

## ***Family policies and the protection of children.***

*An-Magritt Jensen, Dept. of Sociology and Political Science,  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)  
e-mail: anmagritt.jensen@svt.ntnu.no*

### ***Session 105: European population day. Reproduction and family structures. Round Table 3. Family Policies and Legislation.***

***XXIIth International Population Conference, Tours, France***

***18-23 July 2005***

I shall concentrate this presentation on family policy measures in the interface of fertility, gender equality and the protection of children. My examples will be taken from Norway, but will in most cases have relevance to Scandinavian family policies.

First of all, in the European context Norway has a relative high fertility rate (1.80 in 2003) close behind Iceland (1,99), Ireland (1,98) and France (1,89). There is also a high employment rate among parents with small children – 74 per cent of mothers with children aged 0 – 2years (Statistics Norway, 2003). Secondly, family structures have undergone profound changes over the last decades. Since the 1980's children are increasingly born outside marriage, primarily in consensual unions and more children are exposed to family dissolution (the two trends are interlinked). Single-mother families are rising. About one in four children do not live with both parents and more than nine out of ten stay with the mother (Jensen, 2005).

The high employment rate among mothers of small children and the high rate of family dissolutions are challenges to family policy and the protection of children. No explicit population policy is formulated. Family policies have had as explicit goal to promote gender equality and children's welfare.

#### **Up to the mid-1990s: motherhood and employment**

The family policy measures are however contradictory as shifting governments have been in charge. With a long standing social-democratic government up to the 1990s much emphasis was given to minimize the conflict between employment and motherhood. Two policy measures were emphasized during the 1980s: parental leave and day care for children. During the 1980s until 1992 the parental leave was expanded from 12 to 27 weeks of paid leave (Brandth and Kvande, 2003). Children's day care expanded but has always lagged behind the need and remained a political controversy. Today about 70 per cent of the children 1-5 years are enrolled in a day care centre (Statistics Norway, 2004a).

#### **During the 1990s: fatherhood and time with children**

During the 1990's increased attention was given to promoting fathers involvement in child care and to increase children's time with both parents. Two policy measures were: the 'daddy quota' in parental leave (the Social democrats - Gro Harlem Bruntland) in 1993 and the cash-for-care (the Christian conservative - Kjell Magne Bondevik) in 1998. The 'daddy quota' was part of a general extension of parental

leave to 29 paid weeks with an additional 4 weeks reserved for the father. The aim was to promote fathers involvement in the care of children. The ‘daddy quota’ was an immediate success. Only four years after the introduction (in 1998) 85 per cent of the eligible fathers used the quota and this level is stable since then (Brandth and Kvande, 2003). By contrast, the introduction of the ‘cash-for-care’ created one of the most intensive public debates over the last decades (apart from the EU-controversy). The ‘cash-for-care’ implied that parents who did not use a public supported day care would – as an alternative – receive a monthly allowance (about 3000 EURO a year) given to children under 3 years. The justification was to give parents more time with children and a free choice between day care and money. In the public debate it was argued that cash-for-care would be relevant only to mothers (not fathers) undermining the goal of gender equality. It was also argued that children would suffer since parents might shift from a public to a private day care arrangement. More than 70 per cent of the parents with children under 3 have picked up this offer - almost exclusively mothers (Statistics Norway, 2004b). While this has little effect on the employment rate among mothers with children under 3 years, it has a considerable effect on the proportions of mothers who are actually working as opposed to being on leave (74 per cent are employed and among them 33 per cent are on leave – 41 per cent is actually working) (Statistics Norway, 2003).

The ‘daddy quota’ implies that fathers spend with their newborn, but the time is limited (4 weeks), almost no fathers take more leave than the ‘obliged quota’ and only every second is alone with the child (the rest take their leave at the same time as the mother is at home) (Brandth and Kvande, 2003). Time use studies reveal that the ‘daddy quota’ has not impacted the total time fathers spend on child care with children under 3 years. On the other hand, the ‘cash-for-care’ has a strong impact on reducing the proportion of mothers with children less than 3 years who are in work (Rønsen, 2005).

### **Fertility, welfare and family structures**

Extensive welfare, a high level of education and employment imply that women are able to have children also in more risky family conditions (such as consensual unions). Motherhood and employment is combined with a relative high level of fertility. However, while this may elevate fertility more children are likely to be born outside marriage, mostly in a consensual union which in the long term implies a high risk of parental break-up. Norway is a wealthy country and children are unlikely to grow up in poverty. Still, this development challenges the protection of children in terms of economy and social welfare (see below).

