Career or Family? The Fight of Two Prominent Scandinavian Feminist Politicians

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Abstract:

Internationally, in the twentieth century, women in higher and managerial occupations were confronted with barriers because they had to fight prejudices concerning their ability to maintain themselves in traditionally male occupations. This was the case for instance, with women politicians in the West. More than their male colleagues, women politicians had to prove that they were fit for the job. At the same time they were supposed to have a special responsibility for their private sphere. This was more difficult in the period before the second feminist wave than after, but it became never easy. Even in the Scandinavian countries, seen as triumphs of emancipation, at least from the 1970s, it continued to be a struggle.

This article intends to delve deeper into the situation in two Scandinavian countries, Sweden and Norway. It will deal with two prominent political women leaders from these countries, namely Alva Myrdal (1902-1986) and Gro Harlem Brundtland (1939-). Myrdal was a powerful political intellectual and cabinet minister in Sweden. Brundtland would become the first Norwegian woman Prime Minister. In recent years increasing amounts of literature on female political leadership have appeared, but these are often general overviews from a political or sociological perspective. Such general facts and insights are useful, but there is also a need to explore the lives and careers of individual female political leaders. In this way we can expand the insight into how women attempt to gain admittance to political parties and the field of parliamentary and governmental politics. Both Myrdal and Brundtland have had to deal with the snares inherent in the combination of their public and private lives. Their personal biographies give evidence of this: in both cases we are dealing with feminists who attempted to find solutions for their personal problems and at the same time for those of society as a whole. These are solutions that were implemented in reality in their own countries during the second wave of feminism, and found their resonance in other countries. Nevertheless both politicians came up against the boundaries of the feasibility of their own lives, something that for them, as social-democrats – traditional believers in feasibility – must have come as a blow.

1 How many shelves would be filled with books and articles about what now is called ‘the combination problem’? For a long time Western societies have been wrestling with the problem of women and their relation to the public sphere. During the first wave of feminism (app. 1860-1920) among other things, feminists fought for women’s right to paid labour and the vote. During the second wave of feminism (late 1960s until late 1980s) the focus was on implementing these rights. Until the 1960s, the complimentary model of housewife and husband as breadwinner was so wide-spread that women, whether they had children or not, were expected to dedicate their lives to their home. The second wave of feminism fought against this dominant view.

2 Women in higher and managerial occupations were all the more confronted with barriers because they had to fight prejudices concerning their ability in traditionally male occupations. This was for instance the case with women politicians. They not only had to fight discrimination, but also had to struggle with their own diminishing judgments about their capacities as a consequence of a long socialisation leading women to the private sphere. Moreover, their education often did not equip them with the qualities needed in a traditionally masculine sphere (Lawless and Fox 11). No wonder that for most of the twentieth century political women leaders in the West were a rarity. At the end of the century less than thirty percent of all cabinet ministerial posts in ten important Western and Northern European countries were occupied by women (Henig and Henig 56).[1] Nonetheless, from the late 1960s favourable changes started. Factors like better educational opportunities, increasing welfare and the rise of new social movements were important in this respect. The second wave of feminism in particular was directed against the dominant view of female political incompetence.

3 In recent scholarly discussions there is much attention for the *persona* of public authorities (scientists, managers, politicians and so on). Besides aspects of content, factors like gender, race, class, religion, age, appearance, (timephased) norms and values and the question whether one maintains them and the manner of combining public and private affairs also matter; together they constitute the persona (Bosch 33-54). Furthermore, as politicians are concerned, their policies need to meet the expectations of their fellow citizens (Wolffram 3). In order to present a credible persona, more than their male colleagues, women politicians had to prove that they were capable to fulfil the job. They had to prove to be able to distinctly influence parliamentary and governmental politics and (at least partially) meet the expectations of the public. At the same time, they additionally had to maintain their responsibilities to the private sphere by taking care of their families. Such women often were unmarried or had adult children. If they had a family with younger children, they had to justify themselves all the more for the way they combined a political career with motherhood (Van Zoonen 292, 299). This was more difficult in the period before the second wave of feminism than after, but it became never easy. Even in the Scandinavian countries, seen as triumphs of emancipation, at least from the 1970s, it continued to be a struggle.

