10 Creating gender exceptionalism

The role of global indexes

Tori Loven Kirkebø, Malcolm Langford and Haldor Byrkjeflot

The prevailing discourse of Nordic exceptionalism is saturated by references to the region headlining various global indexes and indicators (Kirkebø et al., 2019). In 2015, Norway topped the Human Development Index and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, was second in two rule of law and human rights indexes, and was third in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (Langford and Schaffer, 2015: 26). This index-infused narrative is not surprising. It fits neatly with the rebranding of the Nordic region that occurred from the 1990s onwards. During the Cold War, the Nordics actively constructed an image for themselves as representing a peaceful middle way between the West and the East – 'market[ing] a brand of rational/modern society and international order' (Browning, 2007: 36). Yet, following the fall of the Soviet Union and the decline of a bipolar world order, this imaginary lost traction – and the region was confronted with a new competition-based multilateral order fuelled by economic globalization, multipolar geopolitics, and rising nationalism (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015). In this competitive environment, indexes provided a ready-to-hand measure of policy achievement across multiple fields, with a high ranking communicating 'excellence' and 'exceptionalism'.

The field of gender equality was soon engulfed by this index-based exceptionalism discourse. Gender equality figures prominently in the global narrative on Nordic exceptionalism. It is 'one of the most prominent hallmarks of the Nordic model' (Melby et al., 2009: 4, quoted in Lister, 2009: 248) and 'integral to Scandinavian citizenship' (Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006: 7; and the Nordics 'have distinguished themselves through their active work to promote gender equality' (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2006: 7). The Nordic gender brand is so powerful that any apparent deviation from gender equality in practice – such as Denmark's poor performance in many indices of gender equality (Kirk, 2019) – is framed as an outlier rather than a challenge to the idea of a Nordic model, or simply not mentioned. Likewise, global indexes are mobilized as central evidence and artefacts in the many descriptions of Nordic gender equality success. Gender equality figured prominently in the early wave of global indexes, and the Nordics performed strongly in the first two, which were launched by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in

DOI: 10.4324/9781003017134-10

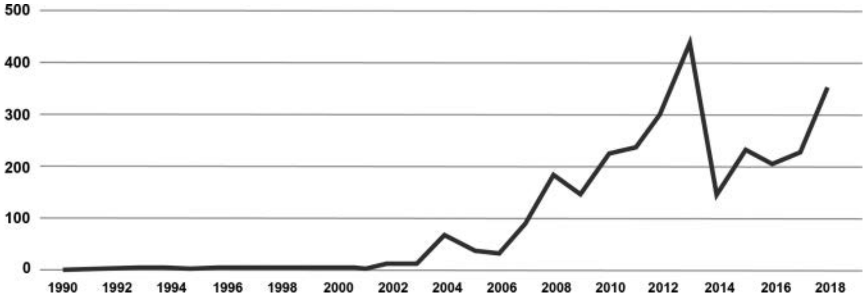

Figure 10.1 Norwegian articles on 'the world's most gender-equal country' over time.

1995: the Gender Development Index and the Gender Inequality Index. The impact of these indexes on the way media reported about gender issues can be witnessed in their distillation into simple slogans or brands (Aspeli, 2018; Bredeveien, 2018). A media analysis in Norwegian newspapers of the phrase 'the world's most gender-equal country' ('*verdens mest likestilte*') showed a rapid increase in the use of the phrase from 2006 (see Figure 10.1).

In this chapter, we examine critically the rise of global indexes and ask how they helped build and shape the idea of Nordic gender exceptionalism, as the region's members moved from being Cold War–era 'middle way countries' to the 'top of the world' in the age of globalization. In the wake of the index revolution, we find a critical scholarship that raises questions about the material construction of such indices (Apaza, 2009) and a broader social scientific scholarship highlighting their symbolic power in shaping perceptions and policies (Mennicken and Espeland, 2019; Mau, 2020; Davis et al., 2012). As indexes constitute a new form of power, they have naturally attracted sceptical inquiry. Indexes help secure attention and influence, elevate status and moral authority, and, in the process, create new social and symbolic hierarchies, global winners and losers.

We begin the chapter by tracing the rise of global indexes and the literature on their limitations and constructive power, thereafter presenting critically the Nordic rankings across 78 global and 8 gender-specific indexes. This enables us to better understand which features of gender equality are captured by the indicators and what the rankings communicate symbolically. We conclude by analysing the presence of indicators in gender-equality discourse, with a focus on the role of media diffusion. In so doing, we make two principal arguments: (1) that indexes powerfully and peculiarly shape the discourse on Nordic gender exceptionalism and (2) that their constructive limitations and constituent power are often underplayed in policy discussions.

