

## **THE NORDIC APPROACH TO THE PROMOTION OF EQUALITY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Nordic countries – including Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – have in many ways constructed a distinctive approach to the development of the welfare state, gender equality and provision for children. The distinctiveness is a result of a long and complicated joint history encompassing collaboration, shifting borders and warfare too. The Nordic countries remained predominantly agricultural for quite a long time, and industrialized relatively late – especially Finland. This has had an impact on ways in which issues related to industrialization have been addressed. The settlement between the state, employers and trade unions has been negotiated with attention social justice. The position of women in Nordic countries has been marked by similarities, and policies have aimed at women's inclusion in the labour market. Distribution of resources is generally more equitable, and income differences are smaller than for example in the UK. To make this participation possible, the care and welfare of children needed to be organised. Generally equality issues in Nordic countries are associated with questions focusing on children, mothers and families, as Anne Trine Larsen (2005) suggests in the context of Denmark. This argument is applicable to other Nordic countries as well.

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There have been differences between the countries too. The process of ensuring a sufficient workforce for expanding economies has varied, but similarities are also noticeable, if comparisons with for example the UK are made. In the UK the expanding economy relied on workers from the colonies and women were not encouraged to work outside the home. Sweden opted for a combination of immigrant workers with encouraging entry of women into the labour market, mostly in part-time jobs. Finland has had a history of shifting borders particularly in the east. Having lost part of its area to the Soviet Union after the Second World War, Finland opted for a policy of a closed door to new migrants. Instead, Finland opened the labour market for women and the expansion of the economy was dependent on their contribution. The development of a public daycare system has been crucial for women's participation in the labour market. Today a daycare place is guaranteed to all children who need it. This right is assigned to the child rather than the parents.

Currently the European Union context is important for the Nordic countries. On the one hand the Nordic countries fare well on the basis of the range of criteria that are used when compiling European statistics. Based on several criteria the quality of life that women in Nordic countries can expect is positive in many ways. For example they are a bit more educated, they live a bit longer and their health is better. However, it is not simple and straightforward to comment on the complexities of happiness and wellbeing. More qualitative research is needed in order to consider the strains that women experience in their everyday lives. Older European societies have longstanding patterns that may impose less complicated expectations on women.

### **‘WOMAN-FRIENDLY’ POLICIES**

The majority of women tend to work full time in Finland and children are in full-time daycare. In other Nordic countries part-time daycare is more common. Considerable gains have been made by women in Finland and other Nordic countries in terms of opportunities for combining work and the family. Yet there are tensions and difficulties as well. The birth rate is low and having children is typically postponed. Such tensions, for example, are demonstrated by looking at ways in which young Finnish women talk about becoming or being a woman, and ways in which they imagine their future lives.

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Examining European statistics Nordic women have higher life-expectancy at birth – 81.5 in Finland, 82.1 in Sweden – compared to the UK, where life expectancy is 80.4. There are, therefore, good reasons to suggest that Nordic welfare states are woman-friendly. However, part-time work has become more common in Finland, too. These shifts have been associated with changes in the labour market in the context of neo-liberal elements in social-democratic policies.

In her comparative study of gender equality in Finland and France, Eeva Raevaara (2005) argues that in Finland gender equality has been promoted as a means to bring the contribution of women – as well as men – to the benefit of the whole society. As Liisa Husu (2001, p.66) suggests, from a global perspective 'Finland may look like a paradise for educated women'. Husu also draws attention to the gender segregation of the Finnish labour market. Although full time work can be argued to provide independence for women, the more flexible patterns in other Nordic countries may contribute to a less stressful everyday life. In the context of the similarities in the position of women in the Nordic countries it is challenging to note the advantages as well as disadvantages they are confronted with.

Arnlaug Leira (2002) has examined the ways in which state policies in Nordic countries have endeavoured to promote 'woman-friendly' welfare state policies. The aim is that families with children can organise their daily lives in ways that are beneficial to all the members, whilst also promoting equality between women and men. As Harriet Silius (2002) suggests, a welfare state is characterised by 'a focus on education, health, housing, means of subsistence, social security and other measures for guaranteeing the well-being of people' (p.32). Moreover, welfare states are located between markets and private lives as well as between paid work and care. Welfare state policies are associated with the promotion of social citizenship.

