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# Swedish parental leave and gender equality

Achievements and reform challenges in a  
European perspective

**Swedish parental leave and gender equality –  
Achievements and reform challenges in a European perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Sweden was the first country to introduce paid parental leave also to fathers in 1974, and this legislation has since then continuously been reformed in order to bring about a more equal parenthood. This study sets out to discuss the Swedish parental leave system and identify achievements, policy dilemmas and reform alternatives in a European perspective. The structure of parental insurance legislation, with earnings-related benefits and a long leave period, is often seen as a main explanation why Sweden has been able to combine relatively high fertility levels with high female labour force participation rates and low child poverty. In the perspective of changing demographic structures in Europe, with declining fertility levels and a growing number of elderly, the strengthening of dual earner family policies, including parental insurance legislation, may mitigate macro-economic and demographic problems by increasing gender equality and decreasing the work-family conflict. Despite the positive consequences, unresolved questions exist in the present parental leave legislation. The flexibility of the Swedish system, which still has extensive transferable leave rights, has the consequence that the lion's share of parental leave days is still taken by mothers, among other things making it difficult for women to compete on equal terms with men in the labour market. Consequently, the gender-based division of parental leave may contribute to a preservation of traditional gender roles and inequalities. Another problem in the Swedish system is the work requirement for eligibility that excludes students and others with weak labour market attachment from the earnings-related benefits, possibly inflicting on the postponement of parenthood. Raising the minimum benefit could be one solution to enable childbearing among persons with weak labour market attachment, but this would also affect the economic incentives for paid work, and thus weaken the dual earner model.

## **Sammanfattning**

Sverige var 1974 det första landet som införde betald föräldraledighet även för pappor. Sedan dess har föräldraförsäkringen reformerats ett flertal gånger för att uppmuntra ett mer jämställt föräldraskap. Denna studie diskuterar det svenska föräldraförsäkringssystemet och identifierar framsteg, dilemman och reformalternativ utifrån ett europeiskt perspektiv. Föräldraförsäkringens utformning, med en inkomstrelaterad ersättning och lång föräldraledighet har ansetts vara en av de viktigaste förklaringarna till att Sverige kunnat kombinera relativt höga födelsetal med hög kvinnlig förvärvsfrekvens och låg fattigdom bland barnfamiljer. Mot bakgrund av fallande födelsetal och en ökande andel äldre i Europa, kan stärkandet av en familjepolitisk tvåförsörjarmodell, där föräldraförsäkringen utgör en hörnsten, dämpa makroekonomiska och demografiska problem genom att öka jämställdheten och minska konflikten mellan familj och förvärvsarbete. Trots fördelarna med det svenska systemet återstår en del olösta problem. Att föräldrapenningen är överförbar mellan föräldrarna (med undantag för de två reserverade månaderna) har gjort att den största delen av ledigheten fortfarande tas av mammorna, vilket bl.a. gör det svårt för kvinnor att konkurrera på lika villkor som män på arbetsmarknaden. Av den orsaken kan föräldraförsäkringen bidra till bevarandet av traditionella könsroller och ojämlikheter och därmed motverka sitt syfte. Ett annat problem med det svenska systemet är kvalificeringsvillkoren som utesluter studenter och andra med svag anknytning till arbetsmarknaden från den inkomstrelaterade ersättningen, vilket sannolikt är en bidragande orsak till det uppskjutna barnafödandet. Att höja föräldrapenningens garantinivå skulle vara ett sätt att göra det möjligt för personer med svag arbetsmarknadsanknytning att skaffa barn men skulle samtidigt vara ett avsteg från arbetslinjen och tvåförsörjarmodellen.

## Introduction

**Whereas many social policy programs in the European Union countries have been subject to cutbacks during the past decades, programs of parental leave have during the same period been expanded in terms of duration and fathers eligibility and several countries are planning an expansion of such policies. This development has, however, not led to convergence in parental leave legislation but rather to the emergence of different strategies in such provision. Sweden was the first country to introduce paid parental leave also to fathers in 1974, and the policy has since then continuously been reformed to strengthened the dual earner model of family policy. The long period of existence of parental leave and the strong ambition to support the dual earner family makes Sweden an important test case for links between motives, institutions and outcomes of such legislation.**

The changing demographic structure in Europe, with declining fertility levels and a growing proportion of elderly, has increased the political interest in how family policy affects childbearing. The ageing of societies creates a demand for female labour force participation at the same time as children are needed to reproduce the extent population size. The connection between female labour force participation and fertility is rather complex; while a negative relationship was observable for Europe on the macro level in the 1970s, the direction of the relationship was reversed and became positive by the 1990s. This indicates that rates of female activity and fertility are higher in those countries that have made structural adjustments over time and created conditions that are more favourable towards parenthood and reconciliation of work and family life.

It is widely known that most men and women still do want children, and that their average desired fertility level approximates what is needed for replacement-level fertility.<sup>1</sup> This implies that there are significant discrepancies between desired and observed fertility in most western countries. The fact that the desired fertility level is well above the actually achieved level indicates a welfare problem for the individual, but also a window of opportunity for pursuing policies that can generate a more balanced population development. Analyses of individual and country level factors indicate that family policies are important for the desired level of fertility (Sjöberg 2004a). Another key for understanding the constraints on childbearing is gender inequality and how childbearing typically involves different consequences for men and women. This raises a complex set of questions related to the possibility of balancing work and family life.

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<sup>1</sup> Replacement fertility is here defined as 2,1 children per woman, the level needed to ensure the long-term replacement of the population.

In a comparative demographic and societal perspective Sweden has succeeded quite well to combine relatively high levels of female labour force participation with relatively high fertility rates and comparatively low levels of poverty among families with children. The successful transition to a dual earner model, where both parents participate in the labour market and in child care, is often explained by a combination of the parental leave insurance, publicly financed and subsidised child care and separate taxation of spouses. In addition, the high labour demand in the 1960s and 1970s and the expansion of the public sector, which is dominated by female workers, facilitated the transition.

Needless to say, the Swedish model is obviously not faultless. Also in Sweden women still perform the largest part of the unpaid household and care work, exemplified by that fathers still use less than 20 percent of the parental leave days. These long-lived structures maintain, among other things, men and women's different opportunities in the labour market and vice versa. Even though fertility in Sweden is above the European average, it is highly fluctuating and below replacement level. Furthermore, persons with weak labour market attachment may not qualify for earnings-related benefits, something that may contribute to postponement of childbearing or increased poverty risks in this group. The goal of the family policy has to be seen as relative to other, sometimes conflicting, goals, such as gender equality, high fertility, high female labour force participation, economic efficiency, individuals' choice capacity and social equality.

