

## A REVIEW OF FAMILY DEMOGRAPHICS AND FAMILY POLICIES IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

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Family policies in the Nordic countries gain international attention.<sup>1</sup> 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. Feminists, anti-poverty activists, and social liberals generally tend to look to the Nordic countries with curiosity and admiration (Lister, 2009). Recently it has also been argued that the Nordic countries not only produce social equality and high levels of living, but also enact active policies targeted at families that enhance productivity and lay the foundation for economic success (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 2002). Such policies simultaneously encourage women to work outside the home, and create good conditions for children's early education. Working mothers improve economic efficiency, broaden the tax base, and improve household income, thus reducing child poverty. It is hoped that early childhood education will create more equal life chances for children and secure a productive labour force for the future (cf. Esping-Andersen, 2002; Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012). Whether viewed from the perspective of gender equality, child welfare, or social investment, then, Nordic family policies appear to have some very useful features.

Not all the international attention is flattering, however. Conservative, mainly American, authors have drawn images of the Nordic countries as dystopias of family decline (Kurtz, 2004; Popenoe, 1988). They point to high rates of extramarital childbearing and divorce in these countries, and also to social attitudes, which are accepting of such practices. Traditional family practices are less dominant in the Nordic countries than in many other regions in Europe, as evidenced most recently in the debates over marriage equality for same-sex couples (see below).

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of some aspects of family demographics and family policies in the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Iceland. With regard to demographics, some main figures regarding divorce and extramarital childbearing, female employment, and child poverty are reviewed. For each of these indicators, comparisons are made with the largest European Union (EU) countries and the EU average. The following examination of family policies is mainly focused on policies regarding care for the youngest children, which is where Nordic policies are most active and most controversial.

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One ambition of the article is to contribute to informing debates about what, if anything, other countries can learn from the Nordic experiences with family policy. Policy diffusion is, however, a complex issue. Policies tend to develop over time in ways that are deeply intertwined with context-specific history and culture, and norms and values. A discussion of the transferability of Nordic policies may benefit from a historical understanding of how various policies emerged from various concerns and how these concerns differed between the five countries. While the Nordic countries may look like “one model” when viewed from afar, there are differences between them that have been historically important, which still linger in some form. In the next section, I briefly review the debate on whether or not there is *one* Nordic model of family policy. I then move on to present some figures on family demographics and family policy outcomes. The main section of the paper presents the key aspects of family policies in the five Nordic countries by looking at family benefits, parental leave arrangements, public childcare, and financial support for home-based care. This section ends with a summary of the differences and similarities between the five countries. Finally, I discuss some future challenges for Nordic family policies and consider the potential for policy transfer.

#### DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES, RECENT (PARTIAL) CONVERGENCE

The Nordic countries are typically portrayed as a unified cluster in social policy studies (e.g. Castles & Obinger, 2008). However, there is a large body of literature outlining the differences between these countries when it comes to family and gender policies. Indeed, the empirical differences between the Nordic countries in these areas became important ammunition for the feminist critics of Esping-Andersen’s influential “welfare regimes” (Esping-Andersen, 1990). For instance, Jane Lewis wrote in an early and much-quoted contribution: “...Esping-Andersen’s identification of a Scandinavian welfare regime breaks down as soon as gender is given serious consideration”(Lewis, 1992). Famously, she suggested that Esping-Andersen’s (1990) dimensions should be replaced by an analytical framework that emphasised to what extent the “male breadwinner model” had influenced national policies. This model would imply that married women were excluded from the labour market, firmly subordinated to their husbands for the purposes of taxation and social security entitlements, and expected to assume caring work at home without public support (Lewis, 1992, p. 162). Lewis (1992) suggested that the UK comes relatively close to this model in their social policies; France displays the model in a modified form, but Sweden provides the best example of a weak male breadwinner model. “The Norwegian system... is closer in many respects to that of Britain than it is to Sweden,” Lewis argued (1992: 162).

Lewis’ observation, drawing on Leira (1992), clearly cracked the image of a coherent Nordic regime. The “gender and social policy debate,” which was vivid during the late 1990s and early 2000s, further refined and nuanced the picture of gender and family policy traditions in the Nordic countries. In this literature, Norway and Finland are typically grouped to one side, with Sweden and Denmark on the other.

Norway and Finland created a model of welfare policies in which women were given rights, including financial rights, as mothers and carers (Wetterberg and Melbye, 2008;

Pfau-Effinger, 1999). Women thus had a certain independence from their husbands and a separate claims base in relation to the state. Sainsbury (1999) named this model the “separate gender roles model,” and relates it to Fraser’s (1994) ideal-typical “caregiver parity model.” Such policies do little to alter the gendered division of labour. In Fraser’s words (1994:606), the aim of the model “is not to make women’s lives the same as men’s, but rather to make difference costless” (1994: 606). This turn towards recognising women as mothers came early: mothers in Norway gained the right to make decisions about the daily life of their children on par with fathers in 1859, while fathers’ supremacy in decisions concerning children lasted until 1920 in Sweden (Wetterberg & Melby, 2008). In 1909, Norway became the first of the Scandinavian countries to grant paid maternity leave, 20 years ahead of Sweden and Denmark (Wetterberg & Melby, 2008). A number of welfare measures for mothers were introduced in the subsequent years during and after WW1, shaping the foundations of the Norwegian welfare state (Skevik, 2001; Wetterberg & Melby, 2008). Similar developments took place in Finland (Pfau-Effinger, 1999). It has been suggested that the emphasis on women’s rights as mothers, carers and domestic workers in Norway and Finland must be understood in light of the late industrialisation of those countries, and the fact that home-based work in the primary industries was a vital part of the economy in the relevant countries until as late as the 1960s (Pfau-Effinger, 1999; Skevik, 2004).

