On the Role of Family Policy in the Nordic Countries
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Introduction

The pivot of this paper is that most individuals – women as well as men - in late modern societies wish to exercise control over the timing, spacing and number of childbirths they experience throughout their adult lives. More specifically, the paper discusses the role of family policy measures from the point of view of the Nordic countries in Europe: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Populations have probably always reacted to external changes by altering their reproductive behaviour. Not just the availability of contraceptive means but also religious, cultural and social acceptance of practicing birth control are important in this respect. If we look at Europe in a historic perspective, former times’ contraceptive means to practice birth control were less safe and effective than the ones available nowadays. Furthermore, state regulations regarding contracting of marriage, acts about mutual rights and responsibilities of spouses have had more or less direct influences on fertility as almost all childbirths took place within wedlock.

In the Nordic countries, where contraceptives are easily accessible and the populations have access to induced abortion on demand, it is possible to live a sexually active life without establishing a family with children (Giddens 1991; Knudsen et al. 2002, Lappegaard 2001a) and in case of childbirth, women are capable of providing for themselves and their children and not in need of a male provider (Borchorst 1993). Under these circumstances, the reproductive behaviour such as family formation, onset of childbearing, timing and spacing of the births and the total number of children during lifetime, must be regarded as subject to deliberate decisions of the women and of couples.

In order to explain the fertility decrease in the Nordic countries during the 1960s and 1970s as well as the subsequent increase, a number of studies have focused on the populations’ attitudes or the political and socio-economic conditions (Andersson 2001; Bernhardt 2002; Bertelsen 1980; Bertelsen 1981; Noack and Østby 2000; Hoem and Hoem 1996; Knudsen 1993; Kravdal 1989; Lindgren et al. 1993). Most of these studies interpreted the fertility behaviour as the individuals’ and thereby the populations’ reactions towards societal changes. The grounds for the declining fertility rates were analysed with the aim of elucidating to what extent the increasing labour market participation of the women influenced their decisions on family size and, subsequently, which measures
might help the women in combining family and work obligations. The early political debates as well as the research problems took the women’s obligations and priority of the family life for granted, and, consequently, discussions focused on whether women wanted to participate in the labour market and under which conditions: Surveys focused on whether women wanted fulltime or part-time work. Recently, the focus of the political discussions have shifted towards considering the attachment to the labour market for both genders and discuss how the work places should be organized in order to allow the women best to take care of their families. Lately, also the fathers’ obligations and wishes in relation to family life have been debated.

However, the influence of policy measures on fertility is many faceted and may not be easily identified. Many studies concentrate on the simultaneousness of existing policy measures and fertility pattern, or even better, of changes in policies and fluctuations in fertility. The recent rapid changes in family formation and fertility in a number of countries are much faster reactions to political changes than those that occurred in the 1970s. This is primarily due to the fact that the means to limit fertility are now so effective that the population can exercise a very effective limiting birth control resulting in a very strong fall in the propensity to give birth. Examples of this were seen in Eastern Germany and the Baltic countries throughout the 1990s after the removal of the iron curtain although this was certainly not a result of political decisions on family matters. The fertility dropped tremendously during a very short period of time in the former socialist countries (e.g. Reicheckel et al 1998) and, subsequently, much research has concentrated on studying the efficacy of specific policy measures aiming at increasing the fertility (e.g. Balicki 2001; Rychtariková 1999; Stankuniene 2001).

It is a precondition for the discussion in this paper, that public policies may exercise some kind of influence on the reproductive behaviour of the population. The sections of the paper present a general discussion of family formation and of the impact of policies on fertility and nuptiality with a special focus on the Nordic countries.
The Nordic Scenario

In the late 1990s, Period Total Fertility Rates (PTFRs) in the Nordic countries were among the highest in Europe: approximately 1,770 in Denmark and Finland, 1,845 in Norway and 1,994 in Iceland, while Sweden reached a PTFR as low as 1,504 in 1998 (Nordic Statistical Yearbook 2001). The low level in Sweden mirrors a decline subsequent to a steep increase, which will be dealt with later in this paper. In all of the countries, the PTFRs are composed by low and still decreasing fertility rates among women younger than 25 while the fertility among women above this age began to increase in the 1980s. The mean age at the birth of the first child has been increasing during the last three decades and was approximately 28 years at the turn of the millennium.

Table 1. Period Total Fertility Rates in the Nordic Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For Finland and Iceland the most recent figures are from 1999. For Denmark ‘1900’ is from 1901. Sources: See Note 3.

The fall in the countries’ PTFRs, which began in the late 1960s, levelled out and reverted in the late 1970s or early 1980s in all the Nordic countries. A similar reversion has not yet appeared in the southern European countries. The fact that this reversion took place even though the countries have very high female activ-
ity rates sharpened the attention towards the relation between policy measures and the women’s situations, also among scholars from outside the Nordic countries.

The completed lifetime fertility varies among the female cohorts in the Nordic countries. The level is lowest in Denmark and Finland but considerable higher although still decreasing in Iceland while Sweden experienced the lowest point earlier than the other countries.

Like in most of the EU-countries, to have two children or just one child was the predominant pattern for the female cohorts that have recently completed their fertility. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, women born in 1945/1950 gave birth to approximately 2 children on average, while the number was somewhat lower in Finland. In Iceland, as well as in Eastern European countries and in Southern Europe, the completed cohort fertility was higher (more than 2 per woman) while the lowest numbers were seen in Austria and Switzerland (1,7) (Recent Demographic Developments in Europe 1999).

Inspecting the total fertility for cohorts reveal that the younger generations (those born 1960->) have slightly more children than the women born 5-10 years before, cf. Table 2. As previously mentioned the fertility deficit for the female cohorts born in the late 1950s and 1960s caused by the continuing delaying of first birth and the decreasing fertility rates below age 25, have been partly compensated at higher ages (Frejka and Calot 2001). However, even though the fall in PTFR has reverted and younger cohorts seem to catch up on the fertility deficit at higher ages, the fertility level in the Nordic countries as a whole is below replacement level.

Some women have less children than the number they consider to be the preferable number of children in a family and even end up with less children than they originally wished to have (Knudsen 1993; Noack and Østby 2000). These observed discrepancies between the preferred and the actual number of children might be resulting from the experience of constraining factors and thus might be subject to change by political incentives.
Table 2. Cohort Total Fertility for Generations of Women in the Nordic Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Recent demographic developments in Europe 1999.

