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Conflicting Directions?

Outcomes and New Orientations of Sweden's Family Policy

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Abstract

Swedish family policies appear to have come to a new defining moment after the 2006 election, and questions have been raised about the future course of policies. Will the prototypical earner-carer model that has been developed over decades persist? The separate reforms of cash transfers, services and tax systems in several ways seem to point in conflicting directions, simultaneously reinforcing new principles of social care. In this study family policy reforms and potential outcomes are discussed from an institutional and comparative perspective. Reviewing research on outcomes of earner-carer policies, the study contributes to the discussion about impending challenges for family policy institutions in Sweden and other advanced welfare states.

For several decades Sweden's family policy has constituted one of the most evident examples of an earner-carer model, encouraging parents to engage in paid work and share unpaid care work. Since the early 1970s this policy orientation has been reinforced step by step through expansions of public day-care, extensions of earnings-related parental leave and an individualization of income taxation. Scholarly debates about gender egalitarian policies have often centred on the Swedish case (see Hernes 1987; Lewis 1992; Sainsbury 1996; Gornick & Meyers 2008). Swedish family policy legislation has also become a point of reference for policy makers in other welfare states, where reforms sometimes have been made with Swedish policies more or less as a blueprint. The introduction of the German parental insurance law in 2007 is here only the most recent example.¹

A major explanation to the scholarly and political concerns for earner-carer policies is the observed relationships to a large number of outcomes associated with behaviour, attitudes and well-being of parents as well as children. On the positive side, earner-carer policies have been related to gender equality and greater possibilities of parents to reconcile paid work and family life, facilitating the combination of extensive female labour force participation and relatively high fertility (Sundström & Stafford 1992; Ferrarini 2006; Neyer & Andersson 2008, Olah & Bernhardt 2008), as well as shaping child well-being, including poverty risks (Kangas & Palme 2000; Misra, Budig & Moller 2007; Huber et al. 2009), and health (Tanaka 2005; Lundberg et al. 2008). It has however increasingly been pointed out that the present variants of earner-carer policies may have unintended negative consequences in that work-family conflicts are augmented (Lewis 1992, Strand & Nordenmark 2006) and that such gender egalitarian policies may restrict the career chances of many women (Datta Gupta & Smith 2001, Mandel & Semyonov 2006).

After the Swedish national election in 2006 the winning centre-right coalition proposed and launched several new reforms in family policy legislation with a pronounced purpose to enhance individual choice. The separate reforms however appear to point in partly conflicting directions, simultaneously introducing new principles of marketization, familization and socialization of care. The Swedish earner-carer model appears to have come to an important cross-road, where the question arises in which way family policies are moving.

The aim of this study is to discuss Swedish family policies, their outcomes and their new orientations. The mapping of past and present family policy reform and their outcomes provides an important point of reference for the discussion about potential consequences of different policies on individual behaviour and well-being in Sweden and other welfare states. The discussion is relevant in the light of the recent changes to Sweden's prototypical earner-carer model but perhaps even more important from a broader perspective of how to evaluate the development of family policies in different welfare states.

We begin with an overview of family policy models developed in Sweden and other longstanding welfare democracies. The two subsequent sections describe the

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advancement of Swedish family policies since the 1970s and presents an overview of research on links between aspects of the earner-carer model and different potential outcomes, including female labour force participation and career chances, male care work, fertility, child well-being and work-family conflict. Finally, the new directions in Swedish family policy and future challenges for the earner-carer model are discussed.

Family policy models in comparative perspective

In the growing body of comparative literature aiming to categorize welfare states along the lines of gender family policy is a key variable (Lewis 1992; Orloff 1993; 2009; Sainsbury 1996; O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999; Korpi 2000; Gornick & Meyers 2008). Different approaches exist on how to conceptualize and measure the content of welfare states. One broad approach views gender structures of welfare states in terms of their degree of 'family-friendliness' (or 'woman-friendliness'). With such a one-dimensional perspective, countries are ordered on a continuum as having more or less developed policies, in particular regarding the extent of family policy transfers and services (e.g. Lewis 1992; Gornick, Meyers & Ross 1997; Gornick & Meyers 2003; Mandel & Semyonov 2005; 2006). Since different aspects of policies have been structured by conflicting goals and values around gender divisions of paid and unpaid work, viewing welfare states as more or less family-friendly may not suffice to capture the variations in policies (Sainsbury 1996). To analyze such variations in gender orientations of policies a multi-dimensional and institutional analytical approach has been proposed (Sainsbury 1996; Korpi 2000). The central question with the latter perspective thus becomes: more or less of which policies?

In the following we use a multidimensional and institutional typology developed by Korpi (2000), later elaborated by Ferrarini (2006) and Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund (2009), to describe cross-national differences in family policy structures and their developments. Figure 1 shows Korpi's (2000) classification of family policy models based on institutional indicators: different cash transfers, income tax structures and public services. The basic idea with the typology is that all policy measures can be separated along two dimensions depending on whether public policies support male breadwinners and women's unpaid work at home (traditional family support) or women's full-time participation in paid work (dual-earner support). A third policy dimension has also been discussed, dual-carer support, where policies directly support male care work for example through earnings-related paid parental leave to fathers (Korpi et al. 2009). Dual-earner and dual-carer dimensions are strongly correlated, and are highly developed mainly in Nordic countries.

An advantage with this typology is that it does not view a country's social policy as something fixed but is sensitive to socio-political change, which is crucial in a field of social policy that has been subject to substantial restructuring during recent decades. Differences in family policies were relatively small in the 1960s. No country had programs of paid parental leave recognizing fathers as potential carer and nowhere was public day care highly developed. Since then welfare states have moved in different directions and three distinct family policy models have formed among longstanding welfare states: an earner-carer model, a traditional-family model and a market-oriented model (Korpi et al.

2009). The effects of family policies do not only operate along the lines of gender, but are also likely to also be shaped by social class and ethnic cleavages (see Quadagno 2000).

By expansions of dual-earner and dual-carer support and decreasing support to highly gendered divisions of labour, Sweden's policy orientation has since the early 1970s been towards an almost continuous reinforcement of an earner-carer model. Important driving forces have been the long-term Social democratic incumbency in combination with organized women's interests in Sweden, both within and outside political parties (Ohlander 1988, Huber & Stephens 2000). The Swedish Liberal party has also been strongly supportive of earner-carer policies (Hobson & Lindholm 1997). The provision of individual social rights in this policy model does here not only support cohabiting parents but also assists the work-family reconciliation of single parent households.

