



Family Policies and Policies for Gender Equality in the Nordic Societies: An Analysis Using the Family Models

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Author's contribution

The sole author developed the idea for the study and prepared the entire manuscript. Collecting existing literature and interpreting the results was done by the sole author.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a literature review studying how family policies and policies for gender equality in the Nordic countries move towards a specific family model. The focus of this paper is how family models have helped in improving gender equality in Nordic societies, and how this has led to the move away from the male breadwinner model to the dual earner family model. Family policies from Norway, Sweden and Denmark were investigated. This study relied on secondary sources of data as a point of departure in the comparative analysis of family models. Journal articles, books, media reports and statistical reports were reviewed in analysing data for the study. Within the Nordic countries, family policies constitute an important component of the welfare state policies. These countries are known for their extensive support for families with children through policies aiming to reconcile work and family life, to share paid and unpaid work more equally between men and women, and to provide solutions that reflect the interest of the child. Findings show that deliberate government policies towards families have led to promoting gender equality and a move towards a dual earner family model.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Nordic countries consist of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. "Scandinavian" and "Nordic" have always been used interchangeably; however, it is only Norway, Sweden and Denmark that can be termed as "Scandinavian" because of their geographical location [1].

The Nordic countries represent a social democratic welfare state [2]. A key feature of social-democratic welfare states is the involvement of the state in providing measures to ensure the provision of care for children within the family. According to Sumer [3], the Nordic countries are moving from the male breadwinner family model to the dual earner family model. The movement towards the dual earner family model has been possible, in part, because of the involvement of the state and politics in developing family policies to ensure that mothers and fathers are able to attain a balance between work and family life.

Within the Nordic countries, family policies constitute an important component of the welfare state policies. These countries are known for their extensive support for families with children through policies aiming to reconcile work and family life, to share paid and unpaid work more equally between men and women, and to provide solutions that reflect the interest of the child [4]. The family policies in the Nordic countries have a long tradition in offering facilities and subsidies to encourage mothers to combine family and work [5]. Family policies in the Nordic countries gain international attention.¹ An important reason for this is that they appear to produce good results: the Nordic countries combine comparatively high levels of fertility with high female employment rates and low rates of child poverty [6].

Using the concept of biopolitics as a frame of reference [7], this essay attempts to discuss how family policies and policies for gender equality in the Nordic countries move towards a specific family model. The essay discusses existing family policies and policies for gender equality and attempts to establish their relationship with a family model. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section presents a brief overview of the concept of bio politics. A discussion of relevant changes within the Nordic families is also provided. The essay then

describes the family policies and shows its relationship with a specific family model. Finally, the essay looks at the new challenges emerging as a result of the development of the policies. The essay concludes by showing which family model fits existing Nordic family policies.

2. FAMILY ROLES OVER TIME

From the 1920's to the 1960's, the breadwinner model was dominant in the Nordic countries as men were the breadwinners of the family and the women were the caregivers who took care of the children and the aged. The political parties at the time agreed that mothers were natural carers of their children and therefore drafted their policies to be in line with this model [8]. Scholars like Myrdal and Klein [9] advocated that women should take a 15 to 20 year break after childbirth. This was an era of massive familialisation where the family was in total control of the provision of care [10]. The periods between 1960 and 1975 saw a move in the change of attitudes of women towards work; more women were involved in paid work outside the home. There was a mass mobilisation of women to get involved in the labour market. This was partly due to the transition from the industrial economy to that of a service economy. This saw the emergence of the gender equality contract [11]. Both men and women were to be treated in the same way and not be discriminated against in their labour contracts because of their gender [11]. However, from 1975 to date there has been an institutionalisation of gender equality by governments in Nordic societies which has led to the changes of roles being played by both the father and the mother in the home. This era has also led to massive defamilialization because both father and mother are engaged in the labour force therefore the government comes in to support in the provision of care in order for the parents to work [10].

