



The Nordic Paradox: Unraveling the Complexities of Gender Equality in the Nordic Model

Sher Muhammad¹, Ammaria Atta², Hafiz Muhammad Zaman³

Abstract

The Nordic countries have created more inclusive and equal societies for all individuals. This paper provides an overview of the Nordic model of gender equality, discussing its key features, benefits, and challenges. It also highlights the Nordic countries' emphasis on promoting gender equality as a fundamental aspect of their social policies, resulting in higher rates of women's labour force participation, greater gender equality in political representation, and reduced gender pay gaps. However, the paper also acknowledges that particular challenges still exist in achieving full gender equality in the Nordic region, particularly regarding intersectional issues such as the experiences of women of colour and immigrant women. The paper concludes that the Nordic model of gender equality serves as an appreciated model for other countries to learn from and strive towards by prioritising policies and practices that promote gender equality.

Keywords: Gender equality, Nordic countries, Social policies, intersectional issues

1. Introduction

The policies and cultural beliefs that have contributed to the high levels of gender equality observed in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are called the "Nordic model of gender equality" (Kangas & Palme, 2006). The Nordic model of gender equality possesses some of the most essential characteristics. The social welfare systems of these countries are among the most inclusive in the world, guaranteeing that all citizens have access to medical care, educational opportunities, and childcare services (Sainsbury, 2012). These policies serve to guarantee that women do not face any discrimination. Instead, they can fully engage in the workforce. Another essential element is the implementation of gender quotas, which have been introduced in numerous Nordic countries. These quotas have been implemented in politics, business boards, and other leadership roles (Haavio-Mannila & Kangas, 2002). This policy of quotas has helped promote gender equality across a variety of fields and also increased the number of women who hold decision-making responsibilities. These nations have some of the most generous parental leave regulations in the world, which means that both mothers and fathers can take paid leave after the birth or adoption of a child. It also reduces the caregiving responsibility that falls on women (Charles & Grusky, 2004). In addition, it is a fact that the nations of the Nordic region tend to have more liberal ideas about gender roles and expectations. There is typically less emphasis placed on traditional gender roles, and males are frequently encouraged to participate in caring and other domestic responsibilities. Generally, the concept that gender equality is a fundamental principle that benefits everyone in society is the cornerstone of the Nordic model of gender equality. The Nordic countries have attained high levels of gender parity in everyday life because they have fostered laws and cultural values favouring gender equality.

The Nordic model of gender equality has been widely recognised as one of the most successful in the world (Nyberg, 2018). Such a belief is, for the most part, realistic. The Nordic countries, including Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Finland, prioritised gender equality before every other European country. Various factors contributed to the Nordic countries being role models for gender equality. There is a high female labour rate. Second, the wage disparity between men and women is minimal. Furthermore, there are several opportunities for women to advance to leadership positions. Citizens enjoy various social and economic benefits (Raaum, 1999). These countries reached 38–47% female representation in the National Parliament and 32–42% in the local councils, compared to women's representation in the world of just around 19% (IPU, 2014). This splendid achievement is not the result of any single policy but was supplemented with state-driven welfare state policies, which created more opportunities for women in all areas of society. This Nordic model pushed other states to adopt policies encouraging gender equality in political institutions. Dahlerup (2011) predicted that these Nordic countries were on the verge of losing their position as leaders. It is worth noting that, until 2010, European countries dominated the top ten list of countries with the highest female representation. However, according to the 2022 ranking of IPU (2022), only one country from the Nordic Region, Iceland, stood in seventh position. Rwanda is presently at the top of the world ranking list. Two eminent scholars, Skjeie and Teigen (2005), assert that these nations' official rhetoric on gender equality makes frequent allusions to social constructs that may yet have "a long way to go." "Considerable steps have been taken" in other areas. There may be some "setbacks"; some facets of society are "legging behind," while others are "almost there." Their study revealed that 84% of males were in a top position, 63% in party leadership, and 84% in business (Skjeie & Teige, 2005).

