



**Well done so far, challenges ahead;
Women's access to public services in Finland**

*by Anne Lammila**

Finland is one of the Nordic welfare countries. It excels in international studies for being a good country to live in (especially for mothers), for having a good quality of life and for being one of the world's most equal countries¹.

The government guarantees its citizens public services, including education, health and social services. It is believed that every person deserves the same rights and that the division of society into different classes is unwise. These rights are complementary and result in a more just and safe society that is better suited to face the challenges of the globalised world.

What are the particular strengths of Finland's approach and experience in this respect and how could these contribute to advances in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean? What are the challenges particular to Finland with regards to equitable access to public services?

How can closer co-operation in the fields of gender equality and equitable access to public services between the EU, Latin America and the Caribbean countries be beneficial to both parties?

It all started in 1906 with the universal suffrage. All Finnish people, regardless of their sex and societal status, were given the right to vote and to be elected. Since 1907, Finnish women have been exercising their political rights in parliament and fighting for equal access in political and economic decision-making and equal treatment under the law. In the parliament, women fought for causes close to their heart.

Social legislation was developed step by step. Legislation for universal and compulsory education for all children was passed in the 1920s. Free clinics for expectant mothers, newborns and children were created in the mid-1940s. At the end of the 1940s, maternity leave was enacted in parliament. At first it was only a few months long and reserved to mothers. Today it is nearly twelve months and is available to both parents. Fathers, too, are guaranteed the right to create a close relationship with their children, by spending

¹<https://foorumi.mfa.uhnet.fi/ws/twinning/Tiedotus/Suomi%20kansainvälisissä%20vertailuissa.docx>



time with them when they are young. Stereotypes are being challenged, allowing both women and men to take care of their children and go to work.

A very important step was taken when National Pensions Act of 1956 was approved. All citizens were granted a pension upon reaching the pension age 63. Nowadays, a pension is offered to anyone over 65, regardless of whether they have worked within the household or outside the home.

Since 1972, the Primary Health Care Act has guaranteed state-organised and -funded health care.

In order for women or men with children to work outside the home, open kindergartens were created to meet the needs of lower income families. Since 1973, municipalities have been tasked with organising daycare for all those who need it. Thanks to comprehensive public services, it is truly possible for Finnish women and men to combine family life and their careers.

How could Finland afford all this? The answer is a comprehensive, just and equitable tax system, which strives to inform the public about the intended uses of the money collected.

There is a wide awareness and knowledge on the link between taxation and public services. The government is held accountable for collecting tax revenues and using them to maintain and improve public services. It is sometimes said that Finns are happy taxpayers because they get value for the money that they pay in taxes.

There is room in Latin America and the Caribbean to expand and boost tax collection. In order to achieve this, taxpayers should consider taxation to be legitimate. An active civil society, parliament and the media can positively impact the legitimacy of taxation, growth of tax revenue and the fairness of the tax system. At the same time, a fight against corruption needs to take place. Finland is ready to share its best practices in this respect². It supports the training of journalists and Members of Parliament in Latin America and the Caribbean to improve their knowledge on taxation so that they can better track the use of public funds.

There remain a number of challenges. One of them is that unpaid care work is still unrepresented in politics and the economy. Geography is another challenge. Finland is a scarcely-populated country with a vast territory. Economic uncertainty and negative

² Tax and Development, Finland's Action Programme 2016-2019



population growth presents a challenge for rural municipalities to provide public services to an increasingly ageing population.

Women are especially affected. Not only do they use public services, but they also make up 72-77% of the work force in the public sector. Innovative solutions have been found in special programmes such as The Nordic Demographic Programme³. One of the main findings was that the private sector and non-profit organisations should participate in the production of services. Sharing best practices and innovations is essential. Collaboration with Latin American countries could be shared through international channels such as the OECD DESERVE network⁴.

I would also like to stress the importance of organising seminars and workshops in the framework of EU-CELAC cooperation, such as the seminar on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment, which was organized in Brussels in March this year.⁵ Bringing together specialists from both regions to brainstorm and learn from each other is mutually beneficial, and of utmost importance.

***Anne Lammila** is the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues and Gender Equality of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

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³ http://www.kainuunliitto.fi/sites/default/files/2_dag_hartman_24022015.pdfSeniorpolis
⁴ https://books.google.fi/books?id=hM3YAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA278&lpg=PA278&dq=DESERVE+network+OECD&source=bl&ots=gYfQIRPdZ4&sig=xrEQWQ8If4xLY_LWINXEwekquoM&hl=fi&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjFxsyEnu7OAhUH1iwKHSfODikQ6AEIIDA
⁵ <https://eulacfoundation.org/en/news/eu-celac-seminar-gender-equality-and-women%E2%80%99s-economic-empowerment>