

Feminism and attitudes to equality – tendencies towards polarization?

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Findings from:



CORE
CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH ON
GENDER EQUALITY

About the analyzes

Attitudes towards gender and equality over time

This brochure addresses the main findings from the report: Feminism and attitudes to gender equality – tendencies towards polarization?

The report seeks to shed light on whether the growing equality skepticism and anti-feminist mobilization that is taking place in a number of countries around the world is found in Norway, a country characterized by strong gender equality advancements throughout the last decades. We examine whether and if so, how increasing polarization around feminism and gender equality is expressed within an overall gender-friendly Norwegian public by analyzing a number of questions about attitudes to gender equality that have been posed in various surveys.

We have reviewed several large survey investigations and mapped the questions about attitudes towards gender and equality that have been asked over time. Furthermore, we have analyzed the development in support for gender equality based on some of these questions. We have been interested in examining whether we see different support patterns for questions about:

- attitudes to women's work
- attitudes to men's participation at home
- the division of labor in couples with children
- the further development of gender equality
- whether change patterns vary between groups in the population.

We have also included questions about views on self-determined abortion, because in addition to being a central theme in anti-feminist debate in other countries, it has shown to have a mobilizing power in the Norwegian debate. Although we have focused on questions that have been repeated frequently over time, some of the results are based on a few questions that have been asked once or twice.

The analyzes we present are taken from international surveys, such as the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), the World Values Survey and the European Social Survey (ESS), as well as Norwegian surveys such as the Norwegian National Election Studies and the Norwegian Monitor survey. Many of the questions may seem a bit outdated and characterized by being designed at a time when the gender equality debate was different than today. However, the primary thing for us has been to examine variation in support between groups and change over time. We have also been concerned with pointing out that the way the questions are formulated, and the context in which they were asked, can have an impact on the image we get of people's attitudes to gender equality.

