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Sharing and balancing life-work responsibilities

Parental leave policy in Sweden: evolution, lessons learned

by

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Sweden is known for having come a long way towards the goal of gender equality. This front-runner position that Sweden shares with other Nordic countries, is due to a long history of gender equality commitment and a wide range of policies that promote the joint goals of family well-being, economic development and gender equality.

Gender equality goals in Sweden focus on an equal distribution of power and influence among men and women, economic equality between men and women, men's and women's sharing equal responsibility for unpaid household and caring labor, and zero tolerance toward men's violence against women. Even if these questions have been given considerable attention over a long period of time, gender equality has not yet been achieved. It is therefore important to recognize the successful achievements in Sweden but also to critically examine how the policies in Sweden could be improved and developed.

This paper will focus on how policies for parental leave have been developed in Sweden. Following a background to the development of gender equality policies in Sweden the paper covers three specific questions: a) How parental leave policy came about and how the implementation of the policy is funded. b) What the impact of this policy, in terms of enhancing the role of men in equal sharing of responsibilities, has been since 2009, year of the adoption of the agreed CSW conclusions that are now under review. c) What the key challenges are facing the implementation of this policy and how they have been addressed since 2009.

Gender equality in Sweden – a background

Political reforms to promote women's participation in paid employment and welfare reforms aimed to support families via universal health care, child subsidies and child care provision have a long history in Sweden. New social and family policies started to take shape parallel to the development of an influential field of governmental commissions, where researchers, experts and politicians meet to develop political policies, already during the early 1930s. Since then until the present day more than 50 governmental commissions have taken part in shaping family policies in Sweden. One important effect of this is that the relation between the "private" family sphere and the "public" market sphere have been regarded as fluid and important to address jointly in the shaping of family and labor politics. The tradition of governmental commissions has also been important for creating close links between researchers and politicians that contribute to achieving political consensus on policy development (Lundqvist 2011, Lundqvist & Roman 2008). Over this extended period increasing women's participation in paid employment has been seen as one of the most important ways to promote societal advancement. The political understanding has focused on how family economy is more stable with two earners and that economic growth will be greater when more women participate in the labor market. Women's employment has been understood as a requirement for family and society well-being (Haas 2012).

Gender equality as such became an institutionalized field of politics during the 1970's. The political commitment to gender equality was an effect of the demands and public debate from the women's movement about sex roles, but also related to the need for additional labor force in the Swedish economy. Close ties between researchers, experts, representatives from women's movements and progressive politicians played part in putting

new policies in place. During this period the fundamental principles of gender equality was outlined focusing on economic independence for women and men individually.

Three specific reforms laid the ground for these political aims: the individual taxation law of 1971 meant that spouses were taxed individually, not jointly, which made it more advantageous for both to work; the 1974 parliamentary decision to expand universal child care provision, with high pedagogical quality; and the parental insurance scheme of 1974, that replaced an earlier maternity allowance with a parental allowance, underscoring men's shared responsibility for care work and also both women's and men's right to be able to combine work with caring for children (Fürst 1999).

Among the important aspects of this policy development was the transition from talking about "women's issues" to addressing "gender equality". This meant outspokenly pointing to that these policies should concern men as much as women and that gender equality perspectives had to be included in all branches of politics. Fundamental was the understanding that it would be impossible to achieve equality in the labor market without changing the traditional role of men and transforming gender relations in the family. Gender equality was viewed as an important step towards realizing equity and democracy and also as part of a social emancipation for both women and men. Women would be supported to take better part in public life and gain financial independence. Men were supposed to enter the traditional realms of women, providing household work and care for children, thereby developing a more care-oriented masculinity (Palme 1972; Klinth 2008).

Gender equality discourse in Sweden has pointed to how men gain from gender equality, especially by developing closer relations to children. This has been seen as a way to engage men in the support for gender equality. Though the effectiveness of this approach has been questioned. Swedish men have been described as having an "in-principle" attitude to gender equality, supporting the main perspectives but lacking in practical engagement (Johansson & Klinth 2008). Since the 1990's gender equality policies have been more direct in addressing men's power and opposition to gender equality. Engaging men for real change arguably needs this joint approach, both pointing to men's power and unwillingness to change but also to point out how gender equality gives men new gains.

