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# A Cross-Country Comparison of Family Policies in the Three Nordic Countries

## Comparing formal childcare and parental leave policies of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark

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**A Cross-Country Comparison of Family Policies in the Three Nordic Countries**

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of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark

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## Abstract

**Title**: A Cross-Country Comparison of Family Policies in the Three Nordic Countries – Comparing formal childcare and parental leave policies of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark



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**Summary**

The aim of this study is to compare family policies between three Nordic countries. Specifically, the differences and similarities of family policies between the three Nordic countries – Sweden, Finland, and Denmark – regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and parents' employment are analyzed through a qualitative research method, document analysis. The government documents of three Nordic countries are analyzed. Along with that, the latest differences in family policies between the three Nordic countries in 2019 and 2020 with regards to these aspects are explored through descriptive statistics. Thus, this study adopts a mixed methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative research.

Through analysis, this study found that the family policy of Sweden supports the health and lifestyle of families with children and promotes gender equity the most among the three Nordic countries. Sweden has a high formal childcare enrollment rate, a gender-equal parental leave policy, and a high employment rate of women with children. Denmark's family policy has performed second after Sweden, with high formal childcare enrollment rates and the highest average number of weekly hours in formal care particularly impressive. Finland's family policy was somewhat inferior to that of Sweden and Denmark because of the relatively low formal childcare enrollment rate, shorter length of parental leave, and the comparatively low employment rate of women with children.

This study is of great significance in that it revealed the differences in family policy between the three Nordic countries that were previously unknown. It is also meaningful in that the qualitative findings and quantitative findings were complemented by using a mixed research method.

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# 1. Introduction

Aging population and low fertility rate are new challenges for the welfare society in developed countries throughout the world (Beck, 2008). The Nordic welfare states are no exception. The decline of fertility rates and the population aging are currently being experienced throughout the Nordic region (Grunfelder et al., 2020). Population aging and low fertility rate not only negatively impact the health and lifestyle of people, but also cause a significant risk in the welfare state that is dependent on labor (Beck, 2008). This is because these problems will increasingly pose greater challenges to financing pensions and welfare services (Bengtsson & Scott, 2011).

One way to cope with these problems is to provide a well-developed family policy. In fact, the intention behind providing family policies such as parental leave and subsidized childcare services may be to increase the fertility rate, even though they are often framed as policies to support the family. Furthermore, childcare was provided as an effective means to maintain the welfare state of European countries and to cope with the challenges provoked by the aging population, as childcare could promote women's labor force participation (Bogenschneider, 2011). As a result, family policies that can further support and promote gender equality are necessary.

By assessing and comparing the current status of family policies in the Nordic region, this study would provide a good start to prepare for a sustainable welfare state and a more gender-equal future. In that vein, the aim of this study is to compare family policies between three Nordic countries – Sweden, Finland, and Denmark – with regards to formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate of parents by sex. With revealing the differences and similarities between the three countries, the latest differences in family policies in 2019 and 2020 regarding these aspects will be analyzed as well. Thereby, this study will be able to discover the differences in family policies among the Nordic welfare states that have been little known so far and identify recent differences, contributing to sustainable family policies.

# 2. Background

## 2.1. The concept of family policy

The definition of family policy varies among scholars as it has moveable boundaries (Razavi, 2020). Consequently, this part will provide some representative definitions of family policy, and the definition of family policy used in this study will be presented. To begin with, Table 1 shows the definitions of family policy by scholars and organizations.

**Table 1**

*Definitions of family policy by scholars and organizations*

| Scholar or organization | The definition of family policy |
|---|---|
| Daly (2020) *The Palgrave handbook of family policy* | - "policies associated with families with children" (p. 26).<br>- policies that are "centered around the well-being, functioning, and responsibilities of families with children" (p. 27).<br>- "state policies oriented to the welfare of families with children and the support and regulation of the family as an institution and a way of life" (p. 37). |
| Ooms (1990, as cited in Bogenschneider, 2011) *Families and government: Implementing a family perspective in public policy* | "family policies encompass the four explicit functions of families: (a) family creation (e.g., to marry or divorce, to bear or adopt children); (b) economic support (e.g., to provide financially for members' basic needs); (c) childrearing (e.g., to socialize the next generation); and (d) caregiving (e.g., to provide assistance for the disabled, frail, ill, and elderly)" (Ooms, 1990, as cited in Bogenschneider, 2011, p. 4). |
| United Nations Children's Fund (2019) *Family-Friendly Policies: Redesigning the workplace of the future – A policy brief* | "those policies that help to balance and benefit both work and family life that typically provide three types of essential resources needed by parents and caregivers of young children: time, resources and services" (p. 1). |
| United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (2020) *Family-Friendly policies handbook for business* | "the measures and arrangements that have a positive impact on workers' abilities to reconcile work and family responsibilities – and advance the development and well-being of their children" (p. 5). |

Along with the definitions of family policy provided by scholars and organizations presented in Table 1, some scholars explained the aims of family policies and displayed specific examples of family policy. According to Daly (2020), family policy in real life mainly aims to support families with income and to provide help with child-rearing. Thévenon (2011) further deepened the theoretical discussion on the goals of family policy by presenting the six main objectives of family policy, which are (a) poverty reduction and income maintenance, (b) direct compensation for the economic cost of children, (c) fostering employment, (d) improving gender equity, (e) support for early childhood development, and (f) raising birth rates. Thévenon (2011) also adds that which and to what extent these six aims are focused varies from country to country.

Bogenschneider (2011) provides a wider view about the concept of family policy, by comparing the family policy to an umbrella that includes "adoption, child care tax credit, family leave, long-term care, school finance, welfare reform, and so forth" (p. 4). She also distinguishes family policy from children's and women's policies that target individuals in that family policy is aimed at a family relationship or family unit rather than an individual (Bogenschneider, 2011). Furthermore, Daly (2020) suggests the three main areas of family policy as "income supports for families with children, early childhood education and care (ECEC), and parenting-related leaves from employment" (p. 25).

Based on these discussions, this study defines family policy as policy that supports the health and lifestyle of families with children and as a result promotes gender equity. Among the specific examples of family policies, this study focuses on formal childcare and parental leave.

## 2.2. Why are family policies important?

United Nations Children's Fund (2019) puts emphasis on the benefits of health, education, and economy that family policy bring, since it is the basis of lifelong health for families, financial independence of families, children's success in education, and parents' success at work. In other words, family policies promote the health, happiness, and wellbeing of the families (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (2020) also stresses the importance of family policies in promoting health and lifestyle of the members of the society. Specifically, family policies play a significant role in "reducing child mortality and low birthweight, decreasing instances of child abuse, increasing rates of breastfeeding and immunization, and enhancing children's cognitive development and school performance" (United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2020, p. 5). Moreover, United Nations

Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (2020) shows "how family-friendly policies support sustainability" (p. 8) as below.

**Table 2**

*How family-friendly policies support sustainability*

| Children | Parents and other caregivers | Communities and society |
|---|---|---|
| • Improve health and nutrition<br>• Enhance social and emotional development<br>• Strengthen language and cognitive skills<br>• Improve readiness for school<br>• Prevent and reduce child labor | • Increase personal well-being and productivity<br>• Increase participation in labor markets<br>• Reduce poverty and alleviate financial stress<br>• Improve work-life balance<br>• Improve parenting skills through parenting programs and support<br>• Support the well-being of families | • Build human capital, enlarge the talent pool<br>• Increase workplace productivity and earnings, likely reducing dependence on social assistance<br>• Reduce poverty<br>• Secure decent working conditions<br>• Improve gender equality in economic participation and reduce women's dropout rates |

*Note*. United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2020, p. 8

In addition to the health and lifestyle benefits that families face, family policies also play an important role in promoting equitable social and economic growth in countries (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). Bogenschneider (2011) explains how families and family policies contribute to the society as a whole. She introduces four public contributions of families and family policies. First of all, Bogenschneider (2011) views families as the contributor for generating productive workers. The role of the family in the children's early life is significant that it even influences their later development, and family policies such as childcare provision promotes the economic efficiency (Bogenschneider, 2011). Moreover, family policies play an important role in developing caring, committed citizens in a society (Bogenschneider, 2011). Especially, family policies that are intended to strengthen parenting are helpful to raise caring, committed citizens (Bogenschneider, 2011). Additionally, family policies are cost-efficient ways to accomplish societal goals (Bogenschneider, 2011). With family policies that support the families to work well, there is no need for the government to fully replace the functions of families, which is an almost impossible method

for the government to afford (Bogenschneider, 2011). Finally, family policies are effective in enhancing positive development of children and youths (Bogenschneider, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, family policies, including affordable and high-quality childcare and paid parental leave, help children to get a good start in life and parents to keep a good balance between work and family life (Chzhen et al., 2019). The next section will take a closer look at the benefits of each of affordable, high-quality childcare and paid parental leave in terms of health and lifestyle.

### 2.2.1. Benefits that affordable, high-quality childcare has in terms of health and lifestyle

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (2019), families are likely to experience benefits in health and lifestyle through affordable, accessible and quality childcare. The United Nations Children's Fund (2019) claims that "children who receive quality and nurturing early childcare are healthier, learn better and stay in school longer, and have higher earnings as adults" (p. 6). Additionally, affordable and high-quality childcare boosts socialization and development of children by providing diverse social learning opportunities (Chzhen et al., 2019). In the long run, moreover, universal access to early childhood education and care may have the effect of alleviating educational inequality (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018).

It is not only the children that reap the benefits of affordable and quality childcare, but also parents are beneficiaries of childcare as well. According to Chzhen et al. (2019), quality childcare supports parents to return to work smoothly. Thus, parents are likely to experience reduced parental stress and increased concentration of work, as childcare enables parents to keep the balance between their commitments at home and at work (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). In short, affordable and high-quality childcare brings diverse benefits in terms of health and lifestyle to both children and parents.

### 2.2.2. Benefits that paid parental leave has in terms of health and lifestyle

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (2019), paid parental leave provides various benefits in terms of health and lifestyle, by improving the children's health and development, and promoting the families' economic lifestyle. For instance, infant mortality rates and bloody diarrhoea drop with the increase in paid maternity leave (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). In addition, paternity leave helps to reduce post-partum depression by promoting more equal distribution of childcare (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). In this way, parental leave policies give supports to families

during the first few years of a child's life; maternity leave helps mothers to regain health after childbirth and to bond with their children; paid parental leave helps women maintain their income and avoid losing their jobs; paternity leave enables more equitable distribution of care among parents and allows fathers to build close relationships with their children (Chzhen et al., 2019). Daly (2020) also points out the enhancement of gender equality and the opportunity for fathers to bond with their children as benefits of "father quotas" limited for the fathers. Therefore, children are likely to engage in a healthy development throughout their lifetime, as their parents are able to form an intimate relationship with them through the opportunity of paid parental leave (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019).

