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challenge of immigration**

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# **Family-oriented policies in Scandinavia and the challenge of immigration**

## **Abstract**

The social political debate on immigration as a challenge to the welfare states has been remarkably silent on gender and family issues. This article argues that immigrants' use of welfare benefits targeted at families may be particularly problematic, because such benefits embody certain normative tensions that other social policies do not. It is suggested that tensions may be particularly high in Scandinavia, given the Scandinavian countries' long-term commitment to facilitating employment for women. What happens when immigrants in the Scandinavian countries use policies targeted at families to maintain gender-complimentary family practices and home-based motherhood? Will such practices be met by reforms that streamline benefits around the principle of universal employment? The article highlights policy arrangements that have been described as detrimental to immigrant women's employment in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and reviews if they have been reformed in recent years and, where relevant, what arguments have been used to motivate reforms. The analysis shows that many of

the relevant benefits recently have been reformed to become less accommodating of home-based care work. However, politics clearly matter, and it is not given that immigrants' use of benefits will always be a trump card. Also, dynamics vary according to how controversial the welfare arrangement in question was before it was highlighted as an immigrant issue. A third finding is that even when benefit arrangements that have been highlighted as particularly detrimental to immigrant women's employment are targeted, politicians often downplay the integration issue when arguing for reform.

Keywords: welfare states, immigration, gender, family practice, Scandinavia

## Family-oriented policies in Scandinavia and the challenge of immigration

Globalisation and international migration are often highlighted among the most crucial challenges for mature welfare states. The financial sustainability of the generous welfare state – the fear that immigrants claim too many benefits and contribute too little through taxes – is one aspect of this (see for instance Gerdes and Wadensjö, 2012). Equally important is the normative challenge, that is, the fear that the majority population will withdraw their support for public welfare arrangements when these are used by newcomers. There is an ongoing debate about the links between immigration and popular support for welfare arrangements (see for example Crepaz, 2008; Finseraas, 2012), and about the extent to which potential “welfare chauvinism” varies by institutional arrangements and between welfare regimes (e.g. Van Der Waal et al., 2013). Another strand of literature takes this further by discussing how political mobilization and party politics mediate between public attitudes and actual policy changes (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008; Bay et al., 2013). It has been argued that the extent to which the inclusion of immigrants undermines popular support may vary between welfare arrangements (Miller, 2006), and also that the relationship between

popular attitudes and policy changes varies by timing: fully institutionalized policies are more resistant than new arrangements (Goul-Andersen, 2006; Raven et al., 2011).

Still, while there is a large and rapidly growing literature on the links between immigration and attitudes to social welfare, relatively little is known about how – if at all – policies actually change when immigrants arrive in a country and are included in welfare arrangements. Also, the welfare chauvinism-debate has so far been remarkably silent on gender and family issues. As the immigrant category is made up of men and women, and opportunities and ambitions may be quite different for the two genders, this is unfortunate. Moreover, immigrants often establish families and raise children in their countries of settlement, and family practices will have consequences for how they interact with their new society. From the majority point of view, gender and family issues raise some normative concerns that do not occur in general social policy debates. Most obviously, while the principle that employment should be the primary option for able-bodied adult men is rarely questioned, the extent to which women with caring obligations should be expected to work outside the home is a matter of passionate debate in many countries. Immigrants to Europe typically come from countries where men and women have separate and complimentary roles, and where women's role is linked to home-based caring activities – in other words, family practices that correspond to the “male breadwinner model” (Lewis 1992). It is likely that this will create tension

when immigrants establish families in equality-oriented countries, and the dynamics of such tensions may be different from those that occur in general social policy debates.

This article attempts to expand on the welfare and immigration debate in two ways: by looking at policy changes rather than attitudes, and by making welfare arrangements targeted at families the focal point. The study focuses on the Scandinavian countries, as it can be argued that this is where these issues are most likely to create controversy: both because the Scandinavian countries are comprehensive welfare states, and because Scandinavians tend to take pride in their gender and family policies (Lister, 2009). It can be hypothesized that gender-complimentary practices, particularly when these are funded by public benefits, will create more tension than in countries where the normative commitment to gender equality is less entrenched and the welfare states' presence in people' lives is less pronounced. The Scandinavian case(s) can be assumed to highlight concerns that are, or are likely to soon become, relevant also in other countries. Moreover, many Scandinavian family policies are relatively recent – some important features were established as late as in the 1990s (Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006). As they are not fully institutionalized, they may be more open to change than more “settled” policies.

