

Labour Market and Gender Segregation in the Scandinavian Countries

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ABSTRACT

Having made a name for themselves internationally in reducing gender inequality to a great extent, the Scandinavian countries continue to make new headways in advancing gender equality, be it Sweden becoming the first country in the world to announce 'feminist foreign policy' and 'feminist government' to introduction of boardroom gender quota in Norway. While the discourse on gender equality and related policies captures imagination of people beyond the Scandinavian region, the existence of gender segregation of labour market in these countries gathers less attention. This article explores the dynamics of highly gender segregated labour market in some of the most highly gender equal countries in the world. It sheds light on the underlying factors that influence the composition of labour market in Scandinavia. Further, the articles discuss steps taken by the governments in these countries to desegregate the labour market.

KEYWORDS: labour market, gender segregation, Scandinavian countries, occupation, public sector

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I. INTRODUCTION

Denmark, Sweden, and Norway are collectively Scandinavian countries or Scandinavia.¹ These countries along with Iceland and Finland hold unrivalled records of gender equality in terms of reducing gap between men and women in educational attainment, health and survival, political empowerment, economic participation, and opportunity. This view could be confirmed by the various international indices and rankings, for instance see World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Reports (GGGR) of various years. The Scandinavian countries put up an impressive show by acquiring several of the top positions. These countries have appeared as special cases and mentions in matters of gender equality, both with regard to their women-friendly welfare policies and women's participation and integration in politics, in public sphere and the labour market, which is the case in point here. Under the GGGR 2021 sub index of *economic participation and opportunity* which uses the variable, (i) the ratios of female labour force participation over male value, (ii) wage equality between women and men for similar work (converted to female-over-male ratio), (iii) female estimated earned income over male value, (iv) female legislators, senior officials and managers over male value, and (v) female professional and technical workers over male value, Norway, Denmark and Sweden occupy the 20th, 11th and 42nd positions respectively out of about 156 countries.

What is puzzling yet interesting here is the fact that although Scandinavian countries remain forerunners in the implementation of gender equality, but their labour markets remain highly gender segregated as has been captured by a variety of studies.² Scandinavian labour markets have been noted for being among the most gender segregated. In sight of these welfare states dedication to gender equality, this is often referred to as a 'paradox' (Ellingsæter 2013).

Across Europe, occupational gender segregation can be also be seen. According to Burchell et al. (2014), considering all the occupations, 69 percent women work in female-dominated occupations (where workforce is more than 60 percent female), and only 13 percent women work in male-dominated occupations (where more than 60 percent workers are male). Women's labour participation in mixed occupations is merely 18 percent. Whereas, 59 percent males worked in male-dominated occupations.

¹ Scandinavian countries combined with Iceland and Finland are known as the Nordic countries or Nordics.

² According to Reskin (1993) segregation is not equivalent to just physical separation but it is a crucial phenomenon underpinning and perpetuation 'social inequality'. The basis of differential treatment rests on the branding of some characteristics as superior or inferior and accordingly separating people.

Many prominent researchers in the past have linked occupational segregation with gender inequality. This line of argument becomes very persuasive in situation where women are being discriminated and do not have equal opportunities in terms of access to education, the rights, skill development and training opportunities, the low standard of living and poor health conditions due to multifarious factors among others. Women in such environments are further handicapped by the pitiable or no state support they receive which shows ‘that the nature of the resulting employment bargains has the consequence of lower levels of pay, longer hours and more exploitation as well as a loss of social status in the occupation’ (Jarman et al. 2012).

II. WHAT IS GENDER SEGREGATION?

A useful start here would be to define the term ‘segregation’ and how it is different from the word ‘concentration’, which could be easily confused. Blackburn and Jarman (1997), have discussed about this differentiation by following James and Tauber (1985) and state that “segregation concerns the tendency for men and women to be employed in different occupations from each other across the entire spectrum of occupation.... Concentration is concerned with the sex composition of the workforce in an occupation or set of occupations”. Thus, in general, while segregation refers to the separation of two sexes across occupations, concentration refers to the representation of one sex within occupations. There have been several significant studies over the past decades exploring cross national differences in segregation levels, for example by Blackburn and Jarman 1997; Anker, 1998; Charles 2003; Charles and Grusky 2004, 2006)

As observed in Human Development Report 2015 “occupational segregation has been pervasive over time and across levels of economic prosperity—In both advanced and developing countries men are over-represented in crafts, trades, plant and machine operations, and managerial and legislative occupations; and women in mid-skill occupations such as clerks, service workers and shop and sales workers”.

