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KERSTIN HESSELGREN (1872-1964)

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The argument is often made that the education of girls and women is important because it brings economic and social benefits to society. This is highlighted in this issue of *Prospects* and it explains why two of the Education for All goals set in Dakar (April, 2000) have a particular focus on the achievement of gender parity and equality in primary and secondary education, and on adult literacy for women (World Education Forum, 2000). It is captured in the often used quote from Mahatma Gandhi that: ‘If you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation’. Another anticipated benefit of the education of girls is that this would permit women to develop new identities and adopt new roles within the family and in society, including having more decision-making power, both privately and publicly.

Biographical research and life stories have contributed to highlighting individual women’s lives. While it is always difficult to measure their impact on societal development and to isolate the contribution of their education to this effect, this may more easily be done when women are in the forefront of developments, acting as pioneers for new ideas and movements at times when society is at a turning point. This, in fact, seems to have been the case of Kerstin Hesselgren (1872–1964), nicknamed ‘Kerstin den Första’ (Kerstin the First) because she was among the first in Sweden to benefit from new educational opportunities for girls, the first woman to assume certain professional jobs, a leader in social movements and women’s organizations, the first female Swedish parliamentarian and the first woman to join Swedish international delegations to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the League of Nations.

Hesselgren is of particular interest in showing not only how her own educational choices determined her career and had an impact on societal development in Sweden, but also in her use of education as an awareness-raising and empowering tool in the work she undertook. She pursued values and ideas and worked in areas that are fundamental to UNESCO's mandate and in many ways represented the social conscience that lies behind the foundation of the United Nations. This is highlighted in her work in three important areas: social reform, women's rights, and peace and international understanding.

Training and work experience

Born in 1872 in Hofors, some 200 kilometres north-east of Stockholm, Kerstin Hesselgren was the eldest child of the provincial medical doctor, Gustaf Alfred Hesselgren, and his wife, Maria Margareta (born Waern) (Gustafsson, 1987). She had three younger brothers and two younger sisters. Her early life was influenced both by her parents' openness to change and liberal thinking, and by the emerging industrialization, which led to a transition from a self-sufficient to a consumer economy, and to an awakening in Sweden around social issues and women's rights. Added to this were more liberal views on education, particularly that of girls, which, combined with her personality and capacities, permitted Hesselgren to break out of an otherwise set social pattern for women at the time.

Her family home was rich in ideas and discussion and open to the external world. Her father, who had studied and travelled abroad before settling in the rural area of Hofors, kept himself informed in his own field and in world affairs through subscriptions to international journals and shared discussions of societal issues and readings of new literature with all family members. Both parents also involved their children from an early age in their own working life. Kerstin Hesselgren joined her father on home visits to the sick in the extended rural area and was introduced by her mother to the various aspects of the self-sufficient, home-producing household economy that was characteristic of the time.

Hesselgren was greatly supported by her mother—'the most radical [of the two parents]' with the 'lively intellect and openness to change' of the Waern family

(Gustafsson, 1987, p. 10). She was taught at home first by her mother and later by a governess. At the age of 5, she knew the three Rs; at the age of 15 she was acquainted with Latin, English, German and French; and at the age of 18 she was sent to a girls' boarding school in Switzerland for one year where she perfected her knowledge and skills in foreign languages and the liberal arts.

She was strongly supported, particularly by her mother, in her wish to pursue further education, her mother having had to abandon a dream of an education for herself when she married at the age of 23. Kerstin was recognized within her family on an equal footing with her brothers, even though 'society still had to adapt to that same kind of philosophy' (Gustafsson, 1987, p. 14). She believed that women have a special social and moral competence for the 'softer' areas of societal life (Lindberg, 2000) and she obtained degrees both in Sweden and abroad associated with these more traditional, female areas. However, within these she explored the newest kinds of education available to girls and became a forerunner as a woman in those specialized areas. She also managed to combine her formal and practical work experience in pursuing further education and career choices, which together provided a solid foundation for her influence as a social reformer nationally, and her international contribution.

