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Gendered Labor Market (dis)advantages in Nordic Welfare States. Introduction to the Theme of the Special Issue¹

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Gender equality has been named as one of the normative foundations of Nordic welfare states. This is reflected in how, year after year, Nordic states rank among the most gender egalitarian countries in the world (see, e.g., World Economic Forum 2020). In Nordic countries, the state has been, and continues to be, a central actor in shaping women's citizenship, labor market opportunities, and caring roles. Especially publicly funded welfare services and policies that facilitate the reconciliation of work and care have played a major part in advancing women's labor market participation (see, e.g., Bergquist et al. 1999; Borchorst & Siim 2002; Ellingsæter & Leira 2006; Siim & Stoltz 2015). The institutional framework of Nordic welfare state policies has been central to what has been called the 'social democratic public service route' (Walby 2004).

One of the important building blocks of gender equality has been the aim of making policies in Nordic countries 'women-friendly'. More than 30 years ago, Helga Hernes (1987) identified the Nordic countries as 'potentially women-friendly societies'. She characterized women-friendly societies as those that 'would not force harder choices on women than on men' (ibid., 15), particularly in relation to work and care. Hernes also envisaged that woman-friendliness should be achieved without increasing other forms of inequality, such as class or ethnicity-based inequalities among different groups of women.

However, achieving gender equality in working life and the sort of women-friendliness that Hernes envisaged at the societal level has in many ways also proved to be challenging, as the ties between the state and gender equality goals are more complex than what they might seem at first glance. Gender disparities have proven persistent also within the Nordic context. When we issued a call for this special issue, we were interested in various forms of gendered labor market (dis)advantage in Nordic countries. Furthermore, we asked how gender segregation, welfare state policies, labor market

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policies, and various labor market actors interact to produce, maintain, challenge, or change gender equality in the labor market in the Nordic countries and beyond. The five articles presented in this special issue address the issue of gendered labor market (dis)advantages in Nordic countries from several vantage points, focusing on both on ‘traditional’ questions, such as corporate power and sustainable employment, and ‘emerging’ questions such as intersectionality, gender culture, and aesthetic work.

Nordic gender equality advancements and the prevailing challenges¹

In the Nordic countries, women’s labor market participation increased rapidly from the 1960s (Chafetz & Hagen 1996; Leira 2002). The overall picture reveals relative stability and small cross-country variations. However, Norway lagged somewhat behind Sweden and Denmark in women’s labor market participation, but throughout the 1980s, Norway made up the distance, as the employment activity of mothers of young children increased sharply. In contrast, the 1950s and 1960s have been called the era of the homemaker (Melby 2008). However, in Finland, women’s occupational activity was higher in the first decades after the second world-war than in the rest of the Nordic region, probably caused by poverty and low male wages (Åmark 2006).

Despite some differences, gender equality in the labor market has progressed well in the entire Nordic region. Women’s labor market participation is high in all the Nordic countries – and in educational attainment, women have surpassed men. Still, relatively large imbalances persist. Part-time work is one of the imbalances that separate women and men in the Nordic labor markets. Part-time work is the least common in Finland and the most common in Norway and Iceland. Yet, part-time work has in recent years been declining among mothers of small children, which is probably due to high coverage of children in day-care, particularly pre-school children (3–5 years). Day-care coverage is the highest in Norway and the lowest in Finland (see Table 1).

Table 1 Labor market participation, education level, and day care use

	% women employed	% women in part-time employment (age 15–64)	% graduated women at tertiary level (age 15–74)	% Children in daycare (0–2 years)*	% Children in daycare (3–5 years)*
Denmark	71.2	32.9	56.3	54.6	88.6
Finland	70.7	19.8	59.2	37.0	87.9
Iceland	73.5	34.9	65.9	58.2	96.8
Norway	72.5	36.1	58.2	59.2	97.3
Sweden	73.5	31.7	62.2	50.6	95.8

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

*Denmark, Finland: 2019; Iceland: 2018; Norway: 2020; Sweden: 2017.