Ranking the world

Terms like ‘indicator’ and ‘index’ refer to a ‘statistic that aims at combining scientific authority with normative authority’ (Davies, 2015: 285), a systematic presentation of information that allows for comparison among units over time. Indicators are ‘globally circulating knowledge technologies that can be used to quantify, compare and rank virtually any complex field of human affairs’ through the creation and defining of social phenomena by naming them and attaching them to data (Davis et al., 2012: 5). Today, they are ubiquitous, ranging from the Sustainable Development Goals to the Human Development Index (HDI) and the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index. Kelley and Simmons (2015) chart a 2,000% increase in ‘global performance indexes’ in the period 1994–2014, accompanied by an expansion in themes that move beyond core socio-economic issues.

To be sure, indicators established themselves early in national and international governance (Gates, 1975). However, the creation of global indexes – combining a set of indicators in a summary and ranked form – was often the result of one-off experiments by experts in their respective fields without organizational support. This stands in contrast with how index production is integrated today as part of regular and long-term activities of an assemblage of organizations, classified formally as Ranking and Rating Organizations (RROs) (Cooley and Snyder, 2015). These RROs extend beyond international organizations to encompass corporations, civil society organizations and activists, with 75% of the leading global indexes being produced in the USA (Kelley and Simmons, 2015). Some of these RROs, such as Freedom House, assemble large teams of analysts and expert advisors (up to 125 analysts and 40 advisors in the case of the Freedom in the World Index) (Ringel et al., 2020: 41).

The reasons for this turn to quantification are diverse. Mau (2020) refers to the engines of economization and digitalization as important forces. Economization is represented by the turn towards markets and market mechanisms and the ascendance of evaluation criteria related to efficiency and performance. Digitalization makes the collection, storage and analysis of data substantially more accessible, quicke, and easier. Furthermore, indicators provide a mutually acceptable means of assessment where there is distrust (Rosga and Satterthwaithe, 2009: 280), providing a low-cost means of accountability and control. Advocates and activists can make problems visible; and businesses and governments can monitor and control behaviour. Indexes are also an ideal communications tool. Offering clear, comprehensible and simple snapshots of complex situations, indicators constitute a ‘technology of distance’ that is ‘well suited for communication that goes beyond the boundaries of locality and communication’ (Porter, 1995: viii, ix). For news media, indexes helpfully simplify complex issues, provide ready-made narratives (some nations go up, others down), and satiate public interest in issues such as national security and identity.

Despite playing an important instrumental role, indicators and indexes have two primary limitations, related to their statistical quality (construction) and sociological impact (unintended and intended effects).

First, in relation to statistical quality, it is worth briefly rehearsing the common critiques. Indexes may suffer from a lack of *construct validity* because they provide a poor or over-simplistic representation of a phenomenon being represented. For example, the global Gender Empowerment Measure measures only the formal (not substantive) participation of women in politics and workplaces. Moreover, indexes may suffer from a lack of *reliable and valid* data. Recorded observations may not be an accurate reflection of the reality being measured, data may be missing, human bias and error or state interference may have affected data creation, different contexts may affect respondent answers, and the selection of weightings for respondent groups or indicators in an index may be incorrect. Finally, global indexes suffer often from the challenge of excessive *aggregation*. Seeking to amass many and widely varying countries and issues in a single scale often results in excessive simplification and a lack of differentiation. One common result is data truncation (Barsh, 1993: 102–103; Landman, 2004: 923). High-income countries are bunched at the top of the index, and it is rare to find analysis on whether there are statistically significant differences in the different countries' rankings.

A second set of challenges concern the interpretation and effects of indexes and indicators. What indicators 'actually communicate, and to whom, may not be what their producers and promulgators sought to communicate' (Davis et al., 2012: 11). A common effect is the focus on the *measurable*. As Davis et al. (2012: 9) remind us, indicators embody a 'theoretical claim about the appropriate standards for evaluating actors' conduct'. If an indicator is loosely matched with a standard or simply achieves prominence, it can quickly take on a normative life of its own. Indicators inevitably become substitutes for the phenomena that they are measuring – 'what gets measured gets managed' – rendering the indicator itself, not what it is measuring, the focus of social action. This includes setting the policy agenda or defining, maintaining and developing a problem field. For example, a consequence of new indexes related to 'good governance' is the introduction of the notion of 'failed' or 'failing' states (Andrews, 2008). Concepts and measurements introduced by RROs gain high salience and will influence how we identify, frame, construct, and respond to global problems.

