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## **The multicultural challenge to the Danish Welfare state**

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**The multicultural challenge to the  
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# The multicultural challenge to the Danish Welfare state – Social Politics, Equality and Regulating Families<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The Scandinavian countries have witnessed intense debates about the effects of increased immigration on the Scandinavian welfare states, family and gender relations. The purpose of the chapter is to analyse the multicultural challenge to the Danish welfare- and gender regime by exploring the different political approaches to gender equality and family relations. It discusses different interpretations of the meaning and implications of immigration and multiculturalism in relation to gender and family relations. The focus is on in the tensions in the policy logics and in the dominant discourses about gender equality and family relations. The Danish exceptionalism is explored by employing a comparative Scandinavian perspective/approach.

The three Scandinavian countries belong to the same welfare and gender regimes and social and family policies have since the 1970s been modelled around principles of universalism and individual rights, including the right and increasingly also the obligation for both women and men to engage in wage work. The countries have been labelled as women-friendly welfare states, but this has been criticized for glossing over inequalities between women in ethnic majorities and the immigrant minorities. Immigration has increased differences among women on the labour market and in society and has inspired public debates about the perceived oppression of immigrant women by their families, religion and cultures.

Recent debates in political and gender theory have raised important theoretical and political questions about the relations between gender equality, welfare policies and diversity/multiculturalism. A controversial issue has been, whether feminism and multiculturalism

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<sup>1</sup> Denne artikel er skrevet som et bidrag til et Nordisk-britisk netværk, som har planlagt en svensk og en engelsk publikation *Gender, Family Relations and Social Policy: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* Editors: Janet Fink (The Open University, UK), Åsa Lundqvist (University of Lund, Sweden), Naomi Tadmor (Sussex University, UK). Bogen udkommer først på svensk med titlen, *Genus, familj och socialpolitik*, Liber förlag: Malmö. Artikelns svenske titel er: "Den multikulturella utmaningen till dansk välfärdsstat. Socialpolitik, jämställdhet och familjereglering".

belong to two conflicting equality projects (Okin, 1999; Parekh, 1999), or whether they are overlapping projects allied in the struggle for equal rights and social justice (Phillips, 1995; Young, 2000; Kymlicka, 1999). Gender equality has today become a universally accepted principle and there is an important debate about the intersection of gender inequality, ethnicity/race and other kinds of inequalities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The argument of this chapter is that gender relations are deeply embedded in the national cultures and therefore the multicultural challenge to gender equality needs to be explored through comparative research and more specifically from the context of Scandinavian welfare and gender regimes (Lister et al., 2007).

We commence by exploring, how welfare, gender and immigration regimes relate to each other theoretically and empirically, and we address the debate on whether multiculturalism and diversity constitutes a threat to the notion of potentially women-friendly Scandinavian welfare states. Subsequently, we focus on the specificities of Danish welfare-, gender equality and immigration policies in relation to the other Scandinavian countries, and discuss the implications of the Scandinavian approaches to welfare and gender equality for the recognition of diversity of minorities. The Danish case is unique because the country has moved from an open to a strict immigration regime during the last 25 years. We argue that this political development has had dramatic effects on the rights and duties of immigrant minorities and their families, for example for the right to welfare benefits and to family unification.

In the third section, we explore these equality dilemmas in more detail by focusing on public and political debates about gender equality from the perspective of the ethnic minorities. We analyse how the dominant liberal approach to the family based upon arguments about autonomy and free choice contrasts with the restrictive, anti-liberal regulation and state intervention for immigrants and their families. This is illustrated by the government Action Plans for gender equality and the Action Plans against forced and arranged marriages, which explicitly target migrant women. We find that this expresses a contrast in the dominant integration discourse between the concern for gender

equality in immigrant families and the lack of concern for gender equality for the ethnic Danish majority. Finally, we discuss different research strategies to analyse the challenges from immigration to Scandinavia focusing on the intersection of gender equality and diversity.

### **The women-friendly Scandinavian welfare states and the multicultural challenge**

The three Scandinavian countries are often included in the same welfare- and gender regime. In welfare state research regime is an established concept related to the variations in political coalitions behind the regimes and different configurations of market, state and the family. A regime thus refers to systematic relations between elements of a system, and the main point in using this concept is to emphasize a limited number of key elements in order to theorize variations. In spite of much criticism of the key concepts and defining variables, the three Scandinavian countries are very often included in the same Social Democratic cluster, which is characterized by a high level of universal and tax financed benefits.

Comparative scholarship has debated whether the Scandinavian welfare regime relies on homogeneous populations and whether a development towards multiculturalism will undermine some of its basic characteristics (Wolfe & Klausen, 2000; Kymlicka, 2006). One question relates to the sustainability of redistributive policies and another to the legitimacy of the universal welfare regime. One side argues that a development towards a multicultural society may cause a potential threat to bonds of solidarity and the other side argues that recognition of cultural diversity does not preclude redistributive policies. We suggest that the future political developments depend on whether the dominant public and political discourse frames diversity as a threat or an asset.

