

Pirjo Markkola

Nordic Gender Equality: Between Administrative Cooperation and Global Branding

The presentation of the Nordic countries as world leaders in gender equality

The Nordic countries are commonly renowned for their comprehensive welfare states, a high level of social services and a dual-earner family model. They also hold top positions in international rankings of welfare policies, social security, and gender equality, among others.¹ One such ranking is the World Economic Forum's annual Gender Gap Report, introduced in 2006. The aim of the report is to reveal role models in economic gender equality as well as to provide information in support of the Forum's initiatives to close the economic gender gap globally.² Based on four criteria – opportunities for economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment – the ranking indicates aspects of equal opportunities between men and women and the ways in which resources, scarce or ample, are divided between them. So, the rankings measure only gender-based disparities. Nevertheless, as Saadia Zahidi wrote in Huffington Post in 2013, the Nordic countries stick out:

Although no country in the world has yet achieved gender equality, the Nordic countries consistently stand out in the World Economic Forum's annual Global Gender Gap Report,

1 Johan Strang, "Introduction: The Nordic model of transnational cooperation," in *Nordic Cooperation: A European region in transition*, ed. Johan Strang (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–27, doi:10.4324/9781315755366–1; Johanna Kantola, "Persistent paradoxes, turbulent times. Gender equality policies in the Nordics in the 2010s," in *The Nordic Economic, Social and Political Model. Challenges in the 21st Century*, ed. Anu Koivunen, Jari Ojala, and Janne Holmén (London: Routledge, 2021), 212.

2 Klaus Schwab, "Preface," In *The Global Gender Gap Report 2009*, ed. Ricardo Hausmann et al. (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2009), v; For the reports, see, *World Economic Forum*, accessed 17 September, 2020 <https://www.weforum.org/projects/closing-the-gender-gap-gender-parity-task-forces>.

which measures how well countries are doing at removing the obstacles that hold women back.³

According to the 2014 report, for example, “[n]o country in the world has fully closed the gender gap, but all five of the Nordic countries have closed more than 80 % of it.”⁴ The Nordic countries held all five top positions. They were referred to as “role models in terms of their ability to achieve gender parity.”⁵ In 2020, the ranking appeared quite similar. The top was still occupied by the Nordic countries; however, Denmark was only fourteenth, a position to which it had dropped in 2017.⁶ Of course, the rankings are problematic, and their results are always partial. More importantly, changes in the rankings indicate that gender equality is a process and that the gender gap, as measured by one inquiry, can also widen. In terms of gender equality, countries are in constant motion.

The Nordic countries are clearly presented as world leaders in gender equality. However, any historian or social scientist interested in gender issues could point out a long list of failures and shortcomings in Nordic gender equality policies and gender relations, whether national or regional. According to several critical assessments since the 1970s and 1980s, attempts to reach gender equality constantly encounter both structural and ideological obstacles based on various factors in education, the labour market, family relations, and general attitudes.⁷ This dilemma, where the Nordic countries are presented as world leaders on the

3 Saadia Zahidi, “What Makes the Nordic Countries Gender Equality Winners?” *Huffington Post*, 24 October 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-makes-the-nordic-cou_b_4159555#:~:text=All%20Nordic%20countries%20reached%2099,to%20primary%20and%20secondary%20education.

4 World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2014* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014), 7.

5 World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap 2014*, 37.

6 World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2017* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2017), 8; World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2020), 9.

7 Elina Haavio-Mannila, “The Position of Women,” in *Nordic Democracy*, ed. Erik Allardt et al (Copenhagen: Det danske selskab, 1981); Elina Haavio-Mannila et al., *Unfinished democracy: women in Nordic politics* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985); Marja Keränen, *Finnish ‘undemocracy’: Essays on gender and politics* (Helsinki: Finnish Political Science Association, 1990); Nordic Council of Ministers, *Kön och våld – Gender & Violence: Ett nordiskt forskningsprogram 2000 – 2004 slutrapport. A Nordic Research Programme 2000 – 2004 Final Report* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005), 7. Among the more current studies, see Johanna Kantola, Kevät Nousiainen, and Milja Saari, eds., *Tasa-arvo toisin nähtynä. Oikeuden ja politiikan näkökulmia tasa-arvoon ja yhdenvertaisuuteen*, (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2012); Kantola, “Persistent paradoxes.”

one hand and filled with problems on the other, is intriguing. What makes seemingly successful Nordic gender equality policies so complicated?

In this chapter, I am interested in the ways in which understandings of equality between women and men were rhetorically presented and formed a transnational *Nordic* gender equality policy, which was shared and confirmed by several agreements and action plans. The current assessment of the Nordic countries as leaders in gender equality presupposes not only a historical change in the concept of equality but also a historical process of conceptualizing gender equality as specifically Nordic. To understand how “Nordicness” in the field of gender equality was established, I will give an overview of the Nordic cooperation on gender equality, initiated in the early 1970s, and explore how certain gender equality policies were gradually named Nordic. This chapter argues that the 1990s were a turning point in the Nordic cooperation on gender equality. Since the 1990s, naming and even branding gender equality as Nordic gained ground among the Nordic gender equality agencies. The Nordic-Baltic cooperation, in particular, served to establish a platform for the rhetoric of Nordicness in the field of gender equality. Moreover, the European Union challenged the Nordic gender equality officials to sharpen their conceptions. This chapter explores how policies became “Nordic,” how the concept of “Nordic” was used, and how the Nordic countries came to be presented as world leaders in gender equality.