Figure 1 *Dimensions and models of family policy around 2005*

		Dual-earner dimension	
		Low	High
Traditional family dimension	High	Traditional family model e.g. Germany	Mixed model
	Low	Market-oriented model e.g. the United Kingdom	Earner-carer model e.g. Sweden

Other welfare states, of which many Continental European, have during the same period introduced traditional-family models that sustain male-breadwinning and female home-making, for example through reinforced tax benefits for a dependent spouse and flat-rate homecare allowances. The traditional family policy model is also characterised by a lack of affordable and full-time day care services for the youngest children. Childcare for the older pre-school children is sometimes extensive but is primarily provided on a part-time basis. Strong Christian Democratic parties have been a main political driving force behind such policies (Bussemaker & van Kersbergen 1999; Montanari 2000; Ferrarini 2006).

In another group of welfare states (of which several are Anglophone) market-oriented family policy models have been sustained and public support systems for either earner-carer and traditional families are less developed. Instead, income taxes are lower and families have to rely on market and family for care. Political proponents of such policies have been centre-right governments, with little influence from confessional parties (Korpi 2000). Women's movements in market-oriented welfare states have with varying success furthered women's rights not through claim rights but instead through legislation that in different areas remove obstacles for women's career chances (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999).

A fourth potential type of broader family policy orientation – labelled a mixed or contradictory – has been discussed. Here, the goals of supporting earner-carer families and more traditional family patterns are both highly pronounced. During recent decades, several countries have gradually drifted towards such a model (Ferrarini 2006). For example, the earner-carer model developed in Finland has been supplemented by a flat-rate home-care allowance for families who do not utilise public day-care (Hiilamo & Kangas 2009). Another example is the new German parental insurance legislation introduced into a model otherwise dominated by traditional family support, with a joint taxation system and less developed day-care for the youngest children. The mixed model implies a goal conflict between the actors and motives underlying different policies, something that also may be reflected in a certain path dependency as new layers of reforms are introduced without removing old institutional structures.

The expansionary phase of earner-carer policies: 1970-2005

The Swedish earner-carer model is commonly viewed as resting on three central pillars: earnings-related parental insurance with long duration; affordable, full-day publicly subsidised day-care from the child's first birthday; and individual income taxation. A fourth pillar, paid less attention in comparative welfare state studies is that of fathers' custodial rights and responsibilities.

In 1974 Sweden was the first welfare democracy to introduce earnings-related parental leave for both parents. The benefit was at the time paid during 6 months after childbirth, entitling parents to share leave as they preferred. In the 1980s, leave rights were extended in steps to a full year also adding a further 3 months replaced at a low flat rate level. Cutbacks in the rate of earnings-related benefits were made during the crisis in the 1990s from 90 to 75 percent, later raised to the current level of 80 percent.

After long and intense debates within the centre-right coalition, the Liberal social minister in 1994 introduced one reserved month for each parent, which means that one parent (mostly mothers) could no longer use the whole leave, unless being single. At the same time a flat-rate home care leave allowance was legislated, paid when children did not use public childcare. The latter benefit was favoured by the Christian Democrats in the coalition government. The two reforms reflect a conflict of interests within the centre-right government, in particular between the Liberal Party, favouring a strengthening of the earner-carer model, and the Christian Democrats which opt for increased support for more traditional family patterns. The home care leave allowance was only in operation for a few months and was abolished after the Social Democratic return to power in 1994.

The months reserved for each parent in earnings-related parental leave were in 2002 extended to two months for each parent by a Social Democratic government. Since then the total leave period has been 16 months, out of which 13 with earnings-related benefit, paid at 80 percent of previous earnings. A large majority of parents meet the requirement of having worked for 240 days before using earnings-related leave.² Parental leave is used by practically all mothers and around nine out of ten fathers (see Duvander 2008). Moreover, state-legislated benefits are for many parents complemented by extra benefits from the employer on the basis of collective agreements.

The leave period is commonly extended by parents accepting a somewhat lower replacement rate and children often participate in some kind of public childcare outside the home around the age of one and a half (Duvander 2005). This is made possible by legislated rights to flexibility in absence from work due to parenting. For example, parts of leave may be saved to extend summer vacations or reduce work hours during the child's preschool years. In addition, the temporary parental benefit for the care of sick children, paid at the same level as parental leave, further aims to facilitate the combination of work and children.³

Even if the last decade has seen increased variety in the forms of childcare (such as parents' co-operations or privately operated day-care) the absolute majority of childcare is financed through public spending and follows centrally set curricula and other regulations. Variations in childcare can be seen as minor, especially compared to other countries with a large part of childcare carried out in the homes and by private childminders. In the 1960s only a few percent of Swedish children participated in public childcare. From the early 1970s to the 1980s, the share of preschool children in public childcare tripled, from around 10 to over 30 percent, and a decade later three out of four children between the ages one and school-age used public childcare (Bergqvist & Nyberg 2002). The last groups to get wide access to public childcare were children of working-class and immigrant parents, in part because childcare initially was granted to families where all adults members were in paid work. Today, 77 percent of all children in ages one to three participate in publicly financed childcare as do 97 percent of all children aged four to five (Swedish National Agency for Education 2007a). Reforms have also been implemented in order to raise pedagogical quality in public day-care and introduce guaranteed rights to participation in programs for all children (also those with unemployed parents).

In 2002, a low fixed maximum user fees for public childcare were introduced abolishing most of the regional differences in fees and availability that previously had existed.⁴ Almost 99 percent of staff working in Swedish day-care centres is trained to work with children. Pre-school teachers with a three year tertiary degree make up around 60 percent of staff in centres, the rest of the educated personnel have a secondary vocational training of between two and three years for care and pedagogical work with children (Swedish National Agency for Education 2006). During the economic crisis of

² The benefit ceiling is relatively high, but was in the 1990s lagging behind real wage increases and many parents (mostly men) received a lower benefit than 80 percent. Parents who do not qualify for earnings-related components receive a low flat-rate benefit that today is SEK 180 but remained at SEK 60 during the whole 1990s.

³ Parents are entitled to up to 120 days per year and child until the child's 12th birthday.

⁴ User fees are set at a maximum 3 percent of net household income for one child, 2 percent for the second child and 1 percent for the third child.

the mid 1990s cutbacks were made in many municipalities and the average number of children per full-time employee increased from 4.4 to over 5 children (Swedish National Agency for Education 2007b).