Moreover, there are also economic benefits that paid parental leave cause, which improves the lifestyle of the families. Families experience positive effects on income in a both short- and long-term with paid parental leave, which lead to reducing their need for public assistance (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). To sum up, paid parental leave is beneficial in the perspectives of health and lifestyle as it brings about healthy development of children, wellbeing of parents, enhanced gender equality in both family members and the labor force, and better long-term economic opportunities for families (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019).

### 2.2.3. Family policies and employment of mothers

There have been several studies dealing with the relationship between family policies, especially childcare policies, and maternal employment. According to Vuri (2016), some studies reveal no effect of childcare subsidies on female labor supply, whereas others show that childcare subsidies foster maternal employment. In countries with already high female labor force participation, subsidized childcare has very little impact on increasing the maternal employment (Vuri, 2016). In Sweden, for example, the significant cost savings of childcare due to the reform did not have a real impact on women's employment rates (Vuri, 2016). On the other hand, countries like Canada and the United States experienced increase in female labor supply due to childcare subsidies (Vuri, 2016).

However, Datta Gupta et al. (2008) pointed out that the family policies of the Nordic countries, especially their public childcare services, made the high rate of female employment possible, which implies that the reason family policies have not had a significant impact in recent years is because they have already encouraged women's labor market participation. Nevertheless, family policies of the Nordic countries have also caused negative effects on the position of women in the labor market mainly due to the lack of flexibility in public childcare (Datta Gupta et al., 2008).

According to Vuri (2016), moreover, although family policies that subsidize childcare may increase maternal employment in some countries, they have different effects on maternal employment across countries depending on factors including employment status, childcare availability, costs, quality, preferences, and social norms. In other words, merely providing financial support for childcare does not directly promote the employment of mothers, as many other factors should be sufficient to enable mothers in care to convert to work (Vuri, 2016).

To conclude, family policies can bring benefits to children, parents, and the society as a whole in the context of health and lifestyle. Nevertheless, in order to fully obtain these benefits in real life, family policies need to be studied from various perspectives and designed to fit social reality. The United Nations Children's Fund (2019) suggests that "family-friendly policies need to be designed as a holistic and balanced package of time-related, resource-related and service-related policies to provide adequate provisions" (p. 3). On top of that, it is necessary for family policies to take into account both the adults' role as workers and parents and reflect various forms of family structure and employment status (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). As a result, this study is beneficial because it can contribute to the improvement of family policy and allow families to fully enjoy the advantages of family policies, by providing a novel perspective in family policies.

## 2.3. Nordic perspectives

As Table 3 shows, family policies, including childcare policies, have developed differently across countries. However, the Nordic countries are often tied up to have similar family policies (Datta Gupta et al., 2006; Datta Gupta et al., 2008; Guo & Gilbert, 2007; Karila, 2012; Thévenon, 2011; Vuri, 2016). Therefore, this part will discuss the Nordic perspectives of family policies.

**Table 3**

*Three main patterns of childcare across countries*

| Northern European countries | Southern European countries | The US, the UK, and Canada |
|---|---|---|
| Universal and highly subsidized childcare | Public childcare with low availability especially for children under age three | Private, high-cost childcare with subsidies mainly targeting single mothers |

*Note*. Vuri, 2016.

Thévenon (2011) emphasizes that the Nordic countries have generous family policies that support parents to keep the balance between work and family. Especially, parental leave policies that allow both mothers and fathers to leave employment after their child's birth, a wide range of formal childcare provision, and tax benefits for dual-income families are examples of family policies that are universal throughout the Nordic countries (Thévenon, 2011). Ironically, this generosity of family policy in Nordic countries may be possible because family is not a strong mobilizing concept in the Nordic region. In consequence, family policy in Nordic countries aimed to support employment and provide equal opportunities to both mothers and fathers, which made possible the provision of high-quality childcare. In fact, the Nordic countries, with their roots in the care and welfare paradigm, are among the international pioneers of early childhood education and care provision (Daly, 2020). Sweden, Finland, and Denmark also assure legal right for children under two years old to early childhood education and care, immediately after the end of parental childcare leave (Eurydice, 2019).

Similarly, Datta Gupta et al. (2006) recognized the Nordic countries to have found the solutions to maintain the balance between work and home commitments through their unique model of family policies. This Nordic model started with the state's intervention in the private sphere to solve the low compatibility of work and family life that mothers experience (Datta Gupta et al., 2006). As a result, Nordic countries have relatively high female labor force participation and childcare use compared to Southern European countries or liberal countries due to their generous and universal childcare provision (Vuri, 2016). Hence, as it shows a positive picture on women's labor supply, fertility rates, child development, and gender equality issues, the Nordic model seems to be able to cope well with the future challenges (Datta Gupta et al., 2006). According to Datta Gupta et al. (2006), nonetheless, the Nordic model of family policies also has some shortcomings; first, it is expensive; second, there seems to have serious side effects on women's position in the labor market paradoxically due to the Nordic's family-friendly policies, which are often inflexible, causing childcare problems for families with irregular or long working hours.

# 3. Problem definition and aims

## 3.1. Problem definition

In Nordic countries, family policies, providing highly subsidized day-care for children, for example, have been playing an important role in running their welfare states, as they enable full employment and stable financing easier (Datta Gupta et al., 2006). In fact, with their implementation of the social democratic welfare states, the Nordic countries have carried out generous family policies compared to other welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Especially, promoting full employment and enhancing gender equity have been emphasized as important aims of family policies in Nordic countries, as demonstrated by their wide range of formal childcare provisions, parental leave system actively used by both parents, and more tax benefits for dual-earner households than single-earner households (Thévenon, 2011).

Although the Nordic countries are often grouped as having similarities in welfare policies, including family policies, some studies have found that there are also differences between the Nordic countries in the emphasis on problem recognition and solutions in the actual implementation of welfare policies (Vallgårda, 2007). However, there has been a lack of research that focuses on the comparison between the Nordic countries regarding family policies, and the differences of family policies between the Nordic countries have been less highlighted.

## 3.2. Aims

This study aims to compare family policies between three Nordic countries. Specifically, the differences and similarities of family policies between the three Nordic countries – Sweden, Finland, and Denmark – regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate by sex will be analyzed. Along with that, the latest differences in family policies between the three Nordic countries in 2019 and 2020 with regards to these aspects will be explored. When combining these two analyses, an attempt will be made to explain and discuss the differences in family policies among the three Nordic countries with the help of theory. Thus, the research questions are:

1. What are the differences and similarities between the three Nordic c ountries' family policies regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate of parents by sex?
2. With regards to formal childcare, parental leave, and employment ra te of parents by sex, what are the differences between the three coun tries in 2019 and 2020?

# 4. Theoretical framework

## 4.1. Choice of theories

This part will describe the central concepts and provide theories related to the research problem. Specifically, social rights discussions on why we need government intervention in family policy will be given. In addition, Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare states will be presented in relation to family policy of the Nordic countries. Moreover, microeconomic theory will be presented to justify the government intervention in family policy in terms of economic perspectives.

## 4.2. Social rights

According to T. H. Marshall (1950), social rights are non-violable rights that are guaranteed on the basis of citizenship and are universal rights to live a certain level of life. Social rights and social citizenship claimed by Marshall (1950) are ultimately the basis for the social welfare policies that exist to improve the quality of life. Family policies can also be explained based on Marshall (1950)'s discussion of social rights. Mothers with young children may have difficulties in achieving a certain level of living because they struggle to find the balance between work and family life in the natural state without government intervention (Chzhen et al., 2019). Therefore, it is necessary for the government to intervene to solve these difficulties faced by mothers with young children so that the social rights of families are not infringed (Marshall, 1950).

Rawls (1971) have further developed this social rights debate, arguing that the distribution of unequal resources to ensure the rights of the most vulnerable classes is necessary. In other words, Rawls (1971) thought that state intervention would be needed if it would help improve the status of the least beneficiaries. Thus, family policies that help enhancing the status of families in the most vulnerable classes by reducing poverty and financial stress can be justified (United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2020). Rawls, however, does not provide enough explanation for health and lifestyle problems of families, as it only defines basic goods such as income and wealth.

It is therefore necessary to note Sen's logic. Sen (1992) highlighted the importance of capability, which differs from functioning. In order to achieve functioning, capability that allows to achieve functioning needs to be present (Sen, 1992). According to Sen (1992), citizens can ask for the government to build the capability by eliminating poverty, lack of government resources, and lack of public services, and the government is also obligated to actively intervene. In that sense, family policies provided by the government that resolve the lack of childcare services and reduce poverty

promote capability, which is why government intervention is necessary in family policies.

## 4.3. Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare states

Esping-Andersen (1990) introduced the three different models of social welfare states: the liberal model, the conservative model, and the social democratic model. These models are adopted in the social welfare states around the world, but each model has a different emphasis on oriented values and dominant sectors. To begin with, in the liberal model, the market plays the most significant role in maintaining the welfare state among the three main actors of the social welfare states: the state, market, and family. Therefore, the liberal model minimizes the role of the state, and the role of the state is to encourage the market. Additionally, the liberal model limits the social rights and deepens the confrontational relationship between classes by dividing people into taxpayers and beneficiaries. The United States, Canada, and Australia are the major countries in the liberal model (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Moreover, whereas the liberal model emphasizes the role of the market, the conservative model places the most importance on the family among the state, market, and family. In other words, it puts great effort into maintaining the traditional family patterns, which encourage the women's commitment to the family. Thus, the state intervenes only when the problem cannot be resolved within the family. It is not only the traditional family patterns, but also the status differences that the conservative model tries to preserve. As a result, the redistributive effects of the welfare state are low in the conservative model. The representative countries of the conservative model are Austria, France, Germany, and Italy (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Last but not the least, the social democratic model emphasizes the role of the state among the state, market, and family. The state aims to provide universal but quality welfare services and to guarantee social rights. In order to effectively and consistently achieve these aims, the social democratic model relies on full employment and taxation based on the employment. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland are the countries that consist the social democratic model (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

**Table 4**

*Comparison of Esping-Andersen (1990)'s three models of social welfare states*

| | Liberal Model | Conservative Model | Social Democratic Model |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dominant Actor | Market | Family | State |
| Main Goals | Encouraging the market | Maintaining the traditional family patterns and the status differences | Providing universal and quality welfare and guaranteeing social rights |
| Major Countries | The United States, Canada, Australia | Austria, France, Germany, Italy | Norway, Sweden, Demark, Finland |

Among these three models, countries that adopt the social democratic model, which include Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, are known to have the most generous family policies (Brennan et al., 2013). Brennan et al. (2013) compared the family policies that support the working parents of children with disabilities of three countries that represent each model – Sweden, Germany, and the United States. Accordingly, they found out that Sweden has the most generous and highest coverage in family policies for working parents, including general leave policies for all parents, the special leave system for working parents with disabled children, and flexible work arrangements (Brennan et al., 2013). The reason why Sweden has resulted in the most generous health and well-being policies for the working parents among the three countries may be because the social democratic model highly relies on the full employment and high taxation based on the employment (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In other words, since the social democratic model encourages women to work as well, the state supports the mothers, who are still the main caregivers of disabled children in reality, not to give up on work and to achieve a work-life balance.