The purpose of this study is to discuss the Swedish parental leave system and identify achievements, policy dilemmas and reform alternatives in a European perspective. First, a broader discussion about models of family policy and parental leave is carried out where Sweden is contrasted to other Western countries with different family policy models. Second, we give an account of the content of the Swedish parental leave legislation as well as a background to the reform. The third part is devoted to a discussion about experiences and consequences of parental leave; policy use, childbearing patterns, gender equality, female labour force participation and poverty among families with children. Fourth, we outline the political debate and attitudes surrounding the Swedish parental leave system. The study ends with a concluding discussion.

## **Models of family policy in Sweden and other Western countries**

The way welfare states organise family policy institutions such as parental leave legislation may impact the choice-capacity, well-being and behaviour of individuals in many ways. Parental leave, among other things, has the potential to structure the gender distribution of

paid and unpaid work, childbearing decisions and poverty risks of individuals. These outcomes are related to whether such policies support a dual earner family or whether they support more traditional family patterns.

Family policy institutions and models can be seen as at least partly reflecting different ideologies around the gendered division of paid and unpaid work. The different structures of incentives embedded in the family policy legislation can thus be expected also to structure the preferences, beliefs and world orientations of individuals. This does not mean that individual action may not be rationally goal-oriented but rather that what an individual may see as rational in itself to a large extent is socially constructed and involves orientations towards material gains as well as to normative orders. Recent research has shown that attitudes of individuals in different countries correlate with family policy structure in the same countries (Sjöberg 2004b; Ferrarini 2005).

Figure 1 shows the different family policy models established in Western welfare democracies around 2000. The typology is based on the broader family policy matrix including parental leave legislation, other benefits provided in cash or through the tax system, for example child benefits and tax subsidies for a dependent spouse, and public services such as child care and care for elderly persons (Korpi 2000). The structure of parental leave legislation, however, to a large extent fits these broader family policy models (Ferrarini 2003).

**FIGURE 1: DIMENSIONS AND MODELS OF FAMILY POLICY IN 2000**

		<b>DUAL EARNER SUPPORT</b>	
		Low	High
<b>GENERAL FAMILY SUPPORT</b>	High	<i>General family policy model</i>  <b>GERMANY</b>	<i>Contradictory family policy model</i>
	Low	<i>Market-oriented family policy model</i>  <b>THE UNITED KINGDOM</b>	<i>Dual earner family policy model</i>  <b>SWEDEN</b>

In Sweden as well as in the other Nordic countries parental leave is strongly oriented towards supporting a dual earner family, where both parents are involved in both the labour market

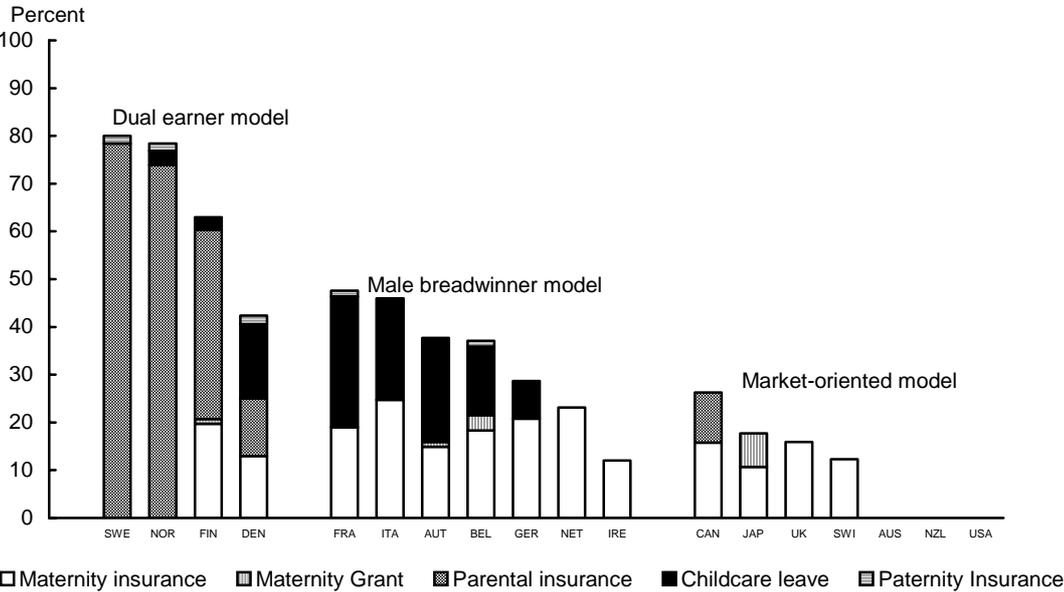
and care work, and earnings-related parental insurance benefits entitles both parents to extensive leave. In many Continental European countries, in Figure 1 exemplified by Germany, have developed so-called general family policy models supporting more traditional gendered divisions of labour. Earnings-related benefits to fathers hardly exist in these countries; instead flat-rate child care leave benefits are substantial in the income-package of families with infants. Child care leave often formally entitle fathers to paid leave, but the benefit structure with flat rate benefits does not promote fathers to use leave. Many English-speaking countries, among them the United Kingdom, with less developed support on both these dimensions belong to a market-oriented model of family policy. A fourth model of family policy may theoretically exist, where both types of support are highly developed, with seemingly contradictory goals of simultaneously supporting a dual earner family and traditional family patterns (Ferrarini 2003). Some countries with either dual earner or general family policy models, have undergone a gradual development towards a contradictory, or pluralistic, family policy model during the past decade. Several Nordic countries have introduced flat rate child care leaves and thereby strengthened support to traditional family patterns, while some Continental European countries, for example Belgium and France, have introduced paternity insurance benefits, albeit with relatively modest duration. Despite these tendencies it is, however, premature to say whether such a contradictory family policy model has come into existence.

