

# Gender Equality In Norway

by Brit Fougner Førde and Helga Maria Hernes

## Equality Issues

Egalitarian values and welfare state policies have had a positive effect on the welfare of Norwegian women.

Equality policies have by no means led to equality among men and women, but they have had two important consequences: they have reduced the distance between men's and women's economic status and political power more than in most parts of the world; and they have given women, regardless of social status and labour market ties, a standard of living above the poverty line. Yet, there remains an inescapably male bias in regard to the content of Nordic equality. This has consequences for a wide variety of issues.

The present struggle for gender equality is a struggle for the redefinition of the content and concept of equality itself as much as it is a struggle for equal status between men and women, i.e. for women's inclusion into the world of men, and thus a struggle for power. "We don't want equality at the behest of men and according to their rules," is a common expression among women of all political persuasions. Giving political content to this abstract claim is a difficult and conflict-filled process, particularly because the passion for equality is shared by men and women alike.

What are the boundaries between the private and the public and where should they be drawn? The importance of this question should be obvious. The division of labour between family, market and state is decisive for the welfare of women and for their social power. The boundaries between these three spheres have moved progressively in the wake of welfare state development. In contrast to many other Western countries, where traditional "family work" has been marketized, the Nordic solution has been its incorporation into the public sector administered by the state and municipalities. Which gender differences do we want to

be able to legitimize within the confines of states that have had equality as a long-standing policy? The strength and fervor of the ideology of equality has become a two-edged sword for women. As a matter of fact, in the early days of the new women's movement, the most frequent assertion by opponents was that gender equality would increase social inequality, and women spent a great deal of energy claiming that the two were connected. Scandinavian languages differentiate between the two. The Swedish *jämställdhet* refers to gender equality and is defined in terms of equality of status between women and men, while the richer concept of social equality that evokes solidarity is termed *jämliket*. In Norwegian and Danish, *likestilling* (ligestilling) is the word for gender equality, while *likhet* (lighed) is the term for general equality. The ideological force of this verbal differentiation must not be underestimated. Women may gain equal status within the confines of dominant ideology and public policy, but the thrust of that tradition must not be threatened by "special" interests. Women's interests are defined even in Scandinavia as "special" interests. The Nordic women's movements' major ideological aim has been to define them as general interests, and to change the content of equality in all its forms and expressions in accordance with women's interests and preferences.

Yet much of the legislation that has finally been passed is couched in gender-neutral terms. In the name of social equality, women have become the "underrepresented gender" in most public documents. Only Norway has been willing to pass some women-specific legislation; yet even its major clause in the *Equal Status Act* of 1977 is gender-neutral. Public documents refer to the "under-represented gender" and women have felt threatened in "their" labour market niches as a result. Most policies of gender equality have been or have started out as labour market policies.

One can discern three policy phases:

phase one encourages women (in preference to male immigrant labour) to enter the labour market; phase two addresses problems of unequal treatment once they get there in gender-neutral terms of equal access; phase three encourages men to take over their share of family work by giving them parental leave. The goal is gender neutrality within the family and society at large (see also Jonung 1982). This is a departure from Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's recipe for the 1930s and Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal's for the 1950s. These books encouraged women to enter the labour market before motherhood in order to get a foothold, to leave the market during the years of intensive child-rearing, and then to return to the market on a full-time basis for the third phase of life (Myrdal and Myrdal 1935, Klein and Myrdal 1956, Bjøru and Sørensen 1983). The life course of men and women, which is what these policies aim to regulate, were still deemed to be "naturally" divergent in the 1930s and 1950s, while today's policy aim is to synchronize them in order to make men and women "equal."

It would be a considerable overstatement to claim that the great changes that have affected Scandinavian women's lives during the 1970s and 1980s came about as a result of public policy. Even in very active states, policy regulates changes that are already occurring for a variety of reasons rather than initiating the changes. Policies can, however, affect the direction and speed of social changes. During the 1970s women entered the labour market, albeit on a part-time basis; they stayed longer in the educational system, although in traditionally feminine areas; Scandinavian men began to participate more in child care, although not in housework strictly speaking; women increased their political participation and representation rates to the highest in the world, although without achieving parity or a majority of seats. Very loosely, one might say that these changes were partly a result of economic development, partly of the activi-

ties of the women's movement, and partly a result of governmental policies.

