

The “boy problem” in public policy

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Abstract

The article investigates how gender differences in school performance are conceptualized in recent Swedish and Norwegian public commission reports against the backdrop of an increasing public focus on “problem boys” and boys' underachievement in school as a policy challenge. We found substantive country differences, despite regime similarities and the considerable level of gender equality norms and policy diffusion within the Nordic region. Whereas Swedish reports address gender differences in school performance and behavior equipped with radical feminist perspectives and theories of patriarchal oppression, Norwegian reports largely avoid explicit references to feminist theory and include analyses of the unfair burdens of boys in school and society. It is argued that the diverging approaches are connected to features of the commissions and of the wider knowledge regimes of the two gender equality forerunners, but also to historical differences in the ideological underpinnings of Swedish and Norwegian gender equality policy making.

KEYWORDS

boys, commissions, educational policy, Europe, fairness, feminism, feminist theory, gender and politics, gender equality policy, justice, knowledge regimes, Nordic model, Norway, policy advice, policy diffusion, public policy, reports, Scandinavia, schools, Sweden, youth

Related Articles

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What has been referred to as the “boy problem”—concerns over how some boys fall behind in or drop out of school—has been a recurrent topic in intellectual and public discourse for centuries (Grant, 2014; Marquis, 2018; Martino et al., 2009). “Noisy,” “naughty,” and “disobedient” boys, underperforming and unable or unwilling to behave properly at school, have been regarded as a threat to morality and decency, an economic liability, but also as reflecting the presence of pervasive societal injustices.

In present-day governance, gender differences in school performance have increasingly become a problem for policy (Haste, 2013; Watson, 2011). In this article, we analyze how the boy problem is approached in recent public commission reports in Sweden and Norway. Regimes with standard Nordic model features, strong gender equality credentials, and support for gender equality policies, where we would initially expect overlapping if not similar problem conceptions, whereas highly divergent approaches would be puzzling. Accordingly, we ask: how are gender differences in school achievements conceived of in Swedish and Norwegian public commission reports in the period 2009–2019, and if there are significant national differences in problem approach, how can we account for them?

Zooming in on how the boy problem is conceptualized in terms of social justice, we find substantively different justice considerations in Swedish and Norwegian reports. Whereas Swedish reports are predominantly based on feminist scholarship that analyzes boys' careers and culture as reflective of an unjust gender order and oppressive gender ideologies, Norwegian reports largely avoid reference to feminist social analysis and include an understanding of boys' underperformance in school as a problem of their unequal life chances. We account for these differences in justice conceptions in the two Nordic model regimes, pointing partly to variations in the compositions of the commissions and their orientations toward evidence-based policy making, and partly to historical differences in the ideological underpinnings of Swedish and Norwegian gender equality policy making.

The article contributes to discussions of boys' underachievement in school as a policy problem and highlights affinities between broader debates around the role of men and boys in feminism and discourse among policy experts. The article also contributes to scholarship on knowledge regimes (Campbell & Pedersen, 2014; Christensen et al., 2017) and shows in a concrete case how the characteristics of knowledge-producing institutions at the science–policy interface contribute to shaping political agendas. Finally, the article adds to the recent scholarship that problematizes the idea of a common Nordic governance and gender equality model (Knutsen, 2017; Teigen & Skjeie, 2017).

In the next part of the article, we present three conceptualizations of the boy problem—related to decency, productivity, and social justice—and elaborate on the complex relationship between mobilization for “problem” boys and feminism. In the section that follows, we provide context to our study. We approach Sweden and Norway as similar systems but also trace the specific background in each country for why the boy problem was put on the policy agenda. We then present our data—recent commission reports—and how we conducted our analysis of these reports, with a primary focus on their approaches to boys' underachievement in school as a social justice issue. The following part of the article presents the findings from this analysis. We note some similarities in reports across countries but concentrate on the significant

national differences in justice conceptions. In the section that follows, we give an account of why this difference in problem conceptualization occurs. The final section sums up the article and outlines some implications of our study.

THE BOY PROBLEM: DECENCY, PRODUCTIVITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Boys' underachievement in school is often presented as a new and acute problem that has occurred in parallel with the strengthening of girls' rights and opportunities (Francis & Skelton, 2005). However, gender differences in school achievement are a general, longstanding tendency. In recent decades, we have seen similar gender differences in school performance across countries and over time (e.g., OECD, 2003, 2014, 2019), and concerns over the boy problem go back centuries (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Marquis, 2018). Conservatives from many corners have worried about “disobedient” and “uneducated” boys being a challenge to law and order and common decency. These conservative narratives have often had race and class biases (Haste, 2013; Martino et al., 2009) and a subtext of contempt for laddish behavior (Hamilton & Jones, 2016).

However, boys' lower grades and lack of proper adaptation to school norms are also identified as an economic liability for society. When boys fail to acquire the skills in demand, this may result in poorer careers or unemployment alongside health and social problems; all of this threatens productivity, growth, and the fiscal basis of public welfare. It has been argued that these economic concerns have intensified from the 1990s onward in parallel with the rise of New Public Management (NPM) and the “competition state” and its “obsession” with academic achievement (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Mahony, 1998, p. 39). A recent upsurge in public interest in boys' school performance began in countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK, and the United States, and can be linked to how these countries' governments have been neoliberal forerunners increasingly concerned with education as an instrument for enhancing human capital efficiency and the long-term economic activity of their population (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Hall & Pulsford, 2019). This has brought new attention to how gender differences in school performance may curb economic development and become a fiscal burden.

Yet, importantly, gender gaps in school performance also raise different concerns about social justice. Schools are supposed to accept pupils as beings of equal worth with equal potential for learning, and boys' underachievement in education has led some to conclude that contemporary schools and teaching have biases in boys' disfavor (Grant, 2014; Nielsen & Malterud, 2019). Boys' poorer school performance may also affect their opportunities and welfare later in life, and claims have been made that disregard for boys' needs and challenges at school constitutes a larger injustice, as it results in disadvantages for them as grown-ups in the labor market and other social arenas (Francis & Skelton, 2005). The idea that boys and men are increasingly on the losing side has also fed into analyses of contemporary populism (Löffler et al., 2020; Roose, 2020), where it is argued that populist parties and movements utilize legitimate grievances among groups of men left unaddressed by mainstream politics.

