The Family and Widowhood in the Nordic Past. The Economic Situation of Widows in Finland and Sweden
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In the ordinances following the law of 1734 it was underlined that judges should protect that rights of those threatened by ruthless people, particularly poor widows were to receive help (Kangas 1982).
The early 19th century poor relief regulations stipulated that old, infirm and disabled people and orphans under 12 years old had the right to assistance. Farmers were to receive retirement benefits on their farms; parents were obliged to take care of their children and children of their parents and close relatives with land or money were obliged to assist their poor relations. The poor and infirm were to have the costs of their medicine covered by parish poor relief funds (Elmgren, S. 1847).

Local studies from France, Italy and Austria have demonstrated that widows in a rural environment tended to reside with their children, even in urban localities up to half of the widows spent their lives in households of or with children (Fauve-Chamoux, 2002; Kertzer and Karweit; Brown 2002). Studies of working class biographies in early 20th century Britain have also evidenced strong economic ties between mothers and children. While many mothers seem to have expected to control the earnings of the children the sense of obligation towards the mother extended in many cases even into the time after the child had left home (Ross, 1986).
The question that is going to be raised in this presentation is; how did the composition of widows’ households reflect an adjustment to economic necessities in the Nordic past. Is it possible to go beyond mere composition of the household to analyse how the economic cooperation between widows and their children functioned.

Widows, economy and activity
In the 18th century the Nordic countries were basically rural and agrarian. The population statistics of Sweden in 1775 shows that about 85 percent of the population were engaged in primary production, mainly agriculture with additional pursuits like cattle, forestry, fishing, transport etc. Seven percent of the females of the active population in the countryside were widows. One third of the widows were running a farm or a croft (32%) while a slightly larger group (37%) lived as retired in the household of a child or another person who had taken over the running of the farm. One third (28 %) was economically dependant on non-family members. These widows were either working as servants (2,2%) or resided in a cottage on the land of somebody else. Some of these were performing a number of tasks around the neighbourhood (Wohlin 1909 ).
The population statistics of Finland for the same year reveal similar trends. As these figures contain also the enfeebled, non-active part of the widows the general distribution within the categories will be slightly different. Only 25 % were registered as running farms and 20 % as living in retirement on the farms. The registration of the urban widows is not very illuminating as it was done using the occupational classification of their ex-husband which might be fine when dealing with a craftsman’s widow, presumably still running a workshop, but in the case of a sailors’ widow or a
soldiers’ widow supplies no information about the economic activity of the woman. By 1800 the only change that can be observed is an increase in the cottagers’ widows and in the part of the widows residing in urban areas. However, the 19th century statistical tables experienced considerable change. Rural women were more and more absorbed into meaningless categories like “assisting family members”, where wives, daughters and mothers were lumped together, the statistics in Sweden are even more problematical (Vattula; Goransson). Making an assessment of the total number widows in the latter part of the 19th century is possible, 1875 about 13 % of the women over 15 in Finland were widows (83, 200). However, by this time the socio-economic changes in society had resulted in an expansion of the landless. While the farmers as a group still showed some increase, their share of the rural population was decreasing, only12 % of the widows were landowning heads of farms. 4 % of the widows were employed by others, 68 % were described as “other widows of the working classes”. The remaining 16 percent were divided between the groups; the retired, women in poor houses or parish paupers, other poor women, however the ratios remain unclear (Population statistics).

Two generations
18th century eastern, northern and central Sweden shows co-residence between generations in 19 to 41 per cent of the households. Elderly women are found in large numbers in the households of their married children. The proportion of families with old parents or widowed mothers varies depending on the degree of proletarianisation of the society. The regional differences in Sweden are to a large extent connected to this issue, the socially stratified south and west have seemingly smaller and less complex households and less inter-generational cohabitation. A socio-economic break up of the families however, reveals that the many workers and inmates households are pulling down the average. In actual fact the farmers households are no smaller then in other parts of the country (Hellspong/Löfgren; Löfgren 1974; Gaunt 1978; Lundh 1995; Eriksson & Rogers 1978).

In Finland the degree of inter-generational cohabitation shows a similar pattern. The higher the proportion of farmers of the total number of households the higher the percentage of households with parents or a parent. While the complicated economic and ownership structure of eastern Finland comes out as a large proportion of complex households , even there the link between the process of proletarianisation and household size can be detected (Moring 1998; Jutikkala 1957; Pylkkänen 1990; Nallimaa-Luoto 1990; Tegengren 1943; Nerdrum 1978; Moring 1994;1996; 1998;Högnas 1938).