In Figure 2, which shows the generosity of five different types of legislated parental leave benefits in eighteen welfare states in 2000, the large cross national differences in institutional design are clearly visible. The parental leave benefits included are earnings-related maternity-, dual parental- and paternity insurance, flat rate child care leave benefits and lump-sum maternity grants. The months reserved for each parent, in for example Sweden and Norway, is included in parental insurance. Benefit generosity is calculated for a family with two earners and two children, where both parents earn average production worker's wages and either eligible parent stays at home one year from the birth of the second child. Benefits are estimated net of taxes and calculated as a share of an average production worker's net yearly wage. The type-case has been chosen to capture the earnings-related dimension of benefits that often is considered important to stimulate fathers' use of leave.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Choosing a shorter leave period, for example half a year, would decrease generosity in Nordic countries to some extent, but would not change country rank or the patterns of institutional variation to any larger degree. Using a longer leave period would of course increase generosity of benefits with duration over a year, primarily child-care leave benefits but in some instances also parental insurance. This would increase generosity in Continental European countries as well as in Finland and Norway, but the conclusions about institutional variation would not be entirely different. Using a prolonged leave period would, however, accentuate the need to analyse the existence of functional equivalents to paid leave, e.g. publicly subsidized childcare for the youngest individuals, which in any case shows large correlation with the extent of dual earner support (Ferrarini 2005). In Sweden for instance, publicly financed day care is generally available from the child is one year old.

**FIGURE 2: NET PARENTAL LEAVE BENEFITS, FIRST YEAR AFTER CONFINEMENT, AS A PERCENTAGE OF A NET AVERAGE PRODUCTION WORKER’S WAGE IN EIGHTEEN COUNTRIES WITH DIFFERENT FAMILY POLICY MODELS IN 2000**



Source: Ferrarini (2003)

While net yearly parental leave benefits for this family type is around 80 percent in Sweden, the corresponding figure for Germany is around 30 percent. Even if the institutional structure of paid leave to a large extent follows along the lines of broader family policy patterns some notable deviations exist. The reason for Denmark having lower generosity than other Nordic countries is largely due to weak earnings-relatedness and shorter duration of parental insurance benefits. Of the countries with market-oriented models of family policy Australia, New Zealand and the United States do not have legislated paid leave rights for this household type, while the relatively high generosity of Canada’s paid parental leave is explained by the fact that it is the only country apart from the Nordic ones that have implemented dual parental insurance benefits. In any case, Swedish parental leave legislation is most likely the one with the most developed dual earner strategies among the Western welfare states.

The broader models of family policy as well as types of parental leave can be related to different outcomes and driving forces. Korpi (2000) for example shows that female labour force participation is highest in dual earner models of family policy and lowest in male breadwinner models, while market-oriented models have medium high levels of female labour force participation. Ferrarini (2003) shows clear macro linkages between types of parental leave and different outcomes. High levels of earnings-related parental insurance benefits are

connected with higher levels of female labour force participation and fertility at the same time as poverty levels among families with infants are relatively low.

It has been shown that different political tendencies have divergent links to family policy design in Western welfare countries. Long term Social Democratic government is an important factor explaining the development of dual earner policies, while Christian Democratic incumbency to a larger extent can be linked to the development of general family policy supporting more traditional gendered divisions of work (Korpi 2000). Gender agency, in terms of the proportion of women in government, also seems to have a positive influence on the development of parental leave policies supporting a dual earner family (Ferrarini 2003). In the following section the socio-political context and motives behind parental leave legislation in Sweden is described.

## **Parental leave in Sweden**

### **Background**

When maternity leave was replaced by the formally gender neutral parental insurance (*Föräldraförsäkring*) in 1974, it was the first program of its kind among western welfare democracies. The parental insurance entitled parents to 26 weeks of paid leave with 90 percent wage replacement. One official motive for the reform was to achieve greater gender equality by making it possible for both men and women to combine work and family. The inclusion of both parents in the care of the baby was in Sweden and the other Nordic countries thought to redress within-family imbalances in the distribution of unpaid care work, and to increase possibilities for a more gender equal labour market participation (SOU 1972; Carlsen 1998; Bergman and Hobson 2002, Ferrarini 2003). In addition to these motives, it has been argued, a main underlying driving force behind the reform was the need for paid female labour in the economy (Lewis and Åström 1991; Hirdman 1999).

Even though it was the Social Democrats who held the power at the time, practically the whole political establishment supported the reform. Differences in opinion mainly had to do with marginal issues such as the duration of leave. Another concern was the gender neutral design of leave. Even before the introduction several members of the parliament, in particular from the Liberal Party (*Folkpartiet*) and the Centre party as well as the Social Democratic Women's Association, drew attention to the potential risk of the mother taking the whole leave and thereby undermining the gender equal goal of the policy. But all parties were divided on this issue and the resistance at this time was too strong to make the leave, or parts

of it, non-transferable between the parents. Instead the parental leave was restricted to six months in order to limit the interruption in women's employment (Klinth 2002).

However, throughout the decades following the introduction of parental insurance, duration was extended stepwise to over a year's duration. The extensions of the parental insurance has enjoyed a relatively broad political support involving not only Social Democrats and the parties to the political left, but also centre-right parties, in particular the Liberal Party, as well as women's interest, both inside and outside political parties.

As many had predicted before the introduction, few men actually made use of their right to parental leave. Twenty years after the reform came into force women still used nearly 90 percent of the leave (see figure 3), but at this point certain political interests, with the Liberal Party as leading force, took the chance to intervene. After a lively political debate, an earmarking of one month of the parental insurance – also referred to as “daddy quota” or “daddy month” – for each parent was launched in 1995. By increasing paternal involvement in care a more gender-balanced distribution of care work and labour market opportunities was to be achieved. Another pronounced motive was that children have the right to a close relationship with both parents. In 2002 the “daddy quota” was increased to two months.

Reforms of parental leave have primarily worked to strengthen the dual earner family. However, for a short time in the mid 1990s a family policy measure that supported traditional gendered division of labour co-existed with earnings-related parental leave. A child care leave benefit (not earnings-related) was introduced by the right-centre coalition government in 1994. The main promoter of this reform was the Christian Democrats, who argued that the previous arrangement restricted family's free choice, not least for homemakers who did not utilise public child care arrangements and were not eligible for the earnings-related component in parental leave. The Social Democrats contested this reform on the grounds that it preserved traditional gender roles, as did organised women's interests. When the Social Democrats were re-elected in 1995 they fulfilled the election campaign promise to remove child care leave benefits.

In the mid-1990s the high unemployment and large state budget deficits had created pressures for benefit cutbacks in all major social insurance programs. During this period the replacement level in parental insurance was lowered in steps to 80 and 75 percent; and subsequently restored to the present level of 80 percent in the late 1990s.

### **Parental leave legislation today<sup>3</sup>**

The consequences of the introduction of parental leave in Sweden may be described as homogenization and strong norms of how to care for small children. All children, regardless of parents' income or labour market status, are likely to stay home with a parent for at least one year before other forms of childcare are initiated. Below follows a description of the parental leave and additional legislations which form Swedish parents' contextual choices.