¹ Associate Professor of Political Science, Govt. Ambala Muslim Graduate College Sargodha, Pakistan

² Assistant Professor, Department of Arts and Humanities, The Superior University Lahore, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan

³ PhD Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, GC University Faisalabad, Pakistan

Although women in this region have achieved a high level of political representation in the region's parliaments, this development is not the result of any quick leap; instead, it is a step-by-step progress (Dahlurape, 2011). This pace of gender equality gained momentum after women gained the right to vote. Women have only 2-4 per cent representation in Nordic countries except Finland, which achieved 10% early representation. In these years, when elections were held in Denmark, only two women (1%) were elected to the Danish Folketing (Dahlurape, 2011). Since 1970, various policies have been adopted by the Nordic states to bring more women to decision-making bodies. The most prominent political parties in these nations have implemented voluntary electoral quotas to increase the number of women who hold seats in the legislature. Iceland took the lead when the first feminist political party was established. This new development contributed a lot to changing the male-dominated political culture of Iceland. Nordic countries continued their journey throughout the period from 1980 to 1990. However, in recent years, it has been observed that it is not a continuous growth, but in some cases, women's political representation is decreased.

The goal was to promote gender equality in the Nordic countries, albeit each state adopted different policies at different times. In order to increase the gender makeup of decision-making institutions, various parity policies were enacted in all of the Nordic countries until 1970. The voluntary gender quota was a significant policy introduced by political parties. In Norway, five out of seven political parties are practising voluntary gender quotas. There is also a legally mandated gender quota for corporate boards in Norway, Finland, and Iceland. Denmark has a gender balance statute, although it is not as specific, while Sweden relies on voluntary methods to achieve this (Niskanen, 2011). Nordic countries used different gender equality tools. It does not mean that state policies about work and family life, such as parental leave and establishment of daycare centres, are not necessary as gender equality tools. According to Skjeie and Teigen (2012), parity regulations were a key component of Norwegian gender equality policies in various spheres of public life, and these programs were generally successful in achieving this goal of parity in the distribution of influential and high-ranking positions. Norwegian gender equality policy is based on three comprehensive laws.

The Ant-Discrimination Act was passed in 2006, whereas the Gender Equality Act was first passed in the late 1970s. Ethnicity, nationality, language, and religion were the key areas of emphasis in this law (Skjeie & Teigen, 2012). The third comprehensive law, which addresses disabilities, was enacted in 2009. A few new institutions were created in addition to new legislation to advance gender equality and end discrimination. The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud and the Equality Tribunal are the most prominent institutions. Another perspective has been the case of women's alliances in Iceland. It was founded in 1983, and this alliance has succeeded in getting a significant position within the political system (Rule, 1987). After more than a decade of activity in women's alliances, many women are active in politics and most areas of society.

Interestingly, these countries have achieved this high level of women's representation. Various scholars have identified different reasons for this splendid achievement of Nordic countries. Christensen and Raaum (1999) pinpoint three key agents: social movements, interest groups, and political parties. One Danish researcher (Togeby, 1993) argues that in any theory of women's political integration in highly industrialised and pluralistic societies, women should have a high level of participation in paid work because paid work increases women's resources to make them independent. Luvenduski (2000) claims that this progress is partly a function of social change, changes in the family structure, and women's membership in the Scandinavian workforce. Dahlerupe (2011) talked about a few other factors; pressure from the women's movement; trade unions; women's organisations; women's groups within the political parties, and academic focus on gender studies. According to another scholar's research, the gender quota was a significant factor in the development of these policies promoting gender equality (Borchorst, 1999). Raaum (1999) attributes the increase in women's representation in Norwegian councils since 1950 to the increased size of councils. Politics was traditionally viewed as a male-dominated institution or a field where gender did not matter. The presence of the women's movement as a whole, including pressure from identical movements, women working in trade unions, and formerly influential women's organisations and groups inside political parties, has been an enormous help in the development of women's representation in the Nordic countries (Dahlerup, 2011). Social movements are the key factor in Nordic politics. Social movements aim to promote collective interest, influence political decision-making processes, and bring about social change in the last instance.

In those countries, political parties play a significant role in promoting gender equality. Political parties are often referred to as "Gate Keepers." Since 1980, most political parties have implemented 40-60 or 50-50 gender mandates for internal party bodies and election lists (Skjeie & Teige, 2012). It is argued that the strong emphasis on gender equality put by social democratic parties has had a stronghold in politics in the last century. The welfare model of the state in Nordic countries has put men and women on equal terms, weakening the male breadwinner model. Lovenduski (2000) points out that political parties have been the central institution in increasing women's level of representation.

