

Infant Mortality as a catalyst for family policy formation 1900-1940

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I AM GOING to talk about social policy formation in Norway at the beginning of the twentieth century, and more specific about how Infant Mortality became a very important factor behind bringing families and children into politics as an important field. The welfare states of the Nordic countries are well known in the rest of the world for their family-friendly policies, enabling both mothers and fathers to combine family and work.¹ How family friendly it is can of course be discussed, but in a world perspective one might say Norway and the Nordic countries seem to be as fortunate as Norway was in 1800 in matter of IMR's. In terms of fertility rates, such policies seem to have been fairly successful. Today, all the Nordic countries are marked by relatively high rates of both fertility and working mothers, something that distinguish them from many other European countries.

Family policy became a new political field during the 20th century. The formation of a new political field is a process of several stages. According to family policies, the stages of initialization, public argumentation, decision-making and conceptual implementation have stretched out over a very long time, within a fast changing society. Here I will explore how the welfare of families became a theme of discussion and political activity in Norway. Family welfare affects individuals, groups and institutions. Thus many reforms can be defined as family policy. In this paper I will pay special attention to the initial stages of the welfare state, and I will claim that the fight against IM became a very powerful catalyst, may be the main force behind the early development of welfare arrangements and family policy. By claiming this I also imply that

¹ I here define family policies as all attempts to support parents in their effort to provide and care for their children, to regulate the relationships between families and society and between members of the family group. In the framework of welfare a family is constituted by the birth of a child, more than by a wedding. Support can be economic benefits, natural goods or practical help, service or protection. Even ideological pressure, as was an important part of the earliest reforms can be seen as family support.

society's concern lay on the children more than on the women. At least it was women as mothers, more than the female individuals themselves that stood in the fore of philanthropic and political concern. Feminists working in this field, such as Katti Anker Møller, developed a special kind of maternal feminism, using the rich source of arguments in their time rooted in the idealizing of motherhood.

Roots and Formulation of Family Policies

In a Norwegian setting the term family policy was first taken into use in a party programme as late as in 1970, after a century-long process of making the field of family life a political issue, thus blurring the borders between public and private. Family matters of political interest were as part of this process drawn into other kinds of political goals, partly to make it legitimate, partly because the field not yet had found its place and form. School reforms, sick pensions, industrial protection laws, taxation, marriage regulations are examples of political areas where family policy could be situated.

An important initiative in the field of family policy was the Nordic cooperative efforts to form common laws on matrimonial jura. This resulted in quite similar regulations of marriage in all the Nordic countries within a period of twenty years – starting with the Norwegian law on divorce in 1909 and closing with the Finnish marriage reform 1929. These reforms stated wives as equals in marriage, repealing male supervision and giving homework equal status as providing activity. Thus women gained equal individual rights, but also responsibility to provide for the family. Though it was assumed complementarity between the spouses, individual rights and responsibilities were paired with the breadwinner model of family providing. The marriage acts were important steps in the process towards the Nordic welfare state with an active family policy, by broadening the field of political action across earlier borders between private and public. The marriage acts are then important for

the understanding of what Helga Hernes named as “the womanfriendly welfare state”².

In the centre of policymaking towards families stands the care-needing child. Society’s concern for the care of children is of course of a much older origin than the term ‘Family Policy’. Here I will distinguish four roots of family policy: The growth and use of statistics and science, social philanthropy, population policies – and the growth of feminist movements. Statistics put light on social problems in the 19th century, and the growth of science brought about solutions in the era of developmental optimism around 1900. Philanthropy was an answer to challenges and possibilities, which was not yet structured within the framework considered as “natural” public tasks before the formation of the welfare state. Especially in the midwar period population trends and policies became a forceful catalyst, motivating the development of a welfare policy for all families, not only marginal groups. Feminism appeared most strongly within the framework of the welfare state, from the mid 1960ies onwards. In the beginning of the century family questions often were debated within the terms of maternalism, which could cause ambiguity by many feminists.