### **EQUALITY**

I use an example to demonstrate Nordic debates. When I was in the Women's Studies Department in Tampere University, I examined students on a unit on the welfare state and gender equality. At times I included a question where I asked them to discuss and compare UK and Finnish feminist theorisation of the welfare state. Many students responded by arguing that the UK theorists emphasised patriarchy, because theirs was a society marked by gender divisions and inequalities. Often the students suggested that women in the UK

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were dependent on men. Therefore the state and its policies were considered to be patriarchal. Because of this patriarchal nature of the state it was not surprising that feminists developed theories that suggested that the state is patriarchal. Although the theory was developed in the UK context, it was nevertheless abstracted from that context. The results were then extended to apply to the state in general, rather than attributing them to state formation in UK in particular.

When students discussed Finnish theories, many of them suggested that the Finnish state is characterised by woman-friendly politics and policies. They obtained the right to vote early and there is a relatively high proportion of women among members of the parliament. It has been argued that the approach of the state in promoting welfare reflected the fact that Finnish society has been committed to equality. Women had participated in parliamentary politics actively, thereby promoting women-friendly policies. Therefore the state policies promoted women's entry to the labour market. Moreover, those women who work there were able to take collective responsibility for practices that had been privatised into the home in the UK. If women stay at home with their children, this has a significant impact on patterns in society, as for example Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody (1989) have argued. They suggested that there is a great deal of differentiation between the practices of middle class and working class mothers.

Finnish society is dependent on the idea of a 'working female citizen', as Anneli Anttonen (2001) has suggested. About a half of the labour force is female in Finland, and about 80 per cent have been working full time. It has been suggested that this is a remarkable achievement that has enabled women to construct independent resources. Rather than the state being represented as a site of patriarchal power as in the UK, it has been considered an ally of women in Finland. Although patterns have been somewhat different in other Nordic countries, where part-time work has been more characteristic of women's position in the labour market, generally the Nordic states are thought to be women-friendly. Recently part-time work has increased in Finland too, because large shops in particular have started to use more part-time labour. This practice has not been welcomed by trade unions.

As Brannen and colleagues (2002) have noted, discourses of equality work in different ways in different countries. They suggest that in Scandinavia there is a silent discourse on equality which is based on normalized expectations. Tensions between such expectations and actual practices do exist, however.

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In the UK, according to Brannen, equality is translated into an issue associated with individual decisions and there is a liberal idea of options or choices. However, due to the shifts that are taking place in Nordic countries as well as in the UK, these societies may be getting closer to each other's models. The need for more extensive provision of public childcare has been recently discussed in Britain.

Thinking about nationality is significant when addressing some of these differences. We have examined ways in which nationality has been constructed in the education system in the UK and in Finland (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2000). In Finland the education system was given the task of producing a united homogeneous nation balancing between the constraints of its geopolitical situation and its historical interest to develop as a Nordic welfare state. The UK, on the other hand, is an old world power, a former empire with a history of colonial conquest. It is not surprising that the nation state is not emphasised in such a self-evident unit as the UK as it is in the Nordic countries. At the same time Britain has been a more heterogeneous country with a long history of ethnic diversity. The process of constructing a nation is less evident in British educational history. The relationship between Englishness and Britishness is complex and ambivalent, and has become perhaps more so, or more examined, in a period of devolution of power to constituent countries of the UK.

### **EQUALITY AND STRENGTH THROUGH WORK**

Based on several dimensions women in Finland occupy a favourable position. The welfare society is based on a rejection of the ideas of a male breadwinner and family wage, a model typical for example in the UK and the US. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) has suggested that in the US the family wage model was crucial in establishing the differentiated division of labour among white women and men, whereas such a division of labour was not considered necessary among other ethnicities. Therefore women as housewives and mothers became an important symbol of the social order that was based on establishing and maintaining racial difference. The Nordic model is based more on the idea of partnership between women and men in the construction of a new society. Indeed welfare policies in Nordic countries and the position of women have been considered as indicators of the general wellbeing in society.

