

**Women across Divides – a place to breathe, a space for action. Reykjavik, June 2004.**  
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I have been working for more than 30 years with women questions in the trade union movement, the women's movement and the revolutionary movement in Norway. I have work experience both from private and public sector. The 6 hour working day, women's wages and women in the welfare state are all issues I have been working on. This is my background for being a part of the initiative to form Women across Divides in 1993, where I have been working since then, as a representative of the Women's Front.

What is Women across Divides (WaD)?

WaD is a co-operation between women's organizations and women dominated trade unions, women's network in male dominated unions and other organisations concerned with the interest of women. It has by now lasted for 10 years.

The co-operation is organized around a yearly nationwide conference, open to all.

WaD functions as a network with a core of organisations taking part every year, while others are on and off, and new organisations are joining.

The work is done by a working group with representatives from organisations who want to join. Also interested individuals can take part. The work is done in spare time.

WaD defines the basic idea in the following way:

“Women across divides is first of all an idea, a way of working. The idea that co-operation between trade unions, women organisations, across divides, outside the system, formally and informally, is necessary to get through with women's interests, in both bigger and smaller issues.”

WaD have wanted to inspire this kind of co-operation, not necessarily as a part of WaD. For instance there are similar conferences from time to time in 3 other cities in Norway, that has no formal connection to the working group in Oslo.

In this short speech I want to emphasize five points.

1. A central idea is the co-operation between the women's movement and the trade union movement. These are to movements that have been and still are very important for women's lives, but have very different history, tradition, culture and ways of working. Women need both women consciousness and class consciousness to be able to fight. Today many trade unions play an important part in fighting increasing market liberalism.

The trade union movement in Norway, as in many other countries, has been strongly gender neutral. When I started to work with these questions, I used to say ironically; There are no women in the trade union movement, only low paid people, workers, members etc. This has changed somewhat, but not too much. Equality work is mostly formulated in gender neutral terms. The central trade union in Norway took a firm stance against separate organizing for women from 1969 to 1995. Such organizing is seldom, questions about issues concerning women have traditionally been met by the attitude: Here we are working for our members. To

think about gender has been to divide the working class. Historically this has been linked to the need of the working class to unite against the employer, but the result has been that the interest of men has been defined as the interest of the whole working class, women's interests have been subordinated. Beatrix Campbell wrote in 1984:

We are yet to conceive a labour movement in the image of women in which class struggle is shaped in a symbiotic relationship to women's interests *as women*.

The trade union movement was built around the concept of the breadwinner, a man should earn enough to support his wife and children. This led to women not being seen as proper workers. Later on, women's lower wages has not been seen as a common problem for the trade union movement as a whole, but as a problem concerning the individual union or field of work, with its unique reasons, to be solved as that.

The women's movement has on the other hand been less active on questions concerning unions. Women researchers have documented the large and widespread wage differences, but the women's movement has to a smaller extent engaged in the politics of trade union negotiations. The modern women's movement in Norway has engaged in issues important to ordinary women and by large overcome the historical contradiction between the working women's movement and the old women's organisations of professional women seeking equality with men. Never the less, also in the women's movement the interests of some women get more attention than others, and that is not the working class women. The question of women leaders is an example.

The differences and the distance have often led to working women being forced to choose between the two movements, between an identity as worker and one as woman. All over the world we see women activists in the trade union movement, even though they are raising women questions, not wanting to identify with feminism. At the same time it is found that a strong class consciousness often goes with a strong woman consciousness.

Cooperation between the two movements is necessary to give room for developing new politics and ways of organising that are able to bridge the historical contradiction and create a movement where women can participate and fight as whole persons – with different interacting identities. WaD is part of such an effort.

## 2. A place to breathe, a space for action.

Our experience is that WaD has created a larger space for action, especially for women in the trade unions. The trade unions have their hierarchies and stress the importance of going by the book, you have to follow the rules of who should be talking to whom. 10 years ago, when WaD was formed, co-operation across organisations in the trade union movement was almost illegal, much has changed in 10 years. Our experience is that when women groups take part in a meeting with trade union women, it is transformed from a trade union forum following their rules to a one that has more freedom to create its own rules and ways of working. This is partly what is meant by being outside the system, working formally and informally.

The American professor Joan Acker has been interested in how written rules work to confirm and keep up the gender neutral thinking in organisations, and cover up the way organisations and organizational practice are gendered. This can partly explain how to put aside these rules can open a wider space of action for women and the feeling of breathing more freely.

Acker is also citing Dorothy Smith, who points to how feminist critics of organizational theory is situated both inside the organizational research with its near relations to the thinking of leaders and decisionmakers and at the same time outside because they are women. Smith is arguing that this double consciousness comes out of being both inside and outside at the same time, and that this makes it possible (but not inevitable) to see connections that have been hidden. To see what has been hidden is difficult, because our ways of thinking have been formed in the same relations of power.

