Fair Share, Fair Care: How childcare policies and provisions in Britain and Sweden affect gender relations.

Hannah Ralph

Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which the care policy and provision for children in the ‘Liberal’ state of Britain and the ‘woman-friendly’ ‘Social Democratic’ state of Sweden encourages or discourages traditional gender roles and power relations. It examines the theoretical debates of states, gender and care and assesses the three main approaches to the care of children; parental leave, childcare institutions and cash benefits and their comparative impact on mothers and fathers. It suggests that although Sweden out-performs Britain in many of these respects, traditional gender relations still prevail, despite extensive interventions.
1. Introduction

In December 2009 the British government was taken to the High Court by the Fawcett Society, a campaign group for gender equality, for its failure to assess the devastatingly disproportionate effects the Coalition Government’s budget would have on women. The spending review was to reduce £18 billion from welfare services by 2014/15 to “rescue” Britain from the “brink of bankruptcy” (Kirkup 2010: 1; Mulholland and Watt 2010: 1). With its cuts to Child Tax Credits and the freezing of Child Benefit, the government failed to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment into the gender implications of these austerity measures (Bachelor and Collinson 2010: 1).

What are the true costs of such policies for women? Are their effects exaggerated, or has the coalition introduced measures to further marginalise women? According to the Labour Party, this is indeed the case; they have suggested that ‘twenty-seven’ of the ‘tax, benefit and pension changes will hit women harder than men’ whilst figures from the Commons Library found that £11 billion of the £16 billion cut would come from the pockets of women (Grice 2010: 1). This disproportionate effect is the result of women’s predominance in claims on the state and their place in the frontline public sector jobs facing the axe (Bennet 2010: 37). As Kantola (2006: 11) observes, ‘women’s lives are more dependent and determined by state policies than men’s’. Critics have called the budget ‘sexist’ and accused it of being ‘a cover for restructuring the state and a more traditional view of women’s roles’ (Campbell 2010: 1).

But what is the picture in Sweden, the oft heralded ‘woman-friendly’ welfare state (Hernes c1988)? Although less affected by the recent economic downturn, during the Scandinavian financial crisis of the 1990s, although cuts were made, these were arguably less gender contentious than those in the UK today as many were eventually restored and benefits increased (Fredén 2008: 1; Hiilamo 2006: 187; Öberg 2009: 7).

So why this disparity? This paper will examine the policies and provisions for the care of children and the way that the political traditions of Britain and Sweden determine the structure of gender relations within both countries. In other words, the way in which ‘traditional’ gender responsibilities, roles and power relations are re-enforced, or reduced, by policies made and provisions the state provides.

These ‘traditional’ roles are understood as women in ‘caring’ and ‘homemaker’ positions, with men as ‘breadwinners’. Feminists however argue that the changing role of women and
their increased participation in the labour market results in a call for provisions of care which should adapt to ‘new needs, expectations and demands’ (Hirschmann and Liebert 2001: 2). Yet as Leira (c1993: 67-8) has discussed, a ‘dual-earner family’ does not necessarily equal a ‘dual-carer’ family. This has left many women working a ‘double shift’ as their increased labour market participation has moved more quickly than men filling caring roles (Hochschild n.d., cited by Christopherson 2001: 251; Sevenhuijsen 2003: 181). Rebecca Asher (2011: 30) has suggested that, ‘when a couple...have children, all the gains women have supposedly made over the past few decades vanish, as the time machine of motherhood transports us back to the 1950s’.

Arguably, to achieve ‘dual earner/dual carer’ partnerships, the ‘politicisation of parenthood’ is needed, where childcare policies give ‘opportunities for working motherhood, and... caring fatherhood’ (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 7). Leira (2002: 9) has posited the need for three practices: the ‘modernisation of motherhood’; the ‘collectivisation of childcare’ and ‘the familisation of fatherhood’.

Daly and Rake (2003: 50) argue there are ‘three dimensions’ of care provision, namely, ‘a need for services, for time and for financial support’, or in the terms of this study, day-care, parental leave, and financial benefits. It is the level of these provisions and their impact which differentiates the way the two countries structure gender roles through care for children. It is therefore vital to consider policy as a means to determine where responsibility for care in placed. Leira (2002: 4) has asserted the effects of the three types of care provision for men and women; it is suggested that day-care ‘facilitate[s] dual-earner model[s]’, parental leave creates ‘dual-earning and care-sharing parenthood’, whilst cash services ‘encourage gender-differentiated family’.

But why are care and gender roles so inextricably linked? The majority of care work, both formal and informal, is carried out by women (Daly and Rake 2003). Moreover, the way in which the state structures provision and the degree to which it values care, significantly determines women’s opportunities and place within society. As Daly and Rake (2003: 49) note, ‘care has been identified as work with a woman’s face’. This is not to dispute the role that some men play in the care of children, but rather highlights their tendency to remain in the minority of carers. Additionally, Orloff (1999, cited by Christopherson 2001: 250) has suggested that it is the responsibility that the state places on itself to supply these provisions that determines the ‘cultural assumptions about gender difference... [and] women’s
responsibility for caring work’. Consequently, by examining the policies of both Britain and Sweden we can gauge with whom responsibility for care lies and the strategies implemented to reinforce or reduce this.

Sweden and Britain have been chosen as two countries suitable for comparison due to the contrasting formations of their welfare states. The question is, what is the impact of these different approaches on the often unfair division of the care of children?

Sweden has long been seen as the ‘holy grail’ for gender equality and state services with its ‘Social Democratic’ system, ‘a magic place...of virtually every utopian welfare policy’ (Smith 2008: 141). In contrast, the ‘Liberal’ tradition of Britain has meant an emphasis on individual responsibility, with less state involvement in perceived ‘private’ issues of care. This paper will question the assumptions of these ‘successes’ of Sweden and the ‘failures’ of Britain.

However, is this picture of Sweden as a ‘woman-friendly’ state accurate? Has policy led to practice or have traditional gender roles prevailed? Studies have suggested that the utopian ideal of Sweden is in fact in many cases exaggerated (Carlsson Wetterberg et al. 2008; Hirdman 1989; Siim 1993; Mulinan 2008).

The paper wishes to examine four principle questions in order to assess the role of care policies in the formation of gender relations. These are:

1. What are the key policies and provisions of care for children in Britain and Sweden?
2. How do these seek to reduce or increase the often sole responsibility of care for children placed on women?
3. How is this care valued?
4. Is it right to regard Britain as a ‘failure’ and Sweden as a ‘success’, or are these divisions more blurred?

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first, a theoretical chapter, will examine the political traditions of Britain and Sweden, feminist debates about states and gender and the ethic of care perspective.

Following this, two sections assess the practical implications of the policy and provision for the care of children. The former scrutinises the policies for parental leave in the two countries and the gendered implications of where responsibility for the care of an infant is seen to lie. The latter examines the different services and cash benefits for childcare in Britain and
Sweden and the implications of each. In addition this section examines the dominance of women in the childcare sector.

The conclusion is drawn that, although Sweden fares far better in comparison to Britain when considering gender equality in the provision of care for children, this does not mean that this comparison is clearly drawn. Rather, Sweden does not always perform as well as one might expect. Despite the extensive equality policy and services available to the Swedes, it is often shown that traditional gender roles still prevail with a lack of consistent experience within genders.

2. Theories of States, Care and Gender

An overview of the key theories and literature surrounding the provision of care and its impact on the structuring of ‘traditional’ gender roles is valuable before examining the policies and provisions in both countries. Furthermore, analysis of their welfare traditions is useful in understanding the systems and structures under which childcare policy operates.

This section is divided into three main parts; the first assesses the political traditions of Britain and Sweden with regard to Esping-Andersen’s (1990) ‘The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism’. The second examines states and gender in relation to the ‘woman-friendly’ welfare state and its critics, whilst the final section considers the theories of the ‘ethic of care’ perspective which has been categorised in terms of ‘citizenship and care’ and ‘dependency and defamilisation’.

