

The emergence of gender equality legislation in the Faroe Islands: A discursive study



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Hvussu javnstøðulóggáva varð til í Føroyum: Ein greining av diskursi

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Abstract

This article concerns the emergence of gender equality legislation and public discourse on gender equality in the Faroe Islands. The article examines which gender equality discourses and underlying gender ideologies are evident in the Faroe Islands. We commence our study in 1980, when public debate on gender equality legislation intensified. Methodologically, we apply critical discourse analysis in our analysis of newspaper articles, interviews, public documents, and parliamentary debates. Taking an island perspective, we examine tensions between being an island context, on the one hand, and being Nordic on the other. Three discourses emerged from our inductive analysis, which relate to certain time-periods: 1) *navigating the concept of gender equality in a religious small-island society*, 2) *gender equality in the context of (Faroese) identity* and 3) *the (ir)relevance of gender equality in the Faroe Islands*. In the discussion, we argue that gender equality ideologies have evolved and transformed over time in constant interaction with Faroese identity, islandness, and the outside world. We identify gender equality ideologies of *traditionalism*, *religious essentialism*, and *egalitarianism* in our early time period. Subsequently, more recent ideologies of *liberal egalitarianism*, *feminist egalitarianism*, *neotraditionalism* and *flexible egalitarianism* are identified.

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Úrtak

Greinin snýr seg um, hvussu javnstøðulógina varð til, og um almenna diskursin um kynjajavnstøðu í Føroyum. Greinin viðger hvørjir kynjajavnstøðudiskursar og undirliggjandi kynjahugsjónir eru sjónligar í Føroyum. Viðgerðin strekkir seg fra 1980, tá ið almenni diskursurin viðvíkjandi javnstøðulóggávu øktist. Vit nýta kritiska diskursanalsu til at greina tíðindablaðgreinar, samrøður, almenn skjøl og kjak á tingi. Frá einum oygghjálarmíði greina vit spenningin millum oygghjakontekstin øðrumegin og tann norðurlenska kontekstin hinumegin. Í tí induktivu viðgerðini eyðmerkja vit tríggjar diskursar, ið hvør sær knýta seg at ávísum tíðarskeiðum: 1) *navigering av kynjajavnstøðuhugtakinum í einum átrúnaðarligum smáoyggjasamfelag*, 2) *kynjajavnstøða úr einum (føroyskum) samleikakonteksti*, og 3) *týðningurin av kynjajavnstøðu í Føroyum*. Í kjakinum vísa vit á, at kynjajavnstøðuhugsjónir eru mentar og broyttar yvir tíð í áhaldandi ávirkan millum føroyska samleikan, oygghjakontekstin og tann ytra heimin. Í tí fyrra tíðarskeiðnum eyðmerkja vit hugsjónirnar *traditionalismu*, *átrúnaðarliga essentialismu* og *egalitarianismu*. Í tí seinna tíðarskeiðnum eyðmerkja vit hugsjónirnar *liberala egalitarianismu*, *feministiska egalitarianismu*, *neotraditionalismu* og *fleksibla egalitarianismu*.

Keywords: Gender equality, gender ideologies, critical discourse analysis, politicising gender, island studies, islandness, Nordic.

Leitorð: Kynjajavnstøða, kynjaideologiir, kritisk diskurs greining, politisering av kyni, oygghjagransking, islandness, norðurlenskur.

1. Introduction

For several decades, women’s rights and representation in society has been a key concern in the Nordic countries³, and integrating women into politics and the labour market has been a state-led project (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). In this sense, gender equality has become highly politicised. For a long time, the Nordic countries have collaborated on equality policies, even branding these globally (Larsen, 2021). The small island community of the Faroe Islands, however, has been labelled the “exception” within the Nordics as it is more traditional and more religious, despite the impact of secularisation in Faroese society and politics (Skorini et al., 2022; van Kersbergen & Lindberg, 2015).

Importantly though, gender equality is not a monolithic concept, it is ascribed diverse meanings and conceived variously within different political contexts (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007), also the Faroe Islands. Consequently, discourses of gender equality remain contested and a site of ongoing discursive struggle. From such struggles emerge diverse political visions, debates and policies pertaining to gender equality, which must be understood historically, geographically, and politically. In this paper, we examine the construction of gender equality as a

³ The Nordic countries are Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Finland, along with the autonomous areas of Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

politicised field in the small island context of the Faroe Islands. We centre our discussion on the emergence of a public debate calling for gender anti-discrimination legislation. The Gender Equality Act was adopted in 1994 (Gender Equality Act, 1994), it was, however, preceded by a lengthy and intense struggle driven primarily by the Faroese women's movement and three women MPs (the remaining 30 MPs were all men).

In 2018, some 25 years on, Minister Eyðgunn Samuelsen presented Parliament with a gender equality action plan for general debate to gauge parliamentary opinion on such an initiative. During the parliamentary debate one MP commented:

Because in reality there is gender equality in the Faroe Islands. And a lot of this is blown out of proportion. It is an ideology of a few people, who are trying to force some things on to all other Faroese people. And they don't want all this at all. That is the truth. And this [gender equality] will come by itself (Føroya løgting, 2018).

This comment represents a discursive strategy to position gender equality as a threat to Faroese society, as an ideology of the few. The gender equality action plan was not voted on, but merely tabled for general debate to gauge the sentiment in Parliament. Throughout the debate, a sentiment akin to the quote above was uttered in different versions by several other MPs, whilst those (predominantly women) favouring the policy document welcomed the action plan. Although the comment above is not representative of *all* Faroe Islanders, it nevertheless illuminates that gender equality remains contested in Faroese society.

We argue that to understand women's rights in the Faroe Islands today, it is necessary to analyse the conflicts and resistance surrounding gender equality historically. Specifically, we are interested in what ideologies underly discourses of gender equality as a politicised phenomenon. In this sense, gender ideologies involve the construction of meaning and cultural norms of women and men's roles and responsibilities in various spheres of society (Grunow et al., 2018). In this paper, we will take a historical-discursive approach to examining discourses of gender equality over time in the Faroe Islands. In other words, we will examine the climate in which women's rights emerged. Concretely, therefore, we ask: *In processes of gender equality legislation and policy in the Faroe Islands, what discourses and underlying ideologies are evident and how have these transformed over time?* To do so, we conduct a critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles spanning the time periods 1980-1999 and 2012-2022. The first period covers the period before, during and immediately after the Gender Equality Act (hereafter GEA) was passed (1980-1999) and a Gender Equality Committee established. The latter period is the most recent ten-year period (2012-22), which we used to gauge change. We, furthermore, draw on interview data,

parliamentary documents (bills and parliamentary committee reports), reports from the Gender Equality Committee, and parliamentary debates.

In what follows, we commence with a literature review, and then turn to our critical discourse analysis approach. We subsequently present our analysis, which starts with the historical context of gender equality legislation in the Faroe Islands. Our critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles is presented according to three discourses, which emerged from our analysis. This is followed by our discussion of underlying gender equality ideologies, and conclusion of the paper.

2. Literature Review

Our review of the literature commences with a discussion of gender equality legislation and egalitarianism. We subsequently discuss gender equality in the Nordic countries and the politicisation of parenthood, especially through the implementation of the Nordic model of welfare. Finally, and to provide a perspective of changing discourses, we briefly examine discourses of postfeminism and choice.

