



Flexible work arrangements

The Nordic Gender Effect at Work



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Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK)

ANP 2018:780

ISBN 978-92-893-5646-6 (PRINT)

ISBN 978-92-893-5647-3 (PDF)

ISBN 978-92-893-5648-0 (EPUB)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/ANP2018-780>

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Layout: Mette Agger Tang

Cover photo: Moa Karlberg

Infographics: Essensen

Print: Rosendahls

Printed in Denmark



Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, the economy, and culture. It plays an important role in European and international collaboration, and aims at creating a strong Nordic community in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation seeks to safeguard Nordic and regional interests and principles in the global community. Shared Nordic values help the region solidify its position as one of the world's most innovative and competitive.

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Investments in gender equality in the labour market have made the Nordic region one of the most prosperous areas of the world. The share of women who work in the Nordic countries is larger than the global average, which is partly the effect of commitments to equal workplaces, subsidised childcare and generous parental leave. With **The Nordic Gender Effect at Work** briefs, the Nordic region seeks to share its collective experience in promoting gender equality at work, and enable more knowledge sharing and progress towards the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



Introduction

Only half of women in the world engage in paid work. Many do so in poor working conditions with low pay, without access to maternity protection or parental leave. Childcare is often unreliable or unaffordable, and violence and sexual harassment are a reality of many working women's day. These exclusions are a violation of women's basic human rights. What is more, gender inequality at work is economically inefficient and ultimately costly for companies and countries alike.

Promoting gender equality at work is thus not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do. The Nordic region can be seen as a case in point. Combined, the five Nordic countries have come to represent the 11th largest economy in the world, not despite their policy commitment to gender equality and social justice, but because of it. Today the Nordic countries are known as financially strong welfare states with good living conditions. However, this has not always been the case.

In the past 100 years, women in the Nordic region have transitioned from living under husbands' guardianships to being financially independent, from not having the right to vote to holding the highest offices in society. The labour movement and the women's rights movement played important roles in making these changes happen, and helped pave the way for new legislation together with progressive policymakers. Descriptions of life in the Nordic countries often reference 'the Nordic model', which is characterised by a political ambition to reduce inequalities and by effective cooperation between the social partners and with collective bargaining in the labour market. Building on this, the Nordic countries have introduced a range of policies since the 1960s that facilitate women's engagement in paid work, as part of a broader policy agenda to advance gender equality and social justice.

Today the Nordic countries lie ahead of the curve on women's participation in the labour force. A significant policy to reach this position was high quality, subsidised childcare for all. The policy incentivised mothers to remain in the workforce after having children, and created a plethora of educational opportunities and jobs in the childcare industry. Enabling and promoting shared parental leave has been another key to prosperity for the Nordics. The countries have even encouraged paternity leave, which sets a path towards more involved fatherhood and happier and healthier families. Nordic employers across industries also recognise that flexible work arrangements do not impede productivity, but rather reduces stress and enables both working women and men to attend to their family responsibilities. It is part of a broader Nordic policy agenda of seeing rights and productivity as two sides of the same coin.

Despite a strong and consistent focus, there is more work to be done. Notably the Nordic countries are grappling with a resilient gender pay gap and a labour market with high levels of occupational segregation. The region does not have all the answers, and in a number of areas (occupational sex-segregation being a case in point) countries in other regions are performing better. The Nordic governments are committed to playing their part in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and seek to enable international knowledge sharing and facilitate a collective improvement in the stride for gender equality.

This brief focuses on flexible work arrangements. The Nordic Gender Effect at Work series include briefs on subsidised childcare for all; shared and paid parental leave; flexible work arrangements; and leadership and equal opportunities at work.



PHOTO: SCANPIX.DK

Flexible work arrangements

Flexible work arrangements enable parents to successfully combine work and family life. The Nordic countries have a strong tradition of collective bargaining, which has resulted in relatively good working conditions, flexible working hours and the right to paid vacation. Nordic companies offer more flexible working hours than anywhere else in Europe.

This brief outlines some flexible work arrangements that pertain in the Nordic countries and places them in an international context.

Flexible working hours can make everyday life easier. It enables employees to control the beginning and end of their workdays, and thus make it easier for parents to adapt their work schedules to their children's school and childcare hours, and indeed to look after older relatives. Opportunities to work from home or other remote locations save time and make family life easier, thus enabling better work-life balance.

A European company survey shows that Finland, Denmark and Sweden are leading internationally when it comes to flexible working hours. The results show that more than half of all company employees in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden can control at least some of their working hours. In contrast, 80 per cent of employees in Greece and Portugal report that their working hours are determined entirely by their employers.