Another effect of indexes is their mobilization of competitive modes of action and broader use in political economy (Mau, 2020). Global performance indexes are a form of *economic and political capital* that can be used by various actors for a wide variety of purposes, which may extend beyond the policy problem that initially motivated the creation of a particular index. This secondary use is especially potent in the branding of nations. Rankings help construct a politics of global competition by creating a single political imaginary (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018) – often through methods such as national reputation management and nation-branding. Angell and Mordhorst (2014: 186) explain that national reputation management constitutes a globalization of nationalism in two senses. First, 'it changes the focus of national identity … to a more external orientation in which the state uses the country's national reputation to promote its interests in the global marketplace'. Second, 'national reputation management moves nationalism out of its traditional political, cultural and ideological field and into the domain of global competition for prosperity – that is, into a commercial field'.

Contemporary indexes facilitate this competition by providing ready-made tools for comparison. Indeed, the core of the nation-branding movement is the Nation Brand Index. However, the competition is not confined to pure commercial interests, as indexes have become a new way for states to build political capital and secure political influence (Kelley and Simmons, 2015; Beaumont and Towns, 2018). Indicators create a 'social pressure' by focusing international attention on low-performing nations and organizations, and they provide valuable political capital for states or other actors jostling for political influence (Moss and Langford, 2020).

A final effect is the divergent *causal explanations* that may be mobilized by the *same* index or a *diversity* of indexes. On the one hand, indexes can strengthen or facilitate the circulation of concepts that incorporate the 'core value' in a country's success. A recent and somewhat amusing example is the explosion of interest in and emergence of a global market for the Danish concept of '*hygge*' – a common Danish and Norwegian word for a form of comfort. After Denmark was named the happiest country in the world in the 2012, 2013 and 2016 World Happiness Reports, the concept of '*hygge*' started to circulate.[1] Today, there are bestselling books,[2] webpages[3] and seminar series[4] set up in the spirit of – or to sell – '*hygge*'. On the other hand, rankings and shifts in them generate, almost instantaneously, a demand for a readily available theory of change. To take the example of the World Happiness Report again, newspaper discussions of why Switzerland was the happiest country in the world in 2015 included the feature of low taxation levels; but, for Denmark in 2016, discussions pointed to the inverse – namely high levels of taxation (Kirkebø et al., 2019). While more serious analyses of the causes of happiness engage with these competing explanations, the conflicting narratives can live on in parallel fashion in the public sphere.

An example of diverse or contradictory explanations can be seen in the field of gender equality. Within the Nordic region, different rankings are mobilized to portray Denmark as either a champion of gender equality or a low performer in comparison with the other Nordic countries. Whereas it is ranked as number 14 in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, which has led to discussions as to why Denmark scores so poorly (Kirk, 2019), other rankings, such as the recent Equal Measures 2030 in which Denmark achieved the top score, made it possible for a campaign to brand Copenhagen as 'the world leader in gender equality'.[5]

Constructing global gender indexes

To understand the role of rankings in helping shape ideas of Nordic exceptionalism, Byrkjeflot et al. (2018) looked at 78 relevant global indexes.[6] These were identified in targeted searches and the list assembled by Cooley and Snyder (2015). The indexes were categorized across seven different issue areas: social, economic, infrastructure, governance, global contributions, global perspectives and gender.[7] The organizations producing the indicators are diverse and were classified as civil society, corporation/interest group, research institute, or international organization.[8]

The average ranking in each category for each Nordic state is shown in Figure 10.2. From a general perspective, there are two notable trends. First, the Nordics perform extremely strong on all indexes, although slightly less so on economic and infrastructure indexes. Second, the performances of Iceland and Finland do not always match those of the other Scandinavian states – which suggests that we might need to think in terms of Scandinavian rather than Nordic exceptionalism.

For present purposes, what is of interest is that Figure 10.2 shows that the highest-ranked category for the Nordics after global contributions (e.g. aid) is gender. This category is composed of eight gender indexes, which are listed in Table 10.1 along with the last-known ranking for each Nordic country. These indexes are: (1) the Gender Empowerment Measure; (2) the Gender Development Index; (3) the Gender Inequality Index; (4) the Gender Equality Index; (5) the Global Gender Gap Index; (6) the Where To Be Born Index; (7) the Mothers Index and (8) the Social Institutions and Gender Index. Not all of these indexes are focused solely on equality (nos 5–6), or are global (nos 7–8) or numerical (no. 8). Nonetheless, the overall pattern is generally clear. In the seven numerical indexes, the Nordics possess an average ranking of 3.6, with the Scandinavian bloc performing most strongly.