Moreover, despite a slow decline in recent years, the Nordic labor markets still have substantial levels of gender segregation. The pattern is relatively similar for the five Nordic countries. Denmark has the highest share of men in female-dominated industries and Finland the lowest. Norway stands out with the lowest share of women in male-dominated industries. The gender gap in hourly wages persists, as women on average earn between 80% and 90% of what men earn per hour. We find the largest pay-gap in Finland and the smallest in Sweden. Furthermore, male-dominance is stubborn on the top of business hierarchies in all the Nordic countries, with Iceland with the clearly poorest results. The situation on corporate boards is more balanced, most likely following the introduction of gender quotas for corporate boards in Norway and Iceland, and changes in recommendations in Sweden and Denmark (see Table 2).

Table 2 Labor market segregation, gender wage gap, and corporate power

	% men in female-dominated industries^a	% women in male-dominated industries^a	Gender pay gap^b	Gender balance % women CEO	Gender balance % women board members
Denmark	26.8	22.9	14.0	12	34
Finland	21.2	22.7	16.6	6	35
Iceland	24.3	22.2	13.8	0	43
Norway	24.8	18.7	13.2	18	40
Sweden	26.0	21.3	11.8	10	38

Source: Nordic Statistics database.

^aMale-dominated industries: (2020) Agriculture, forestry and fishing, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply, water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities, Construction, Transportation and storage, information and communication. Female-dominated industries: Education, human health and social work activities, other service activities. Activities of households as employers, undifferentiated goods, and services-producing activities of households for own use.

^bBased on total industry, construction, and services (except public administration, defense, and compulsory social security).

A Nordic welfare state paradox?

Criticism has been directed at how Nordic countries and their women-friendliness has been depicted in overly positive terms (see also Borchorst & Siim 2002; Lister 2009; Koskinen Sandberg 2018; Mandel & Semyonov 2006) In fact, the indexes placing the Nordic countries as comparatively high achievers of gender equality, are based on very crude measures (Kirkebø et al. 2021). It has also been questioned whether policies that aim for women-friendliness improve the career chances of women in the labor market, or whether they ultimately have the opposite effect on women themselves, leading to the ‘welfare state paradox’ (Mandel & Semyonov 2006). Institutional theories (e.g., Estévez-Abe 2005) have argued that women in Nordic labor markets face more difficulties in their career progression when compared to their female counterparts in less regulated labor markets and less generous welfare states.

This line of research has highlighted that the share of women in managerial positions is relatively low in the Nordic countries, even in the public sector (Abendorth et al.



2013; Dämmrich & Blossfeld 2016; Evertsson et al. 2009; Mandel & Semyonov 2006; Yaish & Stier 2009). It has been argued that in part, glass ceilings and glass doors persist due to long family leaves, strong employment protection, and gender-segregated labor markets (Datta Gupta et al. 2008; Estévez-Abe 2005). However, these findings are also disputed. A different strand of research suggests that gender segregation is declining in the Nordic countries, and that the type of family leave systems that are dominant in the Nordic countries have either positive or limited effects on career choices, equal treatment and pay (Bettio & Verashchagina 2012; Bygren & Gähler 2021; Grönlund & Magnusson 2016; Hook & Li 2020).

Another strand of criticism has also been directed to how treating the Nordic countries as a monolith gloss over the intra-Nordic differences in relation to gender (in)equality in the labor market (e.g., Bergquist et al. 1999; Grönlund et al. 2017). In fact, the developments in the Nordic countries do not always follow similar pathways. However, differences are larger in the introduction of policies to promote gender equality than in gender equal practices (Teigen & Skjeie 2017). Furthermore, no state in itself is a homogenous actor that always aims towards women-friendliness. Various kinds of developments take place simultaneously, which sometimes lead to development of more women-friendly policies and sometimes not (Kantola 2004). The same could be argued for the labor market as well: the labor market in itself is not a uniform entity, but rather a plurality of arenas where various kinds of developments regarding gender (in)equality are constantly taking place and new forms of gendered (dis)advantage emerge.