Sweden and Denmark, on the other hand, consistently pursued social policy strategies aimed at easing women’s entry into the labour force. Important measures included heavily subsidised childcare and long parental leaves, combined with a taxation system that rewarded dual-income families. Those two countries thus consistently moved away from Lewis’ (1992) male breadwinner model and towards gender equality in all areas. More than Norway and Finland, they embody the dual earner/dual carer model that is often associated with Nordic family and gender policies (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Sainsbury (1999) however suggests that the two countries implemented somewhat different notions of gender equality. Denmark has already abolished practically all benefits based on financial provision and care, and stood out in Europe by even abolishing pensions for survivors in 1992. Denmark thus developed social policies along ideal-typical “universal breadwinner” constructions (Fraser, 1994), with little attention to caring work for either gender. In Denmark, care is mainly outsourced to the state or the market. Sweden combined policies to promote paid employment for both men and women with efforts to promote care work for both, thus aiming for a “dual earner-dual carer” model (Sainsbury, 1999).

The above relates to historical developments. Norway had its “great leap” (Skrede, 1999) in family policies in the 1980s, when both parental leave arrangements and childcare coverage were rapidly expanded (see also Leira, 2006). Finland and Sweden were hard hit by the financial crisis of the early 1990s, and both countries joined the EU in 1994 (Norway and Iceland joined the European Economic Area, EEA). Moreover, all the Nordic countries have had various governments with different colours and priorities who have made their mark on family policies in the 1990s and 2000s.

New policy challenges and shifting political majorities ensure that no constellation of policy measures is ever set in stone. Today, however, it is reasonable to argue that the similarities

between the Nordic countries' family policies are more striking than their differences. All the Nordic countries pursue active family policies – family life is not seen as “private” – and all are committed to promoting gender equality. Also, it may be noted that all the Nordic countries share an understanding of who the objects of family policies are; family policies are targeted at nuclear families with dependent children. This is where reciprocal family responsibilities are found: spouses have a legal obligation to support each other and parents are responsible for their (biological or adopted) dependent children. Beyond these immediate relationships, there are no legalised family obligations. Adult children are under no obligation to provide for their elderly parents, neither financially or with regard to care. Also, parents' legal obligations to children formally end the day the child reaches legal adulthood (currently at the age of 18) (Hantrais, 2004:129). This view of what a family is informs the next section, which deals with some key characteristics of family demographics and with the subsequent discussion of policies. The scope is limited to issues concerning families with dependent children.

#### FAMILY DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

In the Nordic countries, almost all families with children live independently. Co-residence with older generations is rare. In Sweden and Denmark only about 15 per cent of parents aged 50 and over live with one of their children (Fokkema, ter Berke, & Dykstra, 2008:12), as do 7 per cent of those aged 75 or older in Norway (Daatland and Herlofson, 2004:52).<sup>2</sup> Studies show that a lot of informal help and support flow between adult children and ageing parents, but this support is typically provided from a distance (Daatland & Herlofson, 2004). Similarly, young adults move away from the parental home comparatively early. In 2005, fewer than 20 per cent of 18–35-year olds in the Nordic countries lived with their parents (with the exception of Iceland, where the figure was 28 per cent) (Aassve, Cottini, & Vitali, 2013). Parents tend to continue to support their young adult children (Hellevik, 2005), but again, this happens from a distance.

The Nordic patterns of partnership formation and dissolution have attracted attention from observers in other countries. In the 1990s, rates of divorce and extramarital birth were high in these countries, and some observers would argue that this was a high price to pay for whatever gains Nordic policies might produce (e.g. Kurtz, 2004). In recent years, however, other countries in Europe seem to be catching up. The Nordic countries are therefore less conspicuous, as indicated in Table 1.

In Table 1, the five Nordic countries are contrasted with the EU average, the three most populous EU countries, and with Poland, the largest EU country in Central and Eastern Europe. These countries are selected for comparison only; to facilitate a discussion of how different the Nordic countries currently are from other European countries. Looking first at mean age at first marriage, the table shows that women in the Nordic countries marry late. The average age at first marriage is above 30 in every country, and above 31 in all countries except Finland (30,9). In Germany, France and the UK, the average age at first marriage is 30, and 25.8 in Poland. Given this indicator, Poland stands out with a low average marriage age for

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<sup>2</sup> For an up-to-date review of these issues, see Dykstra et al. (2014)

TABLE 1: Mean age at first marriage, divorce rates, and rates of birth outside marriage in the Nordic countries, large EU countries, and EU-27. 2012 or most recent data.