‘The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism’

Esping-Andersen’s (1990) ‘The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism’, which includes ‘Liberal’, ‘Conservative’ and ‘Social Democratic’ states defines Britain as Liberal and Sweden as Socially Democratic. This is determined by three factors, ‘decommodification; levels of social stratification; and the relationship between the state, the market and the family’s role in social provision’ (Bambra 2004: 202). But what does this mean for the care of children? In Liberal regimes there is little intervention by the state as care is seen as predominately private and thus most care is provided by the market and the family (Daly and Rake 2003: 142). There is relatively low redistribution of income in Britain compared to
Sweden as ‘entitlement’ is based on ‘need caused by inadequate economic and/or personal resources’ (Sainsbury 1996: 44; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010: 183). This is because Social Democratic countries place greater emphasis on the role of the state in the daily lives of citizens, and its responsibility in providing services. In contrast to Britain then, care in Sweden is viewed as very much a ‘public’ concern, where universality and equality are fundamental features (Daly and Rake 2003: 151).

Esping-Andersen’s categorisations have however faced varied criticism (Bambra 2004). The lack of regard to the role of the family, the omission of gender and the way in which the theory ‘glosses over the care sector’ have been raised (Leira c1993: 56; Sainsbury 1996: 37). In addition, this classification uses a particularly contentious matter in feminist theory, ‘decommodification’, to determine its point of view (Bambra 2004: 202). The controversy lies in the assumption of labour as a commodity. This it can be argued ignores other vital contributions to society such as caring; an activity which often goes unpaid.

The distinct political traditions of Britain and Sweden cannot be discounted in the influence they have on the alternative approaches to policies and provisions for the care of children, and the shaping of gender inequalities.

**States and Gender**

The link between state policies and provisions and gender relations is strong. Pascall (1997: 2-3) has suggested that *malestream* writings have failed to draw the link between ‘social policy and the domestic world’. Second wave feminists, in contrast, have critically analysed the welfare state and its effect on gender roles. As Leira (c1993: 49) has observed, this movement sees the connection between the provision of care and gender relations as ‘an alliance, even as a partnership’.

This section will, whilst linking this thinking to the British and Swedish models, examine Helga Hernes’ (c1988) ‘woman-friendly’ notion of the Scandinavian welfare state and contrast it to suggestions that the ‘anti-women ethos of the welfare state is alive and well, and is as powerfully patriarchal as ever’ (Hirschmann and Liebert 2001: 2).
‘Woman-friendly’ states?

Sweden has been described as a ‘woman-friendly’ state, a term first coined by Hernes (c1988). The suggestion is that through policies and provisions such as public childcare and gender neutral parental leave, women are enabled to have ‘a natural relationship to their children, their work and public life’ thus allowing them to create a more equitable life with men (Hernes 1987, quoted by Siim 1993: 30).

A feature of ‘woman-friendly’ states is the level of female political representation where women are the ‘policy-makers’ as well as the ‘policy-takers’ (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 8). Despite women in Britain and Sweden receiving the vote around the same time, in the first third of the 20th century, their progress to female representation within institutions has been at a substantially different pace (Lewis 2006: 1). Whilst in Sweden there is almost a 50/50 split, in Britain only around 22% of MPs are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2010: 1).

Examining female representation in the U.S., Casey and Carroll (2001) found that female representatives are more likely to pursue policies on feminist matters than male colleagues. Yet is it too narrow to suggest that only women can represent women? Anne Phillips (1995) proposes that their representation does not always lead to the promotion of ‘women’s issues’. The underrepresentation of ethnic minority women in politics in Britain and Sweden also delegitimises the claim that all women are represented in the ‘woman-friendly’ state (Borchorst and Siim 2008: 217).

The critics

With this in mind, ‘does the patriarchal imprint still prevail’ (Leira c1993: 49)? The ‘woman-friendly’ notion itself contradicts the common feminist view of the welfare state as patriarchal and problematic (Borchorst and Siim 2008: 209). Hirdman (1987; 1990, cited by Siim 1993: 26) has accused the state in her ‘gender system’ theory as ‘reproducing hierarchy and segregation among men and women in a new form’ through the ‘iron law’ of gender, where for example, the over-saturation of women in the public sector in Sweden simply reveals their subordination in a different form (Roman 2008: 110). Therefore, whilst emphasising agency, the ‘woman-friendly’ theory fails to pay attention to ‘gender structures and patterns of continuity’ (Borchorst 2008: 31).
Dahlerup (1989, cited by Liebert 2001: 263-264) has also raised a crucial point; she suggests the focus on women in the ‘woman-friendly’ state thesis ignores the way public policies should affect both men and women. For example, is a policy which simply releases partial responsibility of childcare from the mother in maternity legislation, but does not encourage and enforce care from the father in paternity legislation, truly ‘woman-friendly’?

Furthermore, Tronto (2001, cited by Hirschmann and Liebert 2001: 9) suggests evaluating the welfare state purely in terms of ‘women’s dependency and care-giving work runs the danger of reinscribing women’s roles as caretakers’. Perhaps then, ‘woman-friendly’ policy is not an appropriate term for a gender neutral outcome? Plausibly, in the case of this study, ‘family-friendly’ or ‘carer-friendly’ would be more appropriate terminology. However, Bowlby et al. (2001: 237) have suggested that substituting ‘woman’ with ‘gender’ or ‘family’ undermines the ‘complex relationship which underpins much of social life’. Therefore, by removing the gender focus, do we detach from the true root of the problem, and deny the gender issues involved? Liebert’s (2001: 268) solution lies in the term ‘gender-sensitive welfare regime’ which encompasses both Tronto’s notion of ‘degendering care’ and Hirschmann’s proposal of ‘engendering freedom’.

Siim (1993: 30) further criticises the ‘woman-friendly’ notion for ‘understat[ing] the growing economic and political polarization among women’. It is important to note the difficulty in classifying groups of men and women as simply ‘British’ or ‘Swedish’. In both countries the experiences of groups are diverse, through factors such as race, class and culture. Therefore, although this study does not have the scope to examine these diversities and will inevitably draw general conclusions, women are not a homogenous group; instead, they have varied experiences of gender equality and are affected to a greater or lesser extent by different policies (Leira c1993: 50; Lister 1999: 236).

Further, there are claims that the ‘woman-friendly’ Swedish welfare has failed to recognise the implications of increased immigration. Carlsson Wetterberg et al. (2008: 3/16) have argued that ‘gender-equality policy...functions as an ethnic borderline between “them” and “us”’, with other cultures being branded as ‘patriarchal’. These ‘hegemonic trends’ have meant that despite Sweden having the highest immigration rate compared to population in Europe, migrant women are often branded as ‘different, passive, [and] traditional’ (Mulinan 2008: 167). Arguably then, the ‘woman-friendly’ notion refers to ‘white, heterosexual, working mothers’ (Kantola 2006: 11).
Summary

The body of literature which has examined the way states influence how gender roles are constructed has tended to focus on the Scandinavian systems which have been heralded by many as ‘woman-friendly’ in response to the near equal representation of men and women in legislatures, as well as the use of policy and provisions to deconstruct traditional gender roles. However, this view has been challenged. Some have criticised the system for failing to recognise the diverse interests and needs of women, whilst others have suggested traditional gender inequalities remain and have been replicated in different contexts. This criticism arguably places the view of Sweden as ‘woman-friendly’ under doubt and it is with this in mind that we shall discuss the core literature surrounding care and its place within society.

Ethics of Care

Also crucial to this investigation into the way that policies and provisions for the care of children structures gender relations is the way states value care. If the majority of carers of children are women, then the level to which this practice is prized is imperative to the assessment of gender relations. This section examines two areas in the ‘ethics of care’ field, ‘citizenship and care’ and ‘dependency and defamilisation’.

