



Reassessing woman friendliness and the gender system

feminist theorizing about Scandinavian welfare states

Borchorst, Anette

Publication date:
2009

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Borchorst, A. (2009). *Reassessing woman friendliness and the gender system: feminist theorizing about Scandinavian welfare states*. Paper presented at Reassessing the Nordic Model, strand 9, Stockholm, Sweden.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Reassessing woman friendliness and the gender system – feminist theorizing about Scandinavian welfare states¹

Anette Borchorst, Aalborg University

Introduction

In 1987, Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes labelled the Scandinavian welfare states as potentially woman-friendly (1987), and this concept gained impetus in both scholarly and political discourses. It added to the relative optimism that has often coloured descriptions of gender equality in the Scandinavian countries. Hernes' concept also nurtured the image of Scandinavian countries as laboratories of gender equality which could serve as models for other countries.

Few years later Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman reached very pessimist conclusions about the development in Swedish women's position during the after war period in the Swedish Power Study (1990). She concluded that Sweden had continuously been characterized by gender segregation and gender hierarchy from the interwar period, and here had been few improvements in the situation of women. The markedly different conclusions of the two scholars about the situation of Scandinavian women are attributable to their different analytical approaches and their varying empirical focus. Both theories and the diagnosis of Scandinavia that they produced have been debated - from analytical, normative as well as empirical viewpoints.

Two decades later, it is possible to trace distinct processes of political empowerment of Scandinavian women, and the three countries have expanded public child care considerably. This has together with generous parental leave schemes facilitated women's integration into the labour force. At the same time the labour market is

¹ This chapter focuses at Sweden, Norway and Denmark

strongly gender segregated, and a pay gap between the genders persists, despite the fact that women today on average get longer education than men.

How this development is evaluated depends among other things on which kind of yardsticks or vision of gender equality, it is measured against. Hernes has been criticised for evaluating reforms for women mainly in terms of strategies of a universal breadwinner model based on women's sameness with men, whereas she ignored other visions of gender equality stressing difference between the genders and strategies which aim at changing men. The question remains whether breadwinning has become a must for women, who are still responsible for the bulk of house- and care work, even though there are visible changes in the household tasks of men. A central issue is then, whether and how much, women's options in relation to care have been improved.

Both Hernes and Hirdman have been criticized for downplaying differences between women and for dealing only with white middle class women. Another debate focuses on, whether universalism as a central principle of the Nordic welfare states is challenged by globalization, multiculturalism and the opening of borders between the EU member states. The emerging multiculturalism in the previous relatively homogeneous Scandinavian welfare states has also triggered new controversies about gender equality. In fact, this issue has come to the forefront of the debates about integration of ethnic minorities in Scandinavian societies, and it is particularly voiced by political parties that hitherto have been most reluctant to gender equality policies.

In the first part of this chapter Hernes' and Hirdman's concepts and conclusions are discussed, and I reflect upon the differences between them. In the second, the normative foundation of Hernes' theory is analyzed in relation to American philosopher Nancy Fraser's normative theory of justice and her normative visions of gender equality (1997), and I include her distinction between redistribution and recognition as different routes to justice. The third part of the chapter addresses diversity and emerging multiculturalism in Scandinavia and how it has (or has not)

been theorized in the debate about woman-friendliness and Scandinavian welfare states. Finally, Hernes' and Hirdman's different conclusions and theoretical approaches are held up against empirical indicators of gender equality in Scandinavia today.

Woman friendliness as conceptualization of Scandinavian welfare states

When Hernes launched the concept of woman friendliness, it marked a radical shift in feminist theorizing about the welfare state, which had so far been coloured by the rather pessimist approach to the state of Anglo Saxon feminist (Borchorst, 1998). It also represented a break with Hernes' previous conclusions on a tutelary Scandinavian state form and about women being recipients and men participants in the political process (1984: 30f.). The shift from state pessimism to state optimism was coloured by the Norwegian context and the appointment of Gro Harlem Brundtland's so called women's government in 1986 with 44 percent female ministers.

Another aspect of the optimism was the idea, which was prevalent in the political elite in the early 1990ies that the inclusion of women in Norwegian politics could and would make a political difference (Skjeie, 1992). The rhetoric of difference was also nurtured by the fact that Norwegian women were integrated in parliamentary politics before they entered the labour market on a large scale. The dominating political ideal of gender equality was founded on family model based on difference as a normative ideal. This was unlike the situation in Sweden and Denmark, where the inclusion of women in the labour force and in politics more or less coincided, and in these countries difference occupied a less central role in the debates about women in politics.