	Mean age at first marriage, women	Divorce rates	Per cent of births outside marriage
Denmark	32,2	2,8	50,6
Norway	31,4	2,0	54,9
Sweden	33,4	2,5	54,5
Finland	30,9	2,4	41,5
Iceland	32,7	1,6*	66,9
EU-27	-	2,0**	39,5*
Germany	30,7*	2,2	34,5
France	30,0**	2,0*	55,8*
UK	30,0**	2,1*	47,6
Poland	25,8*	1,7	22,3

\* 2011 \*\* 2010

Sources: mean age at first marriage: UNECE

Divorce rates, % of births outside marriage: Eurostat

women – the differences between the Nordic countries and the large Western EU-countries are smaller. A similar pattern occurs with divorce rates. Divorce rates are higher, but not much, in the Nordic countries than in the large Western EU countries—and in Iceland they are lower. Regarding births outside marriage, there is considerable variation among the Nordic countries: the figure varies from 66,9 per cent in Iceland to 41,5 per cent in Finland. On this measure, however, rates in all the Nordic countries – together with the UK and France – are well above the EU average, while Poland is far below.

Figures indicating that about half of all children are born to unmarried mothers do not imply that they are born to mothers who are single. The vast majority of these children are born to cohabiting parents. The most recent data from Norway indicate that the proportion of children born to single women is about 10 per cent, and this figure has been stable over time (Statistics Norway, 2013). Rates of cohabitation are high in the Nordic countries, ranging from about 23 per cent in Norway to 28 per cent in Denmark and Finland (OECD, 2013) for 20–34-year olds. Against this background, it can be argued that it is mainly the order of things that have changed in the Nordic countries: childbearing often precedes marriage. Many cohabiting couples subsequently marry or break up. While 42 per cent of children in Norway live with cohabiting parents in their first year, the proportion has fallen to 21 per cent for six year-olds. By age six, 59 per cent of children in Norway live with married parents, and 20 per cent live with a single parent (with or without a step-parent) (Statistics Norway, 2013).

After divorce, children normally continue to reside with their mother, while the father moves out. The most recent data from Norway indicate that 66 per cent of children live with their mothers after a parental break-up, while 25 per cent of parents say they have shared

custody. Only eight per cent live with their fathers (Lyngstad, Kitterød, & Nymoen, 2014). Several studies however indicate that almost all non-resident fathers have regular contact with their children (Lyngstad et al., 2014; Skevik, 2006a). Moreover, contact appears to have increased over time. In 2012, 85 per cent of non-resident parents said they had contact with their child at least monthly, and 31 per cent said they saw the child for 13 days or more. The corresponding figures for 2002 were 75 and 13 (Lyngstad et al., 2014). There has thus been a reduction in the proportion of non-resident parents who have less than monthly contact, and an increase in the proportion with very extensive contact. It is likely that patterns in the other Nordic countries resemble those in Norway, given similarities in fathers' rights and the gender equality agendas.

A final point that can be made about family practices in the Nordic countries is that all these countries, except Finland, now recognise same-sex marriage. In Finland, same-sex couples can enter registered partnerships. Policies in this area have been moving in a more liberal direction since the late 1980s. Denmark was the first country to allow same-sex couples to register their partnerships in 1989, followed by Norway in 1993. In 2008, Norway became the first Scandinavian country to grant full marriage equality to same-sex couples. Sweden followed in 2009, Iceland in 2010, Denmark in 2012, and Finland in 2014.

Table 2 shows some indicators of family policy area performance in the Nordic countries: fertility, female employment, percentage of employed women who work part-time, and children's risk of poverty.

In 2012, the fertility rate in EU-27 was 1,58. This is well below the replacement fertility rate of 2,1. All the Nordic countries have fertility levels above the EU average – yet none of these countries reach the reproductive level. France and the UK pull the EU average upwards, while rates are low in Germany and Poland.

TABLE 2. Fertility rates, female employment (part-time), and child poverty rates in the Nordic Countries, large EU countries, and EU-27. Most recent data

	Total fertility rate (TFR) (2012)	Total female employment (2013)	Per Cent of total female employment, which is part-time (2013)	Children at risk of poverty (2012)
Denmark	1,73	72,4	35,8	8,3
Norway	1,85	77,1	41,8	8,8
Sweden	1,91	77,2	38,8	12,6
Finland	1,80	71,9	20,2	9,5
Iceland	2,04	79,5	32,3	8,0
EU-27	1,58	62,5	32,7	19,0
Germany	1,38	72,3	46,1	13,5
France	2,01	65,5	30,6	16,8
UK	1,91	69,4	42,6	17,6
Poland	1,30	57,6	11,1	19,3

Source: Eurostat. Children at risk of poverty: EU-SILC

Since the turn of the century, the EU has made a concerted effort to increase women's employment rates. By 2013, it had reached 62,5 for 27 EU countries. The Nordic countries all have female employment rates above the EU average. Rates of part-time employment, however, are relatively high in the Nordic countries, particularly in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Still, the highest rates of female part-time employment in Table 2 are found in Germany and the UK. What used to be a Nordic trait – high female employment rates made up to a high extent on part-time work – is becoming far more common across Western Europe. In the EU as a whole, 32,7 per cent of all employed women work part-time.

