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Kinship foster parenting; gender, class and labour-force participation

Slektsfosterhjem: Kjønn, klasse og yrkesdeltakelse

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Objective: Knowledge about gender, class and labour-force participation of kinship foster parents in European countries is scarce. This study examines the gendered structure and generational pattern of kinship foster parenting in Norway and compares class components and labour-force participation of kinship foster mothers to the larger female population and to non-kinship foster mothers.

Method: The analysis is based on survey data on relationships between foster parents and child, social demographics and placement characteristics from 123 kinship and 88 non-kinship foster mothers of children in state custody. Labour Force Survey and Education Statistics from Statistics Norway were used to compare the kinship sample to the average female population.

Findings: Kinship foster care in Norway is gendered, in that it is women who assume the responsibility for relatives' children. Kinship foster care reflects class differences in that the educational level of kinship foster mothers and their household income are lower than the average female population and of non-kinship foster mothers in Norway. The labour-force participation of kinship foster mothers in Norway is comparable to that of the country's female population in general, except for women aged 35–55 with children under seven, among whom labour-force participation is lower than for the female population.

Keywords: kinship foster care; foster care; gender; class; labour-force participation

Formål: Det er mangelfull kunnskap i europeiske land om kjønns- og klasses- strukturer i slektsfosterhjem. Denne studien utforsker kjønnede strukturer, klasse og generasjonsmønster for slektsfosterforeldre i Norge. Klassekomponenter som yrkesdeltakelse og utdanning for slektsfostermødre sammenlignes med kvinnebefolkningen og med fostermødre som ikke er i slekt med barnet.

Metode: Analysen baserer seg på data fra spørreskjemaundersøkelse om familierelasjoner, demografiske og sosioøkonomiske forhold og karakteristika ved plasseringen fra 123 slekts- og 88 ikke-slektsfosterhjem til barn under omsorg av barnevernet. Sysselsettings- og utdanningsstatistikk fra Statistisk Sentralbyrå er brukt til å sammenligne utvalget av slektsfostermødre med kvinnebefolkningen med barn i Norge.

Funn: Slektsfosterhjem i Norge er kjønnet ved at det er kvinner som overtar ansvaret for slektingers barn. Slektsfosterhjemsomsorg i Norge er et klassefenomen i den forstand at utdanningsnivå og husholdsinntekt til slektsfostermødre er lavere enn for gjennomsnittlig kvinnebefolkning og fostermødre som ikke er i familie med barnet. Slektsfostermødres yrkesdeltakelse er sammenlignbar med

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kvinnebefolkningen i Norge, unntatt for slektsfostermødre i alderen 35–55 med barn under sju år, som har en lavere yrkesdeltakelse enn landets kvinnebefolkning.

Slektsfosterhjem: familiefosterhjem; fosterhjem; kjønn; klasse; yrkesdeltakelse

Introduction

As an ancient practice in many cultures, kinship foster care has been adopted by the public child welfare system over the last 10–15 years in countries in western Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand (Scannapieco 1999, Broad 2004, Aldgate and McIntosh 2006). For example, the Children Act 1989 (United Kingdom), the Children Act 1995 (Scotland) and the Children Order 1995 (Northern Ireland) (Broad 2004), Decret 2, 1997 Caledonia, Spain (Montserrat and Casas 2006), Child Welfare Act (Norway), Socialtjänstlagen (Sweden) (Lindblom 2008) and the Danish Consolidated Act (Denmark) (Mehlbye 2005) are generally supportive of kinship foster care. One definition of kinship foster care suiting the Norwegian practice and used within this research is: ‘the care provided to children and youth in state custody by relatives’ (Hegar and Scannapieco 1999, p. 1).