Further, labour market segregation has been divided into two types ‘horizontal segregation’ and ‘vertical segregation’, the former refers to the gender differences in distribution across the manual/non manual divide and latter referring to the differences in the social status associated with men’s and women’s occupation within the manual/non manual sectors (Charles 2003).

III. CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF GENDER SEGREGATION

The debate surrounding causes and causes of occupational gender segregation gathered steam around the 1970s. Prior to this gender segregation of labour market was not an issue as the labour market was largely male dominated. It is only during the 1960s and onwards that women in the western countries started to penetrate labour market in large numbers. Over the years, a pattern of gender segregated labour market emerged, where women and men got concentrated in distinct occupations. But what caused this segregation on gendered lines? Researchers from different disciplines like economics, sociology, and demography have offered varied explanations. Some of the causes as offered by researchers from different disciplines can be categorised as: *comparative advantage* (physiological differences between sexes); *under-investment in education and training* (of girls and women); *preferences and prejudices* (that women and men are inclined towards certain occupations); *socialisation and stereotypes* (social construction of preferences which indicate sex-based stereotypes); *entry barriers and organisational practices* (legal barring of women from certain occupations and institutional discrimination; and *income and care roles* (double burden of work and family influence women’s decision to seek flexible working conditions) (Bettio and Verashchagina 2009).

While there is no one reason that can be solely attributed to gender-based occupational segregation, with changing circumstances some of these reasons may no longer hold. For instance, in contemporary times, women outnumber men in educational attainment and governmental policies too work towards training people regardless of gender. Further, largely all covert discriminatory mechanisms holding women back from fully participating in paid work have been done away with. Women are now present in virtually all the occupations. Representation of women in many countries can also be seen in police, military and combat roles. Political representation of women has also come a long way. Thus, these factors can no longer be held responsible for contributing to gender segregation of labour market. Prime factors contributing to occupational segregation in contemporary times are primarily noted to be hours of work (full-time/part-time); sex-based stereotypes; covert discrimination and bias; and educational study field (ibid).

Whether gender segregation in labour market is a matter of inequality and discrimination was up for debate for a long time. Some believed gender segregation is not linked to discrimination. However, following decades of debates, discussions and empirical research, there is consensus among scholars from different disciplines that occupational gender segregation is consequential for economic inequality between women and men. Further, it is linked with undervaluation of women’s work and discrimination, wage discrimination (Burchell et al. 2014). Sex-based employment segregation also carries implications for skills development and labour shortages. It must be noted that while occupational gender segregation is observed to be linked with

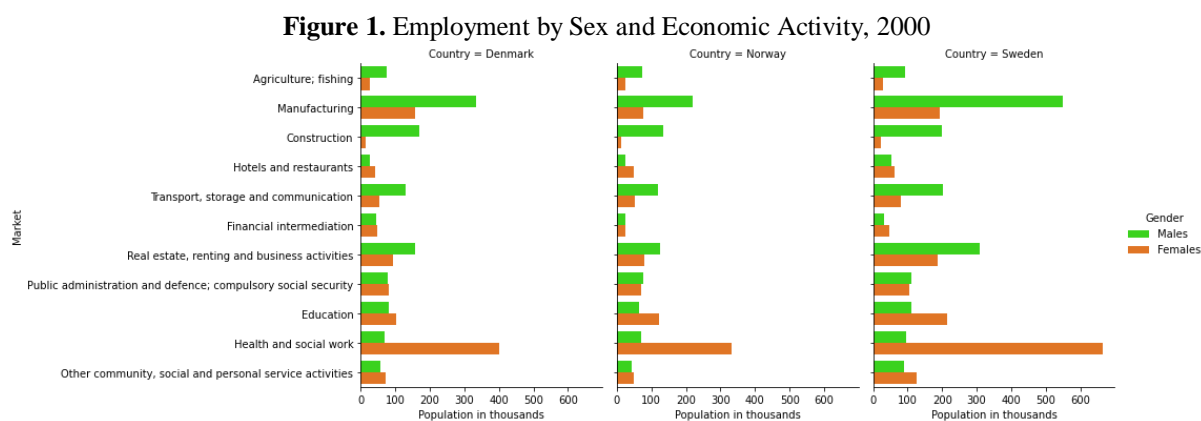
several downsides, it is not invariably linked with disadvantage (ibid). For instance, women concentrated in some female-dominated occupations have better working conditions and wages.