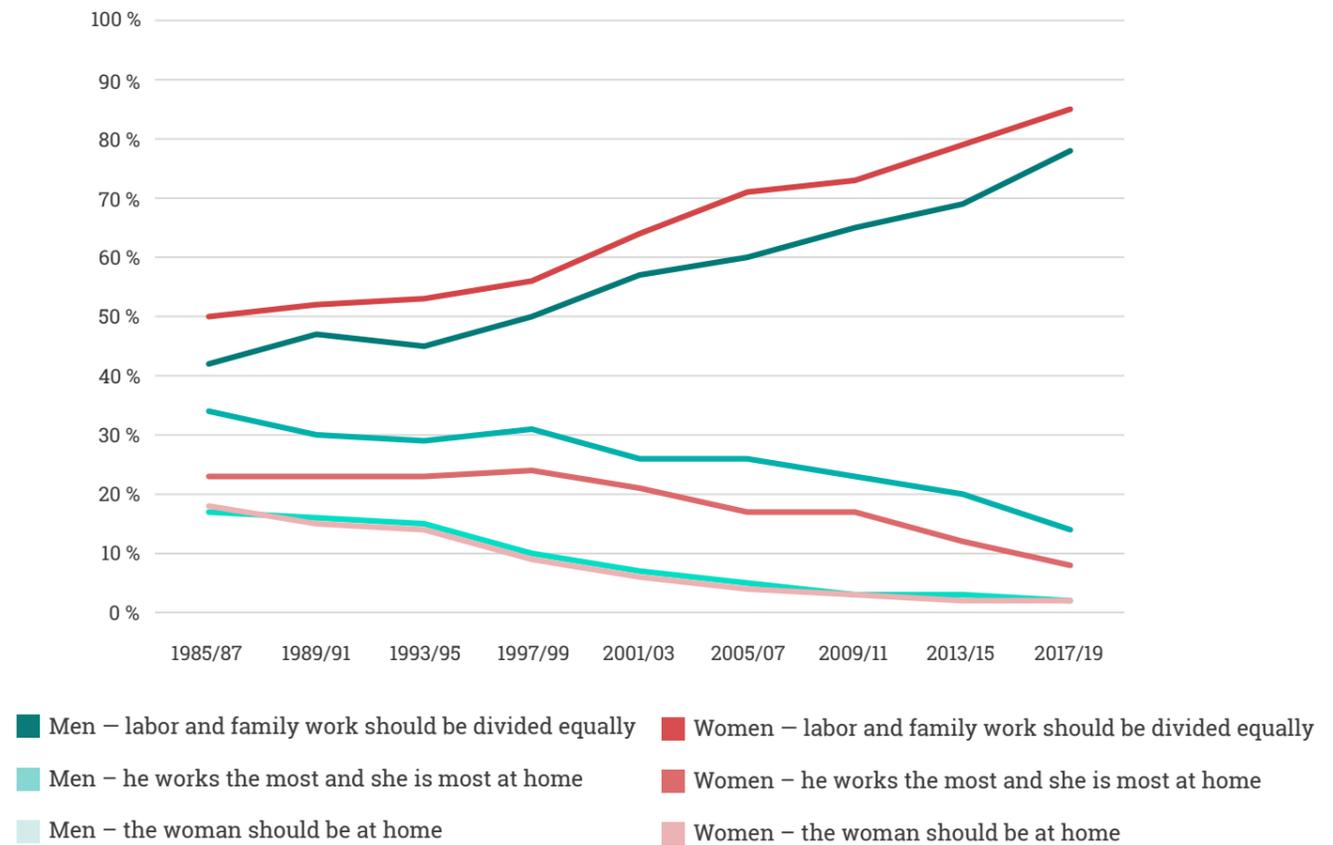
We hope that this survey and these simple analyzes can be a contribution to knowledge about whether and to what extent norms on gender equality are increasingly under pressure as a result of tendencies towards polarization in the public debate and in public opinion in Norway. In addition, we emphasize the need to analyze and assess what is meant by antifeminism and what kind of content it should be filled with. Any expression of opposition or skepticism to gender norms and feminism should not be interpreted as anti-feminism. However, the analyzes of variation in support for various gender equality issues presented in this report can form a starting point for assessing whether there are signs that opposition to gender equality is part of any ongoing tendencies towards increasing polarization around key gender equality issues in Norway.

The main finding in the report is that we find no signs of increasing opposition to gender equality in the form of greater skepticism of gender equality ideals, understood as equal family roles for women and men, or less support for gender equality policy.

Gender-equality ideal

Increasing support for gender equality

An increasing proportion who believe that labor and family work should be divided equally



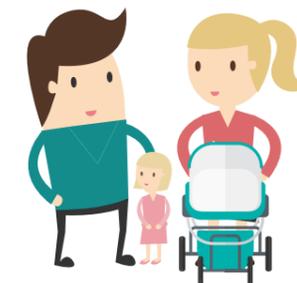
Source: Norsk Monitor.

We find a pronounced increasing support for equality among women and men in working-life and the family, and no tendency for increasing opposition or skepticism to the value of equality.

Our analyzes show:



A close to unison support for women's employment, and a stronger support for women's fulltime employment.



Fewer believe that it should first and foremost be the mother who takes care of the children.



It is not just the father who has responsibility for the financial support of the family.