According to Statistics Norway (2006), 15% of children in state custody are cared for by relatives. The frequency of kinship foster care placements in some other European countries is: UK 18% (The Hadley Centre 2007); Poland 90%, Belgium 33%, Sweden 25% (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006); and Caledonia, Spain 85% (Montserrat and Casas 2006). In the USA, this has become the predominant form of out-of-home placement since the 1990s (Hegar and Scannapieco 1999). In 1997, 29% of all foster children in the US were living in kinship foster homes (US Department of Health and Human Services 2000).

Arguments for kinship foster care have been that it enables children to live with persons they know, reduces the trauma that children may experience when they are placed with strangers and reinforces children’s cultural and ethnic identity (Wilson and Chipunga 1996, Rushton and Minnis 2002). A predominant argument against kinship foster care has been maintenance of negative social inheritance (Rushton and Minnis 2002) and problems in cooperation between child protection authorities and the foster family (Einarsson and Sandbæk 1997).

Research on measures carried out by child protection agencies are intended to ensure the child’s interests. This article, in contrast, focuses on the situation of the kinship foster parents. According to research from the UK, most foster parents who care for related children are grandmothers (Broad 2004). The findings are the same for the USA (Dubowitz *et al.* 1994). In a systematic review, Cuddeback (2004) found that kinship caregivers are more likely to be single women, unemployed, older, less educated and poorer than non-kinship foster parents. Kinship foster parents report more health problems and depression and less marital satisfaction than non-kinship foster families; kinship care families receive less training, fewer services and less financial support. Women, more than men, experience strains and psychological distress (Marks *et al.* 2002). At the same time, living with grandchildren may also have positive effects on mental health for some elders (Ficker *et al.* 2004); and in a study from Spain, caregivers report high levels of satisfaction with the fostering situation (Montserrat and Casas 2006).

Boots and Geen (1999) as well as Minkler and Roe (1993) analysed guidelines on approval of and support to foster homes. About half of kinship foster homes in 41 states in the US had material standards below the level that the authorities

considered acceptable. These kinship foster parents received no payment to compensate for the expenses of child care. The poorest foster parents, mostly 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 and received less financial and social support than non-kinship foster parents. Kinship foster homes are thus clearly influenced by class.

No study on the labour-force participation related to foster care in Nordic countries is found. Unequal participation in the workforce and lower incomes for women than men is an important reason for gender disparities in today's Western societies in general (Korpi 2001). The size of financial support from the welfare system in Norway is related to workforce participation (Hernes 2001). Labour-force participation is also likely to influence a person's self-perception, influencing competence and independence in many areas of life, including patterns of interaction and negotiating positions within the family household (Korpi 2001, p. 66).

The policy of the Norwegian authorities is that foster parents are not considered to be employees and thus shall neither profit from nor have financial strain as a result of being a foster parent. Kinship and non-kinship foster parents are to be authorised by child welfare authorities and are to be treated on equal terms regarding compensation for their work and reimbursement of expenses (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet 2003). Combining caregiving with labour-force participation has been and is still an important prerequisite for gender equality. In 2004, 81% of mothers and 92% of fathers of children aged 0–15 in Norway were employed (Tronstad 2008, pp. 11–14). A feature of women's workforce participation, especially in Norway, has been part-time work. A total of 47% of the female labour force participants and 5% of the male labour force worked part time in 2004 (Tronstad 2008, pp. 11–14). Since 2004 there has been a reduction in short working hours and an increase in long working hours, which indicates a strengthening of women's position in the labour market (Jensen 2000). Educational level is important both for labour-force participation and for the extent of paid employment among women. Less-educated women reflect a relatively traditional employment pattern, with a high proportion remaining in part-time work (Jensen 2000).

International research on kinship foster care often uses a control-group design, in which a kinship sample is compared to a non-kinship foster sample (Berrick *et al.* 1994, Scannapieco *et al.* 1997, Chen 2000, Falcon 2000, Andersson 2001, Shore *et al.* 2002, Harris 2003, Timmer *et al.* 2004, Holtan *et al.* 2005, Cole 2006, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2006). As a comparison group, however, non-kinship foster parents may not be representative of the general population. It is important to have a broader focus on kinship foster care, and it is therefore relevant to compare the situation of kinship foster parents to parents in the general population.

