

Welfare and Labour-Force Participation of Kinship Foster Mothers

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Abstract

Objective: Kinship foster care has become the placement of choice in the Western world. This article explores the welfare, labour-force participation, and caregiving role of kinship foster mothers in Norway.

Method: The study supplements a quantitative study of Norwegian long-term kinship and nonkinship foster care with a qualitative study of parenting in formal kinship foster care. A total of 123 kinship and 88 nonkinship foster mothers participated in the quantitative study. The qualitative data is based on interviews with 22 kinship foster mothers about their caregiving experience.

Findings: Kinship foster care in Norway can be described as gendered, in that it is usually women who assume the responsibility for relatives' children. The economic activity of most kinship foster mothers in Norway is comparable with that of the country's female population in general. The prevalence of single providers among kinship foster mothers is no higher than for the country as a whole. The education level of kinship foster mothers is lower than the female population average.

Conclusion: Social welfare authorities should pave the way for more men to become caregivers, and for development of the system to strengthen the position of women in relation to their services.

Key words: kinship foster care; female kinship carer employment, child welfare;

Introduction

Foster care is a placement of choice within the child welfare services when a child must be removed from its parents because of neglect or abuse. This study addresses formal kinship foster care. Kinship care is broadly defined as 'the full-time nurturing and protection of children who must be separated from their parents by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, step-parents, or other adults who have a kinship bond with a child' (Child Welfare League of America 1994, p.2).

Formal kinship care is a newer placement paradigm in Western Europe, the USA and Australia (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006; Broad 2004; Scannapieco 1999; Vinnerljung 1993). In Norway and some other European countries, a shift in placement policy over the past decade has resulted in a larger number of children being placed with relatives. According to Statistics Norway (2006), 15% of children in public care are placed with relatives. The UK, with 18%, has a lower percentage of children in kinship care than many other countries (www.bristol.ac.uk): 90% in Poland, 33% in Belgium and 25% in Sweden (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006). In the USA, this has become the predominant form of out-of-home placement since the 1990s (Hegar and Scannapieco 1999).

Child welfare measures are intended to be based on the child's best interests, and this is the motivation for giving preference to foster homes and kinship foster homes. The child depends on adult caregivers assuming the responsibility. According to research from the USA, most foster parents who care for their

grandchildren are women (Dolbin-MacNab 2006). In a systematic review, Cuddeback (2004) found kinship caregivers were more likely to be single women, unemployed, older, less educated and poor than foster parents. Kin caregivers reported more health problems, greater depression and less marital satisfaction than foster families; kinship care families received less training, services and financial support. Cuddeback found that birth parents rarely received family preservation services, so that children in kinship care were less likely than children in foster care to be reunified. Boots and Green (1999) as well as Minkler and Roe (1993) analysed guidelines on approval of and support to foster homes. About half of 41 US states did not pay kinship foster parents because they were not approved, as their material standards were below the level that the authorities considered desirable. The poorest foster parents, often single women, remained poor, with minimal government assistance. In line with findings from the USA, Sykes *et al.* (2002) found in their UK study that kinship foster parents had less education and higher unemployment; they received less financial and social support than nonkinship foster parents. Kinship foster homes are thus clearly influenced by class.

A tenet of Norway's post-war welfare policy has been that care for people dependent on help in society should be the authorities' responsibility and should be provided primarily by public-sector employees and professionally educated personnel (Wærness 2000). According to Wærness, this ideology is being challenged today for reasons including economics, criticism of expert rule and central control, and the impersonality of public care. The social policy is being changed to address a crisis of legitimacy as well as financial problems. These are also relevant reasons for a stronger commitment to kinship foster homes.

Research on gender differences related to the effects of taking on a caregiver role has tended to find that women, more than men, experience strains and psychological distress (Marks *et al.* 2002). Marks, however, also found that women who cared for parents outside their own household reported a sense of purpose in life. A systematic review of studies on the health of grandparents raising a child highlighted flaws in the research (Grinstead *et al.* 2003). The authors found that grandparents who experienced both formal and informal support were less likely to experience psychological sadness, grief, or disease. The research may indicate that the system of kinship foster care keeps disadvantaged women in a subordinate position. This article aims to analyse whether measures taken by child welfare services are at the expense of women's labour-force participation and welfare. Questions to be addressed are: Are female relatives particularly likely to be recruited as foster parents? Why did they become foster mothers? Are kinship foster mothers single elderly women with low education? Is the assignment at the expense of their labour-force participation? How do they perceive their position with respect to child welfare services?

