

Dreams of a welfare state

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Women in Southern Europe would like to live in a Nordic-style welfare state to improve their opportunities. But the financial crisis has made their dreams less realistic than ever.

Job opportunities, financial independence, access to care services outside the home. These are a few of the conditions for a good life for women, identified in the new book *Gender and Well-being. The Role of Institutions*.

The book is a product of a long-term collaboration between social researchers from 25 European countries who have compared women's situations in the family, the market and the state.

“Social challenges are solved in very different ways in the various countries, and there is a marked distinction between the Nordic welfare states and countries in Southern Europe,” says John Eriksen, a researcher at the Norwegian Social Research Institute (NOVA) and one of four editors of the new publication.

Welfare state or private solutions

The major difference between the countries is the role played by the state.

The Nordic countries have comprehensive programs that enable women to combine paid work with caregiving duties. Most of the care for the elderly is handled by the public sector, and the vast majority of young children attend state-subsidised daycares.

In the Southern European countries it is much more common for these caregiving tasks to be handled by the family or the private market - or in some cases by paid help in the home, often immigrant women who are living in the country illegally.

These differences have a notable impact: while most Nordic women both work and have children, their Southern European sisters must choose between a career and family. Many choose a career, and the result is rapidly declining birth rates.

Nordic countries are the ideal

According to Eriksen's European research partners, birth rates will not rise again – and women will not achieve better lives – until the Southern European countries become more like the Nordic welfare states.

“For my colleagues in Spain and Italy, for instance, our welfare states are viewed as an absolute paradise for women and are definitively an ideal,” says Eriksen. “However, it is not very likely that the Southern European countries will move in the direction of the Nordic model any time soon. On the contrary, we can anticipate the differences increasing due to the financial crisis.”

He adds that rising unemployment in Europe will result in fewer job opportunities for women, and the financial situation will prevent the public sector from spending more money on care services.

A policy of coercion

But even though the Nordic welfare states are generally considered successful when it comes to gender policies, there are also researchers in the project who have a critical view of the Nordic model.

Danish researcher Anette Borchorst criticises the Nordic policy that expressly aims to have as many people as possible in the work force and the links between certain benefits and paid work.

According to Borchorst, this goal of work for all has played a key role in Nordic policy, and she thinks it is a policy of coercion rather than a policy of rights.

She points out that it cannot be taken for granted that paid work is equal to well-being. And she adds a class perspective and asks: is work valued on the basis of middle-class jobs, which might be more fulfilling and interesting than working-class jobs?

Eriksen thinks this opposing view is timely, but he says it is difficult to get perspectives like these heard in the European researcher group.

“The Southern European researchers were not very interested in criticism of Nordic policy. The Nordic researchers’ critique of policies such as work for all probably does not seem very relevant when the major challenge in their own countries is to secure opportunities for women to work at all,” says Eriksen.

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Fact box

The book *Gender and Well-being. The Role of Institutions* is part of the larger project Gender and Well-being, which has been funded by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST). Social researchers from 25 European countries have participated in the project.

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February 9, 2012 - 01:00

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