As presented, the research may indicate that the system of kinship foster care keeps disadvantaged women in a subordinate position concerning their social welfare. Kinship foster care has become a predominant placement choice, yet little research on *kinship parenting* has been conducted in Norway or other Nordic countries. More knowledge about its strengths and weaknesses is needed for further development of social work and social policy. The first aim of the present study was to analyse the gendered structure and generational pattern within kinship foster care. Our second aim was to study class components such as education, income and marital status of kinship foster mothers. And our third aim was to study labour-force

participation of kinship foster mothers. The class components and labour-force participation of kinship foster mothers were compared to the same factors within the general female population in Norway. We also compared class components and labour-force participation of kinship foster mothers to non-kinship foster mothers.

Methods

The material for this article is drawn from a larger study of kinship foster care for children, parents and foster parents, conducted in Norway from 1999 to 2002. A total of 214 children in state custody, aged 4–13 and with a minimum stay of one year in kinship and non-kinship foster care in Norway, participated in the study. The Regional Ethical Committee and Norwegian Data Inspectorate approved the study.

Participants and procedure on analysis of welfare of kinship foster mothers

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 non-kinship 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 non-kinship response rate of 46%.

The kinship and non-kinship 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 non-kinship sample. The mean duration of present care in the kinship sample was 5.1 years ($SD = 2.9$) and in the non-kinship sample, 5.7 years ($SD = 3.0$).

The questionnaire was designed to compare kinship placement with non-kinship placement through questions concerning: (1) placement history of children in care; (2) family contact; (3) caregiver characteristics (e.g. age, marital status, education, income, health, degree of relatedness between child and caregivers); and (4) social service received (type and number of professional support services). The kinship sample was asked about their kinship relations to the child.

Statistical analyses

To compare the sample of kinship foster mothers with the female population in Norway, we used data from 1996 published in reports on women's participation in the labour force and working hours (Jensen 2000). Jensen's data are based on the Labour Force Survey and Education Statistics from Statistics Norway. A person is defined as participating in the labour force when he or she is employed. Paid work connected to foster home assignment is in this article not defined as employment. 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 for the total age range of labour force participation; 20–66. As Jensen's report does not specify the proportion of labour-force participation for the age group 56–65, we did not perform calculation for this group. For analysis of education, we used statistics

from 1 October 1999 for women aged 25–66 (Statistics Norway 2007). The variable 'educational 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 was used to analyse differences in labour-force participation between kinship foster homes and norm data (data from Jensen [2000] about the Norwegian female population). As 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 the norm, in the variables working hours and education, we used Chi-square tests. Chi-square analyses were also used to study differences in education, income, marital status and labour-force participation between kinship and non-kinship foster mothers.

The questionnaire provides information about household income in four categories from lowest, under NOK 200,000, to highest, more than NOK 600,000. Logistic regression analysis was used to study the association between household income (high over NOK 400,000 vs. low below NOK 400,000) among kinship and non-kinship foster mothers, controlling for marital status.

Results

Kinship foster parents and gender

Table 1 gives an overview of the kinship relation between caregiver and child. An analysis of gender concerning kinship foster care must take into account whether it is the maternal or paternal family which provides the care *and* whether it is the female or male foster parent who is biologically related to the child.

It is primarily the mother's side of the family which provides the basis for agreements on foster homes. As Table 1 shows, 72.7% of the placements are maternal and 27.4% are paternal. The percentage of maternal placements is significantly different from 50 ($p < 0.0001$).

Table 2 shows the sex of the biologically related caregiver within kinship placements. The table excludes placements with *both* grandparents ($n = 24$) in order to emphasise the gendered relationship.