The Role of Infant Mortality in Family Policy formation³

When we talk about a woman-friendly welfare state, we still are above all talking about women as mothers. It is also their offspring, more than the mothers themselves that have been the ultimate targeting group for welfare policies. The first kind of “target family” that accentuated the growth of family policy as a paradigm was the uncompleted family, most often consisting of a single mother with children. These families have always been a vulnerable standard for the generosity of the welfare state. The social need revealed itself

² Hernes 1992

³ For an overview see also Løkke 1998, Bideau et. Al. 1997 pp 38-61, Hubbard et.al. 2002

clearest in this group, and the attention was mainly meant to help the innocent victims of illegitimacy – the illegitimate children.

In 1900 society was in the other end of the demographic transition of the 19th century. IMR had sunk from around 20 to around 10 %, and fertility rates had started the downwards trend that were to come as a big wave in the first decades of the 20th C., causing severe concern by the governments. Would there be too few new babies to grow up and provide for the old people? But one very good way of keeping the population figures and structures up was to diminish the IMR. This had proved possible during the last 100 years or so, more and more visible to everyone.

So when something could be done, who should it be done with to get the most effective results? It was one group that seemed to be needing in every means of the word – the illegitimate children with their lone mothers. Nordic statistics around 1900 did not, as we have seen, only show that infant mortality among illegitimate children were higher in their first year of living than for the legitimate children, but also that the gap between these two groups of children was increasing. This development was the strongest argument for doing something with the social conditions. Statistics revealed the problems and their variations in time and space, thereby making the problems curable – and science provided a way out usable for social reformers. In the same way as welfare policy generally has developed from a social policy of rescuing marginal groups to a more general living condition policy, one might say that the fight for infants' lives was the seed to the development of a general paradigm of family policy. The first wave of acts that came around the turn of century, partly aimed at solving social problems through public action, partly to regulate private behaviour in an advisable direction. Governments went in to re-establish, and to some extent to compensate, for the lack of accordance with the ideal family model – the model of breadwinners. The state chased a providing father. Their goal was to raise the father to a providing responsibility and free the mothers

from work outside home, so they could take care of their children at home. This was especially significant in Norwegian social policies. Here it came a national law in 1915, stressing the responsibilities of the fathers and the rights of their offspring. In the other Nordic countries these problems to a larger degree were dealt with at a municipal level. Also in Norway the process of putting the law out to work was performed by the communes.

There were many participants in the process of legislation, and often it was political struggles before the resolution of a new regime. Professional interests and philanthropic organisations did have a political impact, and individuals could make a big effort in this period. There were still possibilities around 1900 for political enthusiasts outside the system of political parties. In Norway Katti Anker Møller was one of the most eager enthusiasts. She grew up in a liberal family and was early concerned with the destiny of all the women that got too many children, and those who were abandoned by their lovers. She became a radical feminist, but with a bias for maternalism. Her claims ranged from free abortion to state-financed mothers wages. Twenty years old she married a landlord and agricultural politician, and both in her private and public life she made use of all her experiences and contacts with channels of power. She arranged lectures and exhibitions, wrote articles in the newspapers and established stations for maternal hygiene, childcare and birth control. In 1902 she initiated and supported the first home for lone mothers, together with the philanthropists. Homes were built both in Oslo/Kristiania and Bergen this year, and were deeply concerned with the child rescuing movement of the 19th century. The ideology was that through care and discipline the mothers would learn both to take good care of their babies and become able to provide for themselves and their child. This was however a very hard regime. No mother must sit with her hands in the lap, and also the baby should only be there – on its mother's lap – when breastfeeding. The loving and caring mother was surely an ideal and an important ideology behind, and upheld by the child rescuing and

medical programs to diminish IMR's. But for the clients in the mother and child institutions it was rather the working mother than the loving mother which was the ideal.

This kind of strong disciplinary regime must be seen in the light of poverty politics around 1900. Self-help strategies was the common way to "help" the poor, not economic support. At least no more economic support than necessary to get people through a crisis and placing them on their own feet.