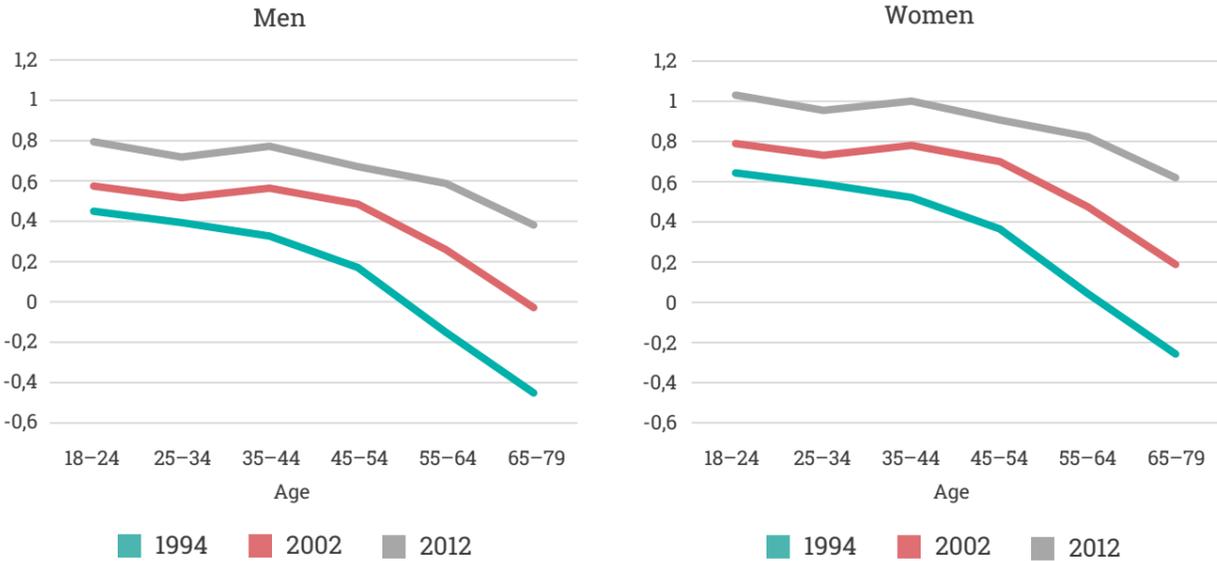
Gender essentialism

Do women and men inherently have different wishes and interests?

Women support gender-equality ideals to a greater extent than men. This applies to the entire period we are looking at. However, relatively speaking, the increase in support for equal family roles has been more marked among men than women, which must be seen in light of the fact that support was initially lower among men than among women.



Increasing support for equal family roles among men and women



Support for equal family roles among men and women in different age groups in 1994, 2002 and 2012. Higher scores mean more support. Source: ISSP 1994, 2002, 2012.

The analyzes indicate that the importance of background factors such as age and education has diminished over time.

There is still greater support among younger people than among older people, and among those with higher education than those with less education, but such background factors have had less to say for views on gender equality over time. We interpret this as that gender equality has become a value shared by the many.

The most important exception is that the difference between the inhabitants of Oslo and the rest of the country has increased over time. Support for gender equality is clearly highest among the people of Oslo.

Overall, the analyzes of the index of support for gender equality, measured as equal family roles, indicate that there has been greater agreement on gender equality over time. There is less dispersion in the attitudes of the population on these questions. Thus, it does not appear that there has been increasing polarization in views on gender equality, although there are still clear differences between groups.