#### *Replacement rate, duration and eligibility*

Parental leave in Sweden in 2004 entitles parents to a total of thirteen months job protected leave with 80 percent wage replacement, with a benefit ceiling of 646 SEK/day (€78). To be entitled to the earnings-related parental insurance one has to work for a minimum of 240 days before the birth of the child. Those who are not eligible receive an amount of 180 SEK /day (€ 20) (*Grundnivådag*). If the parents have joint custody of the child, each of them has the right to half of the parental leave days. One of the parents may, however, transfer their leave to the other parent, with the exception of the two months that are earmarked for each parent, the so-called daddy months. Single parents, where the father is unknown or the other parent does not have custody, are entitled to the full leave period. No other special parental leave benefits exist for single parents.

A further 3 months are replaced at a low flat-rate level (*Lågstanivådag*), at present 60 SEK/day (€7). The father is also entitled to an additional ten days of earnings-related paternal leave, so-called daddy days (*Pappadag*) that can be used simultaneously with the mother being on parental leave any time during the first 60 days after confinement. All parental leave benefits are treated as fully taxable income.

Parental insurance benefits can be utilised until the child's 8th birthday. The earnings-related part has got a high degree of flexibility and can daily be used partially by the parents. This means that both parents can be on leave and work partially on the same day. However, both parents cannot, except for the ten days with paternal leave, use full leave simultaneously. Furthermore, either parent may be on leave a whole week while only receiving benefits for part of the week, or receiving benefits only for a part of a day while being on leave for the whole day, thereby using the possibility to extend leave for a longer period. This is a common, and by labor market law permitted, way to extend the period of leave by accepting a lower level of benefit.

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<sup>3</sup> This section is to mainly based on information from the Social Insurance Board (*Försäkringskassan*), for more information see Försäkringskassans internet homepage in English <http://www.fk.se/other/eng/index.php>.

### *Additional family-benefits*

Several other earnings-related social insurance benefits may be paid to mothers during the pre-natal period as well as to families with older children. If a pregnant mother has a physically demanding job or a job that cannot be carried out due to risks in the work environment and the employer cannot relocate the employee a pregnancy cash benefit (*Havandeskapspenning*) can be used. The benefit can be paid for a maximum of 50 days. Simultaneously with the introduction of parental insurance leave, the right to leave when caring for sick children was introduced. In 2005 the temporary parental insurance benefit (*Tillfällig föräldrapenning*) entitles parents to 60 days of leave per child and year with 80 percent earnings replacement, with a possible prolongation of a maximum of 60 days.

Parents receive child allowances (*Barnbidrag*) simultaneously with parental leave at a flat-rate amount of 950 SEK (€106) per month and child. Additional amounts in child benefits for large families also exist (*Flerbarnstillägg*). Child benefits are non-taxable, and do not offset other types of social insurance benefit payments, such as unemployment and sickness insurance.

In 2002, 84 percent of all children in the age group 1 to 5 years were enrolled in day-care organized by the municipality, privately organized or were taken care of by a childminder. These forms are all forms publicly subsidized (Statistics Sweden 2003). Since January 2002 a maximum user fee (*Maxtaxa*) limits the fee for publicly subsidised child care to a relatively low level of cost. Maximum user fees also decrease with the number of children, the size of earnings and depending on whether the parent is single.

### *Financing of parental leave and non-legislated entitlements*

Parental leave is financed by employer contributions, corresponding to 2,2 percent of individual gross earnings. The cost of parental insurance is together with the cost for child allowances the largest part of the social insurance for families and children. Total parental insurance expenditure is around 5,3 percent of the total expenditure on social insurance (figures from 2003, see National Social Insurance Board, 2004).

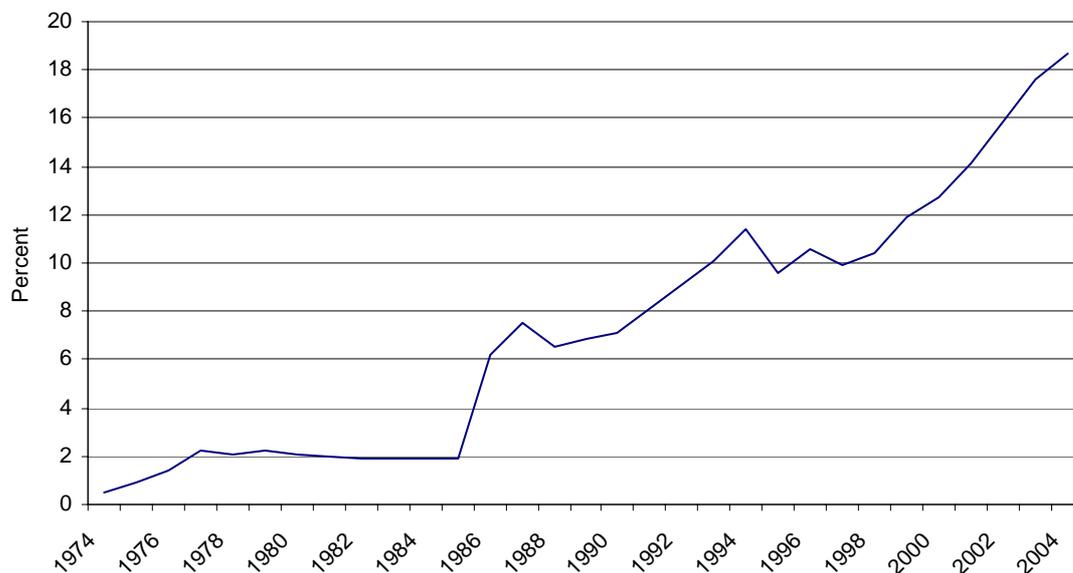
Beside legislated parental insurance, many employers pay additional amounts to employees on parental leave. Such payments are in general regulated by labour market treaties between unions and employers. The state sector for example pays an extra 10 percent to the legislated 80 percent replacement without any ceiling, which means that employees in fact receive 90 percent of earnings during parental leave. Similar arrangements also exist in parts of the private sector.

## Experiences and consequences

### Parents use of leave

As mentioned above, the introduction of the parental insurance was an important step towards making the combination of work and family possible in Sweden. In practice this changed women's labour market situation so that they could keep their employment even after becoming parents. Even though the policy was gender-neutral, it was women who used the overwhelming majority of parental leave days. Not until the beginning of the 1990s did men's share of the parental leave days reach a tenth of the days available to the parents (see figure 3). Today men use about 17 percent of all parental leave days.