2.1. Gender equality: Towards egalitarianism

From a human rights perspective, the starting point for promoting gender equality norms is through anti-discrimination legislation, requiring men and women to be treated comparably in similar circumstances, unless there is a justification otherwise (Szczerba-Zawada & Burek, 2019). Supranational organisations have also played an important role, most notably by means of CEDAW (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979) and European Union (EU) central policies and directives. Nevertheless, our situated approach takes the perspective that global/international norms of gender equality are not appropriated at national or local levels unless they are locally inflected (Zwingel, 2012). Therefore, norms do not spread in a linear fashion. Rather, when actors in diverse contexts engage with global/international gender equality norms, these are translated, (re)defined and reproduced (Fejerskov et al., 2019).

Underpinning gender equality is an ideology of egalitarianism (Knight & Brinton, 2017), that is, a belief in the equality of human beings. Previously, gender ideologies have been conceptualised on a spectrum from traditionalism to egalitarianism, and it was assumed that movement along the spectrum would follow over time. From this perspective, cohort replacement, i.e. the replacement of older people in a population with younger people, is a significant driver of changes in ideology (van Damme & Pavlopoulos, 2022). However, more recently, cross-national studies have challenged the cohort replacement assumption. In these studies, it is argued that the unidimensional spectrum of traditional to egalitarian gender ideologies is too simplistic. This has led scholars to create

multidimensional gender ideology configurations (e.g. Dernberger & Pepin, 2020; Grunow et al., 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017; van Damme & Pavlopoulos, 2022), including research, which has examined how gender ideologies have changed over time (Scarborough et al., 2019).

Advances in gender equality over recent decades have given rise to intense debates concerning the shaping and implementation of labour market and welfare policies generally, and family policies specifically. These include wider discussions of the division of care labour, of fathering, mothering, and labour market participation (Brandth & Kvande, 2020). The Nordic countries have sought to distinguish themselves in this respect (Magnusson et al., 2008), most especially with respect to labour market and welfare policies, which we turn to now.

2.2. Gender equality policies in the Nordic countries

In the 1960s and 70s gender equality became a key political objective in the Nordic countries (Borchorst, 2006). Since then the Nordics, with their core values of egalitarianism, have promoted a particular kind of welfare; the Nordic model (Pedersen & Kuhnle, 2017). Underpinning this model are so called *women-friendly* policies and gender-inclusive citizenship, which in turn has defined Nordic feminism (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2014; Borchorst & Siim, 2008; Teigen & Skjeie, 2017).

In politicising parenthood, the Nordic states have drawn up policies to encourage the father's role in caregiving in a bid to foster a dual earner/dual carer model (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011). This has been especially evident in maternity/paternity leave schemes, which include non-transferable paid leave for fathers (Ellingsæter, 2014). Such parental leave policies are equality-promoting in that they redistribute care within the family, and they further what Brighthouse and Wright (2008) term *strong gender egalitarianism*. Despite variations within the Nordic countries, gender equality policies have emphasised equality of outcome, rather than merely equality of opportunity (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011).

The welfare system in the Faroe Islands is part of the Nordic model of welfare (Jákupsstovu, 2007; Sundström, 2006), which is perhaps not surprising given close Faroese ties to Denmark. Legislation is expressed in gender neutral language, as in the other Nordic countries (Lister, 2009). Furthermore, generous family policies and the state as a key provider of welfare services characterises the welfare landscape. Therefore, in the shaping of legislation and policies concerning gender equality in the Faroe Islands, being Nordic matters (Hayfield, 2020).

The Faroese labour market is characterised by high gender segregation by sector, in part-time work and high-ranking positions, which is similar to the other Nordic countries (Ellingsæter, 2013; Lanninger & Sundström, 2014; Wennemo & Sundström, 2014), albeit much more pronounced (Hayfield et al.,

2016). In terms of national politics, women's representation has reached 30 percent, whilst the Nordic countries range from 44 to 48 percent, except for Denmark at 41 percent (Løgtingið, 2023; Nordic Co-operation, 2022).

It has been argued that underlying gender segregation are confluences of egalitarianism, tradition, and gender essentialism (Hayfield, 2020; Hovgaard, 2015), which is the belief that gender differences are intrinsic, fixed, of a spiritual nature, and closely associated with physical/physiological differences (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Ellingsæter, 2013). Such perspectives hold that women and men naturally have different interests and preferences, and therefore make different choices (Hakim, 2006). Whilst feminism may always have embraced women's freedom to make choices; in more recent years, the entanglement of neoliberal and neoconservative values has led to a different understanding of choice – that of *choice feminism* (McRobbie, 2009).

2.3. Postfeminism and choice

In popular culture, responses to feminism and the so-called *stalled revolution*, have resulted in the association of gender equality with women's individually-driven solutions (Friedman, 2015). Gender equality has increasingly become depoliticised, and it is up to women themselves to be political individuals, if they so wish, unrestrained from structural or cultural barriers.

This shift to an internalised individualistic logic is often attributed to neoliberalism. From this perspective, feminism is shifting from a social movement to the responsibility of individuals – rather than governments (Colley & White, 2019). This has drawn criticism from feminists of a perception of the individual as free to make her own choices (Thwaites, 2017). More specifically, the critique questions and calls for a debate of the notion that women make choices, (relatively) free of structural constraints, not least because, when “...we allow every choice to be equal, there is no capacity to argue against one form of action and decision-making over another” (Thwaites, 2017, p. 57). This discourse of choice effectively stifles debate and equality sensibilities.

Conservative feminism, also termed *choice feminism* (Thwaites, 2017), resembles neoliberal feminism. It fosters the empowerment and agency of women, but disregards “the role of power, institutions, and resources, and the context in which choices are created and must be implemented” (Ylöstalo, 2022, p. 1340). From this perspective, women are encouraged and supported in making choices to inhabit and strengthen traditional gender roles.

Despite the centrality of gender equality in the Nordics, the discursive politics of individualised choice appear to be changing the context of public debate. Socio-democratic state interventions in the form of gender equality legislation and policy initiatives may therefore be viewed as less legitimate, and even meet with a backlash from anti-gender movements (Nygren et al., 2018), which have gained strength, e.g. in Poland and Italy. Such anti-gender movements pursue political and knowledge power arguing that gender equality policies and feminist

movements are a threat to the traditional family and call for the reconfiguration of gender knowledges (Korolczuk, 2020).

Notwithstanding ideological shifts, feminisms as a wide set of perspectives emerge and transform variously in diverse contexts. For the Faroese context, and our study, this entails a feminism, which is coloured by its setting in an island community. Islands require studying on their own terms (Baldacchino, 2008). Integral to this position is the concept of *islandness*, meaning that islands “do not merely reproduce on a manageable scale the dynamics and processes that exist elsewhere [rather] islandness becomes an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant, ways” (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278). Island feminism, according to Karides (2017), therefore applies islandness as a theoretical orientation to understand how feminism might be articulated differently on islands.

The origins of gender-unequal roles have been linked to historical capital advantages for men in production (e.g. physical strength) (Alesina et al., 2013). Although gender roles emerge in historical situations, studies have shown that they have a tendency to persist, or “stick” even after the situation has changed (Alesina et al., 2013; Giuliano, 2017). The argument put forward by Alesina et al. (2013) of male capital advantage can be applied to the historical situation of the Faroe Islands. In an archipelago the sea became the means of production. This did not fit well with women’s caring responsibilities, rendering them less mobile, bound to the home, and dependent on male production. The historical gender division of labour in the Faroe Islands was also further intensified by gender geographical segregation, as men worked long-distance for lengthy periods of time - months and even years. Hence, the intersection of history, situated identities, and geographical positioning determine island feminism. Our approach is, therefore, one which is island situated, in which we consider historical power relations, as well as current international gender equality norms (especially in Denmark and the Nordic countries).