A kinship placement is primarily founded on a relationship between a female caregiver and the child. A female relative is involved in 74% of the placements; a male relative is involved in 26%. One foster father biologically related to the child was

Table 1. Gender and category of related foster parent and kinship relation to the child (*n*).

Gender and category of related foster parent	Maternal		Paternal		Total foster homes	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Aunt	23	18.6	17	13.7	40	32.3
Grandmother	26	21.0	1	0.8	27	21.8
Other female relative	7	5.7			7	5.7
Grandmother and grandfather	17	13.7	7	5.7	24	19.4
Uncle	9	7.3	5	4.0	14	11.3
Grandfather	6	4.8	3	2.4	9	7.2
Other male relative	2	1.6	1	0.8	3	2.4
Total	90	72.7	34	27.4	124	100.1

Table 2. Gender of related foster parent and kinship relation to the child (*n*).

Gender of related foster parent	Maternal		Paternal		Total placements	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Female relative	56	76.7	18	66.7	74	74.0
Male relative	17	23.3	9	33.3	26	26.0
Total	73	100.0	27	100.0	100	100.0

single, whereas 25 foster mothers were single. All male relatives who became foster fathers entered into care with their female spouse, highlighting women's importance as kinship foster parents.

There is no difference between maternal and paternal placements concerning the gender of the biological foster parent. In both of them, the foster mother is most often related to the child.

To understand why most placements are maternal, it is necessary to analyse the family history of the child and the child's family of origin. Before placement, 118 (95.2%) of the children were living with one or both parents. Of these, 66.9% were living in a household with their mother, 8.5% with their father and 24.6% were living with both parents (see Table 3).

There is a statistically significant relation between the gendered household of origin and the gendered foster family household (Chi-square = 25,709, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0005$). Children originally living with their mother moved to their mother's family, and children living with their father moved to their father's family. Children living with both moved to their mother's family in 55.2% of the cases and to their father's family in 44.8% of the cases.

Kinship foster parents generational pattern and age

In 48.4% of the cases, the child moved to grandparents; in 43.6% of the cases to an aunt and uncle; and in 8% to more remote relatives, such as a parent's cousin or grand-aunt/uncle. Table 4 presents the generational pattern and maternal and paternal placements.

The generational pattern differs between the maternal and paternal sides of the family. A total of 72.6% ($n = 90$) of the placements are on the mother's side. Of these 54.4% ($n = 49$) are headed by the mother's parents, especially her mother, and 25.6%

Table 3. Gender of birthparent in household of origin and foster parent's relation to the child (*n*).

Family household of origin	Maternal		Paternal		Total placements	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Mother	68	86.1	11	13.9	79	100.0
Father	2	20.0	8	80.0	10	100.0
Both	16	55.2	13	44.8	29	100.0
Total	86	72.9	32	27.1	118	100.0

Note: Missing maternal placement: 4; missing paternal placement: 2.

Table 4. Generation and kinship placements (*n*).

Kinship relation	Maternal		Paternal		Total placements	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Parental generation: aunt/uncle/cousins of parents	35	38.9	22	64.7	57	46.0
Grandparental generation: grandparents/grand aunt/uncle	55	61.1	12	35.3	67	54.0
Total	90	100.0	34	100.0	124	100.0

(*n* = 23) by the mother's sister. That the grandmother is the relative who most frequently cares for the grandchild placed in foster care is a matrilineal phenomenon. Among the relatives of the child's father, it is not the paternal grandmother (2.9%; *n* = 1) but the father's sister (50%; *n* = 17) who most often assumes the responsibility and care. The difference in gender and generational pattern between the mother's and father's side of the family is statistically significant (Chi-square = 6.938, *df* = 1, *p* = 0.008).

While 94% of non-kinship foster mothers are in the age group 35–55, the group of relatives has a wider age distribution, with 15 (12.2%) aged 29–34, 88 (71.5%) aged 35–55, and 20 (16.3%) aged 56–64. The distribution reflects that kinship foster mothers represent two generations. The age distribution between kinship and non-kinship foster mothers is significantly different (Chi-square = 17.329, *df* = 2, *p* < 0.0005).

