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**Scandinavian gender equality:  
Competing discourses  
and paradoxes**

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# **Scandinavian gender equality: Competing discourses and paradoxes**

## **Introduction**

In many contexts, the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway and Denmark)<sup>1</sup> have been celebrated for being at the forefront generating social equality and gender equality, and it has been a recurrent theme in the national self representations that gender equality is a hall mark of the region. It has been concluded that they have ‘a passion for equality’ (Graubard, 1986). The image has been substantiated in large scale quantitative comparisons. The Scandinavian countries do for instance have relatively low Gini coefficients that measures inequality in terms of income (OECD, 2007), and they are ranked as some of the countries that have the highest level of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2008).

The Scandinavian welfare states have been labelled as woman-friendly, and this term implies that they have been responsive towards women’s claims, given them a voice and adopted a range of policies that increased women’s options. The broad political mobilization of women from the late 1960s through the 1970s and 1980s put a pressure on the political system, and the feminist movement influenced the public and political agendas, where a range of new issues appeared. Today international organizations such as OECD (2002) and EU have praised these policies for making these countries well- equipped to tackle challenges like globalization and the ageing society and for creating ‘flexicurity’ at the labour market (European Commission, 2008).

Scandinavian gender equality is, however, far from an unambiguous success, and it is also clear that the dominant discourse about a gradual and linear development towards more gender balanced societies is not precise, despite the dominant idea about being ‘on the road’ to gender equality (Skjeie & Teigen, 2005). New paradoxes have emerged in relation to the dominant vision of gender equality in terms of a universal breadwinner model, where women are integrated in breadwinning on par with men. There are, however, competing discourses that reveal that gender equality is a contested issue. Furthermore, during the process of increasing multiculturalism, the Scandinavian countries do not stand out in terms of reducing inequality in relation to ethnic minorities and majorities as they have in terms of class and gender, and the grand vision of gender equality has difficulties in acknowledging differences between groups of women and between groups of men.

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis concentrates on Scandinavia. Finland is in some respect similar to these countries.

The overall focus of this paper is the Scandinavian experiences with generating gender equality and the role of institutionalization both in terms of agency and public policies. I critically address woman-friendliness as a discourse and as a practice. I set out by briefly introducing the historical trajectory of the Scandinavian welfare states and the significance of gender equality. Subsequently, I present two competing discourses within feminist research about the achievements in Scandinavia in terms of gender equality. One is far more positive and state optimist than the other. In the following section, I contrast recent discourses about the potentiality of woman friendly policies to tackle the challenges welfare states face in the light of ageing populations and globalized economies. After this, I look at differences between the three countries and the visions of gender equality that have been predominant in their policies. Finally, I address the role of multiculturalism for the Scandinavian welfare models, and I conclude with some reflections on the Scandinavian experiences as models for other countries.

### **The historical trajectory**

The comparative welfare state literature has highlighted the historical trajectory of the Scandinavian welfare states. Roughly speaking, social equality was introduced as a political value of the societies during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The welfare states were expanded due to the pressure from the peasant movement and the labour movement. The social democratic parties led the way towards the adoption of redistribution policies aimed at alleviating class differences, but the welfare policies have been based on broad political alliances. The right wing parties have supported universalist and tax- based, welfare-based benefits as well, and the social partners have been an integral part of the compromise.

In the early years of the welfare states, women were excluded from citizenship; civil, political as well as social. Feminist organizations pushed for reforms for women, and a number of milestones were reached in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bergqvist et al. 1999: 296), among other things because the political systems were responsive to forces in civil society like women's organisations. This was facilitated by the cooperation between experts in law and feminist organizations (Melby et al., 2007), which engaged in policy learning.