3. Methodology

Our methodological approach is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of public discourse on gender equality in Faroese newspaper articles. The study centres on legislative context and formation of public policy and specifically, *what discourses and underlying ideologies are evident and how have these transformed over time?* Using the passing of the GEA of 1994 as our point of reference, we focus our attention on articles published in the surrounding time periods, specifically 1980-1999, and the more recent period of 2012-2022 for comparison. We consider the most recent decade to catch sight of any potential discursive change.

We commence with a brief description of our discourse-theoretical point of departure since CDA has been characterised by its “considerable semantic fuzziness” (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 7). In CDA, discourse is closely associated with power and one of its main objectives is uncovering how discourse plays into the power-structures of society, i.e., how societal inequalities based on gender, class, race etc., are constructed, re-constructed and maintained discursively (van Dijk, 2008). However, CDA does not provide the researcher with one specific theory or specific method of inquiry. Rather it provides a critical perspective and a set of principles for analysis (Meyer, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Our CDA framework builds on a discourse-historical approach (DHA) (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2017; Wodak et al., 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), which emphasises the importance of examining discourse in its sociopolitical and historical context. DHA aims to demystify the hegemonic power of dominant discourses and their underlying ideologies, which Wodak and Reisigl (2017, p. 88) describe as “...an (often) one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group”. Ideology serves as an important discursive tool for achieving hegemony, for instance by gate-keeping access to forming specific discourses in specific public spheres or by establishing hegemony through (often historical) identity narratives (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017).

To illustrate the underlying ideologies, we focus our attention on *what* is being put across (contents) and *how* it is being conveyed (discursive strategies) (Wodak et al., 2009). As for discursive strategy, we follow the definition provided by (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017) as a “...more or less intentional plan of practices [...] adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal” (p. 94). In this step, we examined which rhetorical and argumentative tools were used to gain an understanding of the overall strategies. The strategies reflect the resisting nature of the discourse; resistance towards existing power-structures on one hand and resistance towards change on the other.

We initially systematised our data by general characterisation (date, title, sender), political localisation of the newspaper, as well as assigning each article a theme and a set of keywords. By doing so we produced a schematic overview of the articles, which proved practical to identify recurring discursive themes. After the initial structuring, we conducted a more context and language-oriented *fine analysis*, involving a detailed analysis of a sample of articles, which are as typical as possible of the recurring discursive themes (Jäger, 2001). This step constitutes the foundation on which we primarily base our extended analysis in section five.

Early in structuring the data, it was clear that most of the articles could be grouped into a dichotomy of being *against* the GEA or *for* the GEA, which we argue represents a dominant-discourse and a counter-discourse, respectively (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977; Moussa & Scapp, 1996). A counter-discourse is the

resisting response to oppression, or as Moussa and Scapp (1996) argue, that which arises when those who are normally spoken for and spoken about begin to speak for themselves – in our case women. This categorisation of for-and-against mirrors the polarisation on the subject. The remaining articles, around one third of the dataset, could not be explicitly categorised as being either for or against. These were generally informative pieces and news articles. We do not focus our analytical efforts on these articles, because we are interested in the discursive struggle for hegemony. We do, however, mention these here, as they indicate that there was interest in the subject among the general public, and the subject was regarded as worth reporting.

Furthermore, we have grouped our analysis into time-periods relating to the adoption of the GEA in 1994. The time-periods emerged inductively as we structured our data by theme and intensity of the public discourse on gender equality. As will be further elaborated in section five, the time periods were indicative of the discursive landscape, mirroring the intensity marked by their immediacy to the passing of the GEA.

The analysis and findings of the study are based on 193 newspaper-articles of various types, ranging from editorials, profile articles, political campaign articles, as well as letters to the editor. Our reasoning for selecting newspaper articles is to capture the history of gender equality discourses. In the Faroe Islands, media is important for democratic debate, and is considered integral to protecting Faroese language and culture, a stance similar to those of the larger Nordic countries (Ravn-Højgaard et al., 2021). Traditionally, newspapers have played an important role in public debate in the Faroe Islands, however, with the rise of digital media, circulation has decreased substantially. Furthermore, the newspaper landscape is dominated by non-dailies (1-3 times per week) peaking in 1990 (8 non-dailies), then falling to 3 non-dailies between 2000 and 2018 (Ravn-Højgaard et al., 2021).

The newspapers used in this study were collected using three digital archives (Tiddarrit (a database of print media up to 1999), Sosialurin and Dimmalætting) of Faroese newspapers and searching for the keywords *kvinnurættindi* (women's rights), *javnstøða* (gender equality), *javnstøðunevnd* (gender equality committee) and *javnstøðulóg* (GEA). Before turning to our analysis of newspaper articles, we provide the historical context in which the GEA was debated and politicised. Besides newspaper articles, we examined the legislative process of the GEA, including official documents e.g., the annual reports of the Gender Equality Committee (GEC), parliamentary committees documents, bills tabled in Parliament, and audio files of the 2018 gender equality action plan debate in parliament. In addition, we conducted and transcribed nine background interviews with informants, including current and former MPs and ministers responsible for gender equality, as well as past chairs of the GEC.

We acknowledge that by limiting ourselves to print medium for our CDA (section five), we omit the electronic mediums of radio, television, and social media. From our observations, we have found a significant rise in debates on social media concerning gender equality ideologies. However, there is ample evidence that social media tends to lead to more fragmented and polarised debates, as information is funnelled to certain groups and promotes “dysfunctional group dynamics” (Iandoli et al., 2021, p. 9). Furthermore, Iandoli et al. point out that social media platforms tend to be poorly regulated and are consequently less credible information sources. Therefore, whilst important, we argue that social media may represent a different form of debate. Moreover, including social media would require a different methodological approach in terms of data selection, extraction, and potential biases which is beyond the scope of this paper.

4. Historical context of Gender Equality Legislation

This section is based mainly on parliamentary debates, legislative documents, reports from the Gender Equality Committee (GEC), and interview data. Below we present in brief the sociopolitical, geographical and historical context as it preceded, evolved and transformed before, during and after the passing of the GEA of 1994.

Although geographically remote from Denmark, the Faroe Islands was until 1948 a Danish county, after which it became a self-governing entity within the Danish Kingdom. The continuous navigation of postcolonial relations with Denmark, and identification with other Nordics, we argue, are pivotal to grasp gender equality discourses and policies in the Faroe Islands.

Post 1948 authority over legislative and administrative fields was gradually transferred to the Faroese Parliament. Yet, Danish influence remains clearly evident in Faroese legislation, public institutions and public policy (Larsen, 2022). The Nordics generally, and Denmark especially, are highly present in the historical and present realities of the Faroe Islands. Notwithstanding the Nordic influence, the Faroe Islands’ political discursive context is highly dominated by being an island community, reliant upon the sea for fishing and mobility (Hayfield, 2020). In discourse fishers and skippers are hailed as epic heroes, who, through their bravery and self-sacrifice, are the foundation of society (Absalonsen, 2012). Historically, most men were long-distance workers (and many still are), consequently, there was a clear-cut gendered division of labour with absent men, and women as caretakers and homemakers.