Some feminists have contested this approach to boys' underperformance in school. One reason may be the traditional women-centeredness in feminism and debates on gender equality. Historically, women—some more than others (Delap, 2020)—have been the privileged subjects of the emancipatory struggles of feminist movements, granting them a position to define what gender justice and equality policies should address. This idea may persist, consolidating a problematic taken-for-granted focus on obstacles that disadvantage women in both the feminist movement and academia. Another reason may be how the new focus on the “problems” of boys and men has tended to disproportionately blame feminism if not girls or women generally (Walby, 2011). The antifeminist programs of populist parties and movements

that seek to mobilize dissatisfied male voters are one example; the way “feminist” teachers are blamed for boys' underperformance in education irrespective of evidence is another (Nielsen & Malterud, 2019). Moreover, analyses with these tendencies frequently deny or underestimate obstacles to women's and girls' equal opportunities or trivialize or demonize feminism.

This embedding of the boy problem in tension with or even as antifeminism helps explain why some feminists have ignored boys' underachievement in school or dismissed it as an issue worthy of genuine consideration. Yet feminists have also engaged significantly with the issue, sometimes attempting to redirect the debate (Hamilton & Jones, 2016; Haste, 2013; Watson, 2011). They have drawn on gender studies and feminist theory, not to take away attention from boys' problems in school but to achieve an ostensibly richer, deeper understanding of what these troubles amount to from the perspective of justice (Francis & Skelton, 2005). It has, for instance, been highlighted how both girls and boys, although sometimes in very different ways, can suffer from gendered societal structures and ideologies.

We could initially expect public policy discussions regarding boys' performance problems in school to include reference to more or all these concerns. However, the weight put on each of them, and their elaborations, could vary. Against this background, we now present our study of the Swedish and Norwegian public commission reports.

SIMILAR SYSTEMS DESIGN, SELECTION OF REPORTS, AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CONCEPT AND CONCEPTION

As regimes, Sweden and Norway seem to match up quite closely. Despite nontrivial differences in the two countries' approaches to economic policy, labor markets, and welfare state reform in recent years, both have kept the features of coordinated market economies (e.g., Ezrow & Hellwig, 2015; see also Hall & Soskice, 2001) and social democratic welfare regimes (e.g., Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017). Private educational providers have a more central role in Sweden than in Norway (Dovemark et al., 2018), but the school systems are still quite similar, and the “Nordic education model” with its focus on publicly funded comprehensive education for all has been maintained, although in a variant re-shaped by NPM reforms (Imsen et al., 2017). Sweden and Norway are moreover consensus-oriented political systems, but also similar knowledge regimes (Campbell & Pedersen, 2014), where the government plays a central role as an organizer and funder of policy-relevant knowledge production (Christensen et al., 2017).

Among the central knowledge-producing organizations that link knowledge to policy making are the governmental systems of temporary advisory commissions (Christensen & Holst, 2017): in Sweden, the so-called SOU commissions, which produce Swedish Government Inquiries; in Norway, the NOU commissions and the Norwegian Official Reports. Typically appointed in the preparatory phase of policy making and mandated by the government, SOU and NOU commissions analyze policy issues and propose new policies and legislation. These commissions often deliver consensus reports and have members from public services, interest groups and professional organizations, universities and research institutes, private companies, political parties, etc. Most commissions have multiple members, a chair, and a secretariat, but SOUs can also be so-called one-person inquiries, authored typically by a civil servant or sometimes a researcher. The commission reports on gender differences in school performance and behavior analyzed in this article are SOUs and NOUs.

Sweden and Norway come furthermore closer to one another when we compare gender equality credentials, policies, and support. Both countries are ranked at the top of international gender equality indexes (Teigen & Skjeie, 2017), gender equality ideals are widely shared norms, and gender equality policies have strong support (Teigen et al., 2019). Moreover, despite some national variations, these policies have largely common features, including family

policies for work–life balance, quota policies, and proactive gender equality legislation and government apparatus (Borchorst et al., 2012; Skjeie et al., 2019). Finally, policy ideas and “best practices” have tended to travel between the Nordic countries, and recently also from the EU level to Nordic country levels in the area of gender equality policy (Skjeie et al., 2017, 2019). Furthermore, after the turn of the millennium, educational policy in both Sweden and Norway has been increasingly influenced by trends in transnational policy communities and standard setting in international organizations, such as the OECD assessment of student performance (Karseth et al., 2022).

Such patterns of norm and policy diffusion, along with the many regime similarities and the fact that our data are reports produced by similar systems of temporary advisory commissions, justify the general expectation that problem approaches and conceptualizations of the boy problem would tend to overlap, whereas significant national variation would call for a supplementary account (see Anckar, 2008).

We searched for recent SOU and NOU reports on gender differences in school performance and behavior, focusing on reports in both countries that dealt explicitly and substantively with the issue (for an overview, see Table 1). In Sweden, we pinpointed a relevant series of reports beginning with SOU 2009: 64, titled *Girls And Boys at School—How Gender Equal Is It?* a multi-member commission report, and ending with SOU 2010: 99, *Girls, Boys, Individuals*, delivered by the same commission.¹ We refer to these two reports as the initial and final reports of the Swedish Gender Equality in Schools Commission. We identified in addition seven relevant one-person enquiries that came out in the period between the launch of these two reports (SOU 2010: 10; 33; 35; 36; 51; 52; 53).

In Norway, the two reports that substantively discuss gender differences in school performance both appeared in 2019: NOU 2019: 3 *New Chances—Better Learning. Gender Inequality in School Performance*, and NOU 2019: 19 *Girls' Room, Boys' Room, and Room for Opportunities: Gender Equality Challenges among Children and Young People*. We refer to the two Norwegian commissions as the School Performance Commission and the Youth Commission.