Sweden's "dual-earner" policy has been successful. Sweden has one of the highest employment rates for women in the world. In 2012 the female employment rate in Sweden is 72% (76% for men) compared to an OECD average of 60% (OECD Gender Initiative data browser). It is essential to relate the progress of gender equality to the specific form of welfare system that Sweden and other Nordic countries have developed. Political science professor Diane Sainsbury has made a comparative analysis of how different welfare systems in the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden and the Netherlands impact women (Sainsbury 1996). Sweden is characterized as a comprehensive welfare state, or social service state, with high levels of benefits and universal provisions, where entitlement to benefits and services are based on citizenship and residence, not family relations. Sweden stands out, compared with the other countries, as the most effective in enhancing and upholding women's social and economic rights. Public services aid women (and men) as consumers, employees and as parents. Combining employment and parenthood is facilitated through public childcare. As nearly all women are employed, women have independent incomes and access to work related benefits (Sainsbury 1996:223). However the Swedish welfare system, traditionally related to social democratic policies of the 1970's and 1980's, has of lately gone through transformations relating to the new globalized

economy and demographical changes. New political solutions have included increased privatization of services, reductions in many social benefit levels and lowered taxes. Still Sweden is among the most equal countries worldwide but this development has to be monitored closely, especially its effects on gender equality (Social Insurance Report 2012:4:75).

In the context of the current economic crises, it is worth noting that the Swedish welfare system has proven highly resilient to economic downswings. The financial crises that hit Sweden in the 1990's imposed hardships, especially for women, because of unemployment and cutbacks in the public sector. Large groups of both men and women became unemployed. But social benefits and labor market measures helped to maintain demand, prevented poverty and worked as effective counter cyclical buffers (Ghosh 2013).

Still structural problems of gender equality persist in Sweden. Women are working part time to a much higher degree than men. The Swedish labor market is heavily gender segregated and women are concentrated in care and service sectors. The gender pay gap is considerable. Swedish women earn 14% less than men, just below the OECD average of 15%. One of the reasons for these structural problems lies in the fact that women's transition in to paid labor has not sufficiently been matched by men's transition into unpaid work in the home, even if the gap has narrowed.

Parental leave and men's involvement

Parental leave was introduced in Sweden in 1974. Earnings related benefits paid for six months after childbirth and could be divided between the parents, as they preferred. The scheme covers everyone residing in Sweden and all employers contribute to the system. The leave can be used until the child is eight years old. The earnings-related benefit was set at 90% of previous earnings, but if the parent had no previous earnings he or she received a low flat rate. The set-up works as an incentive, especially for mothers, to enter the labor market before embarking on parenthood. In the 1980's the leave rights were extended by stages to 12 months, and, in addition, a further three months were paid at a flat rate. Cutbacks in earnings-related benefits, from 90% to 75%, were made during the economic crisis in the 1990s and were later raised to the current level of 80% (Duvander & Johansson 2012). In addition parents in fulltime employment are entitled by law to reduce their work hours by 25%, without pay, until the child is eight years old.

In 1995, one reserved month for each parent was introduced, which meant that one month would be forfeited if not used by the designated parent, often called 'daddy' month and 'mummy' month. At the same time, the additional leave was formally made individual, implying that the parent who wanted to use more than half of the leave needed the consent (by signature) of the other parent (except the reserved months, which are not possible to sign over to the other parent). The reform applies to all parents with joint custody, which is the absolute majority of parents in Sweden, and also to cases of separated or divorced parents. The reform applies to heterosexual as well as to same sex parents.

The reserved month in Sweden was proposed by the liberal right government in office 1991 to 1994 and came after a Norwegian equivalent daddy month in 1993, both considered radical at the time. In 2002, the then social democratic government reserved another month for each parent at the same time as the leave was extended by one month to 13 months plus 3 months at flat rate level. The main difference between the first and second reserved

months is that in 2002 a month was added to the leave length, meaning that an increase in one parent's leave did not necessarily mean a decrease in the other parent's leave.

