The Development of Women’s Studies/Gender Studies in Scandinavian Social Science

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1. The Emergence of Women’s Studies in the 1970s and 80’s - from opposition to acknowledgement

Women’s Studies developed as a discipline at the universities in all the five Nordic countries during the 1970s and 80s. Following the strong second wave of feminist mobilization in this period, the pressure for the development of scientific teaching and research about women’s position in society was growing. As late as the 1960s, university students in the social sciences did not receive any teaching about women’s position and gender relations in society as part of their studies. The basis of this negligence was no doubt that ‘women’ or ‘the family’ were mostly seen as ‘natural’ phenomena without any interest for the (male dominated) universities. The first Women’s Studies groups were formed by younger teachers together with students, often with a background in the feminist movement.

In the beginning, the opposition to Women’s Studies as a university subject was severe. Women’s Studies were accused of being ‘political’ and ‘un-scientific’. Feminist scholars answered that male dominated science was itself biased and gender-blind. This was not primarily a moral argument. Instead, it was argued that the scientific quality is suffering,
when old prejudice prevents researchers from seeing the whole picture. For instance, how could economists make a valid study of demand and supply of workers in the labour marked, if the systematic sex segregation of the workplaces and the gender related wage differences were not included in the studies?

The first scholars in Women’s Studies had a hard time getting positions at the universities. Valuable help was obtained from the parliaments, since feminist politicians in most of the Nordic countries pushed their governments to provide money for temporary positions and chairs in this new discipline. Grants were also given in support of networks for feminist scholars, the establishment of scientific journals for Women’s Studies, an archive for the history of women’s movements, information centers for gender research – and, first in Denmark, a Women’s Museum. This was an invaluable support during the first difficult years.

From the 1970s and 80s Women’s Studies, later called Gender Studies, developed all over the world, and today Gender Studies is an acknowledged discipline with a wealth of research centers and networks. At a specific university, it may take the form of an interdisciplinary university center or a feminist research networks within a faculty or a discipline – or both at the same time. Today, there are several interdisciplinary journals in gender studies, such as *International Journal of Feminist Studies and Women's Studies International Forum*, as well journals within specific disciplines, such as *Politics & Gender; Journal of Women, Politics and Policy; Feminist Economics* or area study journals such as *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*. A mounting number of PhD dissertations are written in gender studies, showing the strong interest among younger scholars for gender studies.

All over the world, and also in the Nordic countries, Women’s Studies came out of the women’s movement, where there always was a strong urge to understand why women are oppressed and how male dominance can be changed and has been altered. The Nordic countries, the ‘Sex Role Debate’ of the 1960s started a new, intensive debate. With its focus on socialization, expectances and norms, the research in sex roles tried to answer this question: Why is inequality between women and men still so widespread, when formal equality has been reached and previous inequalities in the law has been removed? A seminal book, *Kvinnors liv och arbete* (‘Women’s Lives and Work’, not published in English) was published 1962 as the result of a Swedish-Norwegian research project (Edmund Dahlström et al, SNS Förlag). This book represented the new wave of research and the beginning of Women’s Studies/Gender Studies in the Nordic countries. Further, in 1970, the Norwegian researcher, Harriet Holter published her book, *Sex Roles and Social structure*, which marked the transition from sex role research in education to a more comprehensive view of gender as a social structure in society at large.
The 1970-80s: Is the (welfare)state good for women?

In the Nordic countries, second wave feminism\(^1\) from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s, was mostly leftist in its orientation like the 68-movements and the student movements in general. But it was also a radical feminist movement, which revolted both against the negligence of almost any women’s perspective by the neo-Marxian ideology of that time, and against the actual exclusion of women from the leadership of movements. Women were ‘tired of making tea for the revolution’ and being ‘the liberated sex objects available for the male leadership’ (Dahlerup 1986).

Because of this close connection between the first scholars in Women’s Studies and the Feminist Movement, the ideas of the movement were reflected in the this new scholarship: ‘Women’s Movement and Women’s Oppression under Capitalism’ or ‘The Exploitation of Women in the labour market’ or ‘The Role of the Family in the Political Economy’. As it is revealed by the scarcity of titles on the Mapping List from the first decade, only few studies at that time were published in English. Even if the Nordic scholars closely followed what was written in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Germany and France, most publications were written in one of the five Nordic languages, Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish and were perceived as an important input in the new scholarly debate in the home country or in the Nordic countries. The Mapping, which for the sake of international understanding, only shows Nordic scholarly works written in English, thus depicts the gradual internationalization of Women’s Studies/Gender Studies in the Nordic countries, when more and more works were published in English.