Finally, women-friendliness has also been criticized for assuming a collectively shared interest among women that presumes a homogenous and predictable life pattern for all women: that all women aim for (full-time) paid work, and that all women will eventually become mothers. Consequently, women-friendliness has been criticized for constructing 'women' as a uniform social category within which all individuals strive from similar social positions towards similar goals. Ultimately, there is the danger that the concept of women-friendliness boils down exclusively to white middle-class heterosexual women with (young) children as its only political subject, thus forgetting intersectionality (Borchorst & Siim 2002; Borchorst et al. 2012; Kantola 2004).

Intersectionality and aesthetic labor as emerging questions

In recent years, the intersection between the inequalities of the gendered labor market and migration-related inequalities have gained increasing interest. On average in the Nordic countries, where native women have high employment rates, employment divides between native and foreign-born populations are wide. In terms of employment rates, the difference between native and foreign-born women is as much as 15 percentage points in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland (OECD/European Union 2019). On the one hand, the lower female labor market participation among foreign-born women may be explained by employer discrimination and employers' biased perceptions about foreign born applicants' qualifications and suitability. On the other hand, explanations are also related to the migrants themselves, such as more traditional family models in some immigrant communities, or lack of relevant experience, qualifications, or networks (Kavli & Nadim 2009; Larsen et al. 2018; Midtbøen 2016; Nadim & Fjell 2019.) Although labor market participation is markedly lower among foreign-born women

than native origin women, there are clear indications that labor market participation is higher and gender differences smaller among descendants of immigrants, than among the foreign-born (Østby & Aalandslid 2020, p. 40).

Heidi Lehtovaara and Marjut Jyrkinen's article in this special issue, about skilled migrant women's job search experiences, addresses this typical blind spot of the 'women-friendliness' narrative. The article describes how highly skilled migrant women arrive in Finland and engage in intensive job search activity in an effort to access the labor market. The article investigates migrant women's experiences of inequalities in access to the labor market, and particularly the emotional burden of being repeatedly ignored or rejected in job search processes, despite having highly relevant qualifications. The authors identify what they call a paradoxical relationship between expectations and experiences, where highly skilled women migrate to a country well known for its high female labor force participation only to find that the labor market is all but closed for women whose credentials and work experience are not recognized as valid, due to their foreign origin.

In addition to intersectionality, another 'emerging' theme in this special issue is the role of appearance in working life, and how in different fields of work, appearance, and presentation of the self is, to an increasing extent, turned into a commodity. In the Nordic countries, the underlying expectation regarding appropriate looks and appearance is that of seemingly effortless looking 'naturalness'. However, as pointed out by Åberg (2020), the ethos of naturalness might override how physical appearance is normatively sanctioned in the Nordic context as well: the requirements of 'naturalness' are attainable particularly to those, who are already privileged in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital.

Two articles of this special issue (Kouri and Kukkonen & Sarpila) focus on aesthetic work, albeit from two very different points of view. Suvi Kouri's article analyzes the emotional and aesthetic labor of Finnish military officers. According to her analysis, the military ideals regarding emotional and aesthetic labor are going through changes, as the new ideal soldier is expected to perform bodily and emotional displays, which are typically considered feminine and are usually performed by women in service work. However, these 'feminine' displays are only done up to a certain limit and the 'right kind of military look' that the military officers are expected to display is still loaded with 'traditional' masculine ideals and valuations.

The article by Iida Kukkonen and Outi Sarpila explores appearance-related perks and penalties in Finnish labor market. According to their analysis, men experience more appearance-related perks than women. However, women are still expected to work on their appearances more, even though their possibilities for gaining benefit from their appearances in working life are restricted.

