**[Lives and achievements of some women leaders](https://nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2020/lives-and-achievements-of-some-women-leaders" \t "_new)**

Atle Hetland March 12, 2020

Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007) was one of the first women in the world to become Prime Minister and head of government in 1988-1990, and again in 1993-1996. She was also the first woman ever to reach that high level in politics in a Muslim majority country. Her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979) had been President of Pakistan from 1971-1973, and Prime Minister from 1973-1977, and later, her husband Asif Ali Zardari (b. 1955) became President of Pakistan from 2008-2013; now, her son, Bilalwal Zardari Bhutto (b. 1988), heads the social-democratic-oriented Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), which is currently in opposition. PPP was founded by her father and she headed the party from the early 1980s, after her father’s execution in 1979 and her mother Nusrat Bhutto had taken charge for some years. Benazir Bhutto chaired PPP until her assassination in 2007. Although she wasn’t able to make all the social reforms she had wanted, but that was not for lack of efforts; it was the conservative men that blocked her.

Let me today, just after the International Women’s Day on 8 March, focus on some important women leaders in my home country, Norway, and the other Nordic countries. I wish I would know why they have succeeded in that part of the world, but that is more difficult to say and needs more articles. But it is a fact that it is becoming common to have women in top posts in politics in the Nordic countries, and it is a general rule that there should at least be forty percent women in the government cabinet – as is also the rule in Norway for companies registered on the stock exchange.

Currently, there are four women PMs in the five Nordic countries; it is only Sweden that has a man, Stefan Löfven (b. 1957) who has been PM since 2014. Sweden has never had a woman PM or a woman head of state. Gender equality is the focus in my article today. Yet, class differences should also be central when we talk about greater equality, and geography, age and other factors should be included. Stefan Löfven has had a unique ‘class journey’ in his life, from he was born to a single mother in Stockholm and growing up in a (good) foster home in the north of Sweden, through a welding course and an uncompleted university degree, and work as a labour unionist and leader, to the top post in the Social Democratic Party Labour Part, the country’s largest, to PM and head of coalition governments.

The longest serving woman PM in the five Nordic countries is the Norwegian PM, Erna Solberg (b. 1961), who came into office in October 2013, and is likely to sit till next elections in September 2021. Solberg is the second woman PM in Norway, after the ‘landsmoder’ Gro Harlem Brundtland (b. 1939) who held the post for over ten years at various times from 1981-1996. Solberg is the leader of the Norwegian Conservative Party, which is more centrist than right-wing, and has led coalition governments with a more conservative party, a Christian party and a liberal party. She appears a confident and competent leader, and the main opposition party leader, Jonas Gahr Støre of the Labour Party, admitted in the election campaign in 2027 that she is indeed a ‘significant leader’.

Last but not least, Finland, with a proud history as for women leaders among the Nordic countries. Tarja Hallonen (b. 1943) was the first woman President from 2000-2006. In December 2019, Finland made headlines because the new PM Sanna Marin (b. 1985) is so young, only 34 when entering office. She is the world’s youngest head of government, with a number of top ministers also being young women. She has spoken about her lower class background, and a mother living with another woman, which had social stigma. With her husband, her high-school sweetheart, she has a young daughter born in 2018. She has said that she was not very clever at school. Well, she did graduate from the University of Tampere with a degree in administration and science, and has shown political skills as a deputy leader and leader of the Social Democratic Party, and a member of city council and parliament.

I would say that it is not gender that is an issue for Finland’s young PM and cabinet; it would rather be her young age and lack of long experience in a ‘world of sharks’. Yet, perhaps that it is an advantage, as well as her unusual background. Maybe one of the shortcomings of traditional politicians (and teachers and other leaders) is that they have all been academically clever at school, and often come from solid middle-class backgrounds, not from the lower classes. That can be a hindrance for understanding many people’s situation and aspirations; a country is a diverse mixture of people, like the rainbow, with all colours. And then half the world is made up of women, holding up the sky.