The Scandinavian welfare states have developed different policies towards immigration. Sweden and Denmark represent two extremes, where Sweden is perceived to be the country with the most multicultural policies and Denmark with the most restrictive policies (Hedetoft et al., 2006). A recent study of the challenges to the Nordic welfare regimes from immigration indicates that in spite of differences

in the government's policies and discourses towards immigration, there are similar problems with integration of immigrant on the labour market and in society<sup>2</sup>. Immigrant women are said to present a special challenge for Scandinavian governments because of their low labour market participation compared to women in the ethnic majorities, which is attributed largely to cultural differences.

Feminist scholars usually agree that the Scandinavian countries share basic characteristics that make it meaningful to include them in the same gender regime, and there is a similar debate in gender research about the ability of the Scandinavian gender regime to accommodate diversity. The purpose of using the notion of a gender regime is to compare different the gender systems in relation to key dimensions, for example women's wage work and political participation. Feminist scholars do not agree about the defining characteristics of a gender regime. Some feminists, like Jane Lewis, have conceptualized the male-breadwinner model that focuses on women's relation to wage work as the sole defining characteristics (Lewis, 1992). A number of researchers have criticised the notion of the male breadwinner models, because it is a one-dimensional typology based upon women's wage work (Siim, 2000; Walby, 2004). Scandinavian feminist scholars have theorized the positive role of the welfare state, particularly in relation to reproduction (Hernes, 1987: 15; Borchorst & Siim, 2002; Siim, forthc.), as well as the importance of state feminism<sup>3</sup> and women's political agency (Hernes, 1987; Siim, 2000; Skjeie & Teigen, 2003; Siim & Skjeie, 2007).

Sylvia Walby has proposed an alternative gender model that aims at analysing the ongoing transformations of the gender regime from a domestic to public form<sup>4</sup>, and the model distinguishes between the

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<sup>2</sup> A study for the Nordic Council of Ministers about integration in the Nordic countries did for instance ignored gender (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2005). It illustrates that the welfare state may potentially function as a mechanism for both inclusion of the majority and exclusion of migrants minorities and concludes that although migration has mainly created problems for the welfare state it may in the future help to solve the problems of labour shortage.

<sup>3</sup> Helga Maria Hernes defined state feminism as 'feminism from above in the form of gender equality and social policies and the feminization of welfare state relevant professions combined with the 'feminization from below' among women activists in political and cultural activities (Hernes, 1987: 153).

<sup>4</sup> The first level is that of regime that designated the overall social system. The second level contains various forms of gender regimes differentiated along two dimensions – the continuum from domestic to public – and the degree of gender inequality. The third level is constituted by a series of domains: economic, polity, and civil society. The fourth is that of a series of social practices (Walby, 2004; 10).



form of the gender regime and the degree of gender inequality (2004: 7-11). She finds that there are three (of several potential) models of transition to a public gender regime: a) the Social-democratic public service route developed in the Nordic countries, b) the market led route followed in the US, and c) a regulatory route developed in particular by the EU.

A comparison of the Scandinavian welfare- and gender regimes focusing on the interplay between the mobilization of women and social and gender equality policies confirmed that in spite of a number of differences (Bergqvist et al.,1999), the Scandinavian countries also share basic characteristics: 1) a strong dual breadwinner model based upon a system of public childcare services and generous maternity- and parental leave, 2) a feminization of the political elite and 3) a strong discourse about gender equality as both part of public policies and the private life of citizens.

The Norwegian political scientist Helga M. Hernes (1987) claimed that the Scandinavian welfare states have a potential to become 'women-friendly', defined as policies which "would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit unjust treatment on the basis of sex" (1987: 15), for example public childcare that would increase women's options and increase their autonomy. Hernes' approach was founded upon a grand vision of gender equality, which combines social rights for women with state feminism that refer to women's political inclusion. Her vision was a society 'where injustice on the basis of gender would be largely eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequality, such as among groups of women' (1987: 15).

Hernes' concept of women-friendliness has been an important inspiration for feminist scholarship, welfare state researchers and political theorists. We have argued that woman-friendliness is an ambiguous concept with greater metaphorical strength than descriptive and analytical potentials, which makes it difficult to use in assessing concrete social policies. Women-friendliness, which is connected to state feminism, points towards the interconnectedness of social policies and gender equality as well as to the importance of

women's political agency. Analytically, it may thus refer both to the content, the agency and the effects of state policies. We have therefore suggested that it is useful to distinguish between social and political dimensions of women-friendliness (Borchorst & Siim, 2002) as well as between the role of women's agency and the effects of public policies. Comparative research has illustrated that social rights and political representation<sup>5</sup> have different characteristics, history and dynamics that are often contradictory, and it is only in the Scandinavian case that extended social rights was followed by a feminization of the political elite (Siim, 2000). Hernes' approach to gender equality has been employed as a universal model but was in fact based upon a dual breadwinner model and thus revealed its bias towards the Scandinavian welfare system (Borchorst & Siim, 2002). The Scandinavian gender- and welfare regime has also be criticised 'from within' for exacerbating the gender segregation of the labour market that is characterized by large power inequalities between men employed in the top of the private sector and the universities and women employed in the public sector (Hirdman, 1990).