Cultural and structural limitations of women-friendliness

Among the most persistent gender inequalities in the Nordic welfare states are labor market inequalities, such as pervasive gender segregation across industries and occupations, the gender pay gap, and underrepresentation of women in higher managerial and corporate positions. These challenges have proven surprisingly difficult to tackle despite being targeted with various gender equality policies, measures, and programs. They are



also interrelated; segregation as well as the gender pay gap are partly due to women working in care, health, and education, often concentrated in parts of the public sector where wage increases and possibilities for career progression are limited. Women also have traditionally been part of the ‘flexible’ workforce, shouldering the brunt of unpaid care work, even when working full-time or accommodating their working hours, working part-time, and often in precarious contracts.

Academic research has for long endeavored to understand the mechanisms by which women’s career progression remain limited in the private sector, especially top managerial positions and on corporate boards. Institutional theories highlight the role of employer discrimination: employers would be reluctant to recruit and invest in careers of women as they are expected to use their long family leaves or withdraw to part-time jobs (Estévez-Abe 2005). Other theories have underlined cultural factors (e.g., Pfau-Effinger 2002, 2012) or the individual women’s preferences and choices that might lead women to ‘choose home or work’ (Hakim 2000). It is likely that cultural factors, such as parenthood ideals, affect women’s careers and choices. For example, while paid private childcare in the home is widely available and accepted in the US (Stone & Lovejoy 2019), it is seen as violating the ideal of involved parenthood among elite professionals in Norway (Halrynjo & Lyng 2009).

The comparative study by Sigtona Halrynjo and Mary Blair-Loy on underrepresentation of women in corporate boards in Norway and in the USA contributes to this discussion by looking into explanations from theories on in-group favoritism, emphasizing cognitive processes leading top-level decision makers to favor people of the same social and demographic group as themselves for top-level positions. Based on information from 457 large companies in Norway and the USA, they find weak empirical support for in-group favoritism in the Norwegian context. The authors discuss alternative explanations, emphasizing societal and organizational structures favoring men’s careers, thus limiting the supply of women with senior operational experience.

Ida Drange and Mia Vabø’s article about sustainable employment in Nordic eldercare addresses an issue that is rarely at the forefront of discussions about the Nordic welfare states, part-time work and female labor market participation. Based on a survey conducted in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, they investigate how part-time shift work, which so often is highlighted as a ‘women friendly’ form of labor force participation, can lead to work-life conflicts and financial distress. The article furthermore discusses Nordic variation in terms of working hours and shift work structures across the four countries, concluding that the Danish system of fixed shifts seem to be the least burdensome of the four relatively different country models.

Understanding remaining inequalities

There are important differences across Nordic countries, both in the actual development of gender equality, and in how gender equality and gender relations are discussed and problematized in public. Significant changes in women’s empowerment, on the labor market and in politics, took place from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, with great ramifications socially and economically. Despite this, the pace of gender equality development has slowed down in recent years. The uneven development of gender equality and the fact that some features of skewed gender relations have proved more

difficult to change than others have been central to this issue of the *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*.

The five articles in this special issue demonstrate how the remaining inequalities partly relate to the structures of the welfare state assumed as women-friendly. The gendered division of labor still forces harder choices on women than on men in the Nordic region. The reconciliation of work and family, the gender pay-gap, male-dominance in leadership positions, division of paid and unpaid work, the influence of stereotypes, gendered ideals, and social norms are not fully relieved by welfare state services and labor market regulation. The articles direct our attention to further research and discuss how achieving gender equality relates to cultural changes in society, in organizations, and in private lives that might be counter-productive.

Structural change, such as change in policy, does not necessarily result in cultural change, and cultural and structural change can also develop in divergent ways and at different speeds. To better understand the contemporary challenges in the progress toward gender equality in the Nordic region, there is a need for more research that examines and understands culture and structure in context.

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Note

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