This article thus starts from the hypothesis that if immigrants take up and use Scandinavian social benefits directed at families, and use such arrangements to shore up gender-complimentary family practices and home-based motherhood, the arrangements

in question will rapidly be changed and streamlined around the principle of employment for all. To what extent has this happened in recent years in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, the three countries in Scandinavia that face the highest levels of immigration? This is the key question to be explored.

It can be noted that while politicians may attempt to alter such policies using “innocent” arguments related to gender equality and immigrant inclusion, their real agendas may be different. Underlying agendas may be a general desire for retrenchment, a general fear of immigrants’ “overusing” benefits, or even a wish to limit newcomers’ rights and reserve welfare goods for “natives”. The ambition of this article is to explore to what extent policy changes happen when immigrants’ use of family-related benefits is placed on the agenda in the Nordic countries. It is thus beyond the scope of this article to assess whether or not any professed concern for integration is genuine, but it should be noted that political agendas can be complex and have both “open” and “hidden” aspects.

The next section outlines some key characteristics of social policy traditions in Scandinavia, with an emphasis on family policies and policies directed towards immigrants. I then present the methodological approach, and three case studies of the countries included (Norway, Sweden and Denmark). The final section sums up the findings.

## Family policies and integration policies in Scandinavia

In debates on integration of immigrants in Scandinavia, images of strong and gender-equal Nordic women are frequently invoked as a contrast to the oppressed immigrant woman (Langvasbråten, 2008; Rugkåsa, 2012). Integration scholars have suggested that the insistence on gender equality in the Nordic countries is an impediment to genuine integration of minorities, because policy makers and the general population only accept one norm: to be a Nordic citizen is to live according to norms of gender equality (Vuori, 2009; Rugkåsa, 2012). Nordic post-colonial feminists have argued that the notion of gender equality is at the core of the Nordic discourse on nationhood, and thus central in defining who belongs, and who does not belong, to the nation (Molinari et al. 2009:5). Accepting and complying with prescribed norms for gender and family practices may thus be a condition for becoming “someone who belongs”.

The image of the Scandinavian welfare states spearheading gender equality is mirrored also in the literature on gender and social policy. Since the 1980s, all the Scandinavian countries have pursued policies to promote gender equality. This relates both to employment and family policies (Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006). Norway, Sweden and Denmark all have high rates of public child-care, and some of the longest parental leaves in Europe (Wall and Escobedo, 2013). These active gender and family



policies have gained international attention, to the extent that Ruth Lister suggested the world is taken by a vision of “Nordic Nirvana” of woman-friendliness (Lister, 2009).

However, when discussing the Scandinavian countries as one unified, gender-equal cluster, the differences between the countries are underplayed. Several empirical contributions show that Sweden, Denmark and Norway part ways both in integration policies and in family and gender policies.

With regard to family and gender policies, the differences are more about different traditions and trajectories than about current orientations. Norway, in particular, stands out with a family policy tradition that differs in important respects from that of Sweden and Denmark. Norway has traditionally had a greater willingness to award women rights, including financial entitlements, as mothers and carers (Wetterberg and Melby, 2008; Sainsbury, 1999a; Skevik, 2004). Through such rights, women were secured a certain independence from their husbands and fathers, and had a separate claims base in relation to the state. Sainsbury (1999) dubbed this approach the “separate gender roles model”: women were not to be encouraged to compete with men in the labour market, but they would be recognised and rewarded in their traditional tasks. Taxation rules, where joint taxation of married couples led to very high marginal taxes on wives’ incomes, is an example of how married women’s employment was downright discouraged. Another important aspect is the subsistence-level benefit for lone mothers, which Norway was unique in establishing in Scandinavia (Skevik, 2006).