Child poverty rates are low in the Nordic countries. In all of the Nordic countries, except Sweden, around ten per cent of children are at risk of poverty as measured by EU standards; the EU average is 19 per cent.

The link between (high) female employment and (low) child poverty rates are intuitive. The determinants for relatively high fertility rates are more complex. There is however evidence to suggest that both high divorce rates and high female employment rates contribute to higher fertility rates (Castles, 2003). This may be counterintuitive, and indeed the relationship was the opposite around 1980 (op.cit). In the last 30 years, however, it seems that fertility rates increase when childbearing, to some extent, is decoupled from marriage, when family forms are flexible, and when women can combine childbearing and employment. In the Nordic countries, it seems that practices, attitudes, and policies prevent a fall in fertility rates on the scale seen in many other countries. The next section reviews policies directed at families, with an emphasis on efforts to combat child poverty and to influence men and women's parenting practices.

## FAMILY POLICIES IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

As noted in the introduction, family policies in the Nordic countries are mainly associated with efforts to promote gender equality. It is important to note, however, that influencing the gendered division of labour is not the only historically important aim of family policies. Other key aims include maintaining the population (pronatalism) and protecting children from poverty (Gauthier, 1996). The pronatalist argument is rarely used in present-day debates, even though it can be assumed that policy measures geared towards other goals can have implications for fertility. Policies to combat child poverty, however, are also important in the Nordic countries, as the next section shows.

## CHILD BENEFIT AND BENEFIT FOR THE POOREST FAMILIES

All the Nordic countries provide monetary child benefits paid to families with children. The benefit is universal and not taxable. In Iceland, it is income-tested for children older than seven (Nordisk Sosialpolitisk Komité, 2013:44). In Denmark, Norway and Iceland, the allowance is payable until the child reaches the age of 18; in Finland, until the age of 17; and in Sweden, until a child reaches the age of 16 years, or 20 years if the child is undertaking education. In Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland the benefit is paid at a higher level to lone parents (op. cit.), and in Finland, Iceland and Sweden, rates are higher for each subsequent child.

Children in lone parent families have a particularly high risk of poverty; this is also true in the Nordic countries. Various benefits are therefore designed to alleviate poverty in such families. The child benefit is often paid at a higher rate for lone parents, and all the Nordic countries have systems in place requiring the payment of child maintenance by non-custodial parents, albeit with somewhat different ways of calculating maintenance amounts (Skinner, Bradshaw, & Davidson, 2007; C. Skinner, Hakovirta, & Davidson, 2012). Also, all the countries have systems for advanced child maintenance. This implies that the state forwards a certain amount of maintenance in respect of the child, and later reclaims the money from the liable (non-resident) parent. In Denmark and Finland, this system comes into force only when the non-resident parent has defaulted on their payments, while in Norway and Sweden it is available upon request. Advanced maintenance can also be paid in cases where the father is unknown, or where the non-resident parent has no ability to pay (Skinner et al., 2007).

By maintaining a subsistence-level benefit known as a transitional allowance targeted at lone parents, Norway has gone one step further in protecting lone parents and their children (Skevik, 2006b; Skevik & Hatland, 2008). This benefit, however, has been considerably reduced in recent years, before 1998 it was payable for as long as the lone parent had a child under the age of 10. In 1998, work requirements were introduced for parents who did not have children under three years-old, and in 2012, these work requirements were extended to parents who did not have children under one year-old. The transitional nature of the allowance has thus been made clearer over time (Skevik & Hatland, 2008). Exceptions apply to the first year after parents' break-up, when the custodial parent of children under 8 years-old can receive the benefit for up to one year without a work requirement. In addition, lone parents undertaking employment or education are entitled to a childcare benefit to offset the costs of childcare. In some cases these parents are also eligible for an education benefit to encourage education (for more detail, see Skevik, 2006b).

#### PARENTAL LEAVE ARRANGEMENTS

In each of the Nordic countries, a woman is entitled to a period of employment leave after she has given birth to a child. During this period, she cannot be fired from work unless the employer can argue convincingly that her dismissal is rooted in factors other than her temporary absence. During the leave period, she is entitled to benefits at a level that entirely or partially replace her wages. Fathers are also entitled to a post-partum leave period, and in all the Nordic countries except Denmark, a section of this leave period is reserved for fathers. This part of the leave must be taken by fathers or be lost to the family. Denmark had a similar arrangement between 1997 and 2002 (Leira, 2006). An overview of the parental leave arrangements in the Nordic countries is given in Table 3.

As the table shows, there is considerable variation in parental leave arrangements within the Nordic countries. Moreover, in most countries the parents have a certain flexibility to decide how they want to use their right to parental leave, which in turn can influence both the total leave period (cf. fathers' "bonus days" in Finland) and the compensation level (cf. longer leaves at lower payment rates in Norway and Denmark).

