BOOK REVIEW


I might as well start by confessing that my initial hunch about this book was soon proved wrong. Based on its subheading ("coping with difference") and the fact that the first chapter opens with a reference to the (in)famous "honour" killing of a Kurdish immigrant woman in Sweden, I assumed that the book would deal with the challenges posed by multiculturalism and anti-essentialism to Nordic legal feminism. Instead, while these issues are touched upon, the book really concentrates on a different challenge, exploring how Nordic legal feminism is dealing with the gradual realisation that the long-standing Nordic commitment to formal equality and "state feminism" have failed to provide substantive equality at a time when global economic forces seem to be gnawing away at the underpinnings of the woman-friendly Nordic welfare state.

Comprising eleven chapters, the book is a standalone sequel to Responsible Selves: Women in the Nordic Legal Culture (Nousiainen et al. 2001) which did a good job of introducing some of the features of the Nordic feminist legal tradition(s) to English-speaking audiences. This volume – which in many ways develops some of the ideas further – starts with an introductory chapter by the editors, which outlines the book’s themes. Eva-Maria Svensson and Anu Pylkkänen then elaborate on the broad challenges faced by Nordic legal feminism today, discussing current trends against the historical background of Nordic feminism(s) and reflecting on both the differences and commonalities between Nordic countries.

Chapters 3 and 4 then focus on employment matters. The contribution by Susanne Fransson and Christer Thörnqvist on the gendered patterns in collective bargaining provides an interesting snapshot of some of the changes that are taking place in the world of employment, and identifies a shift away from collective agreements towards legislation and individual wage claims. Karoliina Ahtela then goes on to examine why the commitment of the Finnish Equality Act of 1987 to promote equality at the workplace has remained at the rhetorical level.
The subsequent two chapters discuss care work. The issue of child care in particular highlights the differences between Nordic countries as to whether the solution should be framed in terms of extensive day care facilities, support for private arrangements combined with public facilities or through a home care allowance system. As regards care work in Norway, Hege Brækhus is concerned about the low value given to it, whether it is done in the private or the public sphere, while Kristine Helen Korsnes remains more optimistic about the Norwegian home care allowance as giving economic value to care work – although she does recognise its potential to also entrench rather than challenge sex roles.

The theme of family life and caring is further developed by Åsa Gunnarsson, Monica Burman and Lena Wennberg. In an illuminating chapter they argue convincingly that the contradictory requirements of family, tax and social welfare laws detrimentally impact on women’s lives, especially when they assume equality where it does not exist. The ways in which gender-neutrality hides gendered power relations are further explored vis-à-vis sexual offences in Johanna Niemi-Kiesiläinen’s chapter on the reform of the Finnish law on sexual offences. She argues, in a somewhat Anglo-American vein, that the law, which rests on a liberal construction of sexual self-determination, insufficiently corresponds to situations where the subject does not meet the high standard set for sexual self-determination.

In her chapter on the concept of equality, Kevät Nousiainen argues for a dynamic reading of equality, while Sari Kouvo’s chapter on human rights does an excellent job of explaining why many Nordic feminists (this author included) often struggle with human rights discourse without being able to explain why this is so. Kouvo argues that the uneasiness really relates to the Nordic welfare tradition of correcting inequalities through collective processes and redistributive justice rather than through resort to individual rights claims and suggests that the Nordic experience could contribute to contesting the primacy of civil and political rights in human rights discourse.

Kouvo’s contribution, which does take issue with the largely ethnocentric response to Sadime Fahindal’s murder, and the last chapter by Hanne Petersen, exploring diversity in legal education, finally do raise some of the issues of multiculturalism that I expected earlier on. Yet, on the whole, the volume has little to say on ethnic minorities, xenophobia or racial inequality even though the myth of