The main sources consist of documents produced by Nordic gender equality agencies. The Nordic Council of Ministers, founded in 1971, was the main body to coordinate Nordic cooperation on equal rights. Its publications include action plans for Nordic cooperation and various project reports and programmes since the 1970s. The concept of “gender equality” is used as an analytical concept, my tool to study Nordic cooperation in policy and politics. At the same time, my intention is to be historically sensitive to the changing conceptualizations of “gender equality” (S. *jämställdhet*, N. *likestilling*, DK. *ligestilling*, I. *jafnrétti*, F. *tasa-arvo*). Until the turn of the 21st century, *jämställdhet* and its Nordic synonyms were often translated as equal opportunities in English language publications. Equal opportunities referred to the same rights, responsibilities, and possibilities for women and men; moreover, women and men were mainly understood as binary categories. Later timelines and histories summarizing the early years of Nordic cooperation often use the concept “gender equality,”⁸ but it

⁸ E.g. Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality – a stronger Nordic Region. Nordic co-operation programme on gender equality 2015–2018* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015).

was not the concept used by contemporaries. As the Finnish political scientist Anne Maria Holli has argued, “gender equality” as a linguistic construction is always a context-bound concept. Other scholars have also stressed the importance of studying “gender equality” as a historical concept, as its content not only varies according to time and place but also can have differing meanings in the same historical context.⁹ Therefore, a historically sensitive reading of concepts is needed. When it comes to “Nordic gender equality,” the rhetorical aspects of Nordicness further underline the need to be historically specific.

Equal rights become Nordic in the 1970s

There is a long tradition of Scandinavian and Nordic cooperation since the 19th century, that can be tracked through the meetings, conferences, and comparative projects of professionals and civil society organisations. Academic scholars and civil servants formed Nordic networks and launched Nordic journals and other publications. Lawyers started inter-Nordic meetings in 1872 and other professions followed the same pattern. Institutionalised Nordic cooperation in the fields of social policy and child welfare were established after the First World War. In the 1920s, following the inter-Nordic cooperation of lawyers and activists in the women’s movement, there were national reforms in family law. By 1929, relatively similar marriage laws were passed in all the Nordic countries.¹⁰

Social policy experts, politicians, and civil servants played a major role in Nordic cooperation, and their work together lead to a shared interest in gender issues as well. The Nordic scholars Thorsten Borring Olesen and Johan Strang

9 Anne Maria Holli, “Kriittisiä näkökulmia tasa-arvon tutkimukseen,” in *Tasa-arvo toisin nähtynä. Oikeuden ja politiikan näkökulmia tasa-arvoon ja yhdenvertaisuuteen*, ed. Johanna Kantola, Kevät Nousiainen, and Milja Saari (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2012), 74; On historical context, see Kari Melby, Anna-Birte Ravn, and Christina Carlsson Wetterberg, eds., “A Nordic model of gender equality? Introduction,” in *Gender equality and welfare politics in Scandinavia. The limits of political ambition?* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2008), 18–20.

10 Strang, “Introduction,” 6–8; Kari Melby et al., *Inte ett ord om kärlek. Äktenskap och politik i Norden ca 1850–1930* (Göteborg & Stockholm: Makadam förlag, 2006); Klaus Petersen, “Constructing Nordic welfare? Nordic Social Political Cooperation 1919–1955,” in *The Nordic Model of Welfare. A Historical Reappraisal*, ed. Niels Finn Christiansen et al. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 70–71; Kari Melby et al., “What is Nordic in the Nordic gender model?” in *Beyond Welfare State Models: Transnational Historical Perspectives on Social Policy*, ed. Pauli Kettunen and Klaus Petersen (Cheltenham & Northampton MA: Edward Elgar, 2011), 150–51; Astri Andresen et al., *Barnen och välfärdspolitik. Nordiska barndomar 1900–2000* (Stockholm: Dialogos Förlag, 2011).

state that official Nordic cooperation “contributed to a Nordification of political discourse and to the promotion of inter-Nordic exchange of ideas among governments, parliamentarians and civil servants.”¹¹ Simultaneously, new popular movements, especially second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, had an impact on the Nordic arena. Moreover, international organisations and transnational movements highlighting human rights and the rights of women were often used as a point of reference in the Nordic countries. The 1945 Charter of the United Nations and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided not only international inspiration but also more compelling incentives for Nordic gender equality policies. As historian Kristine Kjærsgaard shows, the Danish participation in the UN conferences on women in 1975, 1980, and 1985 served in various ways the promotion of national gender equality policies in the 1970s and 1980s.¹²

Nordic cooperation on equality between men and women became institutionalised in the 1970s. The Nordic Council of Ministers (hereafter Council of Ministers) was the main agency to coordinate Nordic cooperation on equal rights. This has been pointed out by the Danish historian Bente Rosenbeck who argues that

over a number of years, the Nordic Council of Ministers has prioritized equal rights, sponsoring a committee for equal rights issues made up of council officials as well as setting up the post of official equal rights consultant, a position later renamed equal rights advisory officer.¹³

In 1974, the Council of Ministers decided that the Nordic governments should nominate representatives to liaise with the other governments on equality be-

¹¹ Thorsten Borring Olesen and Johan Strang, “European challenge to Nordic institutional cooperation: Past, present and future,” in *Nordic Cooperation: The European region in transition*, ed. Johan Strang (London: Routledge, 2016), 29, doi:10.4324/9781315755366-2.

