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Nordic family ties don't mean tying the knot

By Noelle Knox, USA TODAY

BODO, Norway — Marianne Kristensen got pregnant a few months after she started dating Tommy Pettersen. So they decided to buy a house and move in together. They say they are ready to become parents — the baby is due in May — but not to get married.

"We don't know each other quite well yet," Pettersen, 27, an administration officer in the Norwegian Air Force, says of his girlfriend, a 28-year-old pharmacist. "So we have to live together and see if it works or not."

In Norway, half of all children are now born to unmarried mothers. In Pettersen's county, 82% of couples have their first child out of wedlock. The numbers are similarly high for Sweden and Denmark. While many couples marry after having the first or second child, it's clear marriage in parts of Scandinavia is dying.

In the USA, the percentage of children born to unwed mothers has more than tripled since 1970. But there's still a stigma in the USA for women who have a child out of wedlock. Not so in the Nordic countries.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the forces that have driven up the birth rate for unmarried mothers are the same: the introduction of the birth control pill, feminism, the rising number of women in the workforce and the decline of religion. The roles of men and women in the family and society have changed over the past 40 years. Traditional households headed by male wage earners have waned, giving way to everything from single-parent households to families that combine the children that parents have had together and with other partners.

In Scandinavia, however, social trends have been reinforced by policies designed to promote equality for women and further separate the church and state. As a result, the link between marriage and having children has all but disappeared.

"Now days, no one notices if someone is pregnant without being married," says Carl-Johan Lidén, a priest for the Täby församling parish, part of the Lutheran state church in Sweden. Lidén and his wife, AnneLi Amilon, lived together for two years before getting married in January. Because Amilon, also a priest in the Swedish Church, was four months pregnant, they had a civil ceremony. They are planning a religious wedding next summer, and they haven't decided whose last name to take.

In turning away from marriage, Scandinavians have done little to harm their quality of life. Norway ranked first and Sweden second in the United Nations' quality-of-life survey for 2004, which rates per capital income, education levels, health care and life expectancy in measuring a nation's well-being. The USA came in eighth.

But family policies in Scandinavian countries have a downside for women. Female job candidates have a harder time getting work in the private sector. Few rise to the management ranks. The reason: Companies are reluctant to

hire or promote women because they take so much time off to raise their children.

A generation ago

When Margaret Nonshaugen got pregnant with her first child out of wedlock in 1966, her parents made it clear she had to marry her boyfriend. "They expected us to marry. And I was 18 or 19, so I said, 'Yes, I will,'" says Nonshaugen, 57, a nurse. "I didn't have much education and I couldn't cope on my own. So I had to. I really didn't mind. But I didn't want to marry that young."

She had two children in the marriage, which lasted four years before they divorced. She married a second time and had another child in a marriage that lasted 16 years. She has been living with her current boyfriend in Bodø for seven years.

Her children have a very different view of matrimony.

"You choose a father and then you choose a different husband," says Anne-Maren Hanssen, 25, Nonshaugen's youngest daughter. "It's like, 'You'd be a great dad, but I don't want to marry you.' I've got quite a few friends who've got kids and they decided the kids are their own."

Hanssen doesn't believe the traditional, one father/one mother family model is necessarily best for raising kids. "I've had plenty of parents and I've been pretty happy," says Hanssen, who studied dance in London and now is applying to medical school.

She has no children and is not married. She says it would be blasphemous for her to get married in a church. A civil service would be "highly unromantic" and "a lot of papers to fill in and ceremony to go through for something that might not really last that long, because you never know."

Scandinavians who don't marry tend to fall into one of two camps: those who think the institution is largely meaningless and those who think it is too big of a commitment.

Lidén, the Swedish priest, says he performs many baptisms for children of unwed couples and asks them why they don't get married. "They think marriage is such a big step in life that they want to be absolutely sure before they do it," he explains. "My question is, 'What is it to be a parent? Isn't that the biggest step in life?' But they don't see it that way."

