

A Nordic Paradox: Higher Gender Equality, More Partner Violence

Which countries lead the world in gender equality? If you don't know the answer to that you must have been living in North Korea. Everyone else knows that it's the Nordics: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

On average across these countries, three out of every four working-age women are in employment; gaps between the proportion of men and women in the labour market are among the smallest in the world; mothers are more likely to be in work; gender differences in working hours tend to be small; and couples tend to share paid work more equally than in almost all other highly developed countries.

This version of equality has been vigorously promoted by policy and law for up to five decades, and countries like Sweden are held up as [models](#) to the rest of the world.

And yet...

A violent paradox

The Nordic countries have some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) in the European Union. To define terms: IPV is physical and/or sexual violence between partners, heterosexual or homosexual, who may be dating, cohabitating, married or separated. Studies measure physical aggression ranging from pushing and shoving, through hitting to serious beating and forced sex, plus emotional abuse and intimidation.

A [2016 study](#) by Enrique Gracia and Juan Merlo found rates of IPV against women of 32 percent in Denmark, 30 percent in

Finland and 28 percent in Sweden, compared with an EU average of 23 percent.

And that is not an isolated finding. In “Violence Against Women: An EU-wide survey” published in 2014, Scandinavian women reported the [highest rates](#) of past abuse (not just IPV): in Denmark 52% of women, in Finland 47%, and in Sweden 46%. In contrast, partner violence in Austria, Croatia, Poland, Slovenia and Spain was 13%.

While women and men have been growing more equal at the office, something has been going badly wrong at home it seems.

This jarring discordance between gender equality and sexual violence is known, blandly, as the Nordic Paradox, but the picture appears to be even worse than Gracia and Merlo first described.

In a [new study](#) with other researchers they compared data for Sweden and Spain, to make sure that data from the two countries measured the same things. The study not only excluded measurement bias, but found that the differences were very significant.

In Sweden, the general lifetime prevalence of physical IPVAW was 27.86%, and sexual, 10.9%. In Spain, the comparable figures were 12.43% and 4.3%. The same pattern was also found for severe physical (16.76% Sweden vs. 8.03% Spain) and sexual (7.4% Sweden vs. 3.1% Spain) abuse.

That was the raw prevalence. But the effects sizes were much larger – in the case of sexual violence, “remarkable”, say the authors:

“[T]here was an 80.7% probability that a Swedish woman would score higher than a Spanish woman in the physical IPVAW factor, and a 96.1% probability that the Swedish woman would score higher than the Spanish woman in the sexual IPVAW factor.”

What is going on in the Nordic utopias? What can explain the paradox of social equality coinciding with a high level of domestic or interpersonal aggression against women? (Men also are subject to IPV but the studies in question were concerned with women.)

The studies cannot tell us that. In the latest, Gracia et al were only concerned with establishing that this phenomenon is real and not the result of bias. They did not indicate possible causes: "The reasons explaining these high levels of IPVAW prevalence in Nordic countries, despite their high levels of gender equality, are not yet understood as almost no research has addressed specifically this paradox."

It's rather embarrassing, after all.

Culture, and gendered preferences

There are theories, of course, the most popular being that cultural norms in these countries have lagged behind (enlightened) law and policy; in other words that too many men are unreconstructed [chauvinists](#). Blanca Tapia, speaking for the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (the body that produced the 2014 EU survey) [suggested](#) that "some men don't cope well with the gender role reversal and lash out."

That could be, although at least some of the cultural lag seems to be down to women's choices.

The Swedish workforce, for example, is still highly segregated, with women still predominating in nursing and men in engineering and other tech jobs. Researchers from Lund University interviewing 15-year-olds a couple of years ago were bitterly disappointed to find that girls still tended to plan their careers along [traditional](#) gender lines. And so did boys, although they had more confidence than girls in doing work traditionally associated with the other sex.

A [research article](#) published in Science magazine a year ago

suggests an explanation: it is precisely the gender equality achieved by highly developed economies that enables women and men to choose the work and lifestyles they *prefer*. That these choices often turn out to be “gendered” may disappoint equality boffins, but they seem to correspond to deeper inclinations that diverge in men and women.

And a [paper](#) by two psychologists published in 2017, “The Gender-Equality Paradox in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education” found the same thing in relation to STEM graduates: the more gender equality a country has, the less likely women are to choose maths and science professions. The United Arab Emirates was among the countries with the most female STEM graduates.

Many studies have shown that women with young children prefer to be home based, or have part-time work, at the most. So perhaps there is something wrong with the kind of equality the Nordic system has been promoting. Perhaps it contributes to conflict between couples when *she* stays in lower paid work with family friendly hours, and *he* wants her to earn more...

Cohabitation and aggression

However, there is another possible cause of conflict and abuse between couples that is not directly related to gender equality. It has more to do with the sexual revolution and what it has done to marriage.

Cohabitation is common in Western Europe, and in the Nordic countries it is above average. The [OECD Family Database](#) (November 2016, using 2011 data) shows an average for couple households of just under 50 percent married, and almost 10 percent cohabiting. For Spain the married figure rises to 52.55 percent and the cohabiting figure falls to 8.8 percent. For Sweden, however, the married figure drops to 43.63 percent and the cohabiting figure rises to over 19 percent – more than twice as many as Spain.

Why does this matter? Because several studies that have looked at risk factors for IPV have shown that cohabiting couples are more at risk than married couples, particularly among young adults. And two longitudinal studies from the United States show that this risk is related to the level of commitment of the partners and also the constraints they feel to stay together.

Wendy Manning, Monica Longmore and Peggy Giordano in their [study of 20-somethings](#), “Cohabitation and intimate partner violence during emerging adulthood: High constraints and low commitment” (2017), found that cohabiting couples were more likely to report aggression (31%) in their relationship than married (23%) or dating (18%).

From a broader age range (18 to 34) [Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoads](#) had reported in 2010 that 48 percent of the unmarried adults reported some sort of physical aggression in the history of their relationship. Those who reported aggression in the previous year were also more likely to break up than those who had no aggression or where the aggression was further in the past. And yet, among the cohabiting couples who had experienced aggression more recently, “the odds were five times greater that they would remain together if they were cohabiting versus dating...”

Stanley and Rhoads go on to explain how constraints – owning property together, for example – can keep a couple together (“committed”) even when there is aggression in the relationship. They also factor in selection effects – some people are more at risk for bad relationships outcomes because of their background – and what they call “asymmetrical commitment” – where one partner is less dedicated to the relationship than the other. They point out:

“What people often fail to realise is that cohabiting also increases constraints to stay together before dedication has become clear or mature.”

It seems, though, that it will be some time yet before the risks of cohabitation, like the gendered work preferences of many mums and dads, feature in any of the [educational programmes](#) now being offered to schoolchildren to prevent violence against women. Those in charge may stop talking about the Nordic recipe for gender equality – at least for a while – but let's not hold our breaths while waiting for a word or two about the protective effects of marriage.

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