



Photo: Anne Wornier

# THE NORDIC PARADOX

## How women's equality does not always translate into women's safety

Tara Lee

**A** Danish participant in ActionAid's global citizenship programme, Ida, says in her country there are a number of safeguards such as

education as preventative measure and a reporting system to readily serve the female victims of threats and violence.

"There are hotlines for women,

mothers and children. I think it is very much in our educational system that allows us to know that we need to tell our parents and report whatever that happens. At school there

are counselors you can seek help from,” she told Mizzima Weekly.

Ida’s idea of feeling safe goes beyond being able to enjoy public space. “For me, feeling safe is being able to speak my mind without fear of someone hurting me. I feel safe when I can say what I want and not worry about having to say something different to avoid being judged.”

However, even in the so-called First World, sexual violence remains a tough issue to tackle. Denmark, along with other Scandinavian countries, has encountered the puzzling issue of “Nordic Paradox.” The Nordic Paradox is a phenomenon where countries with the highest level of gender equality, measured by data such as level of income and ratio of women in positions of authority, have higher levels of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) against women.

In simple terms, one might expect the level of violence in these

developed Nordic countries to be low, given women’s better status. But Nordic countries tend to have levels of IPV – or violence against women – that are nine to 14 percent higher than countries such as Portugal, Italy and Greece.

The paradox cannot be ascribed to information bias stemming from more social acceptance for talking about sexual violence in more gender-equal countries. A study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) brought to attention the average percentage for EU women who reported incidents of IPA is 20 percent, where as for Denmark and Finland the rate is 10 percent and for Sweden, 17 percent.

Cross-sectional studies suggest a possible explanation is a clash of modern gender equality against a background of traditional gender roles, which Ida concurred with. “I imagine the reason is because

there are still some men who believe only men should be in the position of power. So when they see these women, or any women who are not obedient, they become angry, and perhaps that’s why.” In high income countries with high levels of gender equality, women move away from traditional gender stereotypes, displaying more dominant traits like being more direct and competitive. The shift can create a backlash effect where people who subscribe to patriarchy believe victimization of such women is justified.

Continued violence against women committed by intimate partners in seemingly gender equal countries reveal how advocating for gender equality does not stop at providing equal access opportunities, but to ensure they can do so free of repercussion.

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