**FIGURE 3: FATHERS' SHARE OF ALL USED PARENTAL LEAVE DAYS**



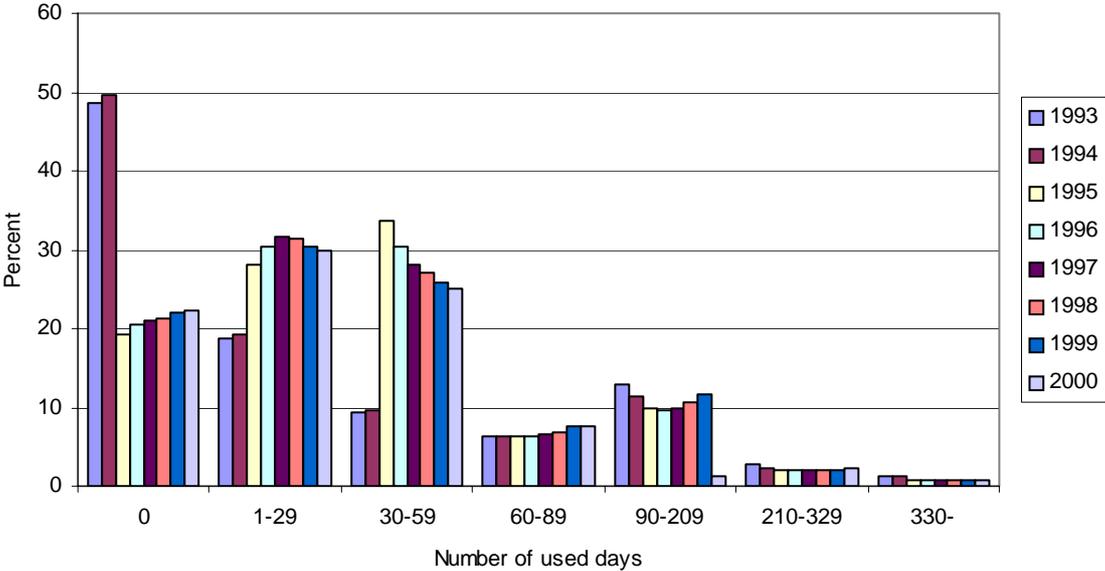
Source: Calculations using data from the National Social Insurance Board

The duration of parental leave has been extended a number of times and the increasing generosity in this respect may have encouraged fathers to use a larger part of the policy. However, the largest change in policy with regard to the gender division was the reservation of one month for each parent in 1995. This change in policy did not make fathers on leave use more days but the proportion of fathers who used no leave decreased dramatically (see figure 4). During the years before 1995, around half of all fathers used no leave at all, but after the introduction of the “daddy month” this proportion was reduced to a fifth of all fathers.

Most men use one to two months of leave. Fathers who have a weak attachment to the labour market, are unemployed, receive welfare benefits or have a low earnings, are over-represented among those who use no leave (Nyman and Pettersson 2002). In other words, fathers who

would receive a low benefit during parental leave most often chose not to take leave. The fathers who use a longer leave are the ones with high income, although the income ceiling in the insurance discourages longer leaves (Nyman and Pettersson 2002; Sundström and Duvander 2002). As the use of parental leave may be seen as a bargaining process between the parents, the relative income of the mother and the father are also of importance (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2004). Furthermore, fathers with high education use longer leave. Also mothers' education and income have a positive effect on fathers' leave use (Sundström and Duvander 2002). Studies have also found that other factors are important for how paid leave is divided, not least attitudes and values (Bekkengen 2002), but also contextual factors such as workplace situation (Bygren and Duvander 2004; Haas, Allard and Hwang 2002; Näsman 1992). Fathers often mention the workplace and employers' attitudes as reasons to not use the parental leave and it seems that small, private, male dominated workplaces inhibit parental leave use for fathers. The above mentioned income and educational factors are furthermore likely to act as proxies for differences between professions and types of workplaces.

**FIGURE 4: FATHERS' USE OF PARENTAL LEAVE UP TO THEIR CHILD'S 4TH BIRTHDAY**



Source: Calculations using data from the National Social Insurance Board

As the time on leave can be stretched out by accepting a lower benefit than 80 percent of earlier income, many parents stay at home longer than would be expected by only considering the formally legislated duration of leave. On average, a child stays at home with a parent for over 16 months before any other form of child care is introduced (estimated length for children born in 1999, Berggren 2004). Over a quarter of all mothers take 18 months of leave or longer.

It is important to remember that parental leave can be used up to the child's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, and even though the main part is used during the child's first years, a fair number of days are used after this first period of leave. Parents normally use up their days with earnings replacement before the days with the low flat rate are used and a very small share of the days with earnings replacement are forfeited (less than 5 percent). The days with a flat rate are more frequently used during the child's preschool years, and not only during the first parental leave period, probably as a way to extend holidays, and in various ways manage absences from day-care that are necessary (for example for health care visits). However, around one fifth of the days with a flat rate are forfeited when the child reaches 8 years old.

### **Linking policy to outcomes**

It is difficult to isolate effects from policies from other changes in society during a particular period. This is of course also true for the Swedish family policy and most conclusions on effects from the policy must therefore be tentative. Some effects may however be evaluated through policy changes, and some may be concluded by comparisons with other welfare states.

#### *Childbearing patterns*

One example of a policy reform that generated a changed pattern of childbearing in Sweden was the introduction of the so-called speed premium in 1986. This policy implied that parents could retain the same level of parental leave benefit paid after the birth of one child until after the next birth, if the new child arrived within 30 months. Parents who reduce their work hours when going back to work after a parental leave period could thus obtain a higher benefit for subsequent children than before this reform. This applies to a large part of Swedish mothers, as it is common to reduce working hours after a birth. More than 40 percent of employed women with children under 7 years work part-time (Statistics Sweden 2001).<sup>4</sup>One consequence of this policy was that the birth intervals were shortened for Swedish women (Hoem 1993). In a comparison with the development in Norway it is also possible to conclude that the shorter birth intervals was one contributing factor to the rise in fertility in Sweden for a period in the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s (Andersson 2002).