IV. OCCUPATIONAL GENDER SEGREGATION IN THE SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES: UNDERSTANDING THE ‘PARADOX’

Formulated in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis by the European Commission, the *Europe 2020 Strategy* laid out multi-pronged approach for the following decade to recover from the hard-hitting slump and strengthen itself. One of the priorities of strategy was that by 2020, 75 percent of the population aged 20-64 should be employed (European Commission 2010). As per the latest data, all the three Scandinavian countries have total employment rate of above 75 percent. Thus, Denmark and Sweden (Norway is not an EU member) have met the employment target of the *Europe 2020 Strategy*. Labour force participation of women and men in Scandinavia is one of the highest in the world, and well above the EU-average as well. In 2020, female labour force participation was more the 75 percent in Sweden and Norway and above 74 percent in Denmark. Male labour force participation was above 80 percent in all the three countries (Eurostat 2021). It must be noted that within Scandinavian, Sweden has the highest female and male labour force participation rates.

High employment rates, particularly of women and mothers, in the Scandinavian is seen as a success story around the world. It is also indicative of inclusive character of the labour market and working of social policy. International media is replete with news of young female law makes from the region, impressive record of educational attainment, among others. The Scandinavian countries deserve all the praise for what they have achieved in multiple sectors. However, what often gets missed from the general perspective is that Scandinavian labour markets are highly gender segregated.

The figure below shows the extent of gender segregation in the labour market as per NACE classification of economic activities (Rev.1.1) for the year 2000.



Source: Eurostat

As can be seen from the figure above, some sectors are predominated by males and some by females. For instance, health and social work has disproportionate numbers of females. Whereas, manufacturing, construction and transport, storage and communication remained dominated by males. These gaps are visible for all three countries. It must be noted that number of employees in Sweden across occupations are higher for Sweden as its population is higher than its neighbours. As on December 31, 2000, the population of Sweden was 8,882,792 (Statistics Sweden³), For Norway the population was 4,478,497 as on January 1, 2000 (Statistics Norway⁴) and as per figures from the census, Danish population was 5,330,020 for the same year (Statistics Denmark⁵).

Looking at the latest figures for employment by sex and occupation for the Scandinavian countries, sex segregation in the labour market is palpable. In education, human health activities, residential care activities, women are overrepresented. Whereas, when it comes to manufacturing, construction, real estate, and computer programming, consultancy and related activities preponderance of men can be seen (Eurostat).

³ <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/population/population-composition/population-statistics/pong/tables-and-graphs/yearly-statistics--the-whole-country/summary-of-population-statistics/> (Accessed 28 November 2021)

⁴ <https://www.ssb.no/en/statbank/table/05803/tableViewLayout1/> (Accessed 28 November 2021)

⁵ <https://www.statbank.dk/10021> (Accessed 28 November 2021)

The prevalence of occupational sex segregation in the countries with high levels of gender equality has been perceived as a 'paradox'. Multiple studies have attempted to unpack this phenomenon and stressed on the role and size of public sector. As we already know, the growth of the modern welfare state in Scandinavia required female labour as the public sector was massively expanding the service sector during the 1960s and onwards. The female labour force participation grew manifold after they were employed by the public sector. According to Asplund *et al.* (1995), at the start of 1990s, approximately 50 per cent active women in the labour force were employed by the public sector in Norway and Denmark, and 60 per cent in Sweden (cited in Hansen 1997). Such dramatic inclusion of women in public sector as employees and as well as beneficiaries of welfare policies has been referred as the 'feminisation of the welfare state'.

Numerous studies have confirmed the fact that Scandinavian countries labour market is gender segregated. Jarman *et al.* (2012: 1010) rightly noted that "the countries with high segregation are not noted for gender inequality, nor are the low segregation countries noted for gender equality. This shows that overall segregation level is not a direct measure of inequality, and although it does have an inequality component it need not even be closely related to the degree of gender inequality. With only moderate vertical dimensions and high horizontal dimensions, giving particularly high overall segregation, are the Scandinavian countries". These countries conflate egalitarianism with high overall segregation, which is largely due to higher horizontal segregation i.e., men and women working in different occupations. Gender essentialist beliefs and large public service sectors and 'woman-friendly' work-family policies are main driver and unintended consequences of the latter factor of continued gender segregation. In their influential work, Charles and Grusky (2004, 2007) contend that there is a struggle between egalitarian and essentialist forces, and the reason gender segregation is durable is that it has a deep gender essentialist underpinning (cited in Ellingsæter 2013).