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of collective bargaining and a large share of all employees is covered by a collective agreement that ensures decent working conditions. There are often provisions for working hours, vacation, and opportunities for parents to take care of a sick child, which make it easier to reconcile work and family life. Protection of workers' rights and promotion of safe and secure workplaces are prioritised issues in society, which contribute towards sustainable development at large.

Collective agreements and laws

The Nordic model is characterised by collective agreements negotiated between the trade unions and employers' organisations concerning the rights and responsibilities at work. In the Nordic countries, an employee covered by a collective agreement only needs to negotiate the salary and type of employment contract (such as temporary versus permanent position, or full time versus part time) with the employer when starting a new job. The rules concerning parental leave, vacation, pension benefits and flexible work arrangements have already been decided and will be specified in the relevant collective agreement. A collective bargaining system with strong social partners has been a prerequisite to the ability to build resilient and healthy welfare states in the Nordic region.

It is no coincidence that many employees in the Nordic countries benefit from flexible work arrangements. Rather, it is a result of the Nordic labour market model, with strong organisations representing employers and employees. The Nordic countries stand out internationally with their high rates of union membership, meaning they have the power to establish reasonable sector-specific agreements with the respective employer organisations. Flexible solutions related to job security have been of great importance to the Nordic trade union movement, and unions have continuously emphasised the fundamental importance of equal opportunities for women and men. This, along with persistent political will, has contributed to progressive legislation in this area.

In addition to the rights laid down in collective agreements, employees in the Nordic countries are legally protected against discrimination in the workplace and the labour market. Progressive and detailed anti-discrimination laws prohibit salary-related discrimination against an employee who is or has been on parental leave. Also, employers are prohibited from asking a person about pregnancy, family plans or marital status during a job interview, nor can they refuse to offer a position to a qualified job applicant for a pregnancy-related reason.

The right to flexible working hours

A full-time employee in the Nordic countries works for around 40 hours per week, and a large share of employees have some type of flexibility when it comes to their working hours. The exact nature of the flexibility varies depending on the sector and the type of work. Flexible work arrangements may include the ability to work from home or to leave work for a few hours to take one's child to the dentist. Compared with the rest of Europe, people in the Nordic countries are more likely to work from a remote location – an opportunity made possible by the ongoing digitalisation of society.

Besides provisions laid down in collective agreements, the Nordic governments have regulated parents' rights to flexible working hours in law to further help them combine work and family life. In

Sweden, employees with children under eight years of age can reduce their weekly working hours by 25 per cent. There is also an option to take part-time parental leave and thus receive partial parental leave benefits. In Finland parents have the right to work part-time. The exact reduction in working hours is subject to negotiation between employers and employees.

In Norway, employees with children under ten years of age have the right to request a part-time work schedule. However, in both Finland and Norway, an employer can deny such a request if there are compelling business reasons. In Denmark, parents are not legally entitled to flexible work arrangements, but may request such arrangements after returning from parental leave without being disadvantaged at work. In Iceland, employers are legally required to take necessary measures to help employees combine work and family life. However, parents are not entitled to part-time work; instead, such arrangements are subject to negotiation between the employer and the employee. One consequence of this is that many Icelandic women work in the public sector, where it is easier to get a request for part-time work approved.

More work part-time

Many parents in the Nordic countries work part-time. It is particularly common among women. In fact, about one-third of women in the

Family-friendly at work

In Sweden, parents can use their parental leave benefits to shorten their working hours. For example, they can choose to work fewer hours per day and/or take one or a few days off every week – the system is very flexible.

Compared with the European average, people in the Nordic countries (and in particular parents) are twice as likely to work from home.

ALL NORDIC COUNTRIES HAVE LAWS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION AT WORK. The legislation is founded in the ILO's Non-Discrimination Convention (C 111), ratified by all five countries, and, for Denmark, Sweden and Finland, upon EU directives, meaning that discrimination in employment and occupation is prohibited. An employee who has experienced discrimination can report the violation to a government agency. The exact design of the protections available and the structure and powers of government bodies overseeing discrimination issues vary across the countries. In several Nordic countries, employers are required to be proactive in promoting gender equality and equal treatment in order to prevent discrimination.