Nordic second wave feminism from the 1970s and 80s were critical to the state, which was scrutinized from a leftist perspective. Paradoxically, this happened during the period, which saw a strong expansion of the Nordic welfare state with child care, individualized social benefits, abolishing of the man as the head of the family, unemployment benefits to part-time workers (mostly women) etc. It was said that women had just exchanged one dependency, namely of the husband, for a new dependency of the state. However, when neo-liberal forces started to attack the welfare state, the historically has been developed by the dominant Social Democratic parties in the Nordic countries, it became important for feminist scholars to defend the welfare state, since an extended welfare state was and is considered fundamental for equality between men and women. ‘Learning to live with the state’ was a typical title of those days.

\(^1\) The first wave of feminism in the Nordic countries was movement just before and after the turn of the previous century and up to World War I, when the suffrage was won.
3. ‘State Feminism’

Helga Hernes’ book from 1987, Welfare State and Women Power. Essays in State Feminism represented a turning point. Helga Hernes was one of the leading scholars behind the breakthrough of Women’s Studies in Norway. She later became deputy foreign minister of Norway representing the Social Democratic party. The concept of ‘state feminism’ was originally used in a negative sense – how can a patriarchal state be ‘feminist’? Later, however, it became a commonly used term for gender equality policies, which were developed and gained its own public institutions during the 1970s-90 in all the Nordic countries, e.g. Gender Equality Ombudsmen (S, N, F), Equal Status Councils (all countries), Gender equality units in the government or even a minister for gender equality (all countries) and many Gender Equality Committees at local and regional level. Today, following the new intersectional perspective, many of these institutions have changed from only dealing with gender into joint institutions for dealing with complaints and problems on account of all types of discrimination (Borchorst et al 2012). As the Mapping list shows, the public gender equality policies have been being subject to numerous critical studies by gender researchers.

4. Women in politics

Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers, the formal structure of corporation between the five small Nordic countries, has been instrumental for a number of joint Nordic research projects on women in the labour market, sex segregation, gender and education, and women in politics. A joint Nordic research project on the influence of women’s organizations, on women’s political representation and gender equality policies resulted in the book Det uferdige demokratiet (1983), published in English 1985 as Unfinished Democracy. Women in Nordic Politics (by Haavio-Mannila et al).

In 1999, another joint Nordic research project on women in politics was issued, again financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers: Christina Bergqvist et al: Equal Democracies? Gender and Politics in the Nordic Countries (apart from English, also published in Finnish and a Scandinavian edition, i.e. in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish).²

During this period, the Nordic countries became the leading countries in the world in terms of women’s parliamentary representation – in the 1980s the Nordic countries (with the exception of Iceland) was the first in the world to pass the 30 percent threshold. Today almost 40 countries from all over the globe have obtained more than 30 percent women in their parliament. While the world average today is 22 percent, the average of women’s share in the

² The languages of the three Scandinavian countries, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, are very close and can – with some efforts – be understood across the borders.
Nordic parliaments is 42 percent. Thus the Nordic countries is still the leading region when it comes to women’s representation in parliament, but be the adoption of electoral gender quotas several countries from the Global South have now also reached the top, and as for 2015 it is Rwanda and Bolivia, which are topping the world ranking order (see www.ipu.org).

The most recent joint publication on women in politics, now also including women in business, and again initiated and financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers is Kerstin Niskanen (ed.), Gender and Power in the Nordic Countries – with focus on politics and business, published by the Nordic Gender Institute in 2011 -  [http://www.nikk.no/wp-content/uploads/NIKKpub2011_broschyr_K%C3%B8n-og-magt_Gender-Power.pdf](http://www.nikk.no/wp-content/uploads/NIKKpub2011_broschyr_K%C3%B8n-og-magt_Gender-Power.pdf)

Theoretically, Nordic research on women in politics has pointed to the political parties as the real ‘gatekeepers’ to elected position. When the voter enters the polling station, the names of the candidates have already been decided – in party systems like the Nordic, by various nominating bodies within the political parties. Instead of blaming women for their under-representation, Nordic research has scrutinized the selection and nomination process within the political parties (see e.g. Skjeie 1992; Dahlerup & Leyenaar 2013; Freidenvall 2013, Freidenvall et al 2014). These scholarly works no doubt have been supportive of the demands made by women’s organizations and women’s groups within the political party committees for enhanced representation of women in Nordic politics – today as a demand for parity: ‘No real democracy without equal representation of women and men’.