The Laslett-Hammel classification scheme has enabled us to gain insights into inter-generational cohabitation patterns. However for a study of widows and their families it is unfortunately inadequate. A simple classification scheme has been developed for the specific purpose of analysing widowhood structures. The categories used are Alone, With married child , With unmarried child, With relative and With non relative. When applied on rural populations not surprisingly the co-residence with children stands out as the most common type of existence. While far from identical there is a resemblance between the categories of co-residence with unmarried children and headship and with married children and non headship. The widow whose husband died early, with young children seems to have been more likely to spend time at the head of the household than one whose husband died when the children were adult.
The farm and the widow with children

An important issue when discussing Nordic land holding and transmission is the separation of the concepts of headship and ownership. Until 1734 land was in theory owned by kinship groups in accordance with the medieval legislation. Women as well as men could inherit land and females had inheritance rights to family property. Even though the extent of the kinship group was cut down in the 17th century the notion of “rights to the land” remained. At certain times in a persons lifetime bonuses were handed out, at marriage, after the death of a father. Most of the time, however, the ownership was of a theoretical nature. In practice this corporative outlook had resulted in a dualism for practical purposes. The farm was run by a head who owned part of the land, he also had an acting deputy, his wife. While the law set limits to the independent economic powers of a wife, in reality women exceeded these continuously for example by sorting out important economic matters at court. In these situations the woman did not act as herself but as her husband.

When the husband died his property was inventoried for division between the widow and the children. Before the division the widows’ fordel; a bed complete with bedding and a set of clothes, and the dower were extracted. Sometimes the dower was not even included in the inventory. Property inherited by the widow from her own family, in the shape of land, was not legally the property of the husband at the time of death. If, however, the husband had borrowed money to provide his wife with a dower she could be liable for the payment of these debts. The personal “paraphenalia” of the wife would also be excluded from the inventory, the purpose was to make a list of the marriage property and the individual property of the husband. The legal share of the widow was one third of this property in rural Sweden and Finland and that of the children two thirds. In urban areas and Denmark the widow inherited 50 % and variation between these two in the Germanic area, in some cases even 100 % for childless widows. As a widow a woman attained unrestricted control over her own property. While she did not have any ownership rights to her husbands’ inherited family land she could retain the headship if her children were young. She became the guardian of her children (even though after 1669 with advice from her husbands kin). As the mother of the prospective heir her power could be considerable. She could even remarry and still remain running the holding while her son or daughter from the first marriage was growing up to adulthood. Needless to say, if the land came from her own family her position was secure (Holmback & Wessen 1940; Communion books, tax registers; Huebner ; Pylkkanen 1991 ; KLNM III).

Headship was commonly transferred to men in the 16th and 17th century and widows succeeded only in 5-10 per cent of the cases. The 18th and 19th century saw the emergence of an increasing number of widows heading households, in some areas 20 per cent or more (Pylkkanen ; Moring 1999, 2001,2002). The reasons were connected with a larger number of proletarian households but also with the better survival of children. Where an adequate labour force could be maintained the possibility of successfully running the farm was not an issue. Therefore the mothers could care for the land while the children progressed towards adulthood and marriage.

Studies of leaving home patterns in the Nordic countries have shown that wherever the family had any assets the children tended not to leave the parental home until they were in their late teens or early 20s. Even in poor families children performed tasks seasonally or intermittently and the definite leaving home and taking up a permanent
position did not take place until after confirmation i.e. about the age of 15 (Moring 2003).
The size and composition of widows households reflects this pattern. The households
on the farms headed by widows were larger than those of landless widows. The
children over 15 remained in the household. In addition to children the households
could include other relatives or servants. The operational potential of the farm was a
high priority. Crofters’ widows generally retained the croft for life and sometimes it
could be handed over to the next generation. The likelihood of finding one adult or
semi adult child in these household was quite considerable in relation to other landless
households. In south eastern Finland it was still unusual for farmers sons to leave home
until marriage in the 19th century and the average number of males over 15 in the
widow headed households was 2-3. The cottagers or inmates widows were the most
likely to live alone or with only young children. These families had no assets to exploit
and income had to be found outside the household. This is also the group that was
most likely to spend their last years as parish paupers either alone or lodging with
other people.

