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Gender and Power in Families and Family Policies

Sweden in the Nordic Context

by Ulla Björnberg

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Introduction

Over the last fifty years, the Nordic countries have introduced institutional changes aimed at modernizing the conditions for families. The political motives and ideals behind the reforms have emphasized gender equality within families and equality between different family forms. Much as a result, the Nordic countries have been portrayed as good examples of cases where gender equality has been achieved through institutional reform guaranteeing men and women formally equal positions in the family and in society at large. Yet, much remains to be accomplished still, with inequalities persisting in all spheres of life, as testified by women's weaker position in the labour market, gender pay gaps, unequal division of domestic labour and care, and uneven distribution of assets and resources along gender lines. The path to gender equality at work, in the labour market, and in families continues to be strewn with obstacles that need to be overcome before the high ambitions behind the equality goals can become reality. At the same time, one may also ask what the future prospects of the "Nordic model" of gender equality might be more broadly, given the ongoing changes in the political climate in the region. In examining these questions, my primary focus will be on what can be coined as a stalled revolution of the Nordic family model. To address the problem area more concretely, I will look at the current state of family policies and family practices in particular in Sweden, considering the extent to which the prevailing practices reflect the stated political

ideals. While the data used in this analysis derives from Swedish sources, references are made to the other Nordic countries as well.

The Nordic Model in Family Policy

In the Nordic countries, family policy has been regarded as one of the strategic priorities for achieving gender equality. Indeed, since 1987 a joint approach has been adopted in the area based on Nordic cooperation. Family policy in these countries has formed part of the general social-democratic model of welfare emphasizing economic growth, redistribution of wealth, social rights, and social security. Recent comparative studies on Nordic family and welfare policies have concluded that also the social policy models in the Nordic countries form a cluster more generally, distinct from those applied in other European countries [Bradshaw and Hatland 2007; Ellingsaeter and Leira 2006; Melby, Ravn, and Carlsson Wetterberg 2009]. The overall model incorporates the following features: To foster the economic independence of all citizens, employment is considered a fundamental right. Taxation is based on individual income and, correspondingly, the universal social insurance system provides compensation for loss of income for individuals, regardless of family income. While all parents have an equal right to paid parental leave, the parental leave scheme, in keeping with the principle of employment, provides *income compensation for the person on leave* while non-entitled persons receive a lower flat-rate benefit. The parental leave scheme is also in principle gender neutral, even if at the same time it is taken for granted that the responsibility for taking care of small children belongs primarily to the mother. In recent years, more attention has been devoted to the *caring responsibility of fathers*, today stressed through the regulations governing parental leave. In Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, a father's quota has been introduced in the paid parental leave scheme, reserving two to three months of the total parental leave time for fathers. The objective of this new legislation is to induce parents to share the caring work for their children more equitably by individualizing parental leave. *De-familization* is a catchword for measures aimed at facilitating women's employment and relieving families (women) from the burden of care responsibility for dependent family members through state subsidies and public provision of care. Care policies in this connection have mainly centred on measures such as public provisions for both the children and the elderly.

Another common feature in the family policies of the Nordic countries is the way parental relationships are regulated after divorce (or separation). Joint parental custody has been the main rule, with visitation rights and decisions about which

parent the child or the children shall live with being normally settled between the partners, although they can also be subject to public regulation and supervision by authorities. The non-resident parent, usually the father, has a right to regular contact with the child, and sanctions can be used if the resident parent (usually the mother) fails to cooperate adequately. The biological aspect of parenthood has a strong foothold in Nordic legislation, leaving social fathers and mothers almost without rights and obligations as a consequence [Hatland and Mayhew 2007]. In practice, it is the mothers who are obliged to guard the rights (or the obligation) of the child to socialize with the other parent, while the same is no more than optional for the fathers [Bergman and Hobson 2002; Eriksson 2003]. In this and other respects, too, the *rights and interests of children* have been increasingly put to the forefront, especially following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990.

Some country differences in parental leave arrangements can nevertheless be discerned. The length of the parental leave period and the exact level of the income replacement, for instance, vary from one country to another. While the total leave period is at least one year in all of them, it is somewhat longer in Sweden and Norway than in Denmark and Iceland. In Denmark and Sweden, there is a greater emphasis on institutional childcare also for children under three years, compared to Finland and Norway where, through a child home care allowance, parents are provided with the option of caring for their children at home over longer periods [Duvander and Lammi-Taskula 2010].