Hernes defined the concept of woman-friendliness in the following way

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. (Hernes, 1987: 15)

Hernes was part of a comparative turn in welfare state research which emphasised the role of agency, movements and coalitions. It was influenced by scholars such as Swedish-Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen and others from the so called power resource school. From the early 1980ies, this tradition challenged functionalist theories of the welfare states and conclusions that argued that economy and industrial development determined welfare state policies. The implication of this was a trend towards convergence between Western welfare states in the long run. The power resource school insisted that politics matters, at Esping-Andersen argued that Western societies were characterized by different configurations of state, market and family, and he developed a typology of welfare state models based on the degree to which welfare policies rendered citizens independent of market forces and the (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The role of political coalitions and social and political movements were central to the theory. In his early work, which was published during a large scale mobilization of Scandinavian women, Esping-Andersen did, however, totally ignore the political role of women. The central objects and subjects of his analysis were male workers, and income maintenance was the primary object of analysis. Social services and benefits such as child care and parental leave were omitted in this work, and this was among the reasons, why he failed to explain how welfare policies had contributed to drastic changes in family structures in Scandinavia.

Hernes also sustained that politics matters, but her main focus was the broad political mobilization of women, and how it had generated responses from the political system in the form of institutionalization of gender equality. She coined the term state feminism for this process. A widespread usage of the term highlights the institutional structures of gender equality, but in Hernes' original formulation, state feminism encompassed both the content of policies and the feminization of welfare state relevant professions (Hernes, 1987: ch. 7; Skjeie & Siim, 2008: 323).

Central to Hernes' definition of woman-friendliness was the notion that Scandinavian welfare states had enhanced women's options in relation to care work. At the same time, feminist scholarship was engaged in a debate on, whether women share common interests that are different from men's. Icelandic-Swedish Anna Jónasdóttir followed up upon an American debate, and she claimed that women shared an interest in being politically present (1985). Norwegian political scientist Beatrice Halsaa argued that this was an interest specific to women (1987), and she found that women's principal work, i.e. being pregnant, giving birth and breastfeeding constituted the basis of women's objective interests (1987). Hernes' position lied somewhere in between the two others. She concluded that women's political interests relates to the organization of daily life and the control over their own sexuality (1987: 71). She ascribed a central role to women's political presence that supported Jónasdóttir's claims, without referring directly to the concept of interests. The three scholars all supported the idea that women constitute a group with collective interests.

Gender segregation and gender hierarchy: the motor of the gender system

Few years after Hernes' book was published, Yvonne Hirdman's theory of the gender system was incorporated in the main report of the Swedish Power Study, where she analyzed changing gender contracts in the after war period (1990). According to her, the gender system operates through two basic dynamics: segregation and hierarchy. Gender segregation relates to the division of tasks between men and women in paid and unpaid work. The exact division may vary, but segregation is a constant on-going process. The other dynamic is a gender hierarchy based on a male norm, and it is connected with the first logic, because segregation is the means to subordination of women

Hirdman's empirical analysis of the changes in the gender system since the 1930ies was characterized by deep pessimism. She concluded that the segregation and the gender hierarchy had been persistent and basically no major changes had occurred in the situation of Swedish women vis-à-vis men:

We see a new pattern of segregation and we see an old and a new hierarchy between men and women. In spite of active political decisions, in spite of powerful agents (of both sexes) who have worked for changing the subordinate position of women, the final conclusion will, however, be that the bottom line is that the situation of women has not improved fundamentally – compared to men's. The gender system has entered its "post modern" phase and the new positions and the new room of manoeuvre have been achieved at a high cost. When women have obtained the social positions, which was unknown to them they discover that they are powerless but filled with responsibility. (my translation) (Hirdman, 1990: 114)

Hirdman also studied the role women as actors in public committees that had contributed to the construction of the Swedish welfare state, but she concluded that they had been silent background figures (Hirdman, 1989; Hirdman, 1994). It is noteworthy that she found that the welfare state itself operated on the basis of the gender conflict as a driving force (1994, 38).

The Poylianna and Cassandra of feminist scholarship?

The two scholars was part of the same trend in feminist scholarship in Scandinavia, which was preoccupied with issues about gender, power and welfare policies (Borchorst, Christensen, Siim, 2002). It may be related to the fact that these countries (and the other Nordic countries) had granted women similar social, civil and political rights and had adopted similar reforms since the early 1900ies. The same kind of rights was often passed within a period of 5-10 years in 3 or 4 of the countries (Bergqvist, 1999: 296). This development was partly a product of policy learning and the coordination between experts, feminist organizations and politicians (Melby et al., 2007).