Nordic equality and anti-discrimination authorities

Denmark: humanrights.dk / ligebehandlingsnaevnet.dk

Faroe Islands: javnstoda.fo

Finland: tasaarvo.fi / syrjinta.fi

Greenland: nali.gl

Iceland: jafnretti.is

Norway: ldo.no

Sweden: do.se

Åland: ombudsman.ax/diskrimineringsombudsman

Source: Equinet 2017

labour force in the Nordic countries work part-time, except in Finland, where it is just one in five. Women in Åland and the Faroe Islands are more likely to work part-time than most other women in Europe. One reason part-time work has become so common in the Nordic region goes back to the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s. The occupations dominated by women are found mainly in the public sector, and since women have traditionally taken a greater responsibility for children and household chores, jobs in this sector were designed accordingly. Before childcare services became widely available, part-time work was often the only realistic option for women who wanted to enter the labour market.

Work flexibility increases with education

Studies show that there is a strong link between an employee's level of education and access to flexible work arrangements. Workers with a university degree tend to have greater control over their working hours and are more likely to occasionally work from home. However work flexibility does not always benefit employees and the effect on gender equality can be ambiguous. Nordic research shows that the trend towards increased flexibility and digitalisation in the workplace can make it harder for the individual worker to draw a distinct line between work-life and home-life, a fact compounded by for example the advance of technology whereby work emails can be accessed anywhere at any time. Employees with care

responsibilities at home may find this particularly challenging.

Women continue to spend more time than men on unpaid household and care work in the Nordic countries. This affects the utilisation of flexible work arrangements. Although both parents have the right to reduce their working hours to take care of their children and families, it is mainly women that work part-time. This often affects their careers and position in society. Part-time work may also have consequences for women's finances, including lower pension savings after retiring. Many part-time working women also say it is difficult to find a full-time job. In some sectors dominated by women, part-time rather than full-time work has become the norm. The likelihood of involuntary part-time work is particularly high for women, less educated workers and foreign-born individuals in the Nordic region.

Nordic challenges

The Nordic countries have come a long way when it comes to flexible work arrangements, yet several important challenges remain. The Nordic region wants to invite others to a discussion on how they can be effectively dealt with.

Sustainable work-life balance

Workplaces are becoming increasingly fast paced and stressful. The opportunity to work

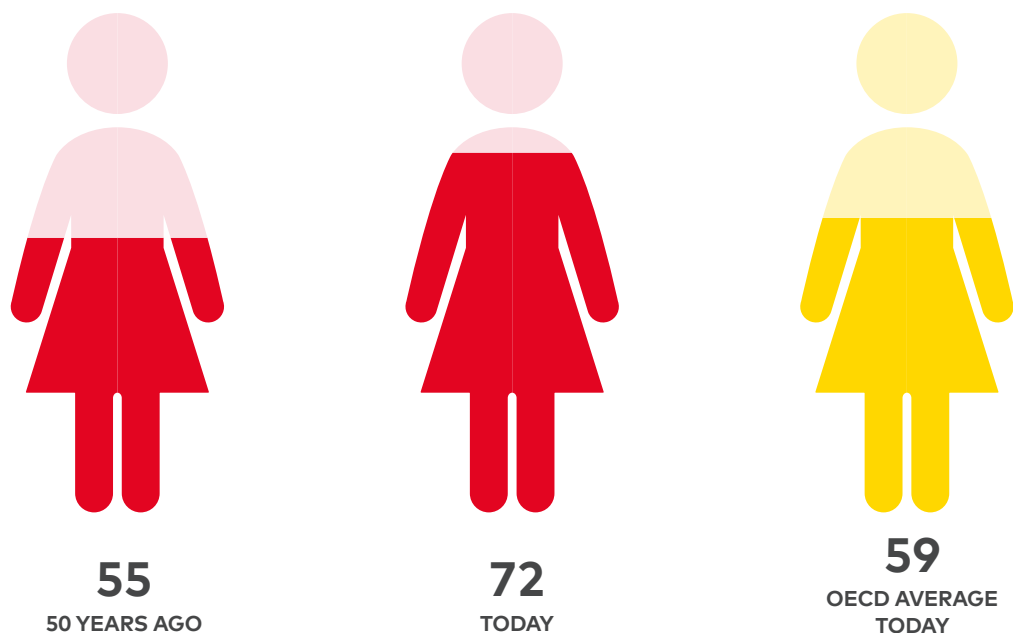
from home or other remote locations does not automatically mean that people work less. How should we achieve a sustainable work-life balance?

Good working conditions

There is an increasing number of workers, in the Nordic countries and globally holding precarious jobs or who are not covered by collective agreements or flexible work

Share of women in work

per cent (2016)



Over the past 50 years, the employment rate for women has increased from 55 per cent to 72 per cent. The increase in Nordic women's employment rate can account for 10-20 per cent of annual GDP per capita growth.