Citizenship and Care

Tronto (2001: 66), has observed how discourses about citizenship shape how we view individuals as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, what we consider valid and invalid as contributions to society. Marshall (1950) has suggested that citizens are seen primarily as workers. In the context of this research, this suggests that unpaid carers are not given much worth. Sainsbury (1996: 35) has therefore noted how Marshall’s definition ‘is laden with patriarchal implications’. Do other roles within society not deserve an equal standing? Bluntly put, ‘care work [is] work’ (Hirschmann and Liebert 2001: 8). Like any other job, the time, effort and commitment is just as substantial. Furthermore, in order for certain ‘citizens’ to fulfil this ‘worker’ role, there must be a reliance on others to fulfil their caring duties, often resulting in a ‘male breadwinner’ and ‘female supporter’ model (Tronto 2001: 67).
Arguably then, caring work performed by women is dismissed and undervalued, often leading to their subordinate position within the household and society as a whole. Consequently, it has been suggested that those working in the home, providing care, are also entitled to a “wage” from the state through benefits (Gornick et al. 1999: 121). As we will later observe, the cash grants given in both Britain and Sweden perhaps are a case in point, although, the gendered implications are a matter for investigation.

But what is the picture of citizenship in the two nations? In Sweden, citizenship has tended to focus on a ‘work-orientated model’ (Siim 1993: 33). A similar focus has also ensued in Britain, where active participation in the labour market by women has been encouraged. This emphasis is seen in the Coalition’s new Welfare to Work programme introduced last year (White Paper 2010).

However in Sweden, unlike Britain, there are substantial public provisions enabling and supporting women to enter the world of work, such as child day-care centres which are seen as an intrinsic part ‘of Swedish social citizenship’ (Daly and Rake 2003: 53). Nevertheless, perhaps important to note is that these services came after rather than before a large proportion of women entered the labour market (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 5). Also, the suggestion that women’s encouraged entrance to the labour force was due to fears of a labour shortage, rather than a means of emancipation, questions whether these ‘woman-friendly’ policies and provisions were a result of necessity or fundamental to the Swedish citizenship model (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 5). Daly and Rake (2003: 152) have suggested that provisions for parents came from an ‘ideology of work, rather than originating in beliefs about care and the nature of private relations’. Does this delegitimise the view of Sweden as a ‘woman-friendly’ state? Do the pillars of gender equality become more unstable when built on a ‘citizenship through work’ rather than a ‘citizenship through care’ foundation?

Women in Britain have arguably had it worse, as Lewis (1993: 5) explains, the government has ‘promoted women’s freedom to engage in the labour market and increased the burden of unpaid caring work’ by their limited development of public childcare services. This conflict has left many women without a net of support, limiting their full participation in the labour market and increasing their exploitation within it.

So what do these views of citizenship mean for the state and its responsibilities? Kittay (2001: 57) has advocated the need for ‘adequate public support’, such as services and monetary benefits whilst Hirschman and Liebert (2001: 8) have suggested that this approach ‘fosters
and facilitates the provision of care [from states] for its citizens and recognises people who provide care as engaged in activities of citizenship’.

**Dependency and defamilisation**

So what are the impacts for women as primary carers? The view that care ultimately leads to dependency is advocated by Fineman (2001) and Kittay (2001). This can manifest itself in many forms, for married women it may amount to economic dependence on a husband, whereas for single parents support may come from the state.

Fineman (2001, cited by Hirschmann and Liebert 2001: 7) has asserted that this dependency is ‘inevitable’. This contrasts to the political discourse often articulated in the British state of ‘dependence versus independence’ which is asserted as a series of ‘myths’ (Fineman 2001: 23/27). If care is ‘inevitable’ why is reliance on the state for support stigmatised? It is this ‘hypocrisy’ of social policy which is fundamental in the examination of the policies and provisions for care (Fineman 2001, cited by Hirschmann and Liebert 2001: 7).

The promotion of universal provisions (seen in Sweden) has been advocated by Titmuss (1963), who observes that this approach helps to de-stigmatise those reliant on such services. In contrast, Murray (1984) suggests that it is vital that welfare should be stigmatised in order to minimise dependency and claims on the state. This, whilst dismissing structural factors, also creates the notion of dependency as unusual and undesirable, a feature challenged by the idea of ‘interdependence’ where we are all reliant on care from others (Tronto 2001: 74). Furthermore, Fineman (2001: 23) has argued that the suggestion of claimants as a ‘burden on the taxpayer’ is purely a ‘political construct’.

Moreover, states attempts to defamilise individuals by preventing ‘women’s dependency on the family... [whilst facilitating] women’s economic independence’ is essential for more equitable gender relations (Taylor-Gooby 1996, cited by Bambra 2004: 203). In the case of single mothers, the state’s assistance to maintain their independence, at minimal financial detriment, is of importance in respect to gender relations and the care of children. If mothers can become independent of fathers, then the de-gendering of the care/worker model has arguably taken place.
A study by Smeeding et al. (1999, cited by Daly and Rake 2003: 64) revealed that being a lone mother in Sweden approximately halved her chances of being in poverty compared to women with no children or in a relationship. Whilst in Britain, a woman in similar circumstances was around two and a half times more likely to live in poverty. This significant disparity arguably reflects the different gender implications of care policy in the two countries and perhaps also reflects the attempt of stigmatisation in Britain and de-stigmatisation in Sweden of single mothers. However, the term defamilisation has been criticised for focusing purely on ‘women’s freedom to enter and exit from marriage and cohabitation’ rather than their ability to gain economic independence within it (Lister 1994, cited by Sainsbury 1996: 39).

Summary

The ethic of care perspective has examined the way states view care within society and the consequent effect this has on gender relations. This has been examined in regard to citizenship, dependency and defamilisation. As Hirschman and Liebert (2001: 9) neatly summarise, the main question of care policies is ‘how to deal with care in ways that avoid...patriarchal reinscription and at the same time recognize it as socially important’. We have seen how, in both Britain and Sweden, the focus of citizenship through work questions the value placed on care within society. However, in the case of dependency and defamilisation Sweden out-performs Britain in creating economic autonomy for mothers.

Conclusion

To summarise, Sweden and Britain approach policies and provisions for care in different ways. The ‘Social Democratic’ welfare tradition of Sweden has seen such matters as universal, as a public issue and as a tool for dismantling traditional gender roles. Comparatively, ‘Liberal’ British welfare practices have meant that the state promotes individualisation, and views care within the home as predominantly private.

So what impact have these contrasting approaches had for care and gender? We examined the ‘woman-friendly’ world of Sweden, where increased political representation of women, and extensive gender-neutral policy in many ways liberated women from their caring obligations
compared to its European counterpart. However, opposition to the theory revealed that things were perhaps not so idyllic, particularly in regards to ethnic minorities and the continuing reproduction of traditional gender roles despite reforms.

The section also assessed the ways in which feminists have viewed the value placed on care within the state, and the consequent effect this has on gender roles through citizenship, dependency and defamilisation. The emphasis placed on ‘citizenship as worker’ challenged notions of the valorising of care in both Britain and Sweden, whilst the universal system in Sweden and its defamilisation effects compared to that of Britain, arguably reflected its attempt to diffuse traditional gender obligations.

Nevertheless, despite the flaws in the British system in regards to gender and care we have also begun to see some holes in the ‘utopian’ vision of the ‘woman-friendly’ state. It is with this in mind that we shall move beyond the theory and explore the practical implications of the policies and provisions for the care of children in Britain and Sweden and their consequent effect on gender relations.