After examining the three models of social welfare states and finding out that the social democratic model pursues generous family policies, a question may be raised: given that the Nordic countries that adopt social democratic model have similarities in family policies, are there any differences between the Nordic countries? To answer this question, this study aims to analyze the differences and similarities of family policies regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate of parents by sex between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. When concluding the results, an attempt will be made to explain the differences in family policies among the

three Nordic countries according to Esping-Andersen (1990)'s three models of social welfare states, which will discuss whether the three countries have family policies that are consistent with the social democratic model, and whether they have elements from other models.

## 4.4. Microeconomic theory

In terms of economic perspectives, moreover, government's role in providing family policies and promoting the employment of mothers is necessary. To achieve Pareto efficiency pursued by economics, which presupposes a first-best economy, the state should intervene in case of market failure. The lack of employment of mothers can be identified as one of the market failures due to external effects. In other words, it can be understood as an inefficiency that does not sufficiently result in positive externalities. That is, the Marginal Personal Benefit, which is measured by employers who have the power to decide whether or not to hire mothers, is underestimated compared to the Marginal Social Benefit because it does not take into account the positive social impact. Therefore, mothers are less likely to get employed without the intervention of the government (Datta Gupta et al., 2006). These statistical discrimination effects in the labor market towards mothers may not be limited to mothers but may extend to all women (Datta Gupta et al., 2006).

The underestimated benefits by employers include improved health and lifestyle of children and parents, and reduced poverty (United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2020). In fact, the United Nations Children's Fund (2019) estimates that gender equality promoted in the labor market would add twelve trillion dollars to the global economy by 2025. Besides, there is an estimate that increase in women's labor force participation would raise gross domestic product in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, which includes Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, by 12 percent by 2030 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). These estimates imply that without the government's intervention through family policies, there will be deadweight loss, which reduces social surplus and thus is inefficient. As a result, in order to resolve this inefficiency, government intervention by providing family policies and enhancing the employment of mothers is needed. Based on these social and economic grounds, the policy needs for family policy and the intervention of the government is justified.

Now that the necessities of government intervention in family policy with regards to social rights and economic perspectives are revealed, it is necessary to analyze how the governments of the three Nordic countries are implementing family policy in reality.

# 5. Methods

This part provides descriptions about the methods of this study. Specifically, it will describe what research design is selected in order to answer the research questions, how sampling have been processed, how data was collected, how data has been processed and analyzed, and what kind of ethical considerations were made. The research methods were selected to support the aim of this study, providing an overview of existing family policies in the three Nordic countries. Three aspects – formal childcare, parental leave, and employment of parents – were analyzed, focusing on the similarities and differences between the three countries and the trends.

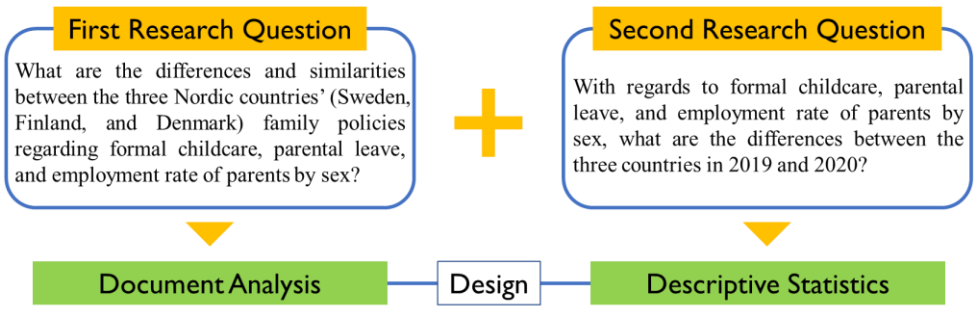
## 5.1. Design and methodological approach

### 5.1.1. Mixed methods design

Document analysis used to find answers to the first research question is a qualitative research method, whereas descriptive statistics used to answer the second research question is a quantitative method (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2015). Therefore, it can be said that this study adopts a mixed methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative research (Bryman, 2015). As using descriptive statistics along with document analysis supplements the shortcomings of document analysis, mixed methods design in this study has several advantages. Another advantage is that the mixed methods design can provide the opportunity for triangulation (Bryman, 2015). Although qualitative method and quantitative method will be used to answer each research question in this study, the results based on the document analysis may be cross-checked by the results driven from descriptive statistics (Bryman, 2015).

**Figure 1**

*Research design of this study*



### 5.1.2. Qualitative research – document analysis

Qualitative research will be held to answer the first research question. As a result, it uses an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research (Bryman, 2015). Through observations and data analysis, this study will provide generalizable inferences, which is making the theory as the outcome of research. In other words, the theoretical data of this study will be formed after the data analysis, showing the inductive nature of the relationship between theory and research (Bryman, 2015).

Among the various methods of qualitative research, document analysis will be used. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). In this study, official documents produced by the government of each country will be used to carry out document analysis. Since document analysis has been used in several studies that compares the policies across the countries (Povlsen et al., 2014; Vallgårda, 2007), it will be a suitable method to answer the first research question of this study, which makes a comparison between the three Nordic countries' family policies. In addition, Bowen (2009) emphasizes the staple use of organizational and institutional documents in qualitative research.

### 5.1.3. Quantitative research – descriptive statistics

Moreover, quantitative research will be held to answer the second research question. In particular, descriptive statistics will be used as a quantitative research. According to Fisher and Marshall (2009), descriptive statistics are "the numerical and graphical techniques used to organise, present and analyse data" (p. 95). In order to seek for the differences of family policies between the three Nordic countries in 2019 and 2020, using descriptive statistics will be an appropriate method. By using descriptive statistics as well, it will be able to compensate the limitations of the analysis of official documents. Povlsen et al. (2014) admits that using political documents as sole source of data has weaknesses, as a very particular perspective to a political process may be provided by these documents.

### 5.1.4. Comparative design

This study is a cross-cultural research, which is a form of comparative design, as it analyzes data from three countries – Sweden, Finland, and Denmark (Bryman, 2015). Hantrais (1996) claims that the aim of a cross-cultural research may be to search for the similarities and differences of social reality in different national contexts, which is why this study is well suited as a cross-cultural research, as it aims to explain the differences and similarities between

the three Nordic countries' family policies. Cross-cultural research has benefits compared to other types of research that focuses on one nation, since it raises an objection to the prejudice that social science studies provide knowledge that is limited to a particular culture (Bryman, 2015).

## 5.2. Qualitative research

### 5.2.1. Sampling

Since this study is a secondary analysis that uses existing data already collected or published by others, it does not necessarily go through the process of sampling (Bryman, 2015). However, as sampling is not just about sampling people, purposive sampling was used in selecting the documents (Bryman, 2015). According to Bryman (2015), purposive sampling is a strategic sampling method that sample cases that are relevant to the research questions. In this study, the documents were selected so that they are relevant to the first research question. This means that official documents that covers formal childcare, parental leave, and employment of parents were selected. In addition, to corroborate relevant data with regards to the second research question, which deals with the recent differences between the three countries, documents published within the last three years have been chosen.

### 5.2.2. Data gathering

In order to conduct document analysis for answering the first research question, official documents published by the governments of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark were gathered. The gathering of documents was limited to documents published in English, to prevent confusion due to the translation of terms and since my native language is not Swedish, Finnish, or Danish. In addition, the documents should be published by the government and should contain information about formal childcare, parental leave, and employment of parents. In order to find official documents published by the governments, I searched on the internet.

The Swedish official document was found on the website of Government Offices of Sweden. An information material from Ministry of Employment named "Gender equality policy in Sweden – A feminist Government," which was published on 07 March 2019 and updated on 01 October 2020, was retrieved.

The Finnish official document was found on the website of Ministry of Social Affairs and Health of Finland. Publication of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health named "Making Finland a global leader in gender equality: Government action plan for gender equality 2020-2023," which was published on 11 February 2021, was retrieved.

The Danish official document was found on the website of the Ministry of Employment of Denmark. Publication of the Minister of Equal Opportunities named "Report / Perspective and Action Plan 2018," which was published on 27 February 2018, was retrieved.

**Table 5**

*Publisher, year, and title of the selected official documents*

| | **Publisher and year** | **Title of the document** |
|---|---|---|
| The Swedish official document | Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment (2019) | *Gender equality policy in Sweden – A feminist Government* |
| The Finnish official document | Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2021) | *Making Finland a global leader in gender equality: Government action plan for gender equality 2020-2023* |
| The Danish official document | Minister for Equal Opportunities (2018) | *Report / perspective and action plan 2018* |

Scott (1990) has provided four criteria for assessing the quality of documents, which are authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. During the process of gathering the documents, I tried to determine the usefulness of particular documents by using these four criteria (Bowen, 2009). According to Bryman (2015), official document deriving from the governments can be regarded as assuring authenticity and as having meaning. Since these official documents were produced by governments, they have credibility and authority as well (Povlsen et al., 2014). Since it is impossible to be representative in a statistical sense in terms of qualitative research, representativeness is not a meaningful aspect to determine in this case (Bryman, 2015).

### 5.2.3. Data processing and analysis

According to Bowen (2009), the steps of document analysis are "skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation" (p. 32). Therefore, after selecting the official documents published by the governments of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark regarding family policies, each document went through a sequential process of skimming, reading, and interpretation for document analysis. First, the official documents of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark were skimmed through by highlighting the keywords relevant to the research question. After that, thorough examination was processed by reading the selected documents several times. Finally, the

documents were interpreted by identifying words or sentences to answer the first research question regarding the aims (Povlsen et al., 2014).

Bowen (2009) claims that the researcher should be objective and sensitive when processing and analyzing data from documents. Therefore, during the entire process of document analysis, I tried to keep objectivity and sensitivity. Additionally, I had the advantage of being able to objectively analyze all documents without particular bias because none of the three Nordic countries is my home country (Povlsen et al., 2014).