One should bear in mind that the time span involved—comparing 2009/2010 reports from Sweden and 2019 reports from Norway—could introduce variation. Processes of problem articulation, knowledge production, and policy formulation are generally complex and dynamic (we will return to this). Still, both in Sweden (2009/2010) and in Norway (2019) a starting point was a situation where the gender gap in school performance was considerable and above the OECD average.² In Sweden, Gender Equality in Schools Commission was one in a row of commissions set down under the educational ministry to reform Swedish educational policy from the 2000s onward (Nordin & Wahlström, 2022). This specific commission was also a response to a growing concern in Swedish public debate and among policy makers about poor PISA scores, including boys' particularly worrisome achievements (Zimmerman, 2018). In Norway, the “boy problem” also received some attention (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008), and both gender and education were reform-intensive policy areas at the time. However, the main focus of the several reform commissions was on other issues. When the educational ministry in the end mandated the School Performance Commission, and later the Youth Commission, to investigate gender gaps in school performance, this was related in part to how such gaps were growing in Norway (OECD, 2019), in part to a stronger emphasis on the issue in central expertise environments. A key role was played by the Director General of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health Camilla Stoltenberg, who was appointed chair of the School Performance Commission. Accordingly, the reports under analysis were produced as

¹Although with a few changes in the composition of members, see Table 1.

²Gender gaps in school performance decreased in Sweden between 2009 and 2018, placing performance patterns closer to the OECD average (OECD, 2019).



TABLE 1 Overview of public commission reports included in the analysis, description of main content, and commission members.

Volume	Content of reports	Commission members ^a
SOU 2009:64. <i>Flickor och pojkar i skolan—hur jämställt är det? (Girls and Boys at School—How Gender Equal Is It?)</i> (264 p.)	Knowledge review focusing on gender differences in school performance and gender equality among Swedish pupils from the 1990s onwards	A. Ekstöm (f) (Director, Central Organization of Swedish Academics), V. Bergsten (m) (Teacher), G. Bråkenhielm (f) (School doctor), I. Hadley-Kampitz (f) (Journalist), M. Ingvar (m) (Project manager, Mälardalen University), K. Sund (m) (Director of accounting, Riksrevisionen), B. Wistrand (f) (Director, Fredrika Bremer-förbundet) E. Witt-Bratström (f) (Professor, Södertörns högskola)
SOU 2010:10. <i>Kvinnor, män och jämställdhet i läromedel i historia. (Women, Men, and Gender Equality in Educational Material in History)</i> (73 p.)	Review of textbooks and teacher guides in primary and secondary schools from a gender perspective, specifically looking at educational material in history as a subject	A. Ohlander (f) (Professor emeritus, Örebro University)
SOU 2010:33. <i>Kvinnor, män och jämställdhet i läromedel i samhällskunskap. (Women, Men, and Gender Equality in Educational Material in Social Science Studies)</i> (77 p.)	Review of textbooks and teacher guides in primary and secondary schools from a gender perspective, with a particular focus on social studies	A. Ohlander (f) (Professor emeritus, Örebro University)
SOU 2010:35. <i>Kunskap som befrielse? En metaanalys av svensk forskning om jämställdhet och skola 1969–2009 (Knowledge as Liberation? A Meta-Analysis of Swedish Research on Gender Equality and School 1969–2009)</i> (118 p.)	Meta-analysis of Swedish research on gender equality in education, including around 1500 scientific publications	F. Bondestam (m) (Postdoctoral researcher, University of Uppsala)
SOU 2010:36. <i>Svensk forskning om jämställdhet och skola. En bibliografi. (Swedish Research on Gender Equality and School: A Bibliography)</i> (157 p.)	Compilation of the publications reviewed in SOU 2010: 35	M. Carlberg (f) (University Librarian, University of Uppsala), F. Bondestam (m) (Postdoctoral researcher, University of Uppsala)
SOU 2010:51. <i>Könsskillnader i skolprestationer—idéer om orsaker (Gender Differences in School Performance—Exploring the Causes)</i> (70 p.)	Analysis of the general causal question of how gender differences in school performance can be explained, focusing on cognitive abilities, school organization, societal developments, and cultural factors	I. Wernersson (f) (Professor, University of Gothenburg)
SOU 2010:52. <i>Biologiska faktorer och könsskillnader i skolresultat (Biological Factors and Gender Differences in School Results)</i> (27 p.)	Analysis of the role of biological gender differences, connected to e.g. brain structure, brain maturity, hormonal differences, and cognitive disabilities	M. Ingvar (m) (Professor, Karolinska Institutet)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Volume	Content of reports	Commission members ^a
SOU 2010: 53. <i>Pojkar och skolan: Eit bakgrundsdokument om "pojkkrisen" (Boys and School: A Background Paper on the "Boy Crisis")</i> (62 p.)	Discussion of the causes of gender gaps in school achievements and behavior, relying on a re-interpretation of the concept of a "boy crisis," connecting boys' underperformance and social problems to self-defeating masculine norms	M. Kimmel (m) (Professor, State University of New York, Stony Brook)
SOU 2010: 99. <i>Flickor, pojkar, individer—om betydelsen av jämställdhet för kunskap och utveckling i skolan (Girls, Boys, Individuals—on the Significance of Gender Equality for Knowledge and Development in School)</i> (271 p.)	Summary and discussion of the findings of previous reports, emphasizing recommendations for new interventions, legislation, and policies	A. Eksström (f) (Director, Central Organization of Swedish Academics), V. Bergsten (m) (Teacher), G. Bråkenhielm (f) (School doctor), Messing, T. (m) (Gender equality officer), K. Sund (Director of accounting, Riskrevisjonen), B. Wistrand (f) (Director, Redrika Bremer-förbundet) E. Witt-Brattström (f) (Professor, Södertörns högskola)
NOU 2019: 3. <i>Nye sjanser—bedre læring. Kjønnsforskjeller i skoleprestasjoner og utdanningsløp. (New Chances—Better Learning. Gender Inequality in School Performance)</i> (282 p.)	Investigation of how boys and girls perform in kindergarten and primary and secondary education, focusing on causes of gender differences, and effects on participation in higher education, and recommending new interventions and changes in law and policy	C. Stoltenberg (f) (Director General, Norwegian Institute of Public Health), H. M. Abdelrahman (f) (University lecturer, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences), R. A. Chaudhry (m) (student, former leader of Elevorganisasjonen), I. Fylling (f) (Associate Professor, Nord University), R. Hausstätter (m) (Professor, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences), M. Kirkebirkeland (m) (Advisor, Civita), A. O. Lervåg (m) (Professor, University of Oslo), T. Ogdén (m) (Director of research, The Norwegian Center for Child Behavioral Development), K. V. Løken (f) (Professor, Norwegian School of Economics), M. Monsen (m) (Director, Fagforbundet Ung), C. T. Nereid (f) (Municipal director, Trondheim Municipality)
NOU 2019: 19. <i>Jentetrom, gutterom og mulighetsrom. Likestillingsutfordringer blant barn og unge. (Girls' Room, Boys' Room, and Room for Opportunities: Gender Equality Challenges Among Children and Young People)</i> (309 p.)	Analysis of challenges to gender quality among young people in school, but also in other arenas, and recommendation of new strategies and policies	L. R. Brenna (f) (Director, Seema), U. Ashraf (m) (Author and communication advisor), T. M. K. Engvik (f) (Nurse and director, Helsestista AS), N. Herz (f) (Author and student, Vågsbygd High school), K. L. Møgstad (f) (Physician, Municipality of Trondheim and, Researcher, Department of Public Health), L. Reisel (f) (Research Professor, Institute for Social Research), A. I. Sinding (m) (Psychologist director of communication, Department of Psychological Counseling) M. A. Sletten (f) (Director of research, Oslo Metropolitan University), J. B. Tanum (m) (Apprentice, Adam & Eva Glasmagasinet) K. C. Vogt (m) (Associate professor, University of Bergen)