### **Scandinavia woman-friendly or a renewed gender system?**

A very influential discourse has been that Scandinavian welfare states have a woman-friendly potential. The concept was launched by the Norwegian political scientist, Helga Hernes in 1987. It has two important aspects. On the one hand, it reflects the idea that the Scandinavian welfare states have been responsive to

changing political forces in civil society and have given room for women's agency. The feminist organizations have been influential in putting central issues, like women's rights and reproductive rights on the public and political agendas, both as autonomous organizations and movements as well as within the political parties. On the other hand, woman-friendliness refers to the impact of political decisions on women's daily lives:

“A woman-friendly state would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex. In a woman-friendly state women will continue to have children, yet there will also be other roads to self-realization open to them. In such a state women will not have to choose futures that demand greater sacrifices from them than are expected of men. It would be, in short, a state where injustice on the basis of gender would be largely eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequality, such as among groups of women.”

Helga Hernes (1987). *Welfare State and Woman Power. Essays in State Feminism*, Vojens: Norwegian University Press, p. 15

The changing boundary between public and private was a central issue in Hernes' account, and feminist scholarship has for many years argued that a public-private dichotomy, especially with regard to the division between family and state, has cemented a patriarchal order. Hernes argued in her book that the development towards 'reproduction going public' was a key element in the woman-friendly potential that increases women's options compared to men's. The definition also highlights the role of options in relation to women's motherhood and responsibility for reproduction and care.

In the years after it was published, her book served as an eye-opener for feminist state theorists. It marked a break with the previous rather state pessimistic view among feminist scholars that had stressed women's marginalization and their dependency on the patriarchal state (see for instance Pateman, 1987). This change towards a focus on the empowerment and inclusion of women was stimulated by the increasing presence of women in politics, especially in Norway and Sweden. Hernes' arguments for Scandinavian exceptionalism resonated with the development in welfare state research at large, which took a comparative turn during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This development implied increasing academic attention to differences between welfare states and the role of politics for institutionalizing specific welfare and gender models (see for instance, Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The term 'woman-friendliness' was catchy, but the strength and empirical validity of the concept have been questioned. Hernes' conceptual framework was, normatively biased towards the political culture, institutions and gender

model of the Nordic countries. It was premised on a vision of a universal breadwinner model, which considers breadwinning as the primary route to gender equality (Borchorst & Siim, 2008).

It is also noteworthy that almost at the same time as Hernes wrote her book the Swedish historian Hirdman (1990) reached conclusions about the development in the Swedish welfare state that contrasted starkly with Hernes' analysis. In the final report from the Swedish power study, Hirdman argued that the gender system had remained intact due to its two operating logics: gender segregation and hierarchy based upon a male norm. Scandinavian feminist scholars often depict Hirdman and Hernes as the pessimist Cassandra versus the optimist Pollyanna, but Hirdman has questioned this interpretation (1996). She explains their different conclusions about the Scandinavian development by her own emphasis on the labour market and Hernes' preoccupation with the welfare state.

Hernes was indeed very state optimist and pessimistic about the potential for achieving gender equality in the market, but another interpretation is that the opposing conclusions are attributable to the fact that Hernes highlights the role of women's agency, whereas Hirdman downplays the significance of actors and underlines the role of structures of the gender system.

A central element in Hernes' interpretation of the Scandinavian development is the synergy between women's agency and political presence and political decisions on welfare benefits and services and women's policy machinery. She emphasizes the combination between 'feminization from below' through the mobilisation of women in political and cultural activities and the response 'from above' in terms of institutionalization. She characterized this as state feminism, which is different from the typical way of defining this concept as referring exclusively to women's policy machineries (Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007, 2-3).

### **Expert discourses: woman-friendly policies as the solution or the problem?**

The concept woman-friendliness has been quite influential, and still plays a role today. However, it is subject to competing discourses, and is framed both as a solution to the future challenges that Western welfare states face and as part of the problem.