Since 2006 Sweden has, once more, a liberal right government. The current government introduced a gender equality bonus 2008 with the message to parents that the more the leave is shared, the more bonus they will receive. The Bonus system was adjusted and simplified in 2012. From being a tax credit that parents' needed to apply for and that was paid to parents' tax account the year after the parental leave was used, it is now given directly to the parents together with the parental leave benefit, without the need to apply. For every day that the parents share the leave equally, a bonus of 100 SEK (approximately 10 euros) will be received. It does not apply to the reserved months or the flat-rate days, and thus can be paid for a maximum of 4.5 months. The government also reintroduced a flat-rate family care allowance (earlier in short use 1994). This reform works counter to gender equality goals, as it encourages parents/women to not enter the labor market, but is not used to large extent.

Parental leave is used by practically all mothers and by around 9 out of 10 fathers. For many parents, state-legislated benefits are complemented by extra benefits from the employer on the basis of collective agreements. The considerable flexibility of parental leave use is often exploited by parents; for example, by saving parts of leave to extend summer vacations or reduce working hours during the child's preschool years. The leave may be extended, by accepting a lower replacement level, a strategy used especially by mothers (Duvander & Johansson 2012).

Summarizing Swedish parents are entitled to 16 months (480 days). 60 days are earmarked for the mother and 60 days for the father/partner. Parents can use it full-time, half-time, quarter-time and one-eight time until the child's eighth birthday. To be eligible for parental leave a parent has to work for a minimum of 240 days before the birth of the child. 13 of the 16 months parental leave are earnings related and replaced at 80 per cent of normal income. The remaining three months are replaced at a flat-rate level (Swedish Social Insurance Agency).

Men's use of parental leave has increased slowly but steadily over time. The reforms of 1995 and 2002 show clear marks. When parental leave was introduced in 1974, men used 0.5% of all days. Since then, men's share has increased, reaching 23.1% in 2010 (see Figure 1). In 2011 men's share reached 24%.

Impacts and challenges since 2009

Looking at the development of men's share of parental leave since 2009 the trend is that of continued increase, but at a slow pace. The major new policy implemented during this period made to improve men's share has been the gender equality bonus of 2008. This reform has shown to be ineffective, not having any clear connection to the increase in numbers over the last years. The changes of the reform made in 2012 might have effect and are yet to be evaluated.

An analysis of the effect of different policies made to enhance men's share of the parental leave made by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency indicate a strong effect on parental leave use resulting from the introduction of the first and second reserved month, in 1995

and 2002, so far, no effect resulting from the gender equality bonus introduced in 2008. The interpretations of the results are that reserved time is more effective than an economic bonus (Duvander and Johansson, 2012).

A comparison can be made with Iceland, where the leave was extended to nine months at the same time as three months were reserved for the father in the early 2000's, and where the absolute majority of fathers use the three months. The Icelandic comparison questions the strategy of slow step-wise reforms to encourage fathers' leave (Duvander and Johansson 2012). As of 2013 parental leave in Iceland has been expanded to 12 months, with 5 months earmarked for each parent.

The Swedish Social insurance agency argue that in order to narrow the gap in the use of parental benefit days additional reserved time is needed for each parent. It is also stated that it is important not to extend the insurance if and when additional time is reserved for each parent (Social Insurance report 2012:9). The changes in the gender equality bonus of 2012 could have positive effects, but greater reform measures will probably be needed to promote a significant enhancement of men's share of parental leave. This could either mean individualizing the scheme all together, taking away the possibility to sign over days between parents or, following Iceland's example, to reserve one third of the days, or more, to each parent, letting the remaining days be left unreserved.

Research has shown that in an international context, men in Sweden are exceptionally active as parents. But Sweden has still just come half way to the goal of men and women actually sharing parental leave equally, and this is a vital problem. Studies have suggested that an extensive period of parental leave for men, 90 days or more, gives long-term positive effect on sharing of responsibilities in the home. Shorter periods does not challenge traditional gendered expectations so much as to change the division of child care long-term, after the fathers period of leave is over. Men's responsibility for parental leave is still negotiable and optional in a different way than for women (Klinth 2008: 22-23).

This fact links to the persistent gender inequality in Sweden. When women use the larger part of the parental leave scheme it results in a "women's trap". A study from the Swedish Institute for Labor Market and Educational Policy Evaluation (IFAU) shows how the gender pay gap in Sweden, constant for the last 30 years, foremost relates to unequal division of child care. 15 years after the first child was born the male-female gender gaps in income had increased with 35 percentage points, for wages the increase was 10 percentage points (Angelov, Johansson & Lindahl 2013). The unequal division of unpaid work within the home explains women's propensity for working part time and could also be linked to Women's disproportional sick leave, both increase heavily after having a first child. To further investigate these correspondences the Swedish government has initiated a gender equality analysis of women's patterns of sick leave by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and also assigned Karoliniska Institutet (KI) to study the relation between childbirth, sickness and sick leave among women, due in October 2013.