## 5.3. Quantitative research

### 5.3.1. Sampling

Sweden, Finland, and Denmark have been chosen for comparative analysis. This study was conducted between April and October 2021. At this time, among the five Nordic countries, only Sweden, Finland, and Denmark have registered their results of the 2020 European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey on Eurostat. Since EU-SILC survey included the data of 'Children in formal childcare or education' and 'Average number of weekly hours of formal care,' which are the key data used in this study, it was necessary to gather the data of EU-SILC survey. Additionally, for the data regarding parental leave, World Bank Gender Statistics were used to gather the data.

### 5.3.2. Data gathering

The data for descriptive statistics to answer the second research question has been gathered through internet. The data of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark were retrieved from Eurostat and World Bank Gender Statistics. Through the website of Eurostat, "children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group," "average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group – children with at least 1 hour of formal care," and "employment rate by sex, age groups, educational attainment level and household composition (%)" were selected for analysis.

To seek the proportion of children in formal childcare or education, "children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group" was selected for analysis. Since long time coverage available at the childcare center is important for parents who are working full-time (Datta Gupta et al., 2008), "average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group – children with at least 1 hour of formal care" was also selected for analysis. Lastly, "employment rate by sex, age groups, educational attainment level and household composition (%)" was chosen to analyze the gender equity promoted by family policies of each

country. Additionally, “length of paid shared parental leave,” “length of paid parental leave for father,” and “length of paid parental leave for mother” were selected for analysis through World Bank Gender Statistics to compare the parental leave status between the three countries in 2019 and 2020.

### 5.3.3. Data processing and analysis

Descriptive statistics were used in the process of data processing and analysis regarding the second research question. In other words, statistical data of 2019 and 2020 retrieved from Eurostat and World Bank will be used to reveal the differences between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. Specifically, “children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group,” “average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group – children with at least 1 hour of formal care,” “length of paid shared parental leave, paid parental leave for father and mother in calendar days,” and “employment rate by sex, age groups, educational attainment level and household composition (%)” will be sequentially analyzed. According to Eurostat (n.d.a), formal childcare refers to (a) education at pre-school or equivalent, (b) education at compulsory education, (c) child care at centre-based services outside school hours, (d) child care at day-care centre organized/controlled by a by public or private structure. Moreover, the average number of weekly hours of formal care is defined as “the weighted average number of weekly hours that children cared for, by formal arrangements other than by the family” (Eurostat, n.d.b). Furthermore, the length of paid shared parental leave refers to parental leave that can be shared amongst the parents, while the length of paid parental leave for father or mother refers to days of parental leave reserved specifically for fathers or mothers. In addition, employment rate of parents by sex indicates the percentage of persons in employment who has children.

## 5.4. Ethics

This study conducts a secondary analysis that avoids additional ethical issues for participants. Since human participants were not present during the study, protection for human participants, informed consent, protection of privacy, and consideration of deception towards the participants were not needed (Bryman, 2015). Additionally, this study uses unobtrusive methods only, as both document analysis and using official statistical data are unobtrusive methods (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2015). Since unobtrusive methods do not involve the cognition that the research participants are being studied and are thus not subject to responsiveness, this study has ethical advantages (Bryman, 2015).

In addition, there was no possibility of harm to the researcher since the study did not raise any physical or emotional risk to the researcher. Moreover, the data used for analysis were data that are available for access to anyone and that do not contain any personal, sensitive, or secret content, which means that data protection was considered to be irrelevant (Bryman, 2015). Furthermore, as this study aims to verify through data whether formal childcare is well guaranteed and whether gender equity in terms of employment rate of parents is promoted in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, this study will benefit the ethical decision making of the Nordic society rather than damaging the participants or communities, which is an important ethical aspect to consider in cross-cultural research (Liamputtong, 2010).

# 6. Results and analysis

In this section, results and analysis will be presented based on the two research questions. To begin with, the results that answers the first research question will be analyzed based on the official documents produced by the government of each country: Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. In other words, the differences and similarities between these three Nordic countries' family policies regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate of parents by sex will be revealed. Additionally, the analysis of the recent differences between the three countries in 2019 and 2020 with regards to these aspects will be followed, which provides answers to the second research question.

## 6.1. Similarities and differences between the three Nordic countries' family policies – qualitative findings

The following sections will provide analysis of similarities and differences between the three Nordic countries' family policies. Before diving in, Table 6 is presented in order to demonstrate an abstract of the following results. It summarizes the similarities and differences of family policies between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark.

**Table 6**

*Similarities and differences of family policies between three Nordic countries*

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Sweden</th><th>Finland</th><th>Denmark</th><th>Similarities<br>Differences</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">1) Formal childcare</td><td colspan="2">Formal childcare is a means of promoting women's employment</td><td></td><td>Similarities (6.1.1.1.)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Childcare in Sweden benefits both men and women</td><td>Childcare in Finland promotes equality for both children and families</td><td></td><td>Differences (6.1.1.2.)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">2) Parental leave</td><td colspan="3">Facilitating fathers to use parental leave is important</td><td rowspan="3">Similarities (6.1.2.1.)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Parental leave policies are aimed to equally distribute household chores and care responsibilities between men and women</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">Finland and Denmark point out the workplace climate that discourages men from taking parental leave</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2"></td><td colspan="2">Sweden and Finland are in favor of reserved parental leave for fathers</td><td>Denmark is against reserved parental leave for fathers</td><td rowspan="2">Differences (6.1.2.2.)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sweden highlights the positive impacts that men’s increased use of parental leave has brought</td><td>Finland has special focus on diverse forms of families regarding parental leave</td><td>Both mothers and fathers demand for longer parental leave in Denmark</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="8">3) Employment</td><td colspan="2">Formal childcare and parental leave policies have positive impact on parents’ employment</td><td></td><td rowspan="5">Similarities (6.1.3.1.)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">All three countries support equal participation in the labor market for both men and women</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Lower labor market status of women is still a problem</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Sweden and Finland aim to increase the employment rate and shorten the employment rate gap between men and women</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">Finland and Denmark highlight the employment issue of minorities as well</td></tr>
<tr><td>Childcare is a main reason for women to work part-time</td><td>Childcare is not a main reason for women to work part-time</td><td></td><td rowspan="2">Differences (6.1.3.2.)</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Some Finnish mothers are out of work due to childcare home allowance and government’s efforts to secure employment</td><td>Denmark has a goal of balancing gender domination in industries</td></tr>
</table>

### 6.1.1. Formal childcare

6.1.1.1. Similarities of formal childcare between Sweden and Finland

*Formal childcare, a means of promoting women's employment in Sweden and Finland*

According to the official documents, the aim of providing formal childcare in the Nordic countries is to promote women's employment. Especially, the Swedish official document and the Finnish official document indicate that formal childcare was introduced in order to boost the employment of women. For example, the Swedish government perceives the reforms of individual income taxation, the development and expansion of public childcare, and the gender-neutral parental leave benefit as boosters of providing women the equal opportunities to participate in the labor force as men and access to employment.

> These reforms promoted gender equality and increased women's prospects to have the same opportunities as men to enter the labour market, and to remain and develop there. (…) Consequently women could gain access to employment and greater financial independence, which increased their well-being and bargaining power in the household. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 8)

The quote above mentions that Swedish women have been able to be part of the labor market as the main worker of unpaid housework and care work has shifted from women to the public welfare system. Along with increased employment rate of Swedish women, their health and lifestyle have also gone through improvement, as their well-being and bargaining power at home have increased.

Among the three important welfare reforms that have acted as facilitators of women's employment, the one that the Swedish government is particularly credited with is the development of public childcare. It even claims that high employment rate of women was possible due to universal and affordable public childcare, which has been a prerequisite.

> The development of affordable public child care facilities available to all has been prerequisite for the large proportion of women in gainful employment in Sweden. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 9)

Since universal public childcare in Sweden has enabled women to balance paid work with household chores and care, many Swedish women have been able to participate in the labor market.

Similarly, the Finnish government perceives that providing free early childhood education will be able to promote women's employment.

> The Government will continue the experimental programme of free early childhood education for children aged 5 (20 h per week) in 2020-2021. The aim is to increase the participation rate in early childhood education, to promote women's employment and to improve pedagogics. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 33)

One of the main goals of the Finnish government in conducting the experimental programme of free early childhood education for children aged 5 is to facilitate women's employment.

#### 6.1.1.2. Differences of formal childcare between Sweden and Finland

*Childcare in Sweden benefits both men and women*

Promoting women's employment is not the only benefit of Swedish formal childcare emphasized by the Swedish government. It also highlights the advantages of formal childcare not only for women, but also for men.

> Together with public elderly care, this (public child care) gives both women and men an opportunity to combine professional life and family life. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 9)

According to the Swedish government, both men and women can enjoy the opportunity to balance professional life and family life due to the government's provision of public childcare.

> Promoting equal economic opportunities for women and men is a fundamental part of the gender equality policy. Parental insurance, combined with an extensive system of public child care and elderly care, has made it possible for both parents to improve their work-life balance. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 9)

In fact, the Swedish government acknowledges the role of public childcare of Sweden, along with its parental insurance and elderly care, has in enhancing the work-life balance of both parents.

*Childcare in Finland promotes equality for both children and families*

While the Swedish government recognizes the benefits of formal childcare in helping to achieve work-life balance of both parents, the Finnish government emphasizes the role of childcare in promoting equality for both children and families.

> Attending early childhood education helps level the playing field with regard to some factors due to the children's backgrounds, such as socioeconomic differences. Therefore, early childhood education

> plays a substantial role in promoting equality, for both the children and their families, and it is for this reason that raising the participation rate is justified. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 30)

The Finnish government argues that the participation rate of public childcare services should be raised because they are main actors that promote equality for both the children and their families. It is possible for the public childcare to improve equality for both children and their families since the Finnish government ensures equal access to childcare at the same quality regardless of their diverse socioeconomic background.

### 6.1.2. Parental leave

#### 6.1.2.1. Similarities of parental leave between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark

*Facilitating fathers to use parental leave is important*

Even in the Nordic countries, the use of parental leave is unequally distributed between men and women; women use more parental leave benefits than men on average. Even in Sweden, where men's use of parental leave is relatively high, the government recognizes an uneven distribution of parental leave days between men and women as follows.

> The use of parental benefit days is unevenly distributed between women and men. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 12).

The Finnish government also admits the unequal distribution of parental leave between men and women.

> Fathers typically take the shorter portion of paternity leave, which can be taken together with the mother's maternity leave, at the birth of the child; 84% of all fathers did so in 2018. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, pp. 23-24).

The Danish government is not an exception; the uneven distribution of parental leave between men and women is also mentioned by the Danish government.

> Women who became mothers in 2015 take on average 298 day's maternity/parental leave. Men who became fathers in 2015 take on average 31 days' paternity/parental leave. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

In consequence, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark put emphasis on the role of fathers when it comes to parental leave. To begin with, the Swedish government admits that it is targeting fathers to use more parental leave benefits as follows.