At the same time, these institutions were child rescuing institutions as far as they could, and they tried to help the mothers also to be good mothers. It was one of Katti Anker Møllers main thoughts behind her work for the lone mothers that they should be given the opportunity to be with their children as much as possible, and above all be given the opportunity to breastfeed. "A mother that have put her baby to her breast would never do it any harm and would never give it away, she claimed in her speeches. She travelled all over the country giving these speeches and lectures, and at the same time she cooperated with local philanthropists and women's organisations to promote upbuilding of mother and child institutions – both as homes and as offices where mothers and pregnant women could come and get advices and practical help. To fund and inform governments and society, she arranged for instance "Barnehjelpsdagen" in 1906 and "Barselhjemsutstillingen" in 1916. Thus Philanthropy, education and information, fundraising and political work all were parts of her program. As long as she was doing philanthropy, she got a lot support all over society. But when she claimed maternal wages from the state and equal inheritance for illegitimate children, she caused great debate and got many enemies, also in the feminist movement.

Even though she did not have the right to vote, Katti Anker Møller managed to turn the spotlight on to her issues by using all available media. Being Johan Castberg's sister-in-law (he was Norway's first minister of social affairs in 1913) gave her an opportunity and him a pressure. The most important

results of these early efforts to make a social framework to support children's life was the children acts in 1915. Behind that law stood Katti Anker Møller and Johan Castberg.

It was not a new issue of the 19th century that the state established a standard for provider's behaviour. There was an old heritage from the population politics of the mercantilistic state to build on. From 1763 it was in the united Denmark, Norway and Iceland by law ascertained that fathers had an obligation to pay maintenance for non-marital children under the age of ten. In 1821 parents' obligation to pay maintenance was established for all children. With an increasing mobility in society it became important to specify that family and other relatives had a responsibility, for one thing to keep the expenses for the system of poor relief down. This was also a part of the motivation when fathers' duty to support was continually ascertained by law around the turn of century. It should not be easy to escape from one's duty to support. A strong increase of non-marital births during the 19th century contributed to bring up the issue of father's alimony on the agenda. In 1863 the system of poor relief got the right to intervene towards poor providers. In 1892 it was fixed by law that fathers of illegitimate children had an obligation to support the child, all depending on their financial means, and poor payers could be denied emigration. Similar laws on father's duty to pay alimonies were made in Denmark 1888, Sweden and Finland 1889. But as long as it all depended on the mothers' will and ability to claim alimony, the laws had little impact. Icelandic laws was the toughest towards the father's duties – after 1900 even their widows had to pay alimonies to the result of their late husbands youth sins.

The most significant action in Norway in the matters of illegitimate births was "The Castbergian Children's Acts" in 1915. They did to a large degree secure both legitimate and illegitimate children equal inheritance and right to carry their father's name. This was considered very radical and caused a tremendous debate – which also contributed to a long-lasting legislation process.

Already in 1909 a rich Proposition to the Odelsting was produced⁴, which first was taken up to a trial six years later. This happened when Johan Castberg, Norway's first Minister of Social Affairs, in 1913 imposed as a condition to enter the Government that he was allowed to promote the proposition concerning the "Children's Acts". His program was expressed in an election speech the same year: *"And we have to learn to pay more respect for a mother. We must learn to understand, that the most important and most holy a human being can take on, is giving birth to a new human being – when she also takes the responsibility that follows."*⁵.

A thorough special study about the illegitimate children's chances to survive, and their social status followed the proposition, and the arguments were hard facts about infant mortality: *"What the statistic investigations have brought to light, regarding the living conditions of illegitimate children, is of such a nature, that the demands of efficient precautions now are inevitable"*.⁶

The study showed that in the period of 1891-1900, 191 Norwegian illegitimate infants died per 100 legitimate infants, in Sweden the relative was 178, in Finland 141 and Denmark 212. While the conditions of infants had generally improved, the conditions of illegitimate infants had deteriorated, particularly in the cities. It was explained with the fact that these children to a larger extent were placed in care, which made their mothers able to work and to provide for themselves and their children. Thus, children died of the lack of mother's milk and an adequate hygienic replacement in the first critical months. The remedy was to make sure that fathers acknowledged their children and paid a sufficient alimony, which allowed mothers to stay at home during the first nine months, a suggestion made by the director of the Central bureau of statistics, Nicolay Kiær⁷. This was in keeping with the general opinion among researchers

⁴ Ot.prp.nr.13 1909

⁵ Castberg, election speech 1913

⁶ Ot.prp. 13/1909, 11

⁷ Ot.prp. 13/1909, 18

and reformers at the turn of century. The State's role was to enforce a solution in people's private life, by making both parents responsible. Norway went furthest with the introduction of equal rights to inherit. This was a significant demonstration of the ties of biological kinship between generations. Even adopted children had to stand back in the queue after illegitimate children, according the norwegian laws on adoption from 1917.

