Nancy: It's the year 1491 and the Norwegian nobel woman Magdalena Olavsdatter had had enough.

Her father, Olav Nilsson, a governor in Bergen, had fought for decades with the Hanseatic League, the German traders who dominated Norway's dried cod trade starting in the 1360s.

Some historians think Nilsson had been trying to free the city of Bergen — or maybe even Norway — from the grip of the German trading association. Others think he was acting purely out of self interest.

Whatever his motivation, the Hansa didn't like him. In early September, 1455 they lured him to a meeting and attacked him. When he fled to a nearby monastery, they set fire to it and killed him. Historians describes him leaning out of one of the towers in the monastery, asking his murderers to give him enough time to confess his sins before his death.

His dramatic demise left Magdalena and her family fatherless, but not penniless, of course. They were nobility. Nevertheless, the custom of the time was that she and her family be compensed for their loss.

Her mother and brother Axel spent decades trying to wring some kind of compensation out of the Hanseatic League, with no success. In 1490 Axel finally came to an agreement with the League. Not Magdalena.

In 1491, Magdalena, now a widow, decided she would act. So what does she do?

Well, she hires pirates.

Enough pirates that the local councillors wrote to the King complaining that he HAD to stop Magdalena.

Randi Wærdahl: The Norwegian counsellors felt that the shipping traffic along the southern coast of Norway was threatened by her actions.

Nancy: We tend to think that women's equality in a place like Norway, which ranks among the top countries on the planet in terms of gender equality, is a modern thing.

But then there's people like Magdalena. Hiring pirates. Lots of pirates. Enough pirates to threaten the shipping traffic along the entire southern coast of Norway. And this in 1491, a year before Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain on his search for Asia and stumbled across North America.

Randi: No one protests that she's a woman, that's not the issue. The problem is that she's doing it. And that the King is not able to stop it. So her gender is not really the issue here.

Nancy: I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you're listening to *63 Degrees North*, an original podcast from NTNU, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Today I'm on a quest to figure out why Norway is such a standout when it comes to gender equality overall.

But before I get into how we got here, let's look at what gender equality in Norway looks like. First of all, Norway was the first independent country in the world to grant full voting rights to women, in 1913.

From a practical standpoint today, women's equality has to do with levelling the playing field when it comes to balancing work and family. It means that women have the right to nearly a full year of paid maternity leave — and the guarantee that their job will be there when they come back from their leave. Childcare is universally available, and is subsidized by the government. There are programs to encourage women to pursue a university education in fields traditionally studied by men — science and engineering in particular. There are national requirements that a certain percentage of company boards of directors be women.

It's not perfect, of course. Women are still paid somewhat less than men for the same work. Regardless, there's a general awareness in Norwegian society that women should be full and equal participants in that society.

Marie-Laure: The system here is absolutely wonderful. You have one year of maternity leave, I mean, parental leave.

Back in the 90s, when I had my two children, the husband or the father had to take only one month. And I mean, it was mandatory for the father to take one month.

Nancy: : The law now gives fathers 15 weeks paid leave at 100 percent pay, or 19 weeks paid at 80 per cent of their salary.

Marie-Laure: I think this is excellent. Because it actually pushes men to be more involved at home.

Nancy: That's

Marie-Laure: My name is Marie-Laure Olivier. I'm French. I've been in Norway since 1996. And I'm the administrative leader for the Centre of Excellence Pore Lab, under the Department of Physics, NTNU.

Nancy: Marie-Laure says it would have been difficult for her to have the same career she has here in Norway — as a leader of a big research lab — in France.

Marie-Laure: My experience is that it's much easier to be women in Norway compared to France, France, there is still this patriarchal culture, which is still going on. Norway is much more advanced socially.I never never experienced any discrimination due to the fact that I'm a woman. Absolutely never.

Nancy: But this didn't happen by accident. Instead, it took powerful medieval nobel women, 19th century farmers' wives, an early 20th century activist on a bicycle, and the feminists who emerged from the postwar baby boom. And yes, there is one Viking woman — but she's not quite what you might think.

The first of our guides on this journey is:

Randi: Randi Bjørshol Wærdahl, a professor in the Department of Historical and Classical Studies at NTNU.

Nancy: That was Randi earlier in the podcast, telling us how powerless the King was in stopping Magdalena Olavsdatter and her pirates. I initially went to her to ask:

Nancy: There are certainly images on popular TV of Viking women going to battle. Is there any historical support for that, or is that just some crazy script writer who decided that it would make the TV series more interesting?