On this background, it is thought provoking that Hernes and Hirdman reached so markedly different conclusions about the development in Scandinavia in the 1970ies and 80ies. They have themselves discussed a distinction between the happy and optimistic Polyanna and the gloomy and pessimist Cassandra of feminist scholarship, which Hirdman however, labels as unscientific (1996: 1). She attributes the different conclusions to the fact that she is more preoccupied with the market and Hernes with the state.

The different empirical focus definitely adds to the differences, but they have also to do with their varying analytical approaches. It is an illustrative example of the long standing debate in social sciences about actors and structures. Hernes' emphasis on actors and Hirdman's preoccupation with underlying structures partly explains why the former tells a story about change and prospects, whereas the latter insists on continuity in gender relations and highlights the constraints for women.

Hirdman did focus on actors and Hernes on structures, especially in her previous work, and she was still quite pessimistic about the options for women in the corporate channel. Their main conclusions about the development in Scandinavia were, however, greatly influenced by their different scientific approaches.

Both theories are suffering from shortcomings. Hernes is criticized for painting a too rosy picture of the Scandinavian welfare states and for downplaying the lack of group rights (Holst, 2002). Furthermore her concept of woman-friendly welfare states is a compelling and powerful metaphor, but it lacks analytical strength, and this becomes clear when it is applied empirically. I will come back to this problem in the last section. Hirdman was above all criticized for downplaying improvements in the situation of women and for the lack of a comparative perspective on Sweden, which could have added to a more nuanced view on Sweden.

Regardless of this criticism, the significance of their contributions has been enormous. Both of them spurred scholarly and political debates about the nature of Scandinavian gender equality, which in the Swedish case turned out to be quite heated and polarized between proponents and opponents of her theory. It is quite surprising for many people outside Sweden that Hirdman's analysis was published in a public report and her theory of the gender system occupied a central role for instance, when a strategy on gender equality was developed by a right wing government in the early 1990ies.

An interesting question is, whether the discourse about the oppression of Swedish women that Hirdman was very influential in shaping, in itself contributed to keeping

gender equality high on the political agenda. This may be supported by comparing with the Danish situation, where a discourse about gender equality as a battle, which has almost been won, is a strong, and it is very different from the dominant Swedish discourse of women being oppressed. Furthermore, the political significance of gender is far more restricted than in Sweden (and Norway), and the political parties ascribes gender equality very low priority in their programs (Dahlerup, 2007; Borchorst, 2007).

Hernes has also influenced international debates on Scandinavia, including the recent discussion on how to implement EU's Lisbon strategy. In 2001, Esping-Andersen together with other experts provided recommendation for making the strategy to make EU the most competitive and knowledge based economy in the world operational (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002). The experts argued that securing social equality and gender equality could be reached by adopting Scandinavian policy solutions like woman-friendly policies. These policies were framed as to win-win solutions that could secure economic competitiveness and benefit women and children at the same time (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002: ch.2).

Normative visions of gender equality

Hernes was not explicit about the normative foundations of her analysis (Borchorst & Siim, 2002). Her conclusions about gender equality were premised on the idea that inclusion in politics and paid work would generate gender equality. Hence, she saw the universal breadwinner model as the main route to gender equality. This model was however just one of several possible models of gender equality. American philosopher Nancy Fraser distinguishes between three different models in her normative theory of justice (1997: ch. 2).

The first one is the universal breadwinner model aims at fostering gender equity by promoting women's employment, and the genders are equally responsible for breadwinning. The second one is a care-giver parity model that aims at promoting gender equity by supporting informal care work. In this model, women are responsible for care and men for breadwinning, but it aims at making difference

costless by for instance paying women for care and granting them social rights on the basis of care.

Fraser argues, that neither model promotes women's full participation on a par with men in politics and civil society. She claims somewhat unrealistically that a third model, the universal caregiver model has the potential to do that and even to dismantle the opposition between breadwinning and care giving and the coding of separate roles for men and women.

The visions are based on breadwinning and care as the key aspects of gendered power and inequality, and these dimensions have undoubtedly been and are still a cornerstone of gender inequality. Still, Fraser fails to recognise other aspects such as bodily integrity and recognition of cultural differences. Like Esping-Andersen and Hernes, Fraser was biased towards Scandinavian solutions stressing economic redistribution as the route to achieve social justice. These solution have, however mainly been geared towards reducing inequalities related to class and gender, and to a lesser extent to erasing ethnic differences.