Denmark has been somewhat lagging behind in granting statutory rights to parental leave to men. There the “daddy quota” was first introduced and then abolished, based on arguments in favour of free choice [Borchorst, 2006].

In Norway, a more maternalist and child care-oriented approach in family policy has been the norm. According to Ellingsaeter [2006], the policies to promote gender equality in the country have facilitated the possibilities for both dual earning in families and parental care. Ellingsaeter suggests that “parents” practices institutionalise work and family as “separate spheres” and reproduce gender difference to a considerable degree, in both childcare and worklife” [*ibidem*, 125]. In Finland, too, there is a system of child home care allowance, owing in part to lack of child care facilities (as in Norway). The trend there has been for children below two to be increasingly cared for at home, while for older children institutional child care remains more common [Duvander and Lammi-Taskula 2010; Forssén, Jaakola and Ritakallio 2008]. Contrasting with the other Nordic countries, family policy in Iceland started attracting greater political attention only relatively late, in the 1990s. In terms of the father’s quote, Iceland has nonetheless been the more radical in its approach, with fathers

having an independent right to three months of paid paternal leave. The mothers have a right to the same, on top of which the parents have an additional three months to be shared freely between them [Duvander and Lammi-Taskula 2010].

Gender Order in Family Practices

In the Nordic countries, any comparisons as to how parental leave is used by men and women are complicated by the fact that the institutional regulations in the countries often vary in quite complex ways. The applied care policies give different incentives for parents regarding how they want their children's care work to be organized, which is also the intention. In Sweden, for example, the incentives for men to take parental leave have been relatively effective, with 44% of the Swedish men taking at least some parental leave days in 2009, compared to 38% only nine years earlier. The corresponding figures for paid parental days were 22% in 2009 and 12% in 2000 [Statistics Sweden 2010]. In the countries where sharing of the parental leave is promoted through specific incentives (i.e., months are lost if no sharing takes place), a more equitable sharing has resulted. The general pattern, however, is for fathers to only take the time allotted to them but not more [Gislason and Eydal 2010; Gupta, Smith and Verner 2006; Ostner and Schmitt 2008; Vuori 2009]. Altogether, the data show that, in all the countries considered, the father's quota has had a significant impact on the extent to which fathers take parental leave [Brandth and Kvande 2003; Duvander and Lammi-Taskula 2010]. However, the home care allowance is mostly drawn by women with low education, probably because the sums paid out are quite low and lower-educated women tend to have a weaker position in the labour market, leading to financially less rewarding jobs [Eydal and Rostgaard 2010a]. The educational level of the couple also seems to affect the sharing of the parental leave. Parents with a higher level of education and a higher level of income tend to share more often, while parents with lower education and lower income levels share less. In addition, public sector employers appear to have a more supportive attitude towards fathers' taking parental leave, making sharing easier for parents employed in that sector [*ibidem*]. It has, however, also been noted that a substantial share of men take parental leave while the mother is still at home. This may be owing to the dominant attitude among parents and employers in the Nordic countries that still presents mothers as the main carers who are basically obliged to care for their small children, whereas for men to decide to do the same is generally viewed as a matter of a choice. The father's quota, however, sends a message that fathers have a right which employers must respect.

The persistence of the traditional gender order is also reflected in the sharing of domestic work and the care of older children. In Sweden, a comparison of how households allocated time to unpaid work in 1990 and in 2001 shows the time that women spent in unpaid domestic work each week to have decreased by 4.5 hours during the period. This decrease, however, mainly involved time allocated to household chores and not time devoted to child care. Meanwhile, the amount of time that men spent in domestic work and child care was about the same in both years, although men with pre-school children had reduced their work week by four hours, probably because they took parental leave more often. Men with children in school age increased the time they spent in child care by almost one hour per week. Men with pre-school children did the same amount of domestic work regardless of whether their partners worked full time or part time, while women did less domestic work if they worked full time [Statistics Sweden 2003].