In the income tax system a series of reforms gradually removed disincentives for earner-carer families. The first and largest reform, implemented in 1971, introduced the principle of individual income taxation. What is less known is that a tax deduction for an economically dependent spouse at that time also was introduced which was in force in the individual tax system for several decades, even if the real value of this tax benefit to some extent was depreciated by inflation. The income tax system was fully individualised as late as in the 1990s (Ferrarini 2009). Individual taxation combined with a progressive tax system favours households with two low or medium earnings compared to households having one single high earning.

In the early 1970s, joint custody was not the default option in case of separation and divorce. In case of conflict the courts had to settle disputes and grant one parent sole custody of the child. Rights to joint custody for unmarried or divorced couples were enabled first in 1977, but even after this reform the room to question joint custody and gain sole custody of the child was relatively large which mostly led to children being under maternal custody. The possibilities of one parent to become sole custodian were radically decreased through the new custodial legislation of 1998. Courts were now given the power to issue a joint custody order against the objections of one parent. These new powers of the courts also comprised the right to decide on the child's place of residence and parents' terms of access to the child. The Social Welfare Boards have the prime responsibility to guide parents to a voluntary agreement on custody and residence of the child, and courts deal with such issues only on rare occasions when conflicts cannot be settled (Schiratzki 1999). This reflects an increased emphasis on the shared responsibility for parents to agree on the care of children. The developments have also contributed to a larger share of children living in joint custody after separation, increasingly meaning that children with separated parents live half their time with their mother and half the time with their father (Statistics Sweden 2007). In 2006, 28 percent of all children with parents living apart lived half the time with the father and half the time with the mother, and an additional 10 percent lived mainly or only with their father.

The intentions behind the above described reforms have been to increase female labour supply and demand as well as to increase the involvement of fathers in care work. The social policy literature has also attributed earner-carer policies to a number of other outcomes in Sweden and other welfare states which will be reviewed next.

Earner-carer policies and their consequences: previous findings

Earner-carer models are often commended for their ability to improve work-family reconciliation, but a simultaneous treatment of the links between policies and their multiple effects for behaviour, attitudes and well-being of men, women, and children has been lacking.⁵ Diverse methodological approaches have been used to evaluate policy outcomes and at times causal conclusions have been drawn without firm support. Below is an attempt to create a systematic but by no means exhaustive overview of the ways in

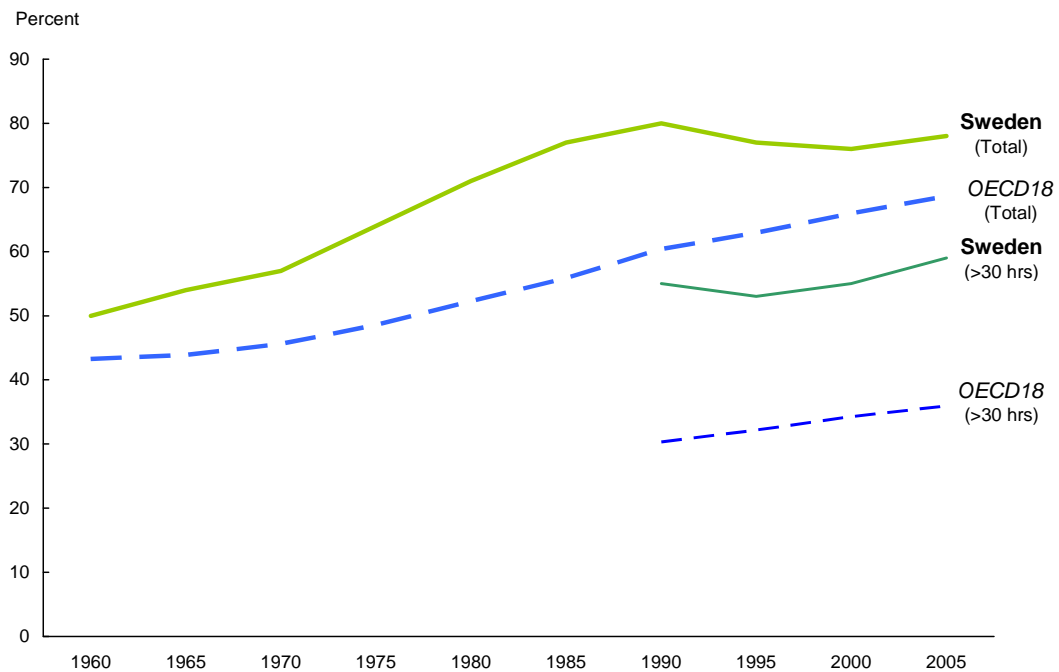
⁵ Datta Gupta et al. (2008) provides an extensive review of mainly economic research on the linkages between 'family-friendly' policies, fertility, women's paid work and wages.

which such outcomes have been related to aspects of earner-carer policies in Sweden and other countries, which serves as a useful background when assessing the most recent developments in this policy area. The review consists of comparative studies as well as case studies of Sweden.

Women's labour force participation and career chances

A main explanation for the high female labour force participation in Sweden is often sought in the structure earner-carer policies. From the mid 1960s to the early 1990s, the female labour force in Sweden increased from around 50 percent to over 80 percent (Figure 2), when it nearly paralleled that of men. During the economic crises of the 1990s female labour force participation fell a few percent. Despite an increasing trend in female labour force participation among the longstanding OECD countries substantial cross-country differences are evident by 2005. The eighteen included countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Among those in the labour force almost 60 percent of Swedish women are involved in full-time or longer part-time work (over 30 hours per week). In the longstanding OECD countries the average share of women working 30 hours or more is little more than 30 percent.⁶

Figure 2. Female labour force participation (total and over 30 hours a week) in Sweden and 18 OECD countries (average) 1960-2005, women aged 15 to 64, in percent.



Source: OECD 2009

⁶ It should here be noted that Sweden due to the legal rights to temporary reduced hours when children are under 8 years old have many women with work working weeks around 30 hours.

Cross-national variations in labour force participation are most pronounced among mothers with low education – groups whose labour force participation is particularly favoured by gender egalitarian family policies (Montanari 2009, Mandel & Semyonov 2005, Korpi et al. 2009). The earner-carer model is also related to high labour force participation of single mothers compared to countries with other family policy models (see Huber et al. 2009), among other things resulting in that Swedish single mother households have larger earnings components in their income packages than their counterparts in other types of welfare states (Hobson & Takahashi 1997).