The authority of the statisticians shows a changed mentality in society after 1870. New individualism and medical science added factors to the new eager to reform social conditions. Single mothers was by the reformers now seen more as victims of bad conditions and normless lovers than sinners and loose "tarts". While the absolutist state during mercantilism had been occupied by the quantity of population, people's quality were more in the centre of the discourse at the end of 19th century. The aim was to save individuals and to prevent the losses of lives through providing information, and actions of hygienic and social types. Norway's first "sociologist", Eilert Sundt, was, in his survey of the mortality conditions in 1851, on a mission to teach people to "count their days" and not give themselves up to a passive fatalism towards death. His opinion was that society should use all available means to prevent sickness, accidents and death ⁸. Sundt was in a European context not alone. One of the main points in Anne Løkke's doctoral dissertation about infant mortality in Denmark was that the statistical knowledge concerning varieties in the mortality conditions put an end to the fatalistic belief that children died of childhood like old people died of old age.⁹ When the numbers varied. The causes must also vary – and thus they could be detected and dealt with.

The conceptions of infant mortality as fightable through a rational, modern medical scientific funded child care, erupted inside European medical

⁸ Sundt 1855/1975, 6

⁹ Løkke 1998, 69

science during the 1860s-70s¹⁰. The effort was primarily addressed to the cruel destinies of foster children, and the alliance of medical profession and philanthropic organisations, with a strong female strain, contributed to an improvement in hygienic and social conditions for many mothers and children. Midwives in the Norwegian cities Bergen and Christiania started to distribute pamphlets about this programme to all women who were about to give birth at the turn of the century. In addition, child care stations, popping up after “Barnehjelpsdagen in 1906, and the general trend for profylactic hygiene contributed in both cities to a marked decrease in infant mortality.¹¹ The criticism of the foster child system, or the system of angel makers (englemakersystemet), as it sarcastically was called in Stockholm, was a mutual phenomenon in Europe. May be the problem of foster homes was not as extensive as activists and governments presumed. However, the criticism was probably a good rhetorical point on the way to make the death of children a political matter. In Norway we got a law on forster children in 1906 – not very effective, but still a law.

The issue of children was a popular target for welfare policy and philanthropy from the 1880s. A modern emotionally based view on consideration according to children was part of a domesticated ideology of women and a product of the ideas from Romanticism. The core of the matter was a profound respect towards the child, and a glorification of childhood, in opposition to puritanism’s emphasis on the child as a sinner. Romanticism formed a conception of childhood’s significance, a conviction that childhood should be happy, and a hope that the quality of childhood, if it was maintained in adult life, could be a liberation in the world of adults¹².

¹⁰ Løkke 1998, 12

¹¹ Hubbard 2000, 346

¹² Cunningham 1996, 96

It was the middle class nuclear family that became the most respected model to follow, where children's emotional welfare gradually was emphasized. Caring is also a matter of an emotional relation between parents and their children. Gradually mothers received an opportunity to put the emphasis on the care of their children, and advice and help when their own motherly love was not enough to keep their children healthy. While the thought of helping poor and illegitimate infants occurred as utopic and even harmful to society before the 1870s, the fight for infants' lives met a comprehensive goodwill during the 1880s. The case of children became the mass movement, surrounded of great sympathy and support ¹³

With maternal love as background the philanthropic child rescuing program and the physicians', politicians' and Government's fight against infant mortality sprang up. Within the female ideology the role of social motherhood became an accepted setting for activity outside one's home, and even those who were'nt mothers could hence grasp a meaningful activity in their life as females. Maternal love became an ideological force, with a firm foundation in the Lutheran doctrines of calling that could motivate and legitimate the philanthropic rescue work among children.¹⁴ This work became very important as a path breaker for governmental and municipal actions that were meant to reduce mortality. The loving philanthropic were joined by powerful allies; medical science and the statisticians. Everything pointed in the same direction: Children put into care and fed by artificial nutrition ran a great risk to die. Children that were breastfed by their mothers both survived and made the unmarried mothers respective citizens. The reformers meant that mothers that had embraced and breastfed their child would not give it away, but put all their love and effort into giving the child a safe home. Doing that she needed help

¹³ Løkke 1998, 443

¹⁴ Hammar 1999, 23-26, Markkola 2000, 19 and 2001, 236-256, Petersen (ed) 2003, 27-46

from society – a help that should both educate fathers and be a safety net if the fathers totally failed.

