Childcare and Parental Leave in Sweden: Implications for Women’s Employment and Gender Equality

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, Sweden has been relatively unique in its focus on implementing programs and services that help both women and men to balance family and paid employment. Family policy in Sweden has largely had a gender equality focus, particularly around women’s labour force participation and men’s role in childrearing. The childcare and parental insurance systems in particular seek to increase women’s labour force participation while, at the same time, aiming for a more equal distribution of childrearing responsibilities between mothers and fathers. As such, these programs address issues of both employability and care. In the current climate of neoliberal globalization, Sweden offers an interesting case study, as it has been the model of a social democratic welfare state in the postwar era; and while neoliberalism has come to influence certain aspects of the Swedish welfare state, the area of family policy remains a haven of social democracy in the Swedish sense. While the 1990s were, for the most part, a decade marked by contraction, Sweden’s childcare system actually expanded during this time, and is now more comprehensive than ever. In addition, while benefit levels were decreased somewhat in the 1990s, the length of leave within the parental insurance system was extended, and the system is the focus of current debate in Sweden over how to encourage fathers to take more leave. Largely due to these comprehensive childcare and parental leave programs, women now make up virtually half of the Swedish labour force. Yet, there remain issues such as gender segregation of occupations, concentrating women in low-paying traditional female careers such as the health and care sectors, as well as the fact that far more women than men use part-time work as a strategy to balance
work and family life. Current patterns of women’s employment will be analyzed in terms of gender equality in work and family life in Sweden.

**Women’s Employment**

The history of social democracy in Sweden is rooted in a model of full employment, which has allowed the development of a comprehensive social democratic welfare state. In post-war Sweden, open unemployment was under 3 per cent (Esping-Andersen, 1990), exceeding this benchmark only three times from 1950-1991 (Olsen, 2002). However, the model of full employment in Sweden has differed from other nations since the 1970s in that full employment applies to both women and men, as women’s labour force participation is just as important and just as needed in the Swedish system. By the early-1990s, women constituted 48 per cent of the Swedish labour force (Olsen, 2002), the highest percentage anywhere in the world. Women’s labour force participation peaked at 85.1 per cent in 1990 (Nyberg, 2004), dropping in response to the economic crisis that hit Sweden in the mid-1990s, which saw an overall drop in women’s (and men’s) labour force participation. In July 2008 women’s labour force participation rate was 81.3 per cent, and women’s unemployment rate was 5.6 per cent (Statistics Sweden, 2008). In fact, since the crisis of the 1990s, women’s unemployment rate has actually been lower than that of men for most of this period (Statistics Sweden, 2008).

Sweden’s emphasis on solving its labour shortage problems in the 1960s and 1970s by encouraging Swedish women to enter the labour market rather than increasing immigration created the conditions for women’s increased employment. After women’s level of labour force participation began to grow in the 1960s and 1970s, the Swedish welfare state began developing policies that encouraged women to balance both family
and paid employment. Policies such as childcare and parental leave have meant that the majority of Swedish women are employed in the labour market and remain there throughout their lives, with only minor interruptions after the birth of a child. The majority of women not in the labour force are pursuing educational studies, are on long-term sickness benefits, live abroad, or are completing military service; only 2 per cent of women not in the labour force count housework as their main activity (Statistics Sweden, 2004).

Most employment growth in Sweden from the 1960s to the 1990s was in the local public sector, and almost all of it has been by women (Rosen, 1996). This has impacted the types of work women are concentrated in - with jobs in education, health care and social work employing 50 per cent of women, and only 14 per cent of men (Statistics Sweden, 2004). This has meant that more women began participating in the paid labour force in Sweden than in any other nation (Sundström & Stafford, 1992). And while employment in the municipal sector has decreased since 1990, it still provides for a large proportion of women’s employment, and the majority of women’s permanent employment (Statistics Sweden, 2004). The welfare state acts as an important source of employment for many women entering the labour force in Sweden. As such, the welfare state not only provides social services, which allow both women and men to work, but it also creates a large labour market within which women may find employment (Esping-Andersen, 1990). These services are not only designed to facilitate women’s entry (and continuation) in the labour market, they also encourage fathers to assume greater responsibility for childcare and household duties. The tax system, too, provides incentive
for both women and men to work outside of the home, as married couples are taxed individually in Sweden (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