The largest proportions of women who never give birth are found in the groups that are also characterized by late entry into motherhood and low average number of children. Among the female cohorts who ended childbearing during the last part of the 1990s, approximately 10 percent remained childless and much concern has been directed towards whether the late onset of childbearing – the ageing of fertility - reduces the biological ability (fecundity) for the women to have the preferred number of children.

The age at first sexual intercourse is around 16 for both genders in all the Nordic countries and this age has been rather stable during the latest decades. Nevertheless, fertility rates among young women are very low as the use of contraceptives is generally accepted and strongly encouraged among young adolescents. In case of unintended pregnancies, the acts on induced abortion on demand give the young people the option to choose pregnancy interruption. The Nordic countries have had liberal laws on induced abortion on demand since the early 1970s, although in Iceland and Finland abortion has to be approved according to a list of (rather broad) indications (Knudsen et al. 2003). The induced abortion has been chosen among approximately two thirds of pregnant 15-19 year old women in Denmark since the mid-1980s, while this proportion has fluctuated between 50 and 60 percent in Finland. At present Denmark has the lowest rate of induced abortion among 15-19 year old women in the Nordic countries and, furthermore, Denmark is the only of these countries in which the rate is not increasing (Knudsen and Gissler 2003).

The relatively high fertility in the Nordic countries during the last decades
has often been claimed to be a result of the welfare policies, which enable the
individuals to combine work and family life: both men and women are meant to
have room for family obligations as well as obligations in their jobs. The welfare
states in the Nordic countries were labelled the Nordic ‘social-democratic wel-
fare regime’ by Esping-Andersen (1990) and characterized by an orientation to-
wards the individual. However, gender relations were not included in the model
(Skrede 2001). The orientation towards the individual is contrasting the regimes
in the countries in Southern Europe, which are more traditional and family-
oriented.

Overall, state efforts in the Nordic countries, especially towards gender
equality and reconciliation between work and family are considered important
factors in relation to the creation of a family friendly situation. A number of
studies indicate so far, that the family policy has had some overall positive im-
pact on the fertility level, although the direct effects are difficult to measure and
probably relatively small (e.g., Andersson 2001; Hoem & Hoem 1996; Knudsen
2002; Vikat 2002).

In addition to the welfare state theories other theories have been applied to
explain the changes in fertility behaviour in the Nordic countries. Lestaeghe and
Moors (2000) mention the importance of the higher female economic autonomy,
the increased need for limiting the number of children due to need for income
and the ideational changes in direction of individual autonomy and a growing
respect for individual choice. These elements were present quite early in the
Nordic countries compared to other European countries (Borchorst 1993; Staal-
berg 2001). Further, during the last couple of decades the Nordic countries have
been among the few countries in which a recuperation of fertility has taken place
among women over 30 although fertility continues to decline among women
younger than 30 years (Frejka and Calot 2001).

Not only the same type of welfare state policies but also other similarities
between the Nordic countries answers further, why it is reasonable to treat these
countries as one group in international comparisons: The countries have a joint
history, the linguistic origin is similar except for Finland, and the contemporary
languages are quite similar in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Further, the cul-
tures and the organization of the states, as well as of the public sectors are very
similar.

These countries also have a number of demographic characteristics in
The young people in the Nordic countries leave their parental home early, the girls leaving earlier than boys like in most other countries. At the age of 20-21 about 50 percent of the young women have left to live either independently or in a common-law marriage. Living in consensual unions has become very predominant and very few marry directly (Carneiro, Knudsen and Osório 2002; Hoem and Hoem 1996; Texmon 1995).

When the adolescents leave their parents, both young men and young women have completed school education (9 to 12 years) and the majority continue with some kind of vocational or further education. Occasionally they may return to the parents’ home for limited periods in-between studies, or between military service and study, but this is not at all as common in the Nordic countries as in Southern Europe. They are expected to, and expect to be, occupation-ally active during their adult lives: Labour market participation is high among women in all four countries and about 70 to 80 percent of the women participate in the labour market also while having small children at home (Knudsen et al 2003). Lifetime housewives have disappeared from the Nordic scenarios. However, recent extensions of the maternal and parental leave schemes have led to a situation in which some women spend longer periods outside the labour market than before and especially longer periods than men do (Haas and Hwang 1999; Knudsen 2002a).

**Family formation**

In contemporary sociology, a family is defined as ‘a group of individuals, related to one another by blood ties, marriage or adoption, who form an economic unit, the adult members of which are responsible for the upbringing of children’ (Giddens 1997:582). In accordance with this, a nuclear family is defined as ‘a household in which a married couple (or single parent) live together with their own or adopted children’ (Giddens 1997:168). This definition refers to the established family, including lone parents.

*Family formation* as such is often defined indirectly in both demography and sociology, and one has to infer that the family formation is the event that implies the establishing of a family, and temporally preceding the situation in which the family actually exists. The *family*, however, is defined either from its structure and functions or quite empirically and pragmatically (based on the ex-
isting data in the national statistical offices). Previously, family formation used to be identifiable by the legal event of contracting a marriage, but today marriage is far from being the only type of family in Europe. The predominance of legal marriage has been substituted by a diversity of family forms (Kuijsten 1996).

In this paper *family formation* is understood as the initial process in which two people of different sex decides to establish a joint household and to have a child - in other words they decide to establish a family. This rather broad definition is in accordance with definitions within demography and sociology, although the mere phase of the formation of the family is not always specified as such. Instead, family formation may be defined as the early phase or stage in the life cycle of a family and interpreted more or less as the concept of *nuptiality*, which in demographic literature is notifying the process of beginning a new family. However, the term nuptiality has often been synonymously substituted by ‘marriage’ denoting ‘living in a family’ or ‘establishing a family’ (as a contrast to living as single) and not just the initial phase of the family.6

Temporarily, the formation of the family is the first stage of a family’s life although it varies whether the formation of a partnership (traditionally most often by marriage) or the birth of the first child is notifying this stage. In Bon‐gaarts, Burch and Wachter’s book on ‘Family Demography’, Höhn (1987) identified the family formation as beginning at the wedding and ending at the birth of the first child and considered it to be the first phase of the life cycle of the family. Influenced by the more recent development in family formation patterns, and especially by the fact that the mean age at first childbirth has changed place with the mean age at first marriage, there might be a need for a new definition. Giddens (1987) has characterized the ‘study of family … as one of the most provocative and involving’ and further, as research involving controversies from various theoretical angles. Moreover, Giddens found uncertainties and risks associated with the changes in family forms and family formation patterns.