Table 3 relates to parental leave arrangements for parents who have been employed. In Finland, Iceland and Sweden, parents without a contribution record are reimbursed at a



TABLE 3. Paid parental leave arrangements in the Nordic countries. 2012

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Maximum paid leave period, weeks	50 <sup>a</sup>	44(48) <sup>b</sup>	39	47 <sup>a</sup>	69
Weeks reserved for mother only <sup>c</sup>	18 (4)	18 (5-8)	13 (4)	9 (3)	8 (9)
Weeks reserved for father only	-	(4) <sup>b</sup>	13	12	8
Either mother or father, weeks	32 <sup>a</sup>	26 <sup>d</sup>	13	26 <sup>a</sup>	52
Mother and father together, weeks	2	3	-	2 <sup>e</sup>	4+2 <sup>f</sup>
Wage compensation rate	100 <sup>g</sup>	70-90 <sup>h</sup>	75-80 <sup>i</sup>	100 <sup>g</sup>	77,6/80 <sup>j</sup>
Year of introducing right to leave for parents	1984	1978	1981	1978	1974
Year when part of the leave was reserved for the father	1997 (abolished 2002)	2003	2000	1993	1994

Sources: (Leira, 2006; Nordisk Socialpolitisk Komité, 2013)

<sup>a</sup> The joint period in Denmark and Norway can be extended to a maximum of 46 weeks (Denmark)/36 weeks (Norway), compensated at a lower rate. This gives a maximum leave period of 64/57 weeks.

<sup>b</sup> Fathers using two weeks of the joint period are entitled to 4 more weeks of leave ("bonus days")

<sup>c</sup> Figure in brackets: weeks that must be taken by the mother before birth, a portion of the total reserved for mothers.

<sup>d</sup> In cases of multiple births, the leave period is extended by 60 days per additional child.

<sup>e</sup> Fathers can take unpaid leave for two weeks around the time of birth. Many employers, including the public sector, offers wage compensation for such leave.

<sup>f</sup> Mothers and fathers can take 4 weeks together, but these are included in the total leave period. In addition, someone beside the mother (normally fathers) can take 2 weeks paid leave around the time of birth

<sup>g</sup> The rate is reduced if parents chose a longer leave period, cf. note a

<sup>h</sup> 90 per cent first 56 days (up to a ceiling), 70 per cent 49 subsequent days (up to ceiling)

<sup>i</sup> This rate is tapered for higher incomes with 80 per cent wage compensation for the lowest incomes.

<sup>j</sup> 80 per cent is the compensation rate, but ways of calculation give a real replacement rate of 77,6

minimum rate for the same number of weeks as employed parents. In Denmark, the same is true for parents who were unemployed or in education prior to the birth. In Norway, parents without previous employment receive a lump-sum payment (Nordisk Socialpolitisk Komité, 2013).

Despite the variation, all the Nordic countries are on the generous end of the spectrum in European comparisons of parental leave arrangements.<sup>3</sup> This is clear in a recent article that compares parental leave arrangements in 22 European countries (Wall & Escobedo, 2013). Wall and Escobedo (2013) identify no less than seven leave policy models in Europe. They group the five Nordic countries in the two most comprehensive models: the "one year leave gender-equality-oriented model" (Sweden, Iceland, Denmark and Slovenia) and the "parental-choice-oriented model" (Norway, Finland, France, Belgium). In the "one year leave gender-equality-oriented model," a short maternity leave immediately after birth is followed

<sup>3</sup> For continuous updates on leave arrangements in 34 countries, see <http://www.leavenetwork.org/>

by a longer parental leave, which allows one of the parents to stay at home with the baby for the first year of the child's life. Sweden and Iceland in particular actively promote gender equality by reserving a portion of the leave for fathers (two months in Sweden, three months in Iceland). The "parental choice orientated policy model" stands out with the availability of very long leave periods. In Norway, Finland, France and Belgium, long paid leaves are followed by the option of taking another year or two out of work without compensation or with a reduced rate of wage compensation. This is bolstered by payments linked to care for young children such as cash-for-care in Norway and the home care allowance in Finland (see below).<sup>4</sup> A crucial feature of this model is that public childcare is available for the youngest children. Parents are then allowed a choice between home-based care and day-care for children under three years-old.

There is little debate in the Nordic context about the length or compensation rates of parental leave arrangements. The rules guiding the division of leave between parents, on the other hand, are controversial. The "daddy quotas," that is, parts of the leave that are lost to a family if the fathers do not take them are particularly controversial. In Norway and Sweden, a key argument in favour of the daddy quota was the opportunities the quota provided for early bonding between fathers and children, something that would be in the child's best interest and emotionally enriching for the father (Leira, 2006:39). It was also argued that an earmarked quota for fathers would strengthen their position in negotiating with both their employers and the child's mother, as a non-transferrable right is easier to claim than a voluntary leave option. Opponents of the quotas sometimes frame their arguments in terms of biology and the mother-child bond, but more often they emphasise freedom of choice and parental autonomy.