When we examine the construction of these eight gender indexes and the reported results more closely, several observations can be made. First, the

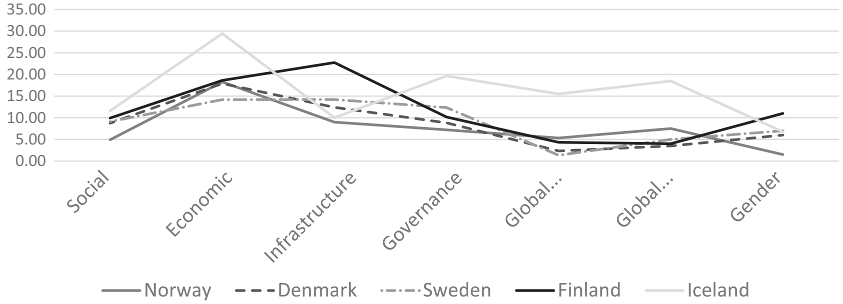

Figure 10.2 Nordic countries' average rank on global indexes.

Table 10.1 Gender indexes and the Nordics[a]

Name	*Source*	*Sample*	*Norway*	*Sweden*	*Denmark*	*Finland*	*Iceland*	*Nordic Average*
1 Gender Empowerment Measure	UNDP	Global	2	1	4	3	8	3.6
2 Gender Development Index	UNDP	Global	1	14	5	23	9	10
3 Gender Inequality Index	UNDP	Global	5	2	2	7	9	5
4 Global Gender Gap Index	WEF	Global	2	4	14	3	1	4.8
5 Mothers Index	Save the children	Global	1	5	4	2	3	3
6 Where To Be Born Index[b]	Economist	Global	3	4	5	11		5.8
7 Gender Equality Index	EU	EU	–	1	2	4		2.3
8 Social Institutions and Gender Index	OECD	OECD	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low	No info	
Country average			2.3	4.3	4.9	7	6	

a The scores are for the last-known publication of the indexes, in most cases 2019.

b Gender equality is one of the quality-of-life factors in the index.

selection and construction of indicators is the subject of critical statistical literature. For example, the UNDP's Gender Development Index (GDI) was first launched in 1995 to adjust the yearly Human Development Index (HDI) scores for the extent to which achievements on income, life expectancy, health and education were shared among men and women.

The GDI faced early criticism though, especially from Bardhan and Klasen (1999), and was subsequently revised. Nonetheless, the same authors later argued that caution should be exercised still in interpreting and applying the revised index in relation to high-performing countries. This is because of concerns with construct validity (choice of constituent indicators) and truncation (small differences between high-income countries in the indicators). 'All this tells us', Bardhan and Klasen continue, 'is that gender bias in the very crude indicators used in the HDI – life expectancy, literacy, gross enrolments, and 'adjusted' income – [is] indeed very small in most rich countries'. Yet, they conclude by noting:

> At the same time, this does not mean that more subtle gender inequalities do not exist in rich countries […] that may have a substantial impact on human development. It is just that the HDI and GDI are too crude to pick up these more subtle inequalities.
>
> (Bardhan and Klasen, 2000: 194)

The implications of these concerns become clear when one compares the Nordics on a neglected indicator such as parental leave. Norway and Sweden have adopted policies that push fathers to take parental leave, while Denmark has taken a very different approach, with a weaker institutionalization of leave conditions and greater focus on individual freedom for each family. In Denmark, the focus is less on gender equality and more on children's rights (Borchorst and Siim, 2008). However, the highly aggregated scores above do not provide this level of understanding or nuance: Denmark significantly outperforms Sweden in the GDI but not on this dimension of gender development.

Likewise, the Gender Empowerment Measure has been criticized on measurement grounds. The index includes formal measures of women's empowerment: share of parliamentary seats; share of administrative, professional, technical and managerial positions; and share of earned income. Yet, even though the index 'captures some aspects of female agency, it is questionable how well the GEM measure at present fully captures economic and political power held by women and their role in the development process' (Bardhan and Klasen, 1999: 1000). This concern, however, is more relevant to those countries with strong use of quotas in formal representative bodies with little power, such as China and Cuba. A more relevant critique for the Nordics is that there are reliability challenges in comparing industries across countries and that indexes do not take into account strong internal regional disparities within countries (Pillarisetti and McGillivray, 1998: 202; Kirkebø and Langford, 2019).

Second, the choice of data has been subject to critique. A common element in global indexes is expert panels or survey data (Kirkebø and Langford, 2019). The Global Gender Gap Index from the World Economic Forum is a case in point, as it includes surveys of executives alongside statistics from international organizations. The risk is that images of certain countries become reinforcing. In the Global Gender Gap Index, the Nordics score very highly, and their performance is particularly strong on two of the five areas measured: politics and economic participation. Such an index allows Denmark to rank quite highly, yet other long-standing indexes show Denmark lagging significantly behind on pay gap and participation. In relation to equal pay, Denmark is ranked at 52, whereas it is ranked 102 in relation to female participation in business (Kolberg, 2020). Indeed, less than 10% of businesses have a female leader, with a greater number being led by men called Lars (Knudsen, 2018).