Making immoral seducers become decent breadwinners

The Children's Acts determined the living fathers' responsibility as a provider and did at the same time leave it a public responsibility to ascertain and to collect alimony – as did the other nordic countries in some way or another. For the poorest mothers it was given legal authority to claim support for the months close to delivery. Local authorities came to carry out the resolutions concerning financial support; hence the effect of the acts varied depending on bailiffs' efforts in duty. If the father had no means there was nothing to fetch. Advanced payment of maintenance was first given from Norwegian public authorities in 1957. Still, a survey from the Norwegian city Bergen shows that the Acts meant a financial improvement for the unmarried mothers, even though it still was a lack to a fully public support¹⁵. One of the Acts established a responsibility for the Public to act as a provider. The Act concerning Children's welfare gave mothers the right to a small municipal benefit two weeks before and up to six months after given birth, if they kept the baby. It was a small benefit, and not all communities made mothers aware of it. Also married women with poor providers could claim this benefit, but local authorities could demand the money paid back from the child's father.

Similar actions were introduced in Sweden to get hold of alimonies from fathers in 1917 law of illegitimate children, including "barnavårdsmannainstitutionen" which was meant to operate with continuous observation of both mothers and fathers of the illegitimate children¹⁶. This law had a strong normative aim towards fathers, but did not go as far as the Norwegian law on fatherhood responsibilities. The right to name and inheritance

¹⁵ Blom 1991

¹⁶ Bergman & Johanson (ed) 2002, 172-201

from the father came in Sweden as late as in 1969. The Swedish law thus had a more moralistic aim than the Norwegian – stating marriage as the fundamental framework of reproduction. From 1937 the Swedish Government granted providing alimonies to mothers. The first public assistance to single mothers in Denmark came in 1888, and the law tried to force fathers to pay by laying out the expenses for absence of alimonies as a poor relief for the father in the public records. Besides it was introduced a municipal supervision concerning foster children. It was first in 1939 with the introduction of *Mødrehjelpen* (Mothers' help) that single mothers in Denmark received the right to public maintenance.¹⁷ However, several philanthropic organisations had earlier had an important function, especially in the cities. Danish illegitimate children got the paternal inheritance in 1937¹⁸, Iceland in 1921 and Finland 1922 – if the father recognized the child.¹⁹ Finnish children of reluctant fathers had to wait till 1975 before they could inherit them.²⁰

Norway was early with a far-reaching legislation aimed at regulating the behaviour of illegitimate fathers and the rights of their offspring. Norway was also to be alone to include single parents in the rights of the pension system. In the continuation of the “Children’s Acts” the municipal of Oslo introduced a benefit of its own for all single mothers in 1919, and several municipalities followed. Still, not all municipalities paid benefits to the unmarried mothers, somewhere only widows and married mothers that had been abandoned got the right to support, and the amount was often rather small and modest. A national benefit for single providers was introduced in Norway in 1964, for both widows and unmarried mothers, divorced mothers were included in 1971, divorced fathers in 1980. Only Norway has this benefit where the State goes in as a supporting “breadwinner”, the other nordic countries do still refer the needy sole

¹⁷ On danish conditions see Rosenbeck in Hjorth et.al. 1996

¹⁸ Bradley 2001, 40

¹⁹ Blom & Tranberg (ed)1980, 101

²⁰ Bradley in Nord 2000:27, 41

providers to the means-tested social care. According to the law from 1964 the state's role as a breadwinner should come to an end when the youngest child reached the age of ten. In 1997 the benefit was reduced to maximum three years, and it will not be given if the youngest child has reached the age of seven. The epoch of breadwinners is over, even in Norway.

