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Young Women in the Districts and Their Expectations for the Future

**Conference on Gender, Environment and Societal Development
in West Nordic and Arctic Countries - November 13-14, at Borgir, University of Akureyri**

The Northern Periphery area is largely characterized by rural settlements. Local communities throughout the area are facing a number of challenges such as declining settlements, gender imbalances, net out-migration especially among young people and women. The settlement structure is to a large extent closely linked to the major industries. Consequently, community development is not only a matter related to the well-being of the inhabitants, but also important for the industrial development in the regions.

Many rural communities in the Northern Periphery experience difficulties in retaining population and the services they require to maintain their viability. Extensive and selective out-migration aggravates the negative consequences of sparse population and the ability of communities to face economic and social challenges. Especially many young people move out, and for many years the majority of the young moving out has been women. There are many explanations to this situation, this paper is, however not about moving out and why, but about what image of their own future young women growing up in the smaller cities, rural communities or villages have. What are their expectations of a good life, and where do they have to live to achieve this good life? The answers to this of course also have implications for the potentialities and prospects for rural municipalities and the type of plans being laid for the future by the young women of these municipalities. Young women – and some young men – from various places in the country talk about the plans they have been making for their lives. They come from different types of rural communities and belong to two age-groups, 17–18 and 20–25. They are pursuing either secondary or higher education (college/university) at three different

categories of municipality: peripheral municipalities, townships and regional urban centers. Data collection was essay writing and a survey.¹

A good life for the rural young – three perspectives

In rural Norway today we find three predominating perspectives on what a good life for a women is (Fredriksen 2001)². These perspectives are grounded on different conceptions of women and are discernible in the way women shape their life projects. We distinguish between three main perspectives or typologies. *Conservative* women shape their life projects on the basis of a woman-for-the-family vision. These women focus on the love project. Other aspects of the life project such as work and leisure are secondary to this family focus. *Modern* women, the second type, model their life projects against the background of a super woman ideal which implies aspirations for career, family and social success, though career goals are the most important. The third type is the *Alternative* women. These women seek out life projects that contrast with those of their Conservative and Modern sisters which, in the eyes of Alternative women, tend to benefit men more than they seem to women. Alternative women shape their life projects on an idea of self-determination and with an intention to negotiate and cross frontiers to embrace new women's lives.

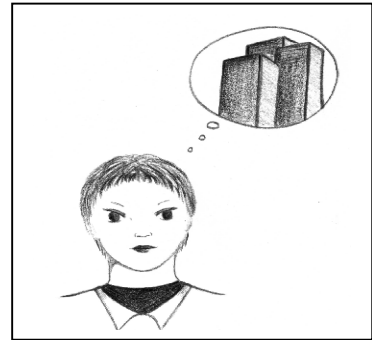
Do the young women in the districts “fit in” into these three perspectives? Do we really find the conservative, the modern and the alternative women among 20 years old women? We do. And above all we find that good life as conceived by these young country women is multifaceted. There is no single type of rural woman to which they all correspond, or one idea of the future to which they all subscribe. The wishes of rural women concerning education and jobs, family and leisure, and where they want to live all vary. We set out with the three women typologies - which we called Modern (Mods), Conservative (Cons) and Alternative (Alts), and tried to see if we could recognize them in the material we gathered. We wanted to see how young women see their futures and plan their lives, the type of ideology underlying these plans, and the demographic/residential implications their residential preferences might imply. What we were asking was whether currently prevailing ideologies concerning women result in their planning to live their lives in the country or in the city.

¹ Nearly 150 girls and boys wrote an essay on their hopes and aspirations, and about 220 young women filled out a questionnaire.

² *Sissel Fredriksen: Scenarios for rural women – 2010* Deciphering paths to rural women's futures Joint Working Paper 2001 NIBR/HIF

We found our three women typologies; the Cons and the Mods are almost equally large,³ and together with the mixed category Mods/Alts, they represent about 90 per cent of the whole sample. The small remaining group consists of the Alts.

The Mods are in the majority among young women studying economy/management, tourism, biology, hotel management, or university subjects such as pedagogic, social sciences, law etc., or are planning to be architects, psychologists, accountants or market economists. The Mods consider higher education an absolute must, as they want to have challenging and interesting jobs. The Mods do not choose a particular course of education because the resulting job will be easy to combine with family life and main responsibility for children, or because the courses on offer are close to their current home or that of their boyfriend. She chooses an education she feels will prepare her as well as possible for the career she wants to pursue. Mods with shorter-term education often become chefs or cooks. If we were to meet the Mods again in ten years, it is far from certain that they would have a family. She wants a husband or partner, but not children. It's not that she's planning for a life without children, but motherhood can wait until she's thirty. The Mods don't want to sacrifice anything, they want everything, and to manage everything: full-time career, children, and an active life. They want to explore different cultures in their time off and activities too, even though the job might not leave much time for that sort of thing. Prospects and opportunities – at work and play – are nevertheless important to the Mods, and the decisive factor in their choice of where to settle is where they believe they will have the best prospects. Nice countrified surroundings and the family close at hand are not enough to keep Mods in their rural township or village; the possibility of a job they can make a career of, or which offers excitement, is much more important for where they want to live in the future. So when the Mods make plans about where they would prefer to settle, it's the regional centre or the city that tend to come up trumps.