Third, indexes can be interpreted in problematic ways, especially through the conflation of relative and absolute performance. Rankings do exactly what the term suggests – they rank; they do not provide any information about whether the level of performance is satisfactory. In practice, however, they are often interpreted in absolute terms. This unintended consequence was noted early with the Gender Development Index: 'As expected, no country has a GDI as high as its HDI, suggesting that all countries have some gender gaps in at least one of their components' (Bardhan and Klasen, 1999: 989).

The role and power of global gender indexes

Moving beyond statistical questions, the potential power of indexes on Nordic gender exceptionalism discourse is arguably palpable. To study this, we performed a quantitative media content analysis of the role of indexes in strengthening gender exceptionalism. Using the global m360 media retrieval service, we identified 6,809 articles in English-speaking online media containing the words 'Nordic' and 'index' in the period between January 2012 and 30 June 2018. The most commonly mentioned thematic words – which are the subject of indexes or objects of substantive comparison – are listed in Figure 10.3. Two of the most common themes are the performance of the business and pharmaceutical sectors, but a range of socio-economic themes also feature strongly, such as happiness, work, technology and war. What is most striking, though, is the prominence of gender. 'Women and girls' are the fourth most-mentioned, and 'gender' the sixth most-mentioned.

How are we to interpret these results? A decision tree analysis of linked phrases and words shows not only that gender is prominent, but also how global indexes in general power the discourse of Nordic gender exceptionalism. On the one hand, many media articles refer to specific gender-specific indexes. One newspaper article discussing this index, on female

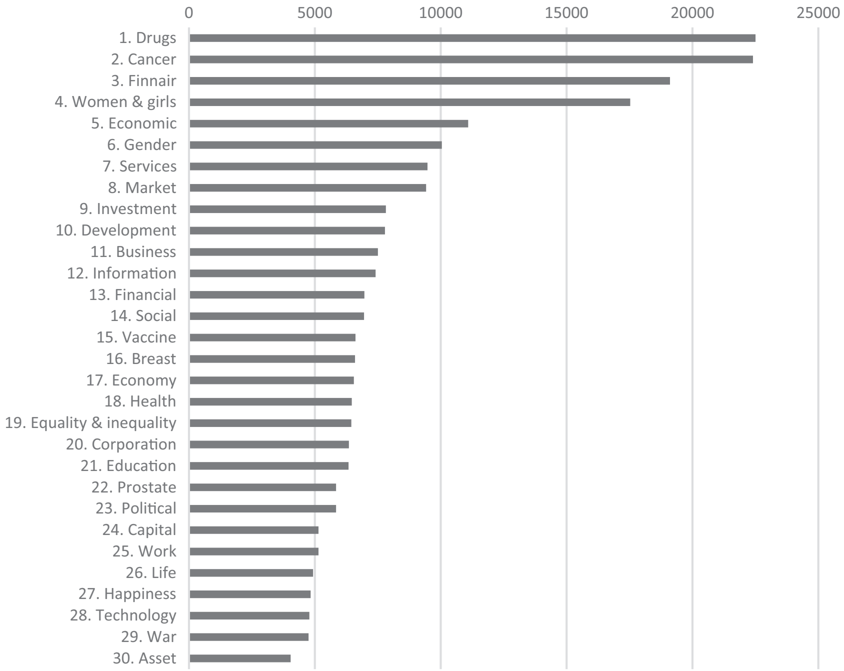

Figure 10.3 Ranking of thematic words in Nordic and index media content analysis (by counts).

participation in the technology industry, contains the following discussion of a low performer:

> [India's Global Gender Gap Index ranking has declined with] a widening of its gender gaps in Political Empowerment… healthy life expectancy and basic literacy.

And then a high performer:

> [Iceland] has closed more than 87% of its overall gender gap… the first in the world to [make] 'paying men more than women' illegal.

On the other hand, many of the decision trees concern other non-gender indexes, yet still address gender. When this occurs, the high performers (often some Nordic countries) are mentioned together with low or other performers. For example, looking at a specific article, which discusses a global index on competitiveness, we see one way in which gender enters:

> The 2018 Global Talent Competitiveness Index benchmarks how countries and cities expand, attract and retain talent…. The Nordic countries

> score remarkably well on most variables related to collaboration, internal openness, social mobility and *gender equality* but they struggle in external openness….. Norway again tops the index.
>
> (*NBR*, 2018, emphasis added)

This broader focus on gender across many different indexes reveals a simple but powerful phenomenon: There is a gender dimension to almost all datasets. Indicators are often disaggregated by gender – as it is the easiest background characteristic to measure (a binary in most cases) and has been measured for a long time. Alternatively, as in the example of the Global Talent Competitiveness Index above, a gender dimension is included in the index. The result is that, in the discussion of virtually any index, there is a good chance that countries that perform well or poorly on its gender dimension are mentioned. Thus, what is powerful for the purposes of discourse is not just the specific gender indexes but gender performance in all indexes.

