The Nordic Model and Female Labour Supply: A Stable Equilibrium or a Historical Uniqueness?

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Abstract:

The Nordic countries are famous for having established a very high level of female integration into the formal labor markets. Not only do many Nordic women work. In contrast to many continental European countries, the Nordic women tend to work fulltime. This is often described as a nexus where the Nordic welfare states both freed the women from domestic responsibilities (by establishing full-time child-care facilities, elderly care facilities etc.) and created job opportunities (in this new large public service sector), which has turned into a stable equilibrium. However, it is often forgotten that the inflow of women into the labour market was supported by strong feminist movements, which advocated for a dual full-time earner-model. This “avant-garde” of the 1970s idealized this family type. But the feminist movements have lost pace in the Nordic countries, especially in Denmark, which might have an impact on females’ orientation to towards fulltime employment. The paper tests this thesis by means of survey data from the ISSP gender module 2002 and the Danish European Value Survey from 2008.

Introduction

The Social democratic welfare regime is often described as the most advanced. In terms of de-commodification and de-familization, the social democratic welfare regimes have advanced more than the conservative welfare regimes found in continental Europe and the liberal welfare regimes found in Anglo-American countries. Generous social benefits make the citizens less dependent on their market value and public child-care and elderly care services make the citizens less dependent on their family (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999). It is well-described how the nexus between the institutional structure of the state and the structure of the family was pivotal for this development. The large expansion of the public service production found in the Nordic countries both freed the women from the former obligations and created new jobs available to women, thereby gradually replacing the male-bread-winner family structure with what Fraser labeled the universal breadwinner model (1997). We will use the term “full-time dual-earner family model”.
The macro-statistic indicates that the full-time dual-earner family model has almost reached a hegemonic status in the Nordic countries. As indicated in figure 1, the female labour market participation rates increased remarkably in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (with some variation within the Nordic countries) and have by 2010 almost reached the participation rates of men. Beneath this development there has been a shift from female part-time employment in the 1960s and 1970s to female full-time employment. Thus, by 2010, the majority of the Nordic women work full-time. The hegemonic status of the dual-earner family is also clearly reflected in the share of pre-school children in public child-care. In 2010, above 95 percent of the Swedish, Danish and Norwegian 3 – 5 years old children were enrolled in day care. In 1990, the levels were respectively around 50 percent in Norway, 65 percent in Denmark and 75 percent in Sweden. In the Nordic context, Finland is a little exceptional by only having around 75 percent of the 3 – 5 years old in day care (2010)(Nord 2011:63). Denmark is the most extreme case as 86 percent of children aged one are enrolled in day care. In Norway, it is 71 percent, in Sweden 49 percent and in Finland 30 percent (Statistics Denmark 2011). Finally, the hegemonic status of the dual-earner family is reflected in women’s investment in human capital. By 2010, more women than men obtained a university degree. Thus, all macro-statistics indicates the hegemonic status of the full-time dual-earner family model. One could also call it a stable equilibrium; in contrast to especially the continental European welfare regimes, which still are characterized as being a process of a shift from a male-bread-winner model to a dual-earner model.

Figure 1: Female labour market participation rates in the Nordic countries from 1960 to 2011

Source: oecd.stat
The question is, however, whether the Nordic equilibrium is impossible to shake. One should always be critical towards arguments, which assume that some “advanced” countries have reached an “end of history”. There is no doubt that the Nordic welfare states through generous parental leaves seem, child-care and elderly care facilities, taxation rules, relative high paid service jobs in the sheltered public sector and high levels of taxation (which reduces the relative wealth of single-earner families) underpin the full-time dual-earner family model. But one should not neglect that the female integration into labour market was also underpinned by a strong feminist movement, where the best educated women, the avant-garde, promoted the double earner-model as “the right” model for modern Nordic women. Thus, as female participation increased, Hernes (1987) famously labeled the Nordic welfare model as being “woman friendly”. One of the pivotal elements in the feminist campaign was to convince their fellow sisters that the family and children would not suffer from having the women at work. On the contrary, having the women working, and also the mothers, was a crucial step towards establishing a better and more democratic family (Dahlerrup 1998). In large, the feminist movement was also successful in this regards. Compared to other Western Societies, the Nordic women are fairly convinced that the family and children do not suffer from women being at the labor market (see below). This clearly underpins the current Nordic equilibrium. However, the article will also show that one can observe instability in this pattern.

