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GENDER EQUALITY IN NORDIC ACADEMIA:
ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES

Liisa Husu

Abstract

The five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – are considered high achievers in global comparisons of overall gender equality of society (World Economic Forum, 2017a). Political will in the region to advance gender equality in academia is high. Gender equality promotion in higher education, academia and research has been on the national policy agendas for four decades, since the late 1970s and early 1980s, through various national level interventions and measures, especially so in Finland, Norway and Sweden. Gender equality is addressed in the university legislation in Norway and Sweden, and in Finland the Gender Equality and Anti-Discrimination legislation especially gives educational institutions a duty to promote equality and prevent discrimination. Universities in Finland, Norway and Sweden have for decades been legally obliged to engage in equality planning. These three countries also show the highest proportion of women on scientific boards in the European Union, approaching gender parity, and the highest proportion of women among university Vice-Chancellors in the EU (EC, 2015). Despite this, unequal gendered structures in academic careers and gender segregation of disciplinary fields prevail. Taking the proportion of women among full professors as one indicator of gender equality in academia, the Nordic region does not excel in a European comparison, neither in the share of women in the professoriate, nor the pace of diminishing the gender gap among professors. This article interrogates the Nordic paradox of high overall gender equality in society, political will and active policy regulation to
advance gender equality in academia and science, on the one hand, and the unequal gendered structures in academic careers and inequalities in resource allocation, including research funding, on the other. Some differences and similarities between the five Nordic countries will be highlighted and discussed, along with historical developments, policy landscapes, and continuing resistances to advancement of gender equality, both within and outside academia.

Introduction

This chapter explores gender equality, gender relations and gender paradoxes in academia and research in the context of the Nordic countries, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, five small countries in Northern Europe. The Nordic countries have a joined identity as small welfare states, and collaborate extensively regionally in different policy areas through various Nordic platforms such as Nordic Council of Ministers, but also belong to different alliances. Three of the countries, namely, Finland, Denmark and Sweden, belong to the European Union; Norway and Iceland are affiliated via the EES; and three countries, Denmark, Norway and Iceland, belong to NATO, with Finland and Sweden being non-allied.

Both when it comes to gender relations and gender equality in society, as well as to academia and research, Nordic countries are a globally interesting context for research and for policy analysis. They have reached a high level of overall gender equality, and can be characterized as research-intensive, competitive societies with high educational attainment. Exploring changing gender relations in academia in this kind of relatively gender-aware and research-intensive context will increase understanding of the dynamics of persistent gendering of academia and research, robustly documented in international and Nordic research during the past decades (ETAN 2000; Caprile et al., 2012; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Bergman et al., 2013; Strid & Husu, 2013; Fox et al., 2017).
The five Nordic countries can be characterized as global and European leaders when it comes to overall gender equality of society (World Economic Forum, 2017a; EIGE, 2015). Furthermore, the five countries have also been rated in a global comparison as “the best countries to be a mother” (Save the Children, 2015). In the Global Gender Gap Report 2017 Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden were ranked in the top five countries globally with smallest societal gender gaps (World Economic Forum, 2017a). Sweden, Denmark and Finland were topping the European Union Gender Equality Index 2013, comparing the state of gender equality in the 28 EU member states in the arenas of work, knowledge, time, money, health and power (EIGE, 2013). However, despite the high level of overall gender equality, several gender equality challenges continue to prevail in the Nordic region, such as gender segregation in education and labour market, gender pay gap, and violence against women.

In the European gender equality comparison, high level of national investment in Research and Development (R&D) was found to be correlated with high level of societal gender equality. In a European context but also globally, the Nordic countries, especially Sweden, are among the top investors in R&D (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, the countries have ranked high in global competitiveness comparisons, with Sweden and Finland in the top ten, and Denmark and Norway 11th and 12th in 2017/2018 (World Economic Forum, 2017b).