4.1. Faroese women in political life

Faroese women gained voting rights in 1916, however, it was not until 1964 that the first woman took a seat in Parliament, deputising for the first-elected member (Tingakrossur, 1964). Much later, in 1978, two women were directly

elected into Parliament (Klettskarð, 2002), in addition to another who deputised for a period. These three women became instrumental in pushing for gender equality legislation. A brief overview of the development of women’s rights and representation in the Faroe Islands is presented below. These events will be referred to throughout the remainder of section four.

Table 1: Milestones in the history of women’s rights and GEA

Year	Legislation/key events	Comments
1916	Women gained political voting rights	Following Danish constitutional change in 1915 granting women voting rights, the Danish Parliament presented Faroese Parliament with a bill for women’s political voting rights.
1964	First woman in Parliament	Malla Samuelson, deputy for first-elected
1978	Two women directly elected to Parliament	Jona Henriksen and Karin Kjølbroy. Additionally, Ingrid Sondum deputised during this electoral period.
1981	Gender Equality Committee (GEC) established	GEC had no powers, only advisory function.
1988	Gender equality bill presented to Parliament	Not passed
1993	GEA passed by Parliament	Came into force in 1994, also conferring powers on GEC.
1996	Bill to restrict remit of GEA	Not passed
2018	Gender Equality Policy and Action Plan presented to Parliament for general debate	Not voted on in Parliament, the general debate (similar to white paper) has the function of gauging the political stance on certain issues.

The work of women in Parliament at the time was strongly associated with the Faroese women’s movement. In the 1970s Faroese women living in Copenhagen, heavily inspired by the Danish feminist movement, started organising and forming groups (Johannesen, 2011). These women subsequently brought back to the Faroe Islands a different gender equality awareness. Amongst these was Karin Kjølbroy, MP, who had become concerned with gender equality whilst living in Denmark, and later put gender equality on the parliamentary agenda. Looking back on this period Karin Kjølbroy states:

And women's rights had also been addressed in the UN. In all parliaments they had got a gender equality act or a gender equity act, in the whole of Scandinavia. It was only we who did not have one. So, I was very interested in us getting one and in proposing such a bill. (Interview, Karin Kjølbro, Sept. 2022).

In 1979 a Proposal for Parliamentary Resolution was tabled in Parliament by three women, Ingrid Sondum, Jona Henriksen, and Karin Kjølbro, for the establishment of a GEC (*Uppskot Til Samtyktar Um Setan Av Javnstøðunevnd*, 1979). The aim of such a committee was to advise authorities on necessary initiatives to promote gender equality in the labour market and society in general. This was passed with 26 (of 32 MPs in Parliament) votes in favour, however, the GEC was not established until 1981.

4.2. Gender equality legislation

In 1987 the Danish High Commissioner in the Faroe Islands requested that the Faroese Government present to Parliament a resolution on the UN convention, CEDAW, an example of how the Danish position on gender equality influenced Faroese politics. The Parliamentary Rules Committee argued in a short written proposal to Parliament, which was passed (19 of 31 MPs voted for the resolution), that "... gender equality between the sexes is an obvious aspect of all democratic politics" (*Uppskot Til Samtyktar Um at Lýsa ST-Sáttmálan (CEDAW) Frá 18. Desember 1979*). CEDAW and later the Optional Protocol were voted through Parliament with 19 (of 32) votes in favour (*Uppskot Til Samtyktar Um Ískoyttissáttmála Sameindu Tjóða*, 2000).

In 1988 a gender equality bill was put before Parliament by Minister Vilhelm Johannesen of the Social Democratic Party (*Uppskot Til Løgtingslóg Um Javnstøðu Millum Kvinnur Og Menn*, 1988). In its comments on the bill, the Parliamentary Rules Committee stated that:

The committee minority (Jógvan Sundstein [People's Party]) argues that Faroese society, by law and through custom, has both equal rights and equality between men and women. In the parliamentary discussion it has been argued that we have equal rights, but not equality. This is, according to the committee minority incorrect, because equality is a consequence of equal rights to the extent that women **use** [our emphasis] their right, from which follows that they have equality and vice versa. (p. 389)

The committee minority statement appears to argue that women themselves were responsible for gender inequality in practices in Faroese society. Ultimately, and despite a (rules) committee majority *for* the bill, when it was returned to Parliament, the bill did not pass (a minority of 15 of 31 MPs voted in favour). Gender equality continued to cause political tension, to the extent that it

was a major factor in the dissolution of Parliament later in 1988. The *Christian's People's Party* left the collation, strongly opposing both the gender equality bill and a bill to criminalise discrimination based on sexual orientation (Sosialurin, 2021).

In 1993 the gender equality bill was again brought before Parliament, and this time it passed with 18 of 32 MPs in favour (Gender Equality Act, 1994). The bill's comments section contains extensive reference to gender equality elsewhere, including CEDAW, the EU, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, which is a clear indication of the importance of developments in the outside world in arguing for the Act. One argument refers to CEDAW, and the comments on the bill state that: "Based on a legal perspective, the UN Convention of 1979 [CEDAW] has not been met, or in any way adhered to, by ascertaining formal equal rights between the sexes" (*Uppskot Til Løgtingslóg Um Javnstøðu Millum Kvinnur Og Menn*, 1993, p. 678). In other words, despite passing a resolution on CEDAW in 1987, no action had been taken in the intervening years.

The GEA mainly refers to the labour market, the gender composition of public committees and councils, as well as ensuring that education material corresponds to gender equality ideals. Furthermore, the GEA stipulates that a GEC be established. In contrast to the earlier GEC of the 1980s, the GEC was assigned responsibilities and the authority of institutional monitoring. In working within the provisions of the GEA, the GEC promotes gender equality, monitors adherence to the GEA and provides recommendations to society at large (§ 9). The GEC is elected for a four-year period and has a limited budget. Furthermore, the GEC is not authorised to issue fines or penalties but can refer cases to court.

4.3. The politics of gender equality post-1994

In 1996 a bill was proposed to restrict the remit of the GEA concerning teaching materials. In the comments, Jenis av Rana (the religious *Centre Party*) states that few agree that gender discrimination takes place in the Faroe Islands. He further adds that although he believes in abolishing the GEA, the aim of the bill was "...to remove or amend unsuitable and outright harmful paragraphs, and in other cases completely remove, in our opinion, completely unnecessary sections of the Act" (*Uppskot Til Løgtingslóg Um Broyting í Løgtingslóg Um Javnstøðu Millum Kvinnur Og Menn*, 1996, p. 374). The bill did not pass with only seven (of 32) votes in favour.

Since 1994 there have been eight GECs and, correspondingly, eight chairs. The GEC produces an annual report highlighting focus areas, GEC activities, and cases considered during the year. From our interviews and some GEC annual reports, we found that the GEC enjoys limited political support, although this varies with the political ideology of the reigning coalition. It was also clear from our interviews and annual reports, that Nordic cooperation is an immensely important part of the GEC work. The Nordic context provides knowledge and a

policy context with inspiration and important tools for influencing policymaking in the Faroe Islands.