Role of Public Sector and Part Time Work

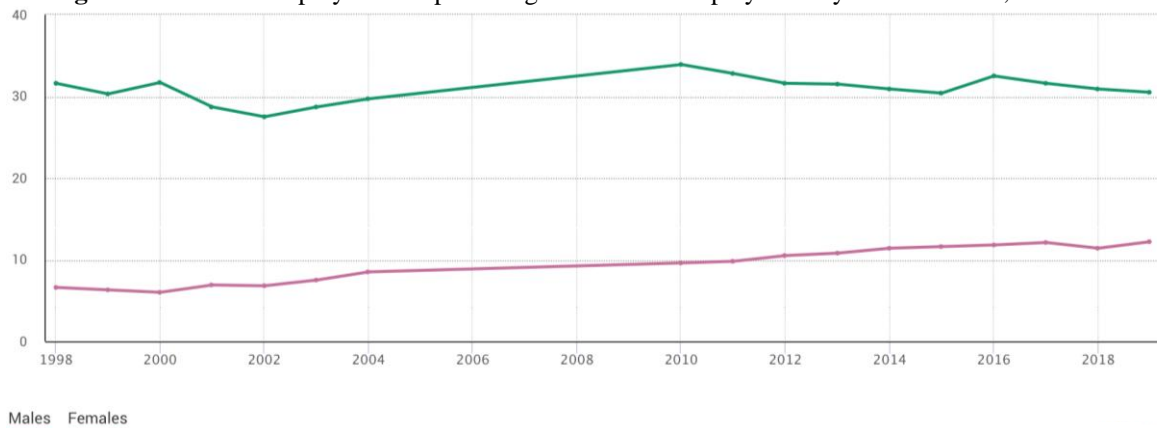
In explaining the occupational sex segregation in Scandinavia, the focus of many has remain on the public sector as there are extensive possibilities of leave for to be mothers, working mothers with small children and related aspects. It is believed that the reason why many women have been drawn to the public sector has been because of welfare benefits, job security, work flexibility, leave from work, and the working condition in general. Hansen (1997) highlights another important aspect of public sector employment that women worked in the occupations dominated by women as another cause of segregation. Further, it was found that men tend to work in male-dominated private sector due to better wage prospects vis-à-vis female-dominated public sector, while women in public sector female-dominated occupations tend to get relatively higher wages. Women's earnings in male-dominated private sector were found to be influenced by the level of caring responsibilities, while no such effect was observed for those in public sector occupations (*ibid*). With increase in women's educational level, many have entered male-dominated public sectors such as medical, legal, public officials, where they might earn more without receiving penalties for caring responsibilities.

Hakim argues that women take up job which require less commitment, flexible working hours etc, women work as 'secondary workers' and 'crowd into' female dominated unskilled occupations (Hansen, 1997). Hansen discusses the link between 'sex segregation and welfare benefits' and how it can lead to discrimination against women. Believes that 'measures intended to facilitate women's labour force activity' can backfire in the form of 'limiting their labour market opportunities'. Women if have got 'social rights' unlike men or simply they do not use it then employers can discriminate against women as for them such rights are unprofitable. Women work in the female dominated occupations and hence increasing levels of sex segregation. Hansen argues "thus, the public sector, and especially the welfare sector, becomes a separate labour market" which leads to high levels of occupational sex segregation (1997: 86).

Hansen in her study notes that the average women in the private and public sector earns approximately the same but 'the wage difference is somewhat larger for those with large childcare responsibilities. Also found that women in the private sector with less childcare responsibilities tend to obtain higher annual wages than women in the public sector (1997), finds that childcare responsibilities have a 'clear and unambiguous' effect on the earnings in the private sector (1997: 95).