¹² Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men in the Nordic Countries: Facts on Equal Opportunities 1988* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1988), 6; Helvi Sipilä, “Yhdistyneitten Kansakuntien toiminta sukupuolten tasa-arvon edistämiseksi,” in *Toisenlainen tasa-arvo*, ed. Sirkka Sinkkonen and Eila Ollikainen (Kuopio: Kustannuskiila Oy, 1982), 13–20; Kristine Kjærsgaard, “International Arenas and Domestic Institution Formation: The Impact of the UN Women’s Conferences in Denmark, 1975–1985,” *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 36 (2018): 271–86; Heidi Kurvinen and Arja Turunen, “Toinen aalto uudelleen tarkasteltuna. Yhdistys 9:n rooli suomalaisen feminismin historiassa,” *Sukupuolentutkimus* 3/2018, 21–34.

¹³ Bente Rosenbeck, “Nordic women’s studies and gender research,” in *Is there a Nordic Feminism? Nordic feminist thought on culture and society*, ed. Drude von der Fehr, Anna G. Jónasdóttir, and Bente Rosenbeck (London: UCL Press, 1998), 354.

tween women and men. The following year, when the UN women's decade on equality, development, and peace commenced, the Council of Ministers established a Nordic contact group on equal rights. In 1978, it published the first *Nordic Equality Bulletin* and presented a proposal to establish a Committee of Senior Officials for Equality. Since then, the Council of Ministers has regularly approved and confirmed an action plan for Nordic cooperation on equality between women and men. The Committee assumed responsibility for Nordic cooperation on equality in 1980, and an advisor with responsibility for equal rights was appointed to the Council of Ministers' secretariat in 1981.¹⁴ During the following years these decisions defined the administrative structures of the inter-Nordic work for equality.

Policies to promote gender equality were thus institutionalized from above, which continued and extended the national equality policies that were often called "state feminism," a concept coined by the Norwegian political scientist Helga Maria Hernes in 1987 to describe the ties between the welfare state and feminism. According to Hernes, the Nordic welfare states were not necessarily woman friendly, but they had capacity to develop into woman-friendly societies. The political scientists Dorothy McBride and Amy Mazur define state feminism as consisting of "the actions by women's policy agencies to include women's movement demands and actors into the state to produce feminist outcomes in either policy processes or societal impact or both."¹⁵ In the Nordic countries, state feminism materialized on both a national and transnational, Nordic level. Moreover, one crucial aspect of state feminism has consisted of the focus on knowledge production, as the historian Eirinn Larsen has indicated in her study of the political process that led to the establishment of the Norwegian Secretariat for Feminist Research in 1977.¹⁶ In the Nordic debates, state feminism has been criticized by feminist scholars, but it has also been used as a relatively neutral concept to describe gender policies in the Nordic welfare states.

14 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality – a stronger Nordic Region: Nordic co-operation programme on gender equality 2015–2018* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015), 26–27.

15 Helga Maria Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987); Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride, "State Feminism," in *Politics, Gender and Concepts: Theory and Methodology*, ed. Gary Goertz and Amy Mazur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 244–69; Dorothy McBride and Amy Mazur, *The Politics of State Feminism: Innovation in Comparative Research* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

16 Eirinn Larsen, "State feminism revisited as knowledge history: The case of Norway," in *Histories of Knowledge in Postwar Scandinavia. Actors, Arenas, and Aspirations*, ed. Johan Östling, Niklas Olsen, and David Larsson Heidenblad (London: Routledge, 2020).

The Nordic contact group, since 1978 the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Equality, took immediate action to arrange seminars and meetings between politicians, civil servants, researchers, and activists in the Nordic countries. In 1976, the first joint seminar *Equality between Men and Women in Family and Work* was arranged in Sweden. Another seminar, this time in Finland, discussed legal guarantees of equality between women and men in the Nordic region. The themes of these meetings suggest that, from the very beginning, family, work, and legislation were central elements in the debate on Nordic equality between women and men. Most publications and seminar programmes did not, however, name these aspects “Nordic” or define the Nordic characteristics of equality. An explicitly Nordic gender equality was not on the agenda. Instead, the adjective “Nordic” was regularly used as a descriptor for region, or cooperation. Nordic cooperation took place in the Nordic region, but the other rhetoric of Nordicness was not very powerful at this time.

The several projects launched by the Committee of Senior Officials for Equality reveal other interesting aspects of contemporary concepts of equality. In general, the concept of equality (*jämlikhet*) became central in the language of Nordic social policy in the 1970s, as Nils Edling, Jørn Henrik Petersen, and Klaus Petersen have concluded. The language of equality was promoted not only by Social Democrats and the trade unions but also by feminists who introduced equality between women and men (*jämställdhet*) to the social policy language.¹⁷ Among the first projects on the inter-Nordic level were the 1977 project on paternal leave, the 1977 project about mass media and equality, and the 1978 project on marriage and livelihood in the Nordic region. Projects on social planning and types of housing, the gender-segregated labour market, and the impact of new technology on equality in the workplace also belonged to the first initiatives.¹⁸ All these topics were typical social issues of the 1970s. The topics of the projects also indicate that key areas of equal opportunities and equality between women and men dealt with families, parenthood, and the labour market.

¹⁷ Nils Edling, Jørn Henrik Petersen, and Klaus Petersen, “Social policy language in Denmark and Sweden,” in *Analysing social policy concepts and language: Comparative and transnational perspectives*, ed. Daniel Béland and Klaus Petersen (Bristol: Policy Press, 2014), 24.

¹⁸ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1988*, 6; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality*, 26.