Family policies akin to the Nordic welfare model have been promoted in the Faroe Islands. In 2000 a paid parental leave system was established to enable women's labour market participation. Other family policy instruments include widely available and publicly funded childcare and eldercare. However, the parental leave system was always intended to be a women-oriented policy, despite the GEC persistently advocating for ear-marked paternity leave (Hayfield, 2020). Later bills to increase ear-marked leave for fathers were met with resistance in Parliament and did not pass. Thus, the dual-earner/dual-carer labour market model has not been promoted in Faroese society. Parliamentary discourses have centred on women as natural carers, upholding the primacy of men's work. The emphasis was on women/family choices regarding division of care-labour, without state interference. Furthermore, debates have continuously highlighted the centrality of family in the Faroe Islands (Hayfield, 2020).

The first (and so far only) gender equality action plan of 2018 encompassed a range of initiatives, including awareness of gender equality, gender equality on the labour market, and men and gender equality (Almannamálaráðið, 2018). In the extract below, the then Minister for Gender Equality reflected on the parliamentary debate:

ES: I tried to make this [action plan] as much of a compromise as I possibly could... and if it was up to me, it would have contained even more impactful initiatives. So, I got quite a shock when I was in Parliament [for the debate] because it [action plan] was slammed down.

Interviewer: Had you not expected that?

ES: Well, I knew they [most male MPs in 2018] were very conservative... But I expected to get more criticism from those that were very leftwing in the coalition – for the policy plan not going far enough... But the debate centred on this being an attempt to overturn traditional society. They also pushed this point because the plan included references to changing traditional society. [They argued that] this was a sneaky and manipulative method of going in and changing patriarchal structures. But it was precisely not that. It was a lot about awareness, and about men, and that one should introduce various initiatives already in childcare institutions. (Interview, Eyðgunn Samuelsen, Sept. 2022)

The extract above highlights how discourses of resistance become explicit when concrete policies are presented in Parliament. We therefore conclude, thus far, that gender equality in the Faroe Islands must be understood in its historical context and remains contested. This we attribute, at least in part, to Faroese-ness

as situated in tension – of identifying as a traditional island fisheries-based society, and at the same time identifying with the egalitarian-oriented Nordic context. Normative boundaries cannot be placed around the Faroe Islands as gender equality norms are constantly being constructed through Faroese interrelations within the Nordic family. Furthermore, the strong gender equality norms of the Nordic countries have acquired regional and global legitimacy, which Faroese politicians have either found unwilling or difficult to ignore. Therefore, as the Faroese engage with international/regional gender equality norms, these are shaped locally through a multi-level process of interaction. Such interaction includes identity relations, geography, time (history), and the Faroese normative environment, which new norms are being moulded into (Fejerskov et al., 2019).

5. Critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles

Our CDA commences with the 1980-89 period, during which a gender equality committee was established (1981), CEDAW was passed, and a gender equality bill fell in Parliament. The second period, 1990-1999, comprises the years prior to and after the passing of the GEA of 1994, and as the new GEC started operating. The third period, 2012-2022, brings us to the present time, twenty-five years after the GEA was passed.

The concrete GEA proposals of 1988 and 1994 have likely compelled people to take a position. Faced with change, people positioned themselves either for or against. The public discourse on gender equality in Faroese written media can therefore be described as an ongoing, dynamic hegemonic struggle between two contrasting discourses. On one side, we identified a dominant discourse of unnecessary of the GEA and resistance to change, and on the other side, a counter-discourse of necessity of the GEA and demand for change.

In the context of the Faroese small island community, the debate culture and its social repercussions can make it difficult to voice one's position, especially if that position stands in opposition to the dominant discourse (Hayfield, 2022). We argue that the dominant discourse, largely rooted in religion and traditionalism, holds historical hegemony. This owes to the status of Christianity, with more than 90% of the population identifying as Christian (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2014), as well as the historical gender-divide in the private and public sphere. This is consistent with a recent study, which found that the importance of religion in people's lives correlates with traditional views on gender equality and negatively correlates with support for active gender equality policies (Hayfield et al., 2023).

5.1. Navigating the concept of gender equality in a religious small island-society (1980-1989)

In the 1980-1989 pre-GEA period, the dominant discourse was largely characterised by a notion of fear of disrupting existing structures. This fear was highlighted by a potential GEA being portrayed as a threat towards religious, family, education, and even democratic institutions. A key characteristic of the dominant discourse was its reliance on religious argumentation and use of biblical referencing, a powerful discursive strategy in a society characterised by high levels of religiosity.

However, the explicit use of biblical interpretation presents a challenge of definition for public discourse on gender equality, i.e., there are signs of conflicting understandings of gender equality between the dominant discourse and the counter discourse. Gender equality as such, according to the dominant discourse, is not necessarily something to strive for. On the contrary, the 1988 bill proposing a GEA is regarded as incompatible with the Bible. Several articles highlight how a GEA would directly contradict the Education Act, which states that schools should provide pupils with a Christian upbringing. One article, for instance, argues that since the bill stipulates that all education material should prevent gender discrimination, *the Bible would not pass as suitable education material since the Bible states that the 'Man is head of the woman'* (Anonymous, letter to the Editor, April 12th, 1988: 9).

As for the GEA's alleged incompatibility with the Bible, another article problematises that the GEA would be woven into children's minds from kindergarten and all the way up, affecting children so much that they will not know how to value the principles of the Bible (á Lakjuni, letter to the Editor, August 31st, 1988, p. 20). In this way, the potential damage of a GEA towards existing social institutions is used as a scare-tactic deeply rooted in a Christian worldview.

The dominant discourse principally uses a rhetoric of idealised norms, referring to imagined scenarios of *what if*, as well as building narratives of moral decline. By using the education system and the traditional family as examples, the GEA is portrayed as anti-Christian and disrupting of traditional values. The following excerpt illustrates this direct biblical deduction:

That the Creator made the man the head of the woman, just like he made Christ the head of the congregation, that is not something we can change even if we try to object with every thinkable and unthinkable conversive finesse (Anonymous, letter to the Editor, 1992, p. 13).

In the Faroese context, the use of the Bible has been discursively powerful. Since counter-speech could easily be interpreted as anti-Christian, it is conceivable that some have remained silent in fear of the social repercussions e.g., exclusion from social or religious communities.

The discourse of threat to existing structures is disputed by the counter-discourse, which emphasises the need for change to achieve gender equality. The counter-discourse relies on comparison to other Nordic countries, as well as actual examples of gender discrimination in the contemporary Faroese context. E.g., the case of a woman vicar denied access to preach on account of her gender, and the case of a woman applicant rejected for a leadership-position because the position *demanded authority* (Henriksen, 1987, p. 23), resulting in a male applicant securing the position.

At this time, the counter-discourse of gender equality was in its initial stages of definition and positioning in the collective Faroese consciousness. Yet the fundamental discrepancy in understanding between the dominant and the counter-discourse, led to it becoming more about *protecting* gender equality from being labelled blasphemous and anti-Christian, which is illustrated by the following excerpt from a letter to the editor by the Chair of the (pre-GEA) GEC:

Just the word “equality” seems to throw people off, as if it is something threatening and dangerous, something unchristian. As if it were to become reality, it would cause an avalanche in society. Equality simply means that all people should have equal rights and equal opportunities to work, for development and for culture. Everything else is a distortion of reality [...] To be against gender equality is to be against democracy (Joensen, 1988, p. 16).