The notion of 'women-friendliness', as well as state feminism, was based upon women's common social conditions and premised upon their common interests vis-à-vis the welfare state. This raises the question, whether it is still useful today, where immigration has increased both cultural differences and social and political inequalities among women. Feminist researchers have started to criticise the present welfare and gender equality policies for neglecting the perspective of immigrants and to debate whether the notion of 'women-friendliness' is premised on a normative vision of gender equality that neglects diversities among women and thus tends to make alternative approaches to gender and family relations invisible and illegitimate. Scandinavian feminist scholars have started to analyse the diversities among women as well as the perceived conflicts between the dominant gender equality norms and the cultural norms of immigrant families, including the diversity of family norms (Siim, 2003; Siim, forthc.; Bredal, 2006; Langvasbråten, forthc.). Post-colonial feminists have also criticised feminist research for

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<sup>5</sup> Hernes did not analyse civil rights that may be understood as a third dimension of citizenship that has today gained importance with the increase in anti-discrimination legislation in the nation states and in the EU.

producing a hegemonic picture of genus/gender and femininity that makes power inequalities among women invisible (Andreassen, 2005), and they have started analyse the material basis for the new inequalities between the 'white' majority and immigrant women (los Reyes, Molino & Mulinari, 2003; 31).

### **The Danish welfare and gender regime**

The Danish gender equality and welfare regime has since the 1970s been characterised by a high degree of social equality and a strong tradition for participatory democracy, voluntary associations and grass root organisation. The Danish labour market institutions are relatively autonomous – labour market organisations play a key role in regulation, and the labour market has to a large extent been regulated in collective agreements between the social partners. Denmark has been praised internationally for its success with “flexicurity” that combines flexibility on the labour market with a high degree of social security at the same time as competitiveness and economic growth have been relatively high compared to other Western economies (Bredgaard & Larsen, 2005).

In terms of gender relations, the Danish welfare regime is based upon a strong dual-breadwinner model premised upon women's wage work. Danish mothers have a record high employment rate in a European context, but relatively few women in private management (Eurostat, 2006). Social and family policies are premised upon individual rights and duties of women and men, children and parents and policies have not been motivated by gender equality. There are universal and extended social policies for all citizens, for example public childcare policies for the less than 2-year olds and elderly care.

Danish gender equality policies are less institutionalised than in Norway and Sweden, and contrary to these two, the country has a very weak tradition of affirmative actions. There are relatively few women in local governments. Women's relatively high representation in the political elite was generated mainly by women's mobilisation and not by affirmative action in political parties – the system of voluntary quotas adopted in the 1980s by the Social Democratic and Socialist Folks Party was abandoned in the 1990s. Social movements, voluntary

associations and networks have played a key role compared to political parties, and research has shown that women are as active as men in social movements and voluntary associations (Christensen and Siim, 2001). The relatively strong autonomous women's movement influenced welfare and gender policies in the 1970s and 80s, but since the 90s it is fragmented and there is no longer an organized link between the feminist organisations and women in the political elite.

The Danish welfare regime, which is based upon strong norms of social equality and homogeneity in relation to ethnicity, religion and language, interact with the challenge from cultural diversity. The implications of the universal welfare regime for immigration politics are contested and the preliminary findings are somewhat contradictory. Lise Togeby's research has pointed towards the strong norms of social equality and tradition for pluralist democracy as a potential for inclusion of minorities (2003), while others find that universal social equality has been a barrier for recognition of diversity (Wolfe & Klausen, 2000). Research of the attitudes of ethnic Danes indicates that many tend to support social and political rights for migrants but have difficulties respecting cultural rights (Thomsen, 2006). The strong welfare institutions can thus be perceived as a potential to accept equal social and political rights for immigrants, whereas the high degree of homogeneity in relation to ethnicity, language and religion and the trend towards communitarianism tend to pull in the opposite direction and is often perceived as barriers to respect cultural diversity (Hedetoft, 2004; Mouritzen, 2006; Siim, 2007).

The implication of the Danish gender regime for ethnic equality and recognition of cultural diversity is also difficult to assess, and it may indeed have contradictory effects. The strong dual breadwinner model, the tradition for extended individual rights in social and family policies and the negative attitude to affirmative action programmes could on the one hand be interpreted as barriers for accepting cultural diversity. The strong tradition for political-cultural pluralism and bottom-up approach to democracy and gender equality could on the other hand be interpreted as potentials for the equal treatment of social groups and for recognition of cultural diversity. While the strong dual

breadwinner model is based upon women's common interests as wage workers, political-cultural pluralism is based upon diversity that could possibly contribute to create transversal dialogues about the diversity of gender equality norms and family relations between ethnic Danish women and minorities. These questions will be explored in more detail in the following.

### **The Danish approach to multiculturalism/diversity and gender equality**

As mentioned earlier the Scandinavian countries are said to belong to the same welfare and gender regime, but they have lately followed different roads and have adopted different policies towards migration. In terms of migration the Danish political institutions present a mix of the dominant citizenship models - ethnic assimilation in the German tradition and cultural pluralism of the British and Dutch traditions (Koopmans & Statham, 2000: 18-29), and migration and integration policies have been positioned between the ethnic assimilation and the cultural pluralist pole (Togeby, 2003). The Danish approach to migration and integration has shifted dramatically from a liberal to a restrictive regime between 1983 and 2002, and integration has moved from the pluralist pole towards an increasing emphasis on a legislation premised on assimilation of minorities to ethnic Danish values and 'the Danish way of life' (Togeby, 2003; Hedetoft, 2004; Mouritzen, 2006). This includes growing concerns that immigrants conform to ethnic Danish gender equality norms and family values (Siim, 2003, 2007).