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Kirsti Lempiäinen (2003) has analysed how Finnish women are talked about in sociology books. The context of the discussion is the position of women in the welfare state and the labour market. She has found claims such as:

The earlier studies do show convincingly that the rate by which women's wage work has become common in Finland is the world record (Jolkkonen and al 1991, p.19);

In the international comparison Finnish women fared well; for instance in Sweden only thirteen women were chosen [to the parliament] (Haavio-Mannila and al 1983, p.36).

Elina Haavio-Mannila notes above that the relatively high gender equality is looked upon as a positive characteristic. Kirsti Lempiäinen suggests that in texts the 'unique' Finnish woman succeeds in competition with other women. When such a Finnish woman is evoked, the assumption generally is that she is white. In this way women from minority ethnic groups remain rather invisible in the context of Finnishness. Eira Juntti (1998) has analysed how this image of a special female appears in Finnish women's magazines. In discussions about the – at the time – forthcoming European Union-membership the strong woman was represented as something that 'we' want to export from Finland to the rest of the world, or in this case to Europe.

However, the relative strength of the Finnish woman is lessened when Finnish men rather than women in other countries are chosen as the point of comparison. Kirsti Lempiäinen wonders why the question about gender equality is posed as 'how well do women in Finland fare when compared to other women in the world?'. It is more useful to state it as follows: 'how well do women fare when compared to men in Finland'. The answer to the latter question would appear more contentious. For example in her analysis of Scandinavian countries Helga Hernes (1987) has suggested that in the context of the welfare state women have moved from private to public dependence (see also Silius 2002).

When I conducted research on feminist mothers (Gordon 1990) in London, Leicester and Helsinki in the late seventies, there were some interesting differences between women in Finland and England. The Finnish women found staying at home during maternity leave more difficult than women in England. For example a woman on maternity leave from her paid work might feel that she is not earning her place in society – even though during her employment she would have paid social insurance fees that will have been

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automatically deducted from her salary, so that she had made her own contribution towards her subsequent maternity leave.

In the Nordic countries single women were integrated into the labour market, particularly in the textile industry. When industrialisation continued, the number of working female citizens increased. Paid work became closely associated with women as well as men. The development of the welfare state opened a labour market for women who became teachers, nurses and nursery workers for example. The division between women's work and men's work is considerable.

### **EDUCATION**

The education system is important in the construction of Nordic welfare societies. Finnish girls have outperformed every other group in the so-called PISA tests that have measured the educational achievement and success of schools. This has strengthened gendered discourses that emphasise the success of girls and bemoan the position of boys in feminised educational contexts.

Elina Lahelma and Elisabeth Öhrn (2003) have examined the idea of the 'strong woman' in Finland and Sweden, and found remarkable similarities between these icons of equality in both countries. Indeed schools are argued to be girl-friendly and a great number of worries have been expressed about boys. However, for example ethnographic research that we have conducted in two schools in Helsinki does not provide support for such girl-friendliness (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2000). In practice during lessons girls are expected to talk less and to move less than boys. Similar results were found in Norway (Arnesen 2003).

The labour market is gender differentiated and therefore women often compete with other women rather than with men. As in other countries, women earn less than men, although the percentage of their earnings is somewhat higher. Young women are more likely to be in less paid jobs than men, and these jobs are often short term. Part time work is also increasing, particularly in the retail sector. With the advent of neo-liberalism such jobs have increased, and women in jobs requiring few skills are likely to be paid an insufficient salary in order to support themselves and their children.

## **WOMEN FOR SOCIETY**

In Eeva Raevaara's (2005) comparison of equality politics in Finland and France she notes that in France equality is considered an inherent part of the French society. In Finland gender equality has been regarded as important for different reasons. The expertise of women has been required in the labour market in order to develop the societal infrastructure and to bring their contribution to the benefit of the whole society.