^aThe sex of commission members are indicated with (f) for female and (m) for male.

parts of country-specific lines of events. Still, several of the background conditions were similar (PISA results, school systems under reform, etc.), including conservative governments in both countries, the Reinfeldt cabinet in Sweden (2006–2014), and the Solberg cabinet in Norway (2013–2021). Commission members in both countries were both male and female, but a majority were women (see [Table 1](#)).

Following the distinction between “concept” and “conception” in the study of political ideas (Rawls, 1999, p. 9; see also Beckman, 2005), where a concept denotes a fundamental political ideal—for instance, justice or effectiveness—and conceptions refer to different interpretations of this ideal, we first searched our selected reports for passages referring to boys' underachievement relying on decency, productivity, or social justice as ideals or concepts. Identifying justice as the fundamental organizing concept across reports in both Sweden and Norway, we in a second step conducted more detailed readings of passages expressive of justice considerations to identify different conceptions of justice, with a particular eye on the relationships between the boy problem and feminist arguments or interpretative schemes. Both steps relied on manual coding of relevant passages from the report texts; in the first step under the three above-mentioned concepts; in the second step the passages coded under the justice concept (during the first step) were coded in more detail to identify different justice interpretations. More specifically, we focused on the various *causes* and *consequences* of the boy problem (see also presentation of findings). This focus was, in part, derived from feminist and other theorizing on justice (including in relation to the role of men in feminism and the boy problem specifically) where the causes and effects of uneven standing and distributions of goods and burdens (e.g., between women/girls and men/boys) are key issues; in part, developed inductively as we tried out how different coding categories made sense in the context of our material. The coding of all reports was conducted by both authors to increase reliability.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IN SWEDISH AND NORWEGIAN REPORTS: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

A question of social justice

Across reports from both countries, passages expressive of the decency concept were hard to identify. Conservative worries over indecent, unruly boys were rather outspokenly dismissed—for instance, when a SOU explains how it is “important to problematize descriptions of boys as simply noisy and disturbing” (SOU 2009: 64, 166). Several reports also condemn the historical tendency to embed analyses of boys' problems at school in racial stereotypes and contempt for working-class lads. Instead, boys' behavior and school performance should be approached with a stronger interest in boys' self-interpretations, reflections, and sensemaking (SOU 2009: 64, 166). Reports in both countries highlight the importance of studying masculinity and boys' culture (e.g., NOU 2019: 19; SOU 2010: 51; SOU 2010: 53), even if some Swedish reports, in particular, accentuate how taking a greater interest in boys' points of view and constructions of meaning and identity should not lead to romantic or idealized approaches, which end up validating “boys' worse performance” (SOU 2009: 64, 171) without problematizing the dysfunctional—and ultimately dangerous and violent—“masculinity” and “male ideology” that are characteristic of a society in “crisis” (SOU 2010: 53, 54).³

³“If we really want to save boys, protect them and promote boyhood, then our task must be to find ways to expose and challenge this male ideology, to break the simple model that boys are once always boys, and to remove boys' sense of self-entitlement” (SOU 2010: 53, 54).



In contrast, the effectiveness concept—the concern that “problem” boys harm the economy—is visibly present in the reports across countries, but as a secondary matter, and most explicitly in Norwegian reports. For instance, the School Performance Commission highlights estimated “economic gains” from investment in “early learning” (NOU 2019: 3, 15) and worries about how some boys’ limited “competence and educational levels” are below the requirements of a society in which “the demand in working life for persons with only primary and secondary school” is decreasing (NOU 2019: 3, 29), while the Youth Commission notes how gender differences in education may strengthen gendered divisions and “patterns in working life” that endanger “flexibility and adaptability in the labour market” and “economic growth” (NOU 2019: 19, 39). However, similar economic considerations are present in Swedish reports, even if less elaborately (e.g., SOU 2010: 51, 33–37).

