

## Child Poverty in a Scandinavian Welfare Context—From Children’s Point of View

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**Abstract** The focus for this article is child poverty in a Nordic welfare state context. With data from two qualitative studies from Sweden and Norway, we discuss child poverty from the children’s point of view, in the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, articles 27 and 28. In article 27, food, housing and clothing are mentioned as particularly important for an adequate standard of living. In poverty studies where children’s voices are being heard there has been little focus on these necessities. We find that a few of the children living with economic hardship experience a lack of necessities such as food, housing and clothing. We also explore whether children experience limited possibilities in relation to education. Despite of the state policies recognition of equal opportunities in relation to schooling, we find differences due to economy. In some cases this leads to young people dropping out of school to work. Overall we find that children take responsibility in relation to their families’ financial situation. In the final discussion we pay attention to the powerlessness of the children’s situation between the parents and the states’ responsibilities for providing for the children’s basic needs. We argue for the need for a discussion about the children’s position between rights and protection. If poor children are loaded with more responsibilities than their peers from better-off families, it will add to the burden of worry and distress in an already complicated situation.

**Keywords** Child poverty · Children’s rights · Adequate standard of living · Education · Agency

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In this article we look into child poverty from the children's point of view, with special focus on article 27 in the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Here food, housing and clothing are mentioned as particularly important for an adequate standard of living. Although the main issue for low-income children in our studies as well as in other studies from industrialised countries is the children's limited opportunities of social participation through activities and consumptions of goods, children also talk about a lack of material necessities such as referred to in article 27. In poverty studies, in industrialised countries, where children's voices are being heard, there has been little focus on these necessities. The *aim* of this article is therefore to explore if and how children living in financial hardship in the Nordic welfare states Norway and Sweden experience lack of necessities such as food, housing and clothing. We also explore if children experience limited possibilities in relation to education. The child's right to education is stated in the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), article 28, where it is emphasized that States Parties recognize equal opportunities in relation to schooling, in particular to take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. Further we explore what consequences any limited possibilities in relation to the above discussed may have for the children.

Norway and Sweden are characterised as what Esping-Andersen (1990) calls social democratic welfare-state regimes, which involves a high degree of state responsibility for securing the welfare for its citizens. Both the Norwegian and the Swedish states have broad social security nets based on universal welfare measures, and, according to Esping-Andersen (2002), they represent "an exception from the welfare polarisation that is taking place elsewhere in Europe between income- and work- poor on one hand and resourceful families on the other hand" (in Sandbæk 2007:191). Esping-Anderson points at two explanations for the Nordic welfare exception: the relatively generous universal benefits, as well as social transfers and the fact that almost all mothers work, including lone mothers. Due to this child poverty in both Norway and Sweden is relatively low, compared to other industrialised countries (for a comparison see Unicef 2007).

However, in both Norway and Sweden there is increasing concern about the polarisation between low-income households and more resourceful families, and about child poverty (Salonen 2009a, b; Harsløf and Seim 2008). The volume, causes and consequences of child poverty are therefore debated in the two countries. In the debate references to the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), article 27, are made. This article states that children have the right to an adequate standard of living, and that parent's or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to provide for that. However it is also stated that the state is expected to assist the parents:

States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.

(Article 27, [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#))

Even though the state is expected to assist parents, the family orientation runs like a red thread through the hole CRC, including article 27 (Olk and Wintersberger 2007). This means that the responsibility for the material well-being of the child lies primarily with the parents. However as pointed out in article 27, the delegation to parents is not to be understood as a release of government responsibility. On the contrary, as Olk and Wintersberger (2007) argue, the governments have an indirect responsibility for promoting and maintaining parents' abilities and in a subsidiary way, a direct responsibility for the well-being of the child. In other words, if the parents are unable to give the children an adequate standard of living, the state has obligations to secure their needs, particularly food, clothing and housing. The question of responsibility that is referred to in the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) is to a high extent based on shared responsibilities between parents and the state; children themselves are much considered as passive receivers and targets of their provision.