Several macro-comparative and longitudinal studies have also shown positive links between total duration of parental leave and female paid work (e.g., Ruhm & Teague 1995; Winegarden & Bracy 1995). In Sweden, Finland and Norway, first-time mothers entitled to parental insurance benefits (re)enter employment considerably faster than do non-eligible mothers (Rönsen 1999; Rönsen & Sundström 2002). Both individual-level and institutional-level studies indicate that earnings-related benefits supportive of earner-carer families are positively correlated with female paid work, while flat-rate benefits supportive of traditional divisions of labour appear to prolong career interruptions (Ferrarini, 2006). Affordable public childcare for the youngest children has in a number of studies in the Nordic countries also been shown to increase mother's employment (Gustafsson & Stafford 1992; Pylkänen & Smith 2004; Kangas & Rostgard 2007). Early evaluations of the introduction of the maximum user fee in Sweden did, however, not indicate any large short-term effects on female labour force participation (Lundin, Mörk & Öckert 2007).

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A growing literature points to potential negative effects of earner-carer policies on women's career chances. By drawing large proportions of women with low education and lower career attainments into public sector employment, labour market segregation and employer statistical discrimination is thought to increase, both lowering and widening the gender wage gaps (Mandel & Semyonov 2005; 2006). Employer statistical discrimination is also enforced by extensive parental leave programs where women use the majority of leave. A number of Swedish studies have analysed the potential effect of parental leave length on women's continued careers, but have found no clear effects (Albrecht et al 1999, Jonsson & Mills 2001, Granqvist & Persson 2004). Such results have been explained by statistical discrimination of the whole group of women, but this is not supported by more recent data from the whole 1990s when wage differentials increased also for women in Sweden.⁷ The potential negative effects have led some researchers to talk about 'welfare state based glass-ceilings' (Datta Gupta et al 2008). It has, however, also been argued that by restricting the analysis only to working women some of the cross-country comparative analyses of glass-ceilings have come to premature conclusions about the consequences of gender egalitarian policies. Bringing women that are outside the labour force into the analysis obliterates cross-national differences in women's representation in the top wage quintile as well as regarding labour market segregation. The likelihood that any woman of working age has top earnings is around ten percent in all rich countries (Korpi et al. 2009). The latter results suggest that gender gaps and inequality in higher positions is determined mainly by other factors than family policies and levels of female labour force participation.

Male care work

A central feature of the earner-carer model is that it encourages the participation of men in care work. When parental leave is used predominantly by women, it is not only more difficult for women to compete on equal terms with men in the labour market, but it also gives men a poorer starting point in taking equal share in parenting. Increasing the incentives for men to use parental leave has been seen as a main way to change the imbalances between men and women in the distribution of work. The Swedish reforms of parental leave have contributed to increased male shares of total parental leave days from below one percent in the mid 1970s to around 22 percent in 2008.⁸

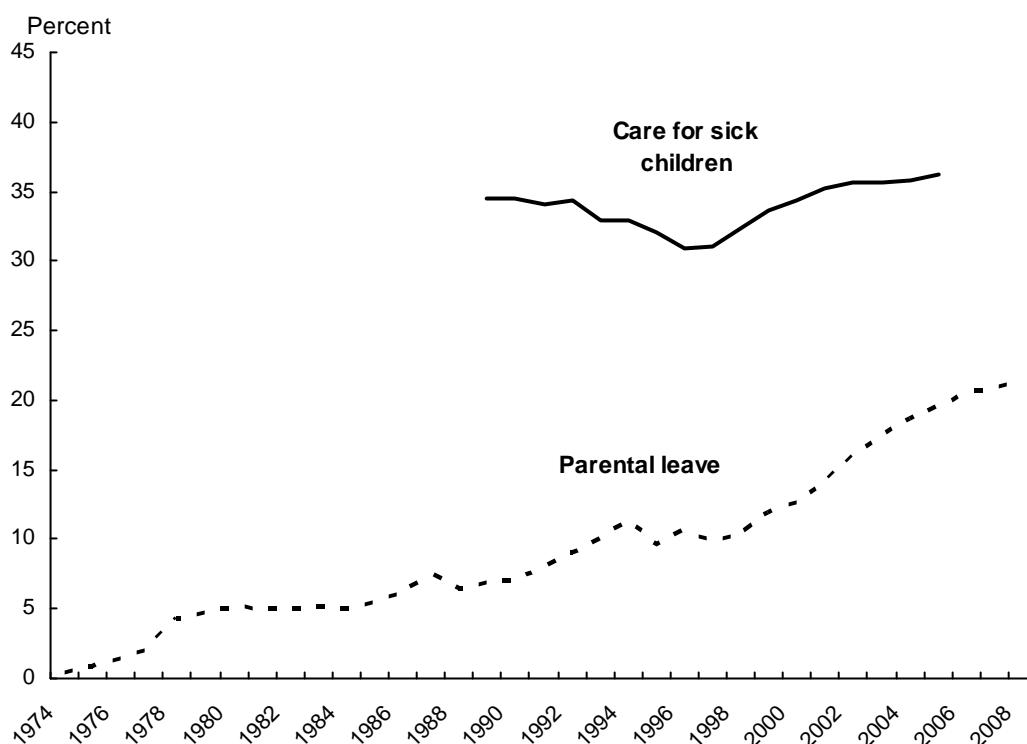
Since parental leave can be flexibly used until the child's 8th birthday it possible to measure the development in various ways. In 2008 the average number of days used by fathers of three year old children is 64 days, which can be compared with 42 days five years earlier. An increasing number of fathers also share leave equally with the mother. Among parents with three year old children, 6.9 percent with children born in 2003 had shared leave equally (defined as somewhere in the range 40-60 percent division), for children born 2005 this number had risen to 8.7 (National Social Insurance Agency 2008).

⁷ Above studies concern the period up to the beginning of the 1990s. A study including also the 1990s find individual effects of leave length on chances of changing to a job of higher prestige (Evertsson & Duvander 2009).

⁸ Compared to other Nordic countries Sweden has for long had the highest paternal use of parental leave. One recent exception is that of Iceland, which increased the proportion of paternity leave by introducing three ear-marked months for fathers in 2005 (Morgan 2008).