Immigration issues include both asylum policies that regulate entrance to the territory and integration legislation, i.e. the rights and obligations of those living legally in the country. Since the general stop for migration in Denmark in 1973, people have arrived either as refugees or as family members to migrants, i.e. via family unification. Today, the migrant population is app. 6 percent and the biggest groups are refugees or immigrants from Turkey, Yugoslavia, Pakistan and Somalia with a high concentration in the big cities: Copenhagen, Århus, Odense and Aalborg.

Since 2001, people must have lived legally in the country for 9 years before they can apply for citizenship. During the last 15 years, the formal naturalisation laws have gradually made access to the country for immigrants more difficult and during the 1990s; public policies intensified efforts to integrate those migrants living legally in the country. Denmark adopted its first Integration legislation in 1998 under the former Social-democratic-social centre government headed by Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and this legislation has been revised several times and has gradually become more restrictive.

Immigration and integration have been covered by the media since the 1970s (Andreassen, 2005), and from the 1990s onwards, it has gradually become the most important issue for the population (Goul Andersen, 2006). Increasingly, both the political developments, and media debates have contributed to reinforce the border between 'them and us' (Holm, 2005; Andreassen, 2005a) and cultural issues including the right to practice your own language, religion, dress and behaviour have become sites of conflicts between the ethnic Danish majority and immigrant minority groups (Siim, 2007).

Immigration became politicised as a key issue in the electoral campaign in November 2001 and contributed to the change of power from the Social-Democratic and social-liberal government in power since 1993 to the Liberal and Conservative government supported by the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti). After the election, the liberal-conservative coalition government adopted a restrictive asylum package in 2002, including rules that restricted the right to family unification. At the same time it reduced the amount received by people on social assistance.

During the 1990s, governments have tightened immigration laws and used gendered issues like forced marriages to legitimise a stricter immigration control in relation to family members. Gender equality has come to play a key role in the dominant discourse about integration, and the achieved gender equality for women in 'ethnic Danish families' is increasingly contrasted with the supposed patriarchal oppression of women in 'migrant families' (Andreassen, 2005). This has been illustrated by a number of studies of media

debates, parliamentary debates as well as studies of integration policies and government actions plans for forced and arranged marriages and for gender equality (Andreassen, 2005a; Siim, 2007; Andreassen & Siim, 2007; Langvasbråten, forthc.).

The position of ethnic minority groups in Denmark has attracted international attention. The CEDAW committee has evaluated the Danish implementation of the CEDAW convention. In 2006, the committee "urged the State party to intensify its efforts to eliminate discrimination against minority women" (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2006: art. 27).

### **Integration policies and recognition of cultural diversity**

‘Economic self-sufficiency’ has become the main principle in Danish integration policies and labour market participation is regarded as the key to integration and ‘the understanding of Danish values and norms’ has increasingly become a means towards assimilation associated with punitive language and citizenship tests.

The Danish approach to integration is based upon conflicting principles that can be used to legitimize both assimilation and discrimination (Ejrnæs, 2001: 3). The first Danish Integration Law proposed by the coalition of Social-Democrats and Radical Liberal Party and adopted by Parliament in 1998 intended to coordinate the previous legislation. It included principles of equal participation with other citizens in political, economic, work, social, religious and cultural life, economic self-sufficiency and the understanding of Danish cultural values and norms. The law stated that the formal objective of integration is ‘equality’ in a broad sense but at the same time, economic self-sufficiency is the overriding principle of integration. Integration policies should contribute to; 1) enable newly arrived foreigners the possibility to participate equally with other citizens in political, economic, work, social, religious and cultural life; 2) contribute to economic self-sufficiency; and 3) give the individual an understanding of Danish cultural values and norms.

In 2002, the new Liberal-Conservative government adopted a strict ‘Immigration Package’ that included two elements with serious

implications for gender and ethnic equality: 1) Danish citizens married to a foreigner are only allowed to be united, if they are older than 24 years, and if they have stronger affiliation with Denmark than any other country. 2) Social assistance was replaced by a new 'introductory grant'<sup>6</sup> for the first 7 years. The grant is much lower than the amount given to people on social assistance [kontanthjælp]. The 'start help' was presented as a tool to integrate newcomers on the labour market, but it means that immigrant and refugee families can only gain the right to full and equal cash benefits after 7 year in Denmark.

One important area of inequalities between ethnic Danish and immigrants and their families is the position on the labour market. In a report about the Danish national Reform Programme 2005 and the Gender aspect of the Danish Employment strategy for the EC, Ruth Emerek has analysed the remarkable gap in employment rates for ethnic Danes and migrants. While ethnic Danes generally have high employment rates – above the Lisbon target for both men and women – 79,1 per cent for men and 70,5 per cent for women, male migrants have an employment rate lower than 55 per cent and female migrants from non-western countries an employment rate lower than 40 per cent (Emerek 2005). This illustrates that the gap in employment rates for Danish and immigrant groups are among the highest in Europe (Udlændinge- og integrationspolitikken i Danmark og udvalgte lande - Baggrundsrapport, 2004).