1.1. Quota as Gender Equality Mechanism

There is a growing consensus that instituting gender quotas is a successful approach for elevating more women to positions of power in the government. Increasing the number of women who hold political office should be the

fundamental goal of any quota system, as this will help women feel that they are less marginalised in society. This is a temporary measure until women can run for general seats in elections. Although very contentious, this approach has spread as a tool to promptly therapy the underrepresentation of women in legislatures (Dahlerup, 2000). Globally, more and more nations are enacting electoral gender quotas in the current political setting. Different arguments are presented to justify the adoption of gender quotas in Nordic countries. Tiegen (2002) claims that the quota is justified through a combination of individual and group-related rights in the discourse of rights. This argument is linked with the discourse of discrimination that such actions that bring equality are acceptable. Two other Nordic scholars (Forde & Hernes, 1988) outlined three significant arguments for participatory demands;

- the democratic rights to participation (the Justice argument);
- women's significant contribution (the recourse argument)
- conflicting gender-structured political interests (the compelling argument).

Even cases are brought before the EU tribunal about the legal position of these actions, but later it was decided that such policies are legal (Tiegen, 2011).

An entirely voluntary party quota is utilised in the legislatures of the Nordic countries. Left-wing political parties in the Nordic countries were the ones that pioneered the practice of voluntarily adhering to party quotas. According to Dahlerup (1998), this approach was endorsed by the Green Party, the Socialist Party, the Social Democrats, and the centre party in Norway. Most political parties in Sweden adhere to the idea known as "Varannan kameras," which translates to "every second woman." It mandates that male and female candidates be nominated on the party electoral list in alternating fashions. Two different political parties in Iceland make use of the voluntary quota system. Although no party in Finland uses quotas officially, many of them do so in practice. A gender quota was in place inside the Socialist People's Party in Denmark; nevertheless, both that party and the Social Democrats employed the quota in the election to the European Union parliament (Dahlurop). It has been stated that the voluntary quota regulations of the political parties in Norway and Sweden have significantly influenced the proportion of women nominated for and elected to political office (Freidenvall, 2015). It is generally agreed upon among academics that the processes of party nominations, rather than voting in general elections, are to blame for the preponderance of men among elected officials. (Lovenduski, 1992). It suggests that the political parties, not the voters, are responsible for selecting how members of the elected assemblies will be distributed among themselves.

Another interesting point to be mentioned here is that even though quotas are called "fast track policies" in Nordic countries, the "Step by Step" model is prevalent, even though it is based on quotas. Norway is the "quota country" in the Nordic region. Quotas in Norway were barely opposed. Denmark has utilised quotas the least. However, quota systems are still utilised in some places in Sweden despite being highly divisive, contentious, and emotionally charged (Dahlerup, 2000). Only gender quotas, it is said, cannot be the solution to every issue. However, another aspect that contributes to the effectiveness and result-orientedness of quota systems is the fundamental nature of the electoral system. A proportional representation electoral system can be used to fulfil gender quotas. The top-ranking list clarifies that most counties use a proportional representation-based voting system. Dahlerup (1988) suggested several mechanisms that enhance quota systems' efficacy. The implemented quota system should be compatible with the nation's electoral structure. The method provides guidelines for the candidate list's gender ranking order and sanctions for violating the quota requirements.

Let us have a thorough discussion about the different kinds of transformations that have occurred as a logical consequence of the rising participation of women in politics. Dahlerup (2010), in her studies of women parliamentarians in Nordic Countries, found that as their [women] numbers grew, it became easier to be a women politician. Also, public perceptions of women politicians changed. These institutional and procedural changes may result in alternations of candidate selection mechanisms to include more women and the introduction of norms of proportionality of women's and men's membership of councils and committees. In addition, it will culminate in the formation of a women's whip and formal and informal quotas of women in organs of collective decision-making inside parties and within legislative and governmental institutions. The representation of women in political office has an effect not only on legislation but also on other policy outcomes. Changes in the legislative institutions are another one of the effects of women's representation. These adjustments refer to actions, such as the encouragement of women's candidates, the explicit use of women as role models, the promotion of sex equality legislation, and action to place women in critical political positions, which will change the internal structure and culture of political parties. These changes are brought about as a direct result of women's representation. In Nordic counties, the adoption of the gender quota has an impact on changing both internal and external norms of political institutions. It will not only alter the parliamentary languages but also, through the use of the political platform, public attitude will be changed. It will alter the discourse of politics such that political women become as regular a concept and image as political men.