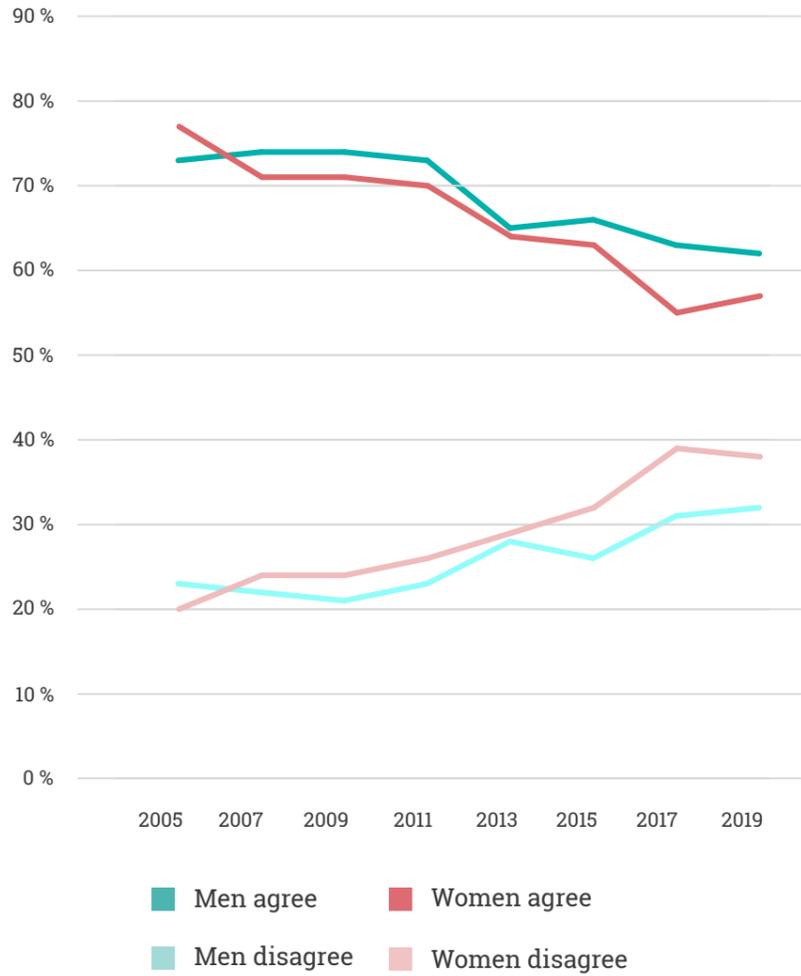
We find far less obvious gender differences when it comes to gender essentialism - the idea that women and men have inherently different aspirations, priorities and interests.

For example, fewer and fewer people believe that home and family are what matter most to women. However, when the question is whether there are fundamental gender differences in thoughts and feelings, then many, of both men and women, agree.

Admittedly, the support for the idea that women and men are fundamentally different is declining, and there are slightly lower proportions of women than men who believe this.

Nevertheless, we note that there is still relatively high support for the idea that women and men are fundamentally different, but there are slightly more men than women who believe that "Men are from Mars, women from Venus".

A majority believe that women and men are different when it comes to thoughts and feelings



Perceptions of whether women and men are very different from nature when it comes to thoughts and feelings. Men and women between 18-79 years. Source: Norsk Monitor.



Discrimination

Are women being discriminated?