Introduction of Nordic programmes

A more systematic way of promoting equality between women and men on the Nordic level consisted of specific programmes and action plans, while the practice of launching projects continued. As the Presidency of the Council of Ministers rotated among the member countries, each country in turn had a mandate to prioritise themes and topics in gender equality. In 1982, the first Nordic programme on equality between women and men, approved by the Council of Ministers for Equal Opportunity, was launched. During the period of the first programme, there were projects on violence in relationships and women in Nordic politics. One achievement during this period was a 1986 Nordic report *The Divided Labour Market* which showed that the labour market continued to be a key arena in the Nordic struggle for equality.¹⁹ The priority is evident in the slogan “from women’s pay to equal pay.”

Some new aspects of gender equality were added by the projects “Men and gender equality” and “Muslim immigrant women,” both created in 1987. These projects are the first indication that gender equality was to be understood as intersectional; it was not only the position of women that was at stake but also class, ethnicity, religion, and other categories. However, the binary categories of women and men continued to dominate debates on gender equality. In 1988, a statistical publication on women and men in the Nordic countries defined the two Swedish concepts of equality as *jämställdhet* and *jämlikhet*. Equality as *jämställdhet* referred to equality between women and men. It meant that women and men were to have the same rights, responsibilities, and possibilities with regard to employment that would provide them with economic independence, childcare, housework, politics, and trade unions, among others. Equality as *jämlikhet* was defined as a wider concept. It was based on the premise that all people were equal regardless of their sex, ethnicity, religion, and social background, and so on. Equality between women and men (*jämställdhet*) was stated to be not only one of the most important aspects of equality as *jämlikhet* but to be applicable to everyone, women and men. In the 1994 publication, *Women and Men in the Nordic Countries*, the translation of *jämställdhet* was “equal opportunities.”²⁰ This translation suggests that the contemporary understanding of Nordic cooperation in gender equality emphasized formal equality.

¹⁹ Nordic Council of Ministers, *The Divided Labour Market* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1986).

²⁰ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1988*, 6; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men in the Nordic Countries. Facts and Figures 1994* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Minis-

A dualistic understanding of equality was more broadly reflected in the Nordic legislation on gender equality. Legislation to promote equality between women and men was passed in the Nordic countries from the 1970s: in Iceland in 1976, in Denmark in 1976 and 1978, in Norway in 1979, Sweden in 1980, and Finland in 1986. All these laws focused on equality between women and men. Other forms of discrimination, on the basis of age, language, religion, ethnic origin, disability, and sexual orientation, were later covered by Non-Discrimination Acts.²¹ On the one hand, the Equality Acts forbade gender-based discrimination and on the other hand, it demanded measures to promote equality between women and men. When it came to positive measures, there were some differences between each country's acts. The Swedish act, for example, obliged employers to promote equality whereas the Norwegian and the Finnish acts obliged public authorities. These Nordic principles of equality legislation emphasised structural changes, promoted equality in the labour market, and were tied to the welfare state.²²

In 1987, the Council of Ministers approved a new Nordic programme for equal opportunities 1989–1993. The second programme period focused on the role of women in economic development. Another prioritized theme dealt with the opportunities for women and men to combine family and work. According to the senior advisor Carita Peltonen, “the focus was on women’s participation in political decision-making, education, equal pay, the situation of immigrant women and on how women can combine their family life with their working life.”²³ Here, again, we can note two themes in the Nordic cooperation for equal rights: women’s position in the labour market, and tensions between work and family in the daily life of both women and men. The Nordic equality policy was intended to push women into the labour market and men into parenting and care.

ters, 1994), 12. On difficulties to translate the Swedish (and Finnish) concepts, see also Nousiainen, “Käsitteellisiä välineitä tasa-arvon käsittelyyn,” 32.

21 Sinikka Mustakallio, *Tulokseksi tasa-arvo. Kokemuksia valtionhallinnon tasa-arvotyöstä Pohjoismaissa* (Helsinki: Valtion painatuskeskus, 1993), 29; On problems of non-discrimination in Finland, see Anne Maria Holli and Johanna Kantola, “State feminism Finnish style: Strong policies clash with implementation problems,” in *Changing state feminism*, ed. Joyce Outshoorn and Johanna Kantola (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 94–95.

22 Mustakallio, *Tulokseksi tasa-arvo*, 29; Kantola, “Persistent paradoxes,” 214–15.

23 Peltonen presents this as the first five-year programme, but it was preceded by the 1982 programme. Carita Peltonen, “Nordic men – Cooperation on Gender Equality,” in *Possibilities and Challenges? Men’s Reconciliation of Work and Family Life – Conference Report*, ed. Jouni Varanka and Maria Forslund (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006), 126.

International cooperation to promote the position of women, together with the fact that Nordic statisticians share a long tradition in Nordic cooperation, was reflected in gender-related projects. In advance of the 1985 UN Conference on Women, the central statistical bureaus of the Nordic countries initiated a joint project to publish statistics on equality between women and men in the Nordic countries. The first booklet, presented in the UN Nairobi conference in 1985, can be seen as a turning point in the rhetoric of Nordicness and the Nordic framing of issues related to gender equality.²⁴ After the Nairobi conference, the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Equality proposed to the Nordic chief statisticians that a Nordic contact group on statistics of equal opportunities should be established and that an updated version of statistics should be published for the forthcoming regional conference. The regional conference to follow up the Nairobi decisions was arranged in Oslo in 1988 in conjunction with the Women's Forum, in which the Nordic work on equal opportunities was one of the main topics. The first results of the cooperation between the Nordic statisticians and equality officials came out as a publication offering "current information on the differences and similarities in women's and men's situations in the Nordic countries, in the form of tables, diagrams, and textual analysis."²⁵

The role assumed by the national statistical bureaus gave Nordic cooperation on gender equality a statistical, fact-based character, in which Nordic (in) equality became a measurable phenomenon. The aim of compiling these statistics was to reveal shortcomings and failures in the achievement of equality, rather than to measure equality itself. Moreover, the scholarly field of women's studies was promoted by Nordic institutional cooperation and state feminism. For example, there was a direct link between the 1988 Women's Forum and the appointment of a Nordic coordinator for women's studies. The coordinator, affiliated with Åbo Akademi University in Finland in 1991–1995, was also involved in the Nordic action programme for equal rights.²⁶ Knowledge production, not only in the form of policy programmes and the provision of statistical facts to decision-makers, but also through support for women's studies became crucial ways for the Council of Ministers' equality officials to promote equality in the

²⁴ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Facts and Figures about Women and Men in the Nordic Countries. Kvinnor och män i Norden 1985* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1985).