3. BIOPOLITICS

Michael Foucault described biopolitics to be the strategies and mechanism through which human life activities are managed by government or the regimes of authority [7]. In other words, governments can regulate the female reproductive body through mechanisms and strategies if they so wish. The legalisation of abortion, the use of contraceptives and other scientific ways of preventing pregnancies have

all led to changes in how the family and society operates today. Females can decide to delay pregnancies by using pills, sterilization and other forms of contraceptives. Mothers can see their unborn babies and know their gender even before they conceive. They have a say on their bodies now than before [7].

The main concept of biopolitics is hinged on liberalism, where there is equality and the exercise of freedom and liberty. Where both males and females are seen as equals. Therefore, to achieve that aim, governments especially in the west agreed to the use of science and technology to help in regulating the female reproductive system for their benefit [7].

In relation to family policies and policies for gender equality in the Nordic societies, governments regulate and initiate policies that go a long way to control human activities of people that will suit the agenda of the government for equity and liberty, because one of the fundamental principles of the Nordic states is gender equality and freedom.

4. SOCIAL CHANGES IN NORDIC SOCIETIES

The Nordic welfare states became lead contestants in transforming from one-earner to dual earner households. The combination of work and family is gradually being redefined from being only a responsibility for women to that of a collective for both fathers and mothers [12]. This was made possible by making parenting issues of concern to the state and politics. Government made deliberate attempts to politicise parenting and child care by bringing to bare policies like subsidised child care, paid parental leave and cash for care as well as promoting gender equality. The female population that were not working were rallied to join the labour force [12]. It opened avenues for women to work and still take care of their children and also made fathers part of their children's lives as well as support in care giving. It has also led to social equality and high standards of living. Women are now able to live independent lives on their own without absolutely relying on men for their needs. Their quality of lives improve because they can afford for themselves what they couldn't when they were not working (ibid).

Furthermore, when women work outside of home, it enables good conditions for children's early education [13]. Mothers are compelled to

take their children to the day care centres because the children cannot stay home or go to work with them, this makes the children start formal training early which is good for their development. The economy of the country is improved as well because the tax net is widened, and their household income is bettered, therefore reducing child poverty. Early investment in children hopes to create more life chances for children and secure a productive labour force for the future [2]. "Whether viewed from the perspective of gender equality, child welfare, or social investment, then, Nordic family policies appear to have some very useful features" [13, p 50].

Some family policies are mainly associated with ways to improve and promote gender equality. However, it is interesting to note that gendered division of labour is not the only important aim of family policies. Maintaining the population (Pronatalism) and protecting children from poverty as well as promoting their welfare and development are some aims of Nordic family policies [14]. Governments in the Nordic regions encouraged the bearing of children and giving mothers the chance to work as well. In her book "The Baby Matrix" Carroll [15] explains that the idea of parenting and raising children should be the prime focus of every person's adult life. And this thinking is very much in line with the ideals of most governments in the Nordic regions that want to see parents get involved in the raising of their children [16].

However, the changes in the family in Nordic countries started earlier and were more radical, there is the changing pattern of partnership and family formation and high rates of partnership dissolution and divorces. There is a move away from the extended family system towards individualistic societies, families put procreation on the back burner and break ups in marriages are on the rise [13]. This has led to child bearing being delayed. For instance, in the mid 2000's Sweden had one of the highest divorce rates in Europe, second to Belgium [13]. Fertility rates in the Nordic regions are at sub-replacement level (except Iceland) (ibid). This means that the total fertility rate if maintained will lead to the new generation being less populous than the previous one. Changing fertility patterns where there is declining fertility aspirations; generally, fertility decline is said to be ascribed to women's agency, when women decide to have children at an older age. Women had that choice and ability to decide when to start having children, due to

prolonged education and career goals. And the longer women waited to give birth it affected their fertility rate. This practise was believed to be started in the later part of the 1970's. Marriage rates have until recently fallen, the proportion of births outside marriage has risen drastically, cohabitation has become a substitute to marriage and sometimes a permanent status as more couples are cohabiting before and between marriage instead of marrying. Single parenting is on the rise [13].

