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## **The Nordic Approach to the Promotion of Equality**

The Nordic countries - including Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – have in many ways distinctive approach to development of the welfare state, gender equality and provision for children. The distinctiveness is a result of a long and complicated joint history, including collaboration, shifting borders as well as past wars. Generally Nordic countries were agricultural, and industrialized relatively late – especially Finland. This has had an impact on ways in which issues such as distribution of resources, settlement between the state, employers and trade unions have been negotiated. The position of women has also been marked with similarities, with policies aiming at inclusion of women in the labour market. To make this participation possible, the care and welfare of children needed to be addressed.

There have been differences between the countries too. The pattern of ensuring sufficient workforce for expanding economies has varied somewhat. Whereas 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 as well as 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 Soviet Union after the Second World War, Finland opted for a policy of closed door to new migrants. Instead, Finland opened the labour market for women, and the expansion of the economy was dependent on their labour. In this context it was necessary to develop a day care system. Today day care place is guaranteed to children who need it. This right is assigned to the child, not the parents. The development of public daycare system has been crucial for women’s participation in the labour market.

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. However, part-time work has become more common after changes in the labour market associated with neo-liberal politics. 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, and low birth rate and having children is typically

postponed.

Such tensions 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.

## **Equality**

When I was in Women's Studies Department in Tampere, and was examining students on a unit on the welfare state and gender equality, I would often include a question where I asked them to discuss and compare UK and Finnish feminist theorization of the welfare state. Many students would respond by suggesting that the UK theorists emphasized patriarchy, because theirs was a society marked by gender divisions and inequalities. Women were dependent and hence the state was indeed patriarchal. When they turned to Finnish theories, many of them suggested that the idea of the woman-friendly state reflected the fact that Finnish society was committed to equality, and made it possible for women to enter the labour market and the sphere of politics.

The existence of the welfare state has indeed been crucial for women, who have been able to work, supported by public daycare. About a half of the labour force is female in Finland, and about 80 per cent have been working full time, although recently part-time work has increased, because particularly large stores have started to use more part-time. The Finnish society is dependent on the idea of a 'working female citizen', as Anneli Anttonen (2001) has suggested.

As Brannen and colleagues (2002) have noted, discourses of equality work in different ways in different countries. They suggest that in Scandinavian countries there is a silent discourse on equality which is based on normalized expectations, and tensions between such expectations and actual practices. In the UK, according to Brannen, equality is translated into an issue of individual decisions and idea of liberal option of choice.

Thinking about nationality is significant when examining 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, 2003). In Finland the education system was given the task of producing a homogeneous, united nation, balancing between constraints of its geopolitical situation and its historical interest to develop as a Nordic welfare state (Gordon, Komulainen & Lempiäinen 2002). 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 as such a self-evident unit in the UK as 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 at least it is more examined now in a period of devolution of power to constituent countries of the UK.

Based on several dimensions women in Finland fare well. The welfare society is based on rejection of the male breadwinner and family wage model, typical for example in the UK

and the US. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (\*) has suggested that 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 well being in society.

Kirsti Lempiäinen has analysed ways in which Finnish women are talked about sociology books. She has found claims like:

‘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 & al. 1991: 19);

Or

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

Elina Haavio-Mannila notes that the relatively high gender equality is looked upon as a positive characteristic. Kirsti notes that in such texts the Finnish woman is constructed as unique and she succeeds in competition with other women. -

Eira Juntti (1998) has analysed how this image 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.

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 wonders why the question about gender equality is not stated as follows: ‘how well do women fare when compared to men in Finland’ and not ‘how well do women in Finland fare when compared to other women in the world’.

## EQUALITY AND STRENGTH THROUGH WORK

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 latter found staying at home more difficult than women in the England. For example a woman on maternity leave from her paid work might feel that she was not earning her place in society – even though in paid employment she would have paid social insurance fees – automatically deducted from her salary – which were

her own contribution to such pay.

Later I carried out a study on single women Helsinki, London and San Francisco Bay Area (Gordon 1990). These are all places where in principle it is relatively easy to be a single woman, Helsinki, because the idea of independent status of women is emphasized, and there is a highest percentage of single women there. In London the anonymity of the big city provides spaces for single women. In San Francisco Bay Area the tolerance of cultural diversity is a stated public value, and the idea of such diversity has tempted people there, because they expect to find easier acceptance there than elsewhere. The percentage of single women is slightly higher there than in the rest of the US.

In the past the problem of single women was addressed in the US, when it was suggested that single women should be transported to the West and hence wives could be provided to those men who had traveled there. Similarly in Uk there was a discussion in the Parliament where it was suggested that single women should be shipped to Australia to accompany men there.

By contrast in Finland there was nowhere to ship single women, so the solution was to integrate them into the labour market, particularly for example textile industry, so that for a while the female population of Tampere was significantly greater than that of men. Again this proved to be a source of worry and consternation. On the one hand unaccompanied single women were considered a problem. On the other hand there was a great innuendo about the availability of the single women.