There can be no doubt that it is the gradual political empowerment of women that will have the greatest and most far reaching effect in the long run. As life patterns, mainly women's life patterns, have changed, the interrelationship between the above three forces of change has become clearer. Most of the growth in women's labour market participation has occurred in the form of part-time labour. This trend was severely criticized within the feminist movement and by trade unions as being inimical to the interests of women and labour power in general. Part-time women, the majority of working women, were thus denied labour union support. Yet they are and were most active in movements, issue-oriented politics, and political parties.

There is no doubt that political parties have increased their recruitment of women as a result of pressure by movement women and their own members. In the wake of the activities of a lively women's movement during the 1970s, women's underrepresentation in, or complete absence from, central power positions had come to be regarded as a public problem and an area for policy intervention. Representation and participation rights became policy issues in themselves. Political powerlessness, i.e. lack of representative office and access to decision making and higher level positions, came to be regarded as unjust, against the interests of women, and ultimately as a disadvantage for society as a whole. This attitude was widespread among women of all political persuasions, and it received lip service from male politicians, especially those on the left. The legitimacy of the issue increased rapidly.

Policies of gender-neutral equality have not been equally well received in all quarters. The tone of the equality debate has changed character with the influx of a large number of women into political and professional life. The clustering effects of labour market segregation, and the fact that most women work within the semi-professions that dominate the public sector and tend to identify public sector interests with women's interests, have also influenced public debate. Many of the conflicts of interest within mature welfare states coincide today with gender conflicts. Gender differences and gender

conflicts have clearly come to the fore as a consequence of the political empowerment of women. This political empowerment is at least in part attributable to the activities of part-time working women, the "deviants" of dominant labour market ideology, an ideology of full employment by which is meant full-time employment. The untidy life patterns of women are thus slowly undermining the dominant life patterns on which public policies have been based.

Policies of gender equality aim at giving women access to decision making roles in different spheres of public life, and enabling them to exercise their rights as citizens. They are explicitly concerned with the integration of individuals into various areas of public life, including higher positions. The Scandinavian policy of equality, in general, is based on the assumption that education and economic independence are the two sources from which all forms of social power derive. In addition it emphasizes the participatory right of citizens. Women's policy has traditionally been social policy, which through a system of transfers and services aims at improving the quality of life of women and children. Today it covers all policy that concerns itself with women in their roles as clients and consumers of policy provisions and as paid employees, and is thus very broad in scope, affecting many ministries. The policy of gender equality is of more recent origin and has established a machinery that aims at increasing women's political and social prestige and power in a more direct fashion. It is a policy that concerns itself with women in their roles as "corporate citizens," both of the state and within other societal settings, for example in large organizations. Women's policy is concerned with the redistribution of goods, services and transfers; gender-equality policy is concerned with the redistribution of status and social power. They are two different types of policy.

Gender-equality policy is concerned with women's access to decision making and with their access as a group to the labour market and to the educational system. It is a policy concerned with elite recruitment and extends beyond the world of electoral politics (where it has no legal validity) and corporate representation (where it does), into that of the recruitment of civil servants, university teachers and

lately, leadership positions in general. Gender has, in other words, become a legitimate and relevant factor in the recruitment selection process, even though the differences in effectiveness of the policy are largely dependent on the type of institution.