5. The Gender Power System

New concepts such as ‘gender regime’ or ‘gender order’ were developed in Anglo-Saxon research literature to replace the older concept of ‘the patriarchal system’. In the Nordic context, the Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman in 1990 launched the concept of genus systemet, which can be translated into The Gender System (Hirdman 1994). Hirdman wrote this as member of the research team behind the comprehensive, public ‘Power Investigation Commission’. According to Hirdman, the system is based on two sets of logics: Firstly, that of a systematic segregation between women and men in all spheres of society; secondly on male supremacy, which implies that all what men are do is valued higher in society than what women are and do, and all or most top positions are dominated by men. One may also label these two principles the horizontal and the vertical dimension of male supremacy, respectively. This concept was soon picked up in the public discourse in Sweden.

Also in Sweden, a large research project on women’s position in society was published in the last part of the 1990s. This project, which was initiated and paid by the Swedish government resulted in the report series, Kvinnomaktutredningen (The Women and Power Investigation), which proved the continuing inequality between women and men in most spheres of society.
It was argued than present inequalities are not just historical left-overs, which eventually will disappear. Inequalities are not just the result of traditional norms and old prejudice. Rather, inequality is being reproduced again and again also in modern settings. In society, women meet structural barriers, which it is the responsibility of the state to remove. From this investigation, the concept könsmaktsordning (in English the gender power system) entered the public discourse in Sweden in the 1990s. These rather radical concepts were eventually adopted by the political parties, and since the end of the 1990s, most political parties in Sweden have labelled themselves ‘feminists’ in their programs and election platforms, that is, all left, green and liberal parties, but the Conservative Party, The Christian Democratic Party and the newcomer since 2010, the anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats have refrained from using such feminist concepts.

It is being discussed to what extent this should be seen as just lip service or as real ideological change? This remarkable development is special to Sweden. The new government, which was formed in 2014 as a coalition of the Social-Democratic Party and the Green Party, and consists of 50-50% male and female ministers, calls itself a ‘feminist government’ and labels its foreign policy a ‘feminist foreign policy’. This is an example of linguistic and conceptual, yes, to some extend even ideological influence from feminist research into political life.

6. Do women make a difference politics?

‘What is the connection between high representation of women and the development of the extended Nordic welfare state?’ How to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the growing number of Nordic female politicians? These are heavily debated questions in Nordic gender research, but has in fact been discussed also in the public ever since women got the formal right to vote and to stand for parliamentary elections in Finland 1906, Norway 1913, Denmark and Iceland 1915 and finally in Sweden 1919. It is a contested issue, may be because people use disparate evaluation criteria and have divergent expectations – even among researchers.

In contemporary research, a distinction is made between descriptive representation (the numbers), substantive representation (the policy content, acting for women?) and symbolic representation of women – or of minorities. All Nordic countries except for Sweden have or have had their first woman prime ministers, and researcher are now studying the constrains they work under as ‘the first’. An interesting question is, moreover, how these first women leaders y themselves chose to construct their role as leaders and which politics they conduct.

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Nordic scholars have been very active in contemporary research about the adoption and implementation of gender quotas – today a world-wide trend (Dahlerup 2006, Freidenvall & Dahlerup 2013). Also in the Nordic countries, the gender quotas are used as an equality policy measure, however, always controversial. The use of gender quotas is most widespread in Norway, and less used – and quite unpopular – in Denmark.

The Nordic countries make use of gender quotas for several public arenas: By some political parties in the form of voluntary party quotas, but never by law binding for all parties (previously in Denmark, today in Norway, Iceland and Sweden). For public commission and boards since the 1980s (all countries). And most recently for the Steering Boards of the biggest companies (by law, Norway and Iceland). Nordic scholars have studied the implementation and effect of gender quotas closely.

Norway was first in the world to introduce binding gender quotas by law for biggest companies, public as well as private. Researchers and politicians from all over the world are asking questions about the effect of the Norwegian law: ‘Did the owners of the companies protest against the law (YES). ‘Could they find enough qualified women to fill the required minimum of 40 % of both women and men on all steering boards’ (Yes). Many Norwegian researchers are occupied with research projects on different aspects of the new law, which today has been taken up by Iceland, France, Spain, Portugal and others (see for instance Mari Teigen 2011 and 2012). All quota provisions in the Nordic countries are gender neutral, i.e. formulated as a minimum (and thereby also a maximum) of both sexes.

