

## The Scandinavian Model and Women's Interests: The Issues of Universalism and Corporatism\*

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Theorizing about women and politics and discussions of women and the welfare state have often neglected contextual factors, such as institutional and country-specific variables. By problematizing the following three concepts – the Scandinavian model, universalism, and corporatism – this article seeks to focus attention on system variations and their possible consequences for women.

The term 'the Scandinavian model' often crops up in efforts to pinpoint the distinctive features of politics or the political economies of the Nordic countries. It has also been used to describe the unique aspects of the welfare states of these countries. Among the distinctive features associated with the Scandinavian model are the *dominance of the Social Democratic party* and/or the *mobilization of the working class* (Castles 1978; Korpi 1980, 1983; Esping-Andersen 1985). In fact, the Scandinavian model has been more or less equated with the 'social democratic model' in some instances. A second feature is the *comprehensive nature of welfare policies* and the *generous levels of benefits* (Heckscher 1984, 79–80; Furniss & Tilton 1977, ch. 6). The *scope and nature of the public sector and its impact on distribution with a concomitant relegation of market forces*, or as termed by Gösta Esping-Andersen 'decommodification', has also been identified as a defining characteristic of the Scandinavian model. Cross-national comparisons, employing a variety of measures of the size of the public sector, reveal that during the 1970s and 1980s the Nordic countries (or more exactly three of them) ranked among the nations with the largest public sectors (OECD Observer; Wilensky 1976, 11; Heidenheimer et al. 1983, 202). Moreover, with respect to the nature of the public sector, the Nordic countries, together with Britain, have public sectors characterized by *large investments in public services and facilities* (Kohl 1981, 313). A major policy thrust of the Nordic countries has been to make medical services, transportation, education, day care, family services, etc. into public goods (Siim 1984, 3), which has occasioned the label 'social service state'. An additional attribute,

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viewed as typical, is a strong emphasis on *universalism* with entitlement to benefits and services based on the idea of social citizenship (Elmér 1975, 252–258; Esping-Andersen & Korpi 1987; Flora 1986, xix). Also the funding of benefits reflects the idea of social citizenship, rather than the insurance principle, in that taxation constitutes the main source of revenues and contributions by the insured and fees are minimal. A further distinction is a commitment to *equality and solidarity* as policy goals (Esping-Andersen & Korpi 1987). The commitment to equality is not limited to equal opportunities, but extends to equality of result or in outcomes. Finally, and more controversially, versions of the Scandinavian model attach major weight to *corporatism* (e.g. Hernes 1984, 1987, 153; cf. Ruggie 1984), i.e. the extensive representation of organized interests in the policy process.

My purpose here is to raise a number of questions concerning the Scandinavian model and women. More specifically, I want to examine two defining properties attributed to the model – universalism and corporatism – and their import for women. Much of the discussion of the welfare state and women proceeds from a generic notion of the welfare state which fails to recognize that welfare states vary and these variations may affect women in different ways. Similarly, theories of women and politics often do not give adequate consideration to country-specific variables. An advantage of looking at the Scandinavian model and women is that such a point of departure emphasizes country-specific attributes and seeks to complement the current focus of feminist political theory. Furthermore, an examination of the Scandinavian model and its components from the perspective of women's interests raises interesting questions concerning the application of the model as an analytical construct.

In applying the model in concrete analysis of the Nordic countries, two fundamental ambiguities exist. The first is the question of what the basic features of the model are. All the traits listed above are seldom explicitly designated as components of the Scandinavian model. More importantly, the second ambiguity is that authors rarely make clear to what extent the model pertains to all the Nordic countries or the nature of possible deviations and whether the deviations are important. Of course, an underlying assumption of the model is that differences are both minimal and insignificant. A pitfall of the model is that it can result in an overemphasis of shared characteristics at the expense of dissimilarities. Recently, however, the appropriateness of the Scandinavian model has been raised in connection with economic policy (Mjøset 1987). The question is equally relevant in the area of social policy.