Foster mothering and class; education, income and marital status

As Table 5 shows, the educational level of the sample of kinship foster mothers is lower than that of the female population in Norway. The difference is significant (*p* = 0.025). The educational level of non-kinship foster mothers is close to the average of the female population in Norway, with 12.5% primary/lower secondary school, 55.7% upper secondary and 31.8% university/college as the highest educational level. There is a significant difference in educational level between kinship and non-kinship foster mothers (Chi-square = 6.821, *df* = 2, *p* = 0.033).

Kinship foster parents have 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). Remuneration for foster care is included in total household income.

Table 5. 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	
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)
Kinship foster mothers	32	26.7	61	50.8	27	22.5	120	100.0
Population of women	208,000	17.4	660,000	55.2	328,000	27.4	1,196,000	100.0

Note: **p* < 0.05 (Chi-square = 7.408, *df* = 2, *p* = 0.025).

Kinship foster mothers also have a lower family income than non-kinship 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 non-kinship foster homes. The difference is significant (Chi-square = 10.677, $df = 1$, $p = 0.001$). When controlling for marital status, there was still a significant difference between kinship and non-kinship foster mothers in the proportion with low income (Wald = 4.904, $df = 1$, $p = 0.027$, OR = 2.014).

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 in 2001 were married/cohabitants, 20.4% single mothers and 2.8% single fathers (Statistics Norway 2008). The proportion of single mothers in kinship foster homes is therefore close to the average in Norway. Non-kinship foster homes, however, are characterised by a particularly high proportion of two-parent households. Non-kinship foster mothers were married/cohabitants in 93% of the cases and single in 7%. The difference in marital status between the samples of kinship foster mothers and non-kinship foster mothers is significant (Chi-square = 11.506, $df = 2$, $p = 0.003$). It is the non-kinship group that differs from the normal population concerning marital status, not the kinship group.

Kinship foster mothers' participation in the labour force

Kinship foster mothers participated in the labour force in 65.9% ($n = 81$) of cases. Correspondingly, 73% of all women in Norway were employed in 1996. There is no significant difference in labour-force participation between the general female population and kinship foster mothers ($p = 0.07$). The proportion of employment for non-kinship foster mothers was 81.8% ($n = 72$). Non-kinship foster mothers thus have high labour-force participation compared to both the average for women in Norway and to kinship foster mothers. Marital status did not influence the proportion of kinship foster mothers' participation in the labour force.

Table 6 summarises labour-force participation among kinship foster mothers by age compared with the female population in Norway in 1996. It also presents labour-force participation among foster mothers with children aged seven or younger (whether it is a foster child or not). The reason to focus on children less than seven years old is that mothers of children at this age typically participate in the labour

Table 6. Labour force participation and age among kinship foster mothers and the population of women in Norway (1996).

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

Note: *** $p < 0.001$ (Chi-square = 24.663, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$).

force in low numbers (Jensen 2000). For the 35–55 age group with children under seven, a lower proportion of kinship foster mothers participated in the labour force compared to women in Norway in general. The labour-force participation between kinship foster mothers and women in Norway aged 35–55 with children under seven is significantly different (see Table 6).

Working hours of kinship foster mothers

Once her children are about the age of seven, a woman's participation in the labour force increases (Jensen 2000) (see Table 7). 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, $df = 2$, $p = 0.141$).

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 non-kinship foster mothers, 36% worked full-time, 28% long part-time and 36% short part-time. The difference between kinship and non-kinship foster mothers concerning working hours is not significant (Chi-square = 1.422, $df = 2$, $p = 0.491$).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore gendered structures among foster parents, as well as class components such as level of education, economic situation, marital status and labour-force participation.