One discourse was prompted by the attempts to implement the Lisbon strategy to comply with globalization and the aging of populations as common challenges. Furthermore, the goal was to make EU the most competitive and knowledge-based economy in the world (Lisbon European Council 2000). The Belgian presidency subsequently asked some welfare state experts to make the Lisbon strategy operational. They stated that the promotion of social equality

should be a core element of the agenda, and, referring to John Rawls' normative theory as a point of departure, insisted that combating inequality was a central issue (Rawls, 1971).

The experts concluded that the achievement of social equality and gender equality was central to compliance with the Lisbon objectives (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002: Ch. 2, 3). A special chapter by Gøsta Esping-Andersen was devoted to a discussion about gender equality, and he recommended policies that he labelled as women-friendly:

“It is uncontroversial to promote better opportunities for women, not only because they respond to women's demands but also because their employment may yield increasing social returns. In many countries women constitute a massive untapped labour reserve that can help narrow future age dependency rates and reduce associated financial pressures. Moreover as, women's educational attainment exceeds men's, clearly there exists an often large, untapped productive reservoir. We also know that female employment is one of the most effective means of combating social exclusion and poverty. All this implies that 'women-friendly' policy is, simultaneously, family- and society-friendly. If it yields a private return to individual women, it also yields substantial collective return to society at large. It should, accordingly, be defined as social investment.”

(Gösta Esping-Andersen et al. (2002). *Why we need a new welfare state*, Oxford: Oxford University press, p. 94

Woman-friendly policies are defined as affordable childcare, parental leave and provisions for work absence when children are ill, and these policies are labelled as win-win solutions that have the capacity to foster social inclusion, gender equality and improve economic competitiveness at the same time. This win-win interpretation stands in stark contrast to another discourse framing welfare policies as the problem per se. The argument was generated by the Danish Welfare Commission in a debate about Danish welfare reforms. The Commission that consisted mainly of neo-classical economists was set up in 2003 by the present right wing government. It was given a task quite similar to the one that was assigned to the EU experts. It should analyse future challenges to the Danish welfare system and provide policy recommendations for the Danish government. It was open to explanations linking the expansion of the Danish welfare state to the large-scale entry of women into the labour force, but for the main and most important part of the analysis, it adopted a narrow utilitarian approach to welfare in interpreting the development of the Danish welfare state.

The Commission calculated net contributions (taxes) and net deductions (take up rates of services and benefits) of the Danish population in a life span, and it concluded that a Danish citizen on average is a net receiver of 800,000 DDK (Velfærdskommissionen, 2004: 381-83). The figures were broken down by gender and it was concluded that, over her lifetime, a newborn girl can expect to get 2.4 million DDK from the welfare state, whereas a newborn boy will contribute with 800,000 DDK. This was explained by the fact that women take up parental leave much more than men and they live longer.

In the final recommendations, the Commission did not suggest cutbacks in welfare service and childcare services. The Commission did, however, frame women's pregnancy, births and responsibility for children as a cost to society and women as policy takers and money spenders. This argument triggered headlines in the newspapers like 'women cost big bucks', 'men pay the bill'.

It is interesting that the two groups of experts shared the same overall objectives to improve economic competitiveness and to tackle the challenges of the ageing society, but they ended up with contrasting views about woman-friendly policies. It is noteworthy that the Commission saw the Danish welfare architecture as problematic for the economy, whereas – the combination of high security and a flexible labour market – the so-called flexicurity - was praised by the European Commission (2008).

Neither the EU experts nor the Danish Welfare Commission successfully influenced the policy agendas. The European Council became more influenced by a neo liberal discourse that did not accept social equality as a parameter for economic competitiveness. The Danish Welfare Commission provoked the right wing government with tax policy recommendations, and furthermore the government was aware of the fact that the female electorate is highly supportive of the welfare state.