The Nordic region is characterized by high educational level of the population, especially women. Women have made great gains in tertiary education in Nordic region. The proportion of female adult population (25-64) with tertiary level education in Finland was third highest, 50.8 %, in the OECD countries in 2016, with Sweden, Iceland and Norway approaching 50% as well (OECD Adult education level, 2018). The proportion of women in EU-28 countries among the working-age population (15-64) with tertiary education was the highest, after Estonia, in Finland (42.9%) in 2017, followed closely by Iceland, Sweden and Norway and somewhat lower in Denmark, EU-28 average being 29.9% (Eurostat, 2017). However, it should
be noted that the Nordic educational landscape is, at the same time, characterized by persistent horizontal gender segregation.

When looking at academic careers in universities, the picture changes. Women have increasingly entered university careers, and nearly every other university teacher in the Nordic region is currently female, but this is also the case in Serbia and many other EU countries (EC, 2015). Furthermore, if the proportion of women among full professors (the highest academic position in each country) is used as an indicator of gender equality in academia and science, the Nordic region does not excel in a European comparison, having reached only somewhat higher level than the European (EU-28) countries on average. In Finland and Iceland, 26.6% respectively 26.3 % of full professors were women in 2013, in Norway 25.2 and Sweden 23.8% (EC, 2015). This is somewhat higher than the EU average 20.9%, but countries like Croatia, Latvia, Romania and Ireland had higher proportions of female professors than the Nordic countries. Gender change in the professoriate is slow. Even in Sweden, where gender equality has been strongly on the higher education agenda for decades, the growth of women’s share among full professors has been only by ca one per cent unit a year (UKÄ, 2016).

However, the scientific arena where Nordic countries do excel in a European and international perspective is the gender balance in scientific and academic leadership and decision-making. When 85% of European universities are still led by male Rectors and Vice Chancellors, the Nordic universities (nearly all of them public institutions) show a clearly more gender balanced pattern in leadership positions. Fifty percent of Swedish, 40% of Finnish, 37.5 % of Norwegian, 33% of Icelandic, and 31% of Danish universities had female Rectors (highest leadership position corresponding Vice-Chancellor in some countries) in 2014 (EU, 2015). When it comes to high level scientific boards and committees, as monitored by European gender and science statistics, Nordic countries again show gender balanced patterns, with Sweden 55%, Finland 50%, Iceland 47%, Denmark 43% and Norway at 40% women on these boards, in contrast to
EU-28 country average 28% in 2010 (EU, 2015). Notably this development is not anything new in the Nordic region but the scientific boards have been gender balanced since the early 2000s, in many Nordic countries even earlier (see EC, 2003, 2009). Women have thus reached significant representation among the gatekeepers who lead academic institutions and shape the scientific agenda in the Nordic countries.

**Political will**

Nordic women entered the public political sphere early from a global perspective: Finland was the first country in the world to give women full political rights in 1906, and Finland, Denmark and Sweden appointed first female ministers to national Governments in the 1920s. Currently, the political power in the Nordic region is more evenly shared between women and men than elsewhere in Europe or in a global comparison. Iceland, Norway and Finland ranked as top one, four and five in the dimension “political empowerment” in the 2017 Global Gender Gap index (World Economic Forum, 2017a.) Finland and Iceland have had a democratically elected female head of state (President), and all Nordic countries except Sweden have had or currently have a female Prime Minister. The Nordic parliaments have for decades had high proportions of women in the parliament from a global perspective, and are approaching gender balance with a regional proportion of women in parliaments 41,4%, when the global average of female representation is 23,8% (IPU, 2018). Women MPs have formed a critical mass in the Nordic parliaments for quite a long period, and many of them have promoted gender equality in their parliamentary work, often joining forces across party boundaries. The national Governments in Iceland, Sweden and Norway are gender balanced in 2018, and Denmark and Finland have 41% respectively 35% of women in their national Governments; several previous Finnish Governments having been gender balanced as well (EIGE Gender Statistics database, 2018).
Gender equality has been on the political agenda in the Nordic countries since the 1960s, and national gender equality machineries, policy programmes and legislation were introduced from the early 1970s onwards. Gender equality legislation was introduced first in Iceland 1976, followed by Norway in 1978, Sweden 1980, Finland 1987 and Denmark 1988, and the equality legislation in each of the countries has been amended several times. Gender equality is also specifically mentioned in the Norwegian and Swedish University laws, the Swedish School Act and the Norwegian Education Act, and in Finland, the duty of educational institutions to promote gender equality is included in the Equality Act.