The United Nations (in 1987) has defined a family unit in a way which takes into account the emerging new family patterns: A family unit exists when a couple is either married or lives together as man and wife, or when one or both parents are living with their unmarried children (Hantrais and Letablier 1996). According to this definition, a family unit is thus formed either by marriage (or a consensual union) or by the arrival of children (Hantrais and Letablier 1996:16).
It should be noted that this definition includes a couple without children as a family unit, an inclusion, which is also found in the vital statistics in Denmark.

The tremendous changes in family patterns, which occurred during the last decades in most of Europe, underline the need for new concepts to understand the changes and the new forms of equilibrium that have developed - or are still developing. Anyway, the traditional concepts of family formation and family life do not catch the new diverse forms of private life (Drew 1998; Kuijsten 2002).

In many countries it has become common to live together before marrying and perhaps even experience a couple of rather long-lasting co-residential unions before having the first child. Consensual unions have higher risks of dissolution, though, even in the Nordic countries (see for instance Vital Statistics 1996 (1998) for information on the situation in Denmark). Consensual unions are more prevalent than marriage among the young people and as mentioned, very few marry directly after leaving their parental home. The vast majority of those women marrying directly in Denmark belong to the immigrant population (Knudsen and Carneiro, forthcoming).

Even in those European countries, in which being married is still the predominant way of family life as adult, cohabitation is currently increasing in the younger cohorts, which is witnessed in the various ‘Country Reports’ from the joint Fertility and Family Surveys in Europe (UN 2002). Consequently, family formation today cannot be identified by the wedding per se, which again points at the birth of the first joint child as the decisive event.

In accordance with this, a couple without children and living in a consensual union will not be regarded as a family in the following. The term partnership therefore names the relation between two persons who choose to commit themselves to each other and regard themselves as being together as a couple. They may live together in the same apartment (in a consensual union or a so-called common law marriage) or they may live separately (Living Apart Together - LAT-couples). If the couple in a consensual union at a later time decide to have a child together, they form a family according to the terminology approved here.

The term family is thus reserved for a couple that has had at least one joint child, and family formation is denoting the process in which a couple have their first child or decides to have a child, notwithstanding the two persons are mar-
ried or cohabiting.

Lone parents are not dealt with separately. Most single mothers or fathers are lone parents subsequent to a split up of the family into which the child was born as a child is only rarely born deliberately by a single woman without a steady partner. Even in the Nordic Countries where the shares of children born by unmarried women are 40-50 percent, the predominant part of these children are born into a family with two parents, although they may live in a consensual union (for details on the situation in Denmark, in which 90 per cent of the unmarried parents are living with the father of the child, see for instance Nygaard Christoffersen 1993). Stepfamilies, or blended families, though, are becoming more common in our societies and a growing research interest is being directed towards these families and how the combination of his, her and their children influences the fertility in the family and in the society (Thomson et al. 2001). However, this will be considered to be a specific aspect and will not be dealt with in detail here.

Much of the research on fertility, on which we base our knowledge on the reproductive patterns simply measure the number of births, by maternal age and parity, by socio-economic background of the mother, the father or both. In these studies the family type is only taken into consideration if the research questions are directly aimed at elucidating fertility in certain types of families or, for instance, how the fertility in a current relationship is influenced by whether the two partners already have children with a previous partner (Thomson et al. 2001; Vikat et al. 1999). In the aggregated statistics on fertility no distinction is made of various family forms.

**Family formation by choice and not by need**

One of the characteristics of the late modern society is the idea of the reflexive formation of life biographies (Giddens 1991). Reproduction and family formation have been included in the life biographies of the individuals as a consequence of the use of contraceptive means and the access to induced abortion that make it possible to reject childbearing and to postpone or even reject family formation. Ideally speaking, no woman is forced into joint parenthood with a man she does not want as the father of her children, if any. Nor is she forced to complete an unwanted pregnancy and face a life as unmarried mother. This is an ideal situation - or a practically and technically possible situation – as the cul-
tural background, the values and attitudes or reactions from family or close friends may influence the woman’s decision about the pregnancy.

For a man, the situation is somewhat different as the woman, in most cases, is the one who administer the use of contraceptives and, moreover, can have her pregnancy interrupted without any consent of the male partner (Knudsen 2003).

In the Nordic settings, almost all of the newborn children are born into a stable relationship, that is parents living together either in a consensual union or in legal marriage. The laws have gradually been adjusted to the fact that consensual union is a widespread alternative to legal marriage, and to day the two family forms are almost equal as regards mutual rights and obligations between the two partners. The fact that the two family forms are considered almost equal and legal fatherhood established in both forms, has led to a situation where living in consensual union is no obstacle for childbearing, and marriage is more like an option than a prerequisite for family formation.

To have a child either by planning a pregnancy or by accepting an unplanned pregnancy is considered to be a joint decision of the partners. One of the rather common reasons for pregnancy interruption expressed in studies on induced abortion is the disagreement in the couple about the decision to have the child. Another reason is that the severity of facing a joint parenthood can make the partners reconsider their partnership and whether they are fit for each other in a family with children (Bankole et al. 1998; Rasch et al. 2001). No doubt the conditions for the child is better if the birth follows a joint decision between the parents-to-be and if both partners are prepared to be parents than if there is disagreement about the decision between the partners.

In the couple’s decision-making regarding the a (first) joint child one of the important factors is the image of their anticipated future as a family with one or more children. This image comprises both the current situation and expectations regarding possibilities to complete an ongoing education, income, aspired living conditions, the daily time structure and leisure possibilities and is also influenced by the observed living conditions of contemporary families with children.

With the knowledge of the existing possibilities to postpone and to reject childbearing, childbearing and family formation (and form of family life) may be considered as optional choices. This is reflected in the continuous postponement of the family formation, as the decision to have a child will be made when the external situation (education, job, and economy) is settled and the partner is
the right one. A family is not a necessity in societies like the Nordic countries where the woman does not need a (male) provider: The female activity rate is high and the laws and rights are directed towards individuals and not towards the family as an institution. Instead, the family has become a manifestation of a ‘preference’. However, this choice is made difficult, among other things because great value is attached to the quality of the relations between the partners in the post-transitional relationship. Moreover, the partnership or the family is expected to fulfil several recreational and social functions for the partners. Therefore, childbearing cannot solely be regarded as a rational choice as individual norms, values and attitudes towards family and children, and towards interruption of pregnancy also play important roles.

**Principles in family policies in the Nordic countries**

Which roles are played by the various policy measures in relation to influencing family formation and fertility patterns? And which policies should be counted when discussing the framework for family formation? A broad range of policy measures are relevant to discuss, as both regulations regarding the social sector (e.g. support for lone parents, leave schemes) and the labour market (e.g. working hours, flexibility) set the frames for family life.