Furthermore, Fraser in her first work ignored the role of political presence, which was very essential in Hernes work, but in 2003, she added political representation as a separate dimension to her theory of justice (2003).

Diversity and multiculturalism

Hernes and Hirdman have been criticized for glossing over differences between women, and the Scandinavian welfare state research has in general not focussed much on the impact of welfare policies on reducing (or enlarging) differences between ethnic groups. Hernes and Hidman did not ignore differences between women altogether. In Hernes' definition quoted above, she explicitly mentions, that woman-friendliness is not compatible with increasing other differences between women. Hirdman also discusses, how some women have become dependant the state and others on the man (1994: 34). The lack of focus on ethnicity may be attributed to the Scandinavian countries have been rather homogeneous until the

recently. During the past decade it has, however, become clear that Scandinavia is characterized by emerging multiculturalism.

During this process, gender equality has become a heated issue, and post colonial and post structural feminists have questioned the idea women (and men) constitute groups that have collective and common interests.

XXXXX

Gender equality in Scandinavia today (section lacks references)

An interesting question is, how useful Hernes' and Hirdman's concepts and theories are for analyzing the Scandinavian societies as of today and whether their very different diagnoses fostered prognosis of the following period that are valid? Are we able to trace developments towards woman-friendliness or persistent gender segregation and gender hierarchies? As a point of departure, it is important to note that Hernes talked about a state form "that may open the way for their transformation into women-friendly societies, and at a certain point she restricted this potential to Sweden and Norway (1987: 135).

When this potential becomes the focus of empirical analysis, it becomes clear that the concept suffers from analytical shortcomings. Woman-friendliness was a catchy metaphor, but it does not easily fit into proper empirical work. The past decades have been paved with controversies on whether and which areas, progress has been made, and whether the glass is half empty or half full.

The core element of Hernes' definition, namely women's options is a slippery indicator. The Scandinavian countries are certainly in the forefront in terms of integrating women in paid labour. Sweden and Denmark reached the bench mark at 60 percent that was set up in the Lisbon strategy for women's employment rates in the late 1970ies: in Norway it happened some 10 years later. Scandinavian women are also very well educated. Their educational level is on par with or higher than men's and on average they get longer education than men. These developments

have been facilitated by public policies on child care and parental leave, and it is interesting that the Scandinavian countries today also have relatively high fertility rates. This implies that the ageing of populations is a relatively smaller problem here than for instance in Southern Europe.

Scandinavian women have also obtained a relatively high political presence, and for many years they (together with Finland) were placed in the top World group in terms of national political representation. Yet, other countries have chosen a fast track, and countries like Denmark is falling behind. This is especially true for local representation, where female representation has stabilized around $\frac{1}{4}$ since the early 1990ies.

The Scandinavian labour markets are characterized by strong gender segregation. Women are concentrated in the public labour market, where family-friendly arrangements are widespread and generous. This increases the pay gap between men in the private sector, who have relatively higher salaries than women with the same level of education in the public sector. Furthermore, relatively few women have made it to top positions. This is especially true for Denmark, where the level of female managers is extremely low. Within the EU, only Malta and Cyprus have fewer female managers (European Commission, 2008).

Hence, it is noteworthy that both the Polyanna and the Cassandra of feminist scholarship captured key elements in their diagnosis and prognosis for Scandinavian welfare states. The story of Scandinavian gender equality reveals both patterns of continuous gender hierarchies and significant reforms for women.