However, with the parallel expansion of the welfare state and women’s entry into the labour force, what has occurred in Sweden is a feminization of the welfare state. For example, in the 1980s, the public sector accounted for 80 per cent of new jobs, with 75 per cent of these being female (Esping Andersen, 1990). The expansion of the welfare state actually occurred through the recruitment of women to part-time service employment (Ryner, 1999). It is clear that women with children who choose to work part-time do so in order to better balance working and family life (Drew, 1992). Yet, part-time jobs in Sweden are not necessarily the same as part-time jobs in other parts of the industrialized world, as they are highly unionized, are accompanied by relatively high wages, and allow women flexibility in their working hours, with three-quarters of full-time being the norm. In Sweden, the vast majority of women who work part-time, work what is called “long part-time,” or 20-34 hours per week, and only a small percentage work “short part-time,” or 1-19 hours per week (Statistics Sweden, 2004). Women are still concentrated mainly in the public sector, with jobs in education, health care and social work employing 50 per cent of women, and only 14 per cent of men (Statistics Sweden, 2004).

In recent years, the proportion of women working part-time has been decreasing. For example, from 1990-1998 the percentage of women engaged in part-time work fluctuated between 43 and 47 per cent, while since then it has decreased to between 33 and 36 per cent; during this same period, the percentage of men engaged in part-time work has remained fairly steady at between 7 and 11 per cent (Wadensjö, 2006). It
appears as though each generation of women entering the labour market works more full-time hours than the one before (Sundström, 2005 Interview). However, there is a life cycle pattern that is detectable, where women work more full-time hours when they first enter the labour market and establish themselves, and then after they have children, they work more part-time hours for a number of years, and then they work full-time again towards the end of their careers (Sundström, 2005 Interview). This clearly illustrates that Swedish women largely use part-time work as a means to balance both work and family life.

**Childcare**

The result of the increase in women’s employment in the 1960s and 1970s was falling birthrates, and subsequent concern about population policy (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). In addition there was a growing demand by parents and female workers for the expansion of public childcare facilities (Swedish Institute, 2004a). Both were clearly important factors in the development and expansion of the public childcare system in Sweden. These concerns were met with the development of policies that encouraged women to be both mothers and workers. From the mid-1960s, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) became the leading advocate for the expansion of public childcare in Sweden (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). And thanks to LO’s strong ties with the Social Democratic Party (SAP), childcare was given high priority on the political agenda, and the number of publicly provided municipal childcare spaces increased rapidly from the late 1960s onward (Curtin 1999), from under 12,000 in 1965 to over 136,000 in 1980 (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). By 2002 there were nearly 730,000 childcare spaces in Sweden (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003). This was partly the result of
lobbying by key women in the trade-union and political spheres, as well as the state’s own agenda to foster an environment where women could work outside of the home while still having children. The Swedish welfare state recognized access to reliable childcare as a basic requirement of a society in which the majority of both parents work outside of the home.

In 1963 only 3 per cent of all pre-school children were in public childcare, however about 36 per cent of all mothers of pre-school children were in the labour market (Nyberg, 2004), which demonstrates the absolute need for expanded childcare at this time. Since the 1960s the Swedish state has exercised a great deal of national “control” in its quest for a national model of childcare with minimum standards (Alvestad and Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). In 1966 state grants to full-time childcare centres doubled in order to encourage expansion and improve the quality of care; this also reflected a shift of support from stay-at-home mothers to working mothers who needed access to full-time childcare (Nyberg, 2004). The work of the National Commission on Childcare in the late 1960s laid the foundation for the Swedish pre-school model that exists today – daycare centres and playschools were combined into a pre-school system that would serve the interests of children while at the same time allowing parents to work (Swedish Institute, 2004a).