It is also important to know whether fathers' leave periods have positive consequences for future father-child contacts. It may be that the period at home is too short to have lasting effects. This is indicated by a study showing that increased parental leave as an effect of the first daddy month did not result in fathers using a larger share of the temporary parental leave for the care of sick children (Ekberg, Eriksson & Friebel 2005). Temporary parental leave is, however, more equally shared than parental leave (see Figure 3). Many parents do not use any temporary parental leave but among parents who do, fathers use on average 2.5 days and mothers 4.5 days, figures that have been stable the last decade (Eriksson 2009). In studies based on interviews rather than national register data fathers' leave use during early years has been associated with a closer parent-child relationship later on (Haas and Hwang 2008) and with continued contact in case of separation, as well as with reduced work hours when the child is older (Duvander & Jans 2009). It is thus plausible that parental leave will affect other aspects of male care work both directly and indirectly through changed norms of fathers' obligations and rights.

Figure 3 *Fathers' share of all used days for parental leave and temporary parental leave for sick child*

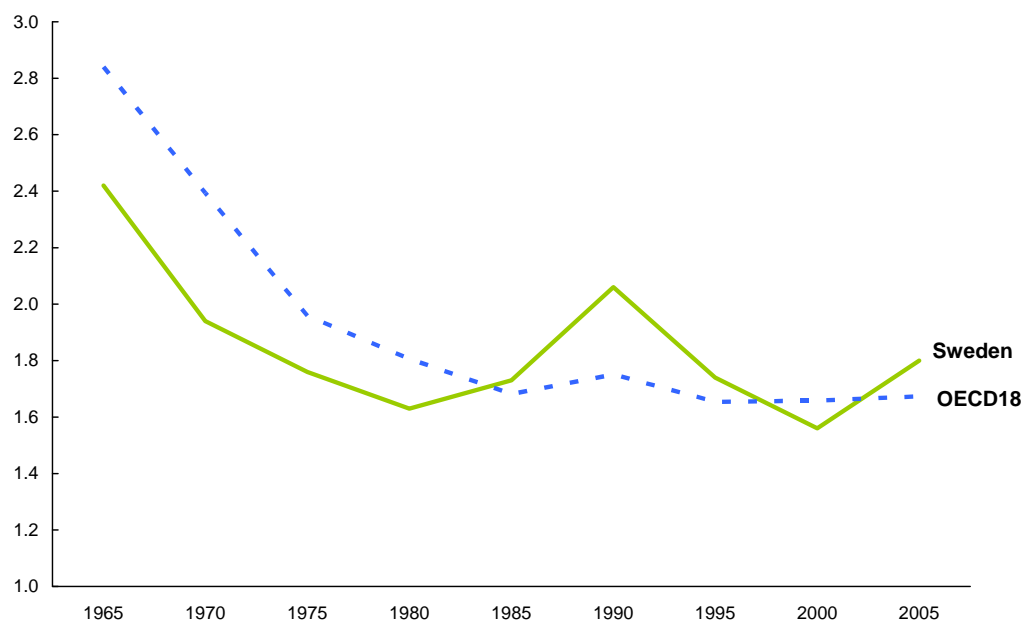


Source: National Social Insurance Agency.

Childbearing

While fertility declined dramatically in many European countries, fertility rates have been maintained at relatively high levels in Sweden despite high female labour force participation. Earner-carer policies enabling work-family reconciliation are often held to be a main explanation for the observed fertility patterns (Olah & Bernhardt 2008, Neyer & Andersson 2007). Figure 4 shows the development of the total fertility rate for Sweden and an average of 18 OECD countries between 1965 and 2005. Sweden's fertility decline occurred from a lower level than the OECD average and has been at a higher level since the mid 1980s with a notable exception, during the economic crisis of the mid 1990s when female labour force participation and fertility fell. It is likely that the earnings-related component of parental leave contributes to this pattern of pro-cyclical fertility, which closely follows the business cycle, increasing during economic upturns and decreasing during downturns (Andersson 2000).

Figure 4 Total Fertility Rate in Sweden and 18 OECD-countries (average), 1965-2005



Source: OECD

Comparative studies of links between parental leave and childbearing support the idea that parental leave affects fertility. In more institutionally oriented and longitudinal studies of longstanding OECD countries, fertility and parental leave are positively correlated, particularly regarding earnings-related leave (see Ferrarini 2003; Rösen 1999). An indication at the micro level of the importance of parental insurance for the fertility decision is that the individual income level is positively associated with the propensity to have a child. This applies to men and women and to first and higher order

births (Andersson 2000; Duvander & Olsson 2001; Duvander & Andersson 2003). The strongest correlation is found between women's income and first births, and a likely contributing factor to this pattern is that women postpone childbearing until they have a sufficiently high income on which to base their parental leave benefit. Having children while studying or while being unemployed is relatively rare, partly because these groups receive very low benefits during parental leave (Thalberg 2009).

Associations have also been found between the degree of gender equality in the household and fertility. Fathers' leave use affect the propensity to have another child especially regarding second births (Oláh 2001; Duvander & Andersson 2006). Explanations have been sought in the shared parental responsibilities that facilitate a higher number of children as well as in fathers' increased child-orientation, even if a selection into parental leave among fathers are probably at play as well.

The increasing delay of first births, partly driven by the extended length of education in combination by work-requirements for earnings-related parental leave, is of great concern with reference to future fertility as it shortens the length of the reproductive period and reduces childbearing. While first-time parenthood at higher ages may be considered positive from an economic perspective it is a high-risk alternative from demographic and medical perspectives. Delayed childbearing may lead to a higher level of childlessness in society, given the age thresholds of motherhood, but may also make individuals increasingly accustomed to a childless lifestyle, unwilling to give up careers and hobbies for parenting. Nevertheless, it seems that the highest shares of childless through the reproductive years are not found in countries with typical earner-carer models but in countries with other types of family policy models, in particular those with traditional family policies (Frejka 2008).