**Theorizing instability**

The institutional line of reasoning, which dominates contemporary comparative welfare state research, suggests that the full-time double-earner family structure will remain hegemonic in the Nordic countries. Once “full-time dual-earner friendly” parental leave schemes, child- and elderly care facilities, child allowances, taxation rules and education systems are in place, this family structure is likely to be reproduced. This can either be theorized as matter of economic incentives (as within rational choice institutionalism) or as matter of what is perceived to be possible, normal and desirable (as within sociological institutionalism). This argument clearly has its merits and there is little evidence of institutional changes e.g. more limited child-care coverage or less generous parental schemes, which in the long-run could come to challenge the hegemonic status of the double-earner family in the Nordic countries. Thus, from this line of reasoning stability is expected.

The full time dual-earner family model could, however, by challenged by the cultural orientations of the Nordic women. The feminist movement, which historically facilitated the women’s labour market participation, has to various extents lost its momentum in the Nordic countries. The ideological and cultural power of feminist movements is difficult to measure but most studies suggest a decline from the hey-days of the 1970s. By 2010, gender equality in government and business seem to be strongest in Sweden, more moderate in Norway and Finland and weakest in Denmark (Niskanen et al. 2011). The same ranking can be derived from the impact gender issues has on the political discourse about maternity leave and day care (Brochorst 2008).

The Nordic women still face a situation where most of their peers form double-earner families
(heavily supported by the institutional structure of the welfare state) but - with the exception of Sweden - they do not any longer face the female avant-garde, which strongly promoted the full-time double-earner family structure. What remains of the feminist movement has even begun to doubt the women-friendliness of the full-time dual-earner family structure. In 1997, Fraser argued for another normative ideal, “the universal caregiver model”. To put it boldly, the idea is not to make women into men (through full-time employment) but to make men into women (by placing care responsibilities on men). Daddy quota in the parental leave scheme is a way to materialize this vision (implemented in Norway in 1993, in Sweden in 1994 and in 1997 in Denmark).

The decline in power of the feminist movement and its reorientation might be of importance for the female supply of labor as one can indeed find drawbacks with living in the dual-earner model. One classic drawback is the fact that the women despite living in a full-time dual-earner family structure often do more of the traditional home duties than men. Though time studies clearly indicate that the Nordic men do progress in this respect, this effect can still be found. Furthermore, even if home duties where shared equally, a full-time double-earner family model does put stress on the daily family life; at least for couples with small children. Maybe the stress level of women in fulltime dual-earner families are not higher than in a classic male-breadwinner model, where the women were responsible for child-care, elderly-care and all the other home-duties. But the stress level is higher than in an imagined family where the women or man work part-time without having the child- and elderly care responsibilities of the classic male-bread winner model. The problem is naturally that this is difficult to afford as the flip-side of the highly developed Nordic service state is high levels of taxation. However, for the better off families a “one-and-half-earner-model” without child- and elderly-care duties is a real possibility. And as the women on average have lower wages than men, it is typically the women who choose part-time. This could be seen as a move towards the classic male-bread-winner model. But it could also be seen as a step towards Fraser universal care giver model. It clearly but feminist thinking in a dilemma as the Nordic women’s’ choose of part time is typically made voluntary.