We find the Cons following a wide range of educational paths, but they are seldom found studying economy/management or for university degrees. What Cons do tend to study is child care work, social work, pre-school teaching, or teaching in general (particularly the latter). Half of the women in the

³ Kjetil Sørli's demographic study, which was conducted in connection with the research on "Scenarios for rural women 2010", shows that Conservative women are the most abundant group (more than 5 in 10), that Modern women (4 in 10) are advancing at the most rapid pace, and that Alternative women are something of a rare species (fewer than 1 in 10). The demographic analysis tells us in addition that Conservative women make up a larger proportion of women in rural areas than in urban areas. Thus far, the Conservative women have been the best demographic bet for the regions, though they are far from a certain winner since their residential choices are determined by their love projects.

sample intending to become teachers can be said to belong to the Cons. When a Con talks about her reasons for choosing a given educational path, she tends to stress the possibility of combining job, family and children, and because she can go to a school or college near her home. The bias towards traditional women's jobs – often low-paid and part-time jobs – we found among the Cons does not necessarily imply that they intend living a life consuming less than their Mod sisters with better paid jobs say they're aiming for. Consumption is also a component in the life style of the Cons, and this consumption needs to be underpinned by a robust family economy. The husband's or partner's contribution to this economic resource base is relatively substantial – though it is not equally substantial in relation to housework or children.



According to the ideology espoused by the Cons, there is a traditional division of labor between men and women: the man has a high-status and well-paid job and he works hard. It is the old, traditional division of labor these young women champion, and wants to be a part of. The Cons do not need to be full-time housewives; they may well have an education and a career, but they have, and want to keep, the main responsibility for the children and housework. A third of the young women in our sample associate themselves with this ideological position.

According to the plans they laid out, these women will have a husband and children ten years hence, and many of them will be working part-time. When not at work they'll mainly spend time together with their children, but also with girlfriends, practicing or going for walks. The Cons also want to live in urban surroundings, preferably a city or regional centre, but not as much as the Mods by a long chalk. About half of the Cons say that they would prefer to live in a regional centre or city, and a third say that in ten years they'll be living in a rural township or village. They emphasize the importance of a good environment for their children to grow up in, and proximity to relations. The possibility of work also plays a large role, but she does not place great weight on pursuing a career which gives her possibilities for self-development. But the Cons often postpone making choices about where they want to live. Of greater importance is choosing a husband or partner, and it is generally the man's job which decides where the removal van will be heading. So even though the Cons value several aspects of rural life, they should not be viewed as a "safe bet" for rural municipalities. The Cons are flexible, and let their men's career ambitions decide where they'll be settling.

The Alts are the smallest group among the young rural women. Their choice of career lies in teaching, tourism, social work, museum management, reflexology, arts and crafts and sociology. Their educational pattern resembles neither that of the Mods nor the Cons. The Alts may have a long or short education, practical or theoretical. What they emphasize is not a career, but having a job that allows them lead a good life, though without work controlling their every move, and without family

life prevailing over work. What is important to the Alts is that the environment they choose is open-minded enough to accept their life style, even though they may not emulate women's traditional ways of living. Their uncertainty regarding where they want to live is confirmed by the proportionally larger number of Alts who say that they don't know where they'll be living in ten years compared to the more decided Mods and Cons. About half say they'll have settled in a village or township, and over a quarter say they'll



be living in a regional centre or city. But because the Alts make up such a small group overall, their ambitions and desires will not have much of a demographic effect in rural municipalities.

We find as much variation among the rural boys as among the girls, of course. Some put work and career before all else in life, some give equal importance to work and family, while some want excitement and challenges – primarily through their work. The first of these groupings, what we call the careerists, depart from the others by emphasizing the value they put on career prospects and the opportunity for self-development in a future work situation, something which also often entails an emphasis on economy and income. The third group, the excitement-seekers – or adventurers – rank the job excitement and challenge highest. They are not only interested in their careers, but they do underline the importance of freedom to experience things a normal workday generally does not tend to offer. The type of excitement they are after seems to be found as much in a life as a circus artist as in that of a freelance photographer working all over the world. This type of excitement seems considerably less likely, they feel, in a stockbroker's office or a dentist's surgery.