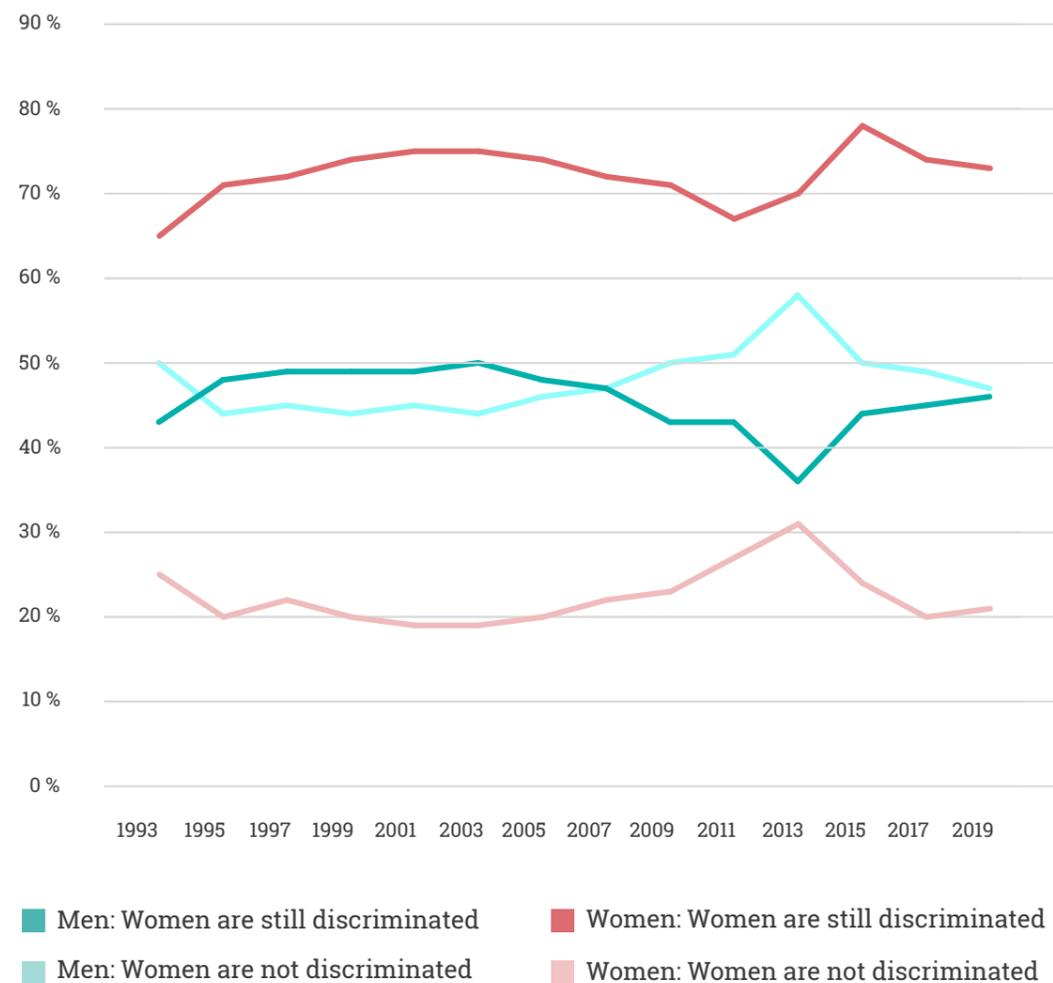
Many of the issues analyzed in the report measure support for gender equality ideals. Another aspect of the debate on gender equality concerns the view of discrimination based on gender.

Since 1993, questions on this topic has been a part of "Norsk Monitor".

There are persistent gender differences in the proportions answering that women and men are treated differently. Among men, there is stability over time in the proportion who believes that women face differential treatment, while the proportion of women, who believe that women face differential treatment, has slightly increased.

We find a similar trend based on the Election Survey's question of whether gender equality should be continued, where there is stability in the proportion of men who believe this, while there is a clear increase in the proportion of women who believe that gender equality should be pursued.

The majority of women believe that women are still discriminated against



Perception of whether women are discriminated against or not. Men and women between 18–79 years. Source: Norsk monitor.

Abortion – view on self-determination

From resistance to broad support

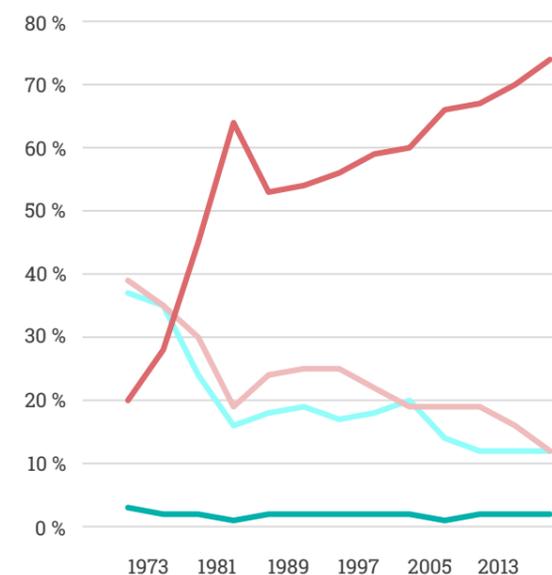
Support for the right to self-determined abortion has increased dramatically over time. It has gone from great resistance to broad support. We see this pattern among both men and women and in all age groups.