²⁵ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1988*, 3.

²⁶ Christina Österberg and Birgitta Hedman, *Women and Men in the Nordic Countries: Facts on equal opportunities yesterday, today and tomorrow 1994* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1994); Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic Gender Equality in Figures* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015); Rosenbeck, "Nordic women's studies," 351; Larsen, "State feminism," 160–63.

Nordic countries. The Council of Ministers funded research on politics and the labour market. A 1980s project *Unfinished democracy*, sponsored by the Council of Ministers, studied Nordic women in political decision-making.²⁷ The project led also to a handbook in women's representation. It was authored by the Danish feminist and political scientist Drude Dahlerup and published in five Nordic languages. Another book based on interviews with female politicians was also issued. Moreover, Dahlerup contributed to the Council of Ministers' work for gender equality by coordinating a Nordic-wide project entitled *BRYT* – which means “break down” – on breaking down sex segregation in the labour market.²⁸

Until the mid-1990s, the Nordic publications on equal rights tended to emphasize shortcomings and failures in equal opportunities for women and men. For example, *Women and Men in the Nordic Countries* (1994), as well as a booklet presenting excerpts from it, motivated this kind of knowledge production. The publications listed the following reasons for the urgent need for basic statistics on the position of women and men in Nordic societies: “1) to raise consciousness, persuade policymakers, and promote change; 2) to stimulate ideas for change; 3) to provide an unbiased basis for policies and measures; and 4) to monitor and evaluate policies and actions taken.”²⁹ A firm belief in the need for gender-based knowledge production and gender statistics was made explicit in the publication series of the Council of Ministers.

The Nordic publications presenting basic statistics on equality between women and men pointed at several problems that were also analysed by contemporary studies on women and gender. When it came to political decision-making, Nordic facts and figures revealed male dominance at all levels, supporting the notions of what feminist scholars termed “unfinished democracy” or “undemocracy.”³⁰ Feminist scholars in the Nordic countries analysed women's and men's paid and unpaid labour in the 1980s and early 1990s, and noted how “women and men work the same amount, but women do more unpaid work, men more paid work.” Intensive Nordic research on the labour market was also echoed by statistical publications which noted that men had higher incomes than

27 Haavio-Mannila, *Unfinished Democracy*.

28 Drude Dahlerup, *Vi har ventet længe nok: Håndbog i kvinderepræsentation* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1988). In Icelandic 1988, Norwegian 1989, Swedish 1989, and Finnish 1990; Drude Dahlerup, ed., *Blomster & Spark. Samtaler med kvindelige politikere i Norden* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1985).

29 Numbering added by PM. Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1994*, 19; Österberg & Hedman, *Women and Men 1994*, 5; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1988*, 18.

30 Haavio-Mannila, *Unfinished democracy*; Keränen, *Finnish “undemocracy.”*

women and that women tended to reach the basic pension only.³¹ Nordic gender equality was not presented as an international model to be followed by the rest of the world. On the contrary, it was full of shortcomings and a work in progress.

Gender equality goes European and global as Nordic

In the 1990s, the concept of gender became more widely adopted in Nordic equality policies. The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, in particular, introduced new concepts and policies, such as gender mainstreaming.³² The Nordic equality bodies were quick to adopt new concepts that also were familiar from the expanding field of gender studies. Simultaneously, a growing interest in regional and European cooperation intensified with the expansion of the European Union. Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995, Denmark had been a member state since 1973, and Norway and Iceland chose to not join. In line with many other policy fields, a dialogue between European and Nordic policies to promote gender equality was found necessary. The EU also posed several challenges for Nordic cooperation on gender equality.³³ In the Nordic countries, legislation on equality was mainly based on promoting equality between women and men in the labour market, while anti-discrimination legislation, emphasised by the EU, was less developed. Many Nordic gender equality agencies were worried about the negative impact of the EU on their progressive gender equality policies; at the same time, they anticipated that, as new member countries, Sweden and Finland would strengthen the EU's gender equality policies.³⁴ These ambiv-

31 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1994*, For gender studies, see, for example, Marja-Liisa Anttalainen, *Rapport om den könsuppdelade arbetsmarknaden* (Oslo: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1984); Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power*; Arnlaug Leira, *Welfare States and Working Mothers: The Scandinavian Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Liisa Rantalaiho and Tuula Heiskanen, eds., *Gendered Practices of Working Life* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

32 Marjaana Jauhola and Johanna Kantola, "Gloaali sukupuolipolitiikka Suomessa," in *Sukupuolikäytös*, ed. Marita Husso and Risto Heiskala (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2016), 223; Raija Julkunen, "Sukupuoli valtiollisen politiikan kohteena," in *Sukupuolikäytös*, ed. Husso and Heiskala, 251.

33 Olesen & Strang, "European challenge," 32–36; Johanna Kantola and Kevät Nousiainen, "Euroopan unionin tasa-arvopolitiikka: Velvoittavaa lainsäädäntöä ja pehmeää sääntelyä," in Kantola, Nousiainen, and Saari, eds., *Tasa-arvo toisin nähtynä*.