5. USING FRASER'S (1997) GENDER EQUALITY MODELS AS ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS FOR THE FAMILY MODELS

Fraser [17] developed the models including the universal breadwinner, the caregiver parity and the universal caregiver model to elaborate various feminist visions for gender equality. The universal breadwinner model represents a situation where both the woman and man are breadwinners. In this model, the state is primarily responsible for childcare and this model sees both woman and man as the same or equal. The caregiver parity model views the woman's role as the caregiver and the man as the breadwinner. This keeps care work in the family context through public funding such as the caregiver allowances. While the first one ensures sameness, the second one perpetuates existing inequalities by ensuring that woman is actively engaged in care work at home. The third model is based on a shared patterned role of care and breadwinning. With this, women are integrated in breadwinning and men are also involved in care work at home [18]. Fraser [17] argues that the universal caregiver model is a combination of the best versions of the universal breadwinner model and the caregiver parity model.

6. NORDIC FAMILY POLICIES VIS A VIS FAMILY MODEL

Extant literature has shown that the Nordic countries have common family policies and these policies have slight differences with that of other European countries [14]. It was around the 1970's that these policies were enacted and has seen significant improvement over the years. This essay will be guided by the concept of policies that promote home care against that of policies that promote the use of formal child care. Parental leave programs and cash for care benefits promote home care. These home care policies are geared towards the refamilialization

of the family. Formal child care and child maintenance promote the use of formal care, defamilialization of the family is promoted in this context [4]. The various family policies that promote home and formal child care will be linked vis a vis the family models of male breadwinner and dual earner.

7. PARENTAL LEAVE

Parental leave is when parents take a job leave for a certain period of time to take care of infants. Parents' jobs are protected when they take these leaves and can return to their work with their job intact. "Parental leave can be assigned to the mother (maternity leave) or the father (paternity leave) or be available to either parent (parental leave)" [14, p 119]. From the 1990's, Nordic countries have initiated policies that encourage fathers to take their leave by providing them non – transferable leave entitlements both for their mandatory leave and paternity leave [4].

Maternity leave also known as pregnancy leave, is a job security leave of absence when the mother is almost due for child birth. In some countries mothers who want to adopt children are given the chance of maternity leave. According to the International Labour Conventions (ILO) at least a period of 14 weeks is allotted for maternity leave [14]. Pre-birth and post birth leave periods are normally combined by most countries. Pre-birth leave of about six to ten weeks is compulsory in some countries. Paternity leave is a common feature in the Nordic countries, but it is not stipulated by international convention. Also, the period of paternity leave is shorter than that of the maternal leave [19].

Parental leave is a family policy that encourages familialization, because both parents are able to provide care for the children at home. It is based on the dual earner- dual carer family model. Both the man and woman are able to share paid and unpaid work equally to a large extent. By the virtue of both parents working and receiving salaries, they can support the home with their income and as well as help in taking care of the children together [20]. However, existing literature also indicate that there are more women than men taking parental leave. Thus, if more women than men take parental leave, how are those women able to engage actively in the labour market? This questions whether paternal leave completely supports dual earner family model. Results from existing literature suggest the dual earner family model becomes possible

for the families after the introduction of the father's quota. It would be useful to consider these nuances [20].