Widows and retirement
When the children reached adulthood and marriage the succession issue was finalised
and the mother could retire.
In a study of localities in north western Finland in the 19th century the mean age at
retirement was 56 for widows and 57 for married women but 60 years for both married
men and widowers, 57-60 for women in Northern Sweden and early 60s in western
Norway. An age calculation for widows in south western Finland shows a mean age of
50-53 for widowed household heads(female) and a mean age of 55-69 for widowed
mothers residing with their children. Longitudinal studies of the households in the same
region reveal that the headship transfer generally coincided with two things. The most
common time of headship change and retirement was at the death of the household
head, however only when a married child was present in the household. The other
event that triggered headship change was the marriage of the eldest child after a period
of headship by a widow, or in some cases her second husband.

In the 16th and the 17th century a headship change did not necessarily mean an
ownership change. Retirement was only a gradual withdrawal from certain tasks and
duties. After the legislative reform of 1734 retirement was legally understood as the
handing over of a conditional gift. This revolution of a traditional concept, once
understood, could only be acceptable through the erection of new safety measures. The
conditions of the conditional gift had to be unambiguous (in writing) as the interests
not just of two individuals but a whole family was at stake. With an absolute
ownership change the land could be sold on to a non-kinsman. The nature and essence
of the Nordic 18th and 19th century retirement contract has been seriously distorted
both in word and writing by individuals who persist in viewing land transfer in the
European past in terms born out of individualism and capitalist ownership.
The purpose of a retirement contract was to ensure a satisfactory generational transfer,
to arrange for suitable compensation to non-inheriting siblings and provide for their
upkeep until adulthood. It also included settlements for disabled family members,
dowries for daughters and the suitable launching of family members into the world
through a proper wedding feast. The other purpose was to create a mechanism for a
gradual withdrawal of the older generation from onerous working tasks. The detailed
specifications of rights and duties of the young generation in relation to the old
developed differently in different parts of the Nordic countries depending on land
ownership and general economic circumstances on local and regional level. Wherever
the land was mainly freehold, the level of debt high and the land market active the
frequency of detailed contracts is the highest. Contracts were set up to secure life in
old age in case the children had to give up the land. As a retirement contract was in the
legal sense a mortgage on the land, not a contract between two individuals, the
contract followed the farm to the new owner not the bankrupt son.
While Nordic legislation viewed a married woman as a legal entity (unlike the English
common law), she always remained a member of her own family as far as land
inheritance was concerned. Her marriage to her husband gave her the right to 1/3 of
the marriage property but just as her husband had no claim on her inherited land, she
had no claim on his. Her right to upkeep in old age rested on three foundations: her
work input on the farm during her marriage, the obligation of children to take care of
their old parents, whether the parents had funds or not, and thirdly her bargaining
position as the proprietor of 1/3 of the assets on the farm, including farm animals, tools
and inventories. In addition to this the wife was always included in the contract made
for a couple during the lifetime of man and wife whereby her husband made sure that
his wife would be taken care of in widowhood. As the majority of contract were set up
in this manner it is of importance to study the contracts of couples as well as those of
widows when making enquiries into the living standard of women in widowhood. If
the family was residing on the family land of the woman, as would have been the case
in 20-30 percent of the farms, the widow was entitled to retirement upkeep as the
previous landowner and member of her family line.
The situation in which a level of insecurity came into operation was when a woman
was her husbands’ second wife. The transfer of land was most likely to go to the eldest
son of the first marriage. While he owed his stepmother respect, because of her
parental position, he was not he blood-relation. If the marriage had lasted for many
years she had earned her right to upkeep through work on the farm and this was duly
taken into account. If however, the marriage had been short or even worse, had taken
place after the husband had retired, the position of his widow was not good. At the
time of the death of the first wife the property would have been inventoried and 1/3
allocated to the children. Therefore the second wife had only the right to 1/3 of her
husbands’ now diminished property. It the second marriage produced children they had
the right to paternal inheritance but not the land on which to take care of their mother.
In some such cases it seems that the husband would set up a retirement contract where
he set aside a croft or some land for himself and his second wife, stipulating that she
was to have these assets until her death. In combination with the obligation of the
inheriting child to see to the shares of his siblings out of the farm, this type of
agreement would give the second wife some form of security on the croft. Some
clauses would also be set up to secure the upbringing of the children of the later union.
Such an arrangement was in line with the concepts of justice in that in cultivating a
piece of land the widow lived of her own efforts not of the proceeds of the farm. At
the time of her death the land would be returned while the movable assets would be
divided between her children.
It has been claimed, using stipulations in retirement contracts on the right of transfer in
case of a new marriage, that the attitudes in the Nordic countries were hostile to
widows remarrying. Such claims are of dubious value. If a widow resided on the farm
she and her husband had taken over from her father, her husband had no authority to make any stipulations whatsoever about her possible remarriage. If on the other hand she was to be cared for out of the proceeds of her husbands’ family land the situation was different. She had earned her right to upkeep and it was also owed to her by her children. A new husband however, marrying a women living on a retirement contract, would not have worked for the farm, had no family connection to the land and was owed no parental obligation by the young generation running it. Therefore the idea that he would share in a reward for which he had made no input was out of the question. A new husband could have a share in the woman’s assets but as to the upkeep he had to make a contribution. The evidence that there was no hostility to the remarriage of women, even when living on the land of their husbands, can be examined in the light of the numerous remarriages of young and middle aged widows still in charge of farming operations. When followed over time such second husbands continued farming and handed the headship over to their stepsons when these were old enough to be in charge of the farm. These men remained on the farm for which they had worked and ended their days on the premises. Because of their input they deserved a reward. (Kivialho 1927; Moring 1994; 1998; Pylkkänen 1990; Jutikkala 1958 : Probate inventories ; Löfgren 1974; Ahlback 1955; Högnäs 1938; 1941; Nikander 1917; Gardberg 1948).