It was her childhood experiences in her father's practice that led to her first educational choice, namely the newly created, specialized education of nurses who would serve as assistants to doctors covering the vast rural areas of northern Sweden. This education included a focus on traditional male topics, such as bacteriology, chemistry and physics. Having complemented this education with studies of hygiene and household economy at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and with further studies of hygiene in Kassel, Germany, she became headmistress of the School of Domestic Science in Stockholm from 1897 to 1906. While on leave from this appointment in 1904–05, she took a diploma course in the Sanitary Inspector's Examination at Bedford College in London. This led to her appointment as the first woman in one of two new positions as health inspector of homes owned by Stockholm city in 1906, the first woman to be in charge of the inspectorate of school kitchens in 1909 and the first woman to be appointed as a sanitary inspector of work places in 1912—a position she held until she retired in 1934.

Her acknowledged social engagement and expertise, and the respect and appreciation she commanded, also translated into a political career. In 1921, she was the first woman to be elected to the Lower Chamber of Parliament supported by Social Democratic and politically independent voters. She remained unaffiliated to any political party until she left Parliament temporarily in 1934. In 1936 she was re-elected on a personal basis from a non-party political list to the Upper Chamber, where she remained until 1944 supporting the parliamentary group of the liberal People's Party. Her election has been characterized as 'a magnificent example of the power of the individual over [party] machinery, a reminder that human capacities can mean more than party press and party electoral votes'. How fortunate that 'this simple lesson has been provided by a woman' (Broon et al., 2000, p. 14). In 1939 she was the first woman elected to preside over Parliament.

Social policy and reform

Hesselgren's strong social engagement and human compassion were rooted in her childhood when, partly through her father's work, she experienced 'the darker sides of life' (Gustafsson, 1987, p. 14) and in her strong Christian belief. While her early dream was to become a doctor like her father, her life's work instead served to mitigate social differences by improving the circumstances of life for the lower social classes and, in particular, women and by enhancing collaboration across gender and class barriers as she had experienced at home.

After some practice as a nurse in her father's office, Hesselgren used her other formal education to improve personal hygiene, food safety, sanitary and other living conditions in homes, and reduce sanitary and other health hazards in work places. As an inspector, she worked to improve the living conditions of the female workers with respect to their food, home, general health and care during sickness, and their capacity in respect of savings, and benefit and insurance schemes. She was also concerned with moral behaviour and intellectual development.

Her challenge was not only to be accepted as a woman, particularly in her position as inspector of work conditions in factories run by men, but also to introduce

new habits and processes which, from the start, involved expenditure on the part of owners of homes and work places, and to change the traditional ways of behaviour of employers and employees alike. Her capacity to win the confidence of all parties involved was partly due to her combined professional expertise and personal characteristics. She has been described as positive though not naïve, with a high capacity for empathy with other people's situations and difficulties, guided by moral and ethical values without being a moralist, and arguing clearly and convincingly without being dictatorial (Gustafsson, 1987, p. 40–41).

Throughout her adult life, Hesselgren brought her experiences as a social worker and as a parliamentarian together in her role as a social activist. She was a contributor to newly established specialized journals on social issues and in newspapers, and a sought-after public speaker as well. She was also the leader of a number of newly established training courses in her area; for example, for household economy and trade unionists. She played a key role in setting up the Association of Social Workers in Industry and Business, which she headed (1922–49). She was also the Secretary-General of a number of other voluntary associations, including the Association of Swedish School Domestic Economy Teachers (1906–13) and the Swedish Association for Mental Health (1939) and became a board member of World Education for Mental Health in 1948.

As a parliamentarian and social activist, Hesselgren participated in debates related to work hours, workers' protection, sickness and accident insurance, maternity assistance, childcare, vocational training and other educational issues. She influenced national legislation concerning the minimum age for female labour in specific trades, the right to abortion and the right to land ownership by the poor. She preferred 'lesser reforms that could be implemented, to larger ones that were unlikely to become reality' (Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1968, p. 155) and has been characterized as blessed by God for her practical genius (Broon et al., 2000, p. 16). She considered responsibility and respect for the individual—as opposed to industrial machinery—as being of primary importance in the production process and wanted work to give a sense of security and pleasure reflecting 'not only our economic life but also releasing the best in us' (Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1968, p. 161).