7.1 Cash for Care

In reality, cash for care is an appendage of the parental leave though the cash benefits that accompanies it for supports parents. Low income earning parents find it more beneficial [14]. Cash for care is a policy geared towards the easy migration from parental leave to subsidised child care, giving parents the chance to stay home a little longer after the parental leave elapses [14]. Cash for care benefit reforms was introduced in Norway in 1998, the main aims of the reform were that parents should be allotted adequate time to care for their own children, give families the luxury of choosing care arrangement and more equitable subsidies to families [21]. Parents with children of ages 1 to 2 years who do not use subsidised day care or kindergarten are eligible to the benefit. This helps distribute public funds equitably between users and non-users of subsidized child care facilities. Sceptics of the policy in its early stages decried that the policy might shift child care demand from high quality professional day-care to more informal arrangement based on private childminders [22]. This indicates it is always a matter of choice of parents on how they want their children to be taken care. Though using the services of childminders may seem convenient for the short term it cannot last for long where parents will resort back to the professional day care arrangement.

Cash for care promotes home care and it also encourages the concept of familization which is in tandem with the dual-earner model because it is reconciling paid work and family life.

On the other hand, other family policies like subsidised child care also known as pre-school or kindergarten and child maintenance support the use of formal care. Defamilization is a feature in these family policies. The role of care is taken from the parents to a large extent so that they can have ample time to work [16].

7.2 Subsidised Child Care

"The Nordic countries, with exception of Finland, have high formal child care enrolment rates. For 3 to 5 year – olds, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden have close to 100% enrolment rates (Finland has 74%) compared to the OECD average of 82%" [14]. The reason for these high

numbers or enrolment is because of the generous subsidies. Subsidised child care refers to facilities where children receive formalised child care at reasonably low prices. It is subsidised so that irrespective of one's social standing they can be able to have access to formalised child care. Studies have shown that there is an encouraging percentage enrolment rate of 0 – 2 years and that of 3 to 5-year olds in Norway and other Nordic countries [14]. Some of the institutions that provide subsidised child care are pre-schools, public nurseries and kindergarten. The use of formal child care is a transition from informal care provided by individuals not specially trained for the provision of care by trained child care providers in public institutions. It is a normal part of childhood to be in a formal child care institution. After 26 weeks old there is a right to child care despite the fact that parental leave may continue until 46 weeks old. It is estimated that 17 percent of children are enrolled in formal child care before they turn one [4]. The state is very much involved in all the child care facilities and therefore tends to look out for the benefit of parents especially that of the mother and the child as well. Government in the Nordic countries are big spenders on child care facilities, therefore it is imperative on government to absorb the pressure of care giving by parents so that when they work they can be taxed to improve or sustain the welfare state [4]. The concept of refamilization comes up here. The provision of care is transferred from the family to the state. Although the formal child care facilities do not operate all day and night, the children spend a sufficient amount of time outside the home. The provision of subsidised child care is based on the dual earner family model, because both parents help in ensuring their wards are enrolled in the subsidised child care institutions. This is because the dual earner policy is influenced by the notion of men and women as equals as far as employment and responsibility for the children are concerned.

7.3 Child Maintenance

In the Nordic countries, maintenance of the child is the paramount responsibility of the parents. Even when there is a parental separation, the parents must still work ways out to cater for the child. Child maintenance is mostly settled when marriage or co-habitation ends. The amount of income earned, and time spent with the child by both parents is the determinant factor as to the level of the child maintenance one pays. The greater income and time spent with the child

leads to higher income. If a parent defaults in payment of child maintenance, the state absorbs that responsibility and later recovers from the defaulter. In Norway the maintenance benefit is income related whiles in Denmark it is a fixed benefit [4].

Child maintenance is based on the family model of dual earner model because the maintenance benefit is paid by both parents though one might pay more than the other based on the amount of time one spends with the child. However, the fact still remains that there is a joint provision for the needs of the child even though the parents might be separated.

7.4 Child Benefit

Child benefit is often confused with child maintenance or child support. Child benefit in the Nordic countries is universal and tax free and independent of parent's other sources of income. It is support provided to compensate parents associated with having children. Parents are entitled to child benefit if they have a child under the age of 18 in their care who resides with them. Single parents are also entitled to these benefits. Payment is done from the time the child is entitled till the time they turn 18 years [23]. However, the benefit rules differ from country to country. Some countries take into consideration the size of the household and whether parents are single or not. For instance, Norway and Denmark award higher benefit to single parents, whiles Sweden has a fixed amount irrespective of the number of parents in the household; nonetheless the benefit per child increases with the number of children in the family in Sweden whereas in Norway and Denmark the reverse is the case [4]. This family policy is undoubtedly hinged on the dual earner model, because families still benefit even in the case of parental separation.

8. POLICIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Gender has become a relevant factor in determining policies across various fields and has become a centre of study especially in the Nordic welfare societies [24]. The Nordic society's main policies for gender equality are to strengthen women's economic independence through labour market participation, positive discriminatory policies and political participation [24]. "Gender equality policies are tightly related to family policies since a major aim of the welfare

state is to promote a change in the traditional gender roles within the families" [3, p.19].

8.1 Strengthening Labour Participation of Women

During the 1970's and 1980's governments in the Nordic Societies implemented policies that would help strengthen participation of women in the labour market and bear children at the same time [21].

Policies like paid parental leave where the parents take a leave from work to cater for the child is an example of this. As time went on, the fathers' quota was introduced to help the mothers in taking care of their children and share the responsibility of care, as well as have the chance to be part of their children's formative years [25]. Cash for care was also initiated so that parent might choose if they prefer a cash benefit to a day care centre so that they take care of the children themselves [26]. Formalised child care facilities are available to parents at subsidised cost and they can send their children there and also be able to work [21].

There is evidence to show that, these policies have influenced gender balance in child care to an extent. For instance, in Norway in the last decade, women have decreased the time they use for housework (unpaid labour) and noticeably increased the time for wage earning (paid labour), whereas men decreased moderately the time they use for wages (paid income) and only slightly increased their share of housework (unpaid labour) [3].

8.2 The Gender Equality Act

In Norway, the Gender Equality Act was formalised in 1979, its aim was to stop discrimination based on gender in all aspects of society, except for internal matters in the religious communities. The Act supported positive preference treatment that sought to improve gender equality. Its recent amendment was in 2005. It was amended to ensure effective implementation and harmonisation of the Gender Equality Act. This was a deliberate policy by the Norwegian government to promote equality and prevent discrimination. This led to pursuing the agenda of gender mainstreaming in the 1980's, where all policies of central government was guided by harmonising the principles of gender equality as a matter of urgency. The sameness

of both male and female was high on the agenda [3,24].

Positive preferential treatment elicited into gender specific measures to fill in the gender gap. Taking Norway as an example, much legislation has been passed to support gender specific dimensions, 40% of boards in state owned companies should have women on them [27,3].

However, a challenge that arises from this initiative is that positive preference measures tend to be discriminatory against men when it is not in sync with gender mainstreaming. It is seen to be a strictly women's agenda. Gender mainstreaming brings balance as it seeks to change the system of discrimination against both genders [24]. Dual earner family model is linked to the Gender Equality Act, because of the sameness the policies advocates for. Both parents provide and equal care and responsibility towards the child. Although the mother might have much affinity to the child since it is a natural phenomenon.

8.3 Female Political Participation

In times past the participation of women in politics was low. To address gender issues there must be political power backing it, however most women were not involved in politics, so they had little influence on the issues. Political participation was therefore crucial to address policies that will promote gender equality and strengthen women's active involvement in home care and employment as their male counterparts where doing. Statistics show that around 1945 only 4.7 percent of parliamentarians were women in the Norwegian Parliament [3].

Political parties employed massive campaign for women as well as giving them quotas to increase women participation in politics. Evidence is there to show that these measures paid off. Priorities of women were brought up and their voices were heard. By 1994, the percentage of women in the Norwegian Parliament rose by 38 points from that of 4.7 percent in 1945. That is why Hernes [28] posits "Reproduction gone public" where the Nordic states deliberately "pulled" women through its policies to let women own their voice and shape developments to benefit their interest.