The policy means that may be considered to be more or less directly supporting family life (child allowances, rights to maternal or parental leave, access to publicly supported day-care) are equal to all inhabitants in each of the Nordic welfare states. Further, the policies in the Nordic Welfare states are aiming at general improvements and reduction of social differences between the families rather than directly at increasing fertility. The policies may support or hinder the couples’ wishes of childbearing and it is quite complicated and perhaps impossible to identify the direct influence on fertility patterns of specific family policies - or policies within other areas of society (Hantrais and Letablier 1996; Strohmeier 2002).

Within this framework, three main underlying principles in the policies will be discussed: The concern for population development, concern for reconciliation between work and family, and the question of gender equality both in the family and in the labour market. Finally, the need for securing time for the family and for private life is discussed.
Population development

Influenced by the decreasing fertility rates in the 1930s, the contemporary political debates in the Nordic countries expressed concerns for the development of population. This concern for growth of the population might be said to be the superior point of view as it deals with the changes at the population level and not at the individual level. Fertility development is the most influential demographic component in the perspectives of population dynamics in countries with very low mortality and little or only moderate immigration.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, fertility in all Nordic countries had decreased strongly. The Period Total Fertility Rate (PTFR) fell from more than 4 per woman in 1900 to 2.1 in 1933 in Denmark while the lowest PTFR was observed in Sweden – in 1935 as low as 1.7, cf. Table 1. Large families became less common as especially the fertility among high parity women in the upper half of their fertile period decreased.

The political measures that were initiated at that time aimed at supporting family life and only indirectly, although positively, to influence the propensity to give birth, and therefore also population growth. In short, political initiatives aimed at improving living conditions for families and – which is one of the most specific characteristics of the Nordic model - for individuals. Programs were introduced to improve health and nutritional conditions of pregnant women as well as newborn children. The superior aims were to diminish the rate of stillbirth, the mortality of infants and small children, and, subsequently, to increase the population. Other initiatives aimed at improving the survival of the newborns by establishing antenatal care programs and provision of health visitors to check the health conditions of the infants. Leave schedules were introduced, giving for the first time women a right to a maternity leave, although the time period was short compared to the ones existing today. In Denmark a maternal leave of two weeks was introduced as a right for all salaried female employees in 1933 (Rostgaard et al. 1999), although previous acts on working conditions had introduced some regulations regarding work in factories after delivery. Gradual extensions of the leave led to 14 weeks’ leave after the birth in 1960. The leave scheme was most extended in Sweden, and already in 1955 Swedish women had the right to three months of paid maternity leave (Haas and Hwang 1999). In the late 1960s, Swedish mothers were guaranteed six months’ leave after the delivery (Sundström 1996).
These initiatives by the Parliament were, at least in Denmark, accompanied by a discussion of the relation between the individual and the state and of the rights for the state to intrude into motherhood and into the private sphere of the citizens. This contradiction between whether the upbringing of the children was a state responsibility or a private responsibility is an underlying explanation of the liberalistic approach still found in the UK and the USA (Gauthier 1996; Wennemo 1994). However, in the Nordic countries, the seeds have been sown of a kind of society more supportive of individuals and families without abilities to take care of themselves. Interestingly, today these frames may be interpreted as frames within which the individuals increase their opportunities to make their own decisions. There are still ongoing discussions about the individuals’ own rights which may be seen as a feature of the individualization. Nevertheless, the publicly provided frames may be seen as a necessity for the individualistic choices.

The initiatives in the 1930s were strongly influenced by the book on the ‘Populations crisis’ (Myrdal and Myrdal 1935), which argued for general improvements by discussing the association between poverty, poor living conditions and low fertility. The authors pointed out the possible positive effects on childbearing intentions and fertility if the conditions for families with children and for the children who were already born were improved. Further, they hypothesized that such initiatives would eliminate some of the reasons for families to desist from having children and suggested to redistribute the financial resources in favour of families with children. Still, the authors also mentioned that children should not be born at any price, and accordingly the book considers the need for fertility regulation including interruption of pregnancy under certain circumstances.

The very low fertility levels in the 1930s were followed by increases in fertility rates which lasted more or less to the mid- and late 1960s, even though the pace and levels differed between the countries. In the 1960s, where a new decrease in fertility began, the PFTFR was again remarkably lower in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries, cf. Table 1.

After the onset of the fertility decline in the late-1960s, the Nordic reactions again aimed at increasing the childbearing propensity, although both the reasons for the policies and the content of the policy measures had changed. In contrast to the previous debate, the issue on population development was not
very outspoken when this new decrease took off. The underlying concern of the policy measures was a concern for social welfare and equality and the countries introduced or enforced policy measures that were generally supportive for the dual-earner family. The Swedish government reacted to the very low fertility in that country by strong initiatives, aiming at general improvements for families with children. It is remarkable that this took place without any attempts to hinder the ongoing discussions about liberalization of the access to induced abortion. In comparison, it should be mentioned, that in 1973 Hungary reacted in the opposite direction in a similar situation. Even though the PTFR in Hungary was only slightly lower than in Sweden, Hungary reacted by restricting the liberal act on induced abortion that had been in force since 1956 (Gauthier 1996; Knudsen 2002b).

In the light of this decline, new perspectives came into the discussion, as the fertility decline appeared together with changes in family forms, the rise in consensual unions and in a situation in which female labour market participation grew, as did the educational levels. Sweden and Denmark have been considered forerunners in relation to many of the changes characterizing the second demographic transition period, which began in the Nordic countries earlier than in most Western European countries (van de Kaa 1987).

Today, one may say that the fertility and nuptiality behaviour is brought into the population question again bearing consequences not only for couples and for family formation but also for the ageing of societies. Consequently, the ageing of the Nordic societies has revived an interest in the future of the populations, often based on economic forecasts of the consequences of the growing proportion of old people in populations with very low fertility and only seldom linked to a discussion of the fertility behaviour.

