The claim of economic citizenship: the concept of equality in a historical context

Abstract

In the beginning of the 20th century the marriage legislation were reformed in all of the Nordic countries. Male privileges were abolished and equality was declared. This early introduction of a principal equality between the spouses was in contrast with the situation in the rest of Europe, where it should take until the 1960s until a similar legislation started to take shape. This makes it relevant to talk about a Nordic model of marriage. But there were also significant differences between the Nordic countries. This article compares how the reform was justified ideologically and how it was designed in Norway and Sweden respectively, highlighting similarities as well as differences. The focus is on questions concerning economic equality and equality in relation to the custody of children. The chapter stresses the importance of looking at gender equality as a historical concept, changing with time, at the same time as it points to the different meanings given to equality, as well as to gender, within the debate. The analysis confirms earlier findings that Norwegian policies are, compared to Swedish, framed by a more marked housewife ideology and rhetoric of gender difference. The principle of gender equality interpreted as gender neutrality was more prevalent and strengthened in time in Sweden. The differences were at this early point in time primarily to be found on a rhetorical level and should not be exaggerated. But it is important to note that the stress on gender difference in Norway paved the way for extended individual rights for mothers, which were not the case in Sweden. The male provider/female housewife-family was the overall norm in society and equality generally meant equality based on gender difference. The marriage reform aimed at giving married women expanded individual rights, related to maintenance as well as to the custody of children, within this frame. The reform thereby expressed the dilemma of modernity: a dilemma between gender division and equality, between a housewife norm and an equality norm, between family orientation and individualism. The Nordic marriage laws combined individual rights and family obligations and can
therefore not easily be defined as a male-breadwinner model it is argued. Instead the concept limited
dual-breadwinner model is introduced. The traditional view on citizenship as a gender neutral concept
is also questioned. What the Nordic family commission, and the women’s organisations, which were
very engaged in this reform, actually were doing was to design a kind of citizenship based on care. But
it was not without complications - thereof the debates - since the introduction of cash economy into
marriage and family disturbed the gendered imagination of the heterosexual male provider/female
housewife-family as a harmonic entity without conflicts of interests