It is possible to think that WaD, as a way of organising both outside and inside the trade union movement, can open up to the same type of double consciousness.

### 3. Women consciousness as a base for common action.

WaD was formed in the wake of the struggle for 6-hour working day and a growing common consciousness around women wages. WaD developed its own platform, which was not necessarily identical to the policies of the participating organizations.

WaDs started out from the concept of women's wages. The lower wages of women takes many different forms and have seemingly many different explanations. But it is a common problem, the base line is that women are paid less because they are women, related to women's historical role as not being the breadwinner.

The consciousness that the discrimination we are subject to as women is not because there is something wrong with us, but that women systematically are oppressed, is necessary to release the power to fight. Rage that is directed outwards instead of contempt that is directed towards oneself.

On this basis it was created a platform to unite women who seemingly were in different positions with different demands: The traditionally low paid women and the educated groups of women who demanded equal wages to men with similar qualifications.

We demand higher wages for all women – a living wage  
and we demand that women get paid for their education and qualifications as do men

The platform expressed the common interest in getting rid of the system of being paid according to gender, and the participant in the conferences brought the demands to their own organizations. It was also agreed that it is necessary to put forward demands not only to the employers, but also to the authorities at different levels. Lower wages for women is an immense social question that deserves public attention, its about unequal distribution of resources and possibilities.

After a period where this common platform had quite a good deal of impact on the trade unions and the struggle for wages in the public sector, the resistance to this way of thinking has been stronger. To day only WaD is using the concept of women's wages.

There have been a lot of reports trying to document that wage differences are not really about gender, but about different branches, sectors, type of work etc. Some trade unions don't want to emphasize that their workgroups are women, they are afraid that will strengthen the discrimination. This view has some support among younger women who is afraid of to much

attention to gender. They want equality and to remove everything that make difference visible. The concept of women's wages is a provocation.

It is interesting to ask oneself why. Maud Eduards has analysed examples of women's collective actions in Sweden. She shows how the critic of this actions reformulated what they were about, so that gender was not to be a political dimension of conflict and interests.

She shows that women's collective actions shake the formal gender neutrality as a central value in politics. Gender is not allowed to become a political dimension and the spirit of democratic co-operation is and shall remain gender neutral. Perhaps this is a part of what we are up against when we struggle for higher wages for women.

Eduards is also pointing to the fact that women's collective actions are naming men as a political category – and that this is the most forbidden. When we talk of women wages, we talk at the same time of male privileges and force men to relate to their social position as men.

By sticking to the concept of women's wages and its common platform for the struggle, WaD function as a support for women conciousness in the trade union movement.

By taking up a broad range of issues in the yearly conferences WaD is contributing to giving women in the trade union movement a common point of reference and a forum where women's lives and reality are in focus and the thing that is taken for granted. The existence of WaD in itself is a reminder of the common experiences of women.

#### 4. Networking.

WaD is giving the participants a network of active women, both in the trade unions and in women's groups. Women they meet again in other positions can be used to make connections and seek support. As men have their network as a basis for their power.

#### 5. My last point is about the relation between women's common interests and the respect for differences.

WaD startet as a co-operation across the divide between the trade union movement and the women's movement, across the divide between different trade unions and between workers in private and public sector. Through the years more divides have come into focus:

- women in women's jobs and male jobs
- lesbian and heterosexuals
- norwegian women and women with minority background
- non-disabled and disabled
- women inside and outside the labour market

The conferences have tried to make this visible in a systematic way, and have used the summing up of the conferences actively:

“I feel that the conference made me visible as a woman, teacher and trade unionist, but that it made me invisible as lesbian, and that my liberation, my freedom from many of the patterns and rules that is a part of the lives of hetereosexual women, was not asked for or visible. I wondered if it was other groups of women that has not been visible, even if they are here.”

and

“The speakers challenged us as a women forum – how do we define groups of women that are not only women, but also something else, something more, as disabled or minority women. But this something often make them smaller, more invisible, with less influence, not only in the patriarchal society, but perhaps also among ourselves. To me it was important to realise that we all take part in making power structures – both from above and from below and not the least across divides. It gives us strength to unite as women, but we must dare to face and speak about that we are a part of the powerstructure in different relations.”

WaD tries consciously to avoid strengthening the stereotypes of women, hvite, middle class, heterosexual, non-disabled, working in women dominated occupations in public sector, having a husband and to children, and to avoid new narrow models. Women have a lot of experience with beeing made invisible that has to be used to avoid doing the same mistakes in their own settings.

With one yearly conference we have limited possibility to create a rom for making all individuals and groups of women visible, but it is necessary to keep the question open. We need to accept that strong unity is only possible if it gives space to talk about domination and oppression in our own ranks. Women know better than many others that unity is not buildt on some people having to keep their mouth shut about their own experience.