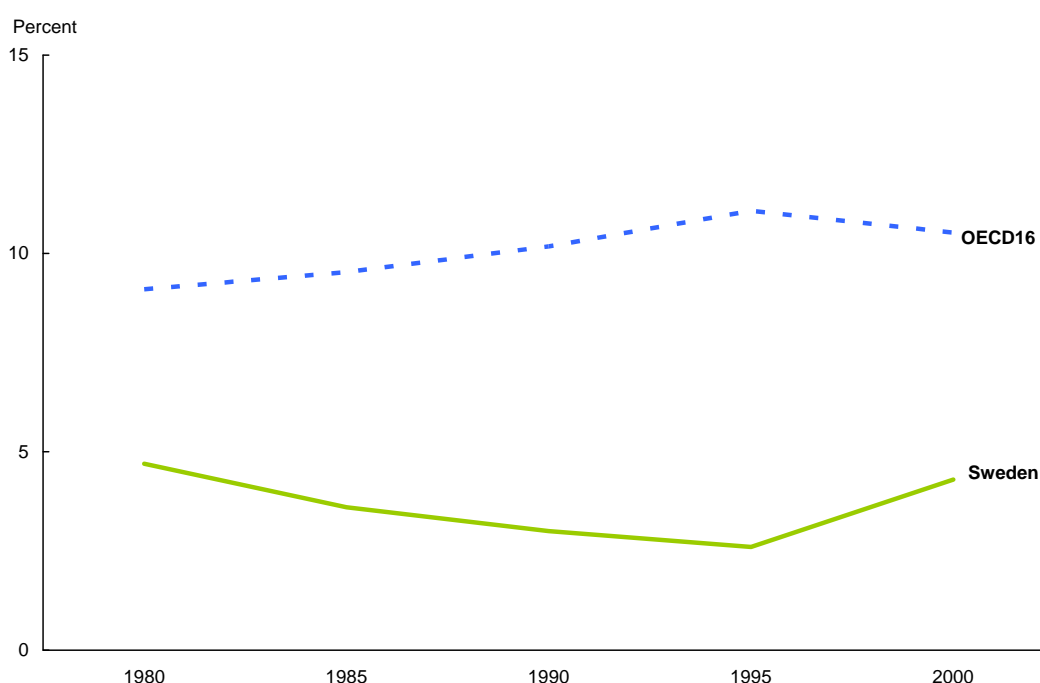
Child well-being

A fundamental aim of Swedish family policies has been to increase gender equality without hazarding the well-being of children. Fathers' participation in care of children has here been seen as important factor for child development and well-being. One important and relatively easily captured aspect of such well-being is the economic situation of households with children. Earner-carer policies are likely to affect income of families in two ways; directly through highly redistributive earnings-related transfers, and through the increase in earnings that occurs by the support of both parents' paid work. It has repeatedly been shown that Sweden and other countries with highly developed earner-carer policies also have the lowest child poverty (e.g. Rainwater & Smeeding 1995; Kangas & Palme 2000; Gornick & Jäntti 2009). Earner-carer policies lower poverty risks also among single parent households, mainly by increasing their earnings-potential but also through generous transfers supportive of dual-earner families (Hobson & Takahashi 1997; Misra et al 2007; Bäckman & Ferrarini, forthcoming).

Figure 5 shows the development of child poverty for Sweden and an average of 16 OECD countries between 1980 and 2000. From the early 1980s to the mid 1990s poverty rates in Sweden declined from around 5 to 3 percent, partly as a consequence of the economic crisis in 1990s poverty rates increased slightly by the end of the observation period. The average child poverty rate has been more than twice as high in the OECD-countries.

In comparative studies of macro links between family policy orientation and child poverty a close relationship has been found; welfare states with earner-carer models have the lowest child poverty, market-oriented countries have the highest rates, while traditional family policies are related to medium high child poverty (Ferrarini 2006). High poverty risks among families with young children do not only deprive family members of potential choices and restrict opportunities when exposed to poverty, but may also have substantial long-term life-course effects, affecting childrens' future life chances (see Duncan et al 1998; Bäckman & Nilsson, forthcoming). Moreover, it has been argued that the choice capacity of parents-to-be may be affected by high poverty risks as a result of childbirth (Ferrarini 2003).

Figure 5 Poverty among households with dependent children in Sweden and 16 OECD-countries (average), 1980 to 2000 (poverty level: 50% of median equivalized income).⁹



Source: Luxembourg Income Study

Another important component in the analysis of child well-being is parental time with children. Whether time with parents is beneficial for child well-being of course depends both on the quality of parents' care and the quality of other forms of childcare. Children of highly educated mothers may sometimes benefit in school performance if they spend longer time at home before starting public childcare, but the general pattern is that parental leave length of parents does not affect school performance in Sweden (Liu &

⁹ The OECD-countries are the same as in figure 2 excluding Japan and New Zealand which lack comparative income data. The figures for around 1980 should be interpreted with care as they are based on only 9 countries. The square-root equivalence scale has been used.

Nordström Skans 2009). A universal public childcare system leads to a more homogenized time-use among parents from different social backgrounds. In a systematic literature review it is shown that some studies point to higher cognitive and language skills for children who have spent time in day-care centers early in life while other studies show no effects. The general conclusion is that especially children at risk benefit from high quality day-care centers (Swedish National Institute of Public Health 2009). Other Swedish studies of long-term effects of public childcare indicate better cognitive outcomes for teenage children that had participated in day-care programs during their first or second year and remained throughout their pre-school years as compared to other children (Andersson 1992; 1994).¹⁰ Positive effects of day-care have also been found in the United States and the United Kingdom (see Brooks-Gunn 2003; Gregg et al. 2005). Studies on parental choices between work and family in Sweden do not support the idea that parents chose out-of-home childcare as a substitute for their own time with the children, since no significant difference can be found in time allocation between families with and without public childcare (Hallberg & Klevmarcken 2003).

More drastic indicators of child well-being are infant and child mortality, where several broadly comparative and longitudinal studies have linked higher generosity of parental leave to lower infant mortality (Ruhm 1998; Tanaka 2005). Lundberg et al. (2008) specify such findings showing that infant mortality has the strongest relationship with earnings-related parental insurance generosity. Explanations for such outcomes have been sought in the fact that social benefits structure the time parents can spend with their infant children, for example increasing the possibilities to breastfeed and monitor the child; and increasing the household income available for household commodities and the advancement of living conditions that improve child health.

Work family conflict and perceived stress

It is sometimes argued that earner-carer policies contribute to a stressful life situation at home and at work where parents (and mostly so women), end up with double duties: long work hours in combination with extensive reproductive work (Lewis 1992, Strand & Nordenmark 2006). But earner-carer policies are often also viewed as supportive of work-family reconciliation (Gornick & Meyers 2003, 2008; Ferrarini 2006) thereby potentially alleviating work-family conflicts. Comparative analyses of the perceived stress and work-family conflict of parents have so far produced little conclusive evidence for the idea that earner-carer models increase work-family stress.