3. Parental Leave

Parental leave is the first welfare provision that connects new parents to the state, and it is arguably here where couples’ views start to be formed as to where the responsibility for the care of children lies. Of importance is the degree to which policies shape the idea of who is to care for the child. With regard to the valorising of care within society, this section is concerned with the time allowance and financial assistance given in order to assess the worth placed on care and the extent to which individuals are enabled to be autonomous.

As we have already observed, Sweden has regularly been referred to as a ‘woman-friendly’ state with its extensive implementation of policies to shift notions of traditional gender roles. Here, state support is described using the gender neutral term ‘parental leave’ where men and women are entitled to the same provision. However, has this policy been effective in changing traditional roles? We will compare these with the more modest provisions in Britain to assess how policy affects gender relations.

We will begin by comparing the leave available for mothers and then fathers in the two countries. It is the extent to which these provisions are similar which will begin to explain
how such support affects gender relations. We will conclude that although the provisions available in Sweden are far superior to that in Britain, there are still numerous inconsistencies in regards to a private/public divide, the unwavering responsibility for domesticity placed on women, and the reality that despite these extensive provisions, women still do the majority of caring.

Maternity Leave

The time and money given to support new mothers is crucial to our understanding of how care is valued in society and thus the way it is linked to citizenship and will allow us to make comparisons as to the leave available for men. This enables us to assess the way in which the state contributes to the construction of gender relations, by influencing social structures of with whom responsibility for the care of infants lies.

**Figure 3.1:** Leave, financial support and coverage for maternity leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Available leave duration (weeks)</th>
<th>Paid maternity leave (weeks)</th>
<th>Wage replacement rate (% wages)</th>
<th>Benefit received after initial wage replacement</th>
<th>Coverage (% employed women)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>80% for the first 18 months</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>90% for the first 6 weeks</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 3.1 reveals that Sweden out-trumps Britain in every respect, from double the amount of leave and extensive financial benefits, to the cohort entitled to these, Swedish mothers’ entitlement to care for their infants is far greater.
So what effect does this extensive leave have? The longer maternity leave in Sweden has been used to suggest an act of ‘refamilisation’ (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006). For example, no child under 1 stays in day-care, whilst just under half of 1-2 year olds do (Nordic Statistical Yearbook 2005, cited by Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 24). This provision can therefore be viewed as either positive or negative; firstly, in the ‘citizenship as carer’ model, extensive leave and generous benefits arguably show a value placed on the care of an infant. However, this becomes less positive when the mother is initially the predominant carer. Here, extensive leave may assign the mother’s responsibility as primary carer far beyond her initial leave, thus limiting her economic independence and/or career prospects.

In contrast, a study found that generous maternity leave policy had in fact tended to increase women’s ‘attachment to paid work’ (Gornick et al. 1999: 122). Therefore, by giving women more freedom and time for children in the earlier stages, they are more likely to have a greater long-term connection to the labour market. If we put this into the comparative spheres of Britain and Sweden then, the female population of the latter, thanks to extensive provisions, should fare better in these respects, and thus women may in the long term have greater access to higher independent earnings. Although, the ratio of female to male managing directors, 8 to 269, questions this assumption (Statistics Sweden 2010, cited by Almqvist 2010: 1).

A further contrast between the maternity leave between Britain and Sweden concerns the entitlement to it. Whilst the Swedish system is universal, where the ‘basis of entitlement... [is] motherhood’, in Britain only 60% of women receive assistance due to the work criteria necessary to qualify (Sainsbury 1996: 95). Consequently we can point to the economic difficulties and conflicts for autonomy that having a baby entails for a non-qualifying mother, leading to financial dependence on a partner. Furthermore, it is arguably those most vulnerable and in need, mothers without stable jobs or incomes, which would be most at risk of not receiving maternity support (although state benefits may materialise in other forms).

**The ‘good’, the ‘bad’ and the maternity**

Interesting to note is the connotations policy implies about ‘good’ mothers, those who stay with their baby as long as possible and ‘bad’ mothers, those returning to work sooner than discourse dictates (Leira 2002: 5). Key here then, is the way extensive parental leave in Sweden, although free for sharing between parents, may be seen by some mothers as
obligatory under social pressures. For example, a workplace culture of new mothers taking full leave may substantially influence an employee’s decision over their own period of leave. Similarly, traditional discourses about fatherhood, about a duty to provide materially for one’s family, may equally prevail.

Both Leira (2002) and Asher (2011) have commented on women’s reluctance to give up their leave for a partner. Boje (2006: 208/210) found that Swedish mothers and fathers found it most difficult in ‘reconciling work and family’, whilst British families found it the easiest. But is this a result of agency or structure? Lammi-Taskula (2006: 96) suggests the latter, ‘a cross-swell of undercurrents taking them towards a traditional gender pattern’. We could therefore suggest that the ‘choice’ given to mothers is perhaps not as simple as it might first appear; ‘as one Swedish mother put it, “It would have been seen as quite weird, had I not stayed at home when the child was young”’ (Plantin 2001, cited by Lammi-Taskula 2006: 93). We could thus argue that the extensive leave in Sweden places social pressures on women to be the main beneficiary which serves to reproduce traditional gender roles.

**Opposition to maternity leave in Britain**

These flaws in the Swedish system become a little less severe, as in Britain, extensions in maternity benefits have been met with open condemnation. The 2005 Work and Families Bill was roundly criticised by the CBI who opposed ‘a rights-based culture’ over a ‘voluntarist approach’ (Campbell and Lewis 2007: 376-7); whilst in October last year The Federation of Small Businesses urged MEPS to vote against European Legislation to extend paid maternity leave from 14 to 20 weeks (BBC News 2010: 1). They claimed businesses would be unable to afford the extra £2.5 billion a year needed for the additional cost, despite the fact that this could be claimed back from government (BBC News 2010: 1). The UK’s position within the EU has meant that it has had to comply with some extensions in policies; however, despite New Labour’s commitment to the European Social Chapter, it did so at the most basic level of ‘compliance’ (Campbell and Lewis 2007: 373).
Summary

The study has found that women in the Sweden have had far more generous lengths of leave, considerably more compensation and comprehensive availability of care, whilst some British women have not qualified for any support. However, there have also been questions raised about social implications of ‘good’ motherhood in the Swedish system, whilst British extensions in policy have been met with criticism.

However, can this caring role purely be filled by women? Eisentein (1981, cited by Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 4) has distinguished between ‘biological’ and ‘political’ motherhood, where obligations are afforded through biology and policy. So how do these policies and provisions compare to those available to fathers? It is perhaps this comparison which is most crucial in assessing how leave for new parents can affect gender relations.

Paternity Leave

Liebert (2001: 272) suggests that it is the way in which a state employs ‘legal provisions [which] redistribute care responsibilities between men and women’ which are vital in assessing states, care and gender. It is arguably this that ‘challenges the gender stereotyping of care for infants’ (Leira 2002: 76). This has been supported by Lewis and Pascall (2004: 384) who have argued that leave for fathers ‘is a crucial part of the jigsaw if women’s care work hours are to be reduced’. We will thus assess the degree to which paternity leave is available and encouraged to determine the way this structures gender relations.

Figure 3.2: The level of leave and financial support for paternity leave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leave specifically for fathers (days)</th>
<th>Maximum amount of leave available for caring without mother (days)</th>
<th>Wage replacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>90% of wage or a maximum of £128.73 a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>80% of wage or a maximum of SEK 874 a day (=£87) for the first 390 days, then SEK180 (=£18) a day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Directgov 2011b; Directgov 2011c; Savage 2008; Swedish Institute 2009 (SEK10.0378/£1, May 2011)
Figure 3.2 reveals that in terms of leave set aside specifically for fathers, the Swedish fair far better, with over four times the days of leave. Furthermore, the extended periods of leave available to the Swedish are also far more substantial, with around two and a half times more provided (420 days/182 days). A high wage replacement (80%) is also available for the majority of this period of care in Sweden. However, in regards to gender relations, most crucially now in both countries the care of infants is able to be shared; although, as we shall later discuss, this policy does not always lead to practical implementation.