Nancy: Her answer quickly put an end to that fantasy.

Randi: My honest opinion, bear in mind, I'm a historian, not an archaeologist, is that these women did not exist.

Nancy: But most of the written information about the Viking age is from the Norse Sagas, written in the 1200s — well after the Viking age ended in 1066. And the Sagas were written by men who maybe weren't that comfortable with women who could wield political power. So there was one very notorious, very powerful woman mentioned in the Sagas….

Randi: Gunnhild, who was married to King Eric Bloodaxe. So now we're down in the 10th century. She is described in several sagas mostly from the 13th century, so we don't have really contemporary sources to her but she's described as a fearsome witch, really bad, she poisoned people. She could, what is the English word

Humløper? Someone who could change themselves into an animal, she could do that. And she had a lot of sex, used sex to get her ways in politics, especially when she was widowed.

She is a very negative figure in the Sagas, giving you the impression that the authors of the Sagas, they didn't really like women with this amount of political power like she had, especially when she was widowed.

Nancy: But Randi says that Gunhild also had some characteristics that showed how Norwegian women had power, even back in the Viking age.

Randi: So even this sort of fantasy figure of Gunhild, she's part of a believable portrait of a certain group, or class or women, I would say, who had access to leading political figure who were sisters, wives, daughters. And that is believable from almost all research we have on this group of women from whatever period of time you look at them, you can see that they they had this soft, indirect power, and sometimes even much more direct power. And were able to use it, to exercise power, really.

Nancy: One of the key elements behind this power was land. In many countries at this time, only men could inherit property. Not so for Norway.

Randi: In the Nordic Region, women did inherit property, which was not necessarily the case all over mediaeval Europe. So that's perhaps the biggest thing that tells us that women perhaps had a better set of rights in the Nordic Region than they did in some other societies further south in Europe. For instance, in the mediaeval Norwegian laws, at least from the 12th, 13th century, especially the national law code that was sanctioned in the 1270s, it said very clearly that women could inherit from their parents.

Nancy: The challenge for Randi and other historians is that they need concrete, written information. Remember, there are written source about the Viking Age, but they’re the Sagas and were written long after the events they record happened. And, as Randi pointed out, they were written by men. It’s only beginning in the 1200s that Randi can read actual documents from that time. Mostly these are…

Randi: the type of ….paperwork related to property ownership and management and control is what has been kept throughout the centuries, because it was important to prove what you owned, disregarding your gender, that doesn't matter. That's what you kept. That's why most of the mediaeval charters left in Norway deal with economic, well, property, mostly an ownership, quarrel, over ownership, not least.

Nancy: And sometimes, like in the case of Magdalena Olavsdatter, there are historical sources that describe how forceful women could be in exercising their

power. A standout was Othilia Ottarsdatter, from around 1500, who lived on the Norwegian/Swedish border.

Randi: She had been directly involved in her husband's military affairs. At one point there is there is a letter where a sort of witness charter where the people of Sarpsborg, the burgers of Sarpsborg in southern Norway today testify about an event took place 10 years prior. And what had happened was that Othilia's husband and his men had attacked Sarpsborg or threatened to attack, to burn the town down.

And they demanded what we call in Norwegian "brannskatt" — a fire tax. So either you pay or we burn down the town.

And at one point during these negotiations, Othilia's husband wasn't present and he was not at their home, which was a castle near the border. And some of the burgers from Sarpsborg, they went to Othilia, who was sitting in this castle, to negotiate with her about the fire tax.

Nancy: So Randi found a written source, a charter, regarding the discussion.

Randi: The charter contains dialogue, words put in the mouth of Othilia, and it concerns the response she gave them when they came pleading to avoid the fire tax and avoid being burned down. The whole town will be burned down. And according to the burghers of Sarpsborg, she then told them that “When I look in a mirror, I see Marstrand burning behind me”. And Marstrand was another town that they had burned down earlier in this conflict. So she threatened them. There was no way they would get anything from her. And this is, I think, the only example I found at least from the Norwegian sources where a woman acts this way.

Randi: I think you could compare this type of warfare with guerrilla warfare.

Nancy: Pirates, shape-shifting women, guerrilla warfare — I like this view of Norwegian women. Oddly enough, however, things got worse in Norway over the centuries before they got better.