The welfare state and economic activity

So far, discussion of the commitment to kinship foster homes has not addressed women's entitlement to participate in economic activity. Welfare states influence gender roles through access to resources and the distribution of roles and power between men and women.

‘The welfare state is not a passive participant, but is active in shaping and negotiating power relations’ (Daly and Rake 2003, p.45).

In their comparative study of eight countries (Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Ireland, the UK and the USA) Daly and Rake (2003) found the countries were similar with regard to gendered care: while caring is a choice for men, it is a duty for women. Similar findings have been reported (Finch 1989; Parker 1990; Ungerson 1987; Wærness 2000). According to Daly and Rake, the situation in Scandinavia is nonetheless far better for women, since care for elderly and ill people as well as for children is the responsibility of the public infrastructure to a greater extent than, for example, in the USA. The Scandinavian welfare state model combines universalist principles with income-related benefits (Korpi 2001, p.77). A number of material rights, especially their size, are related to workforce participation (Hernes 2001). Foster parents are not considered employees in terms of labour law, and fall outside many of the general provisions related to rights associated with an employment relationship. For example, foster parents in Norway do not have the same right as other parents to paid leave of absence if the child is ill. The attitude of the Norwegian authorities is that no one should *earn money* by being a foster parent. Kinship and nonkinship foster parents must be treated on equal terms regarding compensation for their work and reimbursement of expenses (Minister of Children and Equality 2007). The guidelines stipulate that, as parties engaged by the child welfare service, foster parents must have a relatively free and independent position in the exercise of their *role*. The municipality is not regarded as having the prerogative of management and control normal between an employer and employee.

People who do not participate in the workforce, traditionally often women, not only receive fewer material goods, but also fewer social rights (Korpi 2001). In addition, labour-market participation is likely to influence a person's self-perception, influencing competence and freedom in many areas of life, as well as patterns of interaction and negotiating positions within the core family. Unequal participation in the workforce is an important reason for gender disparities in today's Western society in general. Being outside the working world can therefore be seen as a significant indicator of a lack of actor status (Korpi 2001, p.66).

Labour-market participation and the possibility to combine caregiving with economic activity have been important prerequisites for gender equality. Political institutions in countries such as Norway, Denmark and Sweden (in contrast to countries such as Ireland, Italy, France, Germany and Belgium) support a model with two wage earners in the family. This policy appears to generate small class distinctions and small gender differences (Korpi 2001). In Scandinavia, women's workforce participation is high in international terms. There is, however, a common view in Scandinavia that mothers' opportunities to provide support must be strengthened. In particular, single mothers, as well as mothers with low education and low income, have a life situation for which no adequate compensation is provided (Björnberg 2006).

A feature of women's workforce participation, especially in Norway, has been part-time work. Since the 1990s, a divide has emerged between groups of part-time workers: the majority work long part-time hours, with employment terms resembling those of full-time employees (Jensen 2000). The reduction in short working hours and increase in long working hours suggest a strengthening of women's position in the labour market. According to the comparative study

conducted by Daly and Rakes, the proportion of part-time work is especially high in the Netherlands, followed by the UK and Sweden. Education level is important both for labour-force participation and for the extent of economic activity among women. Women with low education reflect a relatively traditional employment pattern with a high proportion of part-time work (Jensen 2000).

Methods and material

The material for this article is drawn from a larger study of what kinship foster care means for children, parents and foster parents, conducted in Norway from 1999 to 2002. It included in-depth interviews with children aged 9-12 in state custody in kinship foster homes, biological parents, and foster parents, and a survey of children aged 4-13 in kinship and nonkinship foster care. The Regional Ethical Committee and Norwegian Data Inspectorate approved the study. This article draws on survey data from the female participants, 123 kinship foster mothers and 88 nonkinship foster mothers, as well as interview data from 22 kinship foster mothers

Survey: Participants and procedure

Kinship placements are not registered at provincial level, so we used information from municipalities. From a total of 436 municipalities, 238 kinship foster families were found within 104 municipalities. Of these, 234 kinship foster parents were asked to participate. The final sample comprised 123 kinship foster mothers, a response rate of 53%. For the nonkin sample, all foster parents (192) in three geographically dispersed counties of the 19 in Norway were asked to

participate. Of these, 88 foster mothers participated, a nonkin response rate of 46%.