Nordic countries are small, and this is why regional co-operation in the Nordic area between the five countries has been significant for knowledge transfer and policy transfer. Governmental co-operation around gender equality started for over 40 years ago, in 1974 as the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the first joint Nordic gender equality program was launched at the end of the 1980s (NIKK, 2018). This Nordic governmental co-operation around gender equality has also provided support to gender research, in terms of large research projects such as: *Unfinished Democracy* on women in politics in the Nordic countries (1985, original 1983), and *Nordic Women’s Literature History* published in five volumes, followed by an extensive website (see [http://nordicwomensliterature.net/](http://nordicwomensliterature.net/)); the Nordic coordinator position for Women’s Studies, and since 1995 a Nordic Gender Research Institute, NIKK (1995-2011) replaced in 2012 by a “new NIKK”, Nordic Information on Gender, that is more policy and information focused than the original NIKK (see NIKK, 2018).

**National initiatives**

At the national level, in the field of gender in academia and research, the political will to promote gender equality has been evidenced by numerous national level publicly funded activities and initiatives, starting in late 1970s and early 1980s. Among the first of these was,
in the aftermath of the UN International Women’s Year 1975, that the Norwegian national Research Council NAVF established in 1977 a National Secretariat for Women’s studies, the aim of which was to promote research on women (Haavind, 1997) and later also women in research more broadly. This publicly funded secretariat was active for 20 years, until 1998, after which an information and documentation centre for gender research, KILDEN, was established within the national Research Council (see www.kilden.forskningsradet.no). In 2004, the promotion of gender equality in research in Norway was given a boost by establishment of a national committee for this aim by the Ministry of Education. The later developments of this committee is discussed further below.

In Sweden and Finland, the first high-level national reports on the position of women in research were published in the early 1980s, notably earlier than similar reports elsewhere in the European Union countries (see ETAN, 2000). The Ministry of Education in Finland set up in 1981 a high-level committee, consisting of prominent female scholars from different disciplinary fields, to review obstacles in women’s research careers. The Committee produced an extensive report with recommendations, with a follow-up 1986 (see Husu 2007). Equal representation of women and men in the national Research Council, the Academy of Finland, was one of the recommendations. In Sweden, a report initiated by the national gender equality committee on conditions of gender equality research and women in research, called “If half were women …” was published around the same time, in 1983. The committee consisted of politicians, with an advisory group of women researchers (SOU 1983:4). In Denmark, the first Ministry level report on women in research was published much later, in 1998 (Ministry of Research and Information Technology, 1998).

The Nordic political will to promote gender equality in academia has twice clashed with European Union regulations and the planned measures had to be stopped. Norway is not a member of the European Union but an EC-associated country, participating fully in European
research activities. The most radical measure allowed by Norwegian legislation was the attempt to earmark academic positions for the underrepresented gender. This measure was disallowed by the EFTA Court in 2003 as discriminatory against men (see Lismoen, 2013). This EFTA ruling forced Norway to develop other types of measures. Sweden encountered similar obstacles from European legislation. The measure of earmarking 31 professorships in 1995 “for the underrepresented gender” was complained by some applicants to the EU court as being against European equal treatment directive. These earmarked professorships were given a nickname Tham professorships after the Social Democratic Minister of Education in charge, Carl Tham. Proportion of women among professors in Sweden was 7% at that time (Jordansson, 1999). These legal complaints that were successful meant that earmarking professorship for women or underrepresented gender was not continued in Norway and Sweden.