The "Castbergian Children's Acts" remained as a vital political symbol and it set a precedent for Norwegian family policy. Probably it contributed to the fact that Norway to some extent, compared to other Nordic countries, put a stronger emphasis on the function of motherhood in its family policy.

Castberg had promoted a children's act with a very normative feature. His view on the authorities' educational function is an important background to understand this normative bias, but it also had a basis in a criticism of capitalism. Even though he was in the liberal party, he did not support the liberal principles in all matters.²¹ Castberg thought of a righteous society realised through the state. He had an unerring belief in the legislation's ability to improve human and social life. As one of the establishers of social policy in Norway Castberg has contributed to the positive view on Government, which has been characteristic for the Norwegian welfare system.

The pursuit of a supporting father was also in harmony with the ideal of self-help in the left-winged state. However, Castberg's will to introduce social reforms did meet some resistance. Farmers were as a general rule a factor of inertia in the accomplishment of benefits and general social security. They normally held tightly to the principle of self-help and work orientation. Their resistance was caused by the fear of an increase in expenses to support the

²¹ Slagstad 1998, 144, 147

poor.²² If you put this in a perspective of gender and family it shows that it was not only the municipals' expenses on the poor that made farmers inertia. It was also a feeling of alienation in relation to the model of breadwinners, where it was only one person that brought about income; the father or the breadwinner. Farmers had an understanding of the family as a "community" where all available hands were in use, independently if they belonged to men, women or children. When it came to public expences, it often was a tendency to cling to this "old" understanding of family functions– the working mother was preferred rather than the caring, homestayng mother. Responsibility to support one self was an even stronger principle than the modern family ideals.

Castberg's and Katti Anker Møller's maternalistic policy was also to a certain extent influenced by the old financial thinking of families, while their policy becomes an expression of functionalism adjusted to modern society. Both of them did in a way consider the society as a huge family, or a functional unity, where the functions of reproduction, particularly the upbringing of children, were regarded as productive work for society. They brought the functionalism and complementarity of the ideal family out on a public level. They argued that in modern society both the state and the production life had a benefit from the labour that families produced, while the household economy did not benefit, but bore all the expences. Katti Anker Møller's opinion was that family work useful for society should be rewarded. Hence the state should pay mothers for their reproductive work.²³ To the liberal women's movement this sounded scandalous, so she turned to the labour women where she met more understanding about her social claims. But in the long run the claim for mother's wages could not survive – it conflicted with too many principles at the labour market and the opinion's view of family and the public/private functionality, as with the ideas of romanticism.

²² Bjørnson in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 2001, 198

²³ Møller: *Kvindernes Fødselspolitik*, lecture 1919, printed in *Mohr* 1968, 149-169

Labour movement supported around 1900 the breadwinner ideal. It was the working class women that were “forced” to work outside their home without any decent supervision for their little children. Children and married women should be kept outside working life. In a suggestion from the central committee of the trade unions as early as in 1885, it is said that children and women were considered as a threat in the competition of work.²⁴ This view persisted dominant in the movement until at least the mid-thirties.

While Katti Anker Møller followed up her ideas by a demand for a national, maternal wage in 1919, Castberg was more successful with his reform proposals, which among others led to the Marriage Act of 1927 –one of the results of the nordic cooperation on family laws. This act ascertained that wives’ work inside their home and men’s role as providers should be of equal status. It was easier to obtain a breakthrough for regulations which concerned civil laws than for the entrance of Government on the field of gender as a competing provider. Nordic marriage reforms in this period modernized gender relations and turned down patriarchal structures. Even though grounded on a functionally divided family model, individual rights were equal and both parts were mutually obliged to provide for one another. Together with the liberalization of divorce and even distribution of matrimonial property, the marriage reforms prepared for a welfare system based on individual rights.²⁵

It is my opinion that these individual rights must be a necessary premise also in reforms concerning diminishing IMR. We must not only look at Women as mothers, but also at men as fathers. This is needed both concerning the childrens right to equal care from both mother and father and it is necessary simply because men have got more power in the world and the mothers and children need them on their side.

²⁴ Bjørnson 1993:39

²⁵ Nord 2000:27,19 and Melby, Rosenbeck & Carlsson Wetterberg 2001, 191-210