[1] The countries involved are Sweden, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy and Germany.

4 I intend to delve deeper into the situation in two Scandinavian countries, Sweden and Norway. My focus will be on two prominent political women leaders from these countries, namely Alva Myrdal (1902-1986) and Gro Harlem Brundtland (1939-). Myrdal was a powerful political intellectual and cabinet minister in Sweden. Brundtland would become the first Norwegian woman Prime Minister. There is sufficient material available in the form of biographies, ego-documents and reflections on their political and scholarly activities, to be able to sketch a credible picture of both women. The portrait of Alva Myrdal is intended to increase the knowledge and understanding of the period before the second wave of feminism and that of Gro Harlem Brundtland the period that followed.

5 In recent years increasing amounts of literature on female political leadership have appeared, but these are often general overviews from a political or sociological perspective. Such general facts and insights are useful, but there is also a need to explore the lives and careers of individual female political leaders. In this way we can expand the insight into how women attempt to gain admittance to political parties and the field of parliamentary and governmental politics and how they combine these activities with their private life (Van der Steen 3). The biographical method also helps to prevent the formation of myths (Renders 39-42; Possing 4, 5). Both Myrdal and Brundtland have had to deal with problems in balancing their public and private lives. Their personal biographies give evidence of this: in both cases we are dealing with feminists who attempted to find solutions for their personal problems and at the same time for those of society as a whole. These are solutions that were implemented in their own countries during the second wave of feminism, and found their resonance in other countries. Nevertheless both politicians had difficulties with the feasibility of their own lives; something that for them, as social democrats – traditional believers in feasibility – must have come as a blow. In the conclusion I will further discuss the solutions to the problems these two women encountered in combining public and private spheres. In how far do they offer them a way out for women of today?

Alva Myrdal, fight against the cult of motherhood

6 In Sweden there is no couple more famous than Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. Both were Nobel Prize winners, Gunnar in1974 for economics and Alva in 1982 when she was awarded the Peace Prize. However, the question is how much pleasure they had from these. For many years Gunnar suffered from physical infirmities and regular bouts of depression. A few months before the 1982 presentation of the Nobel Prize, Alva and Gunnar were confronted with the memoir of their son Jan, a well-known journalist in Sweden with leftist sympathies.

The timing was a coincidence in so far that Jan probably did not know that his mother would receive the prize. But at the time she enjoyed much publicity because of the reception of another prize six months earlier. And this fact may have triggered him. After a period of frequent clashes, especially with Gunnar, Jan had not had contact with his parents since the end of the 1960s. In his book he publicly denounced his upbringing that, according to him, was characterised by the frequent absences of his parents and emotional neglect. Alva in particular was blamed for being a cold and distant mother. The book caused a sensation in Sweden; newspapers, radio and television had a field day. It seems likely that the difficult situation contributed to Alva Myrdal's health issues and her subsequent death (Bok 333-343, Hirdman 366-69; J. Myrdal 24-29).

7 In the case of Alva, her son's reproaches to her address were particularly hard to swallow because she had always loved to have children and moreover was a well-known child psychologist and pedagogics. She had published extensively in the field and as early as the 1930s she pleaded for a child-centred government policy. She combined her interest in children with her feminist aspirations. At a time when Sweden was not the emancipated nation it is today and the housewife-breadwinner model was prevalent there, Alva fought for the right of married women to have a job (Etzemüller 251f.). Collective facilities as childcare, free school lunches, free health care and housing subsidies for families should assist the paid working women. The Myrdal family also had the "Myrdal House" built in the late 1930s: this was a spacious home with every convenience and offered privacy to the parents and play areas for the children. Her daughter Sissela's biography of her mother's life notes how much they had enjoyed this house as children (Hirdman 174-91; Bok 115-25).