Still, discussions of gender differences in school performance and behavior circling around social justice concerns are what dominate and fundamentally shape the reports. These considerations also show similarities across reports. All reports, for instance, use “gender equality” (*likesittlingjämställhet*) as a key term, even if they also employ other terms and vocabularies to flesh out the social justice commitment (“equal opportunities,” “social inclusion,” “gender pluralism,” etc.). Puzzlingly, however, beneath this thin level of overlap between the countries’ approaches, our reading revealed largely diverging interpretations of what justice means and implies.

Causes of the boy problem

This divergence in interpretations of justice is foregrounded if we look more closely at, first, the explanations provided for gender differences in school and the social injustices they are perceived to trigger. Notably, in several SOUs, the notion of the “gender order” or “gender system” (*genussystemet*) plays a decisive role (e.g., SOU 2010: 51; SOU 2010: 53; SOU 2010: 99), and in almost all the SOUs, the “gender order” idea is included in the explanatory framework. The initial report of the Gender Equality in Schools Commission is illustrative. Here, the gender order, understood as “denoting the social structure that creates and upholds power relations between women and men,” is key in structuring the discussion of causes of gender differences in school behavior and performance. It is this order that puts “performing well at school” at odds with “masculinity” (SOU 2009: 64, 22), determines girls’ “subordinate position in society” and brings out their “greater degree of effort” in performing at school (SOU 2009: 64, 23), as when “girls compensate for their relative subordination by trying harder” (SOU 2009: 64, 170). It is also the gender order that produces “gender stereotypes” and dominant or “hegemonic” ideas of “masculinity” and “femininity” that shape “expectations of what professions are suitable for young girls and for young men, respectively” while limiting “the individual’s choice of education and profession” (SOU 2009: 64, 22; see also SOU 2010: 53) and that “prescribes that a certain type of male coded behaviour” should be “highly valued and given high status among pupils,” such as boys “talking more in the class room,” “offending” girls, finding it “uncool to work,” and generally having “exaggerated self-confidence, which leads them to overestimate their abilities,” while girls’ behavior is “low rated” and considered to be the result of “too much effort” and “submission” (SOU 2009: 64, 170–171).

Moreover, in several of the Swedish reports, this gender order is presented primarily as a *gender* order. The role played by other social categories, such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality, in shaping performance and behavioral differences between boys and girls in school is recognized but downplayed. Already, the initial report dismisses any vital explanatory role of socio-economic background as such in shaping boys’ underperformance at school compared to girls (SOU 2009: 64, 150), and several of the one-person inquiries lack substantial discussions of class or social background (e.g., SOU 2010: 10; SOU 2010: 33). The gender order is also a distinctively *social* order. This implies skepticism toward the idea that gender differences in school performance are

an "almost natural fact": to the extent that there are attitudes among teachers that "boys by nature are less interested in school and that there is nothing to do about it," this is "not acceptable" (SOU 2009: 64, 167). It also implies dismissal of any "essential biological difference" between boys and girls (SOU 2010: 35, 75) and of the idea that there are truly gender differences worthy of much consideration in terms of "individual-based" "cognitive factors" (SOU 2010: 51, 15).

Still, while this is the main picture of the Swedish reports on the causes of gender differences in school, there are nuances. One of the one-person inquiries problematizes the concept of gender equality, including the variants that draw on gender order analysis (SOU 2010: 35). This SOU integrates a deconstructive approach criticizing the "dichotomous gender categories" underlying gender order analyses with an intersectional approach highlighting how the "problem" boys are typically the "nonnormative boys," "boys from the working class, with another ethnicity than Swedish, etc." (SOU 2010: 35, 10, 34, 63). Another one-person enquiry focuses mainly on "biological differences" and claims that gender differences in "cognitive functions, emotional regulation and maturity" are considerable (SOU 2010: 52). Even the Gender Equality in Schools Commission's initial report, which concentrates solely on social and cultural factors, recognizes how "gender differences in school performance and attitudes may also be based on biological differences between the sexes, or on the interaction between this and other environmental factors, such as socioeconomic vulnerability" (SOU 2009: 64, 23). However, this suggestion is not revisited or developed in the commission's concluding report. For instance, the enquiry in the SOU series on biology and gender (SOU 2010: 52) is not substantively included in its discussions.

The explanatory approach to gender differences in school performance and behavior in Norwegian reports is significantly different. In particular, the School Performance Commission introduces a conceptual map for explaining gender gaps in school that sharply contrasts with the Swedish gender order analysis. The term "gender equality" also plays a role here, but primarily in the report's review of gender equality legislation and subsections on previous research that draws on the term (NOU 2019: 3, Chapters 1–2). Other parameters, such as "equal opportunities" and "social inclusion," figure much more prominently. For instance, it is emphasized that gender differences in school performance challenge the central norm of "the Norwegian educational system"—"everyone is to have the same opportunities to develop their potential" (NOU 2019: 3, 11)—and the overall societal aim of "equal opportunities" (NOU 2019: 3, 27). It also notes that boys' underperformance may result in "social exclusion" (NOU 2019: 3, 12).

Accordingly, there is no mention of a gender order that structures gendered behavior or, more broadly, of feminist theory and social analysis. Instead, the factors listed to explain gender differences in school performance are "individual cognitive profile[s]" and "personality," "psychological problems," "biological determinants," and different conditions in families, nurseries, schools, and the labor market (NOU 2019: 3, 18–21). Research on gender stereotypes and gendered subcultures in some of these arenas and on "the gender-segregated labor market" is considered, and the "negative environmental influence" that may cause gender differences in school behavior is recognized (NOU 2019: 3, 19), but such influences are not connected to patriarchal social structures or cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity like they are in the SOU series.

Moreover, social and cultural factors are presented as intertwined with biological factors, and instead of dismissing biological approaches to boys' underperformance in school as irrelevant or politically regressive, the Norwegian School Performance Commission elaborates in detail on the research inspired by such approaches within, for example, genetics and neuroscience.⁴ To the extent that gender gaps in school are analyzed through sociological lenses, the gender issue in school is, in this report, linked less to gender exclusively and more to a certain interplay between gender and socioeconomic background (NOU 2019: 3, 13).