Her acknowledged expertise in social policy and labour issues led her to become the first woman to join the Swedish delegation to the ILO, which held its first conference in Washington in 1919 when a unique co-operation in social policy was established. She has been characterized by Swedish observers as the ‘most internationally oriented of the Swedish delegates’ (Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1968, p. 149). She was a strong supporter of the ILO motto that: ‘Peace can only be built on social justice’.¹ She considered social policy reform as a means of assimilating people’s different destinies and of establishing an easier and more feasible co-operation rather than being aimed at more political issues. In her view, the ILO was preoccupied with those areas of life that could most easily lead to international understanding since unemployment, hunger and sickness exist under different political ideologies and independently of language and national boundaries.

In line with Swedish foreign policy in the inter-war period, Hesselgren used these international visits to bring Swedish experiences into the international arena and only to a lesser extent focused on the implications of international experiences for Sweden. During the 1920s and 1930s, she was involved within the ILO in the same areas of legal work as in Sweden: minimum pay, health protection, night work and other protective measures for women and children. In 1946 she was appointed chair of the commission that investigated women’s post-war labour opportunities.

Women’s rights and participation

Although most of Hesselgren’s work related to the needs of women, she considered herself to be a social policy activist rather than a women’s protagonist, and saw her social policy work for women and children as a societal—not a women’s—issue. She was nevertheless influential in the women’s movement in Sweden of that time. Her own membership of the Swedish Parliament in 1922 followed a decision in 1919 to legalize the universal right to vote and award full citizenship rights to women in 1921—outcomes influenced by the advocacy work of the National Association for Women’s Right to Vote that was formed in 1902 and the Association of Liberal Women formed in 1914. Following the award of the voting right, the Association of Liberal Women in 1922 became a national association with Hesselgren as its secretary-general. It was

transformed into the Confederation of Liberal Swedish Women in 1931 and Hesselgren continued as secretary-general until 1944. The Confederation joined the World Democratic Confederation of Women in 1945.

This organization was based on two pillars of thought: the importance of the contributions and responsibilities of the individual for societal life; and the relations and interdependence between social classes within a country and between nations in the international system (Eskilsson, 1991). The views on the rights and obligations of the individual were inspired by French Enlightenment philosophy and liberal views in Sweden at the time stressing the importance of the individual, its self-development and autonomy, and the dignity and sanctity of the human being. What was unique was the perception that women had something particular to contribute to societal life which existed beyond categories of class or gender and beyond party and mere women's politics. While societies had to develop from within, based on a foundation of values and visions, it was critical to add female characteristics to this foundation and to societal life, to consider female characteristics as a norm that should not be separated from that of the male—to marry home and society. Some considered Hesselgren as 'the representative of what one could dream women would bring to political life—an unsentimental maternity, the will to help and understand' (Brandell, 1940, p. 2).

The national association crystallized a core group, or *Konstellation*, of five women who were convinced that the voting right for women would make a difference only if accompanied by their political awakening and equal participation in all aspects of societal life. Besides Hesselgren, the group included Honorine Hermelin (educator), Ada Nilsson (medical doctor), Elisabeth Tamm (estate owner) and Elin Wägner (author). They used two new political instruments to propagate this thinking. First, from 1923 to 1936, the journal *Tidevarvet* [Era] (edited by Wägner) was a forum for debate on women's and other societal issues. Second, in 1922, led by Hesselgren, the group inaugurated the first women's citizenship course, institutionalized at a women's citizenship school in 1925 at Tamm's estate at Fogelstad, with Hermelin as the head and Hesselgren as the chair of the board and council. The school continued to exist for thirty years, but was, like *Tidevarvet*, particularly influential until 1935. The inaugural course brought together women from different branches of the National Association of Liberal

Women. During its existence, the school at Fogelstad addressed itself to more than 2,000 women from all social strata (including teachers, industrial workers and housewives) and age groups (20–80 years old) who participated in two or three months' basic spring courses and two or three weeks' follow-up summer and autumn courses. Disadvantaged women could receive stipends to participate.