8 It was not self-evident that Alva Reimer would receive higher education. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sweden was a poor country with a class problem. Her parents were certainly not rich: her father worked in the building trade and her mother was a housewife. Her father was interested in politics and this influenced his eldest daughter who was regarded as gifted by both her parents and a teacher at her school. Alva read as much as possible and studied among other things philosophy, history and political science. She had to fight to be allowed to finish upper secondary school by taking private lessons. Just as in the Netherlands, it was the received wisdom that girls did not need to study because they would get married. Finally her father agreed. In 1922 she passed her exams. Two years later (22 years old) she received an undergraduate university degree in comparative literature, history of religion and Nordic languages. In the same year she married the law student – who later studied economics – Gunnar Mydal (Hirdman xiii-25).

9 The relationship between the Myrdals is representative of that between other left-wing intellectual couples at the beginning of the twentieth century.[2] Initially Gunnar was somewhat anti-feminist, but as their relationship developed he became more and more an emancipated man. He fully supported the scholarly and political activities of his wife. However, his emancipation did not extend to his own household, as is evident from the biographies by the Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman and his daughter Sissela. Alva had the responsibility for their three children. Gunnar was a brilliant but difficult and demanding man. He wanted to work together with Alva and he wished her to be his scientific assistant. Besides she should be his mental guardian. He saw his children and the care she gave to them as 'hindrances' between him and Alva. The result was that Alva continually had to mediate between the two parties. In the last instance it was Gunnar who won. In 1929, when their son was two years old, he was sent to his grandparents because his parents went to the United States for a year to pursue their academic activities. In 1941 the same thing happened, but this time three children were left in the care of one of their grandmothers. Hirdman points out that such things were not unusual in higher circles (Hirdman 135). This does not alter the fact that Alva already felt guilty the first time, and had great reservations the second time about going ahead with the plan, which, as on the previous occasion, had come about at the insistence of Gunnar. Later she deeply regretted both long absences. As her daughter Sissela writes with reference to the trip in 1941:

> Alva later looked back at that journey as her life's second great mistake. The first had been leaving Jan when he was two years old. This time she was confronted with an ultimatum. […] Gunnar would have seen a choice favouring the children and her work over him as a betrayal. Divorce would, she thought, have been unavoidable. It was a possibility that she was not ready to consider. (Bok 156)

10 Both her daughters have a more positive opinion of their upbringing than their brother – as also evidenced by the youngest daughter's memoir. Both Sissela and Kaj are not uncritical but see the life and career of their mother from the perspective of gender, which gives them the chance to stand back and also to appreciate what their mother achieved. In addition Kaj is very critical of her brother; he was eleven years older than she and dominated her in the absence of their parents (Fölster 81-89). Despite the harsh reality, Alva cherished an image of an ideal marriage with Gunnar, at least in the thirties and forties: "For that is then

[2] For instance the relationship between the Dutch communist couple Jan and Annie Romein, well-known twentieth century historians, was similar to that of the Myrdals, see Romein-Verschoor 1970, Perry 2015.

our great superiority to other people, that we can maintain the most wonderful love in the most modern way of life, as the most boundless romance..." [3]

11 In a fascinating study, the German historian Thomas Etzemüller has illuminated the role of the Myrdals as important members of a broad group of intellectuals and artists who wanted to modernise Sweden. The Myrdal House was an architectural contribution to this process of modernisation (Etzemüller 227). In the framework of this modernisation process, in 1934 Gunnar and Alva published a controversial but ground breaking study in which solutions were offered for the problem of the population of Sweden. Too few children were being born: over 13 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1933, while during most of the nineteenth century yearly 30 children per 1,000 saw the life light. Gunnar was a member of the progressive Stockholm School of economists that, just as the contemporary J.M. Keynes, advocated government investment and monetary incentives to stimulate the economy and deal with the crisis. Alva advocated measures such as prohibiting the firing of pregnant paid working women, housing subsidies for families with children, better child care, easy access to contraceptives and the legalisation of abortion. The book was highly influential and determined much of the discussion around these issues. Many of their suggestions were implemented in Swedish society after the war.[4] In 1938 Alva was already one of the most influential women in Sweden (Etzemüller 240).