Couples establish families driven by love and a wish for togetherness. The notion of power is generally not present in their understandings of family; rather, the idea of good family life is based on a presumption of mutuality. Various qualitative studies on how the division of caring and domestic work is negotiated in Nordic households [i.e. Björnberg and Kollind 2005; Magnusson 2006; Plantin 2001] show there to be a positive attitude towards gender equality in general. However, people have different perceptions of the meaning of gender equality as an ideal. There seem, furthermore, to be different understandings of what practicing gender equality actually means: for some, it may mean accepting active negotiations about the sharing of household duties with the roles and duties of each individual explicitly determined, while for others it may simply entail that the partners do what needs to be done without much overt discussion, under the assumption that they feel a joint responsibility for the well-being of the family and manage the domestic chores accordingly.

Despite all the evidence of conflicts and clear injustices involved in the division of labour and the distribution of resources within families, both men and women living in couples perceive themselves as fairly equal. Their judgments regarding equality are based on several criteria, with different spheres of the relationship weighed against each other. One may, for instance, feel equal in the relationship merely because both partners participate in household chores and child care, regardless of how fair and equitable the division of labour actually is. Alternatively, there may be a general agreement on how things are to be taken care of, with the result that unnecessary conflicts are avoided and less pleasurable tasks can be swapped with more pleasurable tasks. One can also feel equal owing to one's belief that things will even out in the long run [Björnberg and Kollind 2005].

Perceptions of equality are also linked to different understandings of togetherness and the relation that these understandings have to views of justice. Equality and togetherness are also associated with how couples manage conflicts and tensions in terms of interests and perceptions of relationship rules concerning division of labour, consumption, allocation of money, and relationships with the children. The relationship and interaction between individuality, togetherness, and equality is thus central for how these notions are understood and put into practice, which process, moreover, is not gender neutral. Women tend to feel guilty and emotionally obligated to maintain gendered family work patterns, whereas men can take a more rational approach with the gender order allowing them a wider scope of choice. The power hierarchy affords men the right to determine the terms of their engagement and participation: men assume a right for themselves to break any existing agreements if for some reason they think they no longer can or need to abide by them. In the daily stream of events and activities, new priorities of commitments are then created. The partners may believe that the responsibility has been temporarily suspended, but with time temporary actions become permanent habits and routines. Regardless of what was actually agreed upon during the negotiation of household responsibilities, applying relational ethics in the spirit of mutual respect and some type of impartiality in the situation may then be sufficient to allow for a perception of justice to emerge [Kellerhals, Modak, and Perrenoud 1997].

Creation of togetherness and avoidance of conflicts and nagging characteristic of long and repeated discussions is one way of “doing gender” in this context. Studies on the “rhetoric of inequality” [Magnusson 2008] have brought up different ways of arguing against “doing equality” and how equality is frequently seen to contradict with the ideal of togetherness and happiness in the relationship. Magnusson [*ibidem*, 83] has shown how arguments serving one’s own interests come to be construed as “facts” by either partner, identifying at least “seven [interpretative] repertoires that in practice delegitimated gender equality as not being a worthwhile ideology and an acceptable goal.” These were centred, among other things, on “practical considerations,” the career of the male partner, the ideal of being a good mother, and conflict avoidance [*ibidem*].

Unequal division of domestic work and caring is not talked about in terms of domination and subordination in the family context unless there is male violence involved. Couples tend to regard their “specific” situation as a combination of preferences and priorities. While the problem may then be a private one, it is nonetheless linked to the ways in which work life is set up and organized differently for men and women.

Despite institutional interventions to alter them, gender practices and structures seem highly resistant to change. This, to be sure, does not mean that nothing has changed: on the structural and cultural levels, much is today different, with new ways of thinking about gender equality and new attitudes towards gender equality taking hold. The power of men over women in families, furthermore, is no longer protected by law. Yet, the male power continues to be anchored in a gender order that grants men greater freedom to pursue their careers and make more money, while being taken care of in the household. At the same time as men have been relieved of the burden of having the sole responsibility for economic maintenance and key decisions, women have been confronted with the obligation to work without nevertheless being relieved of their full responsibility in caring for others and running the household at home.

Gender Equality in Labour Market Policy, Care Policy, and Family Policy

In an international perspective, the institutional reforms in the Nordic countries have been regarded as landmarks in the advancement of gender equality. The policies developed under the Nordic model have been labelled as “women friendly,” intended as they have been to facilitate women’s entry into the labour force while encouraging men to share more in the private sphere of the home [Swedish Government 2005]. Yet, the outcomes of the model leave ample space for women and men to reproduce the traditional gender structure.