Moving beyond the role of indexes in diffusing and strengthening Nordic gender exceptionalism, some comments on the broader power of indexes on shaping our understanding of Nordic gender equality are warranted. As foreshadowed, the power of gender indexes to mobilize contrasting images of the Nordics is also apparent. Like Kirk (2019), Teigen and Skjeie (2017) place Denmark consistently below the other Nordic countries on most indicators, and identify Sweden as the frontrunner. Yet, other indexes show Denmark performing at a level that is just as high as that of the other Nordic countries. This illustrates how the Nordic model may be sustained even when there is a controversy related to the performance of some of the countries associated with the model.

Equally, there is the power of indicators in driving causal explanations. For example, examining national statistics from the Nordic countries in the 1990s, Skevik (2006: 260) points out that Nordic mothers raising their child alone are less likely to live in poverty than other mothers in a similar situation.[9] Skevik attributes this to the Nordic approach to parental leave and the high degree of employment for women, although the analysis does not indicate a causal relationship between the two. Frazer and Marlier (2007) come to a similar conclusion as Skevik, pointing to inclusive family policies, including parental leave, as an explanation for comparatively less family poverty in the Nordic countries. Reflecting on statistics measuring division of labour in the home, Lister (2009: 261) argues, however, that the belief in the effectiveness of policies among the Nordics weighs heavier than the actual effect of the policies.

However, the effect is not only global – it may also be national. The branding of nations may be intentionally or unintentionally directed at a domestic audience (Moss and Langford, 2020). Towns (2002) argues that the gender-equality identity created and branded in Sweden has divisive effects. She argues that 'this equality discourse has also become implicated in a new inequality, namely the hierarchical categorization of the population of Sweden into "Swedes" and "immigrants"' (Towns, 2002: 157). The gendered effects of national self-understanding can also be evident in discussions of LGBT rights. Populist critiques of migrants have politicized the conservatism of certain migrant communities on the question of sexual minorities – culminating in the emergence of a homonationalist discourse (Puar, 2007). Interestingly, Freude and Bosch (2020) find that Sweden has the fourth-largest homonational grouping in its population – with a high correlation between LGBT tolerance and racism.

This 'dark side' of index success deserves greater attention. Do positive rankings have a negative effect on willingness to impose new regulation or policy to tackle gender issues, given the comparative achievement of the Nordics, or provide easy ammunition for populist critiques? Moreover, in a global perspective, does the possibility of influencing policy development lead to an overplaying of regional success, as we see, for example, when Norwegian officials cooperate with EU officials to develop European policies on prostitution and gender equality, branding and conceptualizing the Nordic model of criminalisation of sex purchase in the process (Langford and Skilbrei, 2021)?

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that contemporary understandings of Nordic gender exceptionalism cannot be divorced from the role of global indexes. These indexes are regularly called upon and mobilized to justify images and imaginaries of gender exceptionalism in the Nordic region, as others have also noted in this book. This chapter has argued that global indexes may contribute to the shaping of Nordic gender exceptionalism in two discrete ways.

The first is that the prominence of gender in the reporting of indexes (both general and gender-specific) creates and maintains a 'background' discourse[10] on Nordic exceptionalism. This is driven by the inherent forces within statistical constructions: Gender is easily operationalizable and thus easily included as an element in an index or a background attribute for disaggregation. It is also shaped by the structure of indicator discourse. Index narratives commonly include high and low performers, or those improving or worsening their position. Thus, the index discourse is arguably constantly skewed towards the production of a narrative on Nordic gender exceptionalism.

The second is that global indexes have created a new discourse for gender exceptionalism: policy characteristics and achievements are often expressed quantitatively in competitive and ranked form. Parsing these developments, this chapter has sought to shed light on the statistical underpinnings and limitations of the indexes and their latent authority in policy discussions – in other words, their constructive and constituent power. It is argued that some caution should be exercised in their naïve reception and use. The simplification and resilience of gender indexes occlude a range of gender-equality paradoxes in the Nordic region and the politics behind their mobilization.

Notes

1 See Green (2016, 2017).

2 See, for example, Wiking (2016); see Higgins (2016) for a list of books on *hygge*.

3 See https://www.hyggelife.com/.

4 See https://www.hygge.nyc/.

5 For the branding of Copenhagen, see Lubanski (2019); for the ranking, see Equal Measures 2030 (2019).

6 A full overview of indexes and their classification is found online at https://www.uio.no/english/research/strategic-research-areas/nordic/research/research-groups/nordic-branding/research-projects/dataset-of-indexes.html. As this chapter focuses on the Nordic countries, indexes that do not include a majority of the Nordic countries have been excluded from the analysis. Most of the Nordic countries are included in all indexes, but Iceland appears in fewer than the rest.