Another important area of inequality between ethnic Danish and immigrant groups is democratic politics. The final report from Commission on Power and Democracy concluded that the lack of influence of immigrants on politics, especially migrant women, is one of the major challenges to Danish democracy (Togeby et al., 2003). Immigrants without citizenship cannot vote in national elections, but since 1981 all who have lived legally in the country for three years have the right to vote in local elections, and immigrant men have become part of local politics. Immigrants are marginalised in the political elite and till the election in 2007 only two persons with

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<sup>6</sup> The low grant to refugees represents a break with the principles of the universal welfare state. It was first introduced by the previous government headed by the Social Democratic Party in 1999 but lasted only 13 months, because it did not have the intended effect to integrate refugees on the labour market (Ejrnæs, 2003: 224-225)



immigrant background are represented in the Danish Parliament, and no women<sup>7</sup>. Several reports from The Danish Commission on Power and Democracy (1997-2004) have addressed the democratic challenge to empower minorities and give immigrants a voice in the public debate and a presence in politics. The studies all demonstrate that immigrants in general and immigrant women in particular, are underrepresented in democratic politics, including participation in voluntary associations, public debates and political and administrative institutions (Hammer & Bruun, 2000; Schwartz, 2002; Hussain, 2003; Togeby, 2003; Siim, 2003).

The present government is concerned about the low activity rates of the immigrant groups, and especially immigrant women, compared to Danish citizens and has adopted a number of programmes targeting immigrant families. Recently two government programmes intended to integrate immigrants on the labour market: “Flere i arbejde” (More in Jobs) from August 2003 and “En ny chance for alle” (A new Chance for All), an agreement between the government, the Danish People’s Party and the Social Democrats from June 2005, both use strong financial incentives to make it less profitable to be on social welfare by reducing cash benefits. One of the stated objectives of this agreement was to integrate immigrant women on the labour market by reducing social assistance for families with only one person attached to the labour market. Persons on cash benefits will have to demonstrate that they are part of the work force<sup>8</sup>. This new program clearly targeted migrant families, because 3 out of 4 married couples on cash benefits have immigrant background although they form less than 10 per cent of the population. The Social Democratic Party, originally part of this agreement, has withdrawn claiming that the new rules would hit the wrong persons.

The government’s approach to integration can be described as mainly punitive, because it attempts to force migrants to take a job by lowering cash benefits, and critiques claim that the real problem is often a lack of qualifications compatible with the needs of the labour

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<sup>7</sup> This changed at the election in November 2007, where four minority women were elected to Parliament.  
<sup>8</sup> If one of the spouses in a family where both receive cash benefits (a universal benefit means tested towards family income) has not worked at least 300 hours within a period of two years, the person will lose the right to cash benefit, and the other spouse will receive a family allowance (Emerek, 2005).

market, or discrimination. The assessment of the effects of government approach to integration is contested and a recent report from the SFI (the Danish Institute for Social Research) commissioned by the Danish government finds that the ceiling over cash benefits has not resulted in more cash benefit receivers having been employed (Graversen & Tingaard, 2005). The SFI report concludes that an economic incitement will have poor employment effects for persons having other problems than just unemployment, for example health problems.

Researchers debate the underlying logic behind the government approach to integration policies, including the start help. Does it represent an exception to the general principle of universality in social policies, or a general attack on universalism? Some researchers interpret it as an isolated attack on the social rights of refugees that does not challenge the general principles of universality and equal social rights (Velfærdskommissionen, 2004; Goul Andersen, 2006). Others claim that it represents a break with the universal welfare state that will create a second class social citizenship for immigrant families', a form of discrimination that reduces their economic resources and a breach against the equal treatment principle in the human rights conventions (Ejrnæs, 2003; Ejrnæs & Skytte, 2004).

Integration policies include principles that affect gender equality and family relations. Feminist scholars have started to analyse the implications of integration policies for immigrant women and immigrant families as well as for the Danish gender regime. Even though Danish social and childcare policies are still at least potentially friendly to all women (Borchorst forthc.), it is debatable whether the Danish gender regime can be labelled as 'women-friendly' from the perspective of immigrant women, who are not included in the labour market and in politics on equal par with ethnic Danish women. The Danish approach to integration has targeted immigrant families in relation to social policies, such as the start help, and immigrant women are in focus in public discourses and action plans on forced and arranged marriages and as an oppressed group in need of gender equality. Arguably, the combined effects of integration and gender equality policies have been marginalisation, stigmatisation and

assimilation of immigrant women to the dominant gender, cultural and family values (Andreassen, 2005; Siim, 2003; 2007).

### **Gender equality policies and action plans directed towards immigrant families**

In this section we first explore the contrast between the dominant liberal and gender-neutral principles of individual rights directed towards ethnic Danes on the one hand and the anti-liberal principles regulating welfare targeting migrant families on the other hand. Secondly we focus on two policy measures directed primarily to immigrant families: Government's Action plan for gender equality and action plans against forced and arranged marriages. In both cases, Danish exceptionalism is traced by a comparative Scandinavian perspective.