In addition, it is interesting that the difference between women and men has changed over time in the view of abortion. While men for a long time were more positive than women about women's right to self-determined abortion, today there are slightly more women than men who support this alternative. The fact that the gender difference in views on self-determined abortion have reversed is interesting.

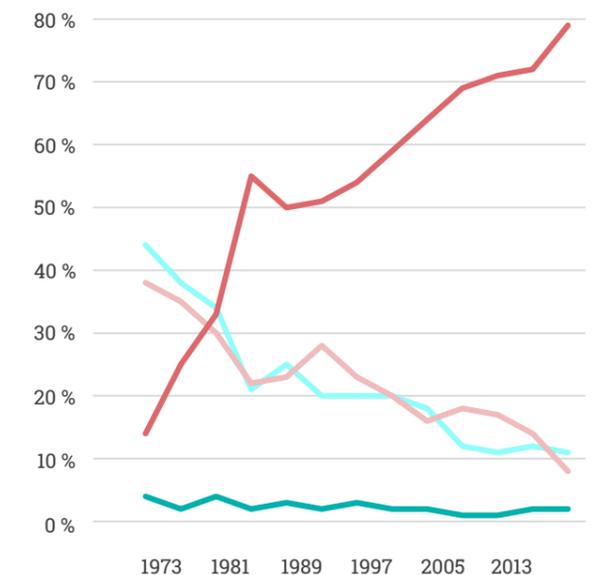
One possible reason may be that this is the only question included in the report, where we have a time series all the way back to 1969. In other words, we do not know if there might have been greater support among men than among women for other gender equality issues in the past, simply because we do not have information about this. However, studies from other countries indicate that in the 1970s and 1980s, too, women supported an equal family model to a greater extent than men.

In any case, our analyzes do not indicate that national conservative and anti-feminist currents in the view of abortion have gained a stronger foothold in Norway, as we have seen in e.g. parts of Eastern and Southern Europe.

Attitudes towards abortion among men



Attitudes towards abortion among women



- Should never be allowed
- Allowed if the woman's life is in danger
- Allowed if personal circumstances dictate
- Self-determined

Attitude towards abortion. Men and women between 18–79 years. Source: The election surveys 1969–2017.

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The analyzes presented in the report were developed out of a genuine curiosity about whether gender equality and feminism contribute to the polarization of the public debate on gender equality issues, also in Norway.

Measured by the questions that we have used and analyzes we have done, the conclusion is relatively clear: **we find no tendency of increasing polarization in views on gender equality. On the contrary, we find a growing consensus on gender equality, and no increase in the proportions who strongly disagree with ideals about gender equality.**

Still, these patterns of support should be followed closely in the years to come.

Firstly, it may be that those who express opposition to gender equality are in a clear minority, but that opposition to gender equality is something they feel strongly about and they are active in mobilizing against gender equality.

Secondly, support for gender equality may be an expression of what is perceived as “politically correct”, but not an expression of a strong commitment to gender equality, as was perhaps the case among many of those who most strongly supported gender equality a few years ago.

Thirdly, we cannot rule out that we would find significant differences between groups in support of gender equality if we had looked at other background factors than those we have included in the analyzes here, e.g. political voting.

Finally, several of the existing gender equality issues have been criticized for being a bit outdated. It may be that they are not as well suited to measuring contradictions around issues of gender equality that are disputed today, or where there is particularly strong opposition.

In 2021, Core – Centre for Research on Gender Equality at Institute for Social Research, will prepare a new survey on gender equality. We will include some of the most well suited questions asked in previous surveys in order to be able to investigate trends over time. In addition, we intend to include new questions in order to map gender equality attitudes and practices more broadly, and to analyze support, opposition and possible polarization around various gender equality issues.