> In order to incentivice men to take more parental benefit days the

> Government subsequently increased the number of days reserved for each parent. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 12)

According to the Swedish government, the reason behind the increase in the number of days reserved for each parent is because it wants to facilitate men to take more parental benefit days. Moreover, the Finnish government goes beyond and has a goal to evenly distribute the days of parental leave between men and women.

> This reform (the family leave reform) must be executed so that, in a family with two parents, both parents will have an equal quota of months of leave. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 11)

In other words, the family leave reform designed by the Finnish government takes an objective so that mothers and fathers will have an equal quota of months of family leave. Furthermore, the Danish government highlights the necessity of promoting fathers to take parental leave as follows.

> It is necessary to continue to work to reduce the gender-segregated labour market, to promote the proportion of women in management and politics, and to encourage fathers to take parental leave. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

The Danish government also emphasizes the need to create an environment where fathers taking parental leave is just as natural as mothers taking leave as follows.

> It should be a natural for fathers to take parental leave in the same way as mothers. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 5)

### *Parental leave policies aimed to equally distribute household chores and care responsibilities between men and women*

Even in the Nordic countries where high levels of gender equality are assured, care responsibilities and household chores are not equally distributed between men and women; women still take more responsibilities of care and housework than men. This is the reason why the governments of the three countries commonly say that they implement parental leave policies that promote gender equality: to equally distribute household chores and care responsibilities between men and women.

First of all, the Swedish government empirically shows the unequal distribution of domestic work between men and women as follows.

> Time-use surveys show that men in Sweden between ages 20 and 64 do 5 hours less of domestic work each week compared with women of the same age. (…) Therefore the Government has introduced reconciliation policies such as a third reserved month for each parent

> in 2016. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 18)

Since the responsibilities of domestic work is unequally distributed between men and women in Sweden, the Swedish government has managed to increase the reserved months of parental leave for each parent.

> The intention behind the increased number of reserved months for each parent has been to achieve a more even distribution of unpaid household and care work, and gender equality in the labour market. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 9)

The Swedish government even directly admits that the increase in the reserved months for each parent is aimed to evenly distribute household chores and care responsibilities.

Similarly, the Finnish government also identifies the problem of unequal division of caring responsibilities between men and women in families as follows.

> Caring responsibilities are not equally divided between women and men in families, and this manifests itself in the use of family leave. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 23)

In order to seek answers to this problem, the Finnish government has planned a family leave reform.

> The family leave reform will facilitate a considerable advance in distributing responsibility for care more equitably between genders. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 28)

In other words, the family leave reform of Finland aims to promote the equal distribution of care responsibilities between men and women.

It is not only the Swedish and Finnish governments that support equality within family, but the Danish government also supports equality in families as follows.

> "The government supports equality on the labour market and in families" (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 26)

*Finland and Denmark point out the workplace climate that discourages men from taking parental leave*

It seems true that the Nordic fathers use less parental leave benefits than the Nordic mothers. According to the Finnish and Danish governments, a less supportive workplace climate for men to take parental leave might be a reason behind this. To begin with, the Finnish government reports that fathers,

especially who work in the private sector, encounter barriers when they try to take rest of the parental leave not reserved for them.

> By contrast, extended family leave was felt to be the most problematic by fathers working in the private sector. (…) several studies have found that while it is considered self-evident for fathers to take the leave that is earmarked for them, the rest of all family leave available is perceived as belonging to the mothers. What is crucial for fathers making use of family leave is how their work will be organised while they are away. Workplaces rarely hire family leave substitutes for fathers; instead, the work is divided up between co-workers, or the fathers manage it themselves. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 24)

The Finnish government goes further to assert that it matters how their work is managed when they take parental leave. It implies that instead of dividing the work between co-workers or making the fathers manage it themselves, workplaces should hire family leave substitutes for fathers as they do for mothers, in order to promote the use of parental leave benefits by fathers. Similarly, the Danish government also mentions a less supportive employer who discourages fathers to take parental leave as follows.

> One in three fathers feel that lack of support from their employer is a barrier to taking more leave. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

#### 6.1.2.2. Differences of parental leave between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark

*Sweden and Finland in favor of reserved parental leave for fathers vs. Denmark against reserved parental leave for fathers*

When it comes to reserved parental leave for fathers, the three Nordic countries take different stances. While the Swedish and Finnish governments support the parental leave allocated to fathers, the Danish government disagrees with the earmarked parental leave for fathers. First of all, in Sweden, three months of parental leave are reserved for each parent, which cannot be used by the other parent.

> Today, women and men are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave (16 months) per child. Ninety days are reserved for each parent and cannot be transferred to the other parent. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 9)

The Swedish government did not introduce a reserved 90-day parental leave at once. It started with a month of reserved parental leave in 1995.

> In 1995, the first reserved month was introduced, and 2002 it was increased to two months. After these changes, fathers took out a

> higher proportion of the total parental allowance. In 2016 the Government added a third month with the same effect. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 12)

After several changes, the Swedish government have increased the reserved days of parental leave to ninety days, as it showed an increase in the proportion of the total parental allowance taken by fathers. Now, the Swedish government is also reviewing further individualized parental leave schemes.

> The Government is also currently reviewing the policy for further modernisation, promoting gender equal parenting with further individualised parental leave schemes. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 18)

Similarly, the Finnish government has also created parental leave quotas for fathers.

> There has been some increase in the 2000s with the creation of leave quotas for fathers, but among the Nordic countries Finland has the lowest rate of family leave taken by fathers. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 23)

However, as Finland has the lowest rate of family leave taken by fathers among the Nordic countries, the Finnish government is planning to further increase the earnings-related leave quotas for fathers as follows.

> Earnings-related leave quotas for fathers will be extended without decreasing the leave currently available to mothers. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 27)

On the other hand, the Danish government does not support introducing the reserved parental leave for fathers.

> The government supports equality on the labour market and in families, but it does not want earmarked leave for fathers. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 26)

In Denmark, reserved leave for both parents is only available for special cases like bereavement leave as follows.

> The change means that from 1 February 2018 both parents are entitled to 14 weeks absence if they lose a child before the 32nd week after its birth or reception. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 18)

*Sweden highlights the positive impacts that men's increased use of parental leave has brought*

Due to the reserved parental leave for each parent, men's use of parental leave benefits have increased in Sweden. According to the Swedish government,

this increase has brought several positive impacts regarding the health and lifestyle.

> Men's increased use of the parental leave benefits have proven to have a clear positive impact on men's relationships with their children as well as a positive effect on the development of women's wages. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 18)

The Swedish government puts special emphasis on the benefits of men's increased use of the parental leave benefits. It acknowledges the increased use of parental leave by men, which has resulted in improved father-child relationships and higher wages for women.

*Finland has special focus on diverse forms of families regarding parental leave*

It is distinct that the Finnish government aims to deal with diverse forms of families when it comes to parental leave. According to the Finnish government, the family leave reform has a plan to deal with various types of families in an equal manner.

> The Government Programme states that the family leave reform will be designed to cater to all kinds of families equally, including diverse families, and to allow for various kinds of entrepreneurship. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 27)

It can be inferred that the Finnish government has a special focus on guaranteeing equality for diverse families.

*Both mothers and fathers demand for longer parental leave in Denmark*

In Denmark, the use of parental leave by fathers is not increasing so much.

> 43% of men who became fathers in 2015 took only 14 days' paternity leave. This has been somewhat stable since 2008. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

In addition, a non-negligible portion of parents wish to take longer parental leave as follows.

> 41% of parents would like to have taken longer leave than they did. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

In order to increase the use of parental leave in Denmark, the Danish government admits the role of the government but also highlights the support and cooperation of other stakeholders, such as businesses and unions. One example that shows the cooperation of companies to increase the use of

parental leave by fathers is the campaign "Parental leave for Dads – take it like a man."

> The aim is to increase the number of men taking parental leave. Many Danish businesses such as TDC, Ørsted, Maersk, NCC and MT Højgaard have signed a declaration stating that they support fathers taking leave, that they promote more men to take leave and that they encourage others to as well. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 17)

This campaign is held through the cooperation of diverse stakeholders, including the Danish government, businesses, and unions to promote the fathers' use of parental leave.

> In 2018, together with businesses, unions, etc., the government will focus on encouraging fathers to take parental leave through the "Mission – Parental Leave for Dad" campaign financed by the Rate Adjustment Pool for 2017. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 19)

To sum up, with the demand of longer parental leave, the Danish government asks the other stakeholders to cooperate in increasing the use of parental leaves by fathers, which is somewhat stable.

### 6.1.3. Parents' employment

6.1.3.1. Similarities of parents' employment between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark

*Formal childcare and parental leave policies have positive impact on parents' employment in Sweden and Finland*

The governments of Sweden and Finland commonly accept that formal childcare and parental leave policies have had a positive impact on the employment of parents. To begin with, the Swedish government acknowledges the positive impact of public childcare services and reserved parental leave policies on women's employment rate as follows.

> In combination with the expansion of child care services and a steady increase of the reserved parental leave months for each parent, it had an important positive impact on women's employment rate. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, pp. 8-9)

Similarly, the Finnish government recognizes the role of formal childcare and parental leave policies that have made a significant contribution to bringing about a number of positive impacts on the health and lifestyle, including ensuring the employment of parents.

> Potential for reconciling work and family life has been improved

> over the decades in various ways, including advancements in family leave, day care, school meals and care for the elderly. The goal has been to contribute to the wellbeing of families, to give parents more opportunities to spend time with their children while allowing the parents to also go to work. However, a fully functioning reconciliation of work and family life and the equitable sharing of caring responsibilities still require further action. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 23)

These positive impacts include family wellbeing, stronger family bonds, and parents being employed. Nevertheless, the Finnish government acknowledges that more efforts are needed for a more equitable distribution of caring responsibilities and a better work-life balance.

*Supports equal participation in the labor market for both men and women*

The governments of the three Nordic countries support equal participation in the labor market for both men and women by providing family policies. First of all, according to the Swedish government, Sweden has been able to support both men and women to participate equally in the labor market through important welfare reforms, including the development and expansion of public childcare, the gender-neutral parental leave benefit, and the individual income taxation.

> These different reforms also contributed to the development of a modern welfare state in Sweden which has proven to be essential for gender equality, as a well-functioning welfare sector enables both women and men to participate in the labour market on equal terms. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 8)

In Finland, according to the Finnish government, both men and women are assured to have jobs and care small children as follows.

> Compared with many other countries, the gender equality situation on the Finnish labour market is rather good. Over a period of several decades, both women and men have been provided with opportunities to both hold jobs and care for small children, also during infancy. Employment rates are very close to each other, 71.8% for women and 73.3% for men (persons aged 15-64, 2019). (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 15)

As a result, the employment rate of women and men are very similar in Finland.