In Finland, the 1980s and 1990s were an especially active and progressive period in addressing gender inequalities in academia and research, but the 2000s less so. The active national stakeholders in the 1980s and 1990s included the Council for Equality and the Equality Ombudsman (the national gender equality machinery), the Academy of Finland (national Research Council) and the Ministry of Education. The measures included both promotion of gender equality in higher education and research, and the promotion of Women’s and Gender Studies at universities and research institutions. Concrete achievements include introducing equality planning in universities and in the Academy of Finland since the early 2000s; Equality Ombudsman’s guidelines on how to promote gender equality in universities; Ministry of Education measure of five-year earmarked professorships in Women’s Studies in universities; one earmarked Academy Professorship funded by the Academy of Finland (notably earmarked to the field, without reference of the gender of the position holder); significant increase in share of women in the boards of national Research Councils; prolongation of fix-term university and
research position in case of parental leave; and general strengthening of Women’s Studies and Gender Studies at universities and in research; and general awareness raising on gender equality issues in the sector (see Husu, 2007).

In the 2000s, the examples of expressions of political will to promote gender equality in universities and research come mostly from Norway and Sweden. A key example on this is the high-level Committee set up by The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. The Ministry appointed in 2004 a Committee for Mainstreaming – Women in Science, later to be changed to be called Committee for Gender Balance in Research, and further Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research. The Committee has completed four terms, and was appointed to a fourth in 2018 with a broadened mandate to address gender and diversity. It is a national level Committee with solid gender expertise, supporting gender equality developments and providing recommendations on measures at the institutions in universities, university colleges and research institutes, engaging in awareness-raising activities and providing advice to stakeholders in the sector. (Kifinfo, 2018; see also Husu, 2015).

In Sweden, the Social Democratic-Green government appointed in 2014 declared itself as a “feminist government”, and has kept gender equality high on the political agenda. The Minister of Education appointed a ministerial advisory group on gender equality. The White Paper on research policy in 2016 addressed extensively gender issues in research careers, funding allocation and also research contents. A major gender mainstreaming programme is in progress since 2016. Swedish universities were given a gender mainstreaming task by the Government in 2016 in the annual governmental ordinance letter to the universities. Most Swedish universities have the status of public authorities; this ordinance was a continuation of an extensive gender mainstreaming duty that was previously applied across key national
authorities, including the public research funding and innovation organisations. All universities were obliged by a governmental ordinance to develop a gender mainstreaming plan by May 2017 to be reported to the Government. In 2016 and early 2017 universities launched numerous activities and allocated resources to prepare their gender mainstreaming plans. The National Secretariat on Gender Research was given a task to support universities in this process, and funding for this support was allocated to the Secretariat in the state budget.

**Persistent paradoxes**

There are at least three paradoxes which can be discerned to highlight and understand the Nordic setting. These are the *paradox of change, the paradox of excellence, and the paradox of interventions*.

The first, the *paradox of change*, refers to the rapid changes of universities and the research landscape, on the one hand: the increasing participation in higher education in general; increase of the proportion of women among doctoral graduates and lower level academic posts; rapid technological change impacting research, teaching and learning; governance changes in the sector; legislative reforms; internationalization; increased mobility; and move towards strategic research funding.

On the other hand, when it comes to changes in gender patterns in academia and research, these have been very slow in several respects, despite the growing proportion of women in the recruitment pool for research, and female majority among students and undergraduates. Gender balance has been approached among the total teaching and research staff at Nordic universities, and leading positions have an increasing share of women: as explained earlier, the proportion of women university Rectors is clearly higher than elsewhere in Europe as is the proportion of women in decision-making boards (EC, 2015). However, the proportion of women among full professors remains low, and is changing very slowly, as is the case elsewhere in Europe. Gender
segregation in the tertiary education remains persistently high in the Nordic region, with natural sciences and technology a continuously male-dominated field. This situation derives from a complex set of factors, including historical conditions, labour market structure with a large public sector, and persistent gendered pathways. A recent study by Stoet and Geary (2018) places such gendered contradictions in a more globally contextualized framework, with a particular focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects.