### **Gender equality or child welfare: contradiction or concurrence?**

The ‘daddy quota’ and ‘cash-for-care’ are major reforms in the interface of family policy, gender equality and children’s welfare in general. In single-parent families the proportion of children living with the father is stable and low: 7 per cent of the children live with the father, 85 per cent live with the mother and 8 per cent live in both homes on a fifty-fifty basis (Jensen, 2005). Family policy aims to promote fatherhood involvement also among non-resident fathers. First of all the legal rights of cohabiting fathers are enhanced – in particular their right to joint legal responsibility. Secondly, their right to be with the child (visits) stands strong. Child allowance depends on visiting frequency – the more visits the lower allowance to pay and –

when proved - the court system is reluctant to reduce father's right to visits with a child.

Controversies of father's rights and child protection in relation to single-mother families are now emerging in two issues. One is the issue of the welfare of commuting children where increased attention is given to risks experienced by children traveling along between two parent's homes. The other issue is whether the father's right to visits has gained strength even at the cost of protecting children. In both cases the Norwegian Child Ombudsman is engaged in warnings on possible conflicts between children are visiting 'obligations' and their welfare.

### **Child protection: economic and social welfare**

Poverty is low in Norway but children's economic welfare depend on family earnings. About 3 per cent of all children are below the low income line (50 per cent of median income). Since a majority of mothers in two-parent families are employed these families are typically two-income families, while single-mother families by definition are one-income families. The proportion of children in low income families is 1,5 in the single-mother families and 3,7 in two-parent-one-earner families (Statistics Norway, 2001). Two incomes (mother's earnings) are the main protection against low income to children. With more single-mother families fewer children at protected against low income through the market mechanisms (Statistics Norway, 2003).

Single-mother families are also associated with concern over social welfare. While contact with the non-resident parent (the father) has been seen as an indisputable benefit to children's welfare, the Child Ombudsman now has raised the question if children need more protection (<http://www.barneombudet.no/barn/>). Children should not be forced to unwanted visits and parents are warned against letting children manage difficult travels on their own.

### **Future dilemmas of family policies and child protection**

#### *Mothers or children?*

Gender equality measures to enable the combination of motherhood and employment has shifted from emphasizing gender equality in the labour market to emphasizing parents' time with children (longer paid parental leaves, cash-for-care) which is almost exclusively used by mothers. In the long run this may undermine children's economic protection since mother's income is reduced and single-mother families are increasing.

#### *Fathers or children?*

Gender equality measures to promote father involvement in child care have primarily effect at a symbolic level in fortifying the ideology the 'involved fatherhood'. No impact is traced in time use or the proportion of children living with fathers after a break-up. The ideology of involved fatherhood may turn into a sacred cow overshadowing problematic effects on child protection. In particular children may be trapped into new risks of traveling and visiting. Very little is known about the extent of such risks (Jensen, 2006).

### *Gender polarized fertility?*

Increasingly children are growing up with mothers – who are the weaker earner among the parents – and increasingly men and fathers are detached from children in their everyday life. Childlessness is growing, and much more among men than women – 22 per cent at age 40 (12 per cent among women), and men are much more likely not to live with children (40 per cent at age 40) (Skrede, 2003). Family policies and welfare policies in general may mitigate the conflict between child bearing and the market society. But the conflict is not eliminated.

### **Sources:**

- Brandth, Berit and Elin Kvande (2003): *Fleksible fedre. Maskulinitet, arbeid, velferdsstat*. [Flexible Fathers. Masculinity, work and welfare state]. Oslo: University Press
- Jensen, An-Magritt (2005): *'Barn som bor med far bor også med mor'*. [Children living with the father are also living with the mother]. Samfunnspeilet No. 2, Oslo: Statistics Norway
- Jensen, An-Magritt (2006): *'Mobile and uprooted? Children and the Changing Family'*. In Zeiher, Helga, Dympna Devine, Anne Trine Kjørholt, Harriet Strandell (eds.) *Children's Welfare Vol 2: Time and Space* (working title), Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark (forthcoming)
- Rønsen, Marit (2005): *Long-term effects on mother's labour supply of the cash-for-care program in Norway*. Paper presented at 15<sup>th</sup> Nordic Demographic Symposium 28-30 April, 2005, Aalborg, Denmark
- Skrede, Kari (2003): Kari Skrede (2003): *'Gender, Generations and Life Courses in the Melting Pot.'* In Eriksen, J. and L. Gulbrandsen (red.) In Natalie Rogoff Ramsøy. En pioner I norsk og internasjonal sosiologi. Et minneskrift. Oslo: NOVA-rapport 10/03. Oslo: NOVA: 59-87
- Statistics Norway (2001): *Slik lever vi* [This is our life]. No. 4, Oslo
- Statistics Norway (2003): *Slik lever vi* [This is our life]. No 6, Oslo
- Statistics Norway (2004a): <http://www.ssb.no/emner/04/02/10/barnehager/>
- Statistics Norway (2004b): <http://www.ssb.no/emner/03/04/30/kontantstotte/>