## Universalism and Women's Interests

Several authors underline that a universal approach to social benefits and

services is a key element of the Scandinavian model. In dealing with this issue it is first necessary to specify the dimensions of universality and then determine to what extent these dimensions are reflected in the policies of the Nordic welfare states. In addition, Mary Ruggie in her book *The State and Working Women*, building on the insights of Richard M. Titmuss, claims that in order to advance the interests of women the welfare state must combine universal policies with selective measures. What are the 'mixes' of universal policies and selective measures pertaining to women in the Nordic welfare states?

The idea of universalism is not as clear-cut as it may seem. I would suggest that universalism is comprised of at least four dimensions, which are not always distinguished: (1) compulsory legislation vs. voluntary arrangements, (2) entitlement based on citizenship (residence) and not restricted by ability to pay, (3) 'equal' benefits or in principle 'equal' access to or utilization of services, and (4) a substantial component of funding through public taxes or minimal reliance on the traditional insurance model and individual contribution. After disentangling these dimensions of universalism, the question is to what extent the policies in the Nordic countries embody these various dimensions.

The next step is to look at the combination of universal policies and selective measures affecting women against the background of Mary Ruggie's argument. She maintains that the success of Swedish policies for women compared to those in Britain is because selective measures which benefit women operate within a universal framework, and thus can differentiate and discriminate positively with the minimum risk of stigma, in favour of those whose needs are greatest. By contrast, 'the emphasis in British policies for women has been on selective measures *without* a universal framework' (Ruggie 1984, 17, italics hers) with the result that the policies only isolate and discriminate against women.

What is the nature of the mix between universalist and selective measures in the Nordic countries and what effects do differing mixes have for women? Obviously an adequate answer to this question is a topic for future research. Here I can only suggest that Nordic policies are much more variegated than implied by the Scandinavian model. Looking at one area – family policy – for example, Denmark differs from the other Nordic countries in that since the mid-1970s the amount of the child allowance is based on parents' income (Johansen 1986, 330), whereas in the other Nordic countries the child allowance is a universal and equal benefit. Simultaneously, however, Denmark (together with Sweden) is a leader in the provision of public day care (Siim 1987, 4. Cf. *Social Security in the Nordic Countries* 1984, 64, 84, 86) and also puts much emphasis on family services. In other words, in one area of family policy Denmark deviates from the other Nordic countries by incorporating selective features in its child allowance, but its approach

to day care is universal in the sense that the goal is equal access and in the mid-1980s the provision of services as a percentage of preschool children was highest in Denmark. Furthermore, the child allowance retains an aspect of universalism in that every child is entitled to the allowance, it is not exclusively targeted to low income families.

In the mid-1980s Norway lagged behind the other three countries in the provision of public day care facilities and with regard to paid parental leave of absence. On the other hand, the amount of the Norwegian child allowance outstripped the other countries and solo parents automatically receive a substantial supplement (Social Security in the Nordic Countries 1984, 64). In the area of family policy, a distinctive feature of Norwegian policy has been much more emphasis on transfers compared to services. Finally, in Sweden the provision of public day care is exceeded only by Denmark, and the child allowance is the second most generous. In addition, single and divorced parents receive an ample maintenance allowance for children, the payment of which is guaranteed by the state. Paid parental leave was the most extensive for both women on the labor market and those in the home. Important selective measures include a means-tested housing allowance, frequently lower day care fees for low income parents, and priority in placing the children of single parents in day care.

These examples seem to indicate that a variety of mixes, leading to improvements for women, are possible and what is essential is the universal framework. In other words, differences in mixes may not be minimal, but they may be rather insignificant in terms of bettering the financial situation of women with children.