The kinship and nonkinship samples did not reveal differences in the children's ages or duration of present care. The mean age of the children was 8.9 years (SD = 2.7) in the kinship sample and 9.5 years (SD = 3.0) in the nonkin sample. The mean duration of present care in the kinship sample was 5.1 years (SD = 2.9) and in the nonkin sample, 5.7 years (SD = 3.0).

The questionnaire was designed to compare kinship placement with nonkinship placement through questions concerning: (1) Care experiences of children placed in care, (2) Family contact, (3) Caregiver characteristics (e.g. age, marital status, education, income, health, degree of relatedness between child and caregivers), (4) Social service received (type and number of professional support services).

Interview participants and procedures

The interviewees were located through the child welfare authorities. For ethical reasons, biological parents had to give their consent for interview requests to the kinship foster parents. In total, 53 biological parents were asked for consent. Of these, 23 approved. All the foster parents (22 foster mothers and one single foster father) consented to be interviewed. The interview topics concerned issues associated with family life and acting as parents for the child, the relationship between foster parents and biological parents, and their cooperation with the child welfare services.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full. The methodological approach partly employs the principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998a; 1998b).

The sample of kinship foster mothers is shown in Table 1:

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

One grandmother and three aunts were related to the child by marriage.

Statistical analyses

The analyses of foster mothers' welfare focus on the variables labour-force participation, working hours, education, marital status and income.

To compare the sample of kinship foster mothers with the female population in Norway, we used data published in reports on women's participation in the labour force, working hours and education (Jensen 2000). Jensen's data are based on the Labour Force Survey and Education Statistics from Statistics Norway; we used her data from 1996. A person is defined as economically active when he or she has paid employment outside standard compensation for work resulting from the foster home assignment. In the analysis of working hours, we follow Jensen's categorisation: short part-time (1-19 hours of work per week), long part-time (20-34 hours per week) and full-time (35 hours or more) (Jensen 2000, p.17).

We also followed the three age categories used by Jensen: 20-34, 35-55, and 20-66. We did not perform calculations for the age group 56-65, as Jensen's report

does not specify the proportion of labour-force participation for this group. For analysis of education, we used statistics from 1 October 1999 for women aged 25-66 (Statistics Norway 2007). The variable 'education level' is divided into three: lower secondary, upper secondary and university/college level, based on Statistics Norway's official standard for education groups.

Fisher's Exact Test is used to analyse differences in labour-force participation between kinship foster homes and norm data (data from Jensen 2000). Since the analyses are based on 2*2 tables, we chose Fisher's Exact Test because this gives an exact p-value. To assess differences between kinship foster homes and norm data in the variables working hours and education, we used Chi-square tests.

Differences between kinship foster homes and nonkinship foster homes were also analysed using Chi-square tests.

The study has methodological limitations since the response rate was low. We have inadequate analyses of foster mothers' income, since the questionnaire did not ask about exact income and only provides information about the income category from NOK 200,000 to more than NOK 600,000.

Results

Kinship foster homes are women's area of responsibility.

It is primarily the female biological relatives who provide the basis for agreements on foster homes. In four of five families (79%), a female biological relative is involved. A male relative normally assumes the responsibility only if

he has a female spouse, highlighting women's importance as foster parents. About every third woman has sole responsibility for care (25 of 74; 34%).

In 48% of cases the child moved to grandparents, in 44% to an aunt and uncle, and in 8% to more remote relatives. That grandparents are the closest to take care of the grandchild is a matrilineal phenomenon. More than half (61%) of foster homes on the mother's side are headed by the mother's parents, especially her mother. Among the relatives of the child's father it is not the paternal grandmother, but the father's sister who most often takes over the care. On the father's side, 67% of placements are with the father's sister/brother. This difference is statistically significant (Chi-Square=6.938 df= 1 p=.008).