The expansion of public childcare services in the 1970s and 1980s dramatically increased the responsibilities of the municipalities, which provide public childcare in Sweden. As the Social Democrats promised a childcare spot for all children over eighteen months in 1985 (Mahon, 1999), the municipalities could not keep up with demand and there were long queues for childcare throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Public funds
continued to be poured into the expansion of the childcare system throughout the 1980s (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001), and in 1995, the government introduced the Act on Child Care under which municipalities became obliged to provide childcare without any undue delay (Bergqvist & Nyberg, 2002). This new legislation combined with an increasing birthrate led to a record number of new childcare openings, and the long queues of the 1970s and 1980s are now virtually a thing of the past.

**Parental Leave**

Parental leave was introduced in Sweden in 1974, replacing maternity leave, which had focused solely on mothers (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). Women’s increasing level of employment, particularly married women and women with small children, was the impetus for the creation of the parental leave system (Lindberg Interview, 2005). At the time there were differing opinions on how to best deal with this new reality of women’s employment – there were calls for the creation of a care allowance which would allow women to stay at home for long periods to take care of their children, and there were calls for the development of childcare and the improvement of working conditions (Lindberg Interview, 2005). Thanks to the hard work and influence of the LO with the SAP, the development of childcare and parental leave, as well as the improvement of working conditions, became the favoured option in Sweden (Lindberg Interview, 2005). In fact it was a 1969 LO family policy document which outlined a parental leave system based on the norm of a dual-earner family, which was influential in the development of the parental leave system (Mahon, 1999). In the end there has been a great deal of agreement among political parties around the necessity of parental leave, but there remains differences of opinion when it comes to the details.
When parental leave was first introduced it consisted of 180 days (6 months) of leave per child, which parents could divide in any way, at a 90 per cent income replacement rate (Nyberg, 2004). The fact that this leave was now open to both mothers and fathers was progressive. The fact that the system was adopted with a great deal of consensus across party lines indicates the strength of the belief in the underlying objective to move Sweden from a male breadwinner to a dual breadwinner society (Bygren & Duvander, 2005). The parental leave system was viewed as a complement to the development and expansion of the childcare system, as both were aimed at helping mothers and fathers better balance work and family life (Cohen, Moss, Petrie & Wallace, 2004). And further amendments to the parental insurance system were made throughout the years to accommodate this goal. For example, in 1978 parental leave was extended to 9 months, with the last three paid at a flat rate; alternatively, the additional three months could be used to reduce the workday for one parent (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001).

The main objectives behind the parental insurance system in Sweden are the well-being of the child, women’s economic independence, and the involvement of fathers in family and home life (Drew, 2005). The last two objectives are related directly to gender equality, with an emphasis on a dual breadwinner model and a more equal division of household responsibilities, particularly around childrearing (Drew, 2005). For even in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the commission that proposed the parental leave system had discussed whether or not to add an additional month reserved solely for the father (Lindberg Interview, 2005). In the end, the majority of the members of the commission voted against such an idea (Lindberg Interview, 2005), but the discussion had begun. This idea posed a serious challenge, since in 1974 only 3 per cent of those who received
parental leave were fathers, and they took less than 1 per cent of the total days available (Nyberg, 2004). While this number has increased, it has not increased as quickly as the architects of the system had hoped (Lindberg Interview, 2005). For example, by 1992, 48.3 per cent of fathers took an average of 63 days leave (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). While this was an improvement, further reforms were taken in the 1990s and 2000s in an attempt to encourage mothers and fathers to share parental leave more equally.