The kinship foster family reflects the general pattern in society concerning the distribution of responsibilities among women and men related to taking care of children. Women take more responsibility for children than men (Tronstad 2008). This is the situation both for the children's parents and for foster parents. Mothers and women in mothers' families far more often take responsibility for children than fathers and fathers' families. This is not unique to children in foster care; it is true for most children in Norway after a family break-up. Also, mothers who are not living with their children after a family break-up have a much more active role and spend more time with their children compared to fathers in similar situations (Kitterød 2006). The same is true for mothers who are not living with their children after foster-home placement (Havik 1996).

Table 7. 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	40.7	56.0	32.1	25.0	27.2	19.0
35–55 with children seven years \geq	34.8	49.0	37.0	31.0	28.3	20.0

Note: Kinship foster parents: 20–66 ($n = 81$); 35–55 with children seven years $>$ ($n = 46$).
Population of women 20–66 ($n = 19,365$); 35–55 with children seven years $>$ ($n = 3238$).

There is a connection between which parent has been responsible for the child and where the child is later placed in foster care. A large majority of the children who participated in this study had lived with their mothers before moving to foster homes. Many of them had lived with single mothers, and a small minority had lived with single fathers. Most of the children moved into foster homes with their mother's relatives. More than half of the children who moved in with their father's relatives had lived with their father before foster-home placement. This shows that the strength in the established relation between parent and child has a great impact on the choice of family with which the child is placed, regardless of the gender of the parent.

Our finding on maternal relatives is in line with findings from Flynn's review on kinship foster care (2002, p. 313), which found that a majority of caregivers were maternal grandparents and maternal aunts. Flynn states that primary studies of the review usually did not state the gender of grandparents and instead used the term generically. The gender of the grandparents is therefore not systematically reported in his review. Hunt (2001) and Waterhouse (2001 cited Flynn 2002, p. 313) found that some children were placed with paternal relatives.

Private negotiations between children's parents and their relatives form the basis for the authorities' formalisation of kinship foster family contracts. Usually a child moves in with relatives who were involved in the life of the child's parents and the child even before the child-protection authorities became involved.

The gendered pattern in foster-home placement, where women take care of their own children and the children of others to a greater extent than men, must be understood as a part of the gendered structure for caretaking in society in general. In their comparative study of eight countries (Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Ireland, the UK and the USA), Daly and Rake (2003) found that the countries were similar with regard to gendered care: while caring is a choice for men, it is a duty for women. The gendered structure of informal care has been reported in research concerning care for the elderly (Ungerson 1987, Finch 1989, Parker 1990, Wærness 2000). Fathers and male relatives within child welfare can choose not to participate in care responsibilities and can define themselves out of such responsibilities to a greater extent than can women; mothers and female relatives often do not have the same freedom of choice within socially acceptable forms (Holtan and Eriksen 2006).

The responsibility for the everyday care of grandchildren represents a break with a woman's 'normal biographic life cycle', i.e. the life cycle pattern which has been established in most Western societies (Gautan 2007). Grandmothers who are foster mothers are placed in a role as caretaking parents in a period of life when they would normally have more freedom to organise their own spare time and focus on their career. Cuddeback (2004) found that children in kinship foster care were less likely than children in non-kinship foster care to be reunited with their biological parents, with the consequence that kinship foster parents take care of and are responsible for the child for a longer period of time than non-kinship foster parents. This indicates that the disruption of the normal biographic life cycle is permanent for grandmothers who become foster mothers.

A finding in our study is that non-kinship foster families have an atypical family structure compared to the general population in that they are two-parent households far more often than families in general. Kinship foster families, in contrast, are similar to the population in general in that they have the same percentage of single

parents. This fact would have been overlooked if the analyses of kinship foster homes had been based on comparisons to the non-kinship group only. The child protection authorities' recruitment of traditional nuclear families is in accordance with the regulations of the Norwegian Child Welfare Act, which give priority to married/cohabitant couples (Barne- og familiedepartementet 2003). The approval of kinship foster families is based on the same criteria, but biological relations are more strongly emphasised than is family structure (Thørnblad, forthcoming).