'When [the maternal grandmother] is fit and capable, she must help'

In contrast to other foster mothers, the 'choice' of taking on the care of a child in the family is not independent, but is associated with perceptions of obligation. Many grandmothers experience being a mother as a lifelong responsibility. A foster mother says: *I have always been there for my children. And that is after all why... Obviously if they need help, or... I think that must be a matter of course, if you are fit and healthy, then of course you must help.*

The maternal grandmother's care for the child usually started a long time before the foster home contract was signed. They have looked after the child when needed; they have stepped into the breach when the child's mother is tired or absent. The mother constantly phones and asks them to fetch the child from day care, says a maternal grandmother: *Mom, can you fetch Sofie from day care? Yes, when are you coming, then? – She did not know.* They have washed the child's

clothes, dressed them up for parties, ironed clothes, searched for the child in town when told that he or she was out alone. They have felt at a loss with no one to look after the child in the morning when they had to go to work and the daughter had said she would fetch the child.

During all the episodes where the grandmothers have been there for the child, their love for the child has also grown. The child, too, contributes to strengthening the bonds. The maternal grandmother mentions the child who says: *I want to be with you, Granny.* Children who are old enough to knock on the door arrive on their own initiative, when the grandmother had planned to do something else. Love for the child grows through all the small experiences that the children share with the adult, and through the perception of being needed by the child.

A maternal grandmother says: *When the mother had the child, we had no peace. Sometimes I drove out in the evening and the night to where she lived to keep an eye on what was happening. It was a terrible time – it was just dreadful. (...) And when we saw that it was back and forth between us and the mother and so on, we came to an agreement with the mother – we took her aside and said to her that this is not working, you are destroying the child, we cannot go on like this. So then she was willing to allow us to take the child.*

The foster mother is in a situation where her own desire ‘not to start with small children again’ is weighed up against the responsibility for a small child and the fear of losing contact with the child. Her love for the child, which has grown through previous caring activities, makes it impossible to turn back.

One relative expressed this as follows: *There are two painful choices here. One was to place her with foster parents who were strangers, and the other painful*

choice, it sounds a bit brutal, that – the other painful choice was to be her parents ourselves for the rest of her childhood.

Most grandmothers would have liked things to be different, but their love and sense of duty to the child made it impossible to say no. Under the circumstances, becoming foster parents was the only alternative, and it became a wish. This is the compulsion of love. Actions based on this compulsion are gendered in that it is usually women who take on the care of the child.

Foster mothers' age, marital status and education

While 94% of the sample of nonkin foster mothers is in the age group 35-55, the sample of relatives has a wider age distribution with 15 (12.2%) aged 29-34, 88 (71.5%) aged 35-55, 20 (16.3%) aged 56-64. The age difference between kinship foster mothers and other foster mothers is significant (Chi-Square=17.329, df= 2, p=.000).

If the age difference between the foster mother and the youngest child in the household (whether it is a foster child or not) is taken into account, the kin and nonkin samples are similar. Foster mothers under 34 care for children under seven; middle-aged foster mothers (35-55) and those over 55 more frequently care for children over seven.

In 79.7% of cases, kinship foster mothers were married/cohabitants; 20.3% were single. Correspondingly, 76.8% of parents of children aged 0-17 in Norway were married/cohabitants, 20.4% single mothers and 2.8% single fathers. The proportion of single mothers in kinship foster homes is therefore close to the average in Norway. Nonkinship foster homes are however characterised by a particularly high proportion of two-parent households. Nonkinship foster mothers

were married/cohabitants in 93% and single in 7% of cases. The difference in marital status between the samples of kinship foster mothers and nonkin foster mothers is significant (Chi-Square=11.506 df= 2, p=.003.).

As Table 2 shows, the education level of the sample of kinship foster mothers is lower than that of the female population in Norway. The difference is significant (p=.025). The education level of nonkin foster mothers corresponds to the average of the female population in Norway.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Kinship foster mothers' participation in the labour force

Kinship foster mothers were economically active in 65.9% (n=81) of cases.

Marital status did not influence the proportion of kinship foster mothers in paid employment. Correspondingly, 73% of all women in Norway were economically active in 1996. The proportion of economic activity for nonkinship foster mothers was 81.8% (n=72). Nonkinship foster mothers thus have high labour-force participation compared with both the average for women in Norway and with kinship foster mothers.