2. Theoretical Discussion on the Nordic Model of Gender Equality

The concepts of equality and difference provide the basis for most of the discussion around gender equality in the Nordic countries. According to Borchorst (2008), academics in the region are faced with the argument that they should select either diversity or equality as the path to achieving gender equality because the two should be considered logically incompatible with one another as a means of achieving gender equality. This is also called "Wollstonecraft's dilemma. In Sweden, social democrats supported the ideology of differences quite early, and the liberal and conservative women's movements can be seen as an oscillation between the two alternatives (Hirdman, 2002). Wollstonecraft's dilemma has been challenged and reinterpreted by many feminist scholars, and it has been argued that difference is opposite not to inequality but to sameness (Borchorst, 2008). Nancy Fraser rejects the idea that gender equality, difference, or any other value may foster gender equality. She claims the equality-difference dilemma is a social construction (Borchorst, 2008).

During 1980, the focus of women's studies in the region grew, which brought new theoretical perspectives. Two perspectives, pessimistic and optimistic, were developed during this period. The pessimistic perspective was on the structural explanation of the continued predominance of male power and women's marginalisation within society. This approach was formulated and promoted by Harriet Holter (1984). The supporters of the optimistic approach claim that politics and political institutions have a certain degree of autonomy, which has positively changed the power relations between the sexes (Berqvist, 1999). Two more types of arguments have also been raised in the Nordic countries' discussion on women and politics. It is argued that women need more integration to bring a meaningful change in male-dominated institutions. On the other hand, the book *Towards a New Democratic Order* claims that "women-specific demands, or disputes about gender and power, cannot be integrated into existing government institutions and parties. Therefore, women need to find new ways of organising" (Berqvist 1999 p: 9).

During the 1990s, the debate over gender equality shifted from being a discourse of rights to a more utilitarian discourse. Tiegen (2005) argues that twenty years ago, the two arguments [Utility and rights] were on equal footing, whereas today, Utility-based arguments dominate. Skije and Tiegen (2005) believe that most often, the argument for gender balance addresses the usefulness of gender equality. Consequently, gender equality is reduced to what "women" can "do." Another writer agreed with the former argument and says today's efforts to secure equal political participation rely on the Making of a Difference Discourse (Dahlerup, 2011). Many writers are sceptical of this argument and claim that Utility puts equality on defence (Skije & Tiegen, 2005). The argument for Democratic Rights relies on the principle of liberal democracy. It is widely held that there is a direct connection between a mature and well-functioning democracy and the provision of equal opportunities to enable all groups of citizens to participate in the political decision-making process (Bergqvist, 1999, p. 6). Lovenduski (2000) believes that women have rights as a citizen and as members of families and that such rights entitle them to participate in government. Dahlerup calls this a "Justice perspective" (2000).

3. Theoretical Background of the Nordic Model

Discussion of prevalent conceptions of women's political representation in the Scandinavian countries is essential. According to Dehelrupe (2000), various competing ideas exist for interpreting the difference in female political representation within Nordic research on women in politics. The most critical theory to discuss first is the theory of patriarchy. This theory is based on the idea that males retain their dominant position in society through various methods and that men do so in part due to the institutions that women have joined. Exit power-enter women was the theory put forth in the 1970s. Another name for these ideas is "the theory of decreasing institutions." Unfinished Democracy: Women in Nordic Politics (Haavio-Mannila, & Skard (Eds.), 2013) discusses the idea of "the law of Rising Disproportionality". According to this phenomenon, the proportion of women decreases as we move up the hierarchy under study.

