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Author

Boyle, Kaitlin

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Taking sameness for granted through the Nordic worker-carer model

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Kaitlin Boyle
University of Oslo
UNC Charlotte

The Norwegian Gender Equality Act of 1978 established that “women and men shall be given equal opportunities in education, employment and cultural and professional advancement” (1978:1). However, there is still a gap between women’s entry into careers historically dominated by men. Taking the example of women pursuing doctoral degrees, there are several barriers that women face when completing their dissertation and entering the job market in academia: having fewer hours to work on their dissertation due to their duties as wives and mothers, as well as the sexist attitudes of mentors (Rogg 2001, Husu 2001, Knudsen 2002). Creating quotas for women in jobs and encouraging them to enter male-dominated professions is not enough; the very idea that women are natural carers and men are natural workers needs to be addressed through policy initiatives (Borchorst 2008). Many policies have been implemented in the Nordic countries to dismantle the obstacles that women face in their careers, and men face in caregiving.

The Nordic countries, particularly Sweden and then Norway, have challenged deterministic claims about sex and gender. This is reflected in policy initiatives that assume men and women do not have inherent differences, and that given true freedom, they would choose more or less the same occupations and family roles. Women and men should be able to develop their own preferences for both household responsibilities and careers, and not be subjected to sexist assumptions about abilities and desires. Because gender is recreated and reinforced in everyday interactions, it can be quite difficult to overcome traditional gender roles. However, there is reason to believe that Nordic countries have been able to do so to an extent. Norway was once known as a great housewife society, with its policies mostly based on gender balance rather than equality, but has been catching up with policies like universal daycare and the daddy quota. The values of individualism and peace, as well as the welfare state and high labor involvement by both genders, have led to easier acceptance and

implementation of such policies (Longva 2003). On the individual level, it has been said that married couples have more trouble being egalitarian when children enter the picture, and childcare becomes an issue. Universal daycare and the daddy quota are two initiatives that enable a couple to retain some of their egalitarian values after having children.

Universal daycare

The argument for full citizenship rights for women began in the early 1900's with debates over marriage and property, and the population issue of women marrying older and less often than previously (Rogg 2 2010). Norway was considered a "country of housewives" as recently as the 1970's, when women were granted (among other rights) universal daycare in 1972 (Borchorst 2008:34)¹. Today, pre-school and kindergarten for all children aged one to six are provided by the Norwegian government. This daycare is in line with the "universal-breadwinner" vision, in that it enables women to have full citizenship rights and to become working citizens (2008:36). Entering the workforce does not only add value to a woman's overall family income, but enhances hers as an individual; it helps women support their family if they are single, divorced, or widowed (Skrede and Ronsen 2006:120-121).

Women are faced with both horizontal and vertical discrimination in the workplace (Holter 1970). Not only are they segregated from men in the types of careers and positions deemed "appropriate" for their sex (horizontal), but they are also stratified below men in the hierarchy of career-oriented value (vertical). Generally, when a couple has children, the man's income increases while the woman's income decreases (Ø.G. Holter 2003). Universal daycare can alleviate some of this discrimination. Women are no longer forced to choose between having a career and caring for their children—as the state has now taken on that responsibility. This means that a woman's period of time off for childcare is shorter than previously, so that she has the opportunity to make more money, work towards a bigger pension, and also advance her career.

¹ It is important to note, however, that cash-for-care is still a policy in Norway, but the amount of money granted to stay-at-home mothers is very small, and is mostly utilized by immigrant women from countries where women generally stay at home.

This policy has been one force in creating gender equality in families and in Norwegian society. Although women still work fewer hours a week and spend less time working full-time, statistics show that this gap has been getting steadily smaller. Women are more able to take on full-time work and longer working hours. Trends show that even though Norwegian women had the highest participation in the workforce in 2000 out of western European countries, Norwegian women still have the highest fertility rate at 1.9, indicating that high work participation does not necessarily mean women will have fewer children; many attribute this to the availability of daycare (Holter 2003:130).