In contrast, both Sweden and Denmark pursued social policy strategies aimed at easing women's entry into the labour force. Important measures in this respect were long and well-compensated parental leaves, rapid expansion of public child-care, and abolition of taxation rules that privileged one-earner families (Leira, 2006; Sainsbury, 1999a). Denmark took this route most consistently, and abolished practically all benefits based on financial provision and care early on. Denmark thus transformed its family policies along "universal breadwinner"-lines (Sainsbury, 1999a): both men and women were expected to undertake paid employment, while public child-care was available for all children, including the youngest. Sweden combined policies to promote paid employment for both men and women with efforts to promote care work for both, thus aiming at a "dual earner-dual carer" model (see also Leira, 2006). Sweden has a very long parental leave, where a section is reserved for fathers, and also high child-care coverage rates.

Until the mid-1980s, women's employment rates were lower in Norway than in Sweden and Denmark, and Norway also had significantly lower child-care coverage rates than the neighbouring countries (Leira, 1992). In recent years, however, Norway has "caught up" with Sweden and Denmark both in terms of female employment and public child-care provision. Norwegian policies however come across as more ambivalent in family policies than in the two other countries. This is partly because some aspects of the "old" approach have existed well into the 2000s: lone parents have

access to a separate benefit, and some pensions acknowledge the recipients' role as providers if they have non-working spouses. But the Norwegian ambivalence is also evident in new initiatives, most obviously the cash-for-care allowance (Ellingsæter, 2012). This is a benefit paid to parents with children under two (until 2012: under three) years of age who do not use publicly-sponsored child-care. This benefit has been controversial from the start, and is seen as a measure to turn back the clock on gender equality in care work (Ellingsæter, 2012).

In recent years, much has been written about the different approaches to immigration and integration in the three Scandinavian countries (Brochmann and Hagelund, 2012), where the schism between Sweden and Denmark in particular is highlighted (Sainsbury, 2012). Brochmann and Hagelund (2012) describe immigration and integration policies in the Nordic countries as "a model with three exceptions". In all the three countries, the main approach was from the start that settled immigrants should be granted the same social rights as natives, and should be included in existing institutions. In Sweden and Norway, however, there was a general consensus that immigrants should also be encouraged to maintain their original culture. In Denmark, the issue was more contentious, and the chosen strategy was to offer migrants equal opportunities within the existing system, without targeted measures to satisfy special needs.

Over time, all countries have introduced integration programs, but the Swedish program stands out in being voluntary. Sweden also differs from the neighbouring

countries in that immigrants are encouraged to find their own homes, and settle wherever they like, once they are granted the right to settlement. In Norway and Denmark, newly arrived immigrants from outside the EEA are placed in municipalities, and the introduction programs are mandatory. In addition, Denmark has experimented with a two-track model for welfare benefits, where newcomers have received benefits at a lower rate than long-term residents (see below). The overall image is that Sweden comes across as the most lenient country, Denmark as the strictest, while Norway is found somewhere in between when it comes to integration policies for newly arrived immigrants from countries outside the EU (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012, Sainsbury 2012).

To sum up this section: Sweden combines a dual earner/dual carer approach in family policies with a tolerant approach in immigration and integration policies. In Denmark, a universal breadwinner approach in family policy is combined with a strict approach to integration. In Norway, family policies retain a certain ambivalence, and integration policies try to combine strict and lenient elements. These differences result from different historical trajectories and policy developments over time, and cannot be reduced to one or a handful of explanatory factors (but see the collection of articles in Brochmann and Hagelund, 2012, Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006 and Sainsbury, 1999b for more detail and discussion). The outline however suggests that there will be more to discuss in Norway than in the two other countries, as Norway does not seem to have

clear guiding principles in either policy area. This is however an empirical question to be explored below.

## Methodological approach

As stated in the introduction, this article will present a case-study of family-oriented benefits in Scandinavia, and what happens to such benefits when they are claimed by immigrants who may be committed to family practices with clearly separated gender roles. “Family-oriented benefits” and “benefits relating to families”, as used here, are not synonymous with “family policies”. “Family policy” is a relatively well established term for a given set of policies: typically family benefits, parental leave arrangements and care services (see for instance Hantrais, 2004). Not all such arrangements invite controversy. Moreover, family practices that are seen as normatively problematic by the majority may be supported by benefits not usually thought of as family benefits, such as social assistance or additions for dependants in health- related benefits. Typically, benefits that may be problematic have unclear eligibility criteria and/or a questionable gate-keeper arrangement, or they are vulnerable to be used in ways that were not intended. Examples are benefits that were intended to support families through shorter spells of non-employment, which on certain conditions can be used to finance long-term withdrawal from the labour market. Other examples include benefits that are determined by household income and the number of people to be supported, which will be paid at

higher rates to large households with few (or no) earners. Such benefits are determined by family size and family practices (i.e. the number of earners), but they are not normally subsumed under the heading “family policy”.