⁴It is emphasized that "underlying neurobiological, genetic or other biological conditions that work together with an individual's environment" may explain gender differences. "The gender differences may be small ... still small differences between individuals of different sexes" can "mean a lot at societal level, especially at the extremes of the distributions" (NOU 2019: 3, 75).

Finally, after an elaborate discussion of the explanatory problem and different factors at work, the main conclusion of the School Performance Commission is that too few rigorous studies have been conducted. Hence, strictly speaking, decisive evidence is presented as largely wanting; there is still a lack of proper knowledge of “the causes of the gender differences in school achievements and educational careers” (NOU 2019: 3, 13). Also, the Swedish reports recommend further research (e.g., SOU 2010: 51; SOU 2010: 99), but this conclusion is not framed as part of a search for firmer conclusions about causal mechanisms but as a call for research that increases our understanding of the gender order and how it relates to girls' and boys' school behavior. Symptomatically, when one of the one-person inquiries (SOU 2010: 35) critically assesses Swedish gender equality research on the educational system, the aim is to widen the scope of feminist theorizing and open a wider spectrum of sexuality and cultural and intersectional studies, not to promote closer interaction between social science and biological research programs or a stricter focus on causality.

The Norwegian Youth Commission report is different from the School Performance Commission report in significant respects. Here, institutional structures, and not least the “gender-segregated labor market” (Chapters 2 and 3), along with “gender-stereotypes” and conventions of “masculinity” and “femininity,” are the explanatory focus (NOU 2019: 19, 53), accounting for gender differences in school and other social arenas along with the different “gender equality challenges” (NOU 2019: 19, 49). While recognizing that the social and biological must be regarded as “interrelated” (NOU 2019: 19, 55), this report elaborates only minimally on “biological gender differences” and concentrates instead on social and cultural analyses of gender, perceived as the most “relevant” approach from the perspective of political intervention (NOU 2019: 19, 56). Still, the Youth Commission, like the School Performance Commission and unlike several of the SOU reports, persistently analyzes gender alongside other axes of differentiation and injustice, such as class, but also ethnicity, religion, disability, and sexuality (NOU 2019: 19, 56–58). Accordingly, the Youth Commission's report adds “gender pluralism—the many ways of being gendered” as a second parameter in addition to “gender equality” (NOU 2019: 19, 52). Finally, and once more in sharp contrast to the Swedish reports, this report lacks explicit embedding in feminist analyses of gender power and patriarchal systems. Gender stereotypes and institutional mechanisms with gendered implications are discussed but not connected to the existence of a gender order or similar patriarchal macrostructures.

Consequences of the boy problem

Diverging interpretations of the meanings of justice in the Swedish and Norwegian reports also come to the fore when we compare the conceived *effects* of the identified injustices. In most of the Swedish reports, the burdens and disadvantages of girls remain the focus. Illustratively (but see also, e.g., SOU 2010: 10; SOU 2010: 33, and SOU 2010: 51), the initial report of the Gender Equality in Schools Commission begins with an elaboration of “psychological problems” among pupils and emphasizes how “girls experience stress to a greater extent than boys” (SOU 2009: 64, 19). To be sure, “young people with difficulties at school are particularly vulnerable”—such as the troubled boys—“but even children who perform well at school”—such as many girls—“can experience anxiety when faced with the need for high marks in order to move into higher and further education” (SOU 2009: 64, 19–20). Furthermore, “many studies have shown that girls worry more about their appearance and weight than boys” (SOU 2009: 64, 20), feel “more stress,” and are “more vulnerable than boys to practically all forms of abuse at school” (SOU 2009: 64, 21). Furthermore, there may be a tendency to underestimate girls' good school performance, which is attributed to strong effort and “submission” (SOU 2009: 64, 170). Accordingly, even if girls apparently

have better school outcomes than boys, this report implies that they still struggle and suffer more. In addition, the contention is that boys' underachievement results in few burdens later in life, as there tend to be “more occupational alternatives available to boys,” so they are less “in need of higher education” and free to brush off “demands to perform better at school” (SOU 2009: 64, 171).

Consequently, the main picture that emerges from the Swedish reports is that mobilization in favor of disadvantaged girls and women is still required, even if boys are underachievers at school. Overall, both girls and boys are perceived as suffering from the effects of the current gender order, but in the SOU series, girls are presented as suffering more, which justifies prioritizing their interests in policy making and emancipatory struggles. Still, nuances occur, as when a one-person enquiry elaborates on how “hegemonic masculinities” deprive boys of the opportunity of being proper “human beings” and emphasizes boys' pains in patriarchy and “feminism” as being in the equal interest of boys and girls (SOU 2010: 53, 54). Similarly, another one-person enquiry questions the dichotomous focus in feminist theory and gender equality research reflected in the many comparisons between women and men and the idea of a competition between women's and men's interests (SOU 2010: 35).

Along similar lines and in clear contrast to the SOU mainstream, the Norwegian Youth Commission shares the view that gendered stereotypes and institutional structures are obstacles to social justice for “all genders” and that “gender equality” should not be approached as a “zero-sum game where either girls or boys win” (NOU 2019: 19, 39). Typically, both girls and boys deserve better than the “strict” roles for girls and the “narrow” roles for boys that the current dominant notions of femininity and masculinity allow (NOU 2019: 19, 19). Accordingly, in its discussions, the Youth Commission report carefully elaborates on obstacles to equal opportunities for all categories of gender and sexuality. Still, particularly in its analysis of how the gender-segregated labor market results in gendered educational choices, the negative effects for girls and women are highlighted. In the general outline, the report notes how it may be unpopular, but still “just,” when groups who have had “privileges historically” must give them up—hinting at men (NOU 2019: 19, 40).