That the debate of children's right to an adequate living standard to a high extent revolves around the duties of adults, and the responsibility between adults and the state, while children appear as objects, is also true for children living in poverty (Skevik 2003; Sandbæk 2007; Ridge 2007; O'Brien and Salonen 2010). Child poverty research has traditionally focused definitions, indicators, volume, causes and long-term consequences for children. Statistical accounting has been a key site in which child poverty has been constructed, and the children themselves have rarely been asked (Ridge 2007). The information provided from such research gives an overview of distinctive features of a childhood in poverty. From this we know which children are vulnerable and under what circumstances. The children at risk are children living in families with unemployment or low income, children with many siblings, children living in lone-mother households and children in minority ethnic groups or refugee/asylum seekers (Bradshaw 2002; Ridge 2007; Salonen 2007; Sandbæk 2004, 2008). We also know that children in poor families tend to live in neighbourhoods characterized by violence, economic deprivation and crime. Poverty can also affect negatively children's health, cognitive development, school achievement, self-reliance and mortality (Christoffersen 1994; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Garbarino 1998; Yngwe 2004; Fløtten 2009). These results are based on statistical accounts where children themselves mostly have not given input. This kind of information does not tell us the experiences of the individual child. However there is a growing amount of studies where researchers have taken interest in including the children, arguing that we need knowledge about their subjective experiences (e.g. Roker and Coleman 2000; Daly and Leonard 2002; Van der Hoek 2001; Ridge 2002, 2007; Sandbæk 2004, 2008; Harju 2008; Redmond 2008). The interest in exploring and achieving knowledge from the children's subjective experiences is connected to the increased interest in seeing children as beings in their own right. From this point of view, childhood is a time of participation in social life and involvement in the creation of norms and values. This includes a view of children as actors with a capacity to shape and actively influence their own, as well as the surrounding life (James and Prout 1990; Qvortrup 1994; Närvanen and Näsmans 2007; Redmond 2008).

## 1 Previous Research

Our studies, as well as other studies in industrialised countries where researchers have taken interest in including poor children's subjective experiences reveal remarkable similarities. As mentioned earlier the main results show that low income affects children's opportunities to live a socially active life. Participation in leisure activities, visiting the cinema with friends, vacation or school activities are all examples of activities that are reduced or from which children are excluded. Children also describe how lack of ordinary consumption goods and the "right" clothes leads to frustration, feeling of exclusion and fear of being bullied. The parents and the children themselves try to "keep up", but this is done with a lot of effort (Roker and Coleman 2000; Daly and Leonard 2002; Ridge 2002, 2007; Backe-Hansen 2004; Thorød 2006, 2008; Harju 2008). Even though the social deprivation is emphasized, children in qualitative studies also talk about the lack of basic needs such as clothing and food.

In Iceland Bjork Eydal and Jeans (2006) studied children's conception of their economical world, and found that the financial situation of their families clearly influenced children's consumption. As an example, children in low income families used their own money to buy things that parents would be expected to provide for, such things as food and necessities for their homes. Children also reported that they use their own money to buy books and supplies for the school. The authors stress that even if it is a relatively small group of children in their study, there are some signs that children are taking on the traditional breadwinner role of adults. Bjork Eydal and Jeans claim that their results reveal that children stretch the limits of what it means to be a child. This because they are active and independent consumers and take responsibility in relation to their own and their family's needs. In an American study Chin (2001) also found that children are responsible consumers, when she took 22 children from low-income families on a shopping trip. Though they had detailed knowledge of brands, they showed little interest in purchasing branded merchandise during shopping trips. Instead they bought things they needed, such as sneakers, clothes, pens, notebooks and notebook paper. Some children also bought presents for family members. For Chin the most striking finding was the degree to which practicality and generosity influenced their shopping.

In her study of child poverty in England, Ridge (2002) found that children were worried about having enough money to cover their own needs and about their parents' capacity to pay the bills. Children also managed their own money to purchase clothes, essential items for school and bus fares. Several children were helping their parents with money, and even when children were not directly contributing with money, they were freeing household money to meet other needs. In two reports from Save the Children, one from Sweden (Lytsy 2004) and one from England (Willow 2001), the authors also found that food was of concern for some of the children. In the Swedish study children living in families with financial problems talked about being hungry all the time and the joy of finding food in the fridge. They also talked about helping their parents with money when food or other necessities were missing in the household. In the English report, children from areas with high levels of social deprivation talked about ending the day "very hungry", "starving" or

with “a gut ache”. Children were also talking about eating out of date food, sleeping in uncomfortable beds, having to wear small shoes and ill fitted clothes with stains and holes.