In the analyses to come, the main independent variables will be country of origin and generation. We will mainly focus on Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. Due to the strong feminist movement in Sweden, we expected the perceived negative effects from the full-time dual earner family to be low and the ambiguity to be low. Due to the severe weakening of the Danish feminist movement, we expect the perceived negative effects and the level of ambiguity to be high (by Nordic standards). We expected Norway and Finland to be positioned somewhere in-between these two Nordic outliers. However, we do not expect this pattern to be uniform across generations. We expect that the generations born in the 1960 and 1970s to be convinced about the absence of negative effects from the dominant full-time dual earner family model. These are the generations, which entered the labour market with the cultural backing of a feminist movement, especially the generation born in the 1960s. We expected the generation prior to these generations to be (uniformly) less convinced about the absence of negative effects from the dominant full-time dual earner family model. In all the Nordic countries, these generations were socialized prior to the radical break-through of the feminist movement in the 1970s and many females from the old generation has not worked or has only worked part-time. Finally, we expected the youngest
generation to deviate across the Nordic countries. Despite this generation being socialized in a period where the full-time dual earner family has become close to hegemonic in all Nordic countries, we expected the youngest Danish generation to indicate some doubts about this model; due to the severe decline of the left-wing women movement.

Data material, measurement and method

The ISSP survey from 2002 on family and changing gender roles provides the most comprehensive comparative data on attitudes towards the full-time dual earner model. The data was collected in postal surveys in 34 countries. In the Nordic countries the response rates were acceptable and the survey institutes did not report any severe bias in the samples. The (perceived) potential negative effects from female participation on the labour market were measured directly by asking respondents to agree or disagree in following statements:

1) “A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work”.

2) “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works”.

3) “All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job”

The responses indicate that the three items form a scale, which measure the perceived negative effects from female full-time employment on family life (crombach alfa above 0.70 in all analysed countries). The items have been merged into a simple additive index going from 0 to 100. 0 indicates that a given respondent have answered “strongly agree” on the first item (“a working mother…””) and “strongly disagree” on the second and third item (“a pre-school child is likely to suffer…” and “all in all, family life suffers…”). Thus, high values on this index mean that the negative effects on family life from female full-time employment are perceived to be high. Those who answered “cannot choose” were left out of the index of perceived negative impact. However, the group will not be neglected (which often is the case) as the amount of “cannot choose” answers is a good way to measure the amount of ambiguity. In the Nordic context, answering “cannot choose” might be a first indication of uncertainty about the dominant full-time dual earner model. The amount of ambiguity is measured on an index from 0 to 100. The latter indicates that the respondent answered “cannot choose” to all three items. The former indicates that the respondents did not use the “cannot choose” category at all. These two indexes are our main dependent variable. More advanced measures could be established but these two are chosen due to their simplicity.

The main independent variables are country of origin and generation (see above). The former is fairly straightforward to measure whereas the latter is more complex. The question is who one encircles certain generations and how they should be labeled. Meaningful generation brackets are difficult to establish within one country and it is even more difficult across countries. We will adopt a very pragmatic approach and simply distinguish between those born before 1945 (the war and pre-war generation), from 1945 to 1959 (often labeled the baby boom generation), from 1960 to
1969, from 1970 to 1979 and finally from 1980 and thereafter. As the ISSP data was collected in 2002 and include those above 17 years old, the latter category only include those born in 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984. The used data from the Danish European Value Survey covers the whole decade

In the two first sections, we provide basic descriptive statistics of the dependent variables across country, generation and gender and conduct some basic t-tests. In the two last sections, we analyze the Danish case by means of the European Value Survey, which included the two first ISSP-items (only available in Denmark). The European Value Survey was conducted in 2008 and thereby increases the number of respondents in the youngest generation.

The perceived negative impact from female full-time job on family life
Looking at aggregated levels across countries, the Nordic women and men stand-out as someone who perceives the negative effects on family life to be modest. In figure 2, the countries are ranked according to how the female score on the index (0-100), which measures the perception of negative impact on family life. The females from the former east Germany scores lowest on this index (mean 27), i.e. they perceive the negative effects on the family from female work force participation to be the lowest. However, the Danish females score second lowest (mean 28), the Swedish score third lowest (mean 31), the Norwegian score fifth lowest (mean 35) and the Finish score seventh lowest (mean 37). In general, men perceive the negative impact on the family to be larger. This is also the case in the Nordic countries. However, compared to men in other countries, the Nordic men perceive the negative impact on family life to be modest (the means are respectively 34, 39, 43 and 43 for Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland). Thus, so far these attitudes towards work and family underpin the dominant full-time dual earner family structure found in the Nordic countries.
Figure 2. Perception of negative impact on family life from female participation on the labour market. ISSP countries 2002. Mean on index (0 – 100) respectively for men and women.

