



Work-life balance in the North

Executive summary

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Introduction

Work-life balance is an important priority in the Nordic countries. Equality and gender equality are engrained in the Nordic society and policies. The comprehensive nature of the Nordic welfare state has provided a system for work-life balance that is both effective and strengthening gender equality. One of its strengths is how the family policies work together from cradle to elder homes. During the MASP project, one of the outputs is a knowledge exchange between the Nordic countries and Norway in particular, and the partner countries. This has been done through two study visits with speakers from important part of the Norwegian society. These, combined with desk research has resulted in two reports, covering a wide range of policies that benefit work-life balance. This document is a summary of these reports, highlighting the main aspects of the findings.

This executive summary will start with an overview of the Nordic model and welfare state. Then the main aspects of the parental leave structure will be presented. This will be followed by Norwegian kindergarten policies. Nordic elder care policies will then be discussed, before ending with a short summary of the best practices from the study visits.

The Nordic Model

The Nordic welfare state was first established in the post-war period, often called the golden age of the welfare state due to the broad strengthening of the institutions in this period. The welfare state is a system whereby the state takes responsibility for the individual and the wellbeing of its citizens. The welfare state in the Nordic countries is characterised by a strong state and universal tax-funded provisions. This means that the state provides a wide variety of services to all its inhabitants, and that the provisions are mostly tax funded. Universalism, welfare services provided to any citizen, is typically associated with the Nordic model. The welfare state is a defining feature of both Nordic policies and the Nordic mind-set. The existence of a strong universal welfare state is not contingent on social democratic parties being in government. Although different parties have different views on how to effectively run and fund the welfare state, there is little dispute on the role it has in the Nordic countries. Although there has been some welfare state retrenchment in the Nordic countries, the importance of a strong welfare state has endured as an ideal across party lines in the Nordic countries.

In 1990, the Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen published the book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. This work quickly became one of the most important contributions to the study of the welfare state. In his book he classifies different welfare state families based on the historical development of the country, the degree of de-commodification, and the role of the public or private sector. De-commodification is defined as: “The degree to which individuals or families can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation” (Bonoli, 1997, s. 353). The welfare state models are ideal types, with one country in each model representing this ideal type. The models are the social democratic model, the continental model, and the liberal model.

	Countries	Level of de-commodification	Type of welfare spending	Level of state presence
Social democratic model	Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland	High	Broad, universal	High
Continental model	Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands	Moderate	Subsidiaries	Moderate
Anglo-Saxon model	Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, UK, US	Low	Individual/ self-pay	Low

Parental leave

The Nordic countries have some of the most extensive paid parental leave schemes for both parents (Cederström, 2019, s. 17). In the Nordic countries “over 90 percent of both fathers and mothers [say that] a father should be heavily involved in childcare” and “three quarters of both men and women agree that parental leave should be shared equally between parents” (Cederström, 2019, s. 6)

Parental leave, especially what is earmarked for the father, as well as comprehensive childcare options, can have a positive effect on the gender pay gap. However, in order to overcome the gender pay gap and create better work-life balance it is important to achieve gender equality in parental leave and parenting and household duties as well as create policies that encourage women to participate in the workforce.

The parental leave in the Nordics is structured as follows:

	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway ¹
Total weeks	69	64	52	49/59
Of which:				
Mother (maternity)	13	21	18	18/21
Father (father's quota in parental leave)	13	11	2	15/19
Parental leave (to be divided)	43	32	32	16/18
Size of benefit, % of income	80 %	70 %	90	100/80%

Introduction of leave for fathers					
	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway	
Paternity leave	1974	1977	1984-85	1978	
“Father’s quota”	1995	2003	1998	1993	