This approach implies that there will be cross-national variation in which arrangements are relevant. This poses a challenge: how to identify the relevant changes, given that they can appear practically anywhere in the comprehensive benefit systems? In both Norway and Sweden, the governments have appointed expert committees to look into the challenges for (part of) the welfare systems posed by immigration. Such expert committees collect, present and discuss evidence, and they quite often have an agenda-setting role, but beyond that they have no independent political power. In Norway, the relevant committee is the Welfare and Migration committee (NOU 2011:7), which was mandated to discuss the ways in which immigration posed a challenge to the Norwegian welfare model (cf. Brochmann and Grødem, 2013). In Sweden, the relevant committee was appointed to look into the labour market participation of newly arrived immigrant women (SOU 2012:69). Both committees used existing research, and also commissioned new evidence, to highlight what they assumed to be critical features of welfare state policies. Attention in Norway was directed at the benefit arrangement for lone mothers, the additions in disability pension for dependent spouses and children, and the cash-for-care allowance. In Sweden, the committee

highlighted the parental leave scheme and the cash-for-care allowance. These, then, are the arrangements I have chosen to outline below.

Denmark has not had a similar committee, and has overall chosen a different approach, consisting of limiting immigrants' access to benefits. The discussion of the Danish case is based on the reforms under the "Flere i arbejde"-initiative ("Bringing more people into employment") from 2002, and the scaling back of these reforms under the Social democratic government from 2011 (Jönsson and Petersen, 2012).

Norway had a change in government in October 2013, when the majority centre-left coalition lost office and was replaced by a minority right-wing coalition. In Sweden, the minority centre-right government was replaced by a minority centre-left coalition in October 2014. As the discussion below will show, these changes in government had a clear impact on the issues discussed here. Denmark had a change in government in August 2015, when a right-wing minority government, supported by the Danish People's Party, took office. This too led to new initiatives to decrease transfers to migrants, although these efforts have so far not been motivated by particular concerns for women's employment.

In the next section, the three countries are discussed in turn. For each country, I review the issues highlighted, explain why they were seen as problematic, and review the policy responses.

## Three case studies: problematic benefits and policy responses

This section discusses the policy areas that have been deemed particularly important for immigrant women's employment in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Table 1 gives an overview of the main policy areas and the recent policy responses.

Table 1 app. here

### Norway: the challenges of ambiguity

As mentioned, Norway is one of the few countries in the OECD that has a separate, subsistence-level benefit payable to lone parents, known as the transitional allowance (Skevik, 2006). This is paid at roughly the same level as the minimum old age pension. Before 1998, the benefit was available to lone parents with at least one child under 10, with no work requirement. In 1998, work requirements were introduced for parents who did not have children under three, and a maximum period of receipt – three years – was introduced (Skevik, 2006).

The 1998 reform was controversial, but had solid backing in the Parliament. Once introduced, there were no attempts to reverse it, and lone parenthood largely disappeared from the political agenda in Norway for almost ten years. When it re-emerged, it was largely as an immigrant issue. By 2011, several research reports had



questioned how the transitional allowance affected immigrant women's employment. Particular concern was expressed for Somalis, which is a large and rapidly growing minority in Norway. While lone parenthood is uncommon among most immigrants from outside the EEA, Somali women are 2,5 times more likely than native women to be lone mothers (Blom and Henriksen, 2008). And the Somali lone mothers have high rates of benefit take-up: 74 per cent of the Somali women with children who arrived in Norway between 1989 and 1993 had received transitional allowance at some point in time (Bratsberg et al., 2011). Among those who arrived between 1998 and 2000 – after the 1998 reform – the proportion was 52 per cent. Among native mothers with low education in a similar age group to the 1989–1993 cohort, 40 per cent had at some point received the allowance (Bratsberg et al., 2011).