In the “modern concept of childhood” school can, at least in western societies, be seen as one of the settings which are defined as children’s places. Children spend a significant part of their lives within the institutional boundaries of the school, and as Daly and Leonard (2002) point out, choices made at school and educational performance have a lifelong impact on children’s lives. Their study shows that children from low-income families are at risk of leaving school early or of not achieving their full potential. The reasons for this include a risk of being excluded from the world of their peers, a risk of being bullied or a general dissatisfaction with school. Ridge (2002) also found that living in a family in receipt of benefits was a significant factor in children being suspended, expelled or truanting. In a cross country report Ridge’s (2007) findings indicate that there is a structural and institutional exclusion within the school for children from low-income families. Embedded institutional barriers prevent children from enjoying secure, engaging and inclusive educational experiences. In UK for example a key concern for low-income children at school is fear of isolation and being bullied. Having considered earlier studies in relation to child poverty from children’s point of view we now move on to a brief description of our own studies.

## 2 Method

The Norwegian sample is qualitative data from the longitudinal study “Children’s level of living—the impact of family incomes” (Sandbæk (ed.) 2004, 2007, 2008; Sandbæk and Pedersen (eds.) 2010). This is a representative national survey focusing on children in families with incomes below 60% of the national median. Supplying the survey, in 2004, qualitative interviews were done in 26 families where one child aged 11–13, and one parent was interviewed focusing their everyday life. The sample covered low-income families from different parts of Norway, urban and rural districts, different family structures, gender, work status and ethnic background. All had reported difficulties making ends meet. Due to the wide poverty measure, there are internal differences in the group, from the very poorest to the families with an income right below the poverty line. These differences can be seen in the child interviews as well.

The Swedish sample is data from the doctoral thesis “Every Day Life with Economic Hardship. A Study of Children’s Experiences and Strategies” (Harju 2008). It includes a total of eight adults and fourteen children aged 7–19 in seven families from a large city in Sweden. All the families are in one way or another dependent on government subsidies to make ends meet, including the parents that have an income from work. The families live on social support, social support combined with study allowance, sickness allowance or income from work combined with sickness allowance. They have lived with financial hardship for many years. The families were contacted by gatekeepers from different non-governmental organisations, e.g. The Swedish Church, local area projects, The Mayflower Charity

Foundation for Children. The majority of the children are in the age of 10–15 years. One person actually falls outside the Swedish definition of child (which is up to the age of 18), but she lives at home and is involved in the families financial dealings and is thus counted as a child. Six of the families consist of a single parent with children, which means that the results of the study particularly reflect the conditions of this family constellation. Of the children, five are boys and nine are girls. In four of the families the parents were born in Sweden and in three families they were born in non-European countries. Children and parents were interviewed on five occasions over a period of 14 months, from September 2005 to October 2006, mostly in their homes. On two occasions the interviews were with the children alone. Since the study is a doctoral thesis its aim, selection, method and ethical considerations has been processed in various seminars.

Both the Norwegian and the Swedish interviews were inspired by the life-mode interview (Haavind 1987; Andenæs 1989). This interview method is often used in child interviews in our countries, due to its practical orientation even for very young children. In the interview, you pass through a whole day from morning to bedtime, talking about what have happened at different times and arenas, what persons have been involved, and the child's thoughts and ideas about this. The interviews were supplied with questions about family and networks, school, friends and leisure activities. The Swedish follow-up interview focused on occasions when the children have felt the effects of limited financial resources, and questions about their wishes for the future, themes that were included in the Norwegian interviews as well. Despite the differences in design in the studies, results from the analyzing process of each study showed many similarities. Both sets of interviews went through a process of open coding, identifying central themes and categories. The interviews in both studies have been systematically analyzed with a hermeneutic approach. After transcription, reading the interviews as a whole led to identifying actual themes that were coded in new categories. This made it possible to find particular phenomenon and occurrences in the material, by Kvale (1997) described as categorization of meanings. When the authors met at a conference in 2006, discovering the parallels in each others studies, this led to a fruitful contact, with discussions, shared ideas and analytical comments. Coming together again to write this article led to a reanalyzing process through the lens of Article 27 in the UN Convention on the Right of the Child. The quotations have been translated from Swedish and Norwegian to English by the authors. Both studies are conducted in line with the legal and ethical guidelines regulating research in each country.