Many widows in the localities studied resided in the household of a child as a household member not a household head. The most common system of residence was that with a son. The households were fairly large which indicates that the farming operations could be conducted successfully. The contract provided protection in case of economic collapse of the farm and could in such case be used to secure a decent standard of living. Housing, heating sufficient food items and clothes were to be provided. In some cases the old women also stipulated access to barns, cowsheds, mills and baking ovens. Frequently arrangements were set up by which the widow could keep a cow and some sheep with minimum effort. It has been said that “retirement contract” is an unsuccessful expression, contract of transfer would describe the phenomenon better. It is in many cases obvious that the primary issue was not the cessation of work but the transfer of rights and duties. The anthropologists have also shown for Sweden as well as Denmark that the work input of retired women on farms was considerable even though task selective (Löfgren 1974, Hojrup 1964).

Widows in urban communities

The Nordic countries were basically agrarian until the 1860s and even as late as the 1890s the vast majority of the population resided outside urban areas. In the 19th century, however some urban and industrial clusters started to develop in connection with the capitals and elsewhere in the countries. Employment could be secured in centres of textile factories, metalwork, sawmills and the growing sector providing the urban centres with services and goods. The countryside was clearly overpopulated by the end of the century. Not in the sense of actual space but in terms of space available for more agricultural exploitation. Some marginal lands were already in use in northern Sweden and Finland where the agricultural year was far too short for successful farming. The turn of the century saw the emergence of migration overseas but
migration into towns of younger children and the offspring of poor families had been the case for some decades. The industrial towns of the 1880s and 1890s showed the same problems as industrial towns have all over the world. Overcrowding in low standard housing, low paid shift work, child labour and semi starvation in times of unemployment or crisis. Irrespective of the negative sides, migration was steady and continuous. In the manufacturing towns a system emerged that was not part of the traditional fabric; the male bread-winner system. While the poor families in rural areas in some cases relied more on the father than other family members fringe bonuses and the right to keep a cow or some sheep could provide a buffer in problematic times and poverty was connected to illness and old age primarily, not to unemployment.

While the situation for widows in the countryside varied radically depending on whether the family were landholders or landless the increase in the urban population was essentially an increase in proletarians. One of the hallmarks of proletarians is that they rarely accumulate savings or capital, but consume their earnings immediately. Within an urban environment the wages would be higher than in the countryside but so would rent and the cost of living. In 19th century Europe social reformers and politicians seem to have suffered from some sort of hysterical fear that all married women were busy working in factories and elsewhere and therefore neglecting their children, with the countries consequently going to the dogs. Suitable legislation was passed, for example against nightshift-work, in some countries in the 19th others in the early 20th century. The result of some of this legislation was that women were barred from work that could be combined with family duties and that certain economic sectors became totally male dominated. Being a widow in such an industrial area was a virtual disaster. It is also ironic that a scrutiny of labour statistics shows that the fear had been unfounded. The large female part of the industrial workforce was primarily unmarried. A study of a sample of the female industrial workers in Stockholm in the 1890s shows that 78 percent were unmarried, 14 percent married and 7.4 percent widowed (Leffler 1897).