**Changes to Childcare (from the 1990s)**

Beginning in the 1980s, the Swedish state had to deal with initiatives for private, for-profit childcare. And, while such initiatives were unsuccessful under the Social Democratic government, they were successful under the centre-right coalition government of the early 1990s. The result is that private for-profit childcare centers are now allowed in Sweden, although they must follow the same rules as public centers in order to receive municipal subsidies (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). Since the early 1990s, the popularity of private, for-profit, childcare has increased somewhat, but mainly only in larger areas such as Stockholm and its suburbs; public provision remains the norm in the rest of Sweden. In addition to the introduction of private, for-profit childcare, the centre-right government also cut public childcare funding during the early 1990s, when it rolled national subsidies for childcare into a general block grant to municipalities (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). Once the economic situation improved and the SAP returned to office, the transfers to municipalities were increased in order to restore childcare standards (Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001). There have been concerns since the cuts in the 1990s over the quality of the childcare system. The concerns centre mainly on group
size and staff ratio. However, there have been attempts to correct these problems, and there is evidence that the staff ratio today is better in the public childcare sector than in the private.

In terms of childcare workers, the sector is dominated by women, and the issue of persistent low pay. The Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union (Kommunal) represents all childcare workers as well as most other blue-collar municipal workers. Kommunal currently has 570,000 members, 80 per cent of whom are women (Kommunal). One of the main issues around which Kommunal organizes relates to the fact that because the sector is so dominated by women, the wages tend to be low (Andersson Interview, 2005). This is a major issue for Kommunal and even lead to a five-week strike in the spring of 2003 (EPSU). In the end, Kommunal agreed to a deal that saw a larger pay increase for the lowest paid groups of workers, including childcare workers (EPSU). The question of pay is an ongoing issue in the area of care work, a sector heavily dominated by women.

Until 2002 each municipality decided its own parental fees and how the fee system was to be constructed within the childcare sector (Swedish Institute, 2004a). During the 1970s and 1980s, the state and the municipalities both covered approximately 45 per cent of the fees, leaving the remaining 10 per cent to be covered by parental fees (Martin Korpi, 2000). But, during the 1990s, the fees became increasingly expensive - linked to family income and the number of hours a child attended the childcare centre (Swedish Institute, 2004a). This is largely due to a change in the funding system owing to a redefinition of the responsibilities of the state and the municipality (Martin Korpi, 1990).

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1 The Swedish National Agency for Education has developed quality indicators and advisory guidelines regarding quality in pre-school care; in addition, local authorities are to be given state grants earmarked for recruiting additional pre-school teachers and other staff, which is in addition to grants in 2003 which saw the hiring of the equivalent of 1,490 full-time staff (Ministry of Education, Research and Culture, 2004).
As a result, by 1998, 17 per cent of the costs of childcare were being covered by parental fees (Martin Korpi, 2000). A serious negative consequence of this increase in parental fees was that because the fees were linked to family income, they provided disincentives for either parent to work more hours (Carlén Interview, 2005; Wennemo Interview, 2005).

Due to the negative consequences for low-paid workers in particular, LO became active in campaigning for a maximum childcare fee (Wennemo Interview, 2005). The issue of childcare fees was placed on the agenda by the SAP in the 1998 election campaign. In November 2000, the Riksdag adopted the SAP bill on matters relating to pre-school, which would be implemented in three parts, including the introduction in January 2002 of a system of maximum childcare fees. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education, this “regulation of childcare fees” immediately led to a decrease in parental fees from 18 per cent to 11 per cent of the gross costs of childcare in 2002, and fee ceilings have not caused deterioration in standards (2007). The maximum fee meant that municipalities could not charge more than 1 to 3 per cent of a family’s income depending on the number of children (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2007). Thus, the results were immediate for parents in the amount of fees they paid for childcare.

The categories of children covered by Sweden’s childcare system have expanded dramatically due to the 2000 law on matters relating to pre-school. In July 2001 the government expanded childcare to include children of parents who are unemployed and in January 2002 to include children of parents who are on parental leave looking after a sibling (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003). In addition, in January 2003 all children aged 4-5 became entitled to 525 hours of free attendance in childcare per year.
These changes have resulted in a more universal childcare system. Today, 80 per cent of children aged 1-5 attend pre-school, while 75 per cent of children aged 6-9 attend leisure-time centres (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2003). This illustrates how a public childcare system marked by low fees and a high level of legitimacy, quality and accessibility is now an integral feature of Sweden’s welfare society (Swedish Institute, 2004a).