We call the third group the equality-orientated young men because they equate several projects in their writings on their aspirations for life. Neither career nor thrills dominates, nor does the family – no boys give family life a top ranking – but they do equate work and career with family and having time to take a share in family life. But this equality with regard to the family does not mean that the young men imagine a future as a family father on a full-time basis or as a house father: work is an obvious element of their life projects. But family and children require demand time and attention, and, at times, less time and attention than their work, is also an undisputed reality for this group. None of them write of spouses or partners as people expected to take on the whole responsibility for children and housework.

Both the young women and the young men in our sample say that wherever they settle in the future, it must fulfill certain criteria. And what they consider to be the favorable aspects of their home municipality – nice country surroundings, a safe and good environment for children to grow up in, and

proximity to family and relations – will simply not suffice in this respect. Job prospects and cultural activities are more important than closeness to the countryside and relatives in the village. One can read in the writings of these youngsters a message to Norwegian rural municipalities saying that it is no good for municipalities to plan for just one of these groups; they have to plan for all of them. If they want to attract the Mods, Cons and Alts, it won't be enough with the traditional schemes in the belief that sufficient day care places for small children will do the trick. It is true that young rural women demand today a safe and good environment for their children, but they also demand exciting jobs, varied cultural activities, and an open-minded climate that gives them the chance to be whoever they want to be without gossip prevailing over from honest concern. So if the municipalities want to attract these young women, they'll have to create the opportunities for them to pursue their interests and choices; it also means recognizing that women do not necessarily share the same wishes or the priorities.

Notions of women in rural areas today

A municipality does not have to boast centrality to appear attractive to women as a place to live in. If we classify regional municipalities according to whether they appeal most to men (men's municipalities), to women (women's municipalities), or in equal measure to both sexes (gender-balanced municipalities), we find among the women's municipalities rural municipalities, peripheral municipalities, and municipalities comprising townships and regional centers. This gender-appeal classification of municipalities is based on the judgments of women and men in general that are observable in the sexual composition of the population. So even though centrality is not a necessary precondition for women to feel attracted to a municipality, there is nonetheless an "excess" of men's municipalities in rural areas. Currently, 6 in 10 municipalities can be classified as men's municipalities, while 1 in 10 can be classified as women's.

If we look at local conceptions of women, that is, the typologies conformed to by local governments; we find that the prevailing conception among rural municipalities is strongly biased in a Conservative direction. The great majority of municipalities (about 8 in 10) focus on Conservative women, Modern women constituting the main focus of a considerably smaller number (about 2 in 10). A typical Conservative-minded municipality tends to hold up as their strongest woman-friendly card good conditions for raising children and family-friendly jobs in the children/youth and care sectors. Furthermore, the woman-focused strategy practiced by this type of municipality has a two-pronged approach. The first prong is an explicit and narrow-gauged "government imposed" commercial/industrial strategy geared towards the establishment of firms and businesses; the other is embedded within the local government sector as a tool for children-friendly environments and family-friendly jobs. This latter, implicit approach is the main *modus operandi* in the municipalities. Conservative-orientated municipalities are often willing to adjust their line of sight in the direction of

Alternative and Modern women when their demographic situation shows signs of imminent collapse. A typical Modern-aligned municipality promotes its multiple business opportunities and its tempting activities, of a cultural and non-cultural nature, as the most important woman-friendly aspects of the municipality. The woman-focused strategy applied by contemporary Modern-orientated municipalities consists of projecting the market and central government as facilitators of women-friendly diversity.

If we examine conceptions of women in the regions, that is, images of women as applied among county councils, what strikes one is their significant diffuseness and ambiguity. The regional rivalry for young women obliges councils to focus more strongly on Modern women, despite governing practices being caught up in old ideas of rural women as consisting mainly of Conservative women. Local and regional conceptions of women paint a picture in the regions in which the children/youth and care sectors are the prominent features employed to entice women to come and to settle down. In the political efforts of the state directed at rural women, the business approach is the main tactic. It is the entrepreneurial women of the Modern variety on whom central government conceptions of rural women are modeled, and which one finds reproduced in regional policy.

Regional paths to women's futures

The situation conjured up by the probable paths to women's futures in the regions is many-sided. The choices made concerning the system of governance will have a key impact on the end result. Firstly, this choice will affect arena trends of relevance to rural women. This will have further ramifications determining whether the labor market for rural women will be restricted to a narrow selection of jobs, whether the regions will lose out in the restructuring of the public sector, and how desirable marriage and leisure in the regions will appear to women. Secondly, the choice of government system will impact on which of the various conceptions of rural women in circulation the system will reinforce. It will also play a role in deciding whether we end up with similar or contrasting conceptions of women in the country and in the towns, and whether the trend in conceptions will benefit the country or the town as places where women want to live. Thirdly, the choice of governance system will have repercussions on the degree to which public-political stakeholders both may and will intervene in the running of society to influence women's futures in the regions and whether to promote the Conservative, Modern or Alternative version.