### **Scandinavian gender equality paradoxes**

The Scandinavian countries have given women a voice by being responsive to forces in civil society. They have successfully integrated majority women in politics, and the five Nordic countries have for many years been in the world's top five in terms of female political participation. Yet, they are no longer placed together in the lead (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>), since some other countries have adopted a fast track approach with gender quotas (Dahlerup, 2006). In terms of employment, it is noteworthy that Sweden and Denmark reached the EU Lisbon targets for women's employment in the late 1970s, 30 years before EU's time limit. However, it is also clear that neither this nor the fact that women today complete higher education more than men has generated

gender equality. The labour markets have become even more gender segregated after the large scale entry of women, and the gender pay gap has stabilized during the last two decades (European Commission, 2008). Furthermore, the share of female managers is low compared to the increased education of women, especially in Denmark (World Economic Forum, 2008). Within the EU, only Malta and Cyprus have a smaller share of female managers (European Commission, 2008).

It is also debatable, whether women's options have been improved, because the pressure for integration in paid employment has been so strong, and women often lose control over future conditions of choice when they become pregnant, give birth and care for small children. The right to care for the newly born has been extended through parental leave, but for older children the right to receive care is much stronger than the right to care (Knijn & Kremer, 1997). At the same time, women are subject to a child penalty and they lose income increases, career chances, pay increase and pension for every child, they get (Nielsen, Simonsen & Verner, 2003).

### **Woman-friendliness and multiculturalism**

During recent years, a new debate about the woman-friendliness of Scandinavian welfare states has appeared in relation to the development towards multicultural societies. When Hernes published her book, the Scandinavian countries were still rather homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, but during the last decades they have become much more diverse, and it has been questioned whether the grand story about Scandinavian gender equality glosses over differences among women (Siim, 2007; Borchorst & Siim, 2008; de los Reyes et al., 2003).

Both Hernes and Hirdman ignored the fact that gender inequalities intersect with other types of differentiations, such as class and ethnicity. The concepts of woman-friendliness and the gender system are both based on the premise that women have common and collective interests. As demonstrated in the quote above, Hernes did, however, emphasize the problem with differences among women. At the time, immigration had not yet become a political problem and a key issue in the public debates in Scandinavia, Today, the question is, whether all groups of women have the same interests in specific care policies and care arrangements. This also highlights the issue of *options* that was central to Hernes' concept of woman-friendliness.

Hernes' conclusion about 'reproduction' going public is also debatable. The public- private split is subject to ongoing negotiations and it has been rearticulated in some countries such as in Denmark, where the daddy quota has

been framed as coercion and unwanted interference with the autonomy of the family, whereas age restrictions for marrying foreigners have not been framed in the same way (Borchorst, 2006; Siim 2008).

Furthermore, minority women have not obtained political presence, and there are relatively few organizations that are given a voice. The group is subject to much stereotyping, and minority women are constructed as passive victims (for Danish media, see Andreassen, 2005). This is for instance very visible in relation to the ongoing debates about headscarves, which is particularly heated in Denmark.

### **One or three models?**

In this paper, the Scandinavian countries have so far been treated as one coherent model. They appear relatively similar in large scale comparisons, and they all have witnessed a combination and a synergy between feminism from below and from above. The same is true of the two remaining Nordic countries. Closer analysis, however, reveals considerable differences in the gender political models and discourses in the three countries (Bergqvist et al., 1999; Borchorst, Christensen & Siim, 2002).

Sweden has the most institutionalised gender model, and the feminist influence has been and is strongest within the political parties. It is remarkable that the majority of the Swedish political parties today call themselves feminist. Gender is highly politicized, and there is a strong discourse about women's structural oppression, which among other things may be attributed to the influence of Yvonne Hirdman's analysis of the gender system (1990).