The Norwegian School Performance Commission is similarly uneasy with a conflict- and power-based approach to gender relations and policy and has as a fundamental premise that none of its recommendations to “reduce gender differences in school performance and education” should make “girls perform poorer or stagnate” (NOU 2019: 3, 16). However, the report clearly accentuates how gender gaps in school performance are harmful and disadvantageous for boys; due to these gaps, it suggests, boys lack “similar opportunities to develop their potential” (NOU 2019: 3, 11). Furthermore, even if this report highlights the uncertainties and lack of rigorous knowledge of explanatory factors, it still predicts that the problems for these boys are likely to increase over the course of their lives, as “formal competence” tends to become more important, “employment in female-dominated industries is growing” and male-dominated industries are in decline (NOU 2019: 3, 12). This represents “a societal challenge” and a “new form of exclusion for a large group of men” that is intimately connected to “educational levels” and gender differences in school performance (NOU 2019: 3, 12). Despite this, the report laments, “no OECD countries have national policies to reduce gender differences in education when these are to men's disadvantage” (NOU 2019: 3, 16). This suggests that current policies have prioritized girls' opportunities and learning at the expense of boys' life chances.

ACCOUNTING FOR DIFFERENCES IN CONCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE: EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING AND GENDER IDEOLOGY

Faced with these significant differences in Swedish and Norwegian reports regarding what a social justice perspective implies for analyses of the boy problem, the question arises of how a

divergence of this sort could develop. Initially, we would expect a much more parallel approach from gender equality forerunners known for exchanging norms and policies and characterized by several regime and other similarities.

We argue that differences in the mandates, authors, and knowledge bases of the selected reports were important and try to show how such differences are reflective of larger changes in the Swedish and Norwegian commission systems and knowledge regimes. Notably, we also see the historically divergent ideological underpinnings of Swedish and Norwegian feminism re-emerge.

The role of evidence-based policy making in Sweden and Norway

A closer look at our selected boy problem reports reveals variations in mandates, knowledge-seeking strategies, and commission composition. The Norwegian School Performance Commission was composed of professors and researchers in tandem with civil servants. The academic members of this commission were, moreover, not recruited from the field of gender equality research specifically but from other areas of educational science, public health, and economics. This contrasts sharply with the Swedish Gender Equality in Schools Commission, which included representatives from the women's movement, civil society, and professional organizations; bureaucrats with backgrounds in education and gender equality policy; and professors who mostly had backgrounds in feminist theory and gender studies in the humanities and social sciences. The authors of the Swedish one-person inquiries were professors with mainly similar backgrounds; for instance, two inquiries were written by a professor in gender history (SOU 2010: 10 and SOU 2010: 33) and another by a professor in critical masculinity studies (SOU 2010: 53).

The mandate of the Norwegian School Performance Commission also stands out. Whereas the mandates of the selected commissions tend to call in general terms for “investigations,” “knowledge,” and similar approaches to different topics related to gender gaps in school, the mandate of the School Performance Commission asked more narrowly for “research” on gender differences and “reviews” and “knowledge analyses” based on “effect studies.” Such formulations allude to the approach referred to as evidence-based policy making—the idea that policy analyses and recommendations should be based on experimental studies of policy effects and reviews that privilege findings from such studies (Christensen et al., 2022). This particular approach to knowledge seeking was, furthermore, reflected in the merits and competences of the commission members—several had backgrounds in the experimental branches of their disciplines. It also shaped the report quite fundamentally, for instance, in the sense that its review of previous research was based primarily on studies with experimental designs—“the gold standard” for research that seeks “to identify causes and effects”—and “observation studies,” which are designed to identify “causal relations” (NOU 2019: 3, 29, 73–74). Accordingly, its references included a range of experimental and observational studies from disciplines such as biology and psychology, while scholarship and theory with an explicit feminist framing, along with much of the existing sociological and educational research on gender equality and gender differences, were omitted. The reference lists in the SOU series were, by contrast, dominated by feminist social, educational, and historical studies.

These features of the Swedish inquiries compared to the Norwegian School Performance Commission are symptomatic of larger diverging trends in the commission systems, where the share of academic members after 2000 has increased in Norway but not Sweden. Arguably, these trends again reflect broader patterns in the implementation of evidence-based policy making in the two countries (see Karseth et al., 2022). Whereas calls for “evidence” in public policy have contributed to an academization of the Norwegian commission system, including

orientation in some commissions toward evidence-oriented “what works” reviews (Christensen et al., 2022), and influenced review and recommendation practices in parts of the Swedish knowledge regime (e.g., within government agencies), there are few signs that academic experts have consolidated or strengthened their role relative to other actors in Swedish policy advice generally (e.g., Svallfors et al., 2022), within educational policy, or within the SOU system (Dahlström et al., 2020). This sheds light on how the Norwegian School Performance Commission ended up with a mandate and composition that prioritized analyses produced in disciplines such as biology and economics, especially those based on experimental studies promoting strict notions of causality, whereas the Swedish commissions delivered reports anchored in feminist approaches and critical scholarship from the humanities and social sciences and embedded in gender order theory.

Yet, it should be noted that the Norwegian Youth Commission was composed of social scientists with backgrounds in gender equality research, interest groups, civil society representatives, and bureaucrats from the gender equality area and engaged primarily with gender equality research from the social and educational sciences, as one would expect from a commission with this composition. The Youth Commission also emphasized how gendered structures and norms produce unfair burdens for girls and women, in contrast to the School Performance Commission's more exclusive focus on injustices against boys. Still, neither of the Norwegian commissions engaged with the kind of feminist and gender order theory that is essential to the Swedish report series. The question is, why?

Swedish and Norwegian feminism: Recurring differences

Despite contemporary regime similarities and inter-Nordic diffusion processes in gender equality policy and research, Swedish and Norwegian feminism have historically had divergent ideological underpinnings. Whereas Sweden has strong traditions of radical feminism that emphasize systematic structures of gender power, the patriarchal nature of society and fundamentally conflicting interests between women and men, a dominant approach to gender equality and women's emancipation in Norway has been that of a harmonious, linear process of gradual development in which women are placed step-by-step on par with men in societal arenas as the result of “mobilization from below” and “women-friendly” policies from above (Hernes, 1987; Skjeie & Teigen, 2005). This main dividing line between the mainstream feminist lenses of the two countries influenced the country's academic theorizing and scholarship on gender for years, including its analyses of and approaches to policy and politics (e.g., Borchorst et al., 2002). Notably, such differences have also been confirmed in some survey analyses of conceptions of what gender equality means and implies (Andersen & Shamshiri-Petersen, 2020; Teigen & Wängnerud, 2009).

