

Nordic Family Policy and Union Dissolution

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Questions about the possible links between gender roles and family stability have emerged with increasing union instability, especially among parents. Theoretical explanations may have changed over time: In the past, women's economic dependence on their spouses was an important reason of family stability (Oppenheimer 1994) and family instability was linked to increasing proportions of dual-earner couples, including both men and women being engaged in paid. These changes have not automatically resulted in gender equality in the family and create a gap between gender equality in the public and private spheres which is a possible source of family instability. In this study we ask whether and how a smaller gap in gender equality between the two spheres is associated with family stability.

The actual policies and policy discourse in a country are likely to influence the development of gender relations in the family (Oláh 2001). Gender equality is an explicit policy goal in the Nordic countries which have a long tradition of promoting gender equality through family policy. That is, policies have on one side actively supported female employment facilitating the combination of childrearing and female employment. On the other side, specific policies are aimed of encouraging men's participation in the domestic sphere and thus change gender relations in the families.

The aim of this paper is to examine how a more active fathers role in the family influence the divorce risk. We will use unique data allowing for detailed information from administrative registers of the whole population of men and women in three Nordic countries – Iceland, Sweden and Norway. We make use of one specific family policy, the parental leave program, which both promotes female employment and challenges the gender division at home. In general, parents are offered a generous wage-compensation for staying home with their newborn child for around one year in Norway and Sweden and somewhat shorter (9 months) in Iceland. For almost two decades in Norway and Sweden (and since 2001 in Iceland), part of the leave has been reserved for the fathers meaning that if the leave days are not taken by the father they cannot be transferred to the mother. This policy is a unique Nordic feature with a direct aim of increasing gender equality in the family. In this paper we will focus on parent's use of the parental leave with a special focus on father's use of the fathers' quota and how it is related to the risk of divorce. The fathers' quota reform has been embraced by the fathers and the majority of all fathers make use of the reserved days. Our analysis is based on an assumption that father's use of parental leave is an investment in the relationship possibly generating more equality in the family in general and thus leads to more stable relationships.

Focusing on three Nordic countries we will consider whether there is cross-national variations in the relation of gender roles and family instability. The similar family policies in Iceland, Norway and Sweden make a comparative analysis highly relevant, but there are some key differences that can provide country differences. For instance, Norway has a longer history of

dualistic family policies that support both dual-earner couples and provide direct family support. Sweden on the other hand has had a more consistent orientation towards gender equality. Iceland is particularly interesting in a Nordic comparative context as they lagged behind in family policy generosity until the turn of the century and has thereafter had the most radical transition towards a gender-equal family policy. Iceland has the longest proportion of leave reserved for the fathers and the shortest proportion of leave possible to take for the mothers. Comparing countries with fairly similar policies, and economic, social and cultural conditions, we are better able to isolate the effects of the family policy on demographic behavior from the effects of other factors.

Background

Let us follow two sets of arguments that lead to contradictory interpretations about the relationship between gender roles and family stability (Cooke 2006). First, in the traditional male breadwinner-female caregiver societies gender specialization increase couples' mutual dependence (Becker 1981) and thereby maintain family stability (Oppenheimer 1994). In the process towards more dual-earner couples women's economic empowerment reduces her dependence upon men which becomes a threat to the benefits for specialization and thus predicting greater divorce risks (Cooke 2006). Second, when both men and women are participating in the labor market the division of paid and unpaid work in the family becomes a result of negotiations between the spouses based on relative wages, preferences etc. (Cooke 2006). Here, alternatives to marriage are seen as important determinants of bargaining power. This means that women's empowerment may invoke a credible threat of divorce when bargaining over division of domestic labor, and thus a more equal share of domestic work should decrease the risk of divorce (Breen and Cooke 2005). In other words when women and men contribute more equally to the family economy an unequal share of responsibility for domestic work becomes perceived both as unfair and problematic given constraints on time and energy, and thus generates a demand for a more equal division family work among women (Oláh 2001). From this it has been argued that increasing divorce risks is not only reflecting more female employment, but also men's lack of changing behavior in response to increasing female employment (Cooke 2006).