## Corporatism and Women's Interests

Corporatist structures representing organized interests have also been designated as a component of the Scandinavian model. Two diametrically opposed views concerning the consequences of corporatism for women have been presented in the literature. On the one hand, Mary Ruggie argues that a particular variant of societal corporatism – ‘corporatist social democracy’ – through its policy outputs promotes women's interests. On the other hand, Helga Hernes maintains that the Scandinavian ‘corporate, redistributive state’ adversely affects women's interests because women exercise little influence in the corporate system of representation. Corporatism works to the disadvantage of women primarily by making them ‘policy takers’ instead of ‘policy makers’.

Both as a term and a concept, corporatism is beset by multiple meanings – critically termed definitional refraction (Panitch 1980) or more positively described as ‘pluri-dimensionality’ (Lehmbruch 1982). Of the dimensions

identified by Gerhard Lehbruch, two figure in Ruggie's and Hernes's discussions. One is corporatism as the integration of organized interests in the governmental decision-making process, and the other is corporatism as a particular set of relations between labor and capital characterized by a harmonization of interests or 'concentration' and a growing role of government (1982, 2-5) – or what other analysts have referred to as 'tripartism'.

Given the definitional diversity surrounding corporatism, it is hardly surprising that divergent views about its consequences for women should emerge. I think it is important to examine these rival interpretations for two reasons. First, each argument exposes or points to certain blind spots or weaknesses in the other. Second, both arguments by belittling the role of women in the policy process raise the issue of whether women are merely recipients and not participants in the political process.

Let us begin by looking more closely at the two arguments. Do the differences in Ruggie and Hernes's perspectives stem from dissimilarities in their conceptions of corporatism? Ruggie, whose analysis is a comparative study of Sweden and Britain, is more elaborate in her discussion of corporatism. In comparing the two countries, she develops two contrasting ideal models – the liberal welfare state and the corporatist welfare state. (Ironically, however, in her initial presentation of the models (Ruggie 1984, 11-17) corporatist arrangements are not a defining characteristic or variable. Instead, the key distinctions revolve around 'stateness'.) Eventually, in chapter 6 she does clarify what she means, describing corporatist social democracy as a form of tripartism where labor, because of its strong position, 'is fully integrated as an equal partner in the tripartite system'. According to Ruggie, labor's status affects the role of the state resulting in policies which are positive for workers in general and women workers in particular.

One difficulty concerning the validity of Ruggie's conclusions is that they are based on only two cases – Britain and Sweden. What happens if we broaden her analysis to include the other Nordic countries? To what extent would the analysis be replicated for the other countries in terms of the independent variable (corporatist social democracy) and the dependent variable (policy outputs)? In other words, how similar are tripartite arrangements in the Nordic countries and, for example, has there been a major decline in wage differentials among female and male workers, organized by LO, in the same occupational categories?

Hernes emphasizes that a particular feature of the Scandinavian state form is the growing importance of the corporate system in determining distribution and redistributive policies. As a general trend in Nordic corporatism she further notes the enormous political clout of associations of employers and trade unions, but that these organizations have few women members and practically no women in leadership positions. Organ-

izations with a predominantly female membership generally have limited institutional access to the political process, whereas men are represented through class organizations which have institutionalized access. Hernes concludes that 'the very narrow representational base of interest representation which corporatism implies underlines and strengthens power inequalities between women and men' (1984, 31; 1987; 35).

In sum, both Ruggie's and Hernes's conceptions of corporatism tend to attach major weight to the second of the two dimensions specified by Lehmbruch, i.e. corporatism as a particular set of relations between labor and capital. This is especially true of Ruggie, and she seems to assume that tripartism is a general feature of the policy-making process rather than a factor whose importance may vary substantially from one policy area to another. At the same time, both authors included the first dimension mentioned by Lehmbruch. Ruggie acknowledges that Swedish societal corporatism has developed into a broad-based system of interest representation – which implies something quite different than a tripartite system. Initially, Hernes also seems to be dealing with a broader number of organizations and not just class organizations, but in contrast to Ruggie she stresses the exclusionary nature of corporatism in general and specifically with regard to women.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, their divergent conclusions arise because their focus and interpretation of women's interests differ. For Ruggie, women's interests are primarily their interests as workers. For Hernes, they are mainly their interests as citizens – as participants in politics. And it is here that I think it is instructive to compare the two arguments.