To begin with, labour market segregation remains pronounced and is difficult to overcome. Even with the ongoing privatization of the public sector that in Sweden has substantially increased the number of women working in the private sphere, women continue to work mostly in the public sector or in service occupations. Nordic statistics also show that, since 2000, the share of part-time workers among women has increased in all countries of the region. In Norway and Sweden, slightly more than 40 per cent of all women in the adult labour force currently work part time, while in Finland their share is somewhat lower [Agerskov 2010]. Moreover, the pay gap between women and men remains significant at all levels of the workforce. In 2009, for example, Swedish women made 15% less than Swedish men, faring thus only slightly better than their counterparts in the European Union, where the gap was at 17% [Eurostat 2009].

Studies on the Swedish power elite have shown women to occupy no more than 26% of the top positions in the country’s economy, politics, and culture. The corresponding figures for Norway, Denmark, and Finland are 17, 12, and 13%, respectively [Göransson 2007]. With the exception of politics, men continue to dom-

inate all spheres of societal life. The fields where male domination is the strongest are business, science, and culture. In the field of business, the share of women in top positions is currently 5%, compared to 45% in politics. While the representation of women in these positions has increased over the last twenty years, especially in politics, the overall situation has remained largely unchanged. The different fields follow their own logics of functioning, including their particular mechanisms of recruitment and exclusion [*ibidem*]. These logics are linked to the ways in which competition for powerful positions within them operates. Within the field of business, for instance, the top positions are allocated on collegial grounds with social and family networks playing an important role, whereas in politics the recruitment processes are usually more transparent and based on general elections. The greater the openness of the recruitment process, the more the opportunities are opened up for larger segments of society, including women [*ibidem*].

As Göransson [*ibidem*] has shown, approximately 40% of the women in elite positions in Sweden grew up in families where both the mother and the father held high-ranking positions or worked in high-prestige occupations, whereas their male colleagues predominantly came from male-breadwinner families. The women in question, in other words, had drawn on cultural capital transmitted by their mothers and fathers. The men in top positions were notably often married to women who were not pursuing a career but instead had assumed all responsibility for caring for the family and the children. While the men in the study did not take parental leave, all of the women had done so. The women who were married generally carried the main responsibility for the family and domestic chores; almost 33% of the women participating in the study, however, were single mothers.

These few examples are consistent with the findings of other studies, and they are in line with the theoretical explanations put forward by gender scholars working in the field. Risman [2004, 432], for instance, has argued that while actions are a function of interests, the ability to choose is patterned by the social structure, including its built-in gender stratification system. Gender is a structure deeply embedded in society, one that is reflected in institutions and cultural rules and norms and makes itself manifest, for example, in the tendency of individuals to identify themselves by their gender to meet interactional expectations in social encounters. Categorization by sex is almost always intersected with the hierarchical order underlying male dominance and sustaining male privileges over the female gender.

A Stalled Revolution?

In Sweden, the question of gender equality began to be framed in political discourse as a matter of unequal *power* beginning in the 1990s. The most significant aspect of this transformation was that men were now openly identified as a gender category with its specific interests and the power to define what is normal and what is deviant [Eduards 2002]. One of the most difficult issues to acknowledge, however, was the tendency of male power to breed male violence, and the extent to which this constituted a social problem [*ibidem*]. A state commission studying male violence against women nevertheless concluded that male violence was to be examined in a broader structural context of male power and the subordination of women [Swedish Government 1995]. Counteracting men's violence against women has been a strong priority of the country's current government, resulting, among other things, in a 2007 action plan for combating violence against women. The plan is geared primarily towards providing education and information to professionals who in their work come across or deal with the problem. Until now, however, the programme has focused solely on the victims. A recent evaluation report concluded that the initiatives taken under it have contributed to an increased awareness of the problem among professionals working with victims of gender-based violence [Swedish National Council 2011]. While violence against women has not decreased, more women today bring their cases to the police and the courts.