Additionally, the Danish government also works hard to "promote gender equality in the labour market" (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 7) as it is under one of the four priority areas – "better use of resources and talents" (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 7).

> Furthermore, it is important to target work to ensure equal opportunities for participation in the public domain, in the labour market, in education and in decision-making processes. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 25)

Clearly, the Danish government puts importance on assuring equal opportunities for both men and women regarding the participation in the labor market.

*Lower labor market status of women is still a problem*

Although formal childcare and parental leave policies have improved the employment of parents and the governments of three Nordic countries have supported equal labor market participation for men and women, women's lower labor market status remains as a problem. In Sweden, it is easy to find women who work part-time, especially women with children.

> However, it is still very common for women to work part-time, especially women with children. When children are born, it is common that women reduce their time in paid work, while men's time in paid work increases. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 12)

In Finland, more women than men still experience gender-based discrimination in the workplace as follows.

> Gender-based discrimination continues to be perpetrated in working life. Women are much more likely to encounter discrimination than men. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 18)

Moreover, the Finnish government views the concentrated care responsibilities as having a major impact on women's lower labor market status.

> An important reason for why women have a lower employment rate and less favourable labour market status is that they tend to accumulate care responsibilities: women use the majority of available family leave, and the majority of those performing unpaid care work are women. Although more women than men graduate from university in the EU, women still face obstacles in entering the labour market. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 53)

The Danish government mentions pay gaps, which shows the women's lower labor market status, that may imply that the potential and talent of women are not fully demonstrated.

> This results in a less flexible labour market, contributes to pay gaps, and may mean that individuals fail to utilise fully their potential and talent. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

*Sweden and Finland aim to increase the employment rate and shorten the employment rate gap between men and women*

According to Esping-Andersen (1990), the social democratic welfare states highly rely on full employment to maintain their welfare state. Therefore, dealing with the employment rate issue will be significant for the Nordic countries. In that sense, the Swedish and Finnish governments have aims to increase the employment rate or to shorten the gap between men and women in terms of employment rate. In fact, reducing the differences in employment rate between men and women is one of the main goals of the Swedish government.

> The Swedish Government has a goal set out to reduce the differences in employment rate between women and men. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 12)

Additionally, the Finnish government has a significant goal to increase the employment rate to 75% as follows.

> A headline goal of the Government is to increase the employment rate to 75% and to increase the number of people employed by at least 60,000. As part of its sustainability road map, the Government intends to set a new employment growth goal at the next government budget session, higher than the current 60,000. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 21)

*Finland and Denmark highlight the employment issue of minorities as well*

The Finnish and Danish governments are not only concerned with the employment of the general public, but also that of minorities. The Finnish government pays attention to the employment of diverse minorities, including single parents, disabled women, and immigrants. For instance, the following quote indicates the Finnish government's concern on the employment rate of single parents, disabled women, and immigrants.

> The employment rate among single parents and disabled women is significantly lower than for the entire population, as is the employment rate among immigrants. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 15)

According to the Finnish government, single parents, disabled women, and immigrants have significantly lower employment rate than the entire population. It seems that the Finnish government has particular interest on immigrants among these three kinds of minorities.

> A particularly negative impact on the school performance of girls from an immigrant background is caused by the mother of the family

> being unemployed or excluded from the labour force. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 31)

The Finnish government recognizes that their mothers not being employed or not participating in the labor force lead to low school performance of girls from an immigrant background.

Similarly, the Danish government puts specific interest on the employment of ethnic minorities. According to the Danish government, the participation of women from ethnic minorities in the labor market has a positive impact on their children, as they are better integrated.

> When women from ethnic minorities are in the labour market, their children are better integrated and negative social control is reduced. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 9)

In that sense, the Danish government is putting efforts on enhancing the labor market participation of ethnic minorities.

> Strengthened efforts for ethnic minorities to take part in the labour market and organised leisure activities: (…) they will have particular focus on improving labour-market attachment for women. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 13)

#### 6.1.3.2. Differences of parents' employment between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark

*Contrasting positions between Sweden and Finland on whether childcare is a main reason for women to work part-time*

While the Swedish government considers childcare as a main reason for women working part-time, the Finnish government argues that childcare is a less common reason behind women working part-time. To begin with, the Swedish government considers women taking care of children as one of the main reasons why more women work part-time than men.

> The main reasons that many more women than men are in part-time jobs are that they cannot find a suitable full-time job or that they are taking care of children. (Government Offices of Sweden – Ministry of Employment, 2019, p. 12)

On the other hand, according to the Finnish government, childcare is a substantially less common for Finnish women to choose to work part-time, as the shortage of a full-time job is the most common reason.

> The lack of a full-time job is the most common reason for part-time employment among women aged 25-34; even in this age group, child care is a substantially less common reason. Part-time employment can be a feasible solution for reconciling work and family life, depending on one's life situation, but part-time

> employment also involves conflicts. Persons in part-time employment earn less in wages and in pension contributions, and the working hours may be difficult to reconcile with the everyday life of a family with children, as many part-time employees work in the evenings and at weekends. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 16)

Additionally, the Finnish government asserts that part-time employment may not be a perfect solution for reconciling work and family life, as it also involves difficulties and conflicts.

*Finnish mothers out of work due to childcare home allowance and the government's efforts to secure employment after parental leave*

According to the Finnish government, there are mothers who do not have a job and claim child home care allowance after parental leave.

> After parental leave, parents may claim child home care allowance until their youngest child's third birthday. About 93% of those claiming this allowance are women (2018), and an even higher percentage of the days spent on this allowance is taken by women. (…) More than half of the mothers who rely thus extensively on the child home care allowance have no job to return to. They have a lower educational attainment than other mothers; more than one in four have only completed basic education. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 24)

Most of these Finnish mothers do not have a job to return to and have a lower educational attainment than other mothers. The Finnish government reveals the different patterns of changes in employment rates between mothers and fathers after they gave birth, and mostly mothers claiming child home care allowance may be the reason behind this difference.

> There is a clear difference in employment rates between the parents of small children. For mothers, the employment rate declines markedly when their youngest child is under 3 years old but then rises again. For fathers, having children does not reduce their employment rate; if anything, the opposite is true. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 25)

In addition, the reliance on child home care allowances may be due to the family leave discrimination and its insecurity of fixed-term employment relationship.

> Further specify legislation so that pregnancy and taking family leave shall not influence the continuation of a fixed-term employment relationship. Explore how to improve the employment security of employees returning from family leave and take legislative and other action as warranted by the findings (Ministry of Social Affairs

and Health, 2021, pp. 21-22)

Therefore, the Finnish government plans to enhance the employment security of employees returning from parental leave. This is important because the employment insecurity, family leave discrimination, and pregnancy discrimination may have a negative impact on the fertility rate, causing new challenges for the welfare state.

> Social policy is supposed to facilitate having children for those who wish to have children. At present, people put off having children for instance because of being in fixed-term employment relationships. Pregnancy discrimination and family leave discrimination are well-known phenomena, and this may have an impact on the fertility rate. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, pp. 26-27)

Moreover, the Finnish government introduced the partial care allowance to reduce dependance on child home care allowances and increase the employment rate of mothers. Allowing Finnish mothers to take partial care leave with a part-time employment slightly increased the part-time employment among parents of small children.

> Efforts have been made to increase employment among mothers for instance by encouraging them to take part-time employment instead of staying at home full-time on the child home care allowance. At the beginning of 2014, the partial care allowance available to parents of children under 3 years old was revised into the flexible care allowance, which is available if a parent applies to their employer for partial care leave. This reform caused a slight increase in part-time employment among parents of small children: in 2018, the flexible care allowance was used in the care of 10% of children under 3 years old. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 25)

Nonetheless, there are mothers who do not take partial care leave for several reasons, including no job to return to, preference, and financial reasons.

> Mothers who do not take partial care leave report as reasons that they do not have a job, that they prefer full-time care leave, that there are financial reasons for not doing so, or that part-time employment is not possible because of the nature of their job duties. Some were excluded from eligibility because of the six-month employment requirement. (…) Income problems associated with part-time employment undermine the wellbeing of both parents and children, being particularly stressful for mothers. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2021, p. 25)

Also, women working part-time commonly undergo income problems that has a negative impact on the health and lifestyle of parents and children.

*Denmark's goal of balancing gender domination in industries*

The Danish government recognizes the possible problem of a society having male-dominated industries and female-dominated industries. It can reduce the flexibility of the labor market, increase the pay gaps, and individuals may not reach their full potential and abilities.

> In Denmark, women and men participate in the labour market on an equal footing, but they typically choose to work within different fields and sectors. This results in a less flexible labour market, contributes to pay gaps, and may mean that individuals fail to utilise fully their potential and talent. (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 15)

Consequently, it is important to reduce the gender domination in industries. The Danish government places special emphasis on the employment of men in the childcare and education sectors.

> Similarly, it is important that men are employed in the care and education sectors. Girls and boys need role models, and these may become skewed if they do not also meet men at daycare centres and schools (Minister for Equal Opportunities, 2018, p. 5)

According to the Danish government, meeting both men and women at childcare centers and schools is important because both boys and girls need to form unbiased role models.

## 6.2. Differences between the three countries in 2019 and 2020 regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate of parents by sex – quantitative findings

### 6.2.1. Formal childcare

In this section, the differences between Sweden, Finland, and Denmark in 2019 and 2020 regarding formal childcare will be analyzed. The proportion of children in formal childcare or education and the average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group in 2019 and 2020 will be used to discuss the results of three Nordic countries. To begin with, Table 7 shows the proportion of children in formal childcare or education in the age group "less than 3 years" and "from 3 years to minimum compulsory school age."

**Table 7**

*Children in formal childcare or education - % over the population of each age group*

| Age group | Less than 3 years | | From 3 years to minimum compulsory school age | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| year | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| | % | % | % | % |
| Sweden | 53.1 | 54.1 | 96.5 | 96.0 |
| Finland | 38.3 | 39.5 | 88.2 | 85.3 |
| Denmark | 66.1 | 67.7 | 91.4 | 36.6 |

*Note*. Eurostat

Denmark had the highest enrollment rate for children younger than three in both 2019 and 2020, followed by Sweden and Finland. The enrollment rates for children under three exceeds 50 per cent in Sweden and Denmark, whereas it does not exceed 40 per cent in Finland, for both 2019 and 2020. On the other hand, for children from three to minimum compulsory school age, Sweden had the highest enrollment rate in both 2019 and 2020. In 2019, the second place was observed by Denmark, while it was Finland's place in 2020, mainly due to Denmark's huge decrease.