International research indicates that kinship foster homes can be characterised as a class phenomenon, since it is in the sections of the population with relatively low education, low income and low labour-force participation that kinship foster families are most common (Sykes *et al.* 2002, Cuddeback 2004). The present study has shown that also in Norway, kinship foster mothers have a lower level of education than the average for the rest of the female population, and a lower household income than average, which may point to the class character of kinship foster homes. Another explanation may be that the average age for the sample of kinship foster mothers in our study was high, and that this may be why the level of education and thus also the income was lower than for the general female population.

One important goal of family and gender equality policy in Norway (as well as in the other Nordic countries) has been that it should be possible to combine family life, caretaking and (full time) labour-force participation. This has been enforced by the social welfare system through generous paid care leave, 'daddy leave', kindergarten, cash payment and other benefits. Despite this policy, part-time work in Norway as well as in EU-countries follows a female gendered pattern (Lewis 2002, p. 341). The percentage of labour-force participation for kinship foster mothers caring for children older than seven is the same as for the female population in general. Kinship foster mothers aged 35–55 with children younger than seven are less active in the labour force than are other women at the same age and with children in the same age group. One reason might be limited opportunities on the labour-force market as a consequence of the generally lower education of this group compared to the average. Another explanation may be that the responsibilities in caring for foster children are more challenging and time-consuming than taking care of one's own children, so that they may interfere with labour-force participation. It is not unusual that the Norwegian child-protection authorities recommend or demand that one of the foster parents stays at home with the child for a period of time. The fact that non-kinship foster mothers show high labour-force participation may indicate that their situation in some ways is diverse from kinship foster parents. Unlike non-kinship foster parents, the basis for kinship foster parents' responsibility for the child is that the child's parents, a son/daughter or brother/sister, has extensive drug and/or psychiatric problems. Most kinship foster parents have been – and continue to be – affected and strained by challenges related to this situation, which can reduce their capacity for labour-force participation.

The level of education, labour-force participation and income of kinship foster parents in Norway reflects a society that, as described by Daly and Rake (2003), is characterised by public welfare systems, relatively small class differences, and a high standard of living compared to, for instance, the USA and the UK. Nevertheless, kinship foster parents in Norway can be said to have some of the characteristics of the lower classes. All kinship foster homes in Norway are approved by the child-protection authorities and receive economic support and compensation. In addition, the child-protection authorities pay for the use of kindergarten and other arrangements for

foster children. This guarantees the foster families' standard of living, and the situation of kinship foster families thus reflects the general welfare level in society. This means that we do not find living conditions for kinship foster families in Norway like those described in studies from the USA (Minkler and Roe 1993, Boots and Geen 1999).

The socio-political priority of kinship foster family placements in large parts of the world has a gender aspect, and the focus on kinship foster families that is reflected in child-protection legislation in a number of countries has consequences for circumstances of life, especially for women in these families. There is reason to question whether an insistent policy to increase the use of kinship foster families includes a proper discussion and evaluation of the possible consequences for the women involved and their circumstances of life.

Our proposal is that social-welfare policies as well as social workers in practice need to take into account the consequences of kinship foster care for the relatives who take on a responsibility that is often a life-long commitment.

Limitation

The response rates of kinship foster parents (53%) and non-kinship caregivers (46%) were above the level of comparable studies, in which the response rate varies from 30% to 39% (Keller *et al.* 2001, Shore *et al.* 2002). The attrition rate should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample did not differ from those who did not participate concerning the age and gender of the children in their care or the type of kinship relation. One attrition bias might be that kinship foster parents who are struggling in their care might be less willing to participate than non-kinship foster parents. We do not know how the educational level or income level might affect the attrition rate. This possibility needs further research.

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