Randi: From the last part of 16th century, but also from especially from the 17th century, there is steady, not an increase in women's rights but rather a downward line for a while. And then you arrive at 19th century where married women's economic agency was much more restricted than it was in the high mediaeval and late mediaeval period.

Nancy: The real giant steps happened much more recently, Randi says.

Randi: We all know that equality is very much a product of processes that began in the 19th century and increased during the 20th century. I mean, even as a

medievalist, I acknowledge that, I can see definitely this is where most of the progress was made.

Nancy: To understand how that happened, we'll need another historian, this time…

Kari: Kari Melby, a historian and a professor emerita at NTNU.

Nancy: Kari says that the roots of modern women's rights lie deep in the country's history as an agrarian society. While most European countries had an agrarian past, farming in Norway was different.

For one thing, Norway is a terrible place to farm, unless you like living on cabbage and potatoes. It's cold, it's wet, and very mountainous. Only about 4 per cent of Norway's land is actually suitable for farming. That's a big reason why Norwegians traded with the Hanseatic League, back in the day when Magdalena Olavsdatter was hiring pirates to ransack their ships. The Hanseatic League purchased dried cod, which Norway had in abundance, in return for flour, malt and beer.

Why does that matter? Because it was tough to make a living on a farm, and farmers were no dummies. They recognized their wives' contribution was critical to their survival.

Kari: If I were to point to one very important explanation, it would be to underscore the strong agrarian tradition, to recognize the work that was done in the household. You can think of a farming society in the 1800s, you couldn't survive, women made food for all the farm workers and for the family of course, made clothes, gave birth, raised children and the next generation, took care of the elderly and the sick.

Nancy: So farmers knew that they couldn't get by without their wives. Another factor was that Norway was relatively late to modernize.

Kari: So the modern institutions weren't set in stone.

Nancy: But another chance factor that came into play was the union between Sweden and Norway.

Norway was in a union with Denmark for roughly 400 years starting in the late 1300s, and then was ceded by Denmark to Sweden in 1814 after Denmark-Norway was on the losing side of the French Revolutionary Wars.

When Sweden took possession of Norway in 1814, the Norwegians objected to being passed around like a prized pig and wrote their own constitution and …

Kari: Norway got a very forward thinking and modern Constitution in 1814, a liberal law. And in that political system, early on in democratization, women were closed out. We had no political rights, we were not considered Norwegian citizens.

But there was a discussion, in fact… The law said, Norwegian citizens have such and such rights. OK, women's rights advocates said in the 1880, aren't women Norwegian citizens?

It wasn't actually necessary to answer this, because it was self evident, women weren't Norwegian citizens. But many men also didn't have the right to vote.

Nancy: The new constitution doesn't sound like an advance in women's rights. But this slap in the face — that Norwegian women couldn't even be considered citizens — led women to organize. They created and joined volunteer associations, which allowed them to mobilize around voting rights when the time was ripe.

Nancy: And one trigger for action happened in 1905, when there was a national vote to decide if Norway should dissolve its union with Sweden. Sweden, by the way, wasn't happy about this. So much so that it looked like there might be war between the two countries.

Norwegian women responded by organizing the

Kari: Norske Kvinners Sanitetsforening — The Norwegian Women's Public Health Association. It was founded in 1896 because the fight between Norway and Sweden over the union had intensified until the union was dissolved in 1905, but there were threats of war, there was unrest on the border, so the NKSF was founded. This organization had a lot of goals: it should fight for women's voting rights, it should prepare women and prepare materials in case there was a war with Sweden and it should fight against tuberculosis.

Nancy: One very determined woman started the association.

Kari: Fredrikke Marie Qvam.

Nancy: One advantage she had was….

Kari: She was married to a member of the Storting, who was a driver for women's voting rights and for leaving the union with Sweden. He said when we become an independent nation, women must have the right to vote, women need to be involved.

Nancy: She and her husband also had several children who died from tuberculosis. That was part of her motivation in founding the Public Health Association.

In a 1915 article about Qvam in “Samtiden”, a Norwegian literary magazine, she was called "The Queen of the Corridors" because she knew how to work with the women associated with prominent men. It’s called soft power, using your networks to indirectly influence outcomes. Just like what Randi Wærdahl found in her studies of powerful mediaeval women!

Kari: In 1905, there was a referendum on union dissolution that women were not allowed to participate in. The Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association called it a men’s referendum and organized petitions and campaigns, and there were a great number of women who signed the petition for union dissolution.