Table 3 summarises labour-force participation among kinship foster mothers by age compared with the female population in Norway in 1996. For the 35-55 age group with children under seven, a far lower proportion of kinship foster mothers

is economically active compared with women in Norway in general. The difference is significant.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Both kin and nonkin foster mothers follow the same pattern for labour-force participation as the average for women in Norway: those with the highest education have the highest proportion of economic activity. The relationship between education and economic activity for kinship foster mothers is not significant (Chi-Square=5.095, $df=2$, $p=0.78$)

Working hours of kinship foster mothers

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Once the children are about seven, women's economic activity increases. No difference in working hours between kinship foster mothers and the female population in Norway was found for the age group 35-55 with children of seven or older (Chi-Square=3.924, $df=2$, $p=.141$).

Of women with a college/university education, 63% work full-time, while 16% of women with lower secondary education work full-time. There is no significant relationship between kinship foster mothers' working hours and education (Chi-Square=6.267, $df=4$, $p=0.180$).

Of foster mothers who were not related to the child, 36% worked full-time, 28% long part-time and 36% short part-time. Although kinship foster mothers have a higher share of full-time and long part-time than other foster mothers, the difference is not significant (Chi-Square=1.422, $df=2$, $p=.491$). Table 5 shows working hours for kinship foster mothers by marital status.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

Kinship foster mothers' income

The median income for kinship foster homes was from NOK 200,000 to NOK 400,000. Kinship foster mothers live in households with a lower family income than the Norwegian average, which for couples with children in 1999 ranged from NOK 550,000 to NOK 650,000 depending on the children's age (Statistics Norway 2001).

Kinship foster mothers also have a lower family income than nonkinship foster mothers. In total, 55.7% of the kinship foster care homes had a family income below NOK 400,000, while this applied to 33% of the nonkin foster homes. The difference is significant (Chi-Square=10.677, $df= 1$, $p=.001$) and cannot be explained only by the differences in marital status between the groups. When the

sample is restricted to married people/cohabitants, two-parent kinship households have lower incomes than other foster families.

Nine (7.3%) of the kinship foster mothers were single and outside the labour market, with low incomes (below NOK 200,000). This is below the average for single people with children, which in 1999 was NOK 311,900 (Statistics Norway 2001). No corresponding group was found among nonkin foster mothers. Only 4.5% (n=4) nonkin foster mothers were single; none had an income below NOK 200,000.

Foster mothers' relationship with the child welfare services and the foster home contract

A consequence of becoming a kinship foster mother is a relationship with the child welfare services. The collaboration may prove to be enriching or burdensome. For the grandmothers, the process of getting the foster home approved has usually involved a battle for acceptance. Child welfare services were previously highly sceptical about kinship placements. The child welfare services are consistently perceived as a threat: *the fear that they would take her away from us*. Or, as another respondent said: *We were told that we grandparents were far down the list. So it was a difficult time. Not only that our daughter had all the problems and the bad things that went with them, but that on top of that we should face the threat that they could come and take the child, that hurt*. Foster parents respond to child welfare control with strategies such as keeping a low profile: *Didn't nag about anything, we just sort of did nothing*. They hoped that time would pass: *time was on our side*. Or as one foster mother said when the case was decided: *A stone fell from my heart*.

The power of the child welfare services may represent a threat to the authority that the foster parents believe they have over the parents and children.

Maternal grandmother; *That's why I also got angry with my husband once, because he rang and asked (...) if our daughter could spend the night here.. I said 'what in the world, why phone and ask about that, it's us who have the basis for making that decision, it's not them.'*

The foster mother will not relinquish authority by asking the child welfare services for permission for the mother to stay outside the agreed visitation plan. This may indicate that the foster mother does not have confidence that the child welfare service will listen to them and discuss the situation with them so that they can arrive at a common decision.

To air personal matters to the child welfare services can be interpreted as a process. Contact between private and public parties characterised by dialogue can form the basis for a more personal relationship between foster parents and child welfare staff. When distrust characterises the initial contact with the child welfare services, it will take more to guide the relationship on to a course in which there is a demand for the competence and services of child welfare staff, and the collaboration becomes enriching for foster mothers.