**Reconciliation between family and work obligations**

A pro-natalist policy was hardly ever present in the Nordic Countries. As Demeny (1987) has pointed out, the clear relation between the success of the nation and the size of the population has lost its relevance in the modern society. Instead, the main aims of policies directed towards the families turned to the question of *reconciliation between family and work obligations*. These policy measures were strongly influenced by the increasing female activity rate during this period and the fact that the option of living as a housewife was disappearing.
The shift towards the question of reconciliation between family and work obligations in the family policy is also mirrored in the EU (EEC) activities as described by Hantrais and Letablier (1996). In the 1960s and 1970s, the EU only expressed a social concern in so far as the activities affected the mobility of labourers or the competitiveness of enterprises. According to Hantrais and Letablier (1996), ‘family matters’ were not mentioned in a community document until 1974. In the early 1980s a ‘Resolution on family policy in the European Community’ was adopted by the Parliament stating that ‘family policy should … become an integral part of all Community policies’. Hantrais and Letablier further conclude that by the mid-1990s, the European Union had still not developed a clearly defined family policy, although the family had been placed on the European social policy agenda. Concrete proposals for EU legislation on childcare, maternity leave etc. had been brought forward as equality or as health and safety measures, as a designated family policy program was absent (Hantrais and Letablier 1996:142).

However, the European Commission established ‘The European Observatory on National Family Policies’ in 1989 with the purpose ‘to monitor changes in family forms and family policies (and other policies which impact on the family) in all member states of the European Union’ (Ditch et al. 1998:v).

Although not directly aiming at influencing the childbearing propensity, a sociological rationale for improving the possibilities for reconciliation could be to consider that the general living conditions of families – defined as couples or lone-parents with children - have impact on how childless adults consider the options of having a child. The early political acceptance of this policy in the Nordic countries may also be seen as a sign that the dual breadwinner family is accepted as inevitable.

The relation between family and working life is often considered an almost ‘classical’ approach to any analysis of women’s lives between family and work, and the focus on reconciliation is closely related to the problems of gender equality. The policies aiming at solving the reconciliation problem included improved day care facilities and leave schemes. The policy of leave schemes - both maternal, paternal and parental leave schemes - are currently being debated in many countries.
Gender equality

The most recent rationales for family policy concern the question of gender equality including the individuals’ obligations in the family as well as in the labour market.

While the reconciliation concern still may be seen as a reaction to changes and as attempts to increase fertility, the equality concern may be regarded as a form of support for the emerging or already emerged patterns and a wish to improve the options for women (as for men as regarding their domestic activities). In the Nordic countries the dual breadwinner model of families has been accepted and the acts and regulations in the welfare states may be said to act to support that fact. Only indirectly the aim can be seen as an attempt to increase childbearing – rather it is a question of making childbearing and family life possible at all.

In the early 20th century, all the Nordic countries initiated legal changes that made women more equal to men and gave them certain rights to decide for themselves, to be educated, to have a job, to earn a salary and to keep the revenue. These changes improved the possibilities to live without a male provider. The reforms from these years are important also in order to understand the more recent patterns, as women in the Nordic countries gained some individual rights also regarding marriage, divorce and custody over children in the 1920s. These changes dissolved the patriarchal and hierarchical structures in the society (Staahlberg 2001).

Some of the important actions taken in the late 20th century in the direction of gender equality aimed at making the legal conditions between married spouses and common-law spouses more equal. This may be seen to be a prerequisite for making the choice between marrying and living in a consensual union an option for both women and men. For women it was primarily a question of financial security in case of family dissolution, and for men important issues have been regulation of contacts with and custodial rights over children after the dissolution.

It seems to be an important angle in the discussion – that the political initiatives aiming at increasing gender equality can be seen as reactions in a situation in which a diversity of family forms are accepted. At the same time, family patterns may still seem to be developing in the direction of finding a new equilibrium and in this process some couples reject to have children.
Time for family life and for private life

Some of the family obligations, which are still the main responsibilities of the woman are locally anchored and context-dependent (especially care for children, for sick people and for the elderly). Women’s lives must be lived in relation to these responsibilities. But how women’s traditional context-dependent bonds to the local community and to family unfold in relation to the flexibility at the labour market, and whether and how that affects men’s lives, are major questions. Women have often solved these problems in relation to work and family by not working full time and/or by finding a workplace within short distance from home. Commuting analyses have shown how women’s labour market in time and space was more limited than that of men (Hanson and Pratt 1995).

Apparently, combining family life with a working life on the present terms is still difficult in the Nordic countries, especially when seen from a woman’s perspective. The apparent success of the more flexible leave systems and the current discussions (at least in some countries) of flexible working hours points in the direction of what might be the pivot of the future policies aiming at making family formation a realistic option for individuals: Time. The question is, however, whether we have reached the point at which a fight for room for a family life is necessary. It has been argued that modern working life is now dominating the family, meaning that the consequences of individualization have contributed to the tendency that we have become controlled by our wish for identity through the job, but also through the consumption made possible by the income. The way in which the time structure of our working life controls our time structure altogether is therefore a cornerstone in any analysis of everyday life. The ‘new’ family life and the form of the family may change considerably from what we know today (Drewes Nielsen and Knudsen 2000).

Research interests in family policies

In studies on fertility patterns, it often seems to be easier to identify potential obstacles for childbearing and child rearing and to answer the question of why people do not have children, than to find answers to why people do want and do have children. Research on the explanations to the latter questions may look to socio-biology or evolutionary theories about the urge to procreate and to multiply – at least in countries where the retired part of the population is not finan-
cially dependent on their own children. Some of the pronounced pro-natalist policies, though, have linked the individuals’ procreation to the nations’ survival through the growth of population - a view, which does not have general appeal today and which has not been evident in recent family policies in the Nordic countries (Demeny 1987; Knudsen 2002a).

The regions in contemporary Europe are characterized by different fertility regimes. The reasons behind the various patterns are nested both in history, in the cultural background and in the contemporary situations of the women at home and at the labour market. The evidence of the effect of policy measures is rather limited and, moreover, the net effect on fertility is generally considered to be small. Further, difficult methodological problems are involved in the research on the effectiveness of the policy measures (Ermish 1996; Gauthier 1996; Gauthier and Hatzius 1997; Strohmeier 2002), and similar policy measures may have different effects in the different regions (Pinelli and De Rose 2001).

In spite of these difficulties, or perhaps also partly because of the difficulties, the question of the effect of (family) policies on the fertility and nuptiality pattern is subject to increasing interest from researchers. Not only European researchers, but also researchers from overseas have studied the profound changes in the European populations’ fertility behaviour over the last few decades. One great challenge has been the dramatic changes in the former socialist countries since the breakdown of the Soviet regime around 1990. Research has been directed towards analyses of whether and how the countries’ different principles in family policy and concrete policy measures have influenced the development.

Studies on the effect of family policy have been grouped into four main categories according to data and methodology (Gauthier and Hatzius 1997). One group of studies is based on data provided by public opinion surveys, in which respondents are asked more or less directly about their attitudes towards family policy measures. A second group consists of studies seeking to assess the effects of family policies on the basis of what is called a descriptive-intuitive approach. By this is meant e.g. studies, which have led to the conclusion of a positive correlation between fertility and policy, based on analysis of fertility trends on the one hand and family policies on the other.