Since the turn of the millennium, queer theory and deconstruction, along with more intersectional approaches to power and societal conflicts, have influenced feminism and gender research in the Nordic countries (Borchorst et al., 2012), making it less likely that these historical differences would still have significant force. However, our findings—that the SOUs rely decisively on a feminist, power- and conflict-based perspective and consistently take women's perspectives, while the NOUs seek to avoid grand feminist-theoretical narratives, conceptualizing gender in “zero sum” terms (NOU 2019: 19, 39) and boys' underachievement in school as a “societal challenge” (NOU 2019: 3, 11)—fit the historical account to a considerable degree after all. It is symptomatic that, in this case, the SOUs did not travel to Norway to inform best practices, as neither of our selected NOUs referred to them. Rather, in our boy problem case, we see Swedish feminism and gender research sticking to their radical core narrative, conceptualizing men primarily as opponents in struggles for gender equality, as it cannot be a “forbidden act” to address men as a group in negative terms (Eduards, 2002; see also Rönblom, 2005). On the

contrary, in Norway, we see “problem” boys conceptualized as yet another group to be harmoniously integrated on fair terms into society, and generally, this process is perceived as compatible with the long-term struggles for gender equality while also correcting a certain “women’s bias” in policy discourse and gender scholarship (Reisel & Teigen, 2014). The latter impetus for revising feminism’s women-centeredness comes most strongly to the fore in the consequence calculus of the School Performance Commission. However, in line with the Norwegian path, a possible conflict perspective never becomes very explicit, and the overall narrative is that of compatibility between the equal rights and opportunities of boys and girls.

It must be acknowledged that certain aspects of the differences identified between Swedish and Norwegian reports may be linked to the temporal dimension, and thus pertain to time—rather than country differences. Specifically, with the increased emphasis on intersectionality and a more nondichotomous approach to gender categories over the years in both countries, it is probable that boy problem reports in Sweden in 2019 would have aligned more with multidimensional and intersectional approaches. However, such perspectives may still be combined with conflict and patriarchal system approaches, for instance as we have recently seen in the turn to “norm critical” pedagogy in Sweden (e.g., Björkman et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

We have investigated how gender differences in school performance are conceptualized in recent Swedish and Norwegian public commission reports against the backdrop of an increasing public focus on “problem boys” and boys’ underachievement in school as a policy challenge. Our analysis concentrated on justice considerations, and particularly on how the “boy problem” is positioned in relation to feminist struggles. Despite some overlapping concerns across reports, we found, surprisingly, substantively different approaches in the two countries, despite regime similarities and the considerable level of gender equality norm and policy diffusion within the Nordic region, whereas Swedish reports approach gender differences in school performance and behavior equipped with radical feminist perspectives and theories of patriarchal oppression, Norwegian reports largely avoid explicit references to feminist theory and include analyses of the disadvantages and unfair burdens of boys in school and society. We have argued that these national differences in approaching the problem are connected to features of the commissions and of the wider knowledge regimes of the two countries. However, interestingly, we also see how historical differences in the ideological underpinnings of Swedish and Norwegian feminism reoccur despite indications of harmonization within Nordic gender equality policy from the 2000s onward.

Our study has some limitations. First, as indicated, it is possible that some of the differences between Swedish 2009/2010 reports and Norwegian 2019 reports are related to time. Still, the differences identified are significant and fundamental, and we have offered an account of how this could be, which emphasizes other central factors. Having said this, we believe more studies are needed, in particular of latter years’ divergences and convergences in feminist discourses of the Nordic region, in both social movements, public policy, and academia.

Furthermore, due to our focus on justice considerations, we have had to leave aside other potentially illuminating venues of enquiry. For one thing, it is likely that the concept of “problem boys” as an economic liability, and even the decency approach to boys’ underperformance, could take different shapes, even if the scope of our article has not allowed us to elaborate on it more.

Moreover, the secondary role of productivity arguments in our selected reports in combination with the greater elaboration of such arguments in Norwegian reports raises interesting questions that we have had to leave unaddressed. Still, commission composition is likely to have been relevant in this case; economic liability considerations would probably have been

more prominent had our selected commissions included representatives from social partners, especially in Norway, as justifications for Norwegian gender equality policy have traditionally relied heavily on utility arguments (Skjeie & Teigen, 2004).

Finally, our focus has been on the problem approach and justice conceptions of boys' underperformance in school, not on the resulting policies and policy effects. Arguably, what matters most for citizens are not the justifications of policies and the worldviews underlying them, but the resulting policies and the implications of these policies for the actual distributions of goods and burdens.

Still, problem approaches and conceptions in public policy are important objects of study as such, as they may influence not only policies in the long run but also public discourse, political mobilization, and social identities. In our article, we zoomed in on conceptions of boys' underperformance in school, a problem with increasing salience in policy circles but also a hot topic in popular debates and an issue that continues to drive populist mobilization. Boys' and men's problems—and how to conceive of them—were always a core challenge to feminist movements and theorizing, but they are now once more brought to the fore and perceived as urgent, including in policy making. We believe there is a need for more studies of how the boy problem is approached and treated under contemporary conditions and in different contexts. There is still a tendency in debates on and within feminism to assume that argumentative patterns and positions are settled and similar across settings. Our study shows instead how approaches to gender differences in school performance in gender equality policy may vary between polities, even within the Nordic region of gender equality forerunners. This article thus also contributes to the literature that questions simplified ideas of a single Nordic gender equality model and to scholarship that seeks to account for intra-Nordic differences.

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