34 Holli & Kantola, "State feminism Finnish style"; Jauhola & Kantola, "Gloaali sukupuolipolitiikka Suomessa," 219–20.

alent expectations obviously urged the Nordic gender equality agencies to clarify their message on the “Nordicness” of gender equality.

The new Nordic programme on gender equality for the period 1995–2000 aimed to influence “European and international developments in gender equality.”³⁵ This goal was also made explicit in the 1994 publication on gender statistics which, for the first time, highlighted a united Nordic approach and a common Nordic platform in gender equality.³⁶ Among the more concrete aims in the 1995–2000 programme were the following: equal access for women and men to political and economic decision-making, economic equality and equal influence, an equal labour market, and improved opportunities for both women and men to reconcile parenthood and careers. In 1998, the Finnish gender equality activist and former Gender Equality Ombudsman Tuulikki Petäjaniemi interpreted these goals as a Nordic decision to become international leaders regarding men and gender equality.³⁷ Moreover, as Ylva Waldemarson has stressed, the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers tended to strengthen the international visibility of the Nordic countries by using the rhetoric of Nordic identity partially based on the Nordic model of gender equality.³⁸ Work towards gender equality in the Nordic countries was transforming into the “Nordicness” of gender equality.

The “Nordic” gender equality policies were to assign men and masculinities a crucial role. In 1997, an action plan for men and gender equality was approved. A Nordic coordinator position for men’s studies was founded by the Council of Ministers, and its host organisation became the Nordic Institute for Women’s Studies and Gender Research (NIKK), founded in 1995 and located in Oslo.³⁹ Critical studies on men and masculinities appeared simultaneously in other parts of the world, and the European Union was also funding projects on men and gender equality. Nevertheless, the men’s studies coordinator Øystein Gullvår Holter

35 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality*, 25; Ylva Waldemarson, “Gender equality the Nordic way: The Nordic Council’s and Nordic Council of Ministers’ cooperation with the Baltic States and Northwest Russia in the political field of gender equality 1999–2010,” in *Gender equality on a Grand Tour: Politics and institutions – the Nordic Council, Sweden, Lithuania and Russia*, ed. Eva Blomberg et al (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 34.

36 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Women and Men 1994*, 4.

37 Tuulikki Petäjaniemi, “Naisten ja miesten tasa-arvo – yhteinen etu,” in Jarmo Tarkki and Tuulikki Petäjaniemi, *Tasa-arvo: Saavutuksia ja haasteita* [Equality: Achievements and challenges] (Jyväskylä: Atena Kustannus, 1998), 18.

38 Waldemarson, “Gender equality the Nordic way,” 38.

39 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality*, 24; Rosenbeck, “Nordic women’s studies,” 350–51.

stated in 2003: “the connection between the policy level and welfare development is in many ways unique to the Nordic region, along with a large proportion of women in the labour force, a high level of women in politics, and a general emphasis on gender-equal status and opportunities. This region is a bit of a social laboratory regarding gender.”⁴⁰ The idea of a specific Nordic gender equality gradually developed as the Nordic equality policies were exposed to the European Union and other contacts beyond the Nordic region.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a changing situation in the Baltic region. The newly independent Baltic states Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania posed new challenges not only to Nordic equality policies but to official Nordic cooperation more broadly. In 1991, the Council of Ministers had established information offices in the Baltic capitals and Baltic politicians were invited to the meeting of the Nordic Council, a cooperative body of the Nordic parliaments.⁴¹ In 1995 the Council of Ministers decided to survey the prospects for cooperation between the Nordic countries and the Baltic states. This initiative led to a publication which strongly recommended Nordic-Baltic cooperation and a joint forum to be organised as soon as possible. The Baltic counterparts motivated the need for immediate action with reference to the ongoing rapid changes in the Baltic states. Consequently, the first Nordic-Baltic meeting of ministers for gender equality was arranged in Oslo in 1997. The meeting approved the first programme for Nordic-Baltic cooperation on gender equality from 1998 to 2000.⁴²

Governmental cooperation became a crucial part of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation programmes. In the beginning, the Nordic counterparts presented Nordic gender equality activities to the Baltic counterparts and national policy instruments were established in the Baltic states. Joint seminars in which the Nordic Gender Equality Ombudsmen introduced the Nordic gender equality legislation were one way to establish cooperation – and to export the “Nordicness” of gender equality. Differing policies within the Nordic region were less relevant in the common attempts to construct a coherent image of the Nordic gender equality

⁴⁰ Øystein Gullvåg Holter, *Can men do it? Men and gender equality – the Nordic experience* (Copenhagen: The Nordic Council of Ministers, 2003), 7–8; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Miehet ja tasa-arvo – toimintaohjelma ja taustamuistio* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 1997).

⁴¹ Olesen & Strang, “European challenge to Nordic institutional cooperation,” 34; Anna Kharikina, *From Kinship to Global Brand: The Discourse on Culture in Nordic Cooperation after World War II* (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2013), 85–86.