### 3 The Children's Experiences

Despite of the success of the Nordic universal welfare system to keep poverty at a low level, children are living in poverty in both Norway and Sweden. Although the main focus for the children in our studies is on limited opportunities of social and material participation, we found that for some of them worries about food, housing, clothes and school are realities in their everyday life. It is these experiences that are emphasised here.

## 4 Clothes

In our studies as well as in other studies (Wærdahl 2003; Brusdal 2004; Ridge 2007) the children to a high extent refer to clothes as having a great symbolic and socially integrating value. For children, in particular young people, clothes and shoes are signalling who they are and are therefore important in their construction of identity. However, clothes do not only contain symbolic value. Their practical functions are also emphasised, and the need to actually have clothes at all concerned children in our studies. For some, getting new clothes is difficult when the ones you have are too small or worn out. One boy, who lives with his mother and sister, is talking about how the financial situation affects him:

We don't have that much money, sometimes you don't get clothes. I for example don't have so many clothes, because I grow out of everything so fast.

Swedish boy, 16

As the quote illustrates, financial hardship is not only a question of symbolic significance. Children grow and there is not always money to buy new clothes when needed. Worn out and ill fitting clothes can also be a reason to be bullied or excluded from social interactions. In child poverty studies bullying and exclusion is to a high extent discussed as a matter of concern when children do not have the "right" clothes (Daly and Leonard 2002; Ridge 2007). As illustrated in the quote below this is also true for children in our studies. But bullying and exclusion is also a matter of concern in relation to having proper clothes:

Some girls at school talk bad about me. They say I'm weird, you know, using weird clothes, so they don't like me. ... I really want new clothes. Because in the morning I can never find anything to wear. One thing is ugly, one is childish and the other has a hole. I feel very outside at school, so if I had the same clothes as the others, maybe they would include me in their group?

Norwegian girl, 11

The girl expresses that her feeling of being excluded from her peer group is related to her clothes. In the interview it becomes clear that she mostly wears second hand clothes from relatives, but she also, as in the quote, talks about clothes with holes in. In this way the symbolic values of clothes and the need of having clothes for practical functions are interwoven in each other and together they become a stigma, a visual sign linking her to a situation of poverty and exclusion.

## 5 Food

Limited access to food is also by children linked to the family's financial situation. Even though the children in our studies do not experience starvation, lack of food is

mentioned. For example, at the end of the month, the fridge can be empty, so that for some days the family only eats bread and no hot meal:

If your economy is bad, you can't eat nice food. You have to eat crackers and cereals at home.

Norwegian boy, 12

Some children also show great consciousness about buying food, like this boy:

We can afford food, but not so much. If we're buying cheese, we have to buy it when the price is lowered.... We can only buy one cheese, so when it comes to food our economy is a little bad.

Norwegian boy, 11

Food can also be of concern in school. In Norway children bring their own lunchbox to school. Although free school lunches have been a political issue in Norway, neither parents nor children mention the lunchbox as a problem. What is a concern, however, are student run cafeterias where students can buy food one or two days a week. This puts pressure on the children to buy, and generate conflicts at home.

In Sweden, where school lunches are free for all the children, the financial hardship can be a matter of concern in relation to having to bring fruit and lunchboxes for excursions. In an interview a girl said that for school excursions the children only were allowed to bring fruit and water, not cookies and chocolate. When asked if she brings fruit she answers:

Sometimes, but when we don't have fruit at home I don't. Everyone else does. Every one brings apples or pears.