Literature

- Banting, Keith & Will Kymlicka (eds.) (2006). *Multiculturalism and the welfare state*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bergqvist Christina et al. (eds.) (1999). *Equal Democracies? Gender and Politics in the Nordic Countries*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, Council of Nordic Ministers.
- Borchorst, Anette (1998). "Feminist Thinking about the Welfare State, pp. 99-127 i Beth Hess, Judith Lorber & Myra Marx Ferree (eds.). *Revisioning Gender*. Sage Publications.
- Borchorst, Anette (2007). "Dansk ligestillingspolitik – visioner og paradokser", *Politik* årg. 10, nr. 2, pp. 68-76.
- Borchorst, Anette & Birte Siim (2002). "The Women-Friendly Welfare States Revisited", *NORA Challenges to Gender Equality in the Nordic Welfare States*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 90-98.
- Borchorst, Anette, Ann-Dorte Christensen & Birte Siim (2002). "Diskurser om køn, magt og politik i Skandinavien", i Anette Borchorst (red.). *Kønsmagt under forandring*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag, pp. 246-266.
- Borchorst, Anette & Birte Siim (2008). "Woman-friendly Policies and State Feminism: Theorizing Scandinavian Gender Equality", *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 26, 207-224.
- European Commission (2008), *Equality between women and men 2008*, Report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and social committee, and the committee of the regions, Com (2008) final, Bruxelles.
http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/gender_equality/docs/com_2008_0010_en.pdf
- De los Reyes, Paulina, Irene Molina & Diana Mulinari (2002). *Maktens olika förklädnadar. Könn, klasse og etnicitet i det post-koloniale Sverige*. Stockholm: Atlas, 11-30
- De los Reyes, Paulina & Diana Mulinari (2005). *Intersektionalitet : kritiska reflektioner över (o)jämlighetens landskap*, Malmö: Liber.
- Drude Dahlerup (2007). "Ligestillingsforståelser i svenske og danske partier – Er borgerlig ligestillingspolitik under afvikling?", *Politik* 10, 2, pp. 6-16.
- Esping-Andersen, Gøsta (1990). *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Esping-Andersen, Gøsta et al. (eds.). (2002). *Why we Need a New Welfare State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fraser, Nancy (1997). *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York/London: Routledge).
- Fraser, Nancy (2003). "Institutionalizing Democratic Justice: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," IN Seyla Benhabib & Nancy Fraser (eds.), *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*, MIT Press.
- Halsaa, Beatrice (1987). "Har kvinner gemensamme interessen?", *Kvinnvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 4, pp. 42-56.
- Hedetoft, Ulf (2004). "Magten, de etniske minoriteter og det moderniserede assimilationsregime i Danmark", *GRUS*, 71, pp. 69-92.

- Hernes, Helga (1984). "Women and the Welfare State: The Transition from Private to Public Dependence", on Harriet Holter (ed.), *Patriarchy in a Welfare Society*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 26-45.
- Hernes, Helga (1987). *Welfare State and Woman Power. Essays in State Feminism*. London: Norwegian University Press.
- Hirdman, Yvonne (1989). *Att lägga livet tillräkte. Studier i svensk folkhemspolitik*, Stockholm: Carlssons förlag.
- Hirdman, Yvonne (1990). "Genussystemet", i *Demokrati och Makt i Sverige*. SOU: 1990: 44: 63.
- Hirdman, Yvonne (1996). *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory – Analyzing Gender and Welfare*, FREIA, Aalborg University, Paper 34.
- Holst, Cathrine (2002). "Statsfeminismens moralske grammatik", i Cathrine Holst (red.), *Kjønnssrettferdighet. Udfordringer for feministisk politikk*, Makt- og Demokratiutredningen, Oslo: Gyldendal. Pp. 54-88.
- Jónasdóttir, Anna (1985). "Kvinnors intressen och andra värden", *Kvinnovetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 6, 2, pp. 17-34.
- Melby Kari et al. (eds). (2007). *Inte ett ord om kärlek. Äktenskap och politik i Norden ca. 1850-1930*. Stockholm: Makadam förlag.
- Mulinari, Diana (2008). "Women friendly? Understanding gendered racism in Sweden", Kari Melby, Anna-Birte Ravn Christina Carlsson Wetterberg (eds.), *The Limits of Political Ambition? Gender Equality and Welfare Politics in Scandinavia* (Bristol: Policy Press, 167-182.
- Prospect* (december, 2000, January 2001, February 2004, March, 2004).
- Velfærdskommissionen (2004). *Fremtidens velfærd kommer ikke af sig selv*. Analyserapport, maj.
- Skjeie, Hege (1992). *Den politiske betydningen av kjønn. En studie av norsk topp-politik*. Oslo: Institutt for Samfunnsforskning.
- Skjeie, Hege & Mari Teigen (2003). *Men imellom* (Between Men) Oslo: Gyldendal, Norsk Akademisk Forlag.
- Siim, Birte (2008). "Dilemmas of citizenship – tensions between gender equality and respect for diversity in the Danish welfare state", in Christina, Kari Melby & Anna-Birte Ravn eds. *Gender Equality as a Perspective on Welfare: The Limits of Political Ambition*. Policy Press.
- Siim, Birte & Hege Skjeie (2008). "Tracks, intersections and dead ends. Multicultural challenges to state feminism in Denmark and Norway", *Ethnicities*, 8,2, pp. 322-344.
- World Economic Forum (2008). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2008*, <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2008.pdf>.