As most European countries, Sweden has experienced a postponement of first births in recent decades. The higher ages at first birth is to a large extent a result of the longer period spent in education. Presumably, the design of the Swedish parental insurance reinforces the post-

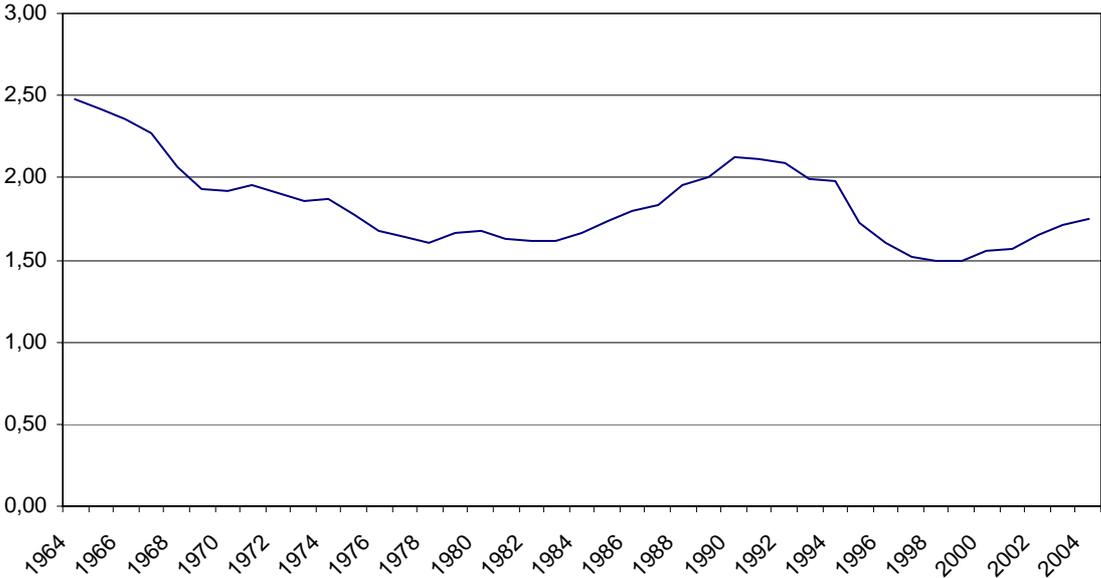
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<sup>4</sup> However, part-time work in Sweden is often relatively long and caused by the legislation allowing parents with children up to 12 years old to reduce full-time work to a 30 hours week.

poning trend. An indication of the importance of the parental insurance for the fertility level is that the individual income level has a strong positive association with the propensity to give birth. This applies to men and women and for first, second and third births (Duvander and Olsson 2001; Duvander and Andersson 2003). The strongest correlation is found between women’s income level and first birth and it can be assumed that a strong contributing factor to this pattern is that women postpone childbearing until they have a sufficiently high income to base their parental leave benefit on. Having children while studying or being unemployed is relatively rare (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2001:57).

The increasing delay of first births is of concern with reference to future fertility as it shortens the length of the reproductive period and thereby reduces the number of children women will have. While first-parenthood at higher ages might be considered as positive from an economic point of view<sup>5</sup>, since the couple is more likely to be able to support the children, it is definitely a high-risk alternative from a demographic and medical perspective. Given that fecundity declines with age, the need for assisted reproduction increases, which is costly and also associated with health risks for both the mother and the child. It is also likely to lead to a higher level of childlessness in society, given both the biological and social thresholds of age at motherhood (i.e. the socially accepted age limit for becoming a mother), but also the fact that people get accustomed to a childless lifestyle and may be increasingly unwilling to give up careers, hobbies etc. for the sake of parenting (Morgan 2003).

**FIGURE 6: TOTAL FERTILITY RATE, SWEDEN, 1960-2002**



Source: Statistics Sweden

<sup>5</sup> This is true only in the short run, ignoring the long-term consequences of an increased dependency burden that may result e.g. in lower pensions.

Furthermore, there may also be an association between the parents' division of parental leave and fertility. There is a positive effect of fathers' moderate leave use on especially second births (Oláh, 2001, Duvander and Andersson, 2004). The reasons may be that fathers that are very child-oriented are more inclined to use the parental leave, but it is also possible that fathers' use of parental leave may enhance both the father and the mother's interest for a larger family.

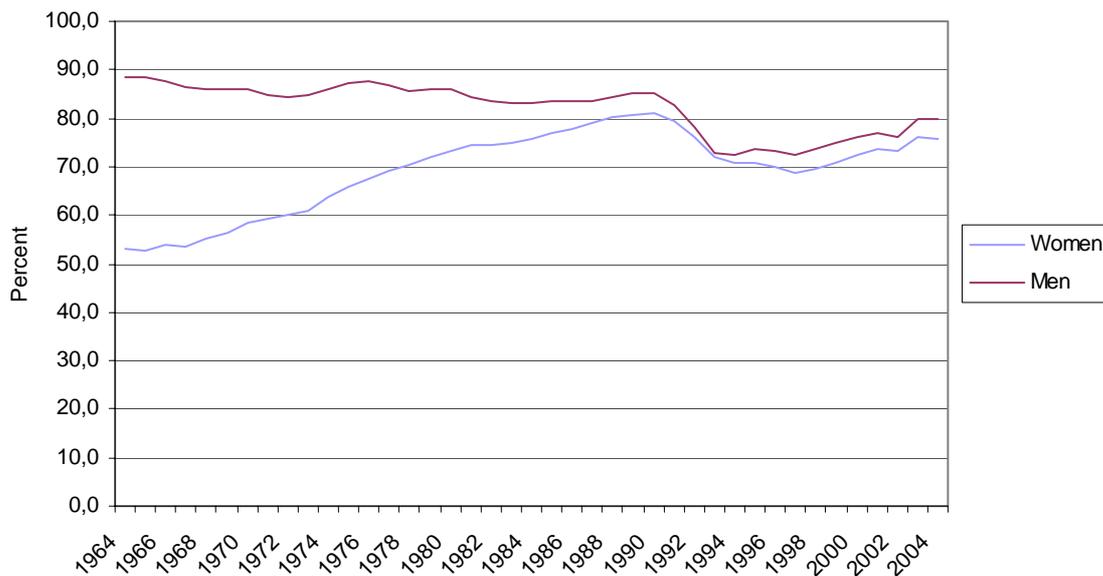
Comparative studies of links between parental leave and childbearing have also shown that paid parental leave institutions may affect fertility rates. In more broadly macro-comparative and longitudinal studies on OECD-countries, fertility and parental leave, in particular earnings-related leave, seem to be positively correlated (Winegarden and Bracy, 1995, Ferrarini, 2003, Rösen, 1999).

