

European Population

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Director General Arni Hole

Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs

CHILDBEARING AND PARENTING IN LOW FERTILITY COUNTRIES:
ENABLING CHOICES

(Ministers, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen)

Thank you for the invitation!

We have read some very interesting and valuable back ground papers that put our minds on the right track.

I will not touch upon the immigration issues, nor the ageing society as such; I will not discuss the pension challenges; but this very day; my Cabinet is receiving a comprehensive study from the Pension Commission; on how to deal with tomorrows issues.

I would like to start with the following

- Norway has a relatively long history of family politics
The first laws concerning children's right came into force as early as 1915. This new legislation ensured that children born out of wedlock were legally recognised as members of the father's family. The law further ensured that all mothers in need, especially unmarried mothers, got some economic support around the time when they gave birth. This was new and radical and the law remained in force until 1956.
- Furthermore, we have a deep and profound belief in and policies for gender equality
It has been the Norwegian (government's) view for several decades that family policy and gender equality are closely connected. The objective is and

has been to enable both women and men to participate in working life on an equal footing and to share work at home. Welfare society must be based on equality between women and men, in the family and in working life, and on children's need for time with both their parents.

- We have a history of child and youth policies

A system of global child benefit was introduced in 1946. The child benefit scheme is today paid to all families with children under 18 years of age.

Norway may be too special to take advice from, says many. May be so. Nevertheless, I have found in the background papers that there is no problem to compare Norway with other countries or to find similarities.

A historical point of departure is useful to understand the Norwegian system; to comprehend the Norwegian landscape, so to speak.

Building the welfare state of Norway following the 2nd WW, is a major route:

- The educational revolution (including financing schemes for all young people), corresponding with the development of the welfare society and the marching in of the women into the labour market¹.

More than one out of five Norwegians is enrolled at the universities. Men and women number equally. In labour force participation, women are almost equal to men. With the growth in educational opportunities and career options, mothers give birth later. Since the beginning of the 1970s, the average childbearing age has increased by approximately four years to 29.9. The average age for the first birth is 27.7. But Norway still has a high fertility level.

- The petrol revenues from the 1970's gave the foundation for a strong optimism in the future and gave many new options for everyone
- The secularisation of society during the 70's, 80's and nineties: No longer a massive religious or societal pressure to get married for pregnant adolescents.

¹ • Today: Women almost equal to men: In 2002 the number of people in employment reached approximately 2.3 million, or 50 per cent of the population. Women accounted for 47 per cent of the workforce. In 2002, the labour force included 69.6 per cent of women and 77.4 per cent of men aged 16 to 74.

Today we experience that 42 per cent of the children born have parents living in cohabitation, 49 per cent have married parents and 9 per cent have a single mother (2002).

- We saw a revision of the abortion law in 1978 introduced women's unconditional right to abortion up to 3 months pregnancy. The freedom to choose to give birth was accompanied by education in reproductive health in primary and secondary school. In 2002 the abortion rate for teenagers was the lowest registered since the law of self-determination for women was implemented.
- Development of the National Insurance Act since the late 60's, with parental benefits, substantial support for single providers, tax redemptions for families, and rights laid down in the Working Environment Act with rights to take paid leave to care for sick children, the right to shorter working hours, the right to extended leave of absence, are of utmost importance.

For the last 20 years Norway could be one of the very few nations with specific Family politics.

When we set up the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs 13 years ago, I would say that we underlined the cross-political - party-consensus on family politics – and equally: A holistic policy for children and youth. This last fact is not much accounted for in the literature I have seen, discussing family affairs; I think it is quite obvious that any nation prioritizing a consistent children policy, will see more children being born. This means a child-conducive environment; a child-perspective mainstreamed throughout society. It would be challenging to see some studies in this field; do child- and youth policies have an impact on the birth rate or not?

Ladies and gentlemen:

I find that some of the background documents for this conference somehow fail to address the importance of gender, and I mean both gender, Not only womens issues ! I would rather say that in pursuing a sustainable family politics you have to integrate and assess the degree of gender equality. The reference to scientific works dealing

with gender equality as a prerequisite for a modern and sustainable family policy, are very few and meagre.

I do not, after having reviewed the Norwegian, Danish, Swedish and other nations' fertility performances, think it is possible to design a future replacement level in European countries without taking gender equality into the studies and practical policies. We truly need a cross-disciplinary approach to the studies in family lives, choices, be that on the micro or macro level. I would strongly advocate to see those two 'fields of studies' together in future analyses. That is: not to view the gender equality issues as solely a question of anti-discrimination-business; and respectively the family issues need to be genderised in a thorough way. As to genderisation; we have to scrutinize men's and boy's roles ; father's roles, and the male role models. There has been very little focus on these matters when discussing family politics, (thanks to the young Swedish gentleman mentioning this yesterday in the post-panel discussion !)I welcome warmly that the UN 's CSW will address this topic in the session in March this year .