Some Somali immigrants voiced concern over this high use of the transitional allowance: they argued that the benefit created perverse incentives that induced Somali couples to divorce, which led to increasing marginalisation of men and decreased Somali children's life chances in Norway (e.g. Aden, 2010). In addition, case workers working with recipients of transitional allowance argued that many immigrant lone mothers needed more intensive counselling and guidance, but this was not given priority because these women were guaranteed a longer-term income that for instance the unemployed were not (Kavli et al., 2010).

Based on this evidence, the Welfare and Migration Committee (NOU 2011:7) recommended that there should be an activity requirement in transitional allowance when the youngest child turned one, and not three as had been the requirement since 1998. This proposal was taken up by the Centre-Left government almost immediately, and was put in place already by January 2012 (Prop. 7L (2011-2012)). In the proposition, the Government mentions immigrant women's situation, but emphasises that the same concerns are valid for non-immigrant women. It points out that the main arguments for introducing activity requirements in the benefit in 1998 was the improvement of arrangements supporting working mothers. As these arrangements – public child-care, long and flexible parental leaves – were improved further by 2011, it seemed reasonable to require activity from parents of younger children (Prop. 7L (2011-2012): p. 8).

Two years later, the right-wing coalition government went one step further, and proposed to limit the benefit to an absolute maximum of one year (Prop. 1S, 2014-2015). This was presented as one of several proposals to improve work incentives. The proposal was rejected in the budget negotiations, but the Government continued to work on it (Prop. 115L, 2014-2015), and it eventually passed – along with other, smaller measures to make the transitional allowance more work-oriented – during the spring of 2015. It is worth noting that all the documents from this government on this matter

consistently emphasise social inclusion through employment, and none mention the words “immigrants” or “integration”.

High levels of *disability pensioning* has been a national concern for years in Norway, but has only recently been linked explicitly to immigration. The link was made with the publication of a study of disability pensioning among male labour migrants who arrived in Norway before 1975 (Bratsberg et al., 2010). The study showed that disability pension was far more common among these immigrants than among native men in similar age groups and with a low education (Bratsberg et al., 2010). This pattern could partly be explained by the extreme sensitivity of immigrants’ employment to the business cycle, but the researchers argued that incentives in the benefit system appeared to be equally important. The study showed that while 35 per cent of immigrant fathers with one or two children were disabled in 2000, the same was true for close to 60 per cent of those with four or more children (Bratsberg et al., 2010:666). Similarly, those with a dependent spouse were about twice as likely to be unemployed or on disability benefit as those with a working spouse. The financial incentives to “prefer” disability benefit over employment were quite obvious: 8,9 per cent of the immigrants with four or more children received a higher annual income from pensions than they ever earned in the labour market, and as many as 63,7 per cent had a higher income on disability pension than they had on average while active in the labour market (Bratsberg et al., 2010). Additions for dependants played a major role in bringing about this result. With

this background, the Welfare and Migration Committee (NOU 2011:7) recommended a reduction in the additions for children.

This proposal was met with complete silence from the Centre-left government. The right-wing coalition that took office in 2013 however proposed, in its first independent budget, to replace the means-tested additions for children in disability benefit with a lower, flat-rate addition similar to the one paid for recipients of work assessment allowance (Prop. 1S, 2014-2015). This was presented squarely as a means to improve work incentives, and neither immigration nor integration was mentioned in the discussions in the budget document. The proposal was among the most controversial in the budget, and led to a hefty public debate. In the end, a compromise was reached: the means-tested additions were maintained, but a ceiling was introduced in order to ensure that no-one should have a higher income as a disability pensioner than he or she had while in employment (Innst. 81L (2014-2015)).

The cash-for-care allowance in Norway has been controversial since its introduction in 1998. Take-up rates for the benefit have however changed over time, and show a different pattern for natives and immigrants. When the benefit was first introduced, 76 per cent of eligible families who had emigrated from countries in Asia and Africa received the benefit, compared to 74 per cent of eligible families in the majority population. By 2011, the corresponding figures were 52 and 24 (Hirsch, 2010). On this background, several actors – among them the Welfare and Migration committee (NOU

2011:7) – argued that the benefit was detrimental to the inclusion of immigrants and should be abolished.