#### *Gender equality and female labour force participation*

The Swedish family policy is often seen as stimulating both fertility and women's paid work, not least by reducing the cost of having children (see for example Sundström and Stafford, 1992, Rösen and Sundström, 1999, Olah, 2003). As mentioned above, the introduction of parental insurance is seen as one of the reasons to Sweden's high female employment rate, together with separate taxation of spouses and access to good quality day-care (Hirdman, 1998). Female labour force participation has increased from 50 percent in the mid 1960s to more than 80 percent in the early 1990s. In 1993 the participation rate among women nearly paralleled that of men. During the economic crises in the 1990s the rate fell more markedly for women than for men, and the difference has persisted since (Jans forthcoming).

However, the generous parental leave could also be regarded as a problem when it comes to gender equality as long as the great majority of leave is taken by women. There are reasons to believe that men and women are treated differently since employers regard young women (with and without children) as a risk group. Men and women are consequently sorted to different workplaces, positions and professions in the labour market. As a result, inequalities, associated with gender segregation in the labour market and the gender wage gap, are reinforced (Nyberg, 2004). Thus, at the same time as an earnings-based parental leave benefit encourages female labour force participation, it also preserves the different roles of men and women. Women will find it difficult to compete on equal terms with men in the labour market while men will have a worse starting point at home.

**FIGURE 7: LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES 1964-2002, MEN AND WOMEN, 15-64 YEARS**



Source: AKU, Statistics Sweden, calculations by Jans (forthcoming)

Evidence from comparative studies indicates that parental leave institutions are correlated with female economic activity. Several macro-comparative and longitudinal studies have shown a positive relationship between total duration of parental leave and female labour force participation (e.g. Ruhm and Teague 1995; Winegarden and Bracy 1995; Ruhm 1996). In Sweden, Finland and Norway, first-time mothers entitled to parental insurance benefits (re)enter employment considerably faster than non-eligible mothers (Rönsen and Sundström 1996; 2002; Rönsen 1999). Both micro and macro-studies show that earnings-related benefits are positively correlated to female activity while flat rate benefits appear to prolong career interruptions (Ferrarini, 2003).

In conclusion, a goal conflict around gender roles thus seems to exist between the motives of different parental leave institutions. Benefits that introduce a 'choice' for women to be on a longer leave period after the child's birth, and pursue the role of homemaker may have negative effects on the 'choice' of women to participate in paid work on equal terms with men. The motive to achieve gender equality in paid and unpaid work, may be counteracted by for example flat rate leave or various forms of tax concessions for a dependent spouse as long as large gender inequalities on the labour market and in the family prevail in Western welfare democracies.

#### *Poverty among families with children*

Earnings-related parental leave benefit is also an important factor contributing to the relatively low poverty rates of families with children in Sweden. A relatively close

relationship has been discerned between institutional structure of family policy and poverty outcome in cross-national studies (see Palme and Kangas 2000; Ferrarini & Forssén 2005).

In a comparative study of the macro link between first years parental leave generosity and poverty among families with infants a tight relationship between policy and outcome in the mid 1990s is found (Ferrarini, 2003). Sweden, and the other Nordic countries with generous earnings-related parental leave benefits show low poverty rates. Between 4 and 8 percent of the individuals in these countries fall below 50 percent of a poverty line based on equivalised disposable income (with Sweden having the lowest incidence of such poverty).<sup>6</sup> Continental European countries, with more dominant flat-rate benefits have poverty rates between 12 and 17 percent among such households (with the figure for Germany being around 14 percent). Poverty rates in English-speaking countries with market-oriented family policy is highest, ranging between 17 and 34 percent. The earnings-related parental insurance component makes the largest contribution to this relationship between paid leave and poverty.

As mentioned earlier, the design of the parental leave benefit based on earnings replacement have a positive effect on the female employment rate, but it may also exclude a not negligible share of parents from the earnings-related component in the benefit. Parents, and especially mothers, who have a loose attachment to the labour market, such as unemployed, students and also parents newly arrived to Sweden, obtain benefits at a low flat rate and are thus not able to use the parental leave as the only source of income.

High poverty risks among families with young children is problematic not only in the sense that it deprives family members of potential choices and may restrict opportunities to pursue their objectives when being exposed to poverty. Poverty risks for families with newly born children also have consequences for parents-to-be. Running the risk of becoming poor due to childbirth constrains parents' choice to have children without suffering from potentially severe economic difficulties. Early childhood poverty may also have substantial long-run life-course effects, as it affects the future life chances. Duncan et al (1998) show that economic living conditions during the first years of a child's life are strong determinants of school completion, in particular among children growing up in families with the lowest household incomes. A lack of such resources among other things increases the risk of a precarious labour market position, which in turn is closely related to experienced poverty risks (for a review of previous research see Haveman and Wolfe 1995).

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<sup>6</sup> Even if long-term poverty increased somewhat in Sweden in the late 1990s (Ds 2004), broader cross-national patterns of poverty remain stable (Ferrarini 2005).

## **The political debate and attitudes towards parental leave**

The parental leave model today enjoys a wide support among the public, the media, the trade unions and the political parties. On the whole, all political parties support the model. The only party that wants to shorten the parental leave and reduce the compensation level is the right-winged Moderate Party (*Moderata samlingspartiet*) who wants to cut down the leave to 12 months and advocates a flat-rate child care leave benefit and subsidised household services to families with children instead. The latter measures are also supported by the other right wing parties, in particular the Christian Democrats has been a strong advocate for child care leave benefits (Thalberg 2003). To (re)introduce child care leave benefits would be a deviation from the dual earner model and a step towards the contradictory model.

An additional question at issue is the earnings ceiling of parental insurance and the minimum level in the parental leave insurance. Since men have higher salaries (and therefore more often hit the ceiling and receive a lower compensation level) some argue that more men would take parental leave if the ceiling is raised. Others want to increase the minimum level so that those who are not eligible for parental leave benefit receive a higher benefit, and thus facilitate for example students to become parents. This however, would undermine the incentives for paid work. Policy-makers consequently have to deal with balancing the issues of both gender equality and social equality.

The main focus of the parental leave in media and the public debate, however, has been on the gendered division of leave days and whether a part of the parental insurance should be non-transferable between parents, and if so, how many months it should involve. In many cases the subject matter cuts across party dividing lines.

The debate on earmarking clearly illustrates the goal conflict between freedom of choice and gender equality and these arguments are also the most frequently used. Another common argument used by both opponents and those supporting earmarking is “the best interest of the child”. Perhaps in particular among those against earmarking who claim that men won’t use their part of the leave and that children therefore will be left at day-care when they are too young. Those in favour of earmarking on the other hand argue that the best interest of the child involves having access to both parents. One option that seems to gain ground in the debate is the “one-third” alternative, where one third is earmarked for the mother, one for the father, and one for the parents to freely divide between them. This arrangement has been successfully implemented in Iceland (Gislason 2004).