The Danish gender equality agenda and policy is characterized by a number of paradoxes. Internationally, Denmark is often regarded at the forefront in terms of gender equality, but the most women-friendly social policies, for example child care policies, is not considered to be part of the 'gender equality' policy agenda and has not been motivated by gender equality concerns but by concerns for children. Gender equality policy refers to a relatively narrow notion compared to the Swedish and the Norwegian counterparts, and the formal notion of gender equality is restricted to antidiscrimination measures, directed mainly at the majority population. Childcare policy, which has generated high quality public childcare provision covering 50 percent of children age 1-3 and 80 percent of children age 3-6, is considered to be part of social policy and is not understood to be gender equality. Both in the OECD and the EU context, this policy has been labelled as women-friendly (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; OECD, 2002), and has been considered as a main reason for the fact that the male breadwinner model faded away during the 1960s and 1970s. Still, these policies are not regarded as part and parcel of Danish gender equality project and has been negotiated as gender neutral measures (Borchorst, forthcoming).

The present liberal-conservative government and its political partner the People's Party is reluctant to focus on gender as relevant criteria

for political regulation. Hence, the earmarking of a period of the parental leave for fathers was abolished in 2002, at the same time as the leave period was prolonged to a year. By this step, Denmark has become the only Scandinavian country that does not entitle fathers to a period of the leave that the mother cannot take up<sup>9</sup>. The arguments behind this policy was that it would interfere with the privacy of the family, which is not consistent with the fact that Denmark earmarks the relatively longest period of the leave to the mother (14 out of 52 weeks) (Borchorst, 2006). As mentioned earlier, the government has at the same time adopted an anti-liberal regulation of families, the 24-year rule, which limits the options of citizens to marry foreigners. This anti-liberal approach to immigrant family life will be explored later. In the official public and political discourse, it is often claimed that gender equality has - almost - been achieved for the majority population, even though many problems remain. The labour market is highly gender segregated with a high concentration of women in jobs at the local level of the public sector. Furthermore, Denmark is falling behind other European countries in terms of the percentage of female managers, and due to this reason and the relatively low number of female ministers, Denmark is today only ranked as no. 20 in UN's political index (World Economic Forum, 2005).

The level of employment for female immigrants is, as mentioned earlier, extremely low, and during its first years, the present government targeted its gender equality actions plans mainly at immigrant women, premised on the assumption that gender equality problems above all relates to the immigrant families. The Danish People's Party, which has only in a very few instances supported policies of gender equality for ethnic Danish women, often argues that gender inequality is a Danish value that the ethnic minority groups fail to comply with. This anti-immigrant party serves as the majority basis of government and it has been influential in targeting the migrant groups as the major problem for gender equality today (Andreassen, 2005).

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<sup>9</sup> Daddy quotas have, however, in both Sweden and Norway (and Iceland) been quite successful in increasing the fathers' take-up rate of the leave. The same was true in Denmark, during the few years it was in effect.

In the recent debate following the decision of a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf to become a candidate for a leftist party a member of parliament for the Danish People's Party compared the scarf with Swastika, the Nazi symbol. The statement triggered several heated parliamentary debates, where the prime minister distanced himself from the statement, but referred to the principle of freedom of speech (Folketingsstidende, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007). The statement caused a decline in the political support for the party, which was later regained. The Danish People's Party has proposed top ban against wearing headscarves in public offices, A majority of the population (71 per cent) is, however, opposed to a ban (Jyllands Posten, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2007).

### *The Danish Action Plans for Gender Equality*

A comparative study of Action Plans for Gender Equality in the Scandinavian countries 2000-2005 illuminates important characteristics of the Danish approach to gender equality (Langvasbråten, 2007). The official discourse during this period constructed gender equality in two separate areas: One for ethnic minorities and another for the ethnic Danish majority. This is illustrated by language and headlines that emphasises the problems for 'ethnic minorities' as a separate domain of special priority for government action. This has several implications. Firstly, gender equality policies for 'ethnic minorities' was treated as a special issue separated from the other areas of gender equality policy, especially from the plans for the ethnic Danish majority. Secondly, the plans targeted ethnic minority women, who were perceived as a specific cultural group with major gender equality problems.

The study further supports Rikke Andreassen's conclusion that gender equality tends to be constructed in the official government rhetoric as a special 'Danish' value, deeply embedded in the very foundations of Danish democracy - "one of the core values that Danish democracy is built upon" (Andreassen, 2005). This is contrasted with the perceived lack of gender equality values and equal opportunities in ethnic minority families and cultures. This key point is illustrated by the following quotations: "Personal freedom and freedom of choice for women and men apply to all living in Denmark. Everyone is to enjoy equal opportunities to define the goals of one's own life, concerning

both the choice of education, work, as well as partner. This applies, of course, also to ethnic minorities. Prerequisite for ethnic minorities to live by the demand of equality between the sexes, is knowledge of gender equality as part of Danish democracy, and an understanding of what gender equality concretely comprise” (The Action Plan for gender equality, 2005, Langvasbråten’s translation).

Langvasbråten’s study illustrates that the Danish approach to gender equality during this period was somewhat different from the Swedish and Norwegian approaches. All three countries express a concern for the agency of ‘women and girls of ethnic minority background’ who are victims of violence and oppression, but there are important differences in the discourses. The study emphasises that while ‘ethnic minorities’ and gender equality was highly prioritised by the Danish government, it does not seem to be part of the Swedish government’s concern. The Danish rhetoric furthermore formulates the clearest example of a believed conflict between immigrant cultural traditions and ‘Danish’ equality norms. This is different from both the Swedish governmental rhetoric, which is dominated by theories about a patriarchal society with all women as the oppressed victims, indifferent to cultural diversity, and from the Norwegian case, which has not formulated any overall gender equality action plans and parliamentary gender equality debates in this period. (Langvasbråten, (forthc.)