The daddy quota

Parenthood is a citizen's social right (Arnlaug 2002). In Norway, women were given custody of children in the majority of cases until the 1970's, and fathers, as the breadwinners, took parental leave very rarely (Ahlberg, Roman, and Duncan 2008:83). In 1974, the right to parental leave became gender-neutral. Unfortunately, with pressures from employers to not take leave, and the mother's belief that she should have control over childcare, very few men were taking advantage of this right (84). In 1993, this was addressed with the creation of the 'daddy quota', a period of leave that is set aside for the father and cannot be used by the mother (Borchorst 2008:34). The daddy quota challenges the idea that men do not have the capacity or desire to care for their children. When this was first implemented, there was some fear that men would not take the paternity leave, or worse, that they would not be able to care for their young children. However, men have always had caring positions in society, and this was only changed in the light of industrialization (Ø. G. Holter 2003:85). As the amount of time set aside from the father has increased from eight weeks to ten weeks in 2010, and to fourteen weeks in 2011, the role of the father in the home has gained greater importance, and thus, credibility (Anti-Discrimination Ombud 2010).

There has also been the so-called rise of the "new man" in Nordic countries (Aarseth 2007). Today's rising fathers grew up in more traditional homes, and have opted for a more flexible masculinity, actively constructing the role of father and man on their own terms. This new model of masculinity enjoys housework projects and cooking, and is an active parent in

his children's' lives (Ø. G. Holter 2003). Research indicates that married couples are choosing tasks less by gender and more by personal preference (Aarseth 2007). Both men and women stand to gain from this new masculinity, in areas beyond fatherhood. As men are more able to have more flexible, intimate, and caring relationships, and the masculine ideal becomes less patriarchal and dominant, men and thus women will have more freedom (e.g., lower levels of intimate violence and prevalence of prostitution, Månson 2001). If the division of labor in the family is changed, the gender roles in wider society will also change (Holter 1970).

Are we there yet?

In dual-breadwinner families, 80-90% of households in Nordic countries still give at least some priority to the man's career (Holter 2003:131). Women are still choosing 'women-friendly' public sector jobs (Borchorst 2008:40). Some men who take leave to care and participate in housework are still met with confusion or derision (2008:153). Even some couples that are rather egalitarian in their division of work and care still rely on standard concepts of masculinity and femininity to define their roles as spouses and parents (Magnusson 2005). So, are we there yet? While the Nordic countries may be on the right path to gender equality, there is still much work to be done by men, women, and policymakers (Holter 2003).

Nordic countries are often depicted as homogenous, and there have been recent criticisms of the lack of attention paid to diverse masculinities, class, and multiculturalism:

- The current gender equality discourse idealizes the "new man" that enjoys spending time at home is appealing, yet this is out of reach for marginalized men and families (Christensen and Larsen 2008).
- Under the guise of "gender equality", the ideal citizen role for both men and women is a masculine one. The female duty to care and female values of cooperation are now relegated to the state's duties through defamilisation, and women are expected to be aggressive in the work world and are applauded when they return to work quickly after childbirth (Longva 2003). Some feminists argue that a better society would result from incorporating the *female* as the norm (Ahlberg et al 2008).
- There is a growing immigrant population, yet gender equality is harder for immigrant women to reach due to a lack of recognition and support in scholarship and policy (Longva 2003).

Fortunately, since the above arguments were made, there has been greater acceptance of multicultural and intersectional approaches to studying gender equality.

Overall, it seems that greater gender equality has created more personal fulfillment for both sexes. As generations pass and more children are raised by women in powerful positions in paid work and fathers who value cooperation and are in previously female-dominated fields, the Norwegian (and Nordic) identity will continue to evolve towards greater individuality and the acceptance of separating biological sex from the social construct of gender. Both universal daycare and the daddy quota spring from the assumption of sameness, and the idea that both participation in the work force and parenthood are a citizen's social rights and duties. Taken together, these two policies help make it possible for women to have more fulfilling careers, and for men to have more fulfilling family roles.

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