Legitimizing gender differences requires and depends on the participation of women in the political process. This in turn requires the presence of women at the various stages of this process. It is a mistake to assume that there exist, at this point in the history of Scandinavian politics, clearly worked out schemes for reconciling gender equality with gender difference. Regarding all differences as inequality or at least potential inequality and thus as the potential object of policy intervention has been a strong trend in Scandinavian politics. Difference as a policy goal is regarded with deep suspicion. This suspicion has been the hallmark of social democratic ideology and the basic force that has created the relatively universal concepts of equality. This universalism, strongly qualified by work-related benefits, has freed women from

**Table I**

**Women's Representation in Decision Making Bodies (Norway)**

	Year	% Women
Cabinet	1972	20
	1986	40
Parliament	1973	16
	1981	26
	1985	34
Local Councils	1971	15
	1979	23
	1987	31
Mayors	1983	5
Governmental Commissions and Boards	1972	10
	1979	22
	1985	30
Municipal Commissions and Boards	1975	12
	1985	32

poverty. It has also given them a client profile from which they are now slowly liberating themselves.

### Patterns of Participation

All public policies have until recently been formulated by political bodies dominated by men and implemented by bureaucracies dominated by men. Women's absence from central societal institutions and decision making forums has until a short time ago been characteristic of all Western democracies. This has changed in Norway where women have made significant advances in terms of political power. Norway's prime minister is a woman. Eight of Norway's eighteen ministers are women, and all the other Nordic governments have a high percentage of women ministers. One third of all members of Scandinavian parliaments are women. Their representation in the public system of decision making is higher than anywhere in the Western world.

### Labour Market Issues

Problems of segregation have not been solved, and the female industrial wage is today about 85% of the male wage. This is not bad by international standards: the US female wage is 60% of the male wage; Swedish women workers earn 90% of the male wage. 40% of women in the Norwegian labour market work in low-wage occupations (i.e. earn less than 85% of the median industrial wage) versus 19% of male wage earners. The percentage of

women in full-time employment drops with the number of children they have, while men's labour force participation is independent of whether they have children or not. The major trend, however, is that women do not leave the labour market when they become mothers, but rather that they go over to part-time employment while the children are small. 90% of those who work part-time are women, and it is this type of labour which had increased rapidly. Women today bring home about 30% of the combined family income, a fact which reflects in part the lower wages of women and in part the frequency of part-time labour.

### The Equal Status Act

By and large the *Norwegian Equal Status Act* (1978) can be characterized as prohibition legislation, although Paragraph 1 states that its principle objective is to improve the position of women. In principle the Act applies to all areas of society, but it cannot be enforced in relation to private life. In brief, the content of the Act is as follows: the general clause establishes that differential treatment does not contravene the general ban on discrimination, provided that "in conformity with the purpose of the Act, it promotes equal status between the sexes" (Paragraph 3).

Any form of discriminatory treatment in relation to appointment, promotion, notice to quit or redundancy is prohibited. Women and men employed by the same employer shall have equal pay for work of

**Table II**

**Labour Unions: Women's Trade Union Membership Rates and Representation on Central Executive Committees 1978/82 and 1986.**

Norway	% Women Members		% Women Executives	
	1982	1986	1982	1986
Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions (LO)	33	36	7	19
Central Federation of Professional Associations (YS)	50	55	13	27
Central Organization of Academics (AF)	20	20	19	35

**Table III**

**Labour Participation Among Women, 1985**

Married Women	62%
Single Women	53%
Divorced & Widowed	41%
All Women 1985	58%
All Women 1972	44%

**Table IV**

**Women's & Men's Working Hours, 1985**

Hours	Men	Women
1-19	5%	23%
20-40	22%	49%
40 or more	78%	28%

equal value. In addition to provisions concerning education, teaching aids and associations, since 1982 the Act also includes a clause relating to the gender-based composition of all publicly appointed committees, boards and councils. None of the other Nordic Acts incorporates a corresponding regulation. A ban on advertising that discriminates on grounds of sex also has been integrated into the Act relating to Marketing Control.

Three authorities are empowered to enforce the Act: the Equal Status Commissioner (*Ombud* in Norwegian), the Equal Status Appeals Board and the Courts of Justice. The task of the *Ombud* is first to seek to accomplish a voluntary settlement. If this fails, the case can be submitted to the Equal Status Appeals Board, which is empowered to impose bans and require that measures are implemented. It cannot, however, make decisions on cases which are in the province of the Labour Court (such as wage agreements, etc.) (Quoted from Eduards et al, 1985: 146).