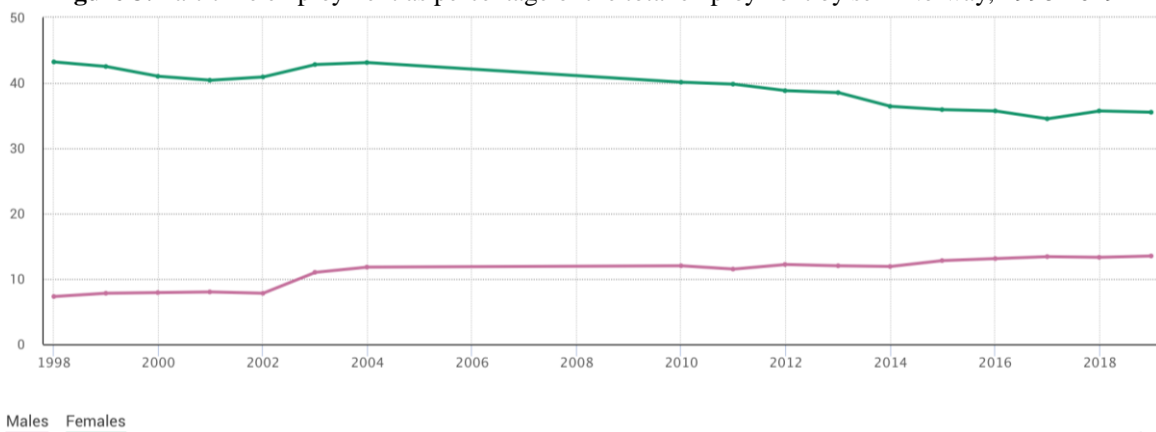
Instance of part-time are higher among women than men across the Scandinavian countries. As can be seen in the figures below, while the gap between proportion of women and men part-time workers as part of the total employment has narrowed slightly in the last two decades, it remains substantial. Within Scandinavia, more women were engaged in part time work in Norway than Denmark and Sweden in recent years.

Figure 2. Part-time employment as percentage of the total employment by sex- Denmark, 1998-2019



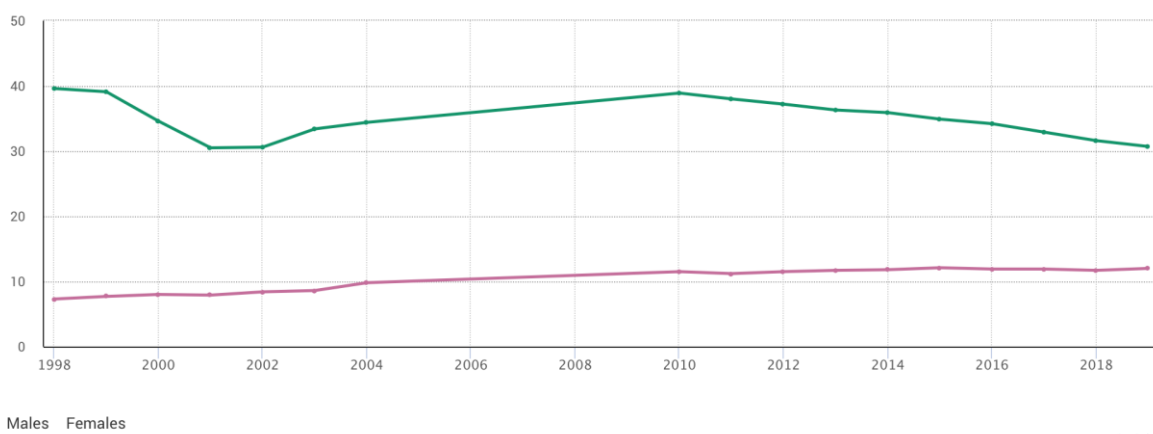
Males Females
Source: Eurostat (LFSA_EPPGA)

Figure 3. Part-time employment as percentage of the total employment by sex- Norway, 1998-2019



Males Females
Source: Eurostat (LFSA_EPPGA)

Figure 4. Part-time employment as percentage of the total employment by sex- Sweden, 1998-2019



Males Females
Source: Eurostat (LFSA_EPPGA)

While women in the Scandinavian countries remain in the labour market for most part of their lives just like men, following childbirth a lot of women join the labour market on a part-time basis due to childcare responsibilities. Once the child grows, many shift back to working full-time. It has been noted that many women are concentrated in occupations where part-time work, flexibility in working, and stable time schedules are available, and most of such jobs happen to be female-dominated. Thus, working hours might influence the gender composition of the labour market.

Gender equality and career guidance

Professional choice of people is dependent on several factors. Gender is one the significant factors of how people decide their career paths, other being educational attainment, socio-economic backgrounds, to name a few. In countries known for reducing gender inequalities to a great extent, career choices may not imply gendered implications. However, extant research has shown that gender stereotyped choices in the Scandinavian countries remain prevalent. This is amply manifest in the gendered labour market patterns, women being predominantly present in feminine professions, like teaching and nursing, and men overrepresent in masculine professions such as construction, farming, fishing, and other sector perceived as masculine. The decision of picking a career is governed by micro and macro level factors. At micro or individual level, a person's background and family play an important part, while political discourse, policies, norms, and values are important macro level factors.