In a comparative study Crompton and Lyonette (2006) find a 'societal level effect' in the earner-carer model countries of Finland and Norway, which have lower levels of work-family conflict. Lower levels of perceived stress in the home and at work (as a consequence of family obligations) in Sweden and other earner-carer model countries are also found by Esser and Ferrarini (2007). Edlund (2007) finds somewhat mixed results regarding the "the work-family time squeeze" in 2002; countries with earner-carer models of family policy report low levels of work-family conflict, even though such low levels are also paralleled by some continental European countries with more traditionalist policies. Strandh and Nordenmark (2006) is one of few studies that conclude differently

¹⁰ These studies cannot account for selectivity into various forms of childcare. Today public childcare is universal in Sweden but it was not the case during the 1970s and 1980s.

discerning higher levels of work-family conflict among Swedish women than women in Eastern European countries, although, when controlling for the presence of a home-maker in the household, no statistical difference is found between countries.

The results from comparative studies should not be interpreted as if Swedish families have been freed from work-family conflicts and inequalities. To the contrary, recent studies on Sweden show that such conflict indeed may be substantial and that there for some families, and in particular women, may be a price for 'gender egalitarianism' (Grönlund & Halleröd 2008). However, the enduring class and gender inequalities in Sweden do not seem to be explained by too much equality around paid and unpaid work but to great extent rather have to do with the persistence of traditional gender roles. A parallel may be drawn to divorce rates which to some degree may be seen as an outcome of conflict and stress. In a study using fathers' use of parental leave as an indicator of gender equality it is found that couples where the father uses parental leave are least likely to divorce or separate (Olah 2003).

Earner-carer model at the cross-roads: reforms after 2006

After twelve years of consecutive Social Democratic rule, a centre-right coalition won the election in September 2006. During the election campaign the coalition advocated a number of reforms to family policy, including the implementation of a gender equality bonus in the earnings-related part of parental leave; a flat-rate home care leave allowance; a voucher system in day-care; improved pedagogical quality in public day care centres and tax deductions for household services. While some of these reforms may strengthen the earner-carer dimension of policy others leave much larger room for market solutions as well as more pronounced familism.

The tax deduction for household services was in 2007 the first to be introduced of the proposed reforms. It provides a tax deduction of 50 percent of the cost of services up to a deductible net value of 50000 SEK per household member. This is a substantial subsidy; for a family of four the maximum deduction amounts to an average production worker's net wage. Services cover activities carried out in connection to the residence: gardening, cleaning, cooking, childcare, help with children's homework etc. Political motives behind the tax benefit are to assist families where both parents are career-oriented and work full-time as well as to create a private 'white' market for care services. The main beneficiaries are those in higher income brackets. The few early indications on the utilisation of the tax deduction point to moderate use even if the frequency is increasing. While less than half a percent of middle income earners use the deduction it is almost ten times as common among those in the highest income decile (Sköld 2009).

In parental leave legislation the gender equality tax bonus was implemented in July 2008; together with the introduction of a municipal home care leave allowance. When it comes to gender roles these particular benefits have opposing effects. This is not surprising given that they are the result of a political compromise emanating from deep-rooted conflicting interests within the centre-right government, in particular between the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. The Christian Democrats have, in analogy with their sister parties on the European continent, for decades favoured the introduction of a home-care allowance that supports parents (mothers) who prefer to stay at home instead

of utilising public day-care, while the Liberal Party has been a long-standing supporter of gender equality and the earner-carer model.

The gender equality tax bonus for couples who share earnings-related parental leave more equally is perhaps the recent family policy reform most in line with previous earner-carer orientations in Sweden. The bonus entitles parents who share leave more equally to a tax reduction of up to SEK 3 000/month (around a fifth of an average net wage). In practice this means that for every month that the parent with the lowest wage shortens leave (mostly the mother) and the parent with the highest wage (mainly men) extends leave, the former will be entitled to a tax exemption. All dual-earner families may use the benefit but the ones with relatively equal incomes may even increase net household income as compared to when both are working. In particular for families with low and medium wages, it will be more advantageous to share leave more equally than to share it unequally (Duvander 2008a). It has, however, been pointed out that the bonus is technically complicated and that it may lead to lower take-up than cash benefits, not least since it may take over a year before payment.

The government also legislated the right for municipalities to introduce a home care leave allowance, an untaxed benefit of SEK 3 000/month for parents on leave with children aged one to three when the child does not utilise public childcare. It is to be used after the parental leave period and although it is formulated in gender neutral terms it is clearly supportive of more traditional family patterns and female part-time or full-time home-making. No previous work requirements are needed to qualify for the home care leave allowance but the other adult in the household (parent or new partner) need to be in employment or education. The conclusions from other countries with leave allowances are that such benefits are mainly utilized by women with low education, increasing the risks for marginalization in relation to the labour market (Gottschall & Bird 2002; Morgan & Zippel 2003). Similar outcomes have also been found in the other Nordic countries where home care leave allowances were introduced in models otherwise oriented to sustain earner-carer families (Rönsen 2000; 2004; Rönsen & Sundström 2002). Lone parents may use the home care leave allowance but the benefit is too low to lift such households out of poverty.

The two reforms of public day-care, improved pedagogical quality and the childcare voucher, also contribute to increased mixed features of family policies. Improvements of pedagogical quality in childcare, with extended rights to guaranteed free pre-school from three instead of four years is in line with previous ambitions to improve children's life chances and support earner-carer families. The pronounced purpose with the childcare voucher is to give Swedish parents a wider range of childcare choices by compensating parents who take care both of their own and of other children in their home. A large group of expected users of the policy are women with poor alternative employment options, in particular immigrants and lowly educated women in regions with high unemployment. The childcare vouchers simultaneously open up for increased familization and marketization.

The effects of these reforms are not easy to foresee, not only because of their conflicting character when it comes to consequences for gender equality, but also because of their different potential impacts along the lines of class and ethnicity. We would expect the short term effects of the reforms to be relatively modest, not least since the main

characteristics of the earner-carer model will persist without major cutbacks. In the long run, fears must be raised that the proposed reforms will have more profound effects. In comparative perspective a main feature of the Swedish earner-carer model is the high integration of lowly educated and working class women in the labour market. It is likely that the proposed changes in particular will decrease employment of women with the lowest education and with the weakest labour force participation, with possible negative effects on child well-being, in terms of higher poverty of children and the risk that these children will not benefit from improvements in the pedagogical quality of primary education but instead are confined to in-home care. This risk is likely to be particularly serious for immigrant children with lowly educated parents, which already have the largest risks for social exclusion.

