



Follow the North

When it comes to gender equality, Scandinavians appear to be ahead of the game. What is their secret?

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They're known as 'latte dads' – young, hipster-bearded fathers who meet up for coffee with their babies in tow. You mostly see them in Sweden. Is it because those who come from Viking stock have a greater appreciation for milky coffee? Perhaps not. They do, however, live in a country where men and women are largely treated as equals. "The only way to achieve equality in society is to achieve equality in the home. Getting fathers to share the parental leave is an essential part of that," Sweden's deputy Prime Minister Bengt Westerberg recently stated in *The New York Times*.

Use it or lose it

"Over the last few years, Swedish men have actively been encouraged to go on parental leave as soon as their babies are born," explains Rense Nieuwenhuis, researcher at the Swedish Institute for Social Research. He's referring to a policy introduced by the Swedish government in 1995, which initially afforded new fathers one month of parental leave at 80% of their salary. Even though fathers had been entitled to parental leave since 1974, there were no consequences if they chose not to use it. Any remaining days would simply be carried over to the mother. Until a new measure was put in place completely cancelling any days unused by dads. A revolution ensued. Whereas before Swedish fathers on

parental leave had to endure the nickname 'velvet dads', all of a sudden hanging out with your newborn became *the* thing to do.

And the Swedes didn't just stop there, as they now have extended the total length of parental leave. Parents share 480 days of leave – or 16 months – per child. That amounts to 240 days each, of which the father is expected to use at least 90, or they see those days vanish into thin air. "There's a lot of social pressure on Swedish fathers now to go on parental leave. They generally tend to put in at least three months of all days allotted," says Nieuwenhuis. "This means fathers and mothers still don't fully share the care of their infants, but at least it's significantly more balanced than in other countries."

In nations like the US, Switzerland and China, fathers don't get any parental leave at all. And then there are countries like Korea and Japan, where men can get as much as 52 weeks of paid leave to cuddle with their mini-me to their heart's content. Nevertheless, only 2% of Korean and Japanese fathers actually choose to do so. This is because employers often consider these fathers 'unprofessional', according to a recent story in the *Korea Times*. In other words, gender equality policies are only as effective as a culture is progressive.

Like Sweden, Iceland and Norway are feminist Valhallas, not afraid to take the lead in gender equality. In the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index list, they are always in the top ten of most gender-equal countries, with Norway in first place. Scandinavian countries don't just do well because of their extensive parental leave, but also because affordable daycare is guaranteed; female political and business leaders are commonplace; and gender-based pay gaps are rapidly closing.

Not enough men

And yet, that doesn't explain why Scandinavia is so far ahead. It takes a look at local history to reveal the cause. In her 2010 book on the subject, Dutch politician Ina Brouwer explains how in the 19th century, most communities in Sweden, Finland and Denmark consisted of farming families. By law, farmland inherited from parents was to be divided fairly among all children, causing whole areas to be cut into tiny slivers. Poor soil fertility resulted in smaller harvests and food shortages, adding to the problem. In poverty-stricken areas, groups of children would roam the roads, looking for food. Swedish farmers soon discovered their emergency stockpiles were insufficient to fill all of those empty stomachs. As a result, between 1830 and 1930, a quarter >

of the Swedish population emigrated to America; that vast promised land of golden fields of wheat.

In the end, only six million people stayed behind. Many of those leaving were young men – a cause of great concern to scientists, politicians and employers. Indeed, the shortage of males caused fewer babies to be born. Experts wondered how they could change the course of events. Then, in December 1934, a book was published on the population crisis by feminist Alva Myrdal and her economist husband Gunnar. Together, they advocated a new approach towards women: regarding them not only as mothers, but as totally independent citizens, with their own ambitions and talents. The Swedish government, their book suggested, would do well to create better circumstances for women that would allow them to combine employment with raising a family. It would become the foundation of the Swedish welfare state, with its extended maternity and parental leave plus childcare provisions, giving women the chance to build a career.

Backwards and forwards

As early as 1939, Swedish parliament introduced a law forbidding employers to fire women on the basis of marriage or pregnancy. Meanwhile, in the rest of Europe, something quite the opposite was happening. The Dutch government went as far as to legally prohibit married women from having a job. The family unit, according to their reasoning, was the cornerstone of society, with men as providers and women as housewives and mothers. It would take until 1957 for the Netherlands to finally abolish this law.

Over the years, more and more women around the world joined the workforce. Nowadays, France stands out, with 74% of mothers holding down a job; a much higher number than the European average of 50%. Remarkably, France also has the highest birth rate in Europe. There are also increasingly more French women in top corporate positions. This is partly due to the female quota, a principle first introduced in Norway in 2008, which stipulates that 40% of all board members of listed companies have to be women.

Gender-equality policies are only as effective as a culture is progressive

Since then, Belgium, France and Italy have followed suit and now require companies to reserve 30% to 40% of all boardroom seats for women. Nevertheless, quotas invite a lot of criticism as well. It was thought that women in the lower echelons of business would also benefit and gain a better chance of being promoted to management positions, which then hopefully would level out pay gaps between men and women. In reality, quotas only end up affecting women who make it into the boardroom. Additional research shows that even though the Norwegians quickly made their 40% quota, only 7% of the listed companies in the country actually have a female CEO.

Income as equaliser

Just to be clear: when are men and women considered equals in society? “When they earn the same amount of money,” states Nieuwenhuis, who earned his PhD with honours on the subject. “In Sweden, women make 45% and men 55% of the average household income. They have almost achieved income equality, whereas many other countries are dealing with a much larger pay gap. Women in the US bring home 35%; in the Netherlands, it’s only 33%.”

And even though those percentages have risen over the last few decades in all of the 18 countries Nieuwenhuis included in his research, those increases appear to be slowing down. “That worries me,” Nieuwenhuis says, “because the idea seems to prevail that a family is better off as long as the mother does the lion’s share of care-giving. But when one partner doesn’t bring in as much as the other, they have less say in how

the household income is spent, don’t put as much towards their pensions and end up with fewer opportunities on the career ladder. These considerations all underscore the long-term importance of gender equality.”

Easy steps

Is there anything countries can do to catch up with Scandinavia? “I think it’s fair to conclude that government policies designed to promote equality actually work,” says Nieuwenhuis. The Swedish government makes a point of asserting itself as feminist, and many of their lawmakers are fighting for gender equality. They even have a minister dedicated to this task, Lena Hallengren.

While Nieuwenhuis stresses that countries can’t simply cut and paste Swedish policies, there are a few effective first steps they could take. “Make day care affordable for everyone; extend paid parental leave for dads; and create awareness campaigns aimed at young dads about what fatherhood entails. Parents need practical solutions to divide work and childcare equally,” he says. Also important, he adds, is that employers should not cough up the money for parental leave alone, but the government and employers should share the burden equally.

Imagine if the politicians in your country would introduce a well-paid ‘daddy quota’. That would be a big step towards equality, setting the tone for each gender’s position in society. Perhaps with more initiatives in place, the fathers of our great-grandchildren will get to be ‘latte dads’ too. ■

Great for men too

Men in societies with more gender equality have a better quality of life and are healthier and happier. Equality between genders also decreases the chance of depression, divorce, or becoming a victim of domestic violence, for both men and women, research by Øystein Gullvåg Holter has found. Holter is Professor of Men’s Studies at the University of Oslo. “It’s a misconception that gender equality only benefits women,” he says. On top of that, new Australian-American research shows that when men share childcare and household responsibilities, they get a better night’s sleep. If we all do our share, we’ll enjoy the benefits together!