In addition, Sweden and Finland both experienced a slight increase of the enrollment rates for children younger than three and a slight decrease for those from three to minimum compulsory school age in 2020 compared to 2019. Denmark also showed a slight increase of the enrollment rate for the group of children under three in 2019 compared to 2019, but for children between three and compulsory school age, the enrollment rate decreased by 54.8 percentage points in 2020, unlike the high rate of 91.4 per cent in 2019.

Furthermore, the enrollment rates for children under three were lower in all three countries than for children from three to minimum compulsory

school age in 2019. In 2020, Sweden and Finland followed the same pattern as in 2019, but in Denmark, the enrollment rate for children younger than three was higher due to the low enrollment rate for children between three and compulsory school age in 2020.

Nonetheless, the proportion of children in formal childcare or education does not represent the full picture of the formal childcare situation in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. Analyzing how many hours children spend in formal childcare would provide a broader picture. Thus, Table 8 shows the average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group for children with at least 1 hour of formal care.

**Table 8**

*Average number of weekly hours of formal care by age group – children with at least 1 hour of formal care*

| Age group | Less than 3 years | | From 3 years to minimum compulsory school age | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| year | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| | hours | hours | hours | hours |
| Sweden | 31.7 | 30.9 | 33.6 | 33.4 |
| Finland | 32.9 | 32.3 | 34.0 | 33.5 |
| Denmark | 33.9 | 69.8 | 34.4 | 44.2 |

*Note*. Eurostat

Denmark had the highest average number of weekly hours of formal care for children of both age groups in both 2019 and 2020, followed by Finland and Sweden. Whereas in 2019 three countries had relatively similar average number of weekly hours, in 2020, children under three in Denmark spent more than twice as much time in formal care as children in Sweden and Finland. Additionally, children from three to minimum compulsory school age in Denmark spent about ten more hours in formal care than children in Sweden and Finland.

Moreover, Sweden and Finland both experienced a slight decrease of the average number of weekly hours of formal care in both age groups in 2020 compared to 2019. On the other hand, Denmark went through a significant increase of average weekly hours in both age groups in 2020 compared to 2019, with more than doubling of time in children younger than three.

Furthermore, in 2019, the average number of weekly hours of formal care was lower than for children between three and minimum compulsory school age in all three countries. In 2020, Sweden and Finland followed the same pattern as in 2019, but in Denmark, the average weekly hours of formal care were longer in children younger than three compared to those from three

to minimum compulsory school age due to the significant increase of average weekly hours in children under three in 2020.

### 6.2.2. Parental leave

**Table 9**

*Length of paid shared parental leave, paid parental leave for father and mother in calendar days*

| Type | Length of paid shared parental leave | | Length of paid parental leave for father | | Length of paid parental leave for mother | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| year | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| | days | days | days | days | days | days |
| Sweden | 300 | 300 | 90 | 90 | 90 | 90 |
| Finland | 221 | 221 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Denmark | 224 | 224 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

*Note*. World Bank Gender Statistics

Table 9 shows the length of paid shared parental leave, paid parental leave for father and mother in calendar days of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark in 2019 and 2020. There was no difference in the length of parental leave in 2019 and 2020 in all countries, regardless of the type of parental leave. In terms of the length of paid shared parental leave, Sweden had the longest length with 300 days. This was followed by Denmark with 224 days and Finland with 221 days of paid shared parental leave.

What is interesting for comparison between countries is the length of paid parental leave for father and the length of paid parental leave for mother. In Sweden, the length of both paid parental leave for father and for mother are 90 days. In contrast, Finland and Denmark both have 0 days of paid parental leave for fathers and mothers. It is confirmed through statistics that the Swedish government favors parental leave reserved for fathers, while the Danish government opposes it, as was revealed in the previous qualitative document analysis. However, in Finland's case, statistics say that there is only paid shared parental leave in Finland, as opposed to the previous qualitative finding that the Finnish government is in favor of parental leave reserved for fathers.

Another important point is that Sweden has the highest number of days of parental leave, regardless of the type, among the three countries. Unlike Finland and Denmark, moreover, Sweden has 90 days of reserved paid parental leave for fathers and mothers in addition to paid shared parental leave days. Even more surprising is that the length of paid parental leave for father

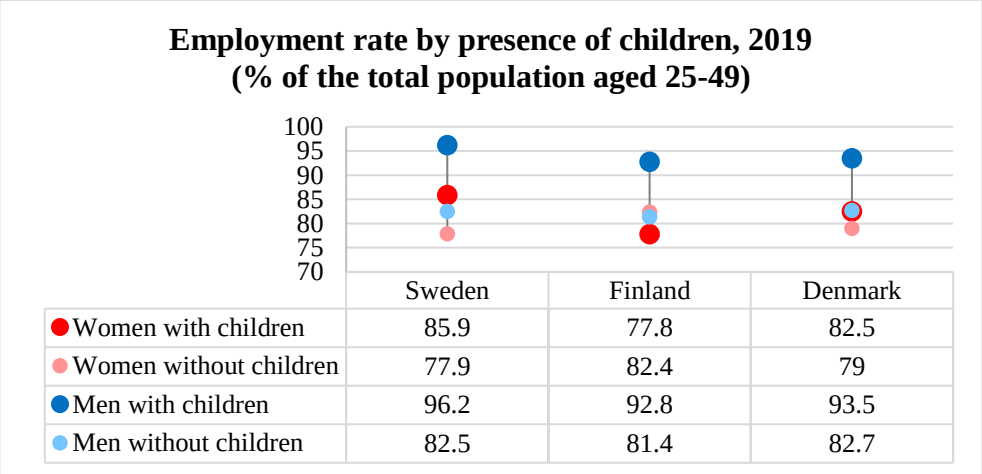
is equal to that for mother. This suggests that Sweden achieved a high level of gender equality in terms of parental leave even compared to other Nordic countries.

### 6.2.3. Employment rate of parents by sex

This part will analyze the employment rate of parents by sex. The employment rates of adults aged 25 to 49, who are likely to have young children and need the support of family policy, in 2019 and 2020 by presence of children are presented below.

**Figure 2**

*Employment rate by presence of children, 2019 - % of the total population aged 25-49*

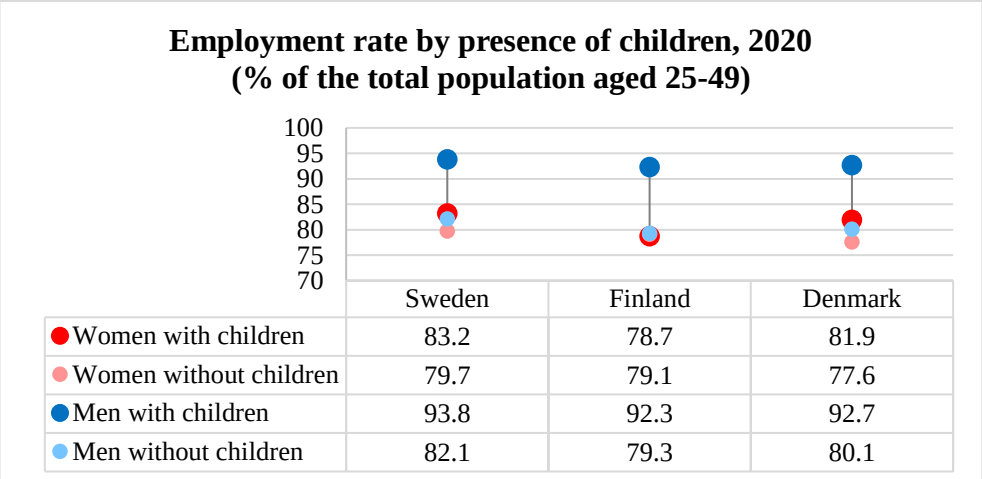



| | Sweden | Finland | Denmark |
|---|---|---|---|
| Women with children | 85.9 | 77.8 | 82.5 |
| Women without children | 77.9 | 82.4 | 79 |
| Men with children | 96.2 | 92.8 | 93.5 |
| Men without children | 82.5 | 81.4 | 82.7 |

*Note*. Eurostat

**Figure 3**

*Employment rate by presence of children, 2020 - % of the total population aged 25-49*




| | Sweden | Finland | Denmark |
|---|---|---|---|
| Women with children | 83.2 | 78.7 | 81.9 |
| Women without children | 79.7 | 79.1 | 77.6 |
| Men with children | 93.8 | 92.3 | 92.7 |
| Men without children | 82.1 | 79.3 | 80.1 |

*Note*. Eurostat

According to Figure 2 and Figure 3, the employment rate of men was generally higher than that of women when the presence of children was the same in both 2019 and 2020. The only exception is the higher employment rate of women without children (82.4%) than men without children (81.4%) in Finland in 2019.

In Sweden and Denmark, the employment rate of adults with children was higher than that of adults without children, for both men and women, regardless of the year. However, in Finland, men with children had higher employment rates than those without children, but women without children had higher employment rates than those with children, in both 2019 and 2020. Furthermore, in both 2019 and 2020, Sweden had the highest employment rate for both men and women with children, followed by Denmark and Finland. Overall, the employment rate declined slightly in 2020 compared to 2019, with the exception of women without children in Sweden and women with children in Finland, where employment rates increased slightly.

# 7. Discussion

## 7.1. Result discussion

Family policy is a policy that supports the health and lifestyle of families with children and as a result promotes gender equity. Among the specific examples of family policies, this study focused on formal childcare and parental leave. The aim of this study was to analyze the differences and similarities between the three Nordic countries' formal childcare, parental leave, and employment of parents. Along with that, the differences between Sweden, Finland, and Demark in 2019 and 2020 with regards to formal childcare, parental leave, and employment rate of parents by sex were analyzed. In this section, the results that answered the research questions will be summed up.

### 7.1.1. Formal childcare

To begin with, the governments of the Sweden and Finland have in common acknowledged that formal childcare is used as a means of enhancing women's employment. Considering that Esping-Andersen (1990) asserted that the social democratic model relies on full employment and taxation based on the employment, promoting women's employment through formal childcare shows aspects of the social democratic model of Sweden and Finland. The Swedish government goes beyond that, emphasizing that formal childcare benefits both men and women. The Finnish government also further

highlights that formal childcare improves equality for both children and families.

Moreover, the quantitative findings revealed that in 2019 and 2020, the formal childcare enrollment rate for children under three was the highest in Denmark, and that for children from three to minimum compulsory school age was the highest in Sweden. Finland, on the other hand, had the lowest formal childcare enrollment for children under three among the three countries in both 2019 and 2020. In Denmark, the average number of weekly hours in formal care was the highest for both age groups, and this average number of weekly hours increased significantly in 2020.