Although Hernes stresses women as citizens, her article also comments on women as clients (of the welfare state) and as employees. In particular it is Hernes's assumptions about women as employees which Ruggie's analysis gives cause to question. Hernes claims that 'regulation and control of the market and the system of production have affected men more directly than women' (1984, 29; 1987, 34). This may be true for women who are not employees, but it can be argued that when they become employees women as a group are often more vulnerable to market forces than men. Ruggie's analysis calls attention to women's vulnerability in the market and the beneficial effects for women of several interventionist policies seeking to regulate the market.

Equally important, Hernes zeros in upon a weakness in Ruggie's discussion which emphasizes the greater equality between Swedish female and male workers in terms of pay, employment, and labor market training programs, but neglects the disparity between women and men workers in terms of influence and power positions. Ruggie depicts women workers as allowing their interests to be pursued by dominant coalitions speaking on

their behalf and in the end benefiting in terms of policies. It is precisely this situation which Hernes finds objectionable.

In different ways, however, both Ruggie and Hernes project a picture of women's marginality in the policy process. In the case of Ruggie, this largely stems from the nature of her analytical framework which highlights structures and scarcely deals with individual decision makers – women or men. Hernes's conclusions concerning women's marginality in the policy process are more emphatic: '. . . one can describe the Scandinavian state form as a tutelary state for women, since they have played a minimal role in the actual decision-making process behind the distribution process.' Or to take another example: 'Women are recipients, men are participants in the political process' (1984, 31; 1987, 35).

On the face of it, there may seem to be much truth in this argument. Women's representation in the Danish, Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish parliaments ranged between only 10 and 20 percent at the beginning of the 1970s. We also know that on inquiry commissions – a chief vehicle for policy formulation – women's representation during the postwar period has been consistently lower than in parliament. In the area of administration, the situation is even more dismal, except in local government. However, we also know that there is a policy specialization among women politicians, and that they are concentrated in certain policy areas. Is it not possible that at least in these areas women are policy makers and not merely policy takers?

Looking at the case of Sweden, I would argue that, in policy areas directly impinging upon their interests and the family, women have been participants in the political process and have frequently been influential. Firstly, if we take contributions to the public debate which have had an effect in changing perimeters of possible policy, the contributions of women stand out. Alva (and Gunnar) Myrdal's famous book, *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (Crisis in the Population Issue), in the 1930s,<sup>2</sup> by modifying the 'idea of the natural' as a constraint influencing women's claims, and the radical policy outputs following in the wake of the Population Commission can be cited. Even more important in changing conceptions of the natural<sup>3</sup> role of women was Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein's book, *Women's Two Roles*. Finally, another woman, Eva Moberg (1961), challenged the limitations of the notion of women's two roles and argued for changing both women's and men's roles – which has subsequently become the official policy goal.

Secondly, since the mid-1950s the cabinet minister responsible for family affairs has generally been a woman. Furthermore, there is evidence that Ulla Lindström, 'family minister' from 1954 to 1966, actively worked for the appointment of women to inquiry commissions – not only those dealing



with family policy and day care but also development assistance and abortion. She also appointed women to chair commissions.

Thirdly, although we have aggregate figures on women's representation on inquiry commissions (Eduards 1980, 23; DS A 1986, 4, 26–38) there is little analysis of the composition of specific commissions. As a result of reading Ruggie's peculiar description of the composition of the 1968 Commission on Child Centers (*1968 års barnstugeutredning*) as an example of the tripartite coalition of labor, employers, and the state bureaucracy, I became curious as to its and other inquiry commissions' exact composition.<sup>4</sup> A random exploratory probe of the gender composition of commissions dealing with family policy since 1960 revealed that only in one case – the 1965 Commission on Family Policy – was the female/male ratio worse than 40/60 and since around 1970 the ratio has been at least 50/50 and in many cases higher.<sup>5</sup> These ratios contrast sharply with women's overall representation on inquiry commissions. Also in this area, union representatives on commissions have included women. In short, in these areas women have been both policy takers and policy makers in Sweden.