It is important to note that Figure 3.2 includes the recent paternity leave reforms in Britain (April 2011) where fathers are now entitled to take half the leave available to mothers. Firstly, as these reforms are in their infancy the remainder of this section is based on research before these changes. Secondly, despite this significant move to share the care of infants, the support is still far less than that available to the Swedes. Borchorst (2008: 40) has questioned whether the Swedish model is ‘exportable’, or, if its generosity is only viable in the Nordic state. A superficial assessment of the structure of the ‘Directgov’ website (2011) for public services implies that full gender equality may not be at the heart of these policies. The separate web pages titled ‘Ordinary Paternity Leave’ and ‘Additional Paternity Leave and Pay’ differentiates between a ‘normal’ practice and extended leave as something of an ‘extra’. Asher (2011: 35) has also criticised the language of the Coalition Government citing ‘encourage shared parenting’ and ‘involved fathers’ as being ‘slippery’ and ‘vague’. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to examine the effect of these policies in practice when they are fully established.

The policies in Sweden are however far from new; from 1975 leave for both parents has been available (Lewis and Pascall 2004: 384). Daly and Rake (2003: 151) have observed the way in which Swedish ‘social policy... interpret[s] gender equality to refer to men’s family roles’ and this is most clearly demonstrated in the paternity leave available to men. Crucially, it is this conscious shift to move to a ‘dual breadwinner/carer model’ which has been so fundamental in the Swedish system. Interestingly, the new ‘umbrella’ gender equality law introduced in Sweden in 2009 contains the ‘Parental Leave Act’ (Swedish Institute 2009: 1). The law in this setting perhaps speaks volumes for the results such policy seeks.
**Sweden and the daddy quota**

A policy within this main framework is the ‘daddy quota’, a period of 60 days which is non-transferable to mothers and has been seen to alter the “‘in principle” attitude of men towards gender equality’ (Borchorst 2008: 34). The ‘use-or-lose basis’ of the scheme has been implemented to add ‘gentle force’ to paternity responsibilities (Leira 2006: 39). Such ‘gender explicit policy’ in a gender-neutral framework is arguably vital in challenging traditional views of parenthood and with which parent caring responsibilities lie (Lister 2008: 218). Leira (2002: 38) has consequently argued that this ‘daddy quota’ has sought to redesign ‘the internal organisation of the family’.

However, it isn’t all good; a study by Nyman and Petterson (2002, cited by Lammi-Taskula 2006: 84). revealed that after the introduction of the daddy quota, the amount of leave fathers took actually fell from ‘40 days in 1993’ to ‘27 days in 2001’. But why? The following sections will examine key influences in the take-up of paternity leave and examine why policy doesn’t always lead to practice.

**Money matters**

The payment for paternity leave has been portrayed as a crucial factor in uptake (Lewis and Pascall 2004: 384). Research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Britain during 2009 showed that 49% of new fathers who didn’t take paternity leave said they couldn’t afford to as the financial subsidy ‘is well below the minimum wage’ (Kelly 2010: 1). So why is this an important element? The higher wages earned by men may mean families are more reliant on their income and explains why the lowest earner (often the mother) would be chosen to care for the infant. Debatably this is also the case in Sweden, where, the persistent income disparities of men and women may mean that despite more generous and equal financial supplements, depending how great the differential between the couple’s wages is, it may still be financially advantageous for the mother to care (Bergman and Gonäs 2009).

Thus, paternity leave has to be ‘flexible and well compensated’ to encourage men to use it (Campbell and Lewis 2004: 373). The need for encouragement however suggests *choice* rather than *obligation* for fathers. It is perhaps this which is central to the limitations of this policy in creating gender equality, particularly in regard to long periods of leave (Daly and Rake 2003: 68).
Policy and Practice

It is therefore not enough to say that leave exists, but rather whether policy translates to practice. As Lammi-Taskula (2006, quoting Hobson 2002: 79) notes ‘does the politicising of parenthood really “make men into fathers”’?

The take-up of paternity leave has been examined in both countries. In Britain a study by Smeaton and Marsh (2006, cited by Campbell and Lewis 2007: 373) found that ‘93%’ of new fathers took leave. Comparatively in Sweden during 1995 77% had time-off to care for their children (Bjornberg 2002, cited by Lewis and Pascall 2004: 384). Due to the more substantial provisions available in Sweden one might have expected this to be higher; however, the time disparity between the two studies (1995/2005) may reveal a ‘modernisation’ of fatherhood taking place. One could also suggest that it is the very extensive timeframe itself which explains why some men are unable to take leave in Sweden; it is perhaps easier for fathers to take 2 weeks from work in Britain than the full 60 days as does its Nordic counterpart.

Further research questions the utopian dream of Sweden as a ‘dual-carer’ nation. Firstly, there seem to be class issues at play, with couples more likely to share parental leave the more educated and wealthy they are (Lammi-Taskula 2006: 85). Secondly, figures released by the Swedish Government revealed that whilst the majority of fathers in Sweden take ‘daddy days’ only 50% utilise ‘paid parental leave’ (Haas and Hwang 1995, cited by Liebert 2001: 276). Whilst the use of ‘daddy days’ is positive, the utilisation of ‘parental leave’ points to an aversion by fathers to long periods of caring. The Nordic Statistical Yearbook (2005, cited by Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 23) revealed that of these 50% taking parental leave, the average period was around 18.3% of that available. Furthermore, as this leave is taken over a long time (up until the child is eight) the sustained periods of caring by men are limited (Lammi-Taskula 2006: 83).

Not only this, but there is a distinction between the public and private sector, where paternity leave was more likely to be used by those in the public than private (Haas and Hwang 1995, cited by Liebert 2001: 276). But why this divide? Leira (2002: 92) suggests that private sector workers were far more likely to be met with problems when taking leave. This suggests that although Sweden may have come a long way in terms of policy for gender equality, the practice is unbalanced between the two sectors of work.
Due to these disparities, a law issued in 1992 required some medium to large companies ‘to submit an annual plan to promote gender equality in the workplace and to induce fathers to take parental leave’ (Liebert 2001: 276) The exemption of some businesses and the very words ‘promote’ and ‘induce’ suggests something less than concrete. There is no mention of compulsion or quota. While it is recognised that obligation is a rather paternalistic and authoritarian approach to welfare, one could argue that purely a recommendation by private companies to their employees that they should take ‘daddy leave’ is not enough when job prospects and/or job security rely on perceived commitment to work. A study by Haas et al. (2002, cited by Lammi-Taskula 2006: 89) also supported this notion, revealing that fathers were more likely to take parental leave if their employers were ‘supportive towards caring fatherhood’. Swedish politicians have thus been accused of ‘paying lip service to the aim of transforming men into caring fathers’ (Roman 2008: 111). The introduction of the ‘daddy quota’ however perhaps contradicts these ideas (Leira 2002: 94). Nevertheless, one might argue that the extensive leave available to mothers means that the necessity for fathers to utilise such a provision is less.

There has been a similar approach in Britain where Labour introduced ‘“light touch” legislation’ which gave fathers with children under six the ‘“right to request” flexible working patterns’ (Campbell and Lewis 2007: 374). Again policies face the same limitations. As Campbell and Lewis (2007: 377) have noted, the very policies employed by the Labour government were done to limit the cost of parental leave to businesses and employers. Therefore, as a MORI poll suggested, despite agreeing with the principles of increased leave, companies did little to promote such reforms (Guardian 1998, cited by Bowlby et al. 2001: 243). As Bowlby et al. (2001: 243) neatly state, ‘the existence of policies is not a good guide to their effectiveness’.