In spite of the different approaches to gender equality, all three countries have adopted strong normative discourses about gender equality as a key national value. On this basis it is paradoxical that neither the Swedish, Danish nor Norwegian gender equality policies can legitimately claim to live up to Hernes’ vision of ‘women-friendly societies’, where injustice on the basis of gender would be eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequalities, such as among groups of women (Hernes, 1987.15).

#### *Actions plans against forced and arranged marriages*

Forced marriages and “honour related violence” became the subject of public concern in Norway, Denmark and Sweden in the 1990s (Bredal, 2005). According to Bredal, the three countries all express a

strong concern about gender equality, women's rights and oppression of girls in patriarchal families, but there are remarkable differences in the Scandinavian policies and discourses about forced and arranged marriages. Denmark has adopted the strictest action plans against both forced and arranged marriages<sup>10</sup>, while Norway's Action Plan is directed solely against forced marriages. In Sweden, the Action Plan is not targeted at specific groups but is directed against the general oppression of girls in patriarchal families.

In Denmark, the public debate about how to prevent forced and arranged marriages is part of the "immigrant debate" and was polarised from the start (Grøndal, 2003). The government referred to growing number of cases of forced and arranged marriages arguing that the known cases were only the tip of the iceberg and accused critics of being afraid to admit facts for fear of being charged with discrimination. Critics of strict regulation claimed that there were only a few reported incidents of forced marriages and complained about media generalisations and stigmatising of minority groups (Grøndal, 2003; Andreassen, 2005).

The Government "Action Plan on Forced, Quasi-forced and Arranged Marriages 2003-2005" is an illustrative example of the official political strategy (Siim, 2007). The initiative expresses the dominant discourse that the overall objective is not only to prevent marriages that involve force, but also to prevent all forms of arranged marriages, including marriage between cousins. The document identifies the main problem as a value conflict and a clash of culture between the Danish majority norms of gender equality in 'normal families' and the cultural tradition of forced and arranged marriages that leads to oppression and lack of self-determination for migrant women.

The discourse about the clash of cultures is constructed by telling a story that ignores the differences between forced and arranged marriages and the diversity between normal Danish families. As a

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<sup>10</sup> The "24 year provision" in the Danish Alien Act § 9 (from 2002), which requires that both spouses must be 24 years before they can get a residence permit to marry a non-citizen, is exceptional has been widely criticized but there have been similar proposals and debates in Norway (Bredal, 2005). In Norway the government in the beginning had another strategy based upon National Plan of Action on Forced Marriages from 1998 that focused on both prevention and remedy, but both strategies were motivated by women's rights

result not only forced marriages, which is against the law, but also arranged marriages is addressed as a problem in need of political regulation. This rhetoric conflating forced and arranged marriages is stated in the title and it is constructed by means of arguments, which stress that forced and arranged marriages have similar negative effects in relation to self-determination, cultural conflicts, force and lack of integration. The document uses references to the Norwegian and British Action Plans against Forced Marriages and to the Human Rights Convention of 1948 and Danish Law against forced marriage to help blur the difference between forced and arranged marriages.

The lack of differentiation between forced and arranged marriages in the official Danish discourse are problematic for a number of reasons. First, it tends to stigmatise the marriage practice of many immigrant families and idealise the marriage practice of ethnic Danish families. Secondly, it ignores the complexities of generational and gender problems in immigrant families and thus treats all immigrant women potential victims of their own culture. According to Bredal (2005), the Norwegian and Swedish Action plans present alternative attempts to solve the conflicts with more emphasis on preventive strategies and dialogues with minority families on the level of social practice and daily life.

The empirical evidence presents a much more complex picture and qualitative research<sup>11</sup> has identified the difference between the portrayal of minority women in political life, public discourses and the media and their own self-understanding (Mørck, 2001; Prieur, 2002). We find that the issue of forced and arranged marriages illuminates the contradiction in the official Danish discourse between liberal values of non-intervention in ethnic Danish families and strict government regulation of immigrant families. The Danish

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One example is the investigation of forced and arranged marriages based upon both quantitative and qualitative data from the five largest immigrants groups in Denmark (Schmidt & Jacobsen, 2004). The report makes a distinction between 'forced marriage' defined as a marriage 'where young persons have not been informed of the marriage or it is against their wishes' and 'arranged marriage' based upon consent, i.e. if the young persons have been informed or agree to the marriage. It is found that the influence of parents should not be exaggerated, because only a relatively small group of the young persons (14 percent from Pakistan, 4 percent from Lebanon and 2 percent from Turkey) had not been involved in their own marriage (2004; 7). The report concludes that marriage in many minority families is perceived as a collective process, which should be defined as an arranged – not forced – marriage, because it is often negotiated and thus both parents and young people may have a right to objections.



exceptionalism also points towards the underlying tensions between the individualist Danish family tradition and practice and the more collective family orientation of many migrant groups'<sup>12</sup>. It further illustrates how the restrictive Danish integration legislation has created strong pressures towards cultural assimilation that contributes to exacerbate cultural conflicts between ethnic Danish and immigrant families groups about family values and gender roles. From this perspective the Danish gender regime built upon a strong dual breadwinner model and an individual right's based family model have contributed to make the issue of forced and arranged marriages an arena for acute political-cultural conflicts between the Danish majority and ethnic minorities.