## Concluding Comments

Theories of women and politics – both of a descriptive and normative nature – have produced generalizations divorced from a consideration of variations of country-specific contexts. Despite problems of application, a discussion of women and the Scandinavian model focuses on the importance of institutional and contextual factors, and calls attention to the fact that different types of welfare states can have very different consequences for women.

Feminist theory has also placed heavy emphasis on the powerlessness of women, and this emphasis has spilled over into the analysis of women and politics in several ways. First, indirectly, this emphasis on powerlessness may have contributed to obscuring (*att osynliggöra*) the role of women as policy makers. Second, the political positions occupied by women have often been assumed to be second-rate in terms of power. According to what has become a famous adage 'where power is, women are not' (Nowotny 1980, 147). Third, and somewhat similarly, the policy specialization of women in the areas of family policy, social policy and education has also been viewed as a factor consigning them to less powerful even marginal positions compared to men. In the Scandinavian countries, where between roughly 25 and 35 percent of the GDP is spent in these policy areas, there is reason to question this view. Perhaps in welfare states, where policies still have a residual character and are mainly directed to the poor, there may be some truth to the matter. But in institutional welfare states

of the Scandinavian type, these policies are an integral part of the well-being of all citizens, thus assuming an entirely different magnitude.

Finally, discussions on the Scandinavian model frequently consist merely of a catalogue of distinctive traits. Seldom do these descriptions move beyond an enumeration of attributes to a discussion of the relationships between attributes. One question worthy of further exploration, which suggests itself here, is: what is the relationship between universalism and corporatism? To what extent has 'corporatist social democracy', to use Ruggie's phrase, contributed to the universalist approach to social policy typical of the Nordic countries? Or are other determinants more important?

#### NOTES

\* This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Conference on 'Politics, Gender and Power', organized by the Nordic Association for Research on Women and Politics, Tversted, Denmark, January 21-23, 1988. I would like to thank the guest editor of this issue, Maud Eduards, and Helga Hernes together with other conference participants for their valuable comments.

1. Several neo-corporatist theorists emphasize the exclusionary nature of corporatism as a defining characteristic. My own position is that it is more fruitful to view this attribute as a hypothetical variable subject to empirical investigation rather than to make it a definitional component. Surely the degree to which corporatist arrangements are inclusive or exclusionary is one of the most interesting and important areas for empirical inquiry in the comparative analysis of corporatism (cf. Sainsbury 1988).
2. Gunnar Myrdal is co-author of the Swedish version, but it is perhaps telling that Alva Myrdal is the sole author of the expanded English version, *Nation and Family*.
3. For a discussion of the importance of 'the idea of the natural' as a constraint influencing women's claims, see Lisa Peattie and Martin Rein, *Women's Claims*.
4. It turned out that Ruggie's description is misleading. No representative for private business or management sat on the Commission on Child Centers.
5. Besides the 1968 Commission on Child Centers, this random probe included the 1962 Family Commission (SOU 1965: 65), the Commission on Family Day Care (SOU 1967: 39), the 1965 Commission on Family Policy (SOU 1967: 52), the Commission on the Adoption of Foreign Children (SOU 1967: 57), the Commission on Abortion (SOU 1971: 58), the Commission on Assistance to the Family (SOU 1981: 25), the Commission on Prostitution (SOU 1981: 71), the Commission on Family Finances (SOU 1983: 14), the Commission on Family Planning and Abortion (SOU 1983: 31), and the Commission on Solo Parents (SOU 1983: 51).

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