8. Empirical research on women’s in public life.

Empirical research on women’s and men’s position in public life has always been a central to Women’s Studies/Gender Studies in the Nordic countries. Theoretical embedded, empirical research has been important for the development of gender equality policies. Consequently, women’s organizations and feminist politicians, female as well as male, are very interested in and make use of such research. Nordic governments themselves encourage and sometimes finance such investigations. However, it is important, that research is conducted independently of the state and of political parties. Most Nordic research is thus financed by the independent research councils or funds, and by the universities. Here are some examples of empirical gender research.

Research on women in the labour marked. This has from the very beginning been a central topic for Women’s Studies/Gender Studies, since women’s gainful employment is seen as key to women’s empowerment and gender equality. Among the research themes are wage
differences, recruitment and career patterns, conflicts between family life and work, and more recently, multiple factors of discrimination (intersectionality), see the mapping, for instance Gonäs & Karlsson 2006).

**Research on gender & the welfare state.** The extended welfare state, which was first developed in the 1930s and expanded considerably after World War II, is considered important for women’s empowerment and gender equality. The welfare state provides public day care for children, care for the elderly, support for single mothers, child allowances, unemployment benefits, support under sickness, maternity leave, today parental leave, means-tested social benefits for those who cannot support themselves and their families, free education (schools and universities, but not free kindergartens) and free hospital service and maternity care. All these welfare provisions make it possible for women to live an independent life, and for women with children to leave a violent husband. However, welfare provisions are constantly subject to change and cuts, especially in times of economic crisis. Thus, this is a key issue for gender research in all Nordic countries (see e.g. Haavio-Mannila & Kauppinen 1992; Anttonen et al 2013; Borchorst & Freidenvall 2012 in the Mapping).

**Research on care work.** Women’s unpaid work is also an important issue for Gender Studies, which has taken a special interest in the transformation from the care work done by women in the home to care as a public service – also mostly done by women – as for instance, child care (public child care now accessible for all pre-school children); care for the elderly and for disabled citizens. The low pay and heavy work for care workers in the public sector have been key issues in gender research (see e.g. Dahl, Keraenen and Kovalainen, eds. 2011).

**Gender & education.** Gender (in)equality in education, be it pre-school, school, high school, vocational training or at the universities, has been subject to theoretical studies, often in combination with practical educational experiments. Why are sex roles so persistent? How to empower girls in natural science education, e.g. in physics and math? Why are there still so few women professors at the universities, in spite of the fact that female students are now in majority among university students? Cohort-analyses have shown that male PhDs still have considerably higher chances to become professors than women with a PhD examine in the same subject and from the same cohort.

**Women & power.** This is an overreaching theme in gender studies, relevant to specific fields or for studied of society in general. In the feminist movements one often hear the argument, that women are only given access to institutions, which are losing power (‘power out, then women in’). Or it is said, that when women have entered an occupation, for instance as medical doctors, or an arena such as parliaments, these occupations or institutions will start losing power in society (‘women in, power out’). Researchers have tried hard to confirm or reject this theory of shrinking institutions, but have concluded that it is too vague as an
overall theory, and that such mechanisms should be studied within specific fields or arenas over a span of years (Skeije 1992).


With the general ‘linguistic turn’, discourse analysis became an extensively used approach also in Nordic gender research within the social sciences, here as everywhere else inspired by Laclau & Mouffe, Fairclough, Foucault and others. Previous analysis of ideas has to some extent been replaced by various types of discourse analysis with focus on the very construction of different discourses, be it the dominant discourses or sub-discourses in a society.

The Australian political scientist, Carol Bacchi has inspired many researchers in the Nordic countries with her ‘What’s the Problem Approach?’ 4 Bacchi argues that central to policy-making research is to focus on how the problem is represented in the discourse. Identifying this representation is important for the understanding of specific policies, e.g. a law. The problem representation frames the choice of solutions available to the actors. In a comment in the journal, *Nora, Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, Carol Bacchi makes an interesting distinction between on one hand discourses as dominant understandings in society and on the other hand strategic discourses used in the political debate by political actors5. The ‘What’s the Problem Approach’ has been used in Nordic research, for instance in research on women’s political power and political representation. If women’s under-representation is diagnosed as caused by women’s lack of political interest or skills, the solution should be to educate the women, as we see it in the many capacity-buildings projects all over the globe. But if, alternatively, the lack of inclusion of women by male dominated political institutions, especially the political parties, is seen as the main cause of the lack of women in politics, then reforms of the selections procedures of the political parties, is a relevant solution to the problem, for instance by the adoption of gender quotas (see e.g. Dahlerup & Freidenvall 2005).