This response indicates frustration in its attempt at counter-speech against the dominant discourse of threat and disruption. The counter-discourse subsequently drew more actively on arguments outlining how gender equality is compatible with biblical compassion and love. It is important to bear in mind that this debate was taking place in a society in which, historically, a majority of the male population were fishers. The condition of living in a remote island community with rough seas, severe weather and harsh working conditions where tragic losses at sea were not uncommon has, historically, demanded existential comfort, which for many came in the form of a “radical” Christianity (Skorini et al., 2022, pp. 104–105). These losses and discourses of fishers as heroes (Absalonsen, 2012), remain evident in the dominant discourse, which argues for respect for this way of life. The discourse demands that histories of Faroese men risking their lives to provide for families must not be marginalised, highlighting the difference between the fate of the genders.

5.2. Gender equality in the context of (Faroese) identity (1990-1999):

In the period around the passing of the GEA, the debate on both sides intensified, indicated by expressions of anger and frustration. The incongruity in differing meanings ascribed to gender equality became more pronounced. It proved especially evident in the context of traditional Faroese identity and gender roles, a recurring theme during the period. This topic is largely

constructed around the historical narrative of men risking life at sea to provide for their families, while women were at home caretaking and housekeeping. Interestingly, this is most evident in letters to the editor written by women. These writings often implicitly shame other women for demanding equality. This is done either by emphasising how men have worked harder and, therefore, are more deserving of a higher salary, or by pointing out how women of the past faced greater hardship, suggesting that today's women are ungrateful or even pathetic, as one article states:

It is pathetic of women if the GEA should be the only way to make women competent for a job [...] If you, as a woman, use the GEA to promote yourself as a woman, then the debate on gender equality has run off-track (Quote from interview by journalist Turið Kjølbro, 1998, p. 16).

This shaming perspective is especially evident shortly after the GEA passed, sometimes with a hint of mockery. Such positions of mockery include allusions to the satisfied, strong women of the past, who got by without help from a GEA, others portray negative images of dissatisfied and demanding *Redstockings* (Danish left-wing feminists). One article declares that women of the past *...did not need any GEA or women's rights movement to get by! No, they rallied in stillness, rolled up their sleeves and did a man's work both in the infield and the outfield* (Olsen, 1994, p. 20).

Discourses of the island context are highly present in the articles, through historical narratives, cultural ideals, Christianity, the seafaring nation, and traditional gender roles – illustrating the centrality of sociocultural history and geography in discourse. This indicates that national (island) identity is significant in the normative ideal of gendered segregation, rooted in a traditional understanding of Faroese-ness, and more specifically, what it means to be a man and a woman in the Faroese context.

Another recurring theme in this period is that of equality of opportunity. By challenging the perspective of un-necessity, the counter-discourse highlighted aspects of society in which there *is* a need for policy to ensure equality for women. This discursive dimension clearly emerges from frustrations over the apparent unwillingness to regard the struggle for gender equality as a *real* problem, and is especially evident in responses to biblical and religious argumentation. One example is a response from the Chair of the GEC to two Christian parties (*Christian People's Party and Centre Party*) in Parliament, which demand that *either* the GEA be abolished, *or* the abortion legislation be rolled back to its more restrictive form (women would need to have abortions abroad). In response to this ultimatum, the GEC Chair in a letter to the editor writes: *I am sick and tired of these people with the Bible in their hand pretending to know what is best for humanity* (Hentze, letter to the Editor, 1994, p. 19).

At this point resistance in both discourses is more concentrated and centres on the GEA itself. It is evident that having a concrete proposal as a reference point provides common ground for the public discourse. However, though both discourses refer to the same proposal, they are still each rooted in their own ideological standpoint, which leads to the intensification of the discursive struggle.

The dominant discourse still relies on tradition and religion as essential argumentation against the GEA. This can be interpreted as a strategy of reproduction, or resistance to the change movement's focus on transforming hegemonic social structures. The counter-discourse, on the other hand, leans more towards the constructionist, transformative strategy. The focus is on challenging existing power-structures and re-defining societal structures, normative gender roles and built-in inequalities.

In Faroese society, the discursive struggle to define gender equality either as something dangerous and unnecessary, or as something desirable and necessary, should be understood through the lenses of islandness and historical gender-divisions (Hayfield, 2020; Hovgaard, 2015). This labour and geographical gender segregation may be instrumental in the dominant discourse promoting gender equality as a non-issue, since men and women have had different and important roles to fulfil. The emphasis on the historical context and traditional gender roles could also explain the discursive resistance in the form of mockery and unnecessary, which is evident in the strategy of undermining the counter-discourse of necessity.

5.3. Discourse of (ir)relevance of gender equality in the Faroe Islands (2012-2022)

In the more recent articles, it appears that the contested nature of gender equality in public debate has died down and/or is not being addressed. Furthermore, the digitalisation of media, restructuring, and financial crisis in print media have led to fewer newspapers on the Faroese market. Therefore, some debate may have moved to other platforms. Notwithstanding the new media reality, there is a general silence on the issue of gender equality. Also, what has become the *former* dominant discourse mainly emerges in the public realm of parliamentary debate. We refer to it as former, partly because the discourse is less powerful, and because it has undergone change. Its utterances are now grounded in different arguments, are rarely explicitly biblical, but centre mainly on traditional family values. In other words, some of the same arguments have now emerged in a more secularised fashion.

News articles addressing gender equality are generally longer pieces. These tend to either summarise election results, pointing out the underrepresentation of women, or are profile articles focusing on individual women, and how they make sense of gender equality. Since the year 2012, thirteen profile articles

about women, in which gender equality is mentioned, emerged in the dataset for this study, and, in comparison, zero articles about men on this topic.

Two profile articles from 2015 provide an example of the contemporary state of the discourse on gender equality in newspapers. At the time of publication, one of the women profiled was CEO of the Faroese airline, Atlantic Airways, and the other, Director of the Faroese Employer's Association. Both articles initially focus on career and backstory, before they eventually steer onto the theme of work-life balance and the subject of being women. As stated in the article about the CEO of Atlantic Airways, she *is not eager to talk about gender equality in the workplace* (Hansen, 2015b, p. 35), after which the interviewer asks if she has ever considered working part-time. In the other article, the Director of the Faroese Employer's Association is asked explicitly: *Don't you find it especially difficult to hold a position with such responsibilities whilst having a household and children?* (Hansen, 2015a, p. 26). There is a clear tendency in these examples, and in the articles generally, to treat gender equality as a concern for women to speak out on, rather than as a societal issue relevant to both men and women.

The push *for* gender equality, on the other hand, comes mainly from GEC press releases, reports on GEC activities, as well as news editorial, including by the editor of the newspaper *Sosialurin*, who has several leaders on the subject. Furthermore, gender equality in newspaper editorial has become somewhat time-specific, i.e., 8th March (International Women's Day) content. Compared to previous periods, however, the lack of explicit contestation of gender equality is evident, and writings are mostly one-sided calls for equality from the counter-discourse.

It would appear that gender equality is no longer contested outright, and it is no longer legitimate to argue against gender equality in itself, implying that the counter-discourse has become a legitimate discourse. Importantly though, the debate on gender equality is evident during this period, but without much explicit use of the term gender equality. As we have previously pointed out (section four), the former dominant discourse emerges, sometimes passionately, in parliamentary debates concerning the politicisation of family roles. These debates concern the division of care labour, e.g. ear-marked leave for fathers, stay-at-home care allowances, and the gender equality action plan debate. In these debates the arguments against politicising parenthood centre around individual and family choice, promote discourses of women as natural carers, and the primacy of men's work (Hayfield, 2020).