7 Social indexes include those that focus on social issues – that is, social justice, religion, child survival, happiness and hunger. Economic indexes measure degree of globalization, innovation, tax and finance. Infrastructure includes access to internet, connectedness and access to data. Governance indicators deal with issues of democracy, freedom, rule of law and peace. There are comparatively fewer global contributions and global perspectives indexes. For the former, we have included commitment to philanthropy and development; for the latter, passport power and good country/nation brands. The last category on gender includes indexes that have a gender perspective, measuring development, empowerment and gender gaps.

8 No states were directly responsible for their production even though they were included as possible actors in the initial coding manual.

9 In another study, Skevik (2006b: 225) compares poverty in the Nordic countries to that in the UK and Netherlands. In the Nordics, the poverty rate is between 5% and 17%, while the rate for the UK and the Netherlands is 40%.

10 See Schmidt (2008: 304) on discursive institutionalism and the power of changing ideas in shaping ‘background ideational abilities’.

References

Andrews M (2008) The good governance agenda: Beyond indicators without theory. *Oxford Development Studies* 36(4): 379–407.

Angell SI and Mordhorst M (2015) National reputation management and the competition state: The cases of Denmark and Norway. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 8(2): 184–201.

Apaza C (2009) Measuring governance and corruption through the worldwide governance indicators: Critiques, responses, and ongoing scholarly discussion. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42(1): 139–143.

Aspeli I (2018) Ny, norsk forskning: Det er ganske slående funn i et av verdens mest likestilte land. *VG*, 2 July. Available at: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/gPAv1A/ny-norsk-forskning-det-er-ganske-slaaende-funn-i-et-av-verdens-mest-likestilte-land (accessed 9 November 2020).

Bardhan K and Klasen S (1999) UNDP’s gender-related indices: A critical review. *World Development* 27(6): 985–1010.

Bardhan K and Klasen S (2000) On UNDP’s revisions to the gender-related development index. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 1(2): 191–195.

Barsh RL (1993) Measuring human rights: Problems of methodology and purpose. *Human Rights Quarterly* 15: 87–121.

Beaumont P and Towns A (2018) All these rankings yet the bodies keep piling up: Rankings, public diplomacy and the soft-power industrial complex. Paper presented at *12th Pan-European Conference on International Relations*, Prague, 12–15 September.

Borchorst A and Siim B (2008) Woman-friendly policies and state feminism: Theorizing Scandinavian gender equality. *Feminist Theory* 9(2): 207–224.

Bredeveien JM (2018) Verdens mest likestilte land – bare ikke i næringslivet. *Dagsavisen*, 6 September. Available at: https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/verdens-mest-likestilte-land-bare-ikke-i-neringslivet-1.1198175 (accessed 9 November 2020).

Browning C (2007) Branding Nordicity: Models, identity and the decline of exceptionalism. *Cooperation and Conflict* 42(1): 27–51.

Byrkjeflot H, Langford M and Kirkebø TL (2018) Indexes and Nordic exceptionalism. Paper presented at the workshop 'Nordic Models in the Age of Populism', Boston University, 27–28 September.

Cooley A and Snyder J (eds) (2015) *Ranking the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davies W (2015) Spirits of neoliberalism: 'Competitiveness' and 'wellbeing' indicators as rival orders of worth. In: Rottenburg R, Merry SE, Park S-J and Mugler J (eds) *The World of Indicators: The Making of Governmental Knowledge Through Quantification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 283–306.

Davis K, Kingsbury B and Merry SE (eds) (2012) *Governance by Indicators: Global Power Through Classification and Rankings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellingsæter AL and Leira A (2006) Introduction: Politicising parenthood in Scandinavia. In: Ellingsæter AL and Leira A (eds) *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States*. Bristol: Policy Press, 1–24.

Equal Measures 2030 (2019) Harnessing the power of data for gender equality: Introducing the 2019 EM2030 SDG Gender Index. Available at: https://data.em2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/EM2030_2019_Global_Report_ENG.pdf (accessed 9 November 2020).

Erkkilä T and Piironen O (2018) Rankings and global knowledge governance. In: Erkkilä T and Piironen O (eds) *Rankings and Global Knowledge Governance*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 219–249.

Frazer H and Marlier E (2007) Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children in the EU. September. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/experts_reports/synthesis1_2007_en.pdf (accessed 30 December 2020).

Freude L and Bosch NV (2020) Homonationalism in Europe? A quantitative comparison of the values of Europeans. *Sexuality & Culture* 24: 1292–1314.

Gates B (1975) Knowledge management in the technological society: Government by indicator. *Public Administration Review* 35(6): 589–593.