The organization and teaching at Fogelstad was influenced by the folk high school tradition established by the Danish priest and educator, Nikolaj Grundtvig (1783–1872), and rooted in romantic nationalism, spiritualism and Christian humanism. It was also inspired by the theories and principles of reform pedagogy, of which Hermelin was an advocate and practitioner (Broon et al., 2000). The school formed part of a broader folk high-school movement whose purpose was to enlighten the wider population through reasoning and conversation rather than strict lessons. It was formed within a liberal political tradition that aimed at the non-ideological training of women for political participation, providing a broad introduction to political and societal issues set in a historical context and debate across party political lines. The purpose was to awaken the women, not to control or guide them in a specific direction. The school was founded on the notion that the individual was of absolute significance in life and that everyone has something to contribute, irrespective of their background. It sought to unite the work of the brain, hand and heart, home with society, and the individual or specific with the community or the general.

The basic course combined teaching of theoretical subjects with practical work. The programme included theoretical studies arranged in three study groups: history and citizenship, practical psychology or spirituality combined with ethics and hygiene, and Swedish language (oral presentation and writing). In addition, practical subjects, for example housework, needlework and weaving, and external lecturing on specific subjects, for example common law, and land and taxation issues, formed part of the programme. In contrast, the follow-up courses were organized around specific themes, including the women's movement, the nature of society, war and peace, and land ownership, with no practical work. The women were trained in critical thinking and argumentation on the issue—not given final answers or solutions. Discussion clubs and role-playing were essential elements of the training; the clubs also functioning as

practical examples of how to run associations or participate in local politics in order to spur women into active citizenship participation.

Peace and international understanding

War, peace and disarmament were other core areas in which Hesselgren was influential both nationally and internationally. Fogelstad and *Tidevarvet* were fora for debate, and the women's organization for which she was secretary-general was an active pressure group, *inter alia* at the women's peace meeting in The Hague in 1915. From 1941 to 1951, Hesselgren was secretary-general of the organization's Committee for International Understanding, which was instrumental in mobilizing half-a-million women behind a peace movement established in 1940 under the motto: 'Against total war: for peace and international understanding'. She also headed the Association of International Cooperation for Peace from 1944 to 1956.

The Committee worked actively to influence government policy on peace issues and benefited from Hesselgren's position as a parliamentarian. In the 1924 parliamentary debate on defence, Hesselgren supported disarmament against the wishes of several of her close family members who were high-ranking military officers, including one of her brothers, arguing that 'humanity has to destroy war before war destroys humanity' (Höjer, 1986, p. 94). The resulting cuts in military expenditure led to increased financial support for the social reforms introduced in 1925 that were close to her heart.

Her underlying peace philosophy was expressed in a later Parliamentary debate:

What is this peace propaganda about? Well, it attempts to teach our children—and even adults, since they are often like children in this matter—not always to distrust other people, other nations, but to attempt to do everything to meet other people in other countries with trust. [...] For whatever you can say about the League of Nations and its weak performance, you have to acknowledge that the League has been a contributory factor to an emerging understanding among nations. It is the work in the individual nations that one should try to push through peace work (Höjer, 1986, p. 93).

Hesselgren also became influential internationally when she was appointed as the first Swedish female participant in the League of Nations, where she served from 1933 to 1935 and again from 1937 to 1938. Her work was mainly concerned with the commission dealing with social issues related, amongst others, to women and children. Nevertheless, she became known internationally, particularly because of her intervention over the

attack by Italy on Abyssinia in October 1935 and its annexation in 1936, which took place despite the plea by Emperor Haile Selassie for assistance from the League of Nations and following lack of forceful sanctions, and failed negotiations and collective action by the League.