The cash-for-care benefit was remodelled in August 2012. Following a political compromise, the benefit was increased for one-year-olds, while it was abolished for 2-year olds. The reform thus partially answered the critics, in that it reduced the period a parent could stay at home from two years to one. The main argument from the government was that children had been given a right to public child-care from age one, so that an allowance to stay at home with two-year-olds was superfluous (Prop. 8L, (2011-2012)). Concerns for integration, together with gender equality, were mentioned in passing in the proposition document.

### Sweden: the challenge of flexibility

The parental leave scheme in Sweden is unique in the Nordic countries in that it is very flexible, and does not require previous contributions. Parents without a previous contribution are compensated at a standard “base level” (grundnivå), at about SEK 6800 per month (app. 790 EUR) (Försäkringskassan, 2012). Parents can take a total of 480 days (16 months) per child. 60 days are reserved for the “minority parent”, almost always the father. Until 2014, the 480 days could be taken at any point in time until the child was eight years old or finished the first year of schooling, whichever happened

first. There was no requirement that part of the leave should be taken within the child's first year, though obviously, this was normally done for children born in Sweden.

The flexible parental leave that was in place by 2013 implied that immigrants who arrived in Sweden with one or more children under 8 were entitled to 480 days of parental leave per child, paid at the base level. This payment was conditioned on one of the parents staying at home for the duration of the leave period. For parents who migrated with more than one child, or who migrated with children and had more children after settlement in Sweden, this could amount to relatively long periods. The expert committee on immigrant women's employment (SOU 2012:69) commissioned a study of parental leave take-up among women from countries outside the EEA, who arrived in Sweden with one or more children under 8 in 2006. This study showed that 34 per cent took more than 200 days leave, and 16 per cent more than 300 days (SOU 2012:69). Almost all these leave days were taken as full days of leave. This take-up pattern implied that it was difficult for the women in question to follow the mandatory language training, and their inclusion in Swedish society was slowed down, the study argued (SOU 2012:69).

Given this background, the Swedish government signalled in the budget for 2013 that it would propose to limit the number of days that could be taken after the child's fourth birthday to 20 per cent of the total number of days (i.e. 96 days) (Prop. 2012/13:1, 2012). In the same document, the government proposed to increase the

flexible take-up until the child's 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. These proposals were put to the Parliament in September 2013 (Prop. 2013/14:4, 2013), and implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014. From 2014 onwards, only 96 days of parental leave can be taken after the child is four – hence immigrants who arrive in Sweden with children between 4 and 12 can take 96, not 480, days of parental leave per child. The main motivation for making this alteration, as expressed in the 2013 proposal (Prop. 2013/14:4, 2013), was the negative effect the old system had on immigrant women's integration. It is however interesting to note that when the proposal was discussed in the parliamentary committee (Socialförsäkringsutskottet betänkande 2013/14:SfU3), Members of Parliament representing the Social Democrats and the Green party made it clear that they agreed with the Government's conclusion to limit the benefit, but rejected the government's argument: the measure should be about children's needs, not immigrant's employment.

Unlike Norway, Sweden does not have a national cash-for-care scheme. Municipalities have however since 2008 had the liberty to establish a similar scheme locally. National guidelines set out the conditions for such municipal arrangements: it can be paid in respect of children between one and three who are not in publicly-sponsored daycare, at a rate of up to SEK 3000 per child per month. It is not taxable. The municipal benefit cannot be paid to families where one of the parents receives unemployment benefit, introduction allowance, or any of the health-related benefits. Allowing the allowance to be paid under those circumstances, the government argued,

might lead to “lock-in” effects, i.e. perverse financial incentives (Prop. 2007/08:91: p. 32). The benefit is however payable to families in receipt of social assistance (*försörjningsstöd*).