The public seem somewhat more conservative than the political parties when it comes to earmarking the parental leave; opinion polls show that a large majority are opposed to making more months non-transferable. In a survey from 1992, only around 40 percent of men and women in childbearing ages were positive to a “daddy month”, men somewhat less positive than women (Statistics Sweden 1994). However, the resistance against the two months already established has weakened since the introduction, considering the intense debates preceding the introduction. More recent surveys also show that most parents (over 80 percent) are satisfied with how they divide the leave between them (Berggren and Duvander 2003). Economical reasons, the father’s work situation and the mother’s desire to be at home are the most mentioned reasons to why parents divide the leave as they do.

In 2004 a commission was appointed by the government to investigate effects of the current parental insurance legislation. Main issues for the investigation are whether the present parental leave insurance is fulfilling its aim of gender equality and whether it acts in the child’s interests. The commission will in particular examine how parental leave legislation promotes a situation where the child has equal access to both parents. Proposals of reforms to decrease the gender-division of the parental leave days will consequently be suggested. The commission will conclude its work in September 2005 (dir 2004:44, see [www.rixlex.riksdagen.se](http://www.rixlex.riksdagen.se)). Already the commission has launched some suggestions. For example, the commission suggests ways of increasing working hours of parents (read mothers). Unintended demographic effects of such policy change are of course possible. The commission also suggests a reduction in period for parental leave use, from today’s eight years to the first four years of the child’s life. This may influence the flexibility of parental leave use, fathers’ leave use and possibly the work-life balance of parents.

## **Conclusions**

It has been proposed that the gendered conflict between paid “productive” work and unpaid “reproductive” work is not fully revealed until the role of the father as carer is recognized in parental leave legislation (Ohlander 1988). Since its introduction in 1974, parental leave insurance has been one of the pillars of the Swedish dual earner model, and reforms of family policy has with few exceptions been in the direction of strengthening this model. By introducing “daddy months” Swedish parental insurance legislation has during the recent decade acknowledged and drawn public attention to the gender distribution of paid and unpaid work. The intense debate about earmarking however demonstrates that the question of equal parenthood is far from settled.

In the perspective of changing demographic structures in Europe, with declining fertility levels and a growing number of elderly, a dual earner family policy, including parental

insurance legislation, may have a number of positive consequences. Parental insurance legislation encourages female (and male) labour force participation. During the recent decades the labour force participation among women in Sweden has been one of the highest in Europe. Another effect of parental insurance legislation is that fathers increasingly have been involved in the care of young children. Today, almost one fifth of the time on parental leave in Sweden is used by fathers, which is far from equal but nevertheless the highest paternal leave use in the Western world. The Swedish parental insurance also seems to have a positive effect on childbearing by enabling both women and men to combine work and family. The earnings-related benefit is also an important factor contributing to the relatively low levels of poverty among families with children in Sweden.

Despite the positive consequences, unresolved questions exist in the present parental insurance legislation. The flexibility of the Swedish system, with transferable leave rights, has the consequence that the lion's share of parental leave days is still taken by mothers, which, among other things, makes it difficult for women to compete on equal terms with men in the labour market. Consequently, the gender-based division of parental leave may contribute to a preservation of traditional gender roles and inequalities. As the Swedish labour market is highly gender segregated, the cost of parenthood is not only unfairly divided between parents but also unfairly divided between the employers of men and women.

Another problem in the Swedish system is the work requirement for eligibility that excludes students and others with weak labour market attachment from the earnings-related benefits. As students are relatively old in Sweden, this affects a large group of men and women in childbearing ages. This is likely to be one of the contributing factors behind the postponement of parenthood, which is a critical development not only from a demographic and medical perspective, but also from a welfare perspective since it reduces the choice capacity of individuals. Raising the minimum benefit could be one solution to enable childbearing among persons with weak labour market attachment, but this would also affect the economic incentive for paid work, and thus weaken the dual earner model.

It is important to remember that parental insurance is only one component in the broader family policy model and that socioeconomic as well as gendered outcomes of parental insurance are produced in a wider context and in interaction with other parts of family and social policy. The foremost important complementary factor is good quality child care at a reasonable price. Furthermore, not only transfers and services have to be considered here, but also other types of legislation, such as job protection while on parental leave, and anti-discriminatory legislation.

In a broader context, the goals of family policy have to be related to other policy goals. This is most clear regarding the goal of gender equality. In the political debate the goal of a gender equal division of family work and labour market work is contrasted to families' free choice, the child's best interest and social equality. The earnings-related component of parental leave restricts parents' choice of dividing tasks into one breadwinner and one homemaker, and supports a dual breadwinner model. Earmarked days to the father may be seen as inflicting on the child's interest of being cared for in the home for a long period (as fathers may not use their part of the leave), but may also enhance the probability of having access to two parents. Earnings-related benefits may exclude certain groups of parents, such as student, but decrease poverty rates and increase labour market participation of mothers.

The Swedish dual earner model of family policy has been gradually extended over three decades and values, attitudes and behaviour has changed gradually. Solid popular support for the introduction of reforms has not always existed before the introduction of reforms in Sweden. Somewhat of a paradox can be discerned in that a majority of individuals were negative to "daddy months" before the introduction, with the main argument being that earmarking decreases choice capacity of parents. However, once implemented, the "daddy month" has less opposition and parental behaviour adapts to it. Nevertheless, further earmarking is instead opposed. This indicates several things. When implementing such reforms, policy-makers are up against deeply rooted gender roles around the division of work. Once in place such institutions may change attitudes around the division of unpaid work and increase support for such legislations.

This study indicates that parental leave legislation may have great consequences for the well-being and behaviour of individuals. Different types of parental leave legislation, together with other types of family policy legislation, introduce different choices and reflect different normative statements implicitly and explicitly. Parental insurance leave implies norms regarding child care and fertility decisions, but also concerning the gender-based division of paid and unpaid work. Excluding fathers from paid leave means that choices around gender-based divisions of work is not recognised. Transferable parental leave benefits recognises fathers as carers but most often lead to the choice that mothers utilise leave, while increases in individualised leave encourages men's choices to participate in care work on equal terms with women, and women's choices to participate on the labour market on equal terms with men. What choices policymakers formulate, in parental leave and other family policy institutions, depends on, and influence, the parental "choices" they want to support.

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