During the last decades, post-modernism and post-structuralism has become highly influential, especially among younger gender scholar, inspired by among others Judith Butler and her theories of gender constructions and gender performativity. How gender is ‘done’ or the ‘doing’ of gender is central to this research (see e.g. Bach 2015). But also inspired by Carol Bacchi (see e.g. Rönnblom 2012). Queer-theory and transgender theory have challenged binary perceptions of gender, and thereby also challenged older feminist theory. These new trends have been strongest within the humanities, but can also be found within newer social science, not least in studies about the body and sexuality. These new research

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approaches are strongly represented in contemporary issues of the Danish Gender Study journal, *Kvinder, køn og forskning* (*Women, Gender and Research*), which has many articles in English. Special issues have been all in English, for instance no 1, 2015: *Gender Dynamics. Chinese-Nordic Perspectives*. Also in the Swedish journal, *Tidsskrift för Genusvetenskap* (*Journal of Gender Research*) these new research approaches are represented. The journals can be found on-line.

**11. The Advantage of cross-national comparisons**

Seen from the outside, the five Nordic countries have followed a rather similar line of development. Consequently, it is common to speak about the Nordic model, characterized by a solid democracy, strong social movements, extended welfare states and high level of gender equality. However, there are interesting differences between the Nordic countries in terms of both policies and discourses. Consequently, Nordic comparisons have been a fruitful research approach for Nordic feminist scholars. One special advantage of cross-national comparisons between rather similar countries (the so-called most-similar approach) is that such comparisons make it possible to identify structural differences, which politicians and the general public is not aware of. Comparisons of implementation and impact of legislation on gender equality has also proved relevant. The official co-operation between the Nordic parliaments and governments in the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers has, as mentioned earlier, been instrumental for such comparative research projects. Unfortunately, the Nordic co-operation is presently subject to budget cuts.

Feminist advocates, supported by feminist research, have with great success ‘played the Nordic card’, i.e. used the development in the other Nordic countries as support for demands of reforms in their own country:

- ‘Sweden and Norway always have fifty percent women and men in their governments. Why don’t we have the same in Denmark and Finland?’

- ‘Norway has introduced quotas by law for the boards of the biggest companies, private as well as public, minimum 40 % of each gender, and Iceland is following Norway, so we should do the same in the other Nordic countries!’

- ‘In Sweden, they criminalized the buying of sex (prostitution), and Norway has followed suit, we should do the same in Denmark and Finland!’

- ‘In Iceland, fathers take out the highest share of the total parental leave, because 3 month are reserved for the fathers, so such measures actually work’.

In this way, cross-country comparisons are highly relevant as a research strategy - and as arguments for women’s organizations in their attempt to influence public decision-making.

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6 “TRANSGEN - Gender Mainstreaming European Transport Research and Policy. Building the Knowledge Base and Mapping Good Practices” is a large research project, financed by the EU (www.sociology.ku.dk/koordinationen/transgen). The FEMCIT project has been another large EU-funded research project with Nordic participation and leadership, see www.femcit.org.
For further information on Nordic gender research:

See the list of publications in the **Mapping Scandinavian Research about Women in Public Life, published in English 1970-2015.**

*Nordic:*

NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender, [www.nikk.no](http://www.nikk.no)


*Denmark:*

Coordination for Gender Research: [http://koensforskning.soc.ku.dk/english/](http://koensforskning.soc.ku.dk/english/)


Kvinfo’s data base link: [http://minibib.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?dscnt=0&fromLogin=true&dtmp=1432112583395&vid=KVB&vid=KVB&backFromPreferences=true](http://minibib.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?dsnt=0&fromLogin=true&dtmp=1432112583395&vid=KVB&vid=KVB&backFromPreferences=true)

*Finland:*

To find out more about Finnish gender research it is possible to turn to HILMA – the University Network for Women’s Studies:


*Iceland:*

To find out more about Icelandic gender research turn to RIKK – Institute for Gender, Equality and Difference, University of Iceland: [https://rikk.hi.is/centre-for-womens-and-gender-research-at-the-university-of-iceland/](https://rikk.hi.is/centre-for-womens-and-gender-research-at-the-university-of-iceland/)

*Norway:*

Information Centre for Gender Research in Norway: [http://eng.kilden.forskningsradet.no/](http://eng.kilden.forskningsradet.no/)

*Sweden:*

Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research: [http://genus.se](http://genus.se)

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Among her recent books are *Women, Quotas and Politics* (ed., Routledge 2006), *Breaking Male Dominance in Old Democracies* (eds. with Monique Leyenaar, Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas* (Int. IDEA, IPU and Stockholm University, 2013). Drude Dahlerup is one of the 25 members of the Global Civil Society Advisory Group to the executive director of UN Women.

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