There is evidence that gives support for both interpretations. In a comparison between the United States and Germany Cooke (2006) finds that while in Germany any move away from gender specialization, either in terms of her involvement in paid labor work or his involvement in unpaid work, increase the risk of divorce, while in the United States, more gender equality in the family are associated with more marital stability. In a comparison between Sweden and Hungary Oláh (2001) finds that gender relations does not seems to be important for family stability in Hungary, while there is a positive association in Sweden. A recent study from the United Kingdom shows that the divorce rate is lower when fathers engage in the highest level of unpaid work and childcare regardless of their wives' employment statuses (Sigle-Rushton 2010). This study also shows that men's active involvement in unpaid work can substantially offset the destabilizing effect of women's employment (Sigle-Rushton 2010).

The relationship between gender roles and family stability is undoubtedly depending on the social context. In societies where there is no policies reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies, men's greater participation in domestic tasks results in more stable marriages regardless of

women's employment (Cooke 2006). In most societies that have encouraged an equal participation between paid work and family work there is still a gap between ideology and practice. It is argued that the establishment of the dual-earner family model influences family stability only if it is accompanied by some changes in traditional gender relations within the family (Oláh 2001).

Given the strong focus on gender equality in the Nordic countries it is good reasons to expect that more father involvement in the family and more equal gender roles increase union stability as suggested in the theoretical arguments. We investigate this using parent's use of parental leave as an indicator of father's involvement. The introduction of the father's quota is related to the gender roles at home, in particular father's role in the family. A more gender equal use of parental leave might help couples achieve more equality in total time spent in paid and unpaid work. A smaller gap between gender roles in the public and private sphere can thereby have a stabilizing effect on the family. In relationships where gender equality is accepted by the partners, men tend to take parental leave both in order to take their share of parenting responsibilities and because they wish to spend more time with their children. More specifically we expect more parental leave taken by the father to increase father's involvement in the family which has stabilizing effect on unions (lower divorce risks).

Data and methods

We use data from the national population registers covering the whole population. Each person is identified by a unique identification numbers. This allows us to link data from different administrative registers and we will construct datasets that contain childbearing histories and longitudinal information on income and education. The data cover an almost twenty year period 1993 to 2011. Father's quota was first introduced in Norway 1993, in Sweden 1995 and in Iceland 2001. When the reform was implemented it was 4 weeks in Norway and Sweden. In both countries there has been additional reforms increasing the father's quota to the total of 10 weeks in Sweden and 14 weeks in Norway. In Iceland it has been 12 weeks from the reform was implemented. Today Icelandic fathers use 32 percent of the leave, Norwegian 15 % and the Swedish fathers 24%. As leave is of different lengths the percentages imply various lengths.

We consider whether the relation of gender roles and family stability is the same among cohabiting and married couples. In the Nordic countries cohabitation has become an accepted way of living and many cohabiting couples live in long-term stable relationships, but also in these countries cohabiting relationships are on average less stable.

In order to examine the relations between parent's use of parental leave and divorce we make use of data on parent's exposure times of 'risks' splitting up and their union dissolution for the different groups of parents. Thus we are making use of an event history analysis of divorce in which we estimate the impact of different use of parental leave and father's use of the fathers' quota on the propensity of the parents are dissolving their union. We are only following parents that had their first or second common child. The estimated risks reflect both the timing and the quantum of the event we study. The hazard rate that is estimated is conditional of a divorce at a particular time since they become parents to first or second common child given that a couple has not yet experienced this event. The technique is a standard tool in analyses of time-dependent data like ours. We estimate models for all and for

married and cohabiting couples separately. We will control for relevant background variables such as age of the parents, age of the youngest child, unions status, education and income.

Innovation

The proposed analysis is innovative in several ways. To this date, there is little research on the relationship between the parental leave policy including the father's quota has been used in analysis of marital stability. Our study will therefore give new knowledge about how a policy with an explicit aim of changing the gender roles in the family are interrelated with marital stability. The key question is whether and how more equal gender roles in the families influence union stability. Preliminary results for Norway suggest that parents where the father uses leave have lower risk of splitting up than couples where only the mother have used leave, while dividing between cohabiting and married couples, the pattern is less evident among cohabiting than among married couples. Although our result cannot distinguish selection effects from causality this suggests that more gender equality in the family is a possible source of family stability. Using a similar-country comparative research design we are better able to isolate the effects of the family policy on demographic behavior from the effects of other factors. Data from administrative registers including information of the whole population allows us to perform more detailed analysis, distinguishing into rather small groups, than previous analysis using survey data have been able to.

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