Denmark has the most bottom-up oriented gender model, which now has a weak input from the bottom. The extra parliamentary feminist movement was very strong in the 1970s and 1980s, but feminist issues never gained ground in the political parties. Today, gender issues are placed low on the political agenda, and the political significance of gender is limited. There is a strong belief that gender equality has already been achieved, except for minority women, who according to a dominant political discourse are oppressed for cultural reasons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This can be illustrated by the following quote by the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in his Opening Speech in the parliament on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2007. Under the heading "We will improve equality between women and men", he stated: "Equal opportunities between men and women contribute to creating strong cohesion. Yet, not everybody in Denmark benefits from the gender equality. Some immigrant women do not have contact with the surrounding society. They do not know their rights, and they do not determine their own existence. The lacking gender equality for many immigrant women is part of the new inequality. The government will launch an overall effort to further gender equality between women and men with immigrant background." The quote illustrates that

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Norway is placed somewhere in the middle. There is a relatively strong institutionalization of gender equality, compared to Denmark, and a medium political significance of gender. The Christian party has played a much more central political role compared to the role the similar parties have played in the two other countries, which have been characterized by strong secularization. The stronger role of religion in Norway has fostered a more ambivalent gender equality policy. During the 1970s and 1980s, Norwegian politics was characterized by a rhetoric of gender differences (Skjeie, 1992), and Norwegian women were integrated in politics before they entered the labour market at a large scale. The processes in Sweden and Denmark were, however, simultaneous.

The family and gender policies in the three countries have been characterized by different policy logics and visions of gender equality (Borchorst, 2008). Apart from the universal breadwinner model that has been forwarded through the expansion of public childcare facilities and parental leave, a second vision seeks to reevaluate women's care work. This may for instance be promoted by adopting cash for care schemes. Finally a third vision sees to integrate men in care (Fraser, 1997: ch. 2).

Norway has the most ambivalent model, since policies have been based on all three visions. The country has adopted cash-for-care schemes and has expanded child care facilities. Furthermore, Norway was the first country in the world to adopt a daddy quota, which may be regarded as a very small step towards the third vision that seeks to strengthen men's caring role.

In Sweden, the universal breadwinner model has been the dominating policy logic, but Sweden also adopted a daddy quota and has prolonged it. In Denmark, the all dominant vision has been the universal breadwinner role. For a few years Denmark had a daddy quota, but it was abandoned in 2001 (Borchorst, 2006).

Differences between the three countries seem even bigger, when it comes to policies for integrating minorities. There is still a lack of systematic research in this area, but it seems safe to conclude that there is no Scandinavian model in this area.

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the government has the belief that gender equality has already been reached for the majority. The inequality problems, that minority women face are seen as rooted in their culture and mainly to be solved individually.

### **Exportable models?**

The work of the EU experts reflects that Hernes' notion of woman-friendliness has become quite influential. The question remains, whether the Scandinavian model is exportable. It is true, that the Scandinavian countries from the 1960s until the 1980s were at the forefront in terms of women's political representation and their employment rates. During this period, they did presumably function as laboratories, but today they are not in the front line in all areas. In some areas such as family-based violence and trafficking only Sweden is proactive. It has also become obvious that there are some shortcomings to the Scandinavian gender visions. Still, the Scandinavian experience may contribute to reflections about what works, and what does not, but it is central to bear in mind that context, timing and political opportunity structures matter, and that makes it difficult to copy policies from one country to another.

First of all, ideas travel and the Scandinavian experience demonstrates that policy learning may work across countries. Some legal reforms have been adopted following close cooperation between experts, organizations and political parties, and during the last century the Nordic countries have engaged in what matches the open method of coordination within the EU. The region has also been greatly influenced by international organisations. The UN recommendations to establish policy machineries for women, the effort to implement the CEDAW convention and to work with gender mainstreaming have been central. The close cooperation about gender equality within the EU that today includes many different areas is also of great importance, although Norway participates in a restricted way.

Finally, the Scandinavian experience demonstrates that the universal breadwinner vision has clear shortcomings. It is often driven by narrow utilitarian policy logic that restricts women's options and makes gainful employment imperative. Yet, it does not generate gender equality, when women are integrated in employment, if men do not participate on an equal level in care work.

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