The paradox of excellence refers to the increase of various excellence initiatives especially in research funding, which have been introduced at the national, Nordic and European level during the 2000s, and their gender impacts. A comparison by the Nordic Institute for Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), on gender division of leadership positions of 269 Nordic centres of excellence in 2011 found that only 12% of the centres had a female leader. These were split as follows: in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland women are leaders of 8%, 7%, 13% and 19% of the centres respectively (Bergman et al., 2013). These figures are notably less than the proportion of women professors in these countries.

Furthermore, a 2010 Swedish monitoring study on the national excellence programmes during the first decade of the 2000s, entitled “His excellence” concluded that 87% of the Swedish excellence funding had been allocated to male researchers (Sandström et al., 2010). It also found that there was only one woman among those 20 researchers who had received the largest share of the excellence funding.

In neighbouring Finland, a national programme called Finland Distinguished Professors (FiDiPro, see www.fidipro.fi) was launched in 2006 to “enable distinguished researchers, both international and expatriates to work and team up with the ‘best of the best’ in Finnish academic research.” It has been funded by the national research council, the Academy of Finland (which as mentioned earlier has a well-established Gender Equality Plan), and TEKES, the Finnish
Funding Agency for Innovation. In the first application round in 2006, all 23 FiDiPro visiting professorships went to male researchers.

The *paradox of interventions* refers to the long history of Nordic gender equality interventions in universities and research and the long equality agendas. Nordic countries, especially Norway and Sweden, have introduced and funded a large variety of gender equality interventions in the higher education and research sector, and various stakeholders are continuously engaged actively in promoting gender equality and providing resources.

Gender equality planning in universities has been conducted for decades. Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish universities have university-level, in some cases faculty-level gender equality plans since the 1990s, and they are statutory by law (on Finland, see Husu, 2007; on Norway, see Kifinfo, 2018). These equality plans have typically covered a broad range of issues, including recruitment and promotion, resource allocation, gender balance in decision-making, prevention of sexual harassment and bullying, and teaching and classroom related issues, in some cases also integration of a gender dimension in curricula. With the development of anti-discrimination legislation that includes several discrimination grounds, gender equality plans have in many universities been broadened to more general anti-discrimination plans.

Despite the multitude of long-term interventions, the long-term gender equality development in the Nordic region, especially academic careers continue to show gendered patterns in men’s favour. Areas where the interventions have had significant positive impact are university leadership positions and the composition of scientific boards. These are also areas where political will plays a role. Horizontal gender segregation and entrenched male dominance among professors continue to persist as challenges, despite the hard work with gender equality interventions.
A further positive outcome of the Nordic interventions is that gender research and Gender Studies programmes at universities can be assessed to have a stronger foothold in the Nordic countries than in many other European countries: practically every Nordic university has a Gender Studies programme, gender research projects, and programmes; in addition centres of excellence in gender research have been funded by major national funding bodies in Sweden. National well-functioning information centres on gender issues and research are publicly funded in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The Nordic region provides a rich laboratory in which gender equality interventions and their implementation and impact in academia and research can be evaluated over an extended period. Notable advances have been reached but the slow development in tackling persistent inequalities in academic careers and structures demands continuous vigilance and commitment of all stakeholders: researchers, academic leaders and policy makers.

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Professor Liisa Husu is a Finnish sociologist and gender expert, actively engaged in gender and science issues in research, policy and civil society since the early 1980s. She is Professor of Gender Studies at Örebro University, Sweden, and Co-Director of *GEXcel International Collegium for Advanced Transdisciplinary Gender Studies*, and affiliated researcher at Department of Management and Organisation at Hanken School of Economics, Finland. Before her academic career she worked in the Finnish gender equality machinery as a senior adviser. Her research and publications focus on gender in science, academia and knowledge production. She has lectured and presented her research in over
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