A 2005 special report commissioned by the then Social Democratic government suggested that any policy aimed at reducing gender inequality be pursued on two separate tracks. Firstly, it was seen as necessary to restructure the country's parental leave system and improve the working conditions of women. The report authors argued that the great flexibility that the current scheme allowed, in terms of how the parental leave period could be divided between the parents and the option it gave for the mothers to use up almost all of the leave days allotted to the couple, had sent the wrong message that child care was optional for men but an obligation for women, in the sense that mothers have the main responsibility for the care of children. Long parental leave was now seen as an obstacle in the efforts to improve women's position in the labour market. Together with part-time work, it was argued, it served to cement women into their tradition role as caregivers and providers of domestic work, helping to reproduce the prevailing attitudes that portray women as more committed to family than work. Full-time employment, the report claimed, was firmly established as a symbol for work commitment, and it was primarily associated with masculinity and regarded as a normative standard. The report authors concluded that through a reconstructed parental leave system a message could be sent that men, too, have a

parental responsibility and even an obligation to provide care; there should be no free choice allowed to fathers as to whether to take parental leave or let the mother use up all the leave days allotted to the couple. This was a message that needed to reach all the parties involved: the mothers, the fathers, and the employers. Parental leave, the report proposed, therefore had to be individualized in the sense that it should be more evenly divided between the two parents without simply leaving it to the partners to decide how they prefer to dispose of their allotted days [Swedish Government 2005]. For this purpose, the father's quota needed to be expanded. Following the election of the new centre-right government in the country in 2006, however, any proposals for a fifty-fifty parental leave solution have been turned down by all political parties in the country, with the exception of the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet). Key arguments against these proposals have been that a reform along these lines would violate the parents' freedom of choice, or their right to make their own decisions about how to share child care. Nevertheless, in 2008 the government went on to introduce a "gender equality bonus," a financial incentive for parents to divide parental leave more equally that all the same has thus far failed to produce any tangible results .

Secondly, the report authors stressed that in order to counteract gender inequality, it was also important to not only raise awareness of the negative aspects of gender inequality (and the positive aspects of gender equality), but also break habits that contribute to reproducing gender equality structures. In view of the gendered practices discussed above, the important areas to be targeted in this respect would seem to be those where informal processes permit wide scope for discretionary action while providing little transparency. The household is one such area, with women still today ending up carrying the main responsibility for domestic work and family, even in dual-career households. Despite all the initiatives to reform practices in families, the gendered division of domestic labour has proven remarkably resistant to change. The current government in Sweden, for example, has introduced public subsidies for the purchase of private services for the household, with three main motives behind the measure: to encourage women to pursue a career, to create work opportunities for immigrants (mostly women) and young, less-educated individuals experiencing difficulties in entering the labour market, and to legalize the shadow market for household work. The introduction of this tax reduction was highly contested in political debates in the country. While it may certainly be viewed as beneficial to some individuals and families, it can equally well be seen as merely passing the problem to another group of women. It also strengthens the existing gender patterns among social classes, as it is primarily the better-off women who can afford to purchase private services to begin with [Sköld 2009]. Moreover, the reform can hardly be proposed as a solution for gender equality more broadly, given that the privately contracted work will be

performed by other women at low cost, which ensures that the maintenance of the domestic sphere will continue to be assigned low value, perhaps even lower than at present. In other words, it is likely to only reproduce and reinforce a gendered labour market. At the same time, however, the reform is also of importance, in that it shifts the focus towards more long-standing situations for families past the early period when they still have small children to care for. Sharing parental leave is important, and the reforms that encourage fathers to take part in caring for their small children have had a positive impact. Yet, given that practices in households develop over time, greater emphasis needs to be placed on other measures as well.

Another contested area in family and care policy concerns the child home care allowance. Introduced in Norway, Finland, and Sweden¹ as an alternative enabling parents to choose between institutional and home-based care for their children, it has been criticized for doing little to address gender and class inequality, since the option is targeted mainly for women with low-income jobs. Arguments in favour of it, on the other hand, have used freedom of choice as a catchword to portray the new arrangement as serving the best interest of the family and/or the child.