A further indication about the significance of the position of women as working female citizens became evident when the borders between Russia, the Baltic countries and Finland became more permeable. This gave a boost to sex industry in Finland which expanded significantly in the early nineties. Finnish women are far less likely to take up jobs in the sex industry, be it prostitution or performing in sex bars. However, it is also clear that not all the Russian and Estonian women are aware that their travel is organized for them in order for them to become prostitutes. There is an element of force used and trafficking in women is big business.

With these examples in mind I want to both endorse and to question ways in which the gender order is constructed in Nordic countries in general and Finland in particular.

## **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 educational achievement and success of schools. This has strengthened Elina Lahelma and Elisabeth Öhrn (2003) have examined the idea of a 'strong woman' in Finland and Sweden, and found remarkable similarities between this icon of equality in the two countries. Indeed a great deal of worries have been expressed about Finnish boys in particular, as well as other Nordic boys – as well as boys in Britain (c.f. Francis 2000).

Such arguments keep emerging, and the fact that Finnish boys performed best of all among boys in the PISA tests has not consoled those discussants who bemoan the success of girls and blame it on girl-friendly schooling (OECD 2001).

Ethnographic research we have conducted in schools in Helsinki does not provide support for such girl-friendliness. Girls are expected to talk less and move less. Teachers are more likely to notice boys and to, for example, learn the names of many of the boys sooner than the names of girls. Öhrn, in her study in Sweden, found similar results, as did Anne-Lise Arnesen (c.f. 2003) in Norway. Arnesen, Lahelma and Öhrn (2004) have examined these debates on boys and have concluded that they are based on 'traveling discourses'. These discourses are utilized to express concern about the (too) strong Nordic girls and women.

Whilst it reflects the gains made by women, the idea of a strong Nordic woman needs to be critically examined too. 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 – on average women earnings are about 80 per cent of men earnings. 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.

At school the 'strong Nordic woman' seemed to cite girls to be forbearing and patient. When a boy teased a girl in the classroom, the teacher noted that this is how 'strong Finnish women' are made. Similar references were made in Sweden. Therefore it seems that the strong Nordic woman that is constructed in such discourses is a woman who can tolerate and bear sexist language and behaviour. This is an interesting notion of equality, particularly when it is thought about in relation to the trends I have cited above.

## YOUNG WOMEN THINKING ABOUT THEIR FUTURES

There were interesting similarities and differences among the young women in Helsinki and UK studies when they were talking about their futures (c.f. Gordon, Holland, Lahelma & Thomson 2005). We asked them to imagine what their lives would be like as adults. Krista from Helsinki explained what worries her about the future:

Krista: Well of course if you don't get to study what you want. And that you have money and can look after financial matters, everything costs money, like rent and all that. Work, work, getting work.

Vicky from UK expresses different kinds of concerns when she is asked to imagine her life at the age of thirty-five.

Vicky: Er, probably in a house, with a husband or something, two kids. I don't know. Just a normal sort of what everyone wants to be like, in a way.

Many young women express similar ambivalence about motherhood in the UK and in Finland. Some of them want to postpone motherhood as far as possible into the future. But young women in the UK are more likely to expect to embrace motherhood more full-time than the women in Finland. This presumably is a reflection of the available childcare.

It is interesting that in interviews in both countries several young women expressed an interest not to become adult 'woman'. This was particularly prevalent in Finland though, and expressed here in Ella's words:

Ella: If you're a young girl, you can be a bit sort of, you can be like a child. But if you're a young woman, it sort of always means that somebody calls you a young woman, it either means that an awful lot is expected of you. Or like that you're a young woman, you should already know how to do this thing. Or another alternative that is that somebody wants to sort of respect you.

There were other young women, however, who did imagine their future lives as women, and embraced the kind of adulthood they pictured for themselves. They were also hopeful that society was improving all the time, and particularly that gender relations will be increasingly equitable. A few of the women embraced feminism whilst others were more careful and wanted to disassociate themselves from any public images of negatively portrayed strident feminism. Some of the Finnish young women debated with me in interviews and emphasised that their lives were going to be different from mine and they were confident about that, particularly at the age of eighteen. In the later interviews the young women were less likely to have such strong beliefs about equality, although they were still hopeful about their futures and worried mostly about studying and work.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Nordic model works in many ways well for women. They feel, overall, confidence about their futures as women, although they worry about how they will combine different aspects of their lives. On the other hand they have seen many models of such women. For example they have been able to observe strong, determined female politicians both at the local, national and EU levels – most notably the president of Finland Tarja Halonen. It is to be hoped they are able to maintain such optimism, and that the neo-liberal elements in societies will not gain further support. The rejection of the EU-constitution in France and the Netherlands can be interpreted partly as a public criticism of some of the neo-liberal aspects in EU-politics.

In the Nordic countries women have fought for mainstreaming issues of gender equality, and the feminist movement has been embedded within the political process. Through negotiations and compromises the Nordic model of integration has provided many opportunities for women, as my students suggested when they talked about 'our' welfare state and 'their' patriarchal system. Paid labour makes women more independent and

enables them to exercise agency in their lives. It is in this context that young women refer to 'our' welfare state and 'their' patriarchy.

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