A number of recent studies have been conducted on a national or comparative international basis, relating trends in fertility at the aggregate level to policy measures. This kind of approach raise a number of questions, like for instance
whether the observation of a fall in the PTFR after introduction of a more liberal right to abortion, can be interpreted as an evidence of an effect of that act? And if this is the case in some countries, like for instance in Czechoslovakia (see Balicki 2001), is a similar effect then automatically to be expected in other countries? In the Scandinavian countries, quite another process was seen, as the fertility decline in the late 1960s began before the acts on induced abortion on demand were approved in the early 1970s. In the subsequent period, the fertility rates and the abortion rates have not been complementing each other as the overall picture shows a rather stable, perhaps slightly decreasing abortion rate while the fertility rate have increased strongly (Knudsen et al. 2003; regarding Denmark, see Wielandt and Knudsen 1997).

A third group of studies is based on aggregate data and involves econometric modelling. These studies have, still according to Gauthier and Hatzius (1997), identified positive relationships between fertility and policies, which involves some economic improvement, e.g. in the form of family benefits (Blanchet and Ekert-Jaffé 1994) or tax relief (Whittington, Alm and Peter 1990). On the other hand, other studies suggest an influence on the timing only, as higher family benefits would encourage early entrance into motherhood (Ermish 1988). Furthermore, it should be noted, that Vikat (2002), found indications that a home-care allowance as that which existed in Finland for a few years after 1990 might have influenced fertility rates for second and higher birth orders in a positive direction.

The fourth group of studies is based on individual data. These studies seem to confirm the results from aggregate analyses, and they often focus on various subgroups of the population. According to Gauthier and Hatzius (1997), the findings from these studies are not at all concurrent, though. This kind of studies, is often performed in the Nordic countries in which national, population-based registers with individual level information exist (Andersson 2001; Murphy and Knudsen 2002; Vikat 2002), and sometimes on combinations of register data with surveys (Kravdal 1989). The individual level data in the registers facilitate studies of life courses of individuals, of family members, parents and children and analyses of for instance the fertility pattern in the families, or in specific groups of women (see for instance Knudsen and Murphy 1999).
Findings on the Nordic countries

The observed changes in the patterns of both family formation and fertility since the late 1960s have often been studied in relation to the profound changes in women’s positions in society (e.g. Women, Work and the Family in Europe 1998; Women’s Position and Demographic Change 1993). When the present situation regarding family formation and fertility in the Nordic countries is subject for analyses, the welfare state system is in general considered to be providing proper frames for childbearing and child rearing, for reconciliation of family life and working life and for providing a framework in which women and men have the options to choose whether or not to have a family with children.

Important features are good coverage of child care facilities, flexible leave schemes for both parents, support for lone parents, legal equality between spouses and the fact that the acts are directed towards the individuals rather than the families, which altogether contribute to a family policy aiming at securing working women the option to have a family and children as well.

This section discusses findings from demographic research on the Nordic countries on how fertility and family formation are influenced by some of the main characteristics of the women’ and the couples’ situation during the last decades of the 20th century. Focus is on the labour market participation, education and the legal gender equality in the family and in the labour market. Some of the studies are based on published data at the aggregate level, while others have used individual level data from the public population registers. Further, findings from both national studies and from international comparative studies, concentrating on the entering into motherhood and on the women’s lifetime fertility will be included.

It is an underlying assumption in these studies that women and men react to the societal frames, the laws, the economic development etc. by altering their fertility behaviour. The assumption that decreasing fertility may be explained as reactions to constraints in daily life – are closely linked to the assumption that it is possible to change fertility and nuptiality patterns in the direction of increasing fertility by introducing family friendly policies.

Education and labour market participation

In the decades after the 1960s, the educational level among the younger cohorts
of both genders has increased as the compulsory school age has been raised. Women in the Nordic countries have acquired education, basic as well as further and vocational education almost in line with their male contemporaries. In the cohorts of young individuals leaving school in 1990 as many as 28 to 46 percent continued in some kind of education (Bonke 1995).

Improved education of women has lead to a situation where women are much better equipped to work in a broad range of jobs than was the case in the 1960s and 1970s. Increasing female employment has occurred in all of these countries during the 1960s, beginning with increases among women in the upper end of their childbearing ages and soon followed by increases among the younger women. Another characteristic pattern is that both the level and the profile of the activity rates over the lifetime show similar slopes for the two genders: Participation increases after ending school, is more or less stable during adulthood and then decreases at the time of retirement. The participation of men has decreased a little since the 1960s, which is contributing to the very equal levels of the participation, although the level is still somewhat higher for men than for women. The slightly lower level among women is due to the fact that women have experienced and still experience a higher rate of unemployment and, further, that women much more than men have periods outside labour market due to prolonged leave schemes.

Legally, women and men have equal rights to work and to be paid equally wages for the same job, but in practice the labour markets are segregated by sex both horizontally and vertically. The proportion of women is lowest in upper shares of occupational positions and, further, women are still predominant in the caring, nursing and teaching sectors and in some industries as well (Women and Men in the Nordic countries 1999).

Less strong attachment to the labour market among women is also seen in the fact that part-time is still more frequent among women than among men, although the differences are diminishing among the younger generations. Part-time jobs were previously seen as individual solutions for reconciliation between work and family and may, as long as it reflects a preference by the woman (and her partner), still be viewed as such. The proportion of part-time female workers has varied considerably between the Nordic countries. Denmark experienced a decrease from 60 percent in 1970 to 20 percent about 1990, while the proportion remained almost unchanged in Norway (45 percent) and Sweden (40 percent). In
the late 1980s, about 60 percent of employed women in the childbearing ages in Sweden worked part-time compared to less than 10 percent in Denmark – a share that was even smaller among women with small children (Yearbook of Nordic Statistics 1995; Helweg-Larsen et al. 1998). Further, part-time normally means more hours per week in Denmark than in the other countries. If a flexible leave scheme and the option of part-time job should be valuable for women and their partners in relation to provide proper frames for childbearing, these possibilities should be accompanied by a high degree of job security so that each individual has the right to go back to full-time, or to the same job, after the leave.

In all countries increasing educational level of the women influences the timing and number of children by delaying the first birth and reducing the number of children (Knudsen 1993; Kravdal 1989; Lappegaard 2001b; Gustavsson et al. 2001). The effect of education is first of all due to the fact that a larger proportion of young women and men stay longer in the educational system, and have poorer conditions for a family with children while they are still studying. Secondly, as Gustavsson et al. (2001) have pointed out, part of the postponement can be caused by career planning, which, by the terminology introduced previously in this paper, is an integrated and important part of the planning of life-biographies.