Foster parents as a vocational role

Not many foster mothers in this study perceived their responsibility for care as a vocational role. Great burdens in relation to the child, the parents, the network and the support services suggest a vocational role focusing on pay and colleague status. The need for salary and remuneration varies depending on the financial

situation of the foster families. Without public-sector contributions, several families will have difficulties with the financial obligations for an extra child.

Aunt: The child came to us with her clothes in a shopping bag. (...) So I phoned the social welfare office and asked if it was possible to get help to get a quilt and bed and a little clothing, so she had something to survive with for the next weeks. (...) She answered that we would have to draw on our reserves. (...) I was taken aback. Because they could have helped us a little, after all.

Here, the foster mother and child welfare have a different understanding of financial responsibility. The child welfare services impose a financial responsibility on the foster family and attribute a different normative content to the kinship placement than the relatives do themselves. The understanding of the contract as work and/or a personal obligation is negotiated with the child welfare services. The foster mother compares her experience with two child welfare workers:

*With the first one, you felt that you were just after money. She withheld the money. And this one here, sort of: It is something you need, it is something you **MUST** have, enough said! If they had all been like that, it would have been more of a pleasure to work with this.*

The first one conveyed the understanding that it was the family's financial responsibility and duty. The other one focused on rights. The child welfare services can force a moral duty on the foster parents, or they can create the opportunity for an alternative understanding of their activities as work.

Discussion, Kinship foster mothers an underprivileged group?

Kinship foster homes as a phenomenon are based on gendered practices, and to a great extent follow society's matrilineal lines: mothers and their relatives are caregivers far more often than fathers and their relatives. While men actively choose to become caregivers, there are normative expectations for care by women. The sociopolitical preference for kinship foster homes in much of the world thus has implications for women's life situation. An aggressive policy to increase the use of kinship foster care homes may impose pressure on certain women and privatise tasks that they would not otherwise have chosen.

The research forming the background for this article showed that kinship foster mothers are underprivileged materially, socially, and in their state of health compared with other foster parents (Cuddeback 2004). We therefore wished to investigate the situation in Norway. With regard to the education level and income of kinship foster mothers, the results of this study showed the same tendency as the research literature from the USA, in that they have a somewhat lower education level than the female population in Norway.

Except for foster mothers aged 35-55 who care for children *under* seven, kinship foster mothers in Norway do *not* have lower economic activity than the female population in Norway. Similarly, kinship foster mothers in Norway do *not* have lower labour-force participation than the female population in Norway. The proportion of single providers among kinship foster mothers is *not* higher than for the country as a whole. This study can therefore *not* confirm findings from the USA that kinship foster mothers are often single women *outside* the labour market (Berrick *et al.* 1994; Cuddeback 2004; Dubowitz *et al.* 1993; Gebel 1996; Le-Prohn 1994). Nor can it confirm research from Scandinavia showing that foster

mothers worked part-time more frequently than mothers in general (Andersson 2001).

An objective of family and gender equality policy in the Nordic countries has been that it should be possible to combine childcare and labour-force participation. This study shows that in Norway this has not been fully successful for kinship foster mothers aged 35-55 with children *under* seven. This group *has* lower labour-force participation than the rest of the female population. One reason may be limited possibilities on the labour market, because the group in general has a low education level. Another reason may be that care obligations for foster children are more labour-intensive than care for one's own children. Foster home care has changed and developed throughout history with respect to the changing population of children, legislation, regulations, introduction of pay, training, counselling and follow-up from the child welfare services. These changes remove the system from the activity of ordinary parents (Wilson and Evetts 2006). The fact that kinship foster mothers with small children in this age group and nonkinship foster mothers both have shorter working hours compared with women in Norway may indicate that the responsibilities of a foster mother are at the expense of her own professional career and possibility to obtain an education at a mature age.

Assuming responsibility for caring for grandchildren interferes with women's 'normal biographical life cycle', that is, the life cycles that have become established in collective life cycles (Gautan 2007). The grandmothers return to a caregiver role at a time when they might be considering a commitment to their own education and career. Kinship foster mothers with low education thus have

little capacity for further education and are kept in a subordinate position in the labour market.