But when the Prime Ministers of Britain only take two weeks statutory paternity leave (Blair and Cameron), what message does this send to prospective fathers? The principle of gender equality at the heart of British politics is thus arguably weaker than that in the Nordic State. Therefore, whilst Swedish ministers speak the language of feminist discourse, of autonomy and ‘dual carers and breadwinners’, British Conservatives talk about their love for marriage, tax breaks and mending the ‘broken’ family (Bagehot 2011b; Barker 2010; Bennett and Lister 2010; Roman 2008: 112).
Constructing gender

Ironically, despite the poor figures of paternity leave in Britain, in regard to activities within the home, men are more likely to take care of children than perform other tasks (Kieman 1992, cited by Pascall 1997: 86). However, women still care for longer, between ‘51 and 86 minutes a day’ whilst men only care for them between ‘32 and 36 minutes’ (Asher 2011: 31). Furthermore, as Kelly (2010: 1) has observed, ‘when the working father comes home for his “quality time” with the children, the mother is left to do the housework’. This divide again points to gender disparities within the home and the power relationships which may emerge from childcare policy. For example, if a mother stays at home to care for the infant a routine may develop where household responsibilities become her sole duty, a practice which may well transcend beyond her leave from the workplace. Bowlby et al. (2001: 236) suggest that it is these ‘performances’ in the home, which create ‘both subtle and not so subtle relations of power’. One could therefore suggest then that view of childcare as a private matter in British homes ignores the wider implications of such relationships.

However, despite extensive leave policy our ‘woman-friendly’ state shows similar results; here, ‘two thirds of housework is done by women’ (Almqvist 2010: 1; Roman 2008: 110). Therefore, the theory that traditional gender roles can be eroded by making matters of the home inextricably public is challenged. Roman (2008: 108) has argued that this lack of change is the result of ‘gender-neutral policy’ which fails to challenge these norms, whilst Lammi-Taskula (2006: 91) suggests that it is caused through routines developed when women predominantly care for the infant. However, as Almqvist (2010: 1) notes, ‘the government is...providing some tax relief to households for using services for cleaning, laundry and gardening’. Therefore, can the state do any more than to actually force couples to share responsibility for childcare and housework in the early stages? Nevertheless, as Moller Okin (n.d., cited by Almqvist 2010: 1) has asserted, ‘a fair society is a society in which men and women participate in more or less equal numbers in every sphere of life’ and it seems that despite the option for the equal sharing of parental leave, gender disparities have failed to be challenged.
Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the way in which care policy and provision influences gender relations and the degree to which care was valued within society. We began by suggesting that Swedish parental leave policy has attempted to share the duties of care for new-borns more evenly, giving men just as extensive rights as women. Comparatively, the British system has tended to give more substantial benefits to the mother rather than father (although the new leave for fathers introduced in April has changed this) suggesting that more traditional roles prevail in Britain rather than Sweden.

However, studies have revealed that despite the possibility in Sweden to share responsibilities, fathers, particularly in the private sector and those less wealthy and well educated, have chosen or been unable to take such opportunities and thus in many respects the female role as principle carer has prevailed.

Although it is important to note the substantial number of fathers in both Sweden and Britain who have utilised some provision, there seems to be a discrepancy, where fathers take brief periods of leave rather than more substantial roles in caring. This limitation is arguably due to the poor financial subsidy for this parent (in the case of Britain), the pressure from employers (be it explicit or implied), and discourses about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motherhood and fatherhood. Therefore, one could suggest that in order for couples to see caring as an equal responsibility, social policy, employers and social discourses must treat parents equally.

We could thus conclude that despite the limitations of Swedish policy in regards to parental leave, it has served far better than the British in protecting mothers, whilst giving more opportunity for the equal share of the care of infants. However, perhaps states use of ‘shared parenthood as a prerequisite for shared power between the genders’ is not so straightforward (Borchorst 2008: 38).

4. Childcare

So how does policy influence gender relations beyond the first caring period? Although less gender explicit than maternity and paternity leave, the gender implications of policy for childcare can be equally significant. The provision determines the degree to which parents can
equally engage in the work place and the financial costs that may be incurred and for whom. For many then, the very nature of childcare is ‘political’ (Roman 2008: 106).

There have been two types of policy for the care of children. The first, public childcare, predominantly seen in Sweden, has allowed parents to ‘manage the tension between workplace and caring responsibilities’ (Gornick et al. 1999: 119). The second, monetary supports, have been used in two ways, to either help pay for childcare in private services (in Britain) or to support those caring within the home (Britain and Sweden).

Of interest here then are the contrasting defamilisation and refamilisation effects of the two approaches (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 7). Childcare leads to defamilisation where both parents are freed from the home to work. As Siim (1993: 34) has summarised, ‘feminist scholars have argued that changes in child-care policies have had the greatest significance for women’. Cash services in contrast refamilise individuals to stay within the private sphere.

It is therefore vital to examine how the policies and provisions available in both countries determine whether women’s roles as primary carers are encouraged or discouraged. Key here is the degree to which childcare is seen as the duty of the state, the extent to which it is subsidised and to whom it is available.

This section is in three parts, the first examines the availability of day-care in the two countries, whilst the second discusses the degree to which money has been used as an alternative to services and its strengths and weaknesses. The final section examines the predominance of female childcare workers. The piece concludes that the extensive and affordable facilities available for parents in Sweden far outweigh those in Britain. However, the developments towards cash-for-care, in line with those supports available in Britain, despite arguably valorising care, may well reinforce traditional gender roles. Furthermore, the replication of women as carers in the childcare sector in Britain and Sweden fails to challenge traditional gender roles.

**Day-care. Public or Private?**

The fundamental difference between the two countries is how Britain has viewed child day-care as a predominantly private responsibility (unless children are at risk and with minimal coverage for 2-4 year olds), whilst Sweden has seen it as inextricably public (Sainsbury 1996:
95). Sainsbury (1996: 96) has suggested that countries which portray the care for children as a private matter ‘reinforces the norm that the mother’s place is in the home’ whilst Ruggie (1984: 210) has suggested this is an act of ‘sex discrimination’. Therefore, public childcare arguably spreads the responsibility for children more evenly between men and women.

In Britain, the private sector, parents, family and friends have filled the care gap. The reliance on market provided care has created a ‘class’ dilemma where ‘some women can buy themselves out... [whilst] others cannot’ (Pascall 1997: 83). This has meant that better educated and high earning mothers are able to combine both work and family, whilst those less fortunate are often forced into a cycle of labour market withdrawal, reduced wages and limited prospects (Lewis and Pascall 2004: 384). Consequently, care policy affects not just women, but those women most vulnerable within society. Therefore, a ‘long-term investment by Government’ of universal childcare services (seen in Sweden) is vital to rectify this division within society (Lewis and Pascall 2004: 384).

This however looks unlikely. In a speech to the Conservative Conference in 2006, the future Prime Minister David Cameron emphasised his party’s aversion to too much state intervention. ‘Britain’s families need Super-Nanny, not the Nanny State’, he said (Bale 2010: 305). One might point the reader’s attention to income and assets of said advocate as going some way to explain these priorities. However, for those on minimum wage, such privately financed support is far beyond their means.