Swedish girl, 7

As illustrated, the children at this girl's school are all expected to bring fruit, but this can be problematic for children who live in families where there is little money. When asked about how she uses her own money, it becomes clear that the girl quoted buys fruit for the excursions, as well as other household necessities:

[I buy] milk and stuff and little juice. Fruit sometimes when I have an excursion and bread and sometimes on Saturday's sweets and chips. Sometimes I rent a movie.

Swedish girl, 7

We find that children in our studies take on a responsibility, and worry for such thing as food. Children in Norway and Sweden usually have access to pocket money for personal consumption (Brusdal 2001; Jonsson 2001; Näsman and von Gerber 2003). This gives them a personal freedom to participate in activities where money is involved. The children in our studies have limited access to money, which means that they have to prioritize very strictly. In using their personal money for basic needs, they take on part of their parents' responsibility, and they thereby protect the parents from financial demands.

## 6 Housing

In relation to housing most families in our studies have a stable living situation, and most of the children feel safe in their neighbourhood. But there are some exceptions where the



housing situation concerns the children. One concern has to do with having to live in confined apartments. Some of the children share a room with one or more siblings. Thereby their privacy is restricted and it is difficult to do homework in peace. These children express, as the girl below, a wish to have a room of their own, a room for privacy:

You know, a house with big rooms, so they have many rooms, so perhaps you could have a room to yourself. That's good, because then you can do what you want. For example when the others disturb you.

Swedish girl, 10

There are also other concerns in relation to housing. Two families in the Swedish study had to leave their homes during the research period and one lived under the threat of having to do so. For a few families in the Norwegian study housing is a serious problem as well.

In two of the Swedish families that had housing problems, the parents were dependent on means tested benefits. They had not fulfilled their obligations vis-à-vis the social services and as a consequence they had to leave their flat, or lived with a pressure of having to do that. In one of the families, the social services estimated that the mother, who is a single mother, did not actively search for work. As a consequence her request of means tested benefits was turned down. The family lived under a pressure of not being able to pay the rent, and therefore losing their home. The children were aware of the situation and they worried about it. The son, 12, said that it didn't feel good. When asked why he answers; "to have to think about the same thing all the time". He continues:

I don't think about it that much but it comes up now and then and then I get irritated, but I try to get away from it all the time.

Swedish boy, 12

It is clear that the action of the parent and the social services has consequences for this boy, and the other children in our studies that are living with an insecure living situation. Apart from the fact that their possibilities of an adequate standard of living is reduced, they experience, like the boy above, anxiety, worries and irritation, as well as hopes for a better future:

The best for us would be to have a home of our own. That's my only wish for the future, really.

Norwegian girl, 11

As the quote illustrates there are children in the Norwegian study who are so worried about the housing situation that their main wish for the future is to get a home of their own. Some of them also express that they wish to get money so they can help their parents with their debts, and then the parents may be able to buy a house. Again we see that children take on an adult responsibility.

The concern about basic needs that these children express is one of the striking findings in our studies. In Scandinavia we usually relate to Townsend's (1979) definition of relative poverty. These children challenge this definition, by giving us a glance into their life at the edge of absolute poverty. Universal grants and social security systems seem not to be sufficient to guarantee these children an adequate standard of living. The children also experience worries, anxiety, and fear of exclusion which in turn has consequences for their agency.

## 7 School

School is a central arena for children, where they spend a significant part of their lives. Educational performance also has a lifelong impact on children's lives. The majority of the children in our studies had a positive attitude towards going to school, especially the younger ones. They liked to learn things and meet friends at school. However this was not the case for all the children. In the Swedish study, for example, the children in the upper secondary school expressed more negative feelings toward going to school, and two girls dropped out of school during the research period. The drop out had to do with, among other things, the family's financial situation. One of them explains:

I don't feel well, so I can't concentrate, I talked to the teacher./.../. I told her that I have anxiety, I can't breathe and if I always would have lived like this [with financial hardship] I would have understood, been used to it, but I have not always lived like this. I lived with my father, and I lived, not in luxury, but I could buy trousers when the others I had were worn out.