On this occasion, Hesselgren asked for special permission from the Swedish delegation to speak her heart as a woman, representing, amongst others, the women of the peace organization she headed in Sweden and adopting the method applied by this organization in its work to influence Swedish peace policy, which included petitions, protests and public speeches. She did so because: ‘I had to. Having remained silent would have meant becoming an accomplice of Italy’s violent action against Abyssinia’ (Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1968, p. 172). Her speech was published in American and French newspapers, and led one of the male delegates to the League to remark to her that ‘you have given us back our hope and belief’ (Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1968, p. 171). Part of what she said is as follows:

Fifty nations let a small power, one of its members, fall to the ground. However can we, after this, hope that any *small country* can have any hope for the future? When last autumn fifty nations rose to help one of its small members of the League against deadly aggression, we took hope. The League was after all a real protector. It had not shown itself so before, but now had come the time, when it would show its strength—when we would learn that our homes and our children could be safe under its wings. And the result! ... The small nation that the League went to help is wiped out and the belief in the League of Nations is shaken to its foundation. [...]

Prevention is the only way—and education of nations as well as individuals in understanding the latent power of good will (Original text in English, Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1968, p. 170–71).

Her experiences in the League of Nations made Hesselgren sceptical about the way in which international diplomacy operates. She also feared that women would face considerable difficulties in influencing the League. She nevertheless engaged in public-relations work concerning the League of Nations in Sweden based on the belief, as she stated at a peace meeting in 1932, that ‘behind any master work have been men and women who believed in their cause—believed *in absurdum*’ (Hamrin-Thorell et al., 1986, p. 172). She maintained her strong interest in and support for the United Nations throughout her life, without being blind to its deficiencies or obstacles to success. As she said in one of her many speeches to her own peace movement:

You can feel tempted to shrug your shoulders at the hope of establishing an international system of justice within the debacle of the United Nations. So much hope [...] so much belief was put into this. I was in Washington when the nations met for the first time after the war to try and organize working life conditions and I shall never forget the atmosphere at the time. *Everything* was possible, *everything* was wanted, *everything* could be done.

[...] But I have also discovered, little by little, the cracks in this proud edifice, seen how hopes have gradually been crossed and an impression developed that it is an illusion to believe that a tenable international system of justice has been reached through the United Nations. It has been the sorrow of my life to acknowledge this, but in doing so I have not accepted that an international system of justice or a form of a united nations cannot be established.

[...] People can learn from their mistakes. [...] We must teach ourselves that peoples must sacrifice their own preferences and demands for the common good in the same way as individuals must. Sacred sovereignty must make room, countries must *give*, not only *take*; prestige must also make room. Both men and women are needed in the work to build this up. [...] We must prepare the ground by fighting people's hatred, believe in one another, keep up our courage and never lose hope in the possibilities of the future (Höjer, 1986, p. 100–01).

Conclusion

Kerstin Hesselgren's contribution to national and international development was shaped by the values and orientation she had gained in her family home. They influenced her educational and career choices at a time when new opportunities and challenges arose with the social change processes taking place in her surrounding society. She lived at a time when influence and decision-making were predominantly local, but nevertheless carried her expertise and experience into the international arena as well.

Her life is a true example of how theory and practice, formal education and practical work can combine to become a societal force. Her outlook was shaped by a Christian orientation and her compassion for human life was expressed in her educational and professional choices that combined to make her a driving force in mitigating social differences and improving conditions and opportunities, particularly for women and children in her country. She also combined traditions of formal and non-formal education to empower women to improve their own life circumstances and contribute to societal development, influenced by early thinking about women's particular role as care-takers.

Her courage, leadership and humanity were also apparent in her international contributions. She expressed the concerns, showed the respect and practised the patience that seem to be just as essential now if the United Nations is to play a key role in a changed, globalized world—still a long way from achieving the equality and balance between private and public that were central to Hesselgren's own life and work.

Notes

1. The Preamble to the ILO Constitution reads *inter alia*: 'peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice'.
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