### 7.1.2. Parental leave

When it comes to parental leave, furthermore, the governments of all three countries emphasized the importance of promoting fathers' use of parental leave, and that parental leave aims to distribute housework and care responsibilities equally between women and men. As solving the problem of mothers with young children taking on excessive caregiving responsibilities improves the mothers' quality of life, the parental leave policies of the three countries are government interventions that guarantee social rights claimed by Marshall (1950). In addition, the Swedish government recognized the positive impact of the increased use of parental leave by fathers. The Finnish government paid special attention to the different types of families on parental leave. Also, the Swedish and Finnish governments were in favor of reserved parental leave for fathers along with the Finnish government. The Danish government, on the other hand, opposes the reserved parental leave for fathers.

Quantitative results, however, show that only Sweden has 90 days of paid parental leave for fathers, and Finland and Denmark only have paid shared parental leave. However, even for the paid shared parental leave, Sweden guarantees the largest number of days at 300 days, followed by Denmark (224 days) and Finland (221 days). Given that the governments of Finland and Denmark have mentioned the workplace atmosphere in which it is difficult for men to take parental leave, it is hard to say that Finnish and Danish men are taking their full advantage of paid shared parental leave. Indeed, according to the Danish government, both men and women want longer parental leave.

### 7.1.3. Parents' employment

Furthermore, governments of Sweden and Finland suggest that formal childcare and parental leave policies have a positive effect on the employment of parents. And the governments of all three countries commonly support equal participation of men and women in the labor market.

This goal is likely to reduce the deadweight loss, a social loss that is likely to happen when women are not sufficiently employed. Nevertheless, the quantitative findings show that, with only one exception, the employment rate of men is higher than that of women when the presence of children was the same. This once again confirms the low status of women in the labor market admitted by the governments of the three countries. Accordingly, the governments of Sweden and Finland aim to increase the employment rate of women and shorten the gap in the employment rate between men and women. The Danish government aims to balance the gender domination in industries. The governments of Finland and Denmark are paying attention to the issue of employment of minorities as well. However, the Swedish and Finnish governments take contrasting views as to whether childcare is the main cause of women working part-time; the Swedish government views childcare as the main reason for women working part-time, while the Finnish government does not.

Looking more closely at the quantitative findings, the country with the highest employment rate for mothers was Sweden, followed by Denmark and Finland, regardless of the year. Also, in Sweden and Denmark, the employment rate of women with children was higher than that of women without children. On the other hand, in Finland, where the employment rate of mothers was the lowest, the employment rate of women with children was lower than that of women without children. This may be due to the fact that many Finnish mothers are taking care of their children at home rather than working due to childcare home allowances mentioned by the Finnish government.

## 7.2. Method discussion

This part will discuss the methods used in this study in reflective and critical approaches considering the scientific and ethical aspects. In this study, a mixed methods design that combines qualitative and quantitative research was used to complement each other. In the qualitative part of this research, document analysis was conducted. To analyze the similarities and differences between the three Nordic countries regarding formal childcare, parental leave, and employment of parents, official documents published by the governments of Sweden, Finland, and Denmark were gathered. These official documents were published within the last three years in English and had to contain information about formal childcare, parental leave, and parental employment. Although all three selected documents have met all these selection criteria, similarities and differences regarding formal childcare could only be found in Swedish and Finnish documents. Since there were not many recently published government documents in English dealing with formal childcare, parental leave, and employment of parents, the nature and purpose of the

selected government documents varied slightly from government to government. In addition, since only government documents in English were used for the analysis, it is unknown whether the results can be generalized to other government documents published in the native language, which may have different prospective readers.

Moreover, descriptive statistics were used in the quantitative part of this research. Confidence intervals for the difference in proportions could not be calculated, as the Eurostat database only gives proportions and not sample sizes. The proportion of children in formal childcare or education and the average number of weekly hours of formal care were examined in order to understand the recent status of the public childcare system in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. In future studies, however, it will be possible to further analyze parental preferences, cultural norms, and the availability of family members who can provide household childcare that affect the participation rate of formal childcare (Chzhen et al., 2019). Furthermore, although the quality of childcare is also a significant factor, this study only analyzed the average number of weekly hours of formal care, since there is no data related to the quality of childcare that can be used in cross-country comparisons (Chzhen et al., 2019). Therefore, it is hoped that complete, comparable, and accurate data that measures the quality of childcare will be developed for the future studies of cross-country comparisons (Chzhen et al., 2019).

The length of paid shared parental leave, paid parental leave for father and mother were assessed to compare the parental leave status in this study. However, this data extracted from the World Bank Gender Statistics do not reveal any differences between 2019 and 2020. Thus, it can be inferred that this data represents the available number of days of parental leave, rather than an average number of parental leave days used by parents. Despite these limitations, this data was used because data on the average number of parental leave days used in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark in 2019 and 2020 were not available. In consequence, it would be necessary to collect and analyze recent data on the average number of parental leave days actually used, in future research.

In this study, employment rate of parents by sex was analyzed in order to discover the labor issues regarding the family policies. However, employment rate might not reflect the full picture. As Datta Gupta et al. (2008) noted that Nordic countries' family-friendly policies are somewhat responsible for the deterioration of women's position in the labor market mainly due to its low flexibility, it will be also important to examine other factors such as gender wage gap and flexibility of public childcare in further research.

# 8. Conclusion

Summing up the discussion, the similarities and differences between Swedish, Finnish, and Danish family policies are revealed. Through this, it will be possible to rank the countries according to whether they are well managing based on the purpose of the family policy. Sweden occupies the first place. Sweden had the highest formal childcare enrollment rate for children between three and minimum compulsory school age. Sweden also had the longest length of paid shared parental leave, and it was the only country among the three countries to have parental leave reserved for fathers and mothers. Even more surprising is that the length of parental leave for father and that for mother are the same in Sweden. This implies that Sweden has achieved a high level of gender equality in family policy. Sweden also had the highest employment rate of women with children, which was higher than that of women without children, among the three countries.

The second place is occupied by Denmark. Denmark has made remarkable progress especially in formal childcare. Regardless of the year, Denmark had the highest formal childcare enrollment rate for children under three. Denmark also had the highest average number of weekly hours in formal care for both age groups. In terms of parental leave, Denmark had the second longest length of paid shared parental leave after Sweden, but the Danish government did not favor reserved parental leave for fathers. In Sweden and Finland, the government intervenes and introduces (or plans to introduce, in the case of Finland) the fathers' quota of parental leave to balance the unbalanced use of parental leave between mothers and fathers, which is a social democratic approach. Denmark was the only country to oppose parental leave allocated to fathers, and it can be said that Denmark has some elements of the liberal model that does not favor government intervention (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Also, according to the Danish government, both men and women in Denmark wanted longer parental leave, and there is an atmosphere in the workplace where men are discouraged to use parental leave. Denmark also had the second highest employment rate of women with children, which was higher than that of women without children, after Sweden.

Unfortunately, Finland, with the lowest overall performance, took the third place. Finland had the lowest formal childcare enrollment for children younger than three. Finland also had the shortest length of paid shared parental leave among the three countries. Although the Finnish government said it was in favor of parental leave reserved by fathers, it was not yet shown in reality. Also, like Denmark, there was an atmosphere in the workplace where it was difficult for men to take parental leave. Above all, the employment rate of women with children in Finland was the lowest probably because of the childcare home allowance. And among the three countries,

Finland was the only country with a lower employment rate of women with children than for women without children. These results, such as low enrollment in childcare, choosing childcare home allowances over work, shortest parental leave days, and low employment rate of mothers, suggest that Finland has elements of the conservative model that emphasizes women's commitment to the family and seeks to maintain traditional family patterns, compared to Sweden and Denmark (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

This ranking, followed by Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, is in line with the ranking of family-friendly policies across the countries that Chzhen et al. (2019) presented. According to Chzhen et al. (2019), in the league table of national, family-friendly policies among the 41 countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU), Sweden occupies the first place; Denmark occupies the sixth place; and Finland occupies the twelfth place.

This study is of great significance in that it revealed the differences in family policy between the three Nordic countries that were previously unknown. It is also meaningful in that the qualitative findings and quantitative findings were complemented by using a mixed research method. In future studies, it will be interesting to include other Nordic countries such as Norway and Iceland in the analysis. To increase generalizability, government documents in their native languages need to be analyzed in further studies. In addition, it will be meaningful to develop an index that can measure the quality of formal childcare services and conduct a cross-country comparison. Also, it is hoped that the average number of days taking parental leave will be measured and compared between countries. Lastly, in addition to the employment rate, it would be interesting to compare other factors including gender wage gaps and to analyze how the employment rate differs according to the number of children in future research. Through this study and future studies that can supplement the limitations of this study, it is hoped that more advanced family policies will be prepared and that there will be no people who wish to have children but cannot have children.

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# Appendices

Table 10 and Table 11 show the raw data extracted from Eurostat and were used to calculate the proportion of children in formal childcare or education. (*See Table 7*).

**Table 10**

*Children in formal childcare or education by duration - % over the population of children less than 3 years old group*

| Duration | Zero hours | | From 1 to 29 hours | | 30 hours or over | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| year | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Sweden | 46.9 | 45.9 | 16.0 | 18.5 | 37.1 | 35.6 |
| Finland | 61.7 | 60.5 | 10.6 | 9.5 | 27.6 | 30.1 |
| Denmark | 33.9 | 32.3 | 7.9 | 2.1 | 58.1 | 65.6 |

*Note*. Eurostat

**Table 11**

*Children in formal childcare or education by duration - % over the population of children from 3 years to minimum compulsory school age group*

| Duration | Zero hours | | From 1 to 29 hours | | 30 hours or over | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| year | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| Sweden | 3.5 | 4.0 | 23.9 | 27.6 | 72.6 | 68.4 |
| Finland | 11.8 | 14.7 | 20.4 | 21.5 | 67.8 | 63.8 |
| Denmark | 8.6 | 63.4 | 9.3 | 2.7 | 82.0 | 33.9 |

*Note*. Eurostat

Table 12 was used to make the figures of employment rate by presence of children (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

**Table 12**

*Employment rate by presence of children - % of the total population aged 25-49*

| Presence of children | | Adult with children | | Adult without children | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| year | | 2019 | 2020 | 2019 | 2020 |
| | Sex | % | % | % | % |
| Sweden | Males | 96.2 | 93.8 | 82.5 | 82.1 |
| | Females | 85.9 | 83.2 | 77.9 | 79.7 |
| Finland | Males | 92.8 | 92.3 | 81.4 | 79.3 |
| | Females | 77.8 | 78.7 | 82.4 | 79.1 |
| Denmark | Males | 93.5 | 92.7 | 82.7 | 80.1 |
| | Females | 82.5 | 81.9 | 79.0 | 77.6 |

*Note*. Eurostat