While the formation of the Nordic model must be viewed primarily as an accomplishment of the reform-minded left, it is important to stress that, in general, the initiatives aimed at strengthening women's labour participation and public care policy have been supported across the political spectrum even during times of economic crisis, as in the 1970s, the 1990s, and in 2008 [Eydal and Rostgard 2010b]. As pointed out by Ellingsaeter and Leira [2006], the severe economic recession of the early 1990s paved the way for more neoliberal currents to gain ground in the region, bringing an emphasis on flexibility and choice, privatization, and opposition to tax increases. So far, however, the new thinking has not left its mark on the basic framework created in the preceding decades. While it is possible to regard the introduction of the child home care allowance as a socially and politically conservative move, the same cannot be said of the father's quota, notwithstanding the fact that its introduction in Sweden was the work of a centre-right government. In the years to come, there will be a great need for a qualified labour force, and women today are especially well educated. The country's current neoliberal government is set on putting all able-bodied citizens to work and making them contribute to the paid economy, and is thus unlikely to introduce new policies that reduce the incentives for work among women.

Given the current government's strong emphasis on workfare policy, it is, however, necessary to analyse how working conditions are developing for women. In Sweden, the standard of living of single mothers has not improved since the 1980s.

¹ It was briefly introduced also in Denmark before being abolished.

The unemployment rate is highest among young women, who, when employed, are also more likely to work in temporary and non-voluntary part-time jobs, receiving uniformly lower pay. The women also shoulder the primary responsibility for domestic work in their families. The public sector has been generally more family friendly, although salaries are typically low, with the discrepancy between private and public sector workers having only widened due to efforts to curtail public expenses. Organizational reforms aiming at further privatization of service work have partly improved the salaries for some categories of women, but not for those with the lowest pay.

Family and care policy has thus far targeted the two-generation family of parents and their dependent children. However, the extended family is more and more coming into focus, especially with the increasing care needs of an aging population. While, in the Nordic model, the responsibility for eldercare rests with the municipalities, reductions in public support for the elderly have made assistance from close kin to grow in significance, at least in Sweden. So far, the trend has not been recognized by policy makers as an issue of work and family life balance. The development towards greater participation of families in eldercare, however, has obvious consequences for gender equality, given that it is mostly women who take on the additional responsibilities, with repercussions for their work situation [Szebehely 2005]. While in principle eldercare is not a family responsibility, in practice adult children frequently do, and are also increasingly more expected to, assume a significant role in the organization of eldercare. In consequence, care policies can be expected to more and more become arenas where urgent societal issues are thematized and tackled in the coming years.

In her comparative analysis of gender policies in the Scandinavian countries, Borchorst traces back the failure of gender equality policy in Denmark to win wider support among political parties to the economic crisis that hit country in 1973. Under the impact of the crisis, the broad political consensus that existed about gender equality in the country was undermined, with the result that gender equality has largely fallen out of the political agenda and gender has failed to become recognized as a relevant political category [Borchorst 2009, 38]. In Nordic comparison, Danish policies have gone furthest in promoting a dual breadwinner model supported by defamiliarization [Borchorst and Siim 2008].

Of all the Nordic countries, gender equality has featured most prominently in the political agenda in Sweden and Norway, probably owing to the fact that social-democratic ideals have traditionally been the strongest in these two countries. Compared to Denmark and Finland, gender research in Sweden and Norway has also been more closely linked to gender equality policy. However, the political landscapes of the Nordic countries have begun to change, and the consequences of these changes have already affected the pace of the reform process towards greater gender equality.

The developments call attention to the gendered effects that the changes to the institutional regulation of entitlements within the respective social security systems may have. In Sweden, for instance, the regulations regarding unemployment and health insurance benefits for part-time unemployed and temporary workers have changed in ways that are likely to have differing consequences for men and women, with predictable effects on the gender equality structure.

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Gender and Power in Families and Family Policies

Sweden in the Nordic Context

Abstract: Abstract: Over the last fifty years, the Nordic countries have been engaged in systematic efforts to modernize the conditions for families, providing what is frequently viewed as good examples of cases where gender equality has been achieved through conscious institutional intervention. The path to gender equality at work, in the labour market, and in families, however, continues to be strewn with obstacles that need to be overcome before the ambitions behind the equality goals can become reality. The future prospects of the “Nordic model” of gender equality more broadly, too, remain uncertain in the current political climate. The analysis of current trends in the region yields a mixed picture of backlash and progression that complicates the question of gender equality in both families and the labour market.

Keywords: *Nordic model, welfare state, gender equality, family.*

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