Nancy: There are stories of Fredrikke Marie Qvam riding around on her bicycle, collecting a total of 300000 signatures on a petition supporting dissolving the union. Pedal power! Kari says the number of signatures showed men it was time that women got a place at the table..

Kari: So they demonstrated that they were politically engaged, and had the authority, in a way, that they wanted to be political individuals. What these women did in 1905 helped lay the ground for women’s full voting rights.

Nancy: Which came in stages, but in 1913, Norway became the first independent nation to give women full voting rights.

Kari says the Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association and organizations like it also played a key role in helping build the foundation for Norway’s welfare system.

Kari: it was women who were the initiators and developers of the welfare offerings in Norway. We are talking about the welfare state, this phrase was used for the first time after the Second World War in Norway, but the foundations for this were crafted much earlier. And the volunteer organizations played a key role, with women and married women. NKSF mobilized women in great numbers to work to fight tuberculosis. Before 1920, they had built 14 tuberculosis sanitariums with more than 500 beds, and that work continued, along with other volunteer organizations with many women members.

These organizations, they organized physician services, midwife services, they were pioneers when it came to institutions for psychiatry, elder care, health centres for mothers and children, nursing education… This is a good example of how women through their volunteer organizations had a major impact on welfare offers, which later were taken over by the state. But women made a formidable contribution.

Nancy: But there was a second, really important development that helped drive women’s rights in Norway. And this was the huge number of unmarried women in the early 1900s — nearly 40 per cent of Norwegian women were unmarried.

Kari: There was a surplus of women in the population, it had to do with men emigrating from Norway.

Nancy: Between 1830 and 1920, 800000 Norwegians, mostly men, left Norway for America and other lands.

Kari: Having so many unmarried women in Norway was also a driver for gender equality. Conservative men, not just liberal men, pushed for formal rights for unmarried women so they could provide for themselves. These were pushed by male politicians who saw that unmarried women needed to have the possibility to provide decent living for themselves. So they pressed for reforms.

Nancy: In addition to given rights to unmarried women, part of these reforms involved the Norwegian marriage law, passed in 1927.

Kari: the Norwegian marriage law is very modern law that is interesting because it is a good example of the Norwegian tradition for recognizing the importance of the wife's work to the household economy. It equalizes the work between the two partners and says that the wife's work at home is as important in providing for the family as the man's provision of money. Both have an obligation to provide for each other. It joins other Norwegian traditions, of which we have a number of examples, in that it values women's work in the home as an economically important. I think that is important, and that also gives rights to women as mothers.

Nancy: In fact, the Norwegian government even decided to pay mothers a monthly sum as support for the family. This started just after the Second World War, in 1946, and continues to this day.

Nancy: The last step in this journey happens in the 1960s. After the Second World War, there's a baby boom in Norway just like everywhere else in the Western world. Norway hadn't fully built out its welfare system, so when all these babies were born, the expectation was that women would stay home and take care of the kids. What changed things was a huge labour shortage beginning in the 1960s.

Kari: There were big shortages in teachers, nurses, there were huge labour shortages, and people had to appeal to women. It was a political problem and the Labour Party saw this, there was a family policy, to get married women out into the workforce. People understood that there needed to be gender equality policies that made it possible for women to move into the workforce.

Nancy: Ironically, politicians overlooked one of the most important aspects of getting married women to move into the workforce. If a married woman had kids, she needed someone to care for them if she was going to work. As a result

Kari: Married women in the 1970s were among the least active in the workforce of any European land. And the women who did move into the workforce had to put together private arrangements for their children.

Nancy: Finally, in 1975, the government enacted a law providing for childcare for young children.

Kari: Officials and politicians, expected and wanted and made it possible for married women to march into the workforce. They allowed for this with active gender quality and family policies.

Nancy: The great French female scientist Marie Curie, who herself was a pioneer in women's rights once said "One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done."

So things do remain to be done — one big issue is that women's salaries aren't quite at the same level as men's. But there's awareness, and hope.

You might be wondering what happened to Magdalena Olavsdatter and her effort to get compensation. Sadly, there's no historical information that says if she ever got anything out of the Hansa or not.

But I like to think she did, and in doing so, showed us that perseverance pays off.

So if efforts to further improve gender equality stall, Magdalena reminds us…. there's always pirates.

Nancy: I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you've been listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. For more information and links to academic articles about the research, check out our show notes. Editorial help and sound design by Historiebruket. Thanks for listening.