Kinship foster homes can be characterised as a class phenomenon, as they tend to be found in parts of the population with lower income, education and labour-force participation. Compared with the USA, this is less characteristic of kinship foster homes in Norway. The results from Norway reflects a society with relatively small class distinctions, well-developed welfare systems and a high standard of living compared with the USA (Daly and Rake 2003). There is however reason to ask questions about the costs of kinship foster homes for women who assume this responsibility, and whether those in the weakest financial positions among these receive adequate compensation from the public sector. There is also a group of kinship foster mothers (7%) in Norway who are single and not economically active, have a low education level and a low income. We cannot find the corresponding group in nonkinship foster care.

Much of the research on kinship foster homes compares the welfare of kinship foster parents with other foster homes, and not with the population in general (Berrick *et al.* 1994; Cole 2006; Holtan *et al.* 2005; Scannapieco *et al.* 1997; Shore *et al.* 2002). Nonkinship foster mothers have high labour-force participation (above the level for women in Norway in general), and differ from the rest of the population since they consist almost exclusively of two-parent households. Since much of the research is based on comparisons between nonkin and kin, the fact that it is nonkin foster homes that are atypical may be overlooked. Nonkinship families reflect the recruitment of middle-class families and two-parent households by the child welfare services.

The basis of the kinship foster home is that one of the family members has been deprived of care and control. By placing the child with a relative, responsibility is returned to the child's family. The child welfare services base this initiative on the child's personal relationships in the network. There is a need to develop other models for collaboration between child welfare and foster mothers, where kinship foster mothers receive greater authority than they have today, while the child welfare services are positioned to offer help where the foster mothers need it.

Conclusion

As a result of welfare and gender equality policy, the consequences with respect to labour-force participation and standard of living for kinship foster mothers in Norway are better than in the USA. A relevant question is however how the authorities can develop this social welfare initiative without it contributing to locking in traditional gendered care practices. This means that recruitment and support arrangements for foster families must have a focus that actively creates the foundation to enable caregiving work in the future to be shared between men and women to a far greater extent.

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Table 1. Kinship of children with informants in the kinship placements (N).

Kinship relation	Matrilinear	Patrilinear	Total placements
Aunt	7	3	10
Grandmother	9	1	10
Other relative	2		2
Total	18	4	22

Table 2. Highest education level among kinship foster mothers and the population of women in Norway aged 25-66 (1999).

Kinship – population *	Primary/lower secondary school		Upper secondary school		University/college		Total	
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)
Kinship placement	32	26.7	61	50.8	27	22.5	120	100.0
Population of women	208000	17.4	660000	55.2	328000	27.4	1196000	100.0

*P<.05 (Chi-Square=7.408, df= 2, p=.025).

Table 3 Labour force participation and age among kinship foster mothers and the population of women in Norway (1996).

Age	Kinship foster mothers		Population of women		P-value
	N	(%)	N	(%)	
20-34	10	66.7	6866	72.0	0.416
35-55 with children 7 years< ***	15	45.5	7041	80.1	0.000
35-55 with children 7 years ≥	46	83.6	3238	83.0	0.538
56-65	10	50.0	2220	Not specified	

***P<.001

Table 4. Working hours among economically active kinship foster mothers and the population of women in Norway (1999) (%).

Age	Full-time		Long part-time		Short part-time	
	Kinship	Population	Kinship	Population	Kinship	Population
20-66 (N=19365) (N=(81))	40.7	56.0	32.1	25.0	27.2	19.0
35-55 with children 7 years ≥ (N=46)	34.8	49.0	37.0	31.0	28.3	20.0

Note: Kinship foster parents: 20-66 (N=81); 35-55 with children 7 years ≥ (N=46)

Population of women 20-66 (N=19365); 35-55 with children 7 years ≥ (N=3238.0)

Table 5. Working hours among economically active kinship foster mothers by marital status (%).

Marital status and working hours *	Full-time	Long part-time	Short part-time	Total	N
	Single kinship foster mothers	68.8	18.8	12.5	100.0
Married/cohabitant kinship foster mothers	33.8	35.4	30.8	100.0	65

*P<.05 (Chi-Square=6.524, df=2, p=.038)