A range of policies has been adopted in the Nordic countries in order to integrate the participation of women in the labour market, but also in order to ensure that they are able to make a contribution at home as well, as Jessica Lindvert (2002) suggests. She notes that Swedish gender policy has been characterised as a 'working mother's policy'. The aim is to facilitate the combination of paid work and motherhood. Lindvert calls this 'the sameness route' (p.100), even though – as compared to Finland – Swedish, Norwegian and Danish women's positions are based more on the idea of a combination of different spheres in women's lives. Yet, as Lindvert argues, 'the Swedish gender policy is framed towards women as citizens, associated with the social rights of collective of *workers*.' (p.103). The rights of Nordic women are very much associated with their status as working citizens, even though, as suggested, their citizenship in this context is connected to their status as women, and that status is differentiated from the status of men. The emphasis on the sphere of work has meant that in Nordic countries issues such as violence against women have been publicly and critically raised rather later than for example in the UK.

Anneli Anttonen (2002) has noted that whilst the development of the welfare state model that is based on universalism has had many benefits for members of Nordic societies, it has also been contradictory and problematic. Similarly in the context of Canada, Janet Siltanen (2002) argues that the 'connections between social citizenship and social policy need to be re-specified, and contexts supporting rights-based social policy identified.'

## **YOUNG WOMEN IMAGINING THEIR FUTURES**

Called upon to be 'women for society', I argue, girls and young women have experienced a great deal of ambivalence about ways in which to combine different aspects of their lives. In our transitions interviews we found that Finnish young women aged round fifteen to eighteen were reluctant to

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describe themselves as women, and also did not relish envisaging the process of aging and giving up girlhood (Gordon and Lahelma 2004). In one interview I had the following discussion with two young women, when I asked them why they do not want to be thought of as women.

Asta: ... women are, in some way, more sensitive. You know recognizing their own capacity is really difficult for them. Or sort of, it's like as if they wouldn't know how to, women don't know how to believe in themselves strongly enough. So that they would dare, you know.

Salli: Yes, or, very easily you get the situation where she has to do everything, look after everything, the whole career and family and the ability has to be the tops.

Asta: Yes, that's right.

Salli: And the sort of terrible effort at perfection. You know men are allowed, you know men have that career, and yes, nice thing.

Asta: Yes, that's right, it's that a woman ought to be so much.

Salli: Women try too much. Or I don't know.

Asta: They try too much, that's why they are exhausted and all a bit mixed up, because, because women sort of have to make a career and work and look after the family. It's all, sort of up to them.

Our interviewees have tended to embrace opportunities available to them as young women. For example many of them like to travel. They are likely to work in order to be able to visit other countries. Saving money is possible because parents have usually provided for their everyday needs. In this context girlhood has seemed more appealing than adult womanhood.

Considering the views and practices of young women is important. As Silius (2002) suggests, it is necessary to examine how welfare policies can be maintained as population ages is likely to pose further demands on the system. Therefore she argues that women's activism is going to be increasingly crucial. In this context it is noteworthy that although young Finnish women are ambivalent about the very status of 'woman', generally they are committed to the idea of public provision of welfare. For example

public provision of education, health care and social services are considered crucial by them.

## **FUTURE GOALS AND DIRECTIONS**

Anttonen suggests that the Nordic tradition of choosing universalism as a means by which to integrate women into society has had many advantages. It has promoted women's well-being, their access to education and their opportunities to combine work and mothering. Nordic, and particularly Finnish women, have seized the opportunities provided by free comprehensive education and by a university system that has endeavoured to make it possible for women to benefit from the opportunities.

For example in Finland flexible timing of studies makes it possible for women to combine studying and mothering. Public childcare as a subjective right for children has encouraged women to study and to work as well as cultivating independent status. This is reflected, for example, in the somewhat higher proportion of single women in the Nordic countries as compared to UK or the US for example. Anttonen also notes that processes of globalization and internationalization pose challenges to the tradition of Nordic universalism. It is the case that many important strategic decisions in Nordic countries have been favourable for women in general. But there are many particular concerns about sustained critical development of the Nordic state feminism. Indeed Arnlaug Leira (2002) has argued that the time has come to update the Nordic gender contract and to examine how family and employment roles are combined.

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*April 2006*