The postponement of first birth was very outspoken among highly educated women from the cohorts who were young at the time of the onset of the fertility decline in the 1970s. A similar decline began somewhat later among women with shorter education (e.g. Knudsen 1993). Still, women with long educations have fewer children in their lifetime than women with shorter education, although some studies and everyday-life observations indicate that the average low number of children among these women covers growing polarization between women with 3 or more children and women without children. Various data from the FFS-studies reveal larger differences in the number of children for young women than among women in their late 30s, which supports the notion that the effect of education is primarily a postponement effect as some of the ‘missing’ fertility is caught up later (UN 2002).

There are some indications that women with long education who begin their childbearing late, have a shorter distance in time to the next child if they continue after the first child (Hoem 1990; Kravdal 1992). A late first birth thus means either that the woman has only one child or that she continues quite
quickly to have more children.

If the male partner has a long education too, the share of couples with no children increases (Emerek 1986), a fact, which may support the idea of career planning as well as difficulties in combining family life and work. However, men with higher education normally have more children than women with similar education as their partners often have less education and consequently better possibilities to adapt the work obligations to the family obligations.

Some studies have found that fertility is higher among women working as nurses or teachers or in occupations with good opportunities for flexible work schemes (Hoem 1993; Knudsen 1993; Lappegaard 2001b). Further, there is a strong relationship between educational level and occupational participation and positions, as women with short education often have less permanent attachment to the labour market or part-time jobs.

The extent to which women are fully employed is another of the features that differentiate between the countries. Overall the participation rate is about 80 percent among mothers with small children in the Nordic countries, although Norway was lagging behind for some years. Still, some differences persist as more than 40 percent of the female workforce in Norway were working part-time in the late 1990s (Skrede 2001). In 1999, 9% of the women and 4% of the men in Denmark were working part-time. The shares in Finland were of the same magnitude while 27% of the women in Sweden, and, respectively, 32% and 37% in Norway and Iceland, were working part-time. In these three countries the share of part-time employed men was about 6-7% (Women and Men in the Nordic countries 1999).

Summarizing on the relation between education, occupation and fertility one may conclude that even in the Nordic countries women’s possibilities to combine work and family still seem to matter more than that of the males. Further, students have difficulties in combining studying with childbearing and strong career orientation from both partners delay and decrease fertility.

**Income and unemployment**

Educational level and occupational position is closely related to income and financial opportunities to secure stability and a certain standard of living. At this point it may be argued that one of the characteristics of the welfare state policies is that state policies for support of the needing being either families or lone par-
ents is activated in case of unemployment or other economic instability.

For Sweden, Hoem (2000) found a positive relation between entering into motherhood and the employment levels in various municipalities, a finding also supported by the pro-cyclical pattern of fertility in Sweden described by Andersson (2000). Hank (2001) showed that the income level of the women increases the chance of giving birth for the first time (when standardized for calendar year and the age of the woman). A similar relation is not found for third births and for second births the relation is even weaker. Furthermore, this effect was stronger for women in their 30s than for women in their 20s.

One may conclude from this, that income plays a role for the decision making to establish a family. However, the same analysis demonstrated slightly increasing first birth intensities among women who had experienced unemployment in the previous years. Two possible explanations are discussed in the paper: Women postpone deliberately the birth until they have a job, have more security in their employment situation and can use the leave opportunities, or – on the other hand – a spell of unemployment may reduce the cost by having a child and thus increase the propensity to give birth (Hank 2001).

Other studies have shown that policies with economic incentives, as for instance a home-care allowance, will most probably have the strongest effect on second and third births than on entry into motherhood (e.g. Vikat 2002).

Leave
Specific analyses have tried to elucidate the effect of changes in rules and regulations regarding the leave system (Hoem 1990). This can be done in one country or in comparative analyses of two or more countries, in which the support is known to be different (e.g. Andersson 2001; Rønsen 1999).

Attention towards the effect of the extended leave systems has increased recently. The best-known effect is probably the so-called ‘speed-premium’ in Sweden, which resulted in a rather rapid increase in the total period fertility rate as the spacing between children were diminished (Hoem 1993). The core of this policy was that women who got pregnant while being on maternity leave could extend that leave until the birth of the next child without loosing any of the leave after that birth. Sweden is the country among the Nordic in which the total fertility rate has fluctuated most, which has been related to the changing economic situation and to the increasing unemployment (Andersson 2000; Hoem and
Hoem 1996). At present, a new research proposal has been launched aiming at studying ‘The Nordic model of Family Welfare’ in a comparative perspective, focusing on to what extent this model of welfare and gender equality represents a sustainable road in a broader comparative perspective (Skrede 2001).

While there was some initial opposition - also from trade unions, even trade unions exclusively for women, primarily based on fear that the women should be marginalized in the workforce if they used the possibilities of leave too much, the leave is now considered as important - especially if it can be organized in a flexible way (see for instance Rønsen 1999). Sweden is a good example of this because it is possible to divide the take leave in short periods - depending on the current needs in the family - for instance a couple of weeks at the time when the child starts to go to school (Hoem and Hoem 1996). In his recent comparison of the fertility trends in Norway and Sweden, Andersson (2001) concluded that the changes in the leave schemes in Sweden did have an effect on the increase observed in PTFR. However, the subsequent decrease in PTFR indicates that the effect was more on the spacing pattern that the total cohort fertility.

The main principles in the acts and regulations on leave are that the mothers can have a rather long maternity leave after the delivery while the fathers have a short leave period (in Denmark for instance two weeks) immediately after the birth of the child together with the mother. More recently, fathers have been given the option to take longer leave at a later time and, further, parental leave has been introduced. In contrast to the leave periods exclusively for mothers or fathers the parental leave is meant to be a possibility for both parents during the first years of the child’s life.

Even after the introduction of paternal leave both statistics and surveys have demonstrated, that only few men use this option. Some of the reasons have been stated as opposition from the workplaces and the greater loss of income as most men have higher income than their female partner (e.g. Nygaard Christoffersen 1990).

**Gender equality**

It was mentioned above that the share of men who takes parental leave are still way below the share of mothers on leave. One way to change this might be to earmark part of the leave period for the father so that the total leave period will be shortened if the father is not taking leave. Another possibility, from the eco-
omic point of view, could be to increase the maximum possible compensation during the leave period to reduce the economic loss for the family. Interestingly enough, some studies have found that the attitudes of the fathers play a stronger role: A high proportion of men with longer education take leave no matter the economic loss for the family. This is a result of the fact that a high share of the well-educated men expresses a strong family orientation (Olsen 2000; Rønsen 1999).