The generational effects also seem to underpin the dominant full-time dual earner family structure. At least this is the case in Sweden, which often is used as the representative for the “Nordic model”. The perceived negative impact from female work declines remarkable from the oldest to the youngest generations. The Swedish females born before 1945 score 40 on the index (n=153), which declines to 18 (n=36) for youngest generation. The same decline can be found for Swedish men. The score declines from 47 in the oldest generation (n=123) to 28 in the youngest generation (n = 26). This pattern confirmed our expectations for the Swedish case. The generational pattern among Danish women also confirms what we expected. The oldest generations score highest (42, n=153), which declines down to 17 (n = 124) for those born in the 1970s. As expected, the youngest Danish women perceive the negative consequences to be larger. This group score 26 (n=39), which is
above the previous generation and above the Swedish women from the same generation. The difference between the Danish women born in the 1970s and those born in the 1980s is statistical significant (one sided t-test, p=0.035). Interestingly, the Danish men do not conform to this expected pattern when asked in 2002. The youngest Danish men (n = 33) have the lowest score found among Nordic men; both across countries and generation. Thus, if there was a “backlash” in Denmark, it was in 2002 more fuelled by the concern of women than of men (see detailed analyses below).

Figure 3. Perception of negative impact on family life from female participation on the labour market. Mean (index 0 – 100). Females and males across generations

The Norwegian and Finish pattern also indicate a downward trend on mean scores on the index. As for the youngest generation there is, however, an upward trend for Finish women, Finish men and Norwegian men born in the 1980s. But none of the averages of those born in the 1980s are significantly different from the averages of those born in the 1970s. Thus, it is only for the Danish women one can observe significant “backlash” in attitudes from those born in the 1970s to those born in the 1980s.

The level of ambiguity across generations in the Nordic countries
The amount of persons answering “cannot choose” is of high interest when one wants to measure uncertainty about the dominant full-time dual earner family model. The mean on the cannot-choose-index (0-100) is shown in Figure 4. The countries are ranked according to how often the women answered “cannot-choose”. The Nordic women are located in the middle area. Thus Nordic women, in general, perceive the negative impact on family life to be modest (see above) but the amount that
“cannot choose” is close to the average of other countries. In general, males tend to be more inclined to answer “cannot choose”. In the Nordic countries, this is especially the case for Finish men.

Figure 4. Ambivalence towards question about negative impact from female work participation on family life. Index (0-100) measuring “cannot choose” answers. ISSP countries 2002.

It is more interesting, however, to look at the amount of “cannot choose” across generations. Here we find a u-shaped pattern for the Nordic women; besides the Swedes women. The oldest female generation (born before 1945) and the youngest female generation (born in the 1980s) are in
Denmark, Norway and Finland more inclined to answer “cannot choose”. This U-shape was caused by two remarkable differences: One between the oldest generation of females and those born between 1945 and 1959 (the former is much less likely to use “cannot choose” category than the latter – besides in Finland where the decrease in “cannot choose is smoother) and one between the youngest generation and those born in the 1970s (the latter is more likely to answer “cannot choose”). The more ambiguity among the Danish, Finish and Norwegian women born in the 1980s is significantly higher that ambiguity of those born in the 1970s (both double-sided and single-sided). In contrast, the youngest Swedish women’s indicate less ambiguity than the Swedish women born in the 1970s. Thus, as expected the full-time dual earner family model is little questioned in Sweden.

Figure 5. Ambivalence towards question about negative impact from female work participation on family life. Index (0-100) measuring “cannot choose” answers. Nordic countries across generation, 2002.

The pattern is different for the Nordic men. In the older generations, one finds modest differences in the amount of “cannot choose” in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The outlier is the Finish men, where the two oldest generations were more ambivalent than the younger generations. The most interesting differences are the one found among the youngest male generation. In Denmark and Finland, there is no statistical difference in ambiguity between the men born in the 1970s and 1980s. In Sweden and Norway, there was a statistical significant difference between the men born in the 1970s and those born in the 1980s. The latter display more ambiguity than the former. Thus, among Nordic young men, one finds the Norwegians at the one end and Danes at the other. The former, are the most ambivalent and they perceived the cost of family life to be the highest. That
latter, are the least ambivalent and they perceived the cost of family life to be the lowest. This was the case in 2002.