Co-residence
The age range of the widows spanned from 20 to 74 but by far the largest group was those between 40 and 49. The widows favoured work in silk factories, tobacco factories, metalwork, cotton factories, work with precious metals, ceramics, washing, rag sorting, hand knitting, brewery work and working as bricklayers assistants (Leffler 1897).
Half of the unmarried female workers lived with their parents, particularly mothers. Half of the widows lived with one or several children. It should also be noted that 60 percent of the women in the sample were migrants and only 40 percent had been born in Stockholm which of course reduced the availability of kin for potential cohabitation. Of the widows and textile workers in Norrköping 1894 27 % had no child, 33% 1 child, 16 % 2 children, 24 % 3 children or more (Key Aberg 1894; Leffler). Of the young workers in Norrköping in the 1870s 20-23 % lived with their parents. 1894 27 % lived with their parents. Viewing the figures from another angle shows that 80 percent of those living in the parental home were women (Plymoth 1999).
While the question of co-residence can be established in many cases, we do not always know what the contribution of the child was to the economy of the family. However some surveys did tackle this issue. The study of female industrial workers in 1890s Stockholm reveals that where there was common residence there was pooling of
resources. 52% of the widows had a child or children with earnings contributing to the family economy only the 20 percent that had children without earning did not receive a contribution (Key Aberg 1894).

A small sample of widows’ families form a survey of workers families in Finland 1911 registered the absorbing of most of children’s earnings into a communal economy in the families of widows. Pocket money was handed out or small sums kept for lunches etc but whenever the economic situation was problematical the children would provide a total contribution if they lived at home. Where the children were young as in 31 % of the widows families they were unable to assist. However in 20 % of the families the contribution of the children was more than 30 % of the total family income. In one case the children’s earnings provided 83 % of the total as the mothers’ earnings were particularly low, she was a washerwoman. In 20 % of the families the children earned less than 10% of the total while in 31 % the contribution was between 10 and 30% of the family income (Hjelt 1911).

Poverty
1733 only 11 % of the widows receiving poor relief in Stockholm were under 60 years old. The support was given to the old and infirm (Jonsson 1984). Between 1872 and 1888 the majority of women dying in the poorhouse in Stockholm were widows, very few were registered as having children and even fewer children living locally (Jacobsson, 1981). In the urban as well as in the rural society the assistance of kin was of vital importance. Between 1874 and 1914 about 10 percent of the population in Norrkoping did at one time or other receive assistance from the poor relief authorities. In 1896 70 percent of these were women. Of the recipients over 15 in Swedish urban areas in 1907 half were women suffering from illness, disability or old age. The widows were seen as a priority group of deserving poor, their economic problems were also revealed in the fact that many were excused from paying taxes. In 1890 15 percent of the widows in Norrkoping were widows with children receiving poor relief. 1904 35 percent of the widows received poor relief, many of these resided with adult children. The poor relief authorities did not conceive it as a problem that they together with the children were keeping the widow (Plymoth). In the industrial town of Tampere in Finland 1870-1910 20 % of out-relief recipients were men i.e poor families 1890 (1910 28 %). The majority of recipients were adult women, 1899 2/3 of these women were widows, 45 % lived with children (Markkola). A survey of workers at the Finlayson factory living in factory owned housing in 1905 revealed that in 8 percent of the families the primary earner was a child or children taking care of old mothers. In addition to this poor working families where both parents had some income retained their children who added their earnings to the family pool. “Even if I did work I never made any real money because my wages were small and I was taking care of my mother after she became ill” The poor relief authorities gave some assistance but the main provider was the daughter. (Markkola 1994)

Conclusion
The examples of collaboration between widows and their children in the Nordic countries show a persisting propensity for keeping together. The law provided some protection for widows of the landholding classes and craftsmen’s widows. Those with property had obligations towards their mothers. In the landholding group it was common for women to reside with their children in old age. While the retirement
contracts created opportunities for separate residence this was usually only practiced after the sale of a farm to non-relatives. The proletarians however, neither inherited anything nor had retirement provisions to fall back on and they were the most likely to have children without means. Where opportunities existed for earning without leaving home, as in industrial areas, a number of children stayed with their mothers. Even after marriage some provided economic assistance. A review of those dying in the care of the parish, urban or rural, we find that the majority did not have children, at least not within the community or they were unable to assist their mothers.