**Childcare services**

Figure 4.1 shows that Swedish childcare is guaranteed for all children aged between eighteen months (parental leave is available up until this point) and school age, whilst in Britain this is not guaranteed. Therefore, in every age group apart from one, there are more Swedish children in public childcare than in Britain. The exception is the different starting age of compulsory schooling (4-5 in Britain and 6-7 in Sweden) where here the English system does care for more children. Nevertheless, we could argue the extensive services and their utilisation in Sweden means that parent’s ability to engage in the labour market is far greater than in Britain, protecting both their economic security and autonomy.
Figure 4.1: The coverage of childcare and the number of children in publicly funded services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Guaranteed childcare coverage (aged 0-2)</th>
<th>Guaranteed childcare coverage (aged 3-5)</th>
<th>% children (0-2) in publicly funded childcare</th>
<th>% children (3-school age) in publicly funded childcare</th>
<th>% children (age 5) in pre-primary or school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>&gt;18 months</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Gornick et al. 1997, cited by Gornick et al. 1999: 127

However, the table raises questions about at what stage these services are taken advantage of in Sweden. The study suggests that there is a significant jump in those attending nursery from the age of eighteen months to two years (32%) and three years to school age (79%). Although we do not know the percentage of the 79% which were older or younger, the smaller figure for younger children perhaps suggests refamilisation taking place during the first few years of a child’s life in Sweden. Here arguably, extensive parental leave encourages parents to care for their child within the home for longer, and depending which parent this is, may have some gendered implications.

Nevertheless, since this study was carried out there has also been an attempt in Britain to move to more developed services. The Labour government using predominantly private businesses, launched ‘The National Childcare Strategy’ and ‘Sure Start’ programme to increase the availability of childcare with free nursery places for three and four year olds. However, despite available places, the number of hours offered (12.5 hours a week) meant that in reality these caring facilities were not adequate to support the full labour market participation of both parents (Rake 2001: 223). Although the Coalition Government in January announced an extension to ‘15 hours a week for the poorest 2 year olds’, the policy motivation of ‘school-readiness’ failed to challenge the often unfair division of care (Clegg 2011: 1).

**Childcare costs**

Key here then is the financial cost incurred when families in Britain are predominantly reliant on private childcare facilities as opposed to the more publicly subsidised services in Sweden, and the impact this has on the ability to use such provision.
In Sweden, payment is made on an ‘ability-to-pay’ scale usually about ‘5% of family incomes’ (Sainsbury 1996: 85/100). Arguably then, this more equitable approach means that no-one is ‘priced-out’ of childcare, allowing both use by single parents and poorer couples.

Access to childcare in Britain however comes at a high cost, limiting access to it. Gornick et al. (1999: 121) have described the expense as a “‘tax’ on mothers’ wages’. Although it would be inaccurate to disregard the financial costs that childcare also has for a father, perhaps the term ‘costs’ moves beyond the purely financial? If we frame this idea in the context where a mother either, stays at home to care for her children and therefore loses her wages, or, goes to work and pays someone else to care for her children and therefore loses her wage, the ‘no-win’ British system becomes clear.

A recent survey by the Daycare Trust (2011, cited by BBC News 2011a: 1) showed that the average cost for nursery provision was £5,032 annually, whilst childminders were £4,680. In regard to Gornick et al.’s (1999) “tax” on mothers, for a mother on minimum wage (with minimum wage at £5.93 working eight hours a day, five days a week), to pay for one child in a nursery she would be “taxed” at just over 40%, the second highest band in the UK. This would no doubt have serious economic implications for single parents, or mothers responsible for this payment.

A study by the OECD (2010, cited by Parker 2010: 3) revealed the comparative cost of childcare in Britain and Sweden.

Figure 4.2: ‘Childcare cost as a % of a family with total earnings of 167% of the average wage’

Adapted from OECD 2010, cited by Parker 2010: 3
Here we see that the contrasting public and private responsibilities for childcare in Britain and Sweden means costs for UK parents are almost six times as great.

David Cameron in a speech to the ‘National Family and Parenting Institute’ hinted strongly that there might be a ‘move towards tax relief on childcare to all working parents’ if his party was elected (Bale 2010: 305). However, the budget and spending review introduced by the Coalition Government has seen these supports cut rather than increased. Research by the TUC (2010, cited by Parker 2010: 1) has revealed the effects the reductions to working tax credits will have on the ability of mothers to pay for care. It is believed that households with ‘low-to-middle income families’ will be hardest hit. For example, a lone parent with two children living in London and earning £11,000 annually will lose nearly £2,000 in ‘tax credit entitlement’ (Parker 2010: 1). Such a cut may well affect the ability of some mothers to pay for childcare, leaving many with no option but to reduce their working hours or withdraw from the labour force to care for their children themselves, limiting both job prospects and earnings (Beckford 2011). As Spencer (2010, quoted by Parker 2010: 3) has observed, ‘on this salary, there is a fairly small margin between managing and struggling’. Furthermore, two-parent families may be equally badly hit. Here, it may make more financial sense for a mother to stay at home (because of her lower wage) rather than work, as this salary would simply cover the cost of care itself (Parker 2010: 1).

Therefore, the different costs incurred for childcare in Britain and Sweden can have a significant impact on the ability to work, financial security and gender relations. The inadequate and unaffordable childcare services in Britain then may leave many financially dependent on a partner, limiting their autonomy. By comparison in Sweden, where childcare is accessible for all, fewer negative gender relations are implied.

**Cash for Care**

There has however been another approach employed for the care of children. Financial benefits have been given to either support those caring within the home (Britain and Sweden) or to enable individuals to utilise private services (Britain).

We have assessed the ways in which childcare enables women to enter the workplace on equal terms with men, but what effect do cash benefits have? Do cash benefits valorise care, or do they simply reproduce traditional gender relations by refamilising women?
Cash-for-care in Sweden

The ‘Freedom of Choice Reform’, introduced by the Centre-Right Coalition, has given parents the option to stay at home and care for their child. Financial assistance is given by the state as long as no public childcare services or public insurance schemes are used. The governing Alliance has sold the policy as a chance for families to spend more time together (Allians för Sverige [Alliance for Sweden] 2006: 10). A study by Christensen (2008, cited by Carlsson Wetterberg et al. 2008: 20) also suggested that ‘the younger generation’ welcomed this ‘choice’ between public and private childcare, giving them autonomy in the creation of their own lives.

Furthermore, Ellingsæter and Leira (2006: 7) have observed the way in which these benefits ‘valorise’ care and make it “‘costless’ for the carer’. If we observe the scheme from the ethic of care perspective then, one could argue that this system gives citizenship to those who care. As Hiilamo and Kangas (2009: 466) observe, the changing terminology used by Centre-Right Coalition government in Sweden reflects a shift to this thinking. The financial assistance, previously known as ‘vårdnadsbidrag [care allowance]’ was rebranded in the 1980s to ‘vårdnadsersättning [care compensation]’ (Hiilamo and Kangas 2009: 466). The implications of ‘allowance’ (a regular payment) and ‘compensation’ (money given to reimburse for a loss), suggests a society which values the roles and sacrifices of carers.

However, it is probable that this ‘compensation’ would fall into the hands of the mother and could thus be treated as an attempt to create more ‘traditional’ family units. Despite its ‘gender neutral rhetoric’ nine out of every ten using the financial ‘compensation’ are women (Borchorst 2008: 37; ICA Kuriren 2011: 61). Borgström et al. (2010: 1) found that women claimants saw their income fall by 10.8% whilst men’s only fell by 2.7%, revealing that these cash provisions do not always serve the interests of both sexes. Furthermore, the study discovered that 80% of those women claiming cash assistance fell into the bottom four income brackets, suggesting that this provision is being utilised by those already vulnerable in the job market. Thus, in the opinion of Borgström et al. this reform has sought to reassert women’s traditional role within the home.

As Leira (2002: 125) asks, is the Swedish Coalition’s rhetoric of ‘choice’ only available to women? Do the ‘cultural, social and practical everyday facts’ determine this ‘decision’ for them (Lammi-Taskula 2006: 94)? The relatively higher wages of men mean that it is often financially sounder for women to stay at home and receive these allowances, reproducing
gender differences. The Social Democratic Party have thus called it a ‘trap for women’ (Hiilamo and Kangas 2009: 461).