Gender equality legislation has a most important impact on the labour market. The Equal Status Act of 1977 opts for differential treatment in favour of women with job placement and promotion. It also applies to certain educational institutions such as technical schools. Universities are required to hire women who are as qualified as male applicants.

## Future Reforms

As early as 1944, the 6-hour work day was set as a goal by Alva Myrdal in Sweden, since, as she said, among other things, this can give women and men an opportunity to put aside their "forced roles of manliness and womanliness."

In recent years the 6-hour day has been widely debated in Norway. Most of the women's organization look upon this as an important means in the struggle for achieving equality. The 6-hour work day is intended to facilitate the combination of a normal working career with the responsibility for home, family and local community.

In April 1984, the government appointed a Commission on Working Hours. The Commission's task was to prepare a professional report clarifying alternative models and goals in connection with working hours policy. The Commission report presents a broad analysis of the various types of working hour references. The average weekly working hours in Norway are among the lowest in the West. This is related to Norway's relatively short normal working week (37-1/2 hours) and the highest proportion of part-time work in the OECD area (NOU 1987:9E). The survey carried out by the Commission shows that referents concerning retirement age received the widest support. Yet shortening the working week or day also gathered support. One out of five would like to have a shorter working day or week, while three out of five women in full-time jobs with children under the age of 7 want shorter working hours or longer parental leave.

A question was also asked about people's attitudes to a 6-hour normal working day for everyone. A good half of the population would like a 6-hour working day if wages were not reduced. If wages are reduced to correspond with the reduction in working hours, support for this reform falls to 21%, which is after all still an impressive number. Yet given the economic constraints of the moment, this reform will have to wait for its implementation. Yet, women of all political persuasions feel that this reform would bring us closer to the realization of a "woman-friendly" state. Such a state would enable women to have a natural relationship to their children, their work and public life. A woman-friendly state would not force

harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex. In such a state women would not have to choose futures that demand greater sacrifices from them than are expected of men. It would be, in short, a state where injustice on the basis of gender would be largely eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequality, such as among groups of women. This is not to say that all forms of injustice, hard choices or forms of scarcity would be eliminated.

This inner logic of post-war Scandinavian development has created the potential for evolution towards woman-friendly states and societies. The questions that arise in regard to this development concern the boundaries between public and private responsibility for reproductive tasks and the acceptance of legitimate gender differences in societies that have equality as an over-riding and long-standing policy aim.

While these questions are being debated actively in Scandinavia, questions about the balance between the private and public, and of reconceptualizations of the notion of equality are shared by women in many countries.

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## STUDIES IN WOMEN'S LIFE COURSE AND LIVING CONDITIONS

*Helga Maria Hernes, Series Editor*

The aim of this eighteen-volume series entitled *Women's Life Course and Living Conditions* is to present a holistic interpretation of women's relationship to the family, work life and the public sphere in the context of a Scandinavian welfare society. The study of living conditions centers around descriptions of women's lives as compared to men's and among different groups of women. Life course studies on the other hand attempt to explain some of the reasons for and causes of these differences and attempt to answer such questions as why women sometimes seem to make different choices from men. To what extent do women have less control over their lives than men? Do women — in other words — have less freedom than men? What do the differences in living conditions, life course patterns and individual choices tell us about the societies we live in?

The series consists of monographs and anthologies on such topics as women's paid and unpaid work, women and the social services, their role in the corporate state and local politics, studies of cooperation and friendship patterns among women, women's law, the integration of women in the existing labour market, regional differences among women's living conditions, women's psychology, and many more. About one hundred social scientists have contributed to the series' eighteen volumes, 12 of which are in print. Their work has largely grown out of a cooperative effort which has in part been financed by the Norwegian Research Council for the Sciences and Humanities, and the Norwegian Ministry of Consumer Affairs and Administration.

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