**The case of young Danish Women and Men interviewed in 2008**

The Danish women born in the 1980s provides an interesting case. They had more worries about the negative impact from female labour market participation and they indicated more ambiguity. At the same time, these young Danish women seemed to be blessed (or cursed) with young men who perceived the negative impact to be more modest than did older Danish men and young men in other Nordic countries (see above). As the ISSP-survey from 2002 only included 39 Danish women born in the 1980s, it was difficult to conduct more detailed analyzes. Therefore we used the European Values Survey, which (only in Denmark) included two first ISSP-items used above (“A working mothers…” and “A pre-school child …”). Again the answers have be transformed into a scale from 0 – 100 (however, as one items is not included and as the EVS did not have the bracket “neither agree nor disagree” the levels cannot directly be compared). The Danish EVS includes 95 female and 96 male respondents born after 1980s.

Figure 6: Perception of negative impact on family life from female participation on the labour market. Denmark 2008
The interviews conducted in 2008, confirmed the finding that Danish women born in the 1980s perceive the negative consequences of work to be higher than older Danish women. And asked in 2008, it is especially, the women born in the 1960s who uphold the perception of female work participation having a modest impact on family life. Thereby we found the expected U-scape. The interviews conducted in 2008 also confirmed that the Danish men only perceived the negative consequences to be a bit higher than did the Danish women. However, the pattern of generation pattern among men had changed. Interviewed six years later, the Danish men born in the 1980s had also come to perceive the negative consequences as higher than those born in the 1960s (see figure 6). They had also become more ambivalent than the men born in the 1960s (not shown). And it is not a matter of those men born in the early 1980s (included in the ISSP) being different from those born in the late 1980s (included in the EVS). There was no difference between the two groups. This indicated that the attitudes of Danish men have also been altered – apparently with some time lack compared to the trend of women (both for women and men the levels among the youngest generation is significantly higher than among those born in the

The “backlash” among the youngest Danish women, and by 2008 also among the youngest Danish men, could be a matter of conservative forces promoting the former male-bread winner model. However, this is not the case. Actually, it is the left-wing segment of the youngest Danish females, who have adopted the perception that female labor market participation do harm to children and family life. Political orientation was in the EVS measured on a classic ten point scale from left (1) to right (10). Figure 7 shows, the perception of negative impact respectively among respondents with a political left-wing orientation (1-3), a right wing orientation (7-10) and a center orientation (4 -6).

Figure 7: Perception of negative impact on family distributed across political orientation, Denmark 2008
For the oldest female generation (born before 1945), the political orientation matters quite a lot. Those with a right-wing political orientation perceived the negative consequences to be higher than did those with center- or left-wing orientation. This skepticism among right-wing, however, cannot be found for those born in the 1960s. Thus, one of the achievements of the feminist movement was to convince right-wing orientated women that female work force participation would not harm family life. Thus, one can find a consensus on this position among the Danish women born in the 1960s (see figure 7). The women born in the 1970s and 1980s perceive the negative impact to be larger but there is an interesting change in the pattern. Among those born in the 1980s, it is those women with a left-wing political orientation who perceive the negative consequences of female work force participation to be the largest. Thus, suddenly it the female left-wing segment who have become concerned about the negative impact from female labour force participation. In a simply linear model, this interaction effect between generation and political orientation is significant.

The pattern is different among the interviewed Danish males. Here political orientation only mattered for the oldest generations; those with right-wing and center orientations perceived the negative impact from female work force participation to be higher those with left-wing political orientation. In the younger generations, political orientation does not make any clear difference (see figure 7).