⁴² Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic Baltic co-operation on gender equality 1998–2003* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2004), <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A701499&dswid=-6425>. Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality*, 23–24; Waldemarson, “Gender equality the Nordic way,” 44–45.

policies. Moreover, as Anna Kharkina has pointed out, the values and contents of cooperation were often determined by the Nordic side of the partnership. She states that cultural cooperation, in particular, aimed at promoting “Nordic values.” Those values consisted not only of democracy, the welfare state, and environmental policy but also of gender equality.⁴³

In terms of gender equality, the Nordic-Baltic cooperation resulted in a joint campaign against the trafficking in women in the Nordic and Baltic countries. This campaign was commonly seen as an outcome of shared values. Governmental gender equality institutions were also established in all Baltic states but attempts to promote the Nordic understanding of gender equality in the Baltic legislation or to introduce top-down quotas and gender mainstreaming turned out to be less successful. The American scholar Denise M. Horn, who has compared the US and the Nordic gender projects in Estonia, concludes that the Nordic discourse of gender equality did not translate very well to the Estonian reality.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Nordic cooperation with their eastern neighbours extended to Northwest Russia and Poland. The changing power constellations in Northern Europe intensified efforts to present the Nordic gender equality policy as a model and to share the established Nordic experiences of cooperation in gender policies.

When it came to inter-Nordic issues, men and masculinities remained on the agenda of “Nordic” gender equality initiatives. The gender equality programme for 2001–2005 prioritized the themes of “Men and gender equality,” as well as “Violence against women.”⁴⁵ During this programme period, the Council of Ministers’ working group on men and gender equality promoted research on men’s reconciliation of work and family life. In 2005, the final conference in Helsinki targeted fatherhood. The Finnish Minister of Social Affairs and Health, Tuula Haatainen, referred to the special role of the Nordic people in the following manner: “I find it important that we Nordic people raise on the agenda the gender equality aspect, which has been traditionally important to us. In the Nordic

⁴³ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic Baltic co-operation 1998–2003*; Kharkina, *From Kinship to Global Brand*, 80–82, 93, 100.

⁴⁴ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic-Baltic Campaign Against Trafficking in Women: Final Report 2002* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2004); Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic Baltic co-operation 1998–2003*; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Nordic-Baltic co-operation on gender equality 2004–2006* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2004), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:norden:org:diva-2103>; Denise M. Horn, “Setting the agenda: US and Nordic gender policies in the Estonian transition to democracy,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10, no. 1 (March 2008): 70–71, doi:10.1080/14616740701747675.

⁴⁵ The third priority, and a new one, was the integration of a gender perspective into Nordic state budgets. Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for Gender Equality*, 24.

countries women's status in society has in many respects long been different from the gender and family patterns prevalent elsewhere in Europe."⁴⁶ She explained that the starting point in the Nordic countries was equal opportunities for men and women in the labour market and equal rights and responsibilities within the family. This dual approach was presented not only as something that differed from the rest of the world but also as something that was inherent in Nordic culture. However, despite the strong discursive emphasis on fatherhood in the Nordic countries, men's share of parental leave remained rather small. Only Iceland, formerly a latecomer, had managed to attract fathers to take parental leave to a remarkable extent.⁴⁷ When it came to social benefits, the idea of Nordic fatherhood was stronger in rhetoric than in practice.

However, in the same conference the Finnish senior advisor Carita Peltonen from the Council of Ministers indicated the shared traditions and mutual benefits of the Nordic cooperation on gender equality. Moreover, she stressed that "[t]he Nordic focus on men and gender equality is unique in an international context and provides a good example of the advantages and necessity of involving all groups in gender equality work."⁴⁸ It was now quite common to indicate these unique features of Nordic gender equality policies. A similar emphasis was expressed in the final report of a Nordic research programme on Gender and violence in 2005. The report stated that "the common tradition of welfare and gender equality policies within the Nordic countries constitutes a unique point of departure for research."⁴⁹ The report also assumed that the Nordic perspective would be important both in the European Union and in the international research community.

Active participation in the global arena became part of the Nordic gender equality policies and supported Nordic branding. Among these branding measures, a good number of Nordic fringe events or side events on equality issues were arranged in conjunction with the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Starting in 2005, the Nordic themes in New York

⁴⁶ Tuula Haatainen, "Opening speech," in *Possibilities and Challenges? Men's Reconciliation of Work and Family Life – Conference Report*, ed. Jouni Varanka and Maria Forslund (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006), 11.

⁴⁷ In 2003, men's share of total days of parental leave was 27.6 percent in Iceland, 18.3 percent in Sweden, 8.6 percent in Norway, 5.3 percent in Finland, and 5.1 percent in Denmark. Frida Rós Valdimarsdóttir, "Nordic Experiences on Parental Leave and its impact on Gender Equality," in *Possibilities and Challenges? Men's Reconciliation of Work and Family Life – Conference Report*, ed. Jouni Varanka and Maria Forslund (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006), 73.

⁴⁸ Carita Peltonen, "Nordic men – cooperation on gender equality," 125.

⁴⁹ Nordic Council of Ministers, *Gender and Violence: A Nordic Research Programme 2000 – 2004 – Final report* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005), 16.

were gender and youth, women's participation in politics and management (2006), the new Nordic role of the father (2007), combating men's violence against women (2008), gender equality and climate change (2009), and results and challenges in relation to Beijing+15 (2010, 2011). In 2012 a panel of Nordic ministers discussed equality between women and men as "the Nordic way," a concept that had been launched in 2010.⁵⁰ A small booklet published by the Council of Ministers clearly revealed that gender equality had become a brand: "Nordic co-operation has been striving to improve gender equality for more than 30 years. The aim is to make policies of gender equality in the Region the best in the world and a model for other countries."⁵¹ This message was brought to the UN fringe events and other international arenas. All former attempts by state feminists and equality officials to reveal and combat the problems of inequality were utilized as a strength and turned into a narrative of great progress in gender equality.