The effects of the earmarked daddy quotas have been notable, to the point that they have been credited with promoting a "father revolution" (Lammi-Taskula, 2006:83). The proportion of Norwegian fathers who took at least some leave during the child's first year increased from four per cent to almost 90 per cent in the first five years following the introduction of the earmarked quota (1993-1998). In Iceland, the take-up rate of leave by fathers grew from less than one per cent to more than 80 per cent in the first year of the one-month daddy quota (op.cit:83). Conversely, in Denmark, fathers' take-up of parental leave fell after the fathers' quota was abolished in 2002 (Rostgaard, 2012).

#### CHILDCARE: PUBLIC AND HOME-BASED

All the Nordic countries have high rates of nursery coverage, although with some differences between the countries and between different age groups (Figure 1) (see also Meagher & Szebehely, 2012). As can be seen in Figure 1, differences between Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and Norway occur for one year-olds, and to some extent for two year-olds. For children over three years-old, there are no real differences between these four countries; between 90 and 100 per cent are enrolled in childcare. Finland is the country that stands out, with much lower

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<sup>4</sup> Similar schemes exist in France and Belgium, known respectively as Cash benefit for parental education (APE) and "time credit system."

childcare coverage rates than its Nordic neighbours. Rates, however, are relatively high here too with almost 70 per cent of three year olds and 80 per cent of five year olds in day-care.

Childcare coverage rates for the youngest children have increased since 1990, quite considerably in some countries (figure 2). The highest childcare coverage rates are consistently found in Denmark: Denmark started out at a high level in 1990 (60 per cent), and increased to 90 per cent in 2010. The main difference, as can be seen in Figure 1, is that Denmark is far more likely than its Nordic neighbours to provide childcare to one year-olds. Sweden had the second highest coverage rate in 1990, at 45 per cent, but was surpassed over time by both Norway and Iceland. By 2010, the childcare coverage rates for the youngest children were 80 per cent in Norway and Iceland and 70 per cent in Sweden. Rates in Finland are lower and have changed little over time. Around 40 per cent of Finnish one to two year-olds are in public childcare.

This expansion of childcare for the youngest children, like the fathers' quota in parental leave, is a feature of the 1990s and 2000s. Both measures have aimed at promoting gender equality, by making it easier for men to care and for women to work – and both are controversial. The controversies, however, take different forms. There are dissenting voices who wish to abolish the fathers' quotas – Denmark has already done so – but there is little opposition to the expansion of childcare. Few argue that public childcare should be scaled back, but it is often argued that parents must have a wider range of childcare choices. Not everybody wants to place their one year-old in a nursery, the argument goes, and parents who wish to care for their child at home should be supported. This is the background for the establishment of benefits for parents with children under three years-old who are not using state-sponsored childcare in Finland, Norway, and in a watered-down version, Sweden.

The child homecare allowance was introduced on a national level in Finland in 1985. When it was introduced nationally, it was part of a compromise between the left and the centre-right: Finnish parents' right to municipal day-care services was introduced together with the cash benefit, to drive home the point that parents should have a genuine choice (Ellingsæter, 2012). In Norway, the benefit was introduced in 1998, as one of the top priorities of the incoming minority centre-coalition government. The proposal was supported by parties on the right, and vehemently opposed by parties on the left. Still, the centre-left coalition government that held office between 2005 and 2013 did not abolish the benefit, but reduced it in 2012 to only cover 1 year-olds.

In Sweden, a national cash for childcare scheme was introduced in 1994 by a centre-right government, only to be abolished a year later when the Social Democratic Party took office (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). It was introduced again in 2008, by a new conservative government, but this time as a voluntary municipal scheme. National guidelines in Sweden determine that the benefit cannot be paid to families where one of the parents receive unemployment benefit or any of the health-related benefits, or is undergoing rehabilitation. It is also not available to immigrant parents receiving the introduction allowance. By 2011, 37 per cent of Swedish municipalities had introduced the benefit (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

Rates of take-up in the three cash-for-care schemes vary between the three countries. In Finland, take-up rates have been stable since the benefit was introduced, at between 50 and 60 per cent (Repo, 2010). In Norway, rates were high early in the period, but rapidly

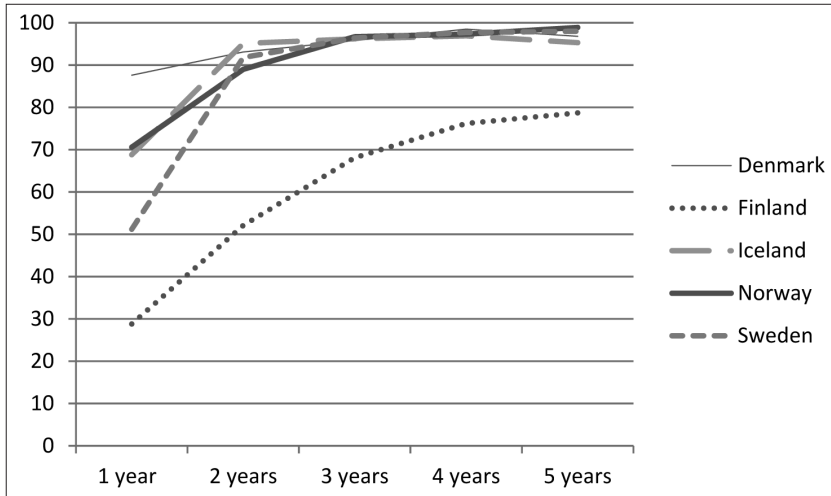


FIGURE 1. Childcare coverage in the Nordic countries by age. 2012.