The stability of the Danish “backlash”
By means of cross-sectional data, it is difficult to judge whether the worries about female labour force participation among the youngest generation is a stable phenomenon or will disappear when they get personal experiences with living in the “women friendly” full-time dual earner family structure. However, one way to test it is to build a statistical model, which control for the fact that fewer in the youngest generation had children (88 percent of the women in the youngest generation did not have children) and fewer had full-time jobs (only 40 percent compared to 72 percent of those born in the 1960s).
In table 1, model II indicates that if one control for these two factors, the generational effect disappears. In the simple base model (I), those women born in the 1980s are estimated to have a 5.2 higher score on the index (0 – 100) than those born in the 1960s. However, this effect disappears if we take into account that having a child reduces the perceived negative impact from female work force participation on family life (-6.1) and having a part time job or not having a job increases the perceived negative impact (respectively with an estimated effect of 9.1 and 2.9). Thus, one possible interpretation is that that the young women’s worries about the impact work might have on family life disappears once they get children and full-time jobs. This would be a story of how the young women adapted to the institutional settings of the Nordic model. Nevertheless, the big question is whether young Danish women will continue to “choose” to have children and continue to “choose” to have full-time jobs. If they “choose” not to have children (in order to succeed at the labour market) or “choose” part time jobs, the dominance of the full-time-dual earner family model could be challenged.

Conclusion and discussion

The perception that children and husbands might be harmed has always been the Achilles heel of women’s integration into the formal labour market. Therefore it is interesting to study whether the mass public believe that “a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship
with her children as a mother who does not work”, that “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works” and that “family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job”. The article shows that the perceptions of negative impact from female employment on family life have largely been dismantled in the Nordic countries. Compare to other countries, the aggregated levels found in the Nordic countries (both among women and men) were low; only the (former) East German women perceived the negative impact to be lower. In general, the younger generations also found the negative effect to be lower than did the older Nordic generations. These findings support the institutional arguments, which predict the full-time-dual earner family model to be stable. The Nordic welfare regime facilitates the full-time dual earner family model both by incentives structures and cognitive structures about the normal, the possible and the desirable.

The decline of power of the feminist movement might, however, de seem to pose a threat to the full-time dual earner family model. The ISSP-data documented that the youngest Danish generation perceived the negative impact to be significantly higher than the level found among Danish women born in the 1970s. In contrast, the youngest Swedish women perceived the negative impact to be significantly lower than did the Swedish women born in the 1960s and 1970s. This findings support the argument that the ideological power of the feminist movement still matters. Furthermore, if one looked at ambiguity, it is not only the young Danish women who have doubts about the full-time dual earner model. The ambiguity was also high among the young Norwegian and Finish women and among the young Danish, Norwegian and Swedish men. It was only the young Swedish women who did not indicate ambiguity. The data from the Danish European Value Survey from 2008 confirmed a “backlash” among young Danish men and women. The Danes born in the 1980s perceived the negative impact from female labour market participation to be higher than those born in the 1960s. This pattern confirmed our initial expectations.

The big question is whether the doubts about the full-time-dual-earner model found in the youngest generation will get any significantly impact on their family and labour market behavior. One argument is that the doubts are only a matter of temporary age-effect, which will disappear once these groups get more experience with the “women-friendly” Nordic institutions. A simple (static) model, which controlled for impact from having children and full-time employment clearly supported this position. Another argument is, however, that the doubts constitute a real challenge to the full-time dual-earner family model promoted by the Nordic feminist movement of the 1970s. The doubts might even create fertile ground, especially among the young left-wing segment, for a new feminist movement, which promotes the idea of freedom to choose motherhood before work. This position might be helped by the fact that once the full-time dual-earner model is installed as the ordinary way of (“Nordic”) life, this lifestyle provides little identity for (better off) women who want to distinguish themselves from the ordinary. In the Danish case, there are signs of a new female avant-garde, which distinguish themselves by actively choosing to focus on the family and lower the ambitions on the labour market. It is not a return to the old family structure as most of the child- and elderly–care is provided by the state and the remaining household duties are shared relative equally. It is a more advanced house-wife, where a lot of time is spend on making high quality food. Thus, the food provided to children has become a strong marker of social class. In real numbers, very few Nordic citizens practice this life style (and produce the food attached to it), but at least in the Danish case, it provide a competing picture of optimal family life and motherhood.
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