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How do Gender Values and Family practices cohere? The case of Norway

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The gender division of labour at home is often viewed as the last entrenchment of the process towards gender equality in society. The division of household work does not however, merely reflect differences in the use of time and differences in duties and responsibility within the family, it also involves (in the terminology of West and Zimmerman (1987)) the process of *doing gender*, as traditional division of tasks and duties contributes to the cementation of traditional gender roles and traditional gender identities. This again has great significance for the attainment of gender equality also in the public sphere, i.e. whether women are given the opportunity to achieve economic, social and political independence equivalently to men. The division of household labour also concerns a question of human rights and the question of fairness as regards the distribution of duties and rewards in society. Another aspect of the question concerning rights and fairness, is to what extent the distribution of duties and rewards is in accordance with what is *perceived* as appropriate and fair, i.e. whether the actual family practices reflect the aims and attitudes of the partners.

This paper focuses on the coherence and incoherence between individual gender role attitudes and the actual gender division of household work in families in Norway, which by all international measures is appointed one of the world's most gender egalitarian countries. Empirical studies conclude ambiguously as regards the correlation between gender role attitudes and the gender division of household tasks. This is especially true in a direct causal sense, as expressed values and attitudes are not always followed by suitable action. Some studies find no relationship between gender role attitudes and housework involvement, and some find attitudes the most important predictor of household labour patterns. The significance of attitudes is often tested against the significance of both individual characteristics, preferences and resources, and relative resources of the partners in the couple. The impact on the sharing of household tasks may also vary depending on who of the two, the woman or the man, holds a special individual characteristic. Poortman and Van der Lippe for

instance, find that men's attitudes influence more than women's attitudes on the division of household work. This is mainly due to women's more restricted ability to act upon their attitudes as regards home and family responsibilities.

Values and attitudes can be explained by *self-interest* or by *experience* or exposure to new ideas through socialisation and education. As regards self-interests in a more equal division of the household work, women as a rule have stronger interests than men, whereas education may have more gender equal consequences. Brewster and Padavic do however, find for the US, that the significance of education on gender role attitudes have decreased since the 1970s.

Attitudes towards gender roles may be measured in several ways. Surveys often cover a number of query designs, from general questions on women's and men's role in society and in the family, till specific questions on personal topics and beliefs, and studies show that both determinants and effects of gender role attitudes vary depending on which specific topics are inquired into. Bolzendahl and Myers find for instance for the U.S. that attitudes related to gender equality in general have been liberalized steadily during the last decades, however not so as regards attitudes towards abortion.

Comparative surveys show that Norway, together with the other Nordic countries, rank top on gender equality values and on gender equality practices, both in the public sphere and in the households. As regards values and practices at home however, Norway as a rule ranks behind Sweden. It has been regarded as a paradox that the Nordic and Norwegian labour markets are among the most gender segregated in the western world. This is of course partly due to the Nordic "women friendly welfare states" (to use Helga Hernes's words) where women's traditional unpaid family care has been transformed into paid work in the form of welfare state occupations. In the same way we find that an increased trend towards sharing of the domestic work between women and men, hide a significantly gendered division of the various tasks, where laundry and ironing is the most female dominated, and maintenance work the most male dominated. Childcare is generally more equally shared than housework. The picture of the gender division of household tasks varies however, depending on whether the informant is a woman or a man: Women report more equal sharing of male dominated tasks whereas men report more equal sharing of female dominated tasks.

Our analysis is inspired by an article by Bühlman, Elcheroth and Tettamanti (European Sociological Review, 2010) where they explore various Value-Practice Configurations related to gender role attitudes and the division of labour among European couples. Based on The European Social Survey data, they inquire into the coherencies and incoherencies between attitudes and practices, and ask to what extent individuals and couples experience tension between egalitarian attitudes and gendered practices.

Our study analyses the relation between Norwegian women's and men's expressed gender role attitudes and how they perceive their actual sharing or division of household tasks with their partner.

We ask two simple analytical questions:

- What distinct classes or types of attitude-practice configurations can be found in Norway and what is the prevalence of the various types?
- What are the main individual and couple characteristics predicting class "membership"?

We also examine which gender equality questions and household tasks are the most significant in differentiating between the various attitude-practice types. Here, I will not, however, have time to go further into that question.

We utilise the Norwegian Generations and Gender Survey 2007, a large representative survey, initiated by the UNECE and conducted in a series of countries. It captures a lot of information on peoples' life course, attitudes, family situation and daily activities. The sample units in our analysis are married and cohabiting (heterosexual) women and men with children, i.e. individuals, not couples or households, but respondents also provide some information about their partners. Hence we have information on *individual* attitudes and the sharing of household tasks between *partners*. We created a typology of couples' attitude-practice configurations on the basis of a large battery of questions and statements on gender role attitudes on the one side, and on statements about each partner's relative involvement in a number of housework and child care tasks on the other. We use logit latent class analysis to identify the couples' latent class membership probabilities. Next, we run a multinomial logistic regression analysis to identify coefficients for covariates predicting class membership.

The results reveal four different types of attitude-practice configurations, where the *coherent egalitarian* couples constitute the largest class, i.e. couples with positive attitudes towards gender equality and to a large degree also actually sharing equally both housework and child

care. They amount to approximately four out ten couples. 35 % of the couples report unequal sharing; The majority of these despite positive attitudes towards gender equality. Women are no surprise, more positive to gender equality and report less equal sharing in the household than do men. The sex of the respondent is one, but far from the only, significant predictor of class membership. Net of a series of other characteristics, men are significantly more often than women reporting a combination of not very positive attitudes and an actually sharing practice with their partner. Number and age of children have no significant effect on the probability of belonging to one of the four configurations. This is somewhat unexpected, as one would assume that children may increase the tension between egalitarian attitudes and gendered practices. As suggested by Bühlman, Elcheroth and Tettamanti, however, the Nordic public care and welfare context may contribute to relieve such tensions.

So, what does this tell us?

- 1 That gender role attitudes do not always go together with actual practices, - here exemplified by the division of household tasks between Norwegian partners.
- 2 Still, about half of Norwegian couples express a reasonable coherence between their attitudes and actions in everyday family life.
- 3 Women express greater incoherence than do men, especially as they express more positive gender equality values and report less equal sharing of household tasks.
- 4 On the other side, men experience greater incoherence in that they more often than women report equal sharing of household tasks despite of their own relatively weak partiality to equal gender roles in society.

Why is it so?

A general explanation is that attitudes and ideals often in practice have to give way to economic and practical utility considerations in the course of family life. Another general explanation is of course, that women and men have partly different attitudes and expectations as regards the sharing of the everyday duties. Women most probably have a stronger engagement in these topics because they, as long as women do the bulk of the household duties, have the strongest *interest* in a more equal sharing. At the same time, the fact that women and men report dissimilarly about the actual division of labour within the (same) households, indicate that these reports are coloured by the gendered values and expectations of the partners.