¹ Further detailed in the study visit reporting

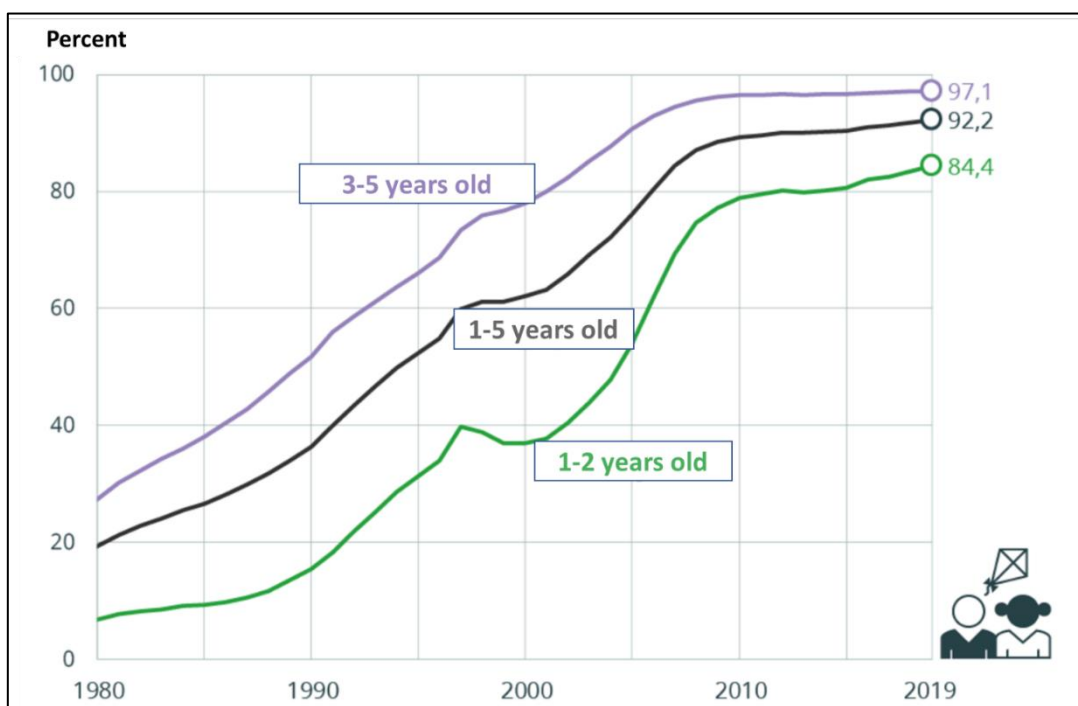
Kindergarten services in Norway

Having a developed kindergarten service can be an important tool for promoting both work-life balance and gender equality. By giving most children a place to stay from an early age, it incentivises parents to go back to work earlier. Since it is still the case that mothers spend more time at home with children, such an incentive promotes gender equality as well.

The kindergarten is a service that in Norway is provided at county level, but the state has set some general laws. The county is responsible for providing coverage for all children, starting from the year they turn 1. This means that if your child turns 1 before the start of August, they are entitled to a spot from August. If the child is born later that year, the county needs to have a spot ready for them by the end of the month they were born in (Government.no, 2020).

It has been almost 20 years since the Norwegian parliament decided on the reform, and much work has been put in increasing the funding for kindergarten, and building more structures to achieve full coverage. While it has taken some time, it is generally agreed that the goals are reached. Since there always will be children that do not attend kindergarten, the coverage is in reality close to 100%. The cap is also law, and enforced in all of the counties.

An earlier study simulated the effect of the reform on female participation in the workforce, and concluded that the participation has increased by more than two hours per week (Haugseth, 2009). This increase has however not been enough to cover the costs, as the state would according to the estimates get back only 60% of the input. Covering the costs was never the main goal of the government, so not reaching this, must be viewed as secondary of importance. What is important, is that women are now working more than before. The main factor of this is the increased availability of kindergarten spots.



Eldercare in the Nordic countries

Eldercare is an important part of work-life balance. In many European countries, a significant part of life goes to taking care of elderly relatives. A good public service would therefore help families, without compromising on the health of the senior citizens. All of the Nordic countries have such systems, though with different focus, and using different tools. In general, Finland, Sweden and Norway are serving the sector with caring institutions, while Denmark has prohibited the establishment of new institutions, giving instead priority to home services.

The Norwegian model

The Norwegian eldercare system is a public responsibility based on the respective municipality policy. The main goal for the state is that all should be living at home for as long as possible, provided that they get the health care they need.

The municipalities might offer simplified living conditions. This would include an adaptation of the user's own apartment, including stair lifts, bathroom rebuilding, and upgraded kitchen facilities. It could also be offering smaller and more "simplified" apartments, often grouped together in communities.

The Danish model

The late 1980s saw Denmark's approach to elderly care change significantly. There is now a significant emphasis on empowering senior citizens to remain self-reliant for as long as possible. This involves supporting them in continuing to be healthy and allowing them to live in their own homes, supported by a social-care system, with visits from home-care nurses, and increasingly: the use of assisted-living technology. In Denmark, the majority of the senior citizens prefer to live in their own homes for as long as possible. To facilitate this, the Danish municipalities are focusing on helping their citizens maintain or regain self-reliance by allocating the necessary human and technological resources.

The Swedish model

According to the Swedish government, health and social care for the elderly are important parts of their welfare policy. Of Sweden's 10 million inhabitants, 20 per cent have passed the standard retirement age of 65. This number is projected to rise to 23 per cent by 2040, partly because of the large number of Swedes born in the 1940s (Sweden.se, 2020).

One of the aims of elderly care is to help elderly people and those with disabilities live normal, independent lives. This includes living in their own homes as long as possible.

Norwegian best practices

What follows is a short summary of the presentations from the study visits. A more comprehensive overview can be found in the reports.