Another challenge for Swedish policy makers is to address differences in the population when it comes to how parental leave is used. In general men and women with higher educational level share the parental leave benefits more equally than men and women with lower educational level. Women born in the Middle East/ North Africa and Turkey (MENA + Turkey) use the largest numbers of days, also with the lowest benefit level. Swedish born fathers receives an average of SEK 568 per day, women born in the MENA countries +

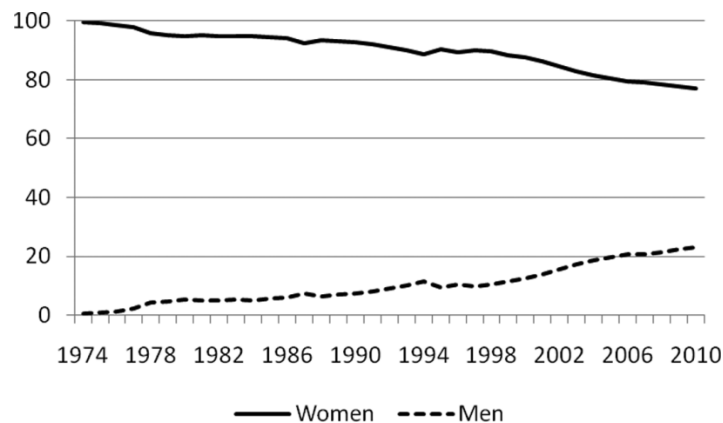
Turkey receives an average of SEK 252. Among men with only primary, not secondary, education 46 percent did not take any parental leave days (Social Insurance Report 2011:13). An intersectional analysis of these circumstances, focusing on the interactions of structures of gender, class and ethnicity, needs to be further developed. In some cases it is possible that cultural aspects contribute. However economic factors are likely paramount.

Attention needs to be directed to women's weaker position in the labor market. In areas of labor with high levels of women from working class and lower middle class, including migrant women, as care and service sectors, part time employment, uncertain employment and substitute positions are usual. This differs from the norm for employment for men in working and lower middle classes. Quite possibly this affects how women in these areas of labor use longer periods of parental leave. A weak position in the labor market could add to the general structure of women's disproportional use of parental leave. In comparison, women with full time employment and higher levels of education could feel more requested to take a shorter parental leave, in the same way as for men in general. Strengthening women's positions in the labor market would in accordance to this be an important structural aspect of promoting a more gender equal share of parental leave in addition to more reserved time for each parent. The Swedish norms for part time work in traditional women sectors vis-à-vis full time work in male sectors needs to be altered.

Ending, it is vital to recognize that parental leave has clear gains for men. This is apparent in the case of how parental leave relates to men's contact with their children. Fathers that use extensive parental leave invest in their relation to children. Studies show how parental leave is associated with fathers working shorter hours later in the child's life, getting a closer relation, and that it positively affects contact between separated or divorced fathers and their children. From children's point of view, shared parental leave means improved access to both parents. Parental leave has also been linked to lower divorce rates, improved health and lower mortality for men (Social Insurance Report 2009:1). From this perspective shared parental leave has positive effects for women, men and society as a whole.

The need to address the role of men in gender equality development is becoming noticed internationally (Farré 2013). Knowledge on questions about changing men and masculinity is vast. The academic field of studies on men and masculinity today constitutes a prominent area of research undertaken in all parts of the world (Kimmel, Hearn & Connell). This field of research gives great contributions to the understanding of gender and grounds current policy development initiatives in the European Union as well as in Sweden and other Nordic countries (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2012). Since the 1970's Sweden has made considerable efforts to include men in gender equality policies and to promote new norms of masculinity (Järvklo 2011, Hearn, et al 2012). Looking at the question of sharing the responsibilities of unpaid labor and promoting gender equality, the lesson learned from Sweden is that parental leave reform is of fundamental value.

Figure 1. Women's and men's share of used parental leave benefit days, 1974–2010.



Source: Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

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