Green P (2016) Move over, Marie Kondo: Make room for the hygge hordes. *New York Times*, 24 December. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/24/fashion/wintering-the-danish-way-learning-about-hygge.html (accessed 9 November 2020).

Green P (2017) Hygge gets heave-ho as Swedes, Norwegians join the fun. *New York Times*, 14 December. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/14/style/

lykke-is-the-new-hygge-scandinavian-lifestyle-books.html (accessed 9 November 2020).

Higgins C (2016) The hygge conspiracy. *The Guardian*, 22 November. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/nov/22/hygge-conspiracy-denmark-cosiness-trend (accessed 9 November 2020).

Kelley JG and Simmons BA (2015) Politics by number: Indicators as social pressure in international relations. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(1): 55–70.

Kirk L (2019) Denmark falls behind in gender-equality ranking. *EU Observer*, 18 December. Available at: https://euobserver.com/nordic/146958 (accessed 19 October 2020).

Kirkebø TL and Langford M (2019) Children's rights indexes: Measuring Norway's performance. In: Langford M, Skivenes M and Søvig K (eds) *Children's Rights in Norway: An Implementation Paradox?* Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 42–104.

Kirkebø TL, Langford M and Byrkjeflot H (2019) Indexes and Nordic exceptionalism. Paper presented at the *Law & Society Association Annual Conference*, Boston, MA, June.

Knudsen JS (2018) Multinational firms. Paper presented at the workshop 'Nordic Models in the Age of Populism', Boston University, 27–28 September.

Kolberg M (2020) Likestillingsministeren i Danmark har også ansvar for fisk, matproduksjon og nordisk samarbeid. *NRK*, 22 October. Available at: https://www.nrk.no/urix/likestillingsministeren-i-danmark-har-ogsa-ansvar-for-fisk_-matproduksjon-og-nordisk-samarbeid-1.15209106 (accessed 13 November 2020).

Landman T (2004) Measuring human rights: Principles, practice and policy. *Human Rights Quarterly* 26: 906–931.

Langford M and Schaffer JK (2014) The Nordic human rights paradox: Moving beyond exceptionalism. University of Oslo Faculty of Law Research Paper No. 2013–25. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2275905 (accessed 30 December 2020).

Langford M and Skilbrei ML (2021) Branding the Nordic model of prostitution policy. In: Byrkjeflot H, Pedersen K, Mordhorst M and Mjøset L (eds) *The Making and Circulation of Nordic Models*. Abingdon: Routledge. Forthcoming.

Lister R (2009) A Nordic Nirvana? Gender, citizenship, and social justice in the Nordic welfare states. *Social Politics* 16(2): 242–278.

Lubanski N (2019) Denmark is world leader in gender equality. *Copenhagen Capacity*, 4 June. Available at: https://www.copcap.com/news/denmark-is-world-leader-in-gender-equality (accessed 2 November 2020).

Mau S (2020) Numbers matter! The society of indicators, scores and ratings. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 29(1–2): 19–37.

Mennicken A and Espeland WN (2019) What's new with numbers? Sociological approaches to the study of quantification. *Annual Review of Sociology* 45: 223–245.

Moss SM and Langford M (2020) Militæraktivisme brandet som fredsaktivisme? Norges kampanje for en plass i FNs sikkerhetsråd. *Internasjonal Politikk* 78(3): 1–14.

NBR (2018) New Zealand ranked for talent and inclusive development. 25 January. Available at: https://www.nbr.co.nz/opinion/davos-2018-new-zealand-ranked-talent-and-inclusive-development (accessed 13 November 2020).

Nordic Council of Ministers (2006) *Nordic Gender Equality Programme 2006–10*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.

Pillarisetti J and McGillivray M (1998) Human development and gender empowerment: Methodological and measurement issues. *Development Policy Review* 16(2): 197–203.

Porter TM (1995) *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Puar J (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ringel L, Brankovic J and Werron T (2020) The organizational engine of rankings: Connecting 'new' and 'old' institutionalism. *Politics and Governance* 8(2): 36–47.

Rosga A and Satterthwaithe M (2009) The trust in indicators: Measuring human rights. *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 27: 253–315.

Schmidt V (2008) Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 303–326.

Skevik A (2006) Lone motherhood in the Nordic countries: Sole providers in dual-breadwinner regimes. In: Ellingsæter AL and Leira A (eds) *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States*. Bristol: Policy Press, 241–264.

Teigen M and Skjeie H (2017) The Nordic gender equality model. In: Knutsen O (ed.) *The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, but Still Viable?* Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 125–147.

Towns A (2002) Paradoxes of (in)equality: Something is rotten in the gender equal state of Sweden. *Cooperation and Conflict* 37(2): 157–179.

Wiking M (2016) *The Little Book of Hygge: The Danish Way to Live Well*. London: Penguin.