There is tremendous improvement in the participation of women in politics. That is why the gender issues are a main part in the narrative of issues in the Nordic societies. However, the

challenge is that of vertical segregation; there is still low numbers of women occupying top positions. There is still gender bias in the labour markets. Lots of women are employed in sectors that pay lower salaries. Women receive about 13 percent less than men when the differences in working hours and occupations are taken into consideration [3]. In the educational sector, there is that of the horizontal segregation; more men dominate in the technical and sciences subjects. This translates in having more men in the engineering, building industry, oil and gas industry etc. while women are more dominant in teacher training, education and health social subjects. It is also evident as we see more women in the nursing and the pedagogy industry. This can be related to the flexible jobs in the public sector where the women are dominant, but they not pay very well as compared to the private sector where the men are also dominant [27]. Dual earner model goes in tandem with the policies of female political participation, where women are elevated to reach the level of men so that they can all serve in equal capacities of caring in the home and being gainfully employed.

9. CHALLENGES TO FAMILY POLICIES AND POLICIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

The Nordic societies are seen as women friendly states, it is evident by the generous family policies and policies for gender equality. However, some of these policies in seeking to address the issues of discrimination and marginalisation in the aspects of gender perpetuate same on other minority groups. Intersectionality must be checked if the agenda of equality and fairness wants to be achieved. Massive immigration over the years in the Nordic countries has created a diverse society with the different cultures and at variance with the Nordic culture. Because of the cultural clashes, marginalisation of these people happens [17]. Also, Nordic societies are divided by class, age and ethnicity; and the various policies tend to favour the middle class who are mostly likely to get comfortable positions in work than others because of their high educational status. Nordic feminist social scientists have suggested that there must be an accommodation for diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds [29]. As succinctly put by Fraser [17] "Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle".

These challenges have led to some people not being able to fit into the family models especially that of the dual earner model that the Nordic societies are moving towards. Intersectionality has led to the exclusion of some minority groups. Some of the females are not employed because the system does not favour them therefore they are likely to depend on their men to take care of them while they take care of the kids [30]. Their husbands cannot take parental leaves to also partake in the care of their children because they will have to work extra hours to provide for the unemployed wife and kids.

These challenges that some families are fraught with rather leads them to toe the line of the breadwinner model because they do not have a chance to be employed so that they can contribute their quota in the family financially apart from the home care they give all the time.

There also the fatigue of hearing the gender equality campaign. The long history of focusing substantial effort on gender equality is exhausting and most people especially the youth are quite dispassionate of it and less interested. Others are of the view that the fight for gender equality has been taken to the extreme. The ideals of free choice, individualization and pluralisation have taken over and the massiveness of gender equality is lagging behind [3].

10. CONCLUSION

Families are an essential part of the Nordic societies; it is seen as the catalyst that propels the welfare system. Parents work and are taxed to keep the system running, children are cared for and given the requisite training to fill the labour market in the near future.

This essay has examined how the policies initiated by the government has helped in getting mothers to be part of the labour system and at the same time be able to bear children. Further family policies for fathers have also given men the chance to help in child care and also be part of their children's life. Women have also become more economically independent and can also contribute to the maintenance of the home. The review of existing literature shows that Nordic family policies are leading to a move away from the male breadwinner model to that of the dual earner family model. The analysis shows that there are not many differences with regards which family models are common within the

Nordic countries as the dual earner family model appears to be dominant.

Some challenges of policies for gender equality were touched upon and how the quest for achieving gender equality is in another breath trying to perpetuate inequality. Policies like positive preference is a typical example, no matter how positive the preference is it still discriminates on another person even it was meant for a good cause. It was also realised that the youth of today are quite indifferent to the much trumpeted issues of gender equality and think they are being blown overboard. The focus looks to have shifted to that of individualism.

Lastly, the essay looked briefly at the issue of biopolitics and how government policies in the Nordic societies are geared towards controlling the lives of people to fit their agenda.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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