12 After the Second World War, Alva Myrdal made a successful career in Swedish politics. She was a prominent member of the Social-Democratic Party, was the director of the Department of Social Affairs of the United Nations in New York (1949-1951) and was the first female Swedish ambassador, being stationed in India from 1955 to 1961. Her finest hour came in 1966 when she was minister for disarmament, a post she held until 1973. She threw herself heart and soul into the cause of world peace and nuclear disarmament, carefully manoeuvring between the two great powers. In addition to this she was active as a feminist; immediately after the war she worked hard to open the masculine world of local and national politics and to involve more women in this area. She called on women's organisations to draw up a list of women who were capable of managing various political posts. She deplored the return of the 'ideal housewife' in the *zeitgeist* after the war. Therefore, in the period 1945-1946, she suggested a revolutionary method for dealing with the problem how to combine paid work and work in the family: a six-hour working day for both men and women, who

[3] As cited by Etzemüller 241 (letters from Alva to Gunnar, 1925, 1932).
[4] Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, *Kris i befolkningsfragen (Crisis in the Population Question)* 1934, see Bok 115-19, Etzemüller 130-36.

would then both contribute to the housework and childcare. This plan was a forerunner of the ideas of the second wave of feminism, as we shall see later (Etzemüller 260f.; Hirdman 266-71, 326; Kaplan 69).

13 In feminist circles, Alva Myrdal is best known for the book she wrote in 1956 with the sociologist Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles*. In this she advocated a trajectory in which women first concentrated on their career and then dedicated themselves to the upbringing of their children, and once these were grown they could once again take up their careers. The book achieved international fame and became part of the canon of second wave feminism. At the same time, it was criticised by second wave feminists because the whole of the responsibility for housekeeping and childcare lay with the woman: the man had no such responsibility. With this approach of the problem Myrdal did take a step backwards from her earlier revolutionary ideas. However, Hirdman rightly notes, the book was written in the context of the conservative 1950s when the breadwinner/housewife model was prevalent everywhere (Hirdman 324-27). Taking the socio-historical context into account, the book now stands out as being progressive for its time. It is also probable that Alva Myrdal had become sadder and wiser through her own experiences of a dominant husband who left her with the burden of the household and children care and that this fact influenced her more conservative stance in the book.

14 When all has been said and done, the question arises if she would have had such an eminent political career if she had not been married to Gunnar. After all, he was a prominent economist whose advice was repeatedly sought by the Swedish government, and was also a cabinet minister for a time from 1945-1947. His position opened doors for Alva and moreover he promoted her career. On the other hand, it also happened that a particular important position was lost to her because the institution concerned did not see the need for two Myrdals. For instance could not she get a post in the education ministry after the war – a job that suited her greatly - because her husband was already a cabinet minister (Hirdman 266).

15 In her biography Yvonne Hirdman calls the problems Alva Myrdal encountered in combining a public with a private life her "gender drama" (Hirdman 291-93). But that is one side of the story. Because one cannot deny the fact that until very old age she kept trying to make a career and to develop herself. Apparently it was worth wile, notwithstanding all the troubles she met. Those difficulties were not in the least caused by the fact that she was a pioneer as a female scholar and politician. For a long time she lived her life in a period when people in the west were negative about paid working women and mothers, especially in the

higher echelons. Her own husband and children too had to cope with a rare phenomenon of a politically influential working mother. Her ongoing attempts to fight the cult of motherhood and make her own life and that of other women better are inspiring. In the end she succeeded in creating a credible persona, albeit temporarily damaged by the problems with her son.

Gro Harlem Brundtland: feminism of the second wave in practice

16 1986 was an exceptional year for emancipation. It was the year in which Gro Harlem Brundtland presented her second cabinet, almost half of which were women: eight of the eighteen members, internationally a unique occurrence at that time. This brought her world-wide publicity. Brundtland was a feminist of the second wave, but had relatively late become aware that something as discrimination against women exists, as she describes in her autobiography (Brundtland 34f., 72, 378; Milestones 35). With two emancipated parents she enjoyed a privileged youth. Her mother had studied law and was active in the Norwegian Social-Democratic Party; her father was a doctor and had twice served as cabinet minister for the same party in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Brundtland herself, her parents made no differentiation in the way in which they brought up their two daughters and two sons. All the children were encouraged to study and Gro Harlem studied medicine, just like her father had done. Only during her student days did she discover during a study trip to Yugoslavia that women and girls were at a disadvantage: it appeared that women there had a much lower status than men. The following step in the growing of her consciousness was when as a young doctor (1969-74) she was confronted with the problem of abortion. She had to judge applications for abortions and fight for these patients in a committee mostly consisting of men. She grew in favour of legalising abortion, which was achieved in Norway in 1978 (Brundtland 58-92).