Instead, Scandinavian people tend to see American views on marriage and children as conservative at best and hypocritical at worst, pointing out the high divorce rates in the USA.

One reason to marry

Social welfare policies in Scandinavia treat all parents the same, married or not.

"The government does not think it is their place to show people how they are supposed to live," says Maria Lidström, a co-coordinator for family policy for Sweden's division of children and family affairs. "Since it was (becoming) more common to live together and have children without marrying, they introduced laws that made it easier for families who were not married."

In Scandinavia, there is no "family values" debate, no soul-searching for ways to reverse the upward trend in divorces and separations. Instead, "the discussion has been more focused on how can we help people who want to split up? How can we make it easier for single parents?" she says. "It's not that the government encourages it. They adapt to make it easier for single parents, single mothers."

So, the state provides maintenance allowances for children (in the event the father does not pay support), and housing allowances. About two-thirds of single mothers in Sweden, for example, receive housing allowances.

Of course, there is some concern among Christian groups about the shrinking number of married couples in Scandinavia. Some critics have raised questions about the impact on children of these relationships.

Laila Dāvøy, the minister for Norway's department for children and family affairs and a member of the Christian Democratic Party, is at a loss to explain why people don't want to get married. "The traditional marriage in our society is more and more unusual than living together, and I'm very concerned about this."

One remaining incentive to marry is inheritance rights. If one parent dies, the other parent inherits if the couple are married. If not, the assets go to the children.

That's why Espen Aasen and Trine Anker got married four years ago. They had been living together for 10 years and had two children. Then, they bought a book on how to draw up a partnership contract, which many couples do to protect their assets in case of a breakup. In the end, they decided it was easier to get married.

The couple — he is the deputy director general for Norway's finance department and she is a grade school teacher — say being married hasn't made a difference in their relationship. Neither wears a wedding ring.

"The idea of the holiness of the marriage has disappeared because there are so many broken marriages," Anker explains.

There is little religious pressure to get married. Even though there are state churches in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, few people go. Church attendance in Sweden, for example, is just 7% for men and 11% for women. (In the USA, 59% of people say they go to church or synagogue at least once a month.)

"Religion has had too many bad things going for it for too long," Hanssen says. "Every single war, every single conflict, everything has been based on religion; so it just reaches a point where you say, 'If God is that great, he's not doing a very good job, is he?' Eventually, you end up choosing not to believe because to me it's just too much of a contradiction. I've got to hope there's no God, because if there is, I've got some issues with him."

Attitudes not created equal

When there is a wedding, the focus is not on the ceremony, but on the party. Everyone talks about the party. The typical wedding party costs about \$9,700 and lasts into the wee morning hours, with dinners, speeches, slide shows, songs and late-night snacks.

Social attitudes toward equality have broken down some marriage traditions. The man no longer asks for permission from the parents of his future bride. The bride walks down the aisle alone. "In America, the father gives the bride away. Some priests with the Swedish Church won't do that," says Tove Leijon, a wedding planner in Stockholm.

But when women walk in for a job interview, the world is not so equal. About half of all women in Sweden work in the public sector. By contrast, 77% of women in the USA work in the private sector. Of managers in the private sector, about 20% are women in Nordic countries, vs. 37% in the USA. The reason: Family leave in Scandinavia ranges from one to two years — with 80% pay — and is fairly evenly divided between the parents.

Here, fathers typically transfer almost all of their time-off to the mothers. And because mothers take so much time off work, companies are more reluctant to hire them. The result: women tend to find jobs in more flexible sectors like health care, teaching or government. And they aren't promoted as often as men.

Scandinavian governments are now considering changing the laws to require men to take more of their share of child leave after the baby is born. "Ultimately (the government) wants to help women in the workforce to make them more competitive," says Lidström, the Swedish co-coordinator for family policy, "The other reason is to make men more involved in the family life."