By 2011, 108 municipalities in Sweden had introduced the voluntary cash-for-care allowance (Statistics Sweden, 2012). This represented 37 per cent of all municipalities in Sweden. Given the eligibility criteria, it is unsurprising that the take-up of this benefit is much lower in Sweden than in Norway. By 2011, the benefit was paid for 8 568 children, equalling 4,7 per cent of all children between one and three in the municipalities where the benefit was available (Statistics Sweden, 2012). Four out of ten recipients had “a non-Swedish background” in 2011, and this proportion had increased by 30 per cent since the benefit was introduced in 2008. These families typically had very low incomes, and between 10 and 16 per cent of them combined the cash for care allowance with social assistance (SOU 2012:69: , p. 303-304).

The expert committee argued that it was unreasonable that social assistance was treated differently than other benefits for the purposes of the cash-for-care benefit, and that this benefit too created poverty traps. It therefore recommended that cash-for-care should not be payable to families receiving social assistance. This proposal was however not taken up by the centre-right government. The centre-left government, that took office in October 2014, immediately proposed to abolish the allowance in its first budget. The motion was rejected by a majority in the parliament. The arguments



followed what had become a well-known pattern: adherents of the scheme emphasised freedom of choice for families, opponents emphasised gender equality in families. It is worth noting that the populist anti-immigrant party, the Swedish Democrats, moved to increase the allowance significantly in order to improve “freedom of choice” (Socialförsäkringsutskottets betänkande 2014/15:SfU3). The proposal to abolish the scheme was however taken up again in 2016, and this time passed the parliament because one of the parties in the opposition alliance (Folkpartiet) decided to break with the alliance and vote in accordance with their party program. In justifying this decision, the leader of the party argued that the benefit represented a trap for immigrant women with poor qualifications (Röstlund 2015). In the end, therefore, it may seem that concerns for immigrants’ inclusion moved one party to make a strategic decision and vote to abolish cash-for-care in Sweden.

#### Denmark: streamlining the last resort

Denmark has gone even further than Sweden in streamlining its social security system around the individualist principle. None of the social security benefits in Denmark have additions for dependants. Parental leave in Denmark is contingent on contributions, and while municipalities can establish a cash-for-care-like scheme, this is highly residual and only payable to families who have resided in Denmark for at least seven out of the

last eight years. Child benefit is paid with a special addition for lone parents in Denmark, but no other benefits earmarked for this group exist.

A special feature of the child benefit in Denmark is that it relies on a settlement requirement: at least one of the parents must have lived in Denmark for two out of the last ten years on order to claim the full benefit. Moreover, parents can lose the benefit if they do not comply with requirements from local authorities in getting school-age children to school, or make sure their children participate in language training if this has been deemed necessary (Udbetaling Danmark, 2015). Between 2002 and 2011, a settlement requirement also existed in the last-resort social assistance scheme. Claimants of social assistance who had not lived in Denmark for at least seven out of the last eight years were paid social assistance at a lower rate, known as “starthjælp”. Unsurprisingly, studies showed that this increased poverty rates among newcomers, although it also was associated with slightly higher employment rates, as intended (Andersen et al., 2012).

The various settlement requirements make up the much-discussed Danish “two-track” model of welfare (Bay et al., 2013). More important for our purposes here are the measures introduced in the social assistance scheme to strengthen work incentives for couples in which one or both parties were out of employment. These include the DKK 500 cap (“kontanthjælpsloftet”) and the 225 hours rule, both introduced in 2002 by the Conservative government. The DKK 500 cap implied that when both parties in a couple

had been in receipt of the allowance for six months or more, their joint support should automatically be cut by DKK 500 (app. 60 EUR). This was hoped to create an extra disincentive against long-term worklessness in households. The 225 hours rule stated that when both parties in a couple received social assistance, they needed to prove that they had both performed at least 225 hours of paid work in the course of the last 12 months.<sup>1</sup> The requirement related to ordinary work, that is, not activity in government-sponsored programs. If this was not proven, their right to benefits was reduced. The purpose of this rule was to put pressure on wives as well as husbands in poor couples to find employment. While the directive was general in nature, the main argument for introducing it was the low labour market participation of immigrant women (cf. Jönsson and Petersen, 2012).