In terms of hegemonic power to shape discourse and define gender equality, there are indications that a recent shift has occurred since the establishment of the GEC. The struggle is still evident, but it is mostly one-sided calls for equality and conflicting ideas on how to achieve it. The lack of perspectives reflecting the former dominant discourse indicate a reluctance to speak explicitly *against* gender equality today, just as the general public was reluctant to speak *for* gender equality between 1980 and 1999. One could argue that the perspective

of gender equality as something necessary in a modern society has reached discursive hegemony, in the sense that it is not regarded as appropriate to speak against gender equality. It might therefore be a discursive strategy of avoidance. In other words, the debate for the former dominant discourse no longer contests gender equality in itself. Rather, the focus is on how it is concretely shaped, e.g., in the work and family context. The discourse on gender equality in the Faroese newspaper context can therefore be described as having reached a point of legitimacy in which there are neither explicit signs of progress, nor regression.

6. Discussion

Referring back to our research question, we set out to examine what discourses and underlying ideologies were evident in processes of gender equality legislation and policy in the Faroe Islands. To answer this, we commence our discussion by bringing together key findings and how discourses have changed over time. We subsequently discuss underlying ideologies before concluding the paper.

6.1. Discourses of 1980-1999

Our analyses of the historical context and newspaper articles illustrates that discourses of gender equality remain contested today, though they have undergone transformations and evolved over time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the focus was on defining gender equality in a Faroese context. Prior to this, gender equality was a non-issue and, therefore, not politicised. The dominant discourse constructed gender equality as incompatible with Faroese religious values. Consequently, much struggle centred on gender equality being at odds with the Bible. At the same time, the counter-discourse emphasised, also using the Bible, that gender equality *is* compatible with biblical compassion and neighbourly love, as well as being about basic human rights. The injection of the secular-religious schism into political debate, including contestation over biblical interpretation, resonates with findings by van Kersbergen and Lindberg (2015) in their analysis of morality in policies concerning LGBT issues in the Faroe Islands. In other words, both the dominant discourse and counter-discourse use the Bible as part of their argument.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the GEA edged ever closer to becoming a reality with the bills tabled in Parliament (1988 and 1994). As a result, the debate intensified and revolved around Faroese identity. On the one hand the GEA was positioned as a threat to Christianity and the traditional fisheries-based society, and by implication gender roles. The argument being that women and men are separate and already enjoy mutual respect and equality. On the other hand, the counter-discourse highlighted prevailing gender inequalities, emphasising that progress and Faroesehood are about egalitarianism, essential characteristics of belonging to the Nordics.

6.2. Discourses of 2012-2022

In the later, and more current, 2012-2022 articles, one important underlying discourse is that gender equality means equality of opportunity by law. There are deemed to be no legal barriers for women or men to make choices as they see fit, in all realms of society. Therefore, further political intervention is positioned as unnecessary and undesirable. This discourse is located in a current reality in which women are highly active on the labour market (Statistics Faroe Islands, 2022), which has brought about a change in gender norms.

Although gender equality appears to be less contested in the 2012-2022 articles, it is regularly advocated for, often by the GEC, and through news articles on women's representation. Contestations of gender equality, and men's participation in domestic care, however, become evident mostly in parliamentary debates. Yet, in print media the former dominant discourse appears non-respondent to the counter-discourse.

Notwithstanding these shifts, it is evident that the former dominant discourse has undergone change. Gender equality is no longer denied legitimacy per se. However, its meaning and direction is contested. Discourses no longer position gender equality as being explicitly unbiblical but are performed in a secularised manner. Furthermore, the idea of egalitarian relations between men and women is not directly contested, although there are clear signs that parliamentary debates are rooted in tradition and the Bible (van Kersbergen & Lindberg, 2015). Rather, a changed former dominant discourse has emerged. This discourse positions gender equality as that which is accomplished, albeit with the understanding that gender roles should be practiced in a nuclear family context. Women's labour market participation is welcome, valued and even necessary, but the predominance of men's work endures (Hayfield, 2020). As the welfare sector has grown, the labour market has been feminised and work-life balance is for many families practiced through women's part-time work (Hayfield et al., 2016). This, we suggest, represents a revised version of the former dominant discourse, having become less dominant, and which we now label the *opposing discourse*.

In the 2012-22 articles, the former *counter-discourse* pursues gender equality along a similar trajectory as in earlier times. It maintains a language of progress and rights and pushes for gender-consciousness. However, the emphasis has intensified on a range of issues pertaining to equality of outcome. These include women's (under)representation in politics, other leading positions, and the segregated labour market. Another pertinent issue emphasised by the former counter-discourse is that of care labour, which entails increasing men's and fathers' involvement in caring roles, e.g., through paternity leave. Furthermore, gender equality is also increasingly positioned as an issue for men (e.g., through

the gender equality action plan), and as a societal issue in general. However, the discourse *for* gender equality arguably remains a form of counter-discourse, in the sense that it positions itself as addressing inequalities and pushing for change. This is evident in its ongoing struggle for changing societal gender norms. Furthermore, the focus of the former counter-discourse is on equality of outcome (representation) rather than limited to equality of opportunity by law, a characteristic of the opposing discourse. However, owing to the legitimacy the former counter-discourse has gained in this later period, we now refer to it as the *established counter-discourse*.

6.3. Gender ideologies in Faroese public discourse

As we have demonstrated, gender equality discourses are shaped in sites of tension. The context for such tension, on the one hand, emerges from a strong island identity reliant on the sea, and from traditional (Christian) gender roles. On the other hand, the sense of belonging to the Nordics, and especially the strength of (postcolonial) ties to Denmark, have heavily influenced institutional structuring (Larsen, 2022). This brings us to the issue of gender ideologies, which we identified in our data. Our gender ideologies (see figure 1 below) derive in part from previous literature, with some meanings partially adjusted, taking account of the Faroese context. In other cases, we have coined ideological profiles based on how these emerged from our analysis.

Figure 1: Gender ideologies

	Dominant discourse	Counter-discourse
1980 – 1999	Traditionalism	
	Religious essentialism	Egalitarianism
	Opposing discourse	Established counter-discourse
2012 – 2022	Neotraditionalism	Liberal egalitarianism
	Flexible egalitarianism	Feminist egalitarianism

6.3.1. Gender ideologies 1980-1999

Our analysis indicates that in the early discourses (1980-1999) we found three underlying ideologies, two versions of the dominant discourse and one of the counter-discourse. The first is *traditionalism*, which we define as gender attitudes rooted in tradition and resisting changes in gender roles. In the Faroese context we find this to be associated with an essentialist view of women and men. Essentialism in this first version implies different, yet, as some of the arguments

go, complimentary gender roles. These gender roles emerge from histories of practiced gender segregation, at work and within the household.

The second ideology, underlying the dominant discourse, we coin *religious essentialism*. This gender ideology differs in some respects from that of traditionalism, because the essentialist nature of gender derives from interpretations of a religious essence of women and men. From this perspective, women and men are not portrayed as equals, and opposition to the GEA emerges primarily from its perceived incompatibility with the Bible. Therefore, discourses with an underlying religious essentialism, we argue, tend to promote restrictive gender norms. Others have also demonstrated a relationship between religiosity and gender (in)equality. E.g. Schnabel (2016) found that the least equal countries have the most religious people, also when taking account of forms of religion and country developmental level. Importantly though, despite our presenting two versions of the dominant discourse, these often conflate.