Norwegian labour and welfare administration (NAV): Parental leave

This public organisation is responsible for most of the welfare services in Norway. Most residents in Norway are entitled to a form of parental benefit. The most common is to receive 100% wage compensation for 49 weeks of leave, or 80% wage compensation for 59 weeks. The maximum compensation from the state is about 60'000€, so people with high incomes might see their wages reduced. There are three main requirements for receiving the full benefit:

- You need to have had an income for six out of the last ten months (other welfare benefits are regarded as income)
- You need to have earned at least 49'929NOK (approx. 5'000€) in the last year
- You need to live in Norway
- If you do not fulfil the requirements, you will get a lump sum of 83'140NOK (approx. 8'300€).

The parental leave in Norway is divided into three parts. With full benefits, the parents have 15 weeks each (the mother has an additional three-week maternity leave before birth), and 16 weeks to divide as they please. At 80%, the division is 21+19+18. In addition to these weeks, you are entitled to take out your annual leave from work. If you take out paid leave, this is paid for by your workplace. You can therefore either postpone the parental leave and the benefit pay-outs, or receive double pay for that period.

Finansforbundet, labour union in the finance sector: Gender-related pay gap

Today there is a 18% pay gap between men and women in the finance sector in Norway. While some of this is due to difference in positions, there is still a discrepancy for people doing the same job. To tackle this, the labour union has developed a set of indicators to measure where the differences are, and how to best deal with them. The indicators are measured every year, and the results are published. Based on these results, the union has developed a set of tools that they can use together with the companies:

1. Reviews of the company's equality strategies
2. Efforts to promote equal pay – conversation with leader once a year, discuss pay, professional development, etc.
3. Focus on diversity strategies in recruitment
4. In the ads used when recruiting the wording is important. I.e. the word: flexible, it is difficult to know what that would mean for a parent. Neutral language is important.
5. Keep and develop female talent
6. Women tend not to seek high risk and challenges, must recruit women in a different way.
7. Efforts to mend the gap for employees in parental leave and toddler phase.
8. Common to have children in childcare, due to high participation in female employment. Be flexible, flexible hours, facilitate teleworking

The labour union has also introduced an automatic raise of one pay grade (about 2,2%) for all of their members out on parental leave for at least five months. When recruiting, the two final candidates have to be a man and a woman, to promote gender equality for all positions.

NHO, The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise: Talents – development and retention

NHO is the largest interest organisations for businesses in Norway. Their goal is to make sure that their members have the best tools and labour to succeed. Rasmus Eiternes Guldvik was their representative at our workshop.

In the last years, Norwegian women have overtaken men in higher education, and are almost equal in participation in the work force. However, the share of women in the private sector is still low, at 37%. This is problematic for the enterprises, who are losing out on some of the highest educated labour. NHO therefore works to promote women's participation in the private sector and especially in STEM-related positions. They have also started the Female Future project, a leadership programme to develop female talents. Companies choose some of the female staff who then receive additional training and networking opportunities. This helps them achieving executive positions, directorships, and board positions.

NHO's members have to work to keep their talents, and are using other means in addition to the initiatives spearheaded by NHO. One way to ensure this is by compensating those workers who are on parental leave, but earn more than the maximum wage compensation from the state. This ensures that these parents get full coverage during their leave.

Oslo Red Cross: Family support – homework assistance

Håvard Ellingsen is the leader of a youth centre in Oslo, run by the Norwegian Red Cross, where they provide a range of activities, including homework assistance. This is an important job that relieves some of the pressure of the parents, while ensuring that the children get a quiet place to work. This activity is free, and runs on local volunteers.

One important service they offer, which helps with work-life balance, is their homework assistance. This service is offered to all students attending compulsory school, as a complementary service to the teaching at school. While these students usually are between 13 and 19 years old, the Red Cross allows for students up to 24, provided they attend secondary education. The reason for having a homework assistance service is that the Red Cross is trying to make a more just society, and this is an important step towards equalling out the socio-economic differences in Oslo. It helps preventing inequality, unemployment, and poverty and reduces the school drop-out rate. Another important benefit is that it helps empower the youths so they can reach their academic and career goals.

Multiconsult: Managing work life balance and equal opportunities through the crisis and beyond

Kari Nicolaisen is the Director for HR and Communications at Multiconsult. Multiconsult is a large engineering consultancy firm in Norway, working in areas such as construction, renewable energy, and transportation. Her testimony covered how the firm has been handling work-life balance issues during 2020, and the lessons the company has learned and that it will continue to do after the pandemic. Another important topic covered was the different initiatives the firm has to promote work-life balance and gender equality.