Source: Nordic statistics, <http://91.208.143.50/pxweb/pxwebnordic/dialog/statfile1.asp>

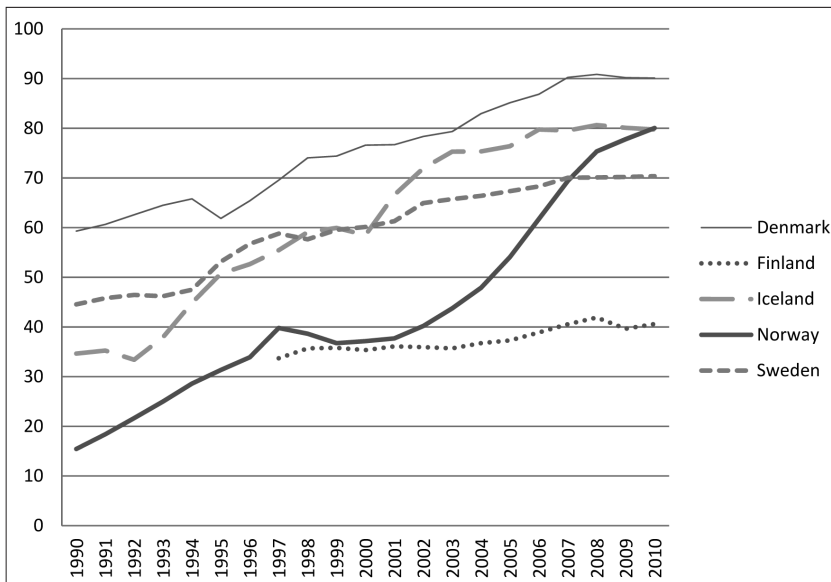


FIGURE 2. Childcare coverage for 1 to 2 year-olds in the Nordic countries. 1990-2010.

Source: Nordic statistics, <http://91.208.143.50/pxweb/pxwebnordic/dialog/statfile1.asp>

fell: while 75 per cent of the eligible families used the benefit in 1999, only 25 per cent did so in 2011 (administrative statistics, quoted in Ellingsæter, 2012). In Sweden, 4,7 per cent of parents living in municipalities where the benefit existed used the cash-for-care benefit in 2011 (Statistics Sweden, 2012). This very low take-up may be partly linked to the fact that eligibility criteria are stricter in Sweden. In all the countries, 85 per cent or more of the recipients are female (Ellingsæter, 2012). In both Norway and Sweden, immigrant women are over-represented among recipients, which has stirred a debate on how this arrangement may be detrimental to the integration of immigrant women (Grødem, 2012). In Finland, with low rates of immigration, this concern has been less prominent.

#### SUMMING UP: A NORDIC MODEL WITH FIVE FACES

After this overview of family demographics and policies in the Nordic countries, it is clear that there are both similarities and differences. All the countries come across as liberal in terms of practices: extramarital childbearing, divorce and cohabitation are widely accepted, and all countries recognise homosexual partnerships – four of five have recently introduced marriage equality for same-sex couples. All five countries have adopted active policies to support working mothers by enacting long parental leaves, high coverage rates for public childcare, and measures to promote caring fathers, through parental leave quotas (except in Denmark).

Not all countries, however, maximise both of these dimensions. Table 4 indicates how the five countries score, relative to each other, on the two dimensions “support for working mothers” and “support for caring fathers” (building on Leira, 2006).

TABLE 4. Country profiles for the Nordic countries: support for the dual earner/dual carer model

Support for working mothers	Support for caring fathers	
	High	Lower
High	Sweden Iceland	Denmark
Lower	Norway	Finland

Sweden and Iceland come across as the most committed to the dual earner/dual carer model. Both countries have long parental leaves with several weeks earmarked for fathers and high childcare coverage rates. Denmark is committed to promoting working motherhood, with very high childcare coverage rates for all children including the very youngest, but has no quota for fathers in the parental leave scheme. Finland has a short and conditional fathers’ quota in its parental leave scheme, and the consistently lowest childcare coverage rates in the Nordic countries. Finland thus comes across as the Nordic country least committed to the dual earner/dual carer model – although in a wider comparative context, the Finnish approach is definitely recognisable as Nordic. Norway supports caring fathers, with a comparatively long fathers’ quota. Given the continuous existence of the cash-for-care scheme, Norway’s support for working mothers comes across as more ambivalent.

There is however a third dimension to present-day family policies that is not mirrored in the table, namely the commitment to parental choice. Critics of this approach argue that

the “choice-rhetoric” overplays choices and underestimates constraints, and that financial structures, attitudes, and employers’ expectations can constitute constraints in this area. Nevertheless, the fathers’ quota was abolished in Denmark to give families choice, and this is also a key argument for the national cash-for-care benefits in Norway and Finland. If this rhetoric is taken at face value, commitment to choice will imply ample opportunities to share parental leaves with little or no earmarking for mothers or fathers and the availability of both public childcare and subsidies for home care. Based on the outline above, Finland will have the highest score on this dimension, and Iceland the lowest. The Norwegian case comes across as “maximalist”: with its combination of long parental and paternity leaves, high childcare coverage rates, and a cash scheme for parents opting out of public childcare, it scores high on support for fathercare, for mother’s employment, and parental choice.

### SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSFERABILITY

Political debates along the axis “gender equality vs. autonomy and freedom of choice,” as highlighted above, have been a feature of Nordic family policy debate since the 1990s. The arguments are well rehearsed, and tend to follow the left-right continuum. Challenges to Nordic policies, including family policies can, however, appear from other angles.

One increasingly pressing challenge, at least in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, stems from immigration. Since the EU enlargement in 2004, all these countries have seen vastly increased rates of labour immigration from within the EU. In addition, these countries all receive immigrants from countries outside of the EU, which is mainly motivated by humanitarian or family reunification concerns (for an overview of immigration and integration policies, see Brochmann & Hagelund, 2012; Djuve & Grødem, 2014). Immigration challenges the welfare states in two fundamental ways: first, immigrants may have other preferences and practices in family life than the majority population. This is illustrated in the debate about the cash-for-care benefit in Norway and Sweden. This implies a risk of increasing polarisation, when over time, some benefits gain a reputation as “immigrant benefits.” This may undermine their legitimacy – the majority may be less willing to pay for benefits that are mainly used by “others.” In addition, increasing immigration may make “promoting social integration” a new key concern in family policies, which may alter the dynamics of the debates. These challenges face all countries who manage migration, but may be particularly pressing in the Nordic countries, given their active family policies (Grødem, 2012).

The second immigration-related challenge concerns EU rules for benefit export. Family benefits are by definition exportable within the EEA, which means that labour migrants shall receive, for instance, child benefit and cash-for-care benefits in respect of children residing in their home country. This is controversial and implies that the expenses of such benefits are more difficult to predict and control for national governments. Government appointed commissions have highlighted this concern in both Norway and Denmark,<sup>5</sup> and the issue has

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<sup>5</sup> Rapport om Optjeningsprincipper i forhold til danske velfærdsydelse, Marts 2011 (available at [http://bm.dk/Aktuelt/Nyheder/Pressemeddelelser/Arkiv/2011/04/~/\\_/media/BEM/Files/Dokumenter/Pressemeddelelser/2011/Optjening/Samlet%20rapport.ashx](http://bm.dk/Aktuelt/Nyheder/Pressemeddelelser/Arkiv/2011/04/~/_/media/BEM/Files/Dokumenter/Pressemeddelelser/2011/Optjening/Samlet%20rapport.ashx)), and NOU 2011:7, Velferd og migrasjon. Den norske modellens framtid.

been hotly debated in both countries. The outcome of these debates may be that the benefits are scaled down or abolished altogether.

A second potential set of challenges can be said to stem from within, to be inherent in modern Nordic family practices. The Nordic countries are pioneering a family pattern where childbearing, to some extent, is decoupled from marriage, many men and women will have children by more than one partner over their life course, many have children relatively late in life, same-sex partnerships are becoming increasingly common. These patterns give rise to both challenges and opportunities. One potential challenge is the tendency towards the marginalisation of men with low education and income, who are increasingly unlikely to establish families (Skrede, 2005). Another challenge is related to the availability of new reproductive technologies, which makes biological parenthood available to older couples and same-sex couples. Debates about such practices, including surrogacy, are among the most heated in present-day family policies (Andersen, 2013).

While the Nordic countries continue to develop and adopt, policy makers and activists in many other countries look north for solutions in the family policy area. What are the prospects for importing elements of this model to other countries? A first conclusion could be that aspects of the model are already being exported in the EU area. The social investment strategy, which has gained popularity in the EU (Morel et al., 2012), draws on many aspects of the Nordic approach to social policies in general, and to family policies in particular. Still, family policies regulate matters close to the heart, and it is often argued that successful family policies must be in accordance with widely held norms and values. While there is certainly merit to this argument, it should be remembered that the Nordic countries were not as “modern” as they may seem now when key policies were implemented. Barely any fathers took parental leave before the daddy quotas were introduced, and nobody knew the demand for public childcare would be as high as it is before such care was actually supplied. Norms and values shape policies, but it can also be argued that policies shape norms. Making choices available is likely to alter behaviour and norms at least in parts of the population.

A discussion of policy transfer may also benefit from the insight that there are many faces of the “Nordic model”: the somewhat muted Finnish version, the maximalist equality-and-choice-oriented Norwegian version, the Swedish dual earner/dual carer version and the universal employment-oriented Danish version. Moreover, none of these variations are set in stone, but are continuously altered as a consequence of new political constellations and new challenges. The Nordic countries do not provide a manual ready for export, but they do offer ideas, experiences, stories of success and stories of failure. They also continue to face new challenges. Viewed as diverse laboratories rather than as blueprints for export, the Nordic countries are potential sources of inspiration for policymakers who wish to develop more active family policies.

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