

Renegotiating gender equality in a changing welfare state

For the past 50 years, welfare policy has been central to gender equality policy in Norway. A wide array of measures have been put in place and expanded. Both services and cash benefits are available for parents with young children (as well as children with special care needs), there are benefits for adults doing care work for family members, widows/widower pensions, and the old age pension is increased for those who have conducted care work earlier in their lives.

Together, the social security system thus supports different legal subjects. Some of these measures facilitate combination of paid work and family care, others improve the economic situation for individuals who are or have been outside of paid employment. While few benefits amount to the same income level as a full-time job, the span of the welfare state has allowed for a comprehensive approach to gender equality. These policies have opened for transformation of gender roles by making it easier for women with children to choose the paid-employment life pattern traditionally considered “male”, while simultaneously accommodating and strengthening the economic situation of those who remain in the traditionally “female” roles of domestic work. Rather than subscribing to either “liberal” or “difference”-oriented versions of feminism, policies have opened for diversity and choice.

This paper argues that this trajectory is shifting, as the fundamental values of welfare policy are being renegotiated. It charts how two key elements of contemporary political debate, namely “workfare” and integration, are slowly, but steadily, setting their marks on welfare law. Although the legal rights to benefits are (mainly) gender-neutral, the impact of these ongoing changes are noticeably gendered. Arguably, current trends change how welfare rights function as a tool for promoting gender equality. Although principles of non-discrimination in a narrow sense are upheld, and even strengthened by including care work as a prohibited ground of discrimination, changes in the welfare state points towards a more monolithic idea of social citizenship, providing less support for differences in life paths.

Finally, the paper takes these developments as starting points for a broader discussion of concepts of equality and their relationship to prohibition of discrimination. Are workfare/integration best understood as challenges to gender equality as a policy objective – potentially overriding it in concrete instances of legislative change – or do we see a new understanding of gender equality emerging?

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