17 In 1960 at the age of 21 she married Arne Olav Brundtland, a student of international law and later a diplomat. It is notable that until the end of the 1980s Arne Olav's politics were those of the right, while Gro rapidly made a career for herself in the Social-Democratic Party, following in her parents' footsteps and making use of their network. Gro Harlem Brundtland said herself that until the beginning of the 1980s this difference in political opinions was no obstacle in their marriage, although they had repeatedly to defend themselves against criticism from others, in the press and in her own party. In 1981 Arne Olav applied, as candidate for the Conservative Party and this situation was unacceptable to Gro: divorce threatened. However, this was avoided because in time Arne Olav realised that he should not pursue this course if he would preserve his marriage intact (Brundtland 178).

He was a feminist and from the start Gro and her husband shared the housekeeping and childcare duties. In the early years Gro took most of these responsibilities, but from the moment that Gro began her political career, Arne Olav took more of these on himself. In addition they regularly had nannies and help from Gro's parents. Later when Gro was a minister and then prime minister the responsibilities fell entirely to Arne Olav, although Gro always tried to be at home as much as possible in the weekends and holidays (Brundtland 40-43, 56f., 68, 173-76, 188).

18 The three priorities in Gro Harlem Brundland's career were the climate problem and the concomitant poverty problem, the problem of emancipation and the socio-economic policy in Norway. The underlying factor that brought the three together was the social-democratic concept of equality. From 1974 to 1979 she was a competent minister of the environment. Particularly her resolute stand in preventing an oil disaster in 1977 brought her respect. The oilrig Bravo had begun to leak and only by rapid and efficient action was a worse situation avoided (Scandinavian Review 94f.; Ribberink 2009). In the area of climate control and the war on poverty she was known chiefly for being the chair of an international commission set up by the Secretary General of the United Nations Pérez de Cuéllar in 1983: this commission was to make a report with recommendations for governments throughout the world. This report *Our Common Future* appeared 1987 and presented the concept of sustainable development, a framework to combine moderate economic growth with climate control, including in the developing countries. Despite criticism of the feasibility of some of the recommendations in the report, it was adopted by most countries and became a guideline for their policy (World Commission 1987; Goodland 1991).

19 As Norwegian premier, Brundtland has done much for female emancipation. She realised all too clearly that as the first female premier she had to prove how good she was and that she was not allowed to fail as a role model: "You not only have to be better than a man; you also must be able to prove it" (Brundtland 233). Especially in 1981 when she was prime minister for the first time (for a period of less than a year) she had to face criticism and scrutiny. "The attacks came on many fronts: clothing, hairstyle, speech, gait, manner of leadership. Everything about me was examined" (Brundtland 153). Under her leadership Norway became one of the leaders in the area of childcare facilities, following the example of Sweden. At the beginning of the nineties, pregnancy leave was not only extended to a year, but also offered to both partners. In addition, there was the possibility of taking an unpaid parental leave. The result was a great increase in the number of (married) women in paid work, a high proportion of them in full-time occupations. These developments have

significantly contributed to the Scandinavian countries' position as frontrunners in the field of female emancipation/ family-friendly politics. Moreover laws were implemented to enforce role-breaking education in schools and to fight sexual violence. The glass ceiling in political bodies was broken by the fact that after Brundtland's 1986-1989 cabinet, the majority of the succeeding cabinets also consisted of at least forty percent women, even those of a conservative cast. Moreover, the Social-Democratic Party of which she was chair set forward a guideline that forty percent of all political functions at various levels should be filled by women (Kaplan 69; Ribberink 2006 and 2010).