*In sum:* The Danish exceptionalism in governmental action plans for gender equality as well as the action plan against forced and arranged marriages can illustrate the inherent dilemma in the Danish approach to gender equality: The dilemma between the principle of gender-neutrality in the official discourse directed towards ethnic Danes, including the reluctance to apply gender as a criterion for regulation, and the highly gendered discourse targeting ethnic minorities. The studies illuminate the difference between the gender neutral equality discourse directed towards the ethnic Danish majority and the government action programmes directed towards immigrant minorities. The dominant discourse thus contributes to construct the border between 'them' and 'us' – between 'ethnic Danish women' that have already achieved gender equality and the patriarchal cultures of 'oppressed ethnic minority women' in need of gender equality. Arguably, the overall effect of this dominant discourse is to contribute to a stigmatisation and marginalisation of immigrant women. At the same time the emphasis on gender equality and self-determination in ethnic Danish families may also contributes to create strong pressures towards assimilation to the family values and gender equality norms of the dominant Danish culture.

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Forced marriage is against the law, but there may in some cases be serious conflicts between Muslim marriages according to the Sharia and the Danish divorce legislation. According to Farhwa Nielsen, consultancy to the National Association of Women- and Crises Centres (LOKK), women are in practice caught in indissoluble marriages, if the husband does not accept and if it is not accepted that Danish legislation is superior to religious rules. Rubya Mehdi, who is professor in Islamic Law at Copenhagen University, therefore argues that all Muslims should sign a declaration that the husband and wife have the same access to divorce like it is done in Norway (*Politiken*, 26.10.06).

## **Conclusion and feminist perspectives**

We have suggested that the Scandinavian welfare states have lost their status as a model for others to follow and that one of the major problems is connected to immigration and recognition of cultural differences in society. Immigration has increased social and political inequalities in Scandinavia and especially inequalities among women. This increased diversity and inequalities among women in Scandinavia represents a new challenge to feminist research to be sensitive to the issue of who speaks for whom and who has the right to define what women-friendly social policies are or should be. Arguably Scandinavian welfare and gender research needs to rethink the foundations of the welfare state and gender equality from the perspective of migration and diversity.

We find that immigration represent a major challenge to the Scandinavian welfare states to recognize cultural diversity and that it raises new research questions about the commonality and differences in the welfare, immigration and gender regimes. In spite of the differences in multicultural policies all three countries have problems with integration of immigrant women on the labour market, in politics and in society. None of the Scandinavian welfare states can therefore claim to live up to Hernes' vision of 'women-friendly societies', defined as societies "where injustice on the basis of gender would be eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequalities, such as among groups of women".

Feminist scholarship has recently started to analyse the conflicts between the Scandinavian welfare and gender equality regime and immigration and in spite of Danish exceptionalism, researchers have identified similar problems connected with marginalisation and discrimination of immigrant women and with a lack respect for cultural diversity. The studies indicate that there are limits to the Scandinavian approach to welfare and illustrate that the women-friendly social policies do not include all women. They have raised critical questions about the abilities of the Scandinavian welfare and gender regime to integrate immigrant groups and to live up to their own promises of social and gender equality. One question is how to rethink the meanings of 'women-friendliness' in the context of

diversity and what are the implications of the increased diversity for gender and family relations. Another question is whether and how the Scandinavian welfare states with their extended public child-care policies and maternity/paternity policies still have women-friendly potentials.

The studies thus point towards the need for more comparative Scandinavian research about the potential and barriers of both the welfare institutions and gender equality cultures for the inclusion of migrant women as equal citizens as well as about the ability of the gender regimes for recognizing cultural diversity, including the diversity of family values and gender equality norms. One research issue could be to study the commonalities and differences in the approaches to migration and gender equality in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. How to explain the Danish exceptionalism that has contributed to exacerbate tensions between gender equality, women's rights and respect for minorities, and how to explain the contradictions between the emphasis on liberal values of non-intervention in ethnic Danish families and strict regulation of migrant families?

From a normative perspective the increased cultural diversity and social and political inequalities among women illustrate the need for feminist scholarship to discuss to what extent the dominant gender research paradigm is friendly towards all groups of women? The arguments in this chapter are first that claims for equality and recognition of cultural diversity are not necessarily contradictory but represent two dimensions of social justice that should be combined. From this perspective it is a democratic obligation to ensure both equal citizenship rights for immigrant women and to recognize the cultural diversity of norms and values in immigrant families. In addition, we find that from a perspective of social justice, as well as the tradition for representation of women in politics, immigrant women should be represented in democratic politics on par with women from the ethnic majorities.

Finally, we suggest that welfare, immigration and gender research need to study the tensions in social, integration and gender equality policies from the perspective of immigrant women. The universal

Scandinavian welfare and gender regimes may in some ways be perceived as a potential for the equal treatment of immigrant women, but there are also strong barriers for equal treatment and recognition of cultural diversity. We need to understand why the tensions between gender equality, women's rights and respect for cultural diversity seem to be especially acute in Scandinavia, and how it is related to the dominant norm of gender equality that is deeply embedded in both national identities and in the family values in everyday life.

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