Source: OECD 2018

arrangements. There is often a pattern in terms of who holds these jobs, such as age, gender and immigrant background. How can we ensure an inclusive labour market with good working conditions for everybody?

Flexibility and gender equality. Flexible work arrangements do not automatically translate into increased gender equality at home, particularly where share of domestic work is

concerned. Studies show that women continue to spend more time than men on unpaid housework. How can the work flexibility be arranged so that it helps improve gender equality both at home and in the labour market?

TRUE STORIES

FINLAND: TECH FIRM MAKES FAMILY-FRIENDLINESS A TOP PRIORITY



PHOTO: KARL VILHJÁLMSON

↑ Emilia Kyllönen, HR specialist at Futurice

Finnish technology company Futurice is a world leader when it comes to flexible work arrangements and family-friendly staff policies.

The company has around 300 employees in Finland and over 400 worldwide, of whom 80 per cent are men. Many of them are parents of young children.

'Our employees have flexible working hours as long as they get their work done. If they want to, they can work harder during certain periods and then take some time off,' says Emilia Kyllönen, HR specialist at Futurice.

At Futurice, the staff keep track of and report how much and when they work. However, to keep workers from risking their health and wellbeing, there are some restrictions as to the time of day and number of hours they can work.

Futurice offers vast opportunities for part-time work, regardless of sex, as well as special benefits in connection with parental leave. All fathers receive full pay when they take three weeks' parental leave, which is a more generous policy than that stipulated by the collective agreement for the Finnish IT sector.

'Almost all fathers take advantage of this opportunity and take these weeks off. Many of them also take

longer periods of parental leave,' says Kyllönen.

The company offers parent workers time off to take care of a sick child. Parents can also use a babysitter service paid for by the firm if they need someone to take care of a sick child while they work. During school breaks, parents can bring their children to work, where children's activities are organised when needed.

'We have for example had a coding camp, where an instructor taught the kids basic computer coding.'

To evaluate the efforts and the company's family-friendly practices, Futurice conducts a survey on a regular basis. A special feature of the questionnaire is that their employees' partners also have been asked to respond at times.

'We ask them how well they are able to combine work and family life and what else the company can do to help,' says Kyllönen.

Futurice has fewer staff sick days than the average in Finland. Kyllönen connects this to the company's flexible work arrangements.

'We think it's important to take care of the staff. We believe that the good things we do will come back to the company, that's why we do it,' she says.

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This brief is based on interviews with researchers.

About

Nordic Solutions to Global Challenges is an initiative by the Nordic prime ministers to enable knowledge sharing and exchange under three pillars, namely: Nordic Green, the Nordic Gender Effect and Nordic Food & Welfare. The initiative is part of the Nordic region's effort to promote progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals through the Nordic Council of Ministers, the official arm of Nordic governmental cooperation. The Nordic Gender Effect at Work is the name of the prime ministers' flagship to promote gender equality as a goal in its own right, and as a prerequisite for decent work and economic growth.

This series of briefs was prepared by Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK). NIKK is a knowledge centre, which collects and disseminates Nordic research, knowledge and policy in the area of gender equality.

The briefs describe how the Nordic countries have facilitated women's participation in the labour market and promoted gender equality at large. The introduction provides an overview of the Nordic welfare model and a historical context for the solutions that have been developed in the Nordic region over time. There are four specific briefs, which outline policies and experiences on subsidised childcare for all, shared and paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements and measures to achieve gender balance in leadership and equal opportunities at work. and nikk.no

For more: norden.org/nordicgendereffect and nikk.no

Acknowledgements

The Nordic Council of Ministers would like to acknowledge and give special thanks to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and UN Women for contributing with invaluable feedback to the briefs, and to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for the collaboration on the Global Dialogue on Gender Equality in the World of Work, which provided an invaluable foundation for the series.



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Promoting gender equality at work is not only a matter of rights; it is the smart thing to do from the perspective of inclusive growth. The Nordic region is a case in point, as it has come to represent the 11th largest economy in the world, not despite policy commitments to gender equality and social justice, but because of it. The Nordic countries have robust economies and good living conditions, where both women and men have high labour force participation rates. However, the gender pay gap is persistent and occupational segregation continues to hinder gender equality.

The Nordic Gender Effect at Work briefs share the collective Nordic experience in investing in gender equality including parental leave, childcare, flexible work arrangements, leadership and equal opportunities at work, and seek to make further progress through cooperation.

ANP 2018:780
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