20 Since the 1970s Norway has been the richest of the Scandinavian countries due to its oil reserves. These certainly helped the country to survive the economic crisis of the eighties relatively unscathed. However when world oil prices began to fall in the second half of this decade, this was a blow for Norway. But the policy of Brundtland's second cabinet was known for its effective measures such as curbing inflation by increasing interest rates, economic cuts and the devaluation of the Norwegian krona to increase Norway's competitiveness. The price to be paid for this was an increase in unemployment from two to four percent, low in comparison with the West-European countries, but high for Scandinavia (Kuehnle 147, 153, 167, 170, 178). This cost her the 1989 election and she was followed by a right-wing cabinet (Valen 1986, 1990). From 1990-96 she returned as premier when her greatest challenge was to bring Norway into the European Union. In a referendum in 1994, the supporters of entry lost by a narrow margin (48 against 52 percent). Generally speaking, her cabinets enjoyed a good reputation, in the opinion of, among others, the influential volume *Nordic Social Policy* (Kautto et al. 26, 44, 82; Davis 1995).

21 At first glance it seems as if Gro Harlem Brundtland really did manage to combine her career and her private life. A closer looks reveals a less ideal picture. When, due to Gro's developing career, Arne Olav had to take on a greater share of the housekeeping and child care, he accepted this – but not without protest. He was forced to give less attention to his prospering career in the field of international relations and that did not sit entirely well with him, at least according to Gro's biographers Bjerke and Ekeberg (Chapter 2). In her autobiography she makes no mention of this. However, Gro herself was not completely satisfied with the combination of her public and private life. She felt guilty because her busy life meant that she saw too little of her husband and children (Brundtland 134; Ribberink 2006). Apart from the combination problem in the narrow sense, there was always the pressure from the media and publicity. As Prime Minister she was used to being in the spotlights and she accepted that. But she found the stress from the media on her family hard

to swallow. It made the burden of balancing her career and private life heavier. Brundtland wrote about the moment she became prime minister for the first time:

> Both of us [Olav and she] understood that life from now on would be different. For six years my family and I had been in the public spotlight. We realized that we would have even less calm and privacy now. I had already seen the first signs that the children were suffering from my being under public scrutiny. It wasn't just that I had less time for them. Photographers and journalists caused considerable strain during weekdays – also at home. (Brundtland 134)

22 After her youngest son Jörgen committed suicide in 1992, Gro Harlem Brundtland blamed herself. He had suffered from depression for years and his parents were very worried. As a physician Gro had stepped into the affair, not by directly treating him, but by reading literature and talking to his psychiatrists. But the fact that she had not foreseen this tragedy, let alone prevented it, continued to torment her. Her autobiography testifies to her deep remorse and does not leave the reader unmoved. This was to be the greatest tragedy of her life and led to her resignation as party leader because the double burden with the premiership became unbearable (Brundtland 382-414). Her popularity in Norway rose to new heights because so many were concerned for her and her family.

23 In 1996 she stepped down as prime minister, but in 1998 the secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, asked her to become the director general of the World Health Organisation. Brundtland hesitated to take on the post because she enjoyed being close to her family and grandchildren. Nevertheless she accepted and filled the post from 1998 to 2003 (Brundtland 429-34, 453). She deserves respect for the way she put ideas from the second wave of feminism about balancing private and public life into practice. Besides, she was a competent premier and functions as a role model in that capacity. But feminism was not enough. Following I shall discuss the obstacles she encountered during her struggle with the combination problem.

To conclude: what do we learn from their biographies?

24 When we consider the biographies of these two women, we come to the conclusion that for them as women, a political career of the highest order was not easy to combine with a family. The two women I have discussed did their best, were competent but in the eyes of others (Myrdal) or in their own opinion (Brundtland and also Myrdal) were not successful enough in reaching their feminist ideals. Myrdal had to deal with a persistent cult of motherhood in the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to the second wave of feminism, which made entry into the public arena an uncertain and difficult undertaking. In

addition she had a husband who, to put it mildly, did not really co-operate in making the combination of public and private life any easier. She paid a high price in the fractured relationship with her eldest child and only son and the negative publicity that surrounded the affair. Brundtland, a child of the second wave of feminism, was certainly not completely happy with the way she had balanced her career with her private life. The care for her family was perfectly organised, but the way in which this was done caused tension with her husband. Moreover she felt guilty towards her family due to her frequent absences.