Discussion

To what extent will the recent reforms change the Swedish model of family policy? Given that Sweden's prototypical earner-carer model is a key case for scholars studying the welfare state this is a crucial question. There are at least two answers to the question. The simplest answer would be that the earner-carer model persists, at least in the shorter perspective. The reason for this is that few cutbacks have been made to the existing earner-carer policies and that some of the new reforms, such as the gender equality bonus, even seem to reinforce the model, although the bonus primarily affects earner-carer families with two stable jobs where a solid basis for gender equality already prevails. Another, more complex answer is that central aspects of the new reform agenda changes the underlying policy logic, functioning and outcomes of family policies in the longer perspective.

Reviewing previous research indicates that earner-carer policies in Sweden and other countries are related to several central outcomes: higher female labour force participation, in particular among working class women; relatively high fertility; increased male participation in care of young children; and low child poverty among two-parent as well as single parent households. Fears have been raised of major perverse effects of egalitarian policies; including increased work-family conflict and stress, the creation of glass-ceilings hindering women to reach top positions, and high occupational segregation. Reviewing research in these areas shows that work-family conflicts do not seem to be larger in countries with earner-carer policies; if anything previous studies indicate lower levels of perceived conflicts and stress. Women's chances to reach top positions is lower and occupational segregation higher in countries with earner-carer models if women in employment are considered, but not when all women are analyzed. The latter analysis is necessary to fully understand policy-outcome links since female home-making is much more common in countries lacking earner-carer models, where support for traditional families is extensive.

What long-run effects may then be expected from the new reforms to Swedish family policies? First, the new reforms can be expected to increase between-group differences. The logic is here clearly not only operating in terms of gender, but also concerns class and ethnicity, and intersections between these aspects. The flat-rate home care leave allowance presents an alternative to labour market participation for some groups of

women, especially in households with a tendency towards a more traditional division of labour, large earnings differentials, limited career prospects and low education, of which many belong to ethnic minorities. Women with high earnings, high education and promising career prospects are unlikely to be affected by the home care leave allowance to the same extent. The voucher system in childcare creates incentives for a similar polarisation between women who are likely to choose a child-orientation and women who have stronger incentives to participate on the regular labour market, utilize public childcare with higher pedagogical ambitions and share the care responsibilities equally within the household. The new tax deduction for household services also foments polarisation since it is used primarily by households with higher earnings.

A central part of the gender equality equation is male care work and Swedish family policies have actively sustained men's responsibilities and rights to care for their children. During the last decades a radical increase in male care work has occurred in terms of parental leave use and joint custody after separation. If women's home orientations are facilitated through the new policies, men's involvement in care is likely to be reduced. Nevertheless, the extent of care work performed need not always constitute a zero-sum game. For example, because of flexibility in the parental leave system, men's increased leave may be accompanied by women's decreased leave, or the home orientation may be strengthened for both parents if they accept a lower earnings replacement. Although, the most probable scenario from the reforms is that of polarisation: gender equality can be expected to increase in families with advantageous socioeconomic positions while other families will lag behind, primarily those with working class background, low education and belonging to ethnic minorities. Furthermore, a group of households that overall have lower access to several of the new reforms are single parent households, which still mostly are female, who are less able to use the gender equality bonus and excluded from utilization of the home care leave allowance.

Changing fertility patterns may also follow from changing policy structures. If various policy measures transform home orientation to a more attractive alternative at the same time as the labour market becomes more restricted this may result in an increasing number of children in more traditional families. Also, if work incentives of highly educated women are strengthened but not for their partners this group of women may postpone children even longer and possibly even refrain from having children. However, fertility patterns are not likely to change quickly and a more polarized fertility in Sweden, in lines what can be observed in other European countries, must at this stage be seen as a highly tentative idea.

The discussion carried out here raises a number of hypotheses of more differentiated behavioural patterns as an outcome of recent family policy reform, where class and ethnicity become more salient dividing lines for Swedish women, men and children. Even if the full effects of policies often are difficult to evaluate, in this particular case such difficulties are accentuated by the fact that the multiple reforms to family policies, which in several respects have conflicting elements, are introduced almost simultaneously. A question therefore also arises around the most appropriate way to evaluate policy outcomes. Two broad strategies can be discerned: individual-level analyses of short-term policy change and analyses of broader long-term institutional level effects of policies. The first approach is often held to be most appropriate to establish direct causal links, but

often fails to capture long-term system level effects. Welfare state reform does not always operate directly on behaviour but is filtered through systems of norms and beliefs among central actors in society. The delayed effects of policies may with this approach be underestimated. The parental leave legislation of 1974 in Sweden is one example where less than one percent of leave was used by men during the years following the reform, despite fathers having the legal right to use half of the paid leave period. The second approach frequently requires cross-national system level analyses of long term change, but is obviously less sensitive to more detailed effects of policy on individual level behaviour. Individual level analyses also often struggle with problems to account for causal claims, even if recent methodological developments may be of help here.

We would argue that both approaches complement each other when untangling links between policy design and outcomes. In both cases, however, to evaluate potential causal effects, policy analysts require detailed knowledge about the institutions they study and the contexts in which they operate. Multidimensional approaches to the study of family policy institutions are useful not least since policies have been developed with diverging underlying motives and are related to divergent intended and unintended outcomes regarding the divisions of paid and unpaid work. It also appears important to concentrate on the effects of policies on the totality of work in society (paid and unpaid) and not only on paid work, since policies do not only actively shape labour market entry of women and men from different backgrounds but also labour market exit and intensity.

Even if basic features of Swedish family policies remain, the almost four decade long strengthening of an earner-carer model has come to a halt at an important cross-road. Political goal conflicts within the centre-right government simultaneously introduce new principles of marketization, socialization and familization of care. With these reforms a new logic is established between gender, class and ethnicity. A more mixed family policy model is emerging. The main tendency of the new reforms is not to provide men with increased rights and responsibilities to participate in the care of their children, instead greater room is left for intra-household bargaining. History has shown us that such developments are likely to cement larger gender divisions of labour in paid and unpaid work for many households.

Whether these new orientations of policies are strong enough to challenge the fundamental orientations of the earner-carer model and its outcomes ought to be paid close attention by welfare state researchers as well as policy makers in different countries. The possible policy options are several, the most concrete alternative path being a continued strengthening of the earner-carer model for example through further individualized parental leave that intensifies paternal participation in care. A trade-off is evident between the potential choices of women, men and children of different backgrounds and gender equality. Class is here likely to be as salient as gender. The balance between different goals in family policy is likely to be a continuous battleground for fierce political debate also in the decades to come.

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