Swedish girl, 17

The family's financial situation affected the girl's school situation to such a degree that she dropped out of school. We know that children from low-income families are at risk of leaving school early or of not achieving their full potential because of social exclusion, risk of being bullied or a general dissatisfaction with school (Ridge 2002, 2007; Daly and Leonard 2002). For the girl above the reason for the drop out was anxiety and difficulties to concentrate, as well as not being able to buy basic things as new clothes. She seems to link her anxiety to the financial situation. The Children's level of living survey finds a high amount of mental problems among women in low income families (Elstad 2008). At the age of seventeen, this girl is already experiencing such problems. This is serious and may predict a life in a marginalized situation and indicate recirculating mental ill-health across generations.

## 8 Children Taking Responsibility

Like other studies of child poverty (e.g. van der Hoek 2001; Chin 2001; Ridge 2002; 2007; Backe-Hansen 2004; Bjork Eydal and Jeans 2006; Redmond 2008) we found that children are not passive about the limitations and social risks the financial situation can entail. As actors they interpret and reflect on their situation and choose to act in different ways, based on their interpretation of the situation, and on their opportunities and limitations (Närvanen and Näsmans 2007). Their agency is expressed by different strategies. These can be divided into reactive, that is, strategies for adapting to the limitations, and proactive strategies, that is, intents to affect and change their own and also the family's scope for action. The strategies at hand for the children depend to a great deal on their age and their social network. Older children are more able to use proactive strategies to influence their own and the family's scope for action because they can get access

to larger sums of money and greater freedom of movement. The most crucial proactive strategy we found in our studies is to use personal money. The main sources of money are work, donations from persons in the social network or study grants with extra addition. The money is above all used for personal consumption. It is also sometimes spent on things that the parents are expected to supply, like equipment for leisure activities, basic clothes and things for the household's shared consumption such as food. The girl who explains above that she uses her own money to buy fruit for school is also using her money for family consumption:

Sometimes if I and my mother and my sister don't for example have milk, then I feel it's a pity and then I buy some milk and sweets for me. Because there's enough money for sweets too. But sometimes I don't buy sweets.

Swedish girl, 7

As the quote illustrates some children deliberately assume financial responsibility by using their own money for the household's shared consumption. The sister of this girl is one of the two girls who dropped out of upper secondary school. She explains why she did it:

It was a decision that I took. My mum understood, because there were many things happening in our family, so I had to take a break. I couldn't concentrate on school. Before I go back to school I want to work so I can help mum with her bills. I can see that the extra grant they are giving me, doesn't help her.

Swedish girl, 19

It is also shown in other studies that children in low income families assume financial responsibility in relation to the household economy (Ridge 2002; Bjork Eydal and Jeans 2006). Bjork Eydal and Jeans (2006) found that children in low income families used their own money to buy things that parents would be expected to provide for. The authors show that children in their study are active and independent consumers who take responsibility in relation to their own and their family's needs, and they stress that their results reveal that children stretch the limits of what it means to be a child. This is also the case for children in our studies, but they don't only use proactive strategies. They also take responsibility by using reactive strategies. The children's lives are filled with limitations, and they often have to use reactive strategies for adapting to the limitations. The most crucial reactive strategy is to "manage without". Ridge (2007) points out that the strategies used by children can range from an overt form of self-restraint to a more covert self-denial. In our studies we found that the strategy to manage without can contain both forms. An example of overt self-restraint used by the children is to balance whether to ask parents for things they want:

I'd really like to play handball, but I don't bother asking my parents. Sometimes I say no, I don't bother. It's not only because my parents don't have money or can't afford it. It is because I think about it myself, whether to start or not.

Norwegian girl, 12

As the quote illustrates the children in some cases do not even mention their wish to the parents. They can tell about a friend's activity, and the parents' response will decide whether they take the case further. In this way the children interpret their parents' signals, and by not stressing the issue they practise self-restraint. At the same time, they demonstrate their empathy for their parents' situation.