In 2017, Multiconsult set a number of targets to promote gender equality. There would be a minimum of 30% women in director positions. There would be gender balance in project management and expert positions, to reflect gender balance in the company. When hiring for leadership positions, there has to be both men and women in the final round of interviews. Lastly, the company would strive to close the wage gap for women versus the industry statistics. After three years, the results are quite positive.

Goal	Status October 2020
30% women in director positions	43% female directors, 50% women in executive board, and female CEO
Gender balance in projects	Not been measured, but 40% female employees, up 2%. This increase is mostly in the architecture department.
Hiring policy	95% of all interview rounds have both men and women
Salary, close the gap	Index 99,9, but women are still not level with male colleagues of the same age

MiA (Diversity in the workplace): Facilitating opportunities and inclusion

MiA is a knowledge centre and network for Norwegian enterprises in need for competence building in the fields of equality and diversity. They offer a variety of courses, and have behind them many important Norwegian companies and public offices. Their best practice testimony was presented as a video conversation between Eli Kristin Langset, the CEO of MiA, and Violet Simon Weli, one of their researchers.

Weli has been working in both Nigeria and Canada, and uses her diverse background to shed some light on the Norwegian model. According to her, the Norwegian system is tailored in such a way that families are able to work and enjoy what they do. In her workplace, the employees have the opportunity to plan their own routines, and meet once a week to discuss what has been done. During these meetings, the employees also get inputs from each other, to further strengthen their performance. For her it is also interesting that in Norway, it is common that the manager has lunch with their employees. This is an important way to strengthen the feeling of teamwork. This focus on the team is also important for Langset, and for the management it is important to have these meetings, so it is easier for them to facilitate the day of their employees. This could be scheduling according to kindergarten pick-up times, or doctor's appointments etc. It also prevents conflict within the team.

Norwegian eldercare: Experiences and reflections

The overall policy for elder care in Norway, which all political parties support, is that people should stay at home for as long as possible. When the people cannot cope on their own, the municipality will provide services at their home, even three-four times a day, and at night if needed. Then, when you cannot stay at home anymore, you are offered a place in a nursing home with health workers. Other services are so-called “day homes” where people can come during the day for different activities. There are privately run homes, which often have a higher level of luxury than the public ones, if one can pay for it. Another type of service, which is inspired by the US, is the elder collective. Here, all of the users have their own apartment, but there are a lot of common rooms where people can meet and have meals. There are also 469 volunteer centres across Norway. They are run by volunteers and are financed by the Norwegian ministry of culture.

The senior centres, which are normally run by NGOs, do not necessarily provide health services. They are for people 60+. All municipalities are required to have at least one, but larger municipalities need to have more. In Oslo there are 17, and they are partially funded by the districts and partially by NGOs such as the Red Cross. The centres are for the most part run by volunteers, but there is usually one paid manager and some staff. The centres offer a broad variety of activities. Examples include language courses, history classes, and physical training. There is a weekly lecture that people can attend for free, and a café that serves sandwiches and hot meals. There is also a supervisor, whose task is to communicate with the seniors and find out how their health and living conditions are, and if they have special needs. It is difficult to say if these senior centres really help with the work-life balance of the families. The reason is that those who come to the centres are usually people who are quite independent. Those who actually need assistance rarely come, as they may be more depending on public services.

The impact of Covid on Norwegian society from the government’s perspective

On March 12th, Norway went into a national lockdown, with schools and businesses closing. These restrictions lasted until early May when there was a gradual rollback. New restrictions were re-introduced in November 2020.

It is still too early to assess the long-term consequences of the pandemic have been for family life, work life balance and the relations between men and women. It might also be that the data that the government has now will be foundational, or if there will be changes in the future. However, the initial findings collected during the first lockdown show that the traditional gender roles in the home have been emphasized. The Centre for Gender Equality has stated that they do not know why this is, but their educated guess is that women have been doing the tasks that they consider “theirs” more frequently. For example, if your task is to clean the kitchen, during the pandemic, you would do this more frequently. It is suggested that this is due to the fact that as women now are more at home, they spend more of their time doing these tasks. Another guess is that men take now less responsibility at home.

One interesting finding is that when asking families how their work life balance is now during the pandemic, both men and women are more pleased. This could be due to the fact that families now have more time for each other. For instance, it is easier have breakfast

together. Now, these numbers are general, and there is no data for those families where one or more members have been laid off. It is however reasonable to assume that those families are not as content with their situation.

Final remarks

The Nordic countries, and Norway among them, are often viewed as “different” from the other European nations. The extensive welfare state is one aspect which has attracted considerable research. What lessons can be learned, and how can parts of the welfare be replicated in other countries? This executive summary was created to give a brief overview of the results collected during the study visits of the MASP project, which tries to answer these questions. The executive summary is based on two reports written by EUROMASC, and where one can read more about the issues presented here.

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