The above mentioned, brief historical windows, are among the most obvious and visible causes behind what we experience today:

- We have a relatively high fertility rate
The total fertility rate was in 2002 1.75 children per woman and was slightly lower than for the two previous years. It is too early to say if the decline is a new trend, or if it is due to random circumstances. If we disregard immigration and emigration, the fertility rate in any country must be 2.1 to ensure the long-term natural replacement of the population. Norway has remained below this level since the mid-1970s.
- We see a high participation of mothers in the labour market
Statistics show that 75,8 per cent of women with children aged 0-2 years and 85 per cent of women with children aged 3-6 years were in the labour force in 2001. It has been more common to work full time, but as many as 45 per cent of mothers with children worked part time in 2002.

- More fathers taking part in child care

Fathers have had the possibility since as far back as 1977 of sharing the parental leave period with the mother. Few fathers exercised this option: only 2-3 per cent of fathers took parental leave at the beginning of the 1990s. The introduction of the obligatory paternity quota in 1993 led to a steep increase in the number of fathers taking their four-week leave. In 2002, about 85 per cent of the fathers who were entitled to the paternity quota made use of this right.

I would argue for, and offer an explanation of, the relative success of Norwegian fertility, as such:

- The current parental benefit scheme:

(The right to parental and adoption benefits is laid down in chapter 14 of the National Insurance Act)

The parental benefits period is 42 weeks with full wage compensation or 52 weeks with eighty per cent wage compensation.

Women who have not earned the right to parental benefits receive a lump sum grant, (which amounts to NOK 33,182 per child in 2003 (=3 904 EURO)).

Four weeks of the parental leave period are reserved for the father. These four weeks are not normally transferable to the mother and, if the father does not use them, they are lost.

- Fathers who are not entitled to the paternity quota because the mother has not earned the right may still be entitled to parental benefits based on their own eligibility. This is conditional on the need for care of the child, either because the mother returns to work or studies after delivery or because she is too ill to take care of the baby herself.
- The right to leave of absence
(The right to leave of absence is laid down in Section 31 of the Working Environment Act)

In addition to the year of paid leave, each parent is entitled to one year of leave without pay. This reform also has a clear gender equality profile. If the parents want to stay at home until the child is 3 years old, the father must take his share of the care.

In addition to the paternity quota, fathers (or any other person close to the mother) are entitled to two weeks leave without pay in connection with the birth, regardless if the mother has been employed or not.

- The right to shorter working hours

(The right to shorter working hours is laid down in Section 46A of the Working Environment Act)

The rights related to leave also include the right to work shorter hours for employees who are responsible for the care of young children. Also so-called flexible hours, are very important to parents.

Ladies and gentlemen; Finally I would cite some of our further objectives:

- Last April the Cabinet presented a White Paper on family politics to the Parliament, with the title: The obligations of family life and parenthood with a focus on family life, seen very much from the child's perspective, but also discussing important items like the legal status of cohabitants, how to combat violence in the family, all kinds of support to families, as well as counselling and child care.
- The White Paper focuses also on gender equality within the family: To give the father possibilities to use more time with the children; for instance by expanding today's fathers quota. Care work in the home is an 'investment' in the children, the marriage and the family life! The Parliament agreed upon the expanding of the fathers quota, and also to focus on the role of men.

Realistic seen, this wanted change within the home, also has to do with equal pay for women's work in the labour market, the possibility for women also to be the 'bread-winners' outside the home if so wanted, making careers and good wages. This is a political issue in Norway.

- To give the parents an opportunity to choose whether to stay at home the first three years of the child's life or to go to work and make use of one of the State-subsidised day-care centre places (appr. 66 % of the children 1-5 years of age are offered a place), the Cash Benefit Scheme was introduced in 1998 to complement and use in combination with, the day-care centers. To make the right to choose real, we are now building day-care centers to meet all the demands from the parents of small children (appr. 80 per cent of the children). This task is today one of the most profiled political issues of the Cabinet, and also in the Parliament. The completion of the Day-care-sector, would also bring gender equality many, many steps forward. And hopefully, the fertility rate will rise .
- The White Paper states that **parenthood is a lifelong project** to secure that the child enjoys the right to two parents, even if those two do not live together.

Even if the parents are not married, but cohabitants (as many young people are in Norway today ,when they have their first child), the Government wants to make professional counselling and mediating compulsory, before partners decide to break up. Mediation is today compulsory only to married couples with children below 16 years of age.

- Another suggestion is to give every couple, married or cohabitants, a gift from the Government when they have their first child: A Family Life Guidance Course, free of charge. The Parliament has agreed.

I believe that this 'web' of arrangements, schemes and legal measures, together with at strong belief in further development of a welfare society, accounts for the fertility rate in Norway. It is a combination of individual choices, a macro infrastructure provided for (one has to qualify for most of it) and future prospects for the young, (as a low unemployment rate). A core value is that of gender equality.

Thank you for your attention.