The official Nordic cooperation on gender equality celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2014 in a changing context. The old issues of women's participation in the labour market, men's right to be caregivers, and the reconciliation of work and family did not disappear, but the long-lasting focus on heteronormative family patterns and monocultural Nordic countries in the Nordic discourses expanded to include intersectional approaches in which diversity had a stronger role. In the gender equality programme, that ran from 2006 to 2010, it had been underlined that a systematic minority perspective must be incorporated in all initiatives for gender equality, and new intersectional aspects were promoted. However, the equal rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI) people were recognized very late. It was not until September 2019 that the Nordic programme on gender equality was supplemented with a programme on equal rights and opportunities for LGBTI people.⁵² Moreover, on the global level the focus was on more traditional aspects of equality between women and men.

50 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for gender equality*, 19–23; Nordic Council of Ministers, *The Nordic cooperation programme on gender equality 2005* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005), 4, 9; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Gender equality – the Nordic Way* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2010).

51 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Gender Equality – the Nordic Way*, 4; Also, Waldemarson, "Gender equality the Nordic way," 37–38.

52 Nordic Council of Ministers, *Together for gender equality*, 23; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Focus on gender – working toward an equal society: Nordic gender equality co-operation programme 2006–2010* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006), 13; Nordic Council of Ministers, *Supplement to Nordic co-operation programme on gender equality 2019–2022: Equal rights, treatment and opportunities for LGBTI people in the Nordic region* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020), 4.

The Nordic tradition of gender mainstreaming, however, incorporated other issues, such as sustainable societies. Climate change and sustainability were made Nordic gender issues in the global context as well as in the local arena.

Conclusions

The Nordic cooperation on equality between women and men was introduced in the early 1970s simultaneously with the introduction of national policies to promote equal rights for women and men. The early years of Nordic cooperation witnessed many events, projects, and publications in which the particulars of equal rights were defined. Women's participation in the labour market was one of the key issues, and the reconciliation of work and family was made into a shared Nordic equality issue. Interestingly, there seemed to be little interest in naming these efforts Nordic. The adjective Nordic was mainly used to qualify cooperation and to name the geographical region where this cooperation took place. In the inter-Nordic dialogue, it seemed to be less relevant to name equality policies Nordic. As the Nordic cooperation turned towards international arenas, the need to define the contents of their cooperation as Nordic became obvious. The UN Nairobi conference in 1985 was one of those external impulses that led to some more explicit expressions of the Nordic. Moreover, the concept of gender was introduced in the equality discourse in the 1990s. This impulse came from the 1995 conference in Beijing.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new cooperation with the Baltic states was one of the turning points in which Nordic gender equality was made into a product for export. As the product needed to be named and qualified, the rhetoric of Nordicness served as the marketing. Nordic Equality Ombudsmen were the new ambassadors of gender equality. I see a clear turning point in the early 1990s, in contrast to previous assumptions that the Nordic countries had aimed to persuade other governments to “do gender equality the Nordic way”⁵³ since the 1970s. The first decades of the Nordic cooperation on equal opportunities between women and men focused on pointing out problems, compiling statistics on the lack of equality, and seeking improvements within the Nordic countries. However, I agree with the previous conclusions that the cooperation with the Baltic states and Northwest Russia really aimed at promoting gender equality the Nordic way, i.e. taking “Nordic” gender equal-

53 Waldemarson, “Gender equality the Nordic way,” 20.

ity abroad.⁵⁴ Since the 1990s, the Nordic model of gender equality was consciously constructed as a model, and the rhetoric of Nordicness served to promote that model.

Another explicit turning point strengthening Nordicness can be dated to the mid-1990s when Finland and Sweden joined the European Union. Now it became important to compare the Nordic gender equality with the European conception of equality. The Nordic gender equality was based on the values of the welfare state, women's labour market participation, men's family responsibilities, and the possibilities for women and men to combine working life and family. The European traditions of anti-discrimination legislation and bans on discrimination were less central in Nordic gender equality. Gender equality was a concept referring to power relations between women and men whereas non-discrimination referred to other forms of equality, encompassing age, health, ethnic origin, sexuality, religion, and other bases of discrimination. When the Nordic legislators adjusted to the European standards, Finland passed a separate Non-Discrimination Act and made amendments to the Equality Act whereas Sweden and Norway chose to integrate legislation on gender equality and non-discrimination. Moreover, since 2006, the mergers of Equality Ombudsmen and Discrimination Ombudsmen or their offices have taken place in most of the Nordic countries. The integration of the rights of the LGBTI people into the "Nordic" gender equality remains tardy, however.⁵⁵

Despite the fact that the Nordic countries have been obliged to adjust to European standards in equality legislation, gender equality has become a hallmark of the Nordic societies, often used in various contexts. The UN fringe events, in particular, provided opportunities to market the "Nordic way" globally. The Nordic Council of Ministers does not hesitate to publish brochures in which the leading position of the Nordic countries in the field of gender equality is emphasised, or to organise events on the Nordic model of gender equality. Over forty years of cooperation on equality between women and men, and equal opportunities resulted in a construction of the Nordic gender equality as a brand with some "unique" characteristics. The Nordic cooperation contributed to a discursive construction of Nordicness. The working mother and the woman in the labour market became a characteristic representation of a Nordic woman. The Nordic cooperation has also shifted the focus towards men and masculinities and made the caring man a crucial discursive construction of a Nordic man. In the rhetoric of

⁵⁴ Horn, "Setting the agenda," 61; Waldemarson, "Gender equality the Nordic way," 21.

⁵⁵ Waldemarson, "Gender equality the Nordic way," 36; Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), accessed 20 October, 2020, <https://nikk.no/en/home/>.

Nordicness, the Nordic father, in particular, became one of the finest outcomes of the Nordic gender equality.