The settlement requirement in social assistance (the “starthjælp”), the DKK 500 cap and the 225 hours rule were measures under the “More people in employment”-initiative, which was introduced by the Conservative government that held office in Denmark between 2001 and 2011. When a centre-left coalition won the 2011 election, all these measures were immediately abolished (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2011). The right-wing minority government that took office in August 2015 has proposed to limit newly-arrived immigrants’ access to social assistance, through the introduction of the so-called “integration benefit”. At the time of writing they have however not proposed to

re-introduce the instruments to increase incentives to work for both parties in non-employed couples.

## Discussion

The hypothesis presented in the introduction was that as it is documented that immigrants use family-oriented benefits in Scandinavia to shore up gender-complimentary family practices, these benefits will rapidly be altered and streamlined around the principle of universal employment. After this review of recent development in three countries, we can conclude that the reality is more complex than that.

First, it seems clear that politics matter. “Discovering” that immigrants use benefits in a certain way does not automatically lead to political action. Rather, concerns for integration and immigrants’ levels of living enter the debate on par with other relevant arguments. Such arguments may include concerns for poverty in general, gender equality, welfare state retrenchment, social investment, visions of a good family life and other arguments that have been well-known for decades of social policy. It is not given that concerns regarding “immigrants” or “integration” are given status as trump cards in these debates.

Second, the dynamics of the debates appear to be different depending on how controversial the welfare arrangements in question are. Some of the policy areas reviewed here barely attracted any political attention before expert committees looking particularly at immigrants' situation placed them on the agenda. This was the case for the transitional allowance to lone parents in Norway, and also for the flexible take-up of parental leave in Sweden. When attention was drawn to these policy areas, changes – albeit incremental – happened relatively quickly and with remarkably little debate. When the questions of integration and immigrants' use of benefit were thrown into debates that were already heated, as was the case with the cash-for-care allowance in both Norway and Sweden, different dynamics played out. The cash-for-care benefits have powerful enemies, but also powerful friends, in both countries. For opponents of the schemes, arguments concerning immigrant women's integration simply added to their case. Defenders of the schemes continued to highlight families' "freedom of choice", and insisted that immigrants with young children had the same right to choose as everybody else (see Ellingsæter 2012 for more on these debates). Making "integration" a point did practically nothing to change positions in these debates. The cash-for-care scheme was scaled down in Norway in 2012, but this followed a very long policy process, and it is hard to argue that arguments concerning immigrants in themselves tipped the scales. In Sweden, the scheme will be abolished in 2016, after Folkpartiet decided to break with the pro-cash-for-care alliance and vote in accordance

with their anti-cash-for-care party program. The leader of Folkpartiet emphasised immigrant women's situation when justifying this move, but clearly overall strategic concerns also played a role.

As a third point, it is worth noting that when policy changes have been made, policy makers in Scandinavia have often avoided linking the changes too closely to immigration. For instance, the Norwegian (centre-left) government's motivation for changing the transitional allowance to lone parents was that recent developments in public child-care made extended benefits to parents superfluous. Even the Minister of Social Affairs from the Progress Party in Norway – a party known for its strict policies on immigration and integration – avoids talking about his proposed reforms in social security in terms of integration. Rather, he emphasises inclusion through employment for all. In Sweden, some Members of Parliament made explicit that they supported the government's proposal to limit the number of days of parental leave available after the child's 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, but objected to the government's line of reasoning behind this conclusion: the real issue should be children's needs, not immigrant women's employment, these representatives argued.

Should we worry that there may be hidden agendas here – that elite politicians talk in terms of social inclusion and gender equality, but that they are in fact out to promote assimilation or even to exclude newcomers? As this article has reviewed policy changes and the arguments publicly presented by governments in favour of these changes, the

question cannot really be addressed. It can however be argued that policymakers will use the arguments and language they deem palatable to their voters. The evidence presented here indicates that elected politicians in Norway and Sweden at least assume that their voters do not demand aggressive policies to restrict welfare goods to natives.

This article has used family-oriented policies in three Scandinavian countries as a case. Dynamics between different policy goals may be different in other policy areas, and they are also likely to be different in countries with different traditions in family and integration policies. In order to shed further light on the relationships between national welfare states and international migration, a variety of case studies from diverse contexts may be necessary.

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<sup>i</sup>The precise number of hours required has varied over time – for much of the period the directive was in place, the requirement was 300 hours, it has also been as high as 450 hours.