In addition, the childcare system took on an increasingly educational focus during the 1990s. In 1996 responsibility for childcare was moved from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2004). In 1998, the Swedish National Agency for Education took over responsibility for the childcare system and at the same time the legislation was transferred from the Social Services Act to the Education Act (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2004). This move to a more educational focus was the culmination of a number of factors, from increased decentralization to the municipalities, an increased emphasis on pedagogy and ‘lifelong learning,’ to more economic and efficiency arguments, as well as decades of debate over whether or not childcare should be integrated into the school system (Cohen, Moss, Petrie & Wallace, 2004). In addition, in 1998 a new school form was introduced, a pre-school class for 6-year-olds, which is technically voluntary but virtually all 6-year-olds who have not yet started compulsory school attend (Swedish Institute, 2004a). This new focus on education has led the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to support the Swedish pre-school as a model for other countries (2001).

**Changes to Parental Leave (from the 1990s)**
The state is also very much involved in changes to the parental leave system, an integral part of family policy in Sweden. In 1995 the first ‘fathers’ month’ was introduced, which meant that thirty days of leave could no longer be transferred to the other parent (Nyberg, 2004). In 2002 this was extended to two months per parent (Berg, 2005). Ensuring a more equal division of parental leave has been a goal of the social democratic welfare state, and has been since the early 1970s, but is not translating into much voluntary action by fathers. As such, the state has felt it necessary to get involved on a number of occasions to try to change the behaviour of both mothers and fathers when it comes to the division of parental leave. By 2003-2004 women were still using 83 per cent of parental leave, and men were using an all-time high of 17 per cent (Drew, 2005). While this is not anywhere near equal, there has been movement in a positive direction since the introduction of both reserved months. Studies indicate that the higher the education level of the both the mother and father, the more parental leave the father will take (Nyberg, 2004). In addition, the level of income of the father affects how many days he will take, with higher income-earners taking a larger proportion of days (Nyberg, 2004). While the reasons for this are not completely clear, this could perhaps be explained by increased job security with higher income, or by women in working-class couples wishing to take the majority of the leave rather than return to physically demanding jobs in the public sector.

In 1995, at the same time as the first father’s month was introduced, the state lowered the replacement rate for parental leave from 90 to 80 per cent; the rate was further reduced to 75 per cent in 1996, and then raised back to 80 per cent in 1998 (Nyberg, 2004), where it has remained since. Currently the parental leave system includes
13 months leave at an 80 per cent replacement rate, with an additional 90 days, which can be taken at a flat rate (Drew, 2005). In addition, those parents who do not qualify for parental leave, as it is tied to employment, are entitled to 16 months at a daily flat rate (Drew, 2005). The difference in benefits depending on one’s employment status is a built-in feature of the system, which encourages both men and women to establish themselves in the labour market before having children (Sundström & Duvander, 2002). This is a crucial part of most, if not all, Swedish welfare policies – encouraging residents to attach themselves to the labour market from an early age and to never detach from the labour market. This, of course, is tied to the fact that the Swedish social democratic welfare state is based upon a model of full employment and thus its programs provide incentives to work.

The total of 16 months currently available to parents has two months reserved for mothers and two months reserved for fathers, leaving twelve months to be divided as the parents wish (Swedish Institute, 2004b). The parental leave system in Sweden is very flexible, allowing parents to use parental leave until the child’s eighth birthday in a variety of ways, from full-time leave to part-time work and part-time leave (Swedish Institute, 2004b). Due to the generosity and flexibility of the parental leave system, it is very popular, with 97 per cent of parents using at least some of the income-related days, and 90 per cent using at least some of the flat-rate days; in addition, 60 per cent of families use their full entitlement (Nyberg, 2004). There are virtually no mothers in Sweden who do not take advantage of the parental leave system, and most use at least 6 months of leave (Bygren & Duvander, 2005).
In April 2004 the government appointed a commission to examine the parental leave and benefits systems, to determine whether the system works in the best way for children and contributes to greater equality between women and men (Berg, 2005). This commission was headed by Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, a senior official at the Swedish Metalworkers’ Union, and was made up of many experts in various fields from economics to psychiatry (Thoursie Interview, 2005). On September 15, 2005 the commission presented its proposals which included a recommendation to increase paid parental leave to 15 months which would be divided into 5 obligatory months for the mother, 5 obligatory months for the father, and 5 months for the parents to split as they wished; in addition, all mothers would have the right to 30 days leave before the birth, and the parents could take 30 days leave together after the birth (Berg, 2005). These recommendations are very controversial, supported by some, but lacking support in the general population.