This points in the direction of an understanding of the influence of non-economic factors. The attempts to increase the fathers’ involvement in childcare at an early stage are partly rooted in the wishes to increasing the equality between the genders – not just in the labour market but also in the family. Equality in the family includes increasing male involvement in and responsibility for the domestic chores, including care of children. Shared responsibilities at home and fathers taking their share of the obligations in relation to care of children must be seen as a prerequisite if full-time working women will choose to have children. The women have adjusted the number of children as well as the time spent on domestic chores to be able to manage their occupational activities: During the decades with the great fertility changes in the Nordic countries the time spent weekly on domestic chores by women decreased much more than the increase in time spent by males.

**Perspectives**

The observed differences and the fact that family forms are presently developing at different stages in the countries of Europe, raises the question whether it is at all possible that we can have the same policy in all countries - and whether we can expect the same effect of specific policy measures.

Looking at the last decades, there is greater uniformity in the fertility patterns in Europe than in the nuptiality patterns and in the forms of families, which are developing or have developed (Kuijsten 2002). This makes it even more relevant to discuss whether evolving family forms should be seen as resulting from different preferences and different possibilities to establish a family nucleus.

In the discussions of family formation earlier in this paper, I quoted Giddens (1987) for the statement, that uncertainties and risks are associated with
changing family forms. However, the highlighted changes, which altogether have been seen as signs of the loss of importance of the family per se, are measurable changes in *form*, not in the *content*: decreasing marriage rates, increasing divorce rates, the evolvement of new types of families, and decreasing fertility (see also Beck 1992). Based on the recent changes in fertility pattern and family formation it was debated whether the family as well known institution is undergoing a process of dissolution. It has also been argued, though, that individuals are still searching for closeness and for a joint community. What is happening is rather the family as a frame for the joint lives for individuals is changing in form, and the increasing diversity of family forms is a sign of the development of new family forms (e.g. Kuijsten 1996; Lestaeghe and Moors 2000) - and the development of new forms of private life, as Kuijsten (2002) recently expressed it.

The large amount of dissolutions of families and the rise of new forms imply the emergence of a more diversified picture of the family. Likewise, the society of singles, which is an often-used label on e.g. Denmark and Sweden, overlook the fact that many of the individuals who live as singles may do so in a phase between either parental home or partnership or between two partnerships. Many singles are a natural outcome, when serial monogamy is common (Nielsen and Knudsen 2000).

One important point is that it may be difficult to understand this development in a simple concept. At the same time as Beck seems pessimistic about the family, he criticizes the family sociologists of being too narrow-minded as they are not able to imagine other family forms than the forms of today (‘today’ is here the 1980s). With the changes in society regarding labour market, and the rising individualization, a diversity of family forms may exist side by side. Also, economic and ideational conditions favour this development.

In their recent analysis of the delayed fertility in Europe (Pinelli and De Rose 2001), concludes that modernization, institutional support and a fair gender system encourage changes in family behaviour in the direction of fertility delay – but also, although with a weaker effect – a higher fertility. They find a lower fertility in cases where the situation is less progressive. The ‘modern’ patterns of behaviour are easier to combine with fertility in e.g. Sweden (representing Scandinavia in their analysis) than in Southern Europe, in which family policies are not supportive for the dual-breadwinner-pattern becoming more popular.
among the young generations. In the terminology used here we can say that the policy in Southern Europe do not support the attempts to develop a new equilibrium of family forms.

Provocatively, I have stated that for the individuals, who, in late modern societies, are not forced to establish a family, even in case of childbirth, family life is an optional choice. What does it mean that people form a family and that they have children by choice rather than by need? And how do we assure frames within which individuals and couples are given the options to act according to their preferences?

Being optimistic, one may see the Nordic welfare state model as a model giving the couples opportunities for deciding about their life courses. In line with the discussion of the development of new family forms above, the Nordic countries do provide opportunities for a new equilibrium between family life and working life. Nevertheless, families with small children often complain about the lack of time in the daily life and the subsequent fewer possibilities to act in the most desirable ways. This experience of lack of time may be partly due to increased expectations about the quality time spent in the family and with the children.

Still, couples in the Nordic countries - and women in particular – experience a number of obstacles in obtaining the number of children they wish for. The question on gender equality needs to be revived. There are still deficits in the male involvement, as it is still the women who take the most responsibilities and adapt their career to the time and space bindings in the close relations. Men as fathers must be more involved, especially in countries in which the women’s roles are rapidly changing and resulting in a very low fertility.

One way or another it is not possible to believe that women - and men – do not wish to have children. Therefore, the aim must be that general conditions for family life and for childbearing and child raising should be satisfactory and flexible for individuals to the extent that they will have the children they want, and that they can manage to combine family life with working life.

**Literature**


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Notes

1 This paper is a revised version of a paper prepared for an International Workshop/Seminar

2 The Period Total fertility rate is defined as the number of live born children that would be born by 1000 women throughout the fertile age span, provided they in each single age give birth as indicated by the age-specific fertility rates in the year in question and provided none of the women die before they have turned 50.


4 Details about the family formation patterns and the family sizes in the Nordic countries can be found in the FFS-reports: See: http://www.unece.org/ead/pau/ffs/ffs_standtabframe.htm for the tables.

5 Coleman (1996) places Denmark in the group of Western European countries, while the rest of the Nordic countries together with the Baltic countries are placed in one group of Northern European countries.

6 In the ‘Subject Index’ of a recently published book on Family Life and Family Policies in Europe (2002), nuptiality is included, but with the note: ‘*see also marriage’.

7 In fact the family appeared only indirectly in the context of reconciliation of family responsibilities and work aspirations and the need for an action programme for migrant workers and members of their families.

8 Inherent challenges in the studies are to examine to which extent it is possible to conclude from the fertility levels at aggregate levels to individual behavior. One interesting approach to study the consistency between register data on fertility trends and survey data on sexual behaviour are presented in Wielandt et al. (2002).

9 The analysis is solely based on information on the women’s situation. To include information on the partner would increase the understanding of the influence of economic security.

10 The project will be carried out in cooperation between researchers from Denmark, Norway, Sweden and in MPIDR, Rostock, working on Nordic register data on the populations. All researchers are part of a network established in 2000, aiming at conducting joint or parallel register studies on the situation in the Nordic Countries.