It is clear that regardless of whether strategies are proactive or reactive, children in our studies try to protect themselves and their parents from the restrictions of the financial situation. They show ability to what George H. Mead (1934/1967) calls rôle-taking towards their parents, i.e. they have an ability to take the parents perspective, and thereby also empathising with them. The children, in particular the younger ones, express a clear understanding of their parent's needs and of the limitations of the financial situation. The proactive and reactive strategies used by the children can also be likened with Lister's (2004) four types of agencies in the analysis of strategies for coping with poverty: getting by, getting out, getting back at and getting organised (Redmond 2008). Children in our studies are mostly in a position where "getting by" is their way of acting, for example by saving money, helping parents, taking advantage of networks, not asking for anything and not complaining. Some of the children are "getting out", in particular by taking up employment, or by participation in organised leisure activity. This can give the children valuable competences and experiences, but it is often restricted by lack of money for membership fees, outfits etc.

## 9 Different Experiences

We have so far in the article pointed at children's shared experiences, and even if this is the main aim for the article we also want to stress some discernible patterns of differences between the children. We will here discuss the most crucial differences that have been found. These are related to age, gender and family network. However, the results have to be interpreted carefully because of the small numbers of children involved in our studies, and therefore more considered as hypothetical results.

Age constitute the most striking discerned difference. The older children are more able to influence their own and the family's scope for action since they have access to larger sums of money and greater freedom of movement. Due to this they also feel more pressure, than the younger ones, to take economical responsibility, parallel to discoveries in studies by Ridge (2002), and Daly and Leonard (2002). Some of the older children express that they help their younger siblings by supplying them with clothes and other necessities. This kind of care-taking can make a difference of experience between younger and older siblings, since the younger ones then are more protected. This is closely related to gender, since it is mostly older sisters who express that they help their siblings. In relation to gender, there is, in the Swedish study, some signs that older girls take, or are demanded to take, responsibility of their own and their families' financial situation. As an example from the Swedish study, girls dropped out of upper secondary school to help their parents financially. This result is according to findings in previous studies, which show that girls express more worries, than boys, for their parents (Ridge 2002).

Involvement from people in the immediate surroundings can make a difference in how the economic hardship is perceived by children. In both studies it made a difference whether the fathers, who doesn't live with the children, are active or not in the children's life's. This is also relevant for other persons in the family network. For example, in one family, in the Swedish study, the mother met a new man who was financially well off. When asked if his arrival to the family had made difference, one of the children answered that it had, among other things, it made a difference in relation to the family's food situation:

Before it was like that, below with food, we couldn't buy bigger amount of food. Everything is more mediocre, a bit more now when he is in the picture.

Swedish boy, 12

Also the Norwegian sample shows that family network is a crucial factor. The sample has been analyzed with focus on location and ethnicity, and there are some variations. Some immigrant children have poor networks in Norway. This means that the families have to provide for the children's needs by their own limited resources, supplied by welfare grants. These children are often marked by poverty. Where there are family networks and friends however, they often contribute with money, consumer goods and nice experiences like holiday travel. This makes the poverty less burdensome in the child's everyday life. Locations on the other hand, have some other effects. Living in rural areas seems to some degree to generate bonding social capital, by its egalitarian social structure. There are fewer organized activities than in the cities, but this means that most of the children in the community participate, regardless of socioeconomic differences. In the cities activities require access to money, which put a greater pressure on the families. It seems then that supportive networks and access to social capital are more crucial than other background factors (Thorød 2010).

## 10 Discussion

The results in this article are based on a group of children that in the Nordic welfare states Norway and Sweden are confronted with restricted possibilities to an adequate standard of living in relation to needs like food and proper clothing, stable housing conditions and peace of mind to be able to continue studying. Based on their opportunities and limitations the children take responsibility by trying to change their own and their family's scope of action or to adapt to the situation. Although the results in this article are based on a minority of the children in our studies, their life experiences are a reality for them, and our findings therefore raise some important issues.

One issue concerns children's experiences of low income over years. One may expect that long lasting poverty increases deprivation and social exclusion to a greater degree than if poverty is a short time experience. The newly completed study Children's level of living (Sandbæk and Pedersen 2010) finds for example that differences in health increase with age. This can be due to a lasting low income situation, but the explanation can also be that there is greater risk connected to

experiencing poverty in the late teens. Regardless the explanations, the study reveals a greater risk for living condition problems both in the group that experiences low income for a short period, and for those in a more permanent low income situation. This indicates time independent risks connected to the poverty situation, and challenges our responsibility to deal with it.