Another significant one is the time-lag theory which presents an optimistic rather than a pessimistic view (Patriarchal Theory). Karvonen and Selle (1995) presented an alternative thesis to Unfinished Democracy from 1983 (Dahlerup, 2000). This theory is predicated on the concept that mobilisation must first occur at a lower level in order for it to be able to mobilise individuals at a higher level. In other words, achieving gender parity will be possible in the future. This notion has been the subject of general public discussion. However, in recent years, a plateau in the percentage of women holding political office in several Nordic nations has cast doubt on its veracity. The number of mayors in Denmark in 2005 was fewer than in 1985. This new information has called into question the fundamental premise of this theory, which is whether or not gender equality develops over time.

Ulrik Kjaer, a Danish researcher on municipal politics, has proposed an alternate theory called saturation without parity (Dahlerup, 2000). Because there is already a certain amount of "saturation," it is possible that efforts to increase the number of women in leadership positions will reach a plateau before gender equality is achieved [31%]. This saturation threshold has been achieved because voters and political parties agree that "this far but no further." In

addition, he asserts variations in the saturation points of the various parties, despite the phenomena being present in all of them (Dahlerup, 2000). This idea needs to be more consistent, such as that saturation only occurred in Denmark rather than in other Nordic countries. Why have other countries passed the saturation point (31%) and reached between 36 and 42 per cent?

4. Multiculturalism and the Nordic Model of Gender Equality

Multiculturalism and gender equality are two critical values that Nordic countries prioritise in their policies and practices. According to Yngve Lithman, a Nordic Council of Ministers researcher, "the Nordic countries have a strong tradition of promoting gender equality and have also made significant efforts to accommodate diversity and promote multiculturalism" (Lithman, 2017, p. 2). One example of this is Sweden's "Feminist Foreign Policy", which was introduced in 2014 by the country's foreign minister, Margot Wallström. This policy aims to promote gender equality and women's rights in all aspects of foreign policy and international relations (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2022). Similarly, Norway has implemented a Gender Equality Act, which requires public and private organisations to actively work towards gender equality and prevent discrimination based on gender (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality, 2022).

Regarding multiculturalism, Finland has implemented the National Diversity and Inclusion Strategy to promote equal treatment and opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2020). Denmark has also implemented several policies to promote diversity and integration, including the Active Citizenship programme, which supports immigrants and refugees in becoming active members of Danish society (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2022). Overall, the Nordic countries' emphasis on both multiculturalism and gender equality has resulted in policies and practices that prioritise the rights and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their background or identity.

In recent years, efforts have been made to address the issues of multiculturalism and gender equality. The book, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* sparked and ignited controversy (Okin, 1999). She stated that multiculturalism has been gender-blind and investigated the tension between the rights of women and groups in her article. This essay raised an essential question about the relationship between respect for cultural variety and gender equality. Another contradiction in Nordic gender equality laws was uncovered by Longvasbratten (2008), who argued that in order to be effective, policies promoting gender parity must not be biased against any group of people and must be tailored to the unique circumstances of women who are underrepresented in power structures. Gender equality initiatives, by contrast, should be equipped to deal with the issues and obstacles encountered by women, who are a numerical minority. Another academic thinks that the actual concern is how a reinterpretation of equality and a more conciliatory perspective of differences will, in the long term, damage the social democratic nature of Norwegian society. This person thinks the main question is how these things will play out (Longva, 2003).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Nordic Model of Gender Equality is a unique gender equality model that has proven successful in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the Nordic countries. The model is based on equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities for all individuals, regardless of gender. It focuses on creating a gender-neutral society by addressing structural and cultural barriers that prevent women from participating fully in all aspects of life, including the labour market, politics, and social life. The Nordic Model of Gender Equality has resulted in several positive outcomes, including high levels of women's labour force participation, equal pay for equal work, and gender-balanced political representation. The model has also helped promote a more equitable distribution of resources and social benefits, such as parental leave and childcare, enabling women to balance their work and family responsibilities. However, the Nordic Model of Gender Equality is not without its challenges. Despite the progress that has been made, issues remain to be addressed, such as the gender pay gap, the underrepresentation of women in certain professions and industries, and the persistence of gender-based violence and harassment. Overall, the Nordic Model of Gender Equality is an important example for other countries seeking to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. While the implementation of the model may vary depending on the specific cultural and societal contexts, the principles underlying the model can be adapted and applied in different contexts to create a more equitable and just society for all.

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