25 It is difficult to come to any general conclusions based on two cases, but they do lead to further thinking. The biographical method seems to be a useful means of giving a concrete basis for understanding female political leadership and balancing public and private life. There are other female political leaders who have had to deal with the problem of combining their career with caring for their children. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the female premier of Sri Lanka from 1960-65, 1970-77 and 1994-2000 and also the first woman prime minister in the world, in an interview in 1972 complained that her children saw little of her during her period of office (Fallaci 232). Margaret Thatcher, the first female prime minister of Great Britain (1979-90) did not talk about it herself, because most of the time she painted a perfect image of her career and her family, a perfect persona. But her daughter, in a biography of her father, among other things expressed criticism of her politician mother's frequent absences in her childhood (Thatcher 71). It is no coincidence that there are but few women politicians and government leaders with young children.

26 In the course of history, solutions have been offered from a feminist perspective for this dilemma, which seems to be a well-neigh insoluble problem. Just after the Second World War, Alva Myrdal herself came up with the idea of a six-hour working day for both sexes, as we saw earlier. During the second wave of feminism this sort of idea was again taken up. In Sweden parents together have sixteen months leave after the birth of a child. Because most of the time women took three quarters of this leave, a law has been implemented that allocates three months to each parent (BBC Television 2016). In the 1990s, after this period the parents could maintain a six-hour working day until the child had reached school age, whereby they decided between themselves who took the leave and when, but at a reduced income (Kaplan 69). At the moment people can take parental leave in a variety of forms until the child is eight at 80 per cent of their wage (Sweden Emigration Site 2016). In addition, since 2015 in various places in Sweden there has been an experimental six-day working week for everyone (Metro 2016 and Trouw 2016). So, at least in Sweden Alva Myrdal's solution for combination problems has not been forgotten. How about Norway and other countries?

27 The Norwegian and Swedish Social-Democratic Parties were closely allied (Brundtland 189). The women's organisation of the Norwegian Social-Democratic Party advocated the six-hour working day in 1981, but Premier Gro Harlem Brundlandt judged this not achievable in the short term (Brundtland 154). The first organisation of the Dutch second wave of feminism, the Action Group Man Woman Society, founded in October 1968, argued for a five-hour working day in combination with a reallocation of the paid and unpaid work between the sexes. Swedish (Myrdal's) influences can be discerned here (Ribberink 1998 67f.). Ideas on the reduction of the working week in combination with a redistribution between the sexes of paid and unpaid work were also propagated later by the feminist movement in the Netherlands and found their way into the left-wing political parties and trade unions.

28 Gro Harlem Brundtland has also greatly contributed to facilitate the balancing of the public and private lives of young couples in Norway by her measures for parental leave and extending child care facilities. As premier, Brundtland had to deal with the opinion that higher and managerial functions both inside and outside politics can only be fulfilled in a full-time capacity. A working of week of sixty hours or more is not unusual. During the second wave of feminism ideas were brought forward about partner jobs for higher and managerial functions. These have scarcely been put into practice, although in medical care with group practices of general practitioners and dentists it is beginning to gain ground, at least in the Netherlands. Maybe it is time to internationally implement partner jobs and group practices into politics as well.

29 Myrdal came up with the idea for the six-hour working day in order to solve her personal dilemma and that of others. She could not profit from it herself, but the idea was not lost for later generations. During and after the second wave of feminism it returned in feminist programs. Brundtland played her part in trying to alleviate the combination problem for Norwegian young couples. And although she did not have a solution for the political culture of long working hours – her own problem - her contribution to women's emancipation was valuable. Both women had to fight hard in their own lives to make balancing private and public easier and they did not succeed in everything they wanted. But they both are inspiring in the things they did reach indeed and were able to present a credible persona in the end - as we can learn from their personal biographies.

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