Another issue concerns the question about the division of responsibility between parents and the state for providing an adequate living standard. Despite the children's agency, their powerless position is obvious. Children are bound by their parents' financial opportunities and dispositions. In the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), article 27, it is stated that the child's basic needs shall be provided for in the frame of the family. In the article it is also stated that if the parents are unable to fulfil this duty, the state has obligations to support the family for the best of the child. In other words, society expects parents to handle their children's basic needs, and if they fail, the welfare-state has measures to secure the needs of the child. However, today child based rights are competing with active citizenship policies (Sandbæk 2007; O'Brien and Salonen 2010). As O'Brien and Salonen (op.cit) argue, the policies arising from active citizenship and activation, i.e. emphasis on responsibilities and obligation and a move from "passive" to "active" welfare, have consequences for children living in poverty. The policies are aimed at shaping the lives and behaviour of adults and little attention is taken to what they mean to children living in families where the parents do not meet the active citizen requirements. O'Brien and Salonen claim that the policy of child based rights and the policy of active citizenship are moving in opposite directions, and it is a movement in which the children bear the consequences when active citizenship policy is prioritized. Sandbæk (2007) also argue that the social policy debate evolves around rights and duties of adults. She takes as example new restrictions in Norwegian unemployment benefits that imply that the holder no longer has the right to holiday pay, and may attend training courses during summer, which lead to difficulties with spending time with children during their summer holidays. In our own studies we also have examples of how active citizenship policy is prioritized before the child based rights, like the mother who was judged not to live up to the requirements that recipients of means tested benefits should undertake in order to be eligible to receive assistance. With this development one can ask whether more children in the future will experience limited basic needs in our two countries and for the eldest, to take responsibility, for example by dropping out of school.

A third issue concerns education. Ridge (2002) argues that we need to look for the school environment, and the institutional processes within schools, that act to exclude children from their peers. She claims that exclusion from school has long been recognised as a factor in children's likelihood of experiencing social exclusion, and that exclusion within the school may pose an equally grave danger for children from low-income families. In our studies children talk about exclusion within school in terms of not being able to go participate in school trips and other activities (Harju 2008; Thorød 2008). As showed in this article some children also talk about not being able to buy food in the cafeteria or bring fruit to excursions. In relation to exclusion from school we found that children drop out of secondary upper school, which in both Norway and Sweden is based on rights and free participation, and includes more than 90% of the young people (Barnombudsmannen 2007; Statistics

Norway 2009). Education is a basic guarantee for avoiding poverty in the future, and therefore Esping-Andersen and Sarasa (2002) suggest economic compensation for parents who support their children's education. Qvortrup (2002) takes this further by suggesting that children themselves get this compensation. We already see in our study that children take financial responsibility, and to some degree fall into a breadwinner role, e.g. by dropping out of school to work full time. This might be avoided if school work was economically compensated. However, this raises new questions. Will compensation put too much responsibility on the children's shoulders? In line with the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), children's rights are focused in the recent discourse of children's agency. What about children's right to protection? Children from low- income families already live under a lot of stress. Giving them new responsibilities for their own maintenance may have an opposite effect.

Our welfare states aim to eradicate poverty by a combination of workfare policy and in the end social grants. However, the significance of children's rights in the western society's shows its limitation when it comes to basic economic distribution. Only people above 18 years can claim help after The Social Security Acts in both Norway and Sweden. Children's needs must be included in calculation of the grants, but children are still dependent of others to force their claim. Oppedal (2008) discusses children's social rights, and concludes that the national laws insufficiently include the international conventions on children's rights. However, the state has a particular responsibility to see that children's needs are included in social grants, and in the long run to strengthen the children's rights. A life in a persistent low income situation puts a pressure on the children and risks over time to undermine the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, a breach of the UN convention on the rights of the child (Sandbæk and Grødem 2009).

We know there are long term risks in growing up in a poor family (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Yngwe 2004; Fløtten 2009). We have to consider very carefully the consequences of our actions to improve the children's situation. It is challenging to find measures that reach the children directly, without giving children responsibilities that belong to the adult world. We have shown that children already takes this kind of responsibility which make the borders between children and parents unclear and may contribute to the start of a life in a marginalized situation.

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