One of the major issues behind the current debate over parental leave is the fact that the parental leave system has actually had some unintended negative side effects for women’s labour force participation. While parental leave has been successful in ensuring women’s labour force attachment before and after having a child, there have been negative consequences as well. Because women take the majority of parental leave, employers seeking to hire new employees or to promote employees see women as more of a risk. This is cause for concern for the Swedish state, as gender equality and full employment are two underlying goals of the welfare state. Anna Thoursie, an economist at the LO and commission member, suggests that if both mothers and fathers had a fixed number of months under the parental leave system, then employers would be forced to
adjust their expectations (Thoursie Interview, 2005). The OECD has also concluded that due to the generosity of the Swedish parental leave scheme, women’s labour market prospects are being harmed – that the parental leave system is having detrimental longer-term career prospects for women (OECD, 2005a; OECD 2005b). The Ministry of Finance in Sweden found that employers exclude women from occupations where absence is costly, resulting in a gender-segregated labour market (Nyberg, 2004). Many of the trade unions and left-wing political organizations of youth and women believe that parental leave should be divided equally between the parents in order to remedy this situation (Berg, 2005), as does the ombudsman for gender equality, Anne-Marie Bergström (The Local, 2008).

The LO, the Left Party, the Green Party, as well as the Social Democratic Women’s Federation (SSKF) and the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League (SSU) are all in favour of the commission’s proposals; the Social Democratic Party, however, is more reluctant as it fears the Swedish people are not behind such a reform (Berg, 2005). The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, as well as the Moderate Party and the Liberal Party, all share the belief that parental leave should be left to individuals to choose how they wish to share it² (Berg, 2005). In the case of parental leave, popular opinion has constantly been lagging behind more progressive politics. For example, before the first father’s month was introduced, surveys showed a majority were not in favour; similar results were found before the second father’s month was introduced, although a majority was now happy with the one month that had already been introduced (Ferrarini Interview,

² However, as part of its 2008 budget bill, the current centre-right government proposed an equality bonus for couples that share parental leave equally, which came into effect on July 1, 2008. The centre-right parties view a gender equality bonus as an acceptable alternative to individualization, as ‘freedom of choice’ informs their ideologies.
2005). As such, politicians have had to walk a fine line when it comes to how far to push their citizens in the direction of gender equality, although the citizens do tend to support such changes after they are introduced.

**Conclusions**

The examples of childcare and parental leave illustrate two important points in the Swedish case. First, they are, for the most part, areas of the welfare state which have not been reduced or reformed in a negative way, and in fact have been expanded in recent years. Second, these areas are clearly tied to women’s employment and gender relations in Sweden. The proportion of working women with small children in Sweden, as well as the increased number of fathers taking a share of parental leave is evidence of this.

However, there are also a few remaining areas in need of advancement. First, there is the issue of gender segregation of occupations, and the related issue of low wages in female-dominated sectors, such as the care sector. Second, there is the issue of part-time work, predominantly chosen by women as a means to balance both work and family life. Third, after being a frontrunner in introducing parental leave legislation over thirty years ago, Sweden is still wrestling with the issue of how to get parents to share the leave more equally. All of these issues remain on the political agenda as areas in need of improvement for both women’s employment and gender equality in Sweden.
Bibliography

Interviews


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**Secondary Sources**