The third ideology, that of *egalitarianism*, represents the counter-discourse. Being as it was in its early stage of development, gender equality ideology is promoted as important in its own right. We have not found distinguishable versions of egalitarianism in our data in these early years – as we did in the later period. This might also be attributed to the few advocates of egalitarianism in Faroese newspapers during the 1980-1999 period, who were generally woman politicians or belonged to the women’s movement. This is consistent with other literature, which highlights that social movement domains tend to expand over time, as inequalities are highlighted and become documented (Jenness, 1995). In other words, in these early years, the domain of inequality was mostly limited to promoting gender equality legislation. Whilst there may be more complex gender ideologies at play, they were not voiced, at least not in our data. Hence, egalitarianism in this earlier period was put across through a language of rights, of progress and equal value.

As we have previously pointed out, historical gender relations originate in specific historical situations. For the Faroe Islands, being (remote) islands and historically dependent on fishing as subsistence and economy, has led to a strong spatial and labour-related gender segregation. From such segregation emerge cultural norms, which position the sphere of women as naturally connected to the home. At the same time, the historical danger associated with working at sea positions men’s work as more valuable and legitimate (Absalonsen, 2012; Hayfield, 2020). The origins of gender roles are, as Alesina et al. (2013) argue, extremely “sticky” and persist over time, even after societal conditions change.

6.3.2. *Gender ideologies 2012-2022*

Turning our attention to gender ideologies of the latter period, our analysis suggests that the GEA has reached a state of legitimacy, even though some

opposing voices are still discernible. We argue that egalitarianism, despite being present in several versions, is widespread in Faroese society today. It is therefore not a monolithic concept, having undergone change from our earlier periods. In some respects, the concept of gender (in)equality has undergone *creep* (Haslam et al., 2020), i.e. it has been expanded upon and/or adopted by new actors as we shall see below. We identified four ideological versions of egalitarianism in this latter time period, which represent quite different understandings of what egalitarianism might be. We find the concept to apply to a wider spectrum of perspectives, which also portrays the multidimensionality of gender equality (Grunow et al., 2018). These versions, we acknowledge, are a simplification of a complex reality. However, for analytic purposes, we present these below.

In comparison to our earlier period, we now identify two ideologies, which we broadly associate with the established counter-discourse. The first type, *liberal egalitarianism* (Knight & Brinton, 2017), strongly supports egalitarian gender roles. From this discourse standpoint, the underrepresentation of women in public life is considered problematic and these discourses disassociate with essentialist attitudes. However, this liberal version of the counter-discourse focuses on identifying and eradicating (most especially through law, policies, and systems) structural barriers for women. This means ensuring that women and men have actual equal opportunities to make their best choices.

Feminist egalitarianism, which we coined the second established counter-discourse, rejects essentialist views of women and men. Focusing mainly on equality of outcome means that equal opportunities are not enough, even when they address structural constraints. Rather, this discourse signals grave concern that women are underrepresented in positions of influence throughout society, that they bear a heavier burden at home, and that men are underrepresented in caring roles, which has also been confirmed in a recent study (Hayfield et al., 2023). Importantly, in liberal egalitarianism and feminist egalitarianism, gender equality is considered a *political* matter, and the state, therefore, has a key responsibility in promoting gender equality. However, in the case of feminist egalitarianism, there is a stronger emphasis on the state in promoting/legislating parity in representation on the labour market and in the home.

The third gender ideology is associated with the opposing discourse. It remains rooted in tradition but has evolved and emerged as *neotraditionalism* (Damaske et al., 2014). In this version, women's labour market participation is valued and even expected, however, their primary identity as carers endures and the norm of part-time work is widely practiced. Their primary identities, therefore, are expected to be with the family and the primacy of men's work remains highly dominant. This is similar to the findings of others, who argue that traditional beliefs are reconfigured rather than replaced (Scarborough et al., 2019). In this sense, the ideology is essentialist and familialist and might even lean towards serving as a guise for patriarchy. Furthermore, egalitarianism is discernible on issues such as women's labour market participation, whilst

traditional and Christian views have a greater effect on gender roles in the private sphere, as is also identifiable elsewhere in Europe (Begall et al., 2023; Voicu, 2009).

The fourth and final ideology, also connected to the opposing discourse, is that of *flexible egalitarianism* (Knight & Brinton, 2017). From this perspective, minimal political interference is key, and women should be free to make their own choices. Discourses within this ideology have adopted discursive strategies of early feminists, which advocated for women's choice. Hence, the very foundations of the gender equality movement have expanded into the domain of the gender equality opposing discourse. In other words, motivated concept creep has expanded the domain of gender equality with the adoption of a choice rhetoric (Haslam et al., 2020) as an argument against the established counter-discourse.

Egalitarianism in this understanding is flexible, i.e. if women want to pursue careers, be in positions of power, and men be primary carers, such pursuits are tolerated. Discourse can in this sense veer to liberalism. However, this ideology sits more comfortably with traditional gender roles, as women and men are considered fundamentally different. Therefore, gender differences are natural, should be respected and even facilitated, e.g., through stay-at-home choices for mothers. Van Damme and Pavlopoulos (2022, p. 865) point out that those subscribing to this ideology emphasise free choice, in which they are referring to women's free choice. Given the emphasis on choice and minimal state interference, flexible egalitarianism sits well with individualism in a neoliberal rationality. However, in the Faroe Islands the family-based individualism, which Gaini (2013) refers to, implies that discourses of choice may not be about women's choices, but equally about family-based choices.

As we inspect the four overarching ideologies of the more present time, our analysis highlights that for liberal egalitarianism and feminist egalitarianism, gender equality is politicised, and the state has an important role to play in promoting gender equality. However, for neotraditionalism and flexible egalitarianism, there is a general resistance towards politicising gender and parenthood. Rather a discourse of depoliticisation prevails.

7. Conclusion

Our paper has analysed public debate concerning the GEA, the GEC, and gender norms in the small island community of the Faroe Islands. Overall, our analysis demonstrates that whilst gender ideologies have changed and been reconfigured from 1980 till the present, they remain contested. Through our discourse-historical approach, we examined gender equality by bringing together history, geography and politics to make sense of changing discourses. We have demonstrated that being an island community significantly impacts how gender norms emerge, are maintained, and contested. Importantly though,

these norms are constructed in continuous tension between the outside world (in the case of the Faroe Islands, the Nordics, and especially Denmark) and the island context.

Whilst we hope our study provides a contribution to the study of gender norms in the Faroe Islands, there is much still to be addressed. There are ample connected topics, which conflate with gender equality, e.g., care labour, LGBTQ+ rights, ethnicity, hours of work and gender quotas – and studies taking an intersectional approach would be especially valuable. Studying these topics would no doubt also shed light on matters of gender equality and underlying ideologies. Furthermore, explorations of social movements such as the anti-gender debates in the Faroese context, have yet to be undertaken and would be of value. Anti-gender debates are likely especially present on social media platforms, which is beyond the scope of our paper. We therefore call for further research on these topics, including the use of a broader range of media, most notably electronic media. This, we suggest, could help piece together the multidimensional nature of gender equality in the Faroe Islands, over time and in the present.

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