"Male Winners and Strong Regions?" Discourses on Regional Politics and Gender-Equality in Norway and Sweden

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This paper discusses gender-equality in relation to regional politics in Norway and Sweden. In both countries, the strategy of gender mainstreaming has been adopted with the goal of making regional development politics “more gender-equal”. During the 80’s and until the mid 90’s, the focus in both countries concerning gender and regional politics was (if any) mainly to give special support to women in sparsely populated areas. In Sweden, for example, regional resource centres were established in all counties with the broadly defined goal of increasing women’s positions in society, especially in sparsely populated areas. Today, the political intention is instead to “think gender” in the whole of regional politics. The overall question in the paper is how gender and gender-equality is constructed in relation to this policy area, and especially what the practice of gender mainstreaming means in this context. Concepts like growth, development and strong regions are scrutinised from a feminist perspective.

In this paper, a special emphasis is put on the importance of what could be called a territorial power dimension, i.e. an urban – rural power dimension, and the analysis include both the national levels and a couple of regional examples. In other words, the analysis puts sparsely populated regions in the northern parts of the two countries in focus. Here, the ambition is to discuss and question the image of these areas as “backwards” or “traditional”. What does it for example mean to be, or struggle to become, a “strong region” when the established way of understanding growth and strength is in an economic manner that puts regions in the south in a much “stronger” position? And what does this understanding mean when gender is included in the analysis?