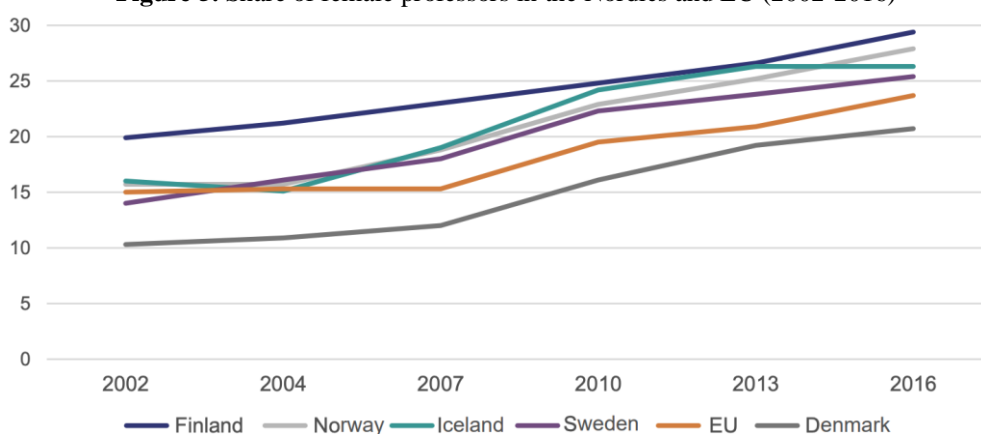
What is being done to de-segregate labour market in Scandinavia?

As per their study, Burchell et al. 2014 found decreasing trends of gender segregation in various EU member countries including Denmark and Sweden (Norway is not an EU member). For Norway, trend in similar direction is also observed by the Centre for Research on Gender Equality (CORE) (Norway). Similarly, Hustad et al. (2020) demonstrate patterns of desegregation between 2002 and 2011 in Sweden. Women are now well present in educational fields and professions earlier dominated by men. For instance, increasing number of women today study and practice law, medicine, along with financial services.

However, gender segregation remains prevalent in the Scandinavian countries. Several attempts are being made to desegregate labour market. That educational choices of girls and boys are not dictated by sex stereotypes, Scandinavian countries have put in place certain mechanisms. For instance, at school-level, provision of counsellors is present for career guidance helping students to form career choices independent of their gender (Schulstok and Wikstrand 2020). Sweden has gone a step further in this approach where the Swedish National Agency for Education has come up with guidelines for schools. Moreover, the agency in 2013 promoted a course in gender aware career guidance (ibid).

Women academicians hold less than 40 per cent of academic positions at the top universities in most European Countries. As per s study, women academics were 31.7% in Norway, 31 % in Denmark and 36.7% in Sweden (Catalyst 2015). Further if one looks at the professorships and chairs held by women academics, they are even lower than the above-cited percentages. To bring greater gender balance in academia, research and innovation, awareness and efforts are being increased across the Scandinavian countries that include “establishment of positions as gender equality advisers, systems for reporting discrimination, or work environment surveys and other systematic reviews of working conditions that may be examined with regard to gender imbalance”⁶.

Figure 5. Share of female professors in the Nordics and EU (2002-2016)



Source: CORE Infographics (She Figures Scandinavia: Women in academia)

As can be seen from the figure above, the share of female professors has steadily increased over the years. However, there are inter-country variations in their progress trajectories. For instance, within Scandinavia, share of female professors is lowest in Denmark, which is even below the EU average.

⁶ Kidlen Gender Research (2021), URL: <https://kjonnsforskning.no/en/2021/02/fewer-gender-equality-measures-academia-finland-norway-and-sweden>.

There are certain occupations where desegregation has proved to be quite resistant, such as kindergartens. Majority of kindergarten employees happen to be women. For the southern Norwegian city, Kristiansand, in 2013, approximately 95 percent kindergarten employees were women (Strategy for equality, inclusion and diversity in Kristiansand municipality 2015-2022).

V. CONCLUSION

The Scandinavian countries have come a long way in narrowing the inequalities between women and men across education and labour force participation. However, labour market in these countries is highly segregated. While gender segregated labour markets might not downrightly imply disadvantage and discrimination, it does have implications for economic equality between women and men, reinforcement of gender roles, and diversity. Labour markets in the Scandinavian countries have shown signs of desegregation but still there is a long way to go. Here gender equality policies can play an important role. Several efforts are underway from monitoring to assessment of institutions, ensuring women are not discriminated in sectors where gender imbalance is large, such as research and innovation.

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