As well as gender discrepancies, there are signs of disinvestment in care. A place for a child in public day-care costs the state around SKR 8000 per month, whilst the cash assistance is less than half at SKR 3000 (Socialdepartementet [Ministry of Health and Social Affairs] 2007, cited by Hiilamo and Kangas 2009: 468). These money saving schemes may be attributed to the financial crisis of the 1990s, the influence of globalisation and ‘neo-liberal discourses’ (Borchorst 2008: 40; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 11; Hiilamo 2006). However, like the cuts to the British care sector by the Coalition Government, they may well be motivated by political ideology as much as necessity.

Tax Credits in Britain

It is these very cuts which currently threaten tax credit support for parents. Tax credits have been used to either support those caring within the home or to contribute to the cost of childcare. Those eligible for these has fallen significantly since April 2011, and the freezing of the child benefit will arguably leave many families far worse off (Bachelor and Collinson 2010: 1).

The tax credits themselves however, introduced under the former Labour Government, also left some unfortunate gender inequalities. The Working Tax Credit was initially delivered through the principle earner’s pay check. This arguably reinforced financial inequalities and power relations between the main earner (often the father) and main carer (often the mother), although, after much lobbying this was changed (Rake 2001: 218). Nevertheless, the previous plan, no doubt principally utilised to reduce administration costs, arguably shows to whom, in the ‘worker/carer’ model, such a benefit is seen to belong. Sainsbury (1996: 73) has articulated the crucial factor of whether benefits are paid directly to the mother or father as a factor influencing gender relations, and economic dependence in relationships.

Moreover, the ‘Childcare Credit’, only available to those in work, further aggravates the issue of citizenship as worker rather than carer (Rake 2001: 218). Additional criticism lies in the way the Working Family Tax Credit discourages dual-earner/dual-carer families. Whilst benefits are paid to an individual working over 30 hours a week, a couple who work 15 hours each have no entitlement. Thus, a traditional ‘bread-winner’ and carer model is favoured in
order to receive this support (Rake 2001: 219). Gregg et al. (1999, cited by Rake 2001: 220) has suggested that this discrepancy leads to withdrawn labour market participation by married women.

Who cares?

In both Britain and Sweden women are predominant in childcare employment (Christopherson 2001: 251; Pascall 1997: 76). Why is this a problem for gender relations? As Bowlby et al. (2001) have observed,

childcare merely recreates the gender template by promoting low paid jobs for women as paid
carers who are predominantly providing care services for other women (Bowlby et al. 2001: 233)

Therefore, whether women are ‘workers’ or ‘mothers’ is it they who ‘organise’ and carry out the care (Bowlby et al. 2001: 239). This links with Hirdman’s (1989) ‘gender system’ theory, which suggests gender inequalities are simply reproduced in different settings.

Formal care is poorly paid. In Britain, care workers earn around the minimum wage (Daly and Rake 2003: 57). Whilst Hartman and Pearce (1989, cited by Kittay 2001: 57) have observed that ‘child-care workers, are the most poorly paid workers relative to their level of education and skill’, nevertheless there has been a lack of emphasis on training and regulation within the British care sector (Daly and Rake 2003: 57; Land and Lewis 1998: 77). This disregard for skills to care for children devalues the professionalism required, and instead justifies low wages through its attendant ideas about ‘natural women’s work’. We could therefore argue that the dominance of women in this field places them in a subordinate position being undervalued and exploited.

So what is the picture in the ‘woman-friendly’ state? In Sweden, care workers earn similar wages to those of ‘male unskilled industrial worker[s]’ (Statistics Sweden 1996, cited by Szebehely 1998: 260). In contrast to Britain, emphasis has been placed on training. That ‘skilled’ women care workers fall into the same wage-bracket as ‘unskilled’ men raises serious concerns about the valuing of such expertise and work in society (Szebehely 1998: 260).
So who is to blame? One could suggest that the authorities’ drive to lower costs of childcare in both countries has come at the price of those working in the sector. Kittay (2001: 57) has however accused those paying for childcare of ‘exploit[ing] other women’. Smith (2008: 140) has also painted the picture of the ‘wealthy white woman’ whose is able to ‘purchase the masculine privilege...by entering into an exploitative contract with a nanny’, whilst in turn just reproducing the same-old gender relations framework. But do these women have a choice if they want financial independence? Are these women too not facing similar problems of poorer wages and job market segregation?

Surprisingly then, considering Sweden’s reputation as a ‘woman-friendly’ state, the country lies at number twenty one for ‘occupational sex segregation’ with women dominating the public sector, arguably due to the more generous benefits and support for working mothers (Borchorst 2008; Christopherson 2001; Lewis 1993; OECD 2000, cited by Leira 2002: 66). In contrast, British women work predominantly in the private sector, arguably as a result of the part-time work available, allowing them to fit work around caring responsibilities (Lewis 1993: 10; Liebert 2001: 276). It seems then, that despite the different emphasis on public services, gender inequalities have prevailed on both sides of the North Sea.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the extensive and affordable childcare services available to the Swedes for younger children has far exceeded the costly and limited provision available in Britain. The facilities in Sweden have meant that both men and women have been able to work, giving both sexes financial autonomy, whilst cash benefits and minimal public care centres in Britain have done little to compensate for women’s roles as carers and the sacrifices such roles bring.

However, the picture in Sweden is mixed; the introduction of ‘cash-for-care’ has arguably reasserted traditional gender roles, whilst despite the availability of care institutions and the liberation of women into the world of work, labour market segregation is apparent. Furthermore, the majority presence of women in the childcare sector in both Britain and Sweden reveals how this field replicates traditional gender relations in a new form.

Dean (2010: 77) has observed the way in which The Fawcett Society has advocated a childcare system similar to that of the ‘Nordic States’. Whilst the Swedish system has no doubt liberated many women from the sphere of the home into work, our study has revealed
that gender inequalities still prevail, and therefore the limitations of such a childcare policy are raised. Perhaps then, public childcare services are the ‘pain relief’ rather than the cure for more equitable gender relations.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how the policies and provisions for the care of children in Britain and Sweden structures gender relations. It aimed to assess to what degree, if at all, the contrasting welfare states of the two nations sought to break down traditional gender responsibilities through care provisions for children.

It began by examining the theoretical implications for care and gender in the differing welfare states. ‘Socially democratic’ Sweden was the perceived leading force for ‘woman-friendly’ policy, where political representation for women was high, and policies used to break down traditional gender roles through an equal sharing of care. As Bagehot (2011a: 1) has observed, ‘enthusiasm’ for the Swedish state has been overwhelming, where academics have ‘swooned about a northern New Jerusalem in which contented, gender-sensitive citizens traded high taxes for gleaming...public services’. In comparison, we painted a picture of the ‘private’, individualistic notions of the ‘Liberal’ British welfare state, where the home was seen as space free from state intervention and where the writ of feminist politics had had relatively little influence.

Yet when addressing the assumptions made of the Swedish state we began to see that perhaps not all women were represented as well as might have been expected. Instead, women from different classes and ethnicities had been grouped together where their needs and wants were seen as indistinguishable.

This initial outline was followed by an examination of the theories which emphasised the importance of care within society and the role which care policy plays in liberating women. It was argued that women were still the predominant carers within society, and the degree to which this role was valued and financially supported was of vital importance for women’s autonomy.

With these theories established, the final sections of the paper moved to examine the policies and provisions of care for children, in order to form a practical understanding of the way these
affected gender relations and considered parental leave, childcare services and financial assistance.

The study found that equality in parental leave and universal state funded childcare in Sweden, which sought to dissect traditional gender roles, had indeed liberated many women from financial dependency on men and had enabled couples to function as ‘dual earners’. In Britain, despite some developments in access to childcare and extensions in paternity leave, policy tended to encourage mothers as main carers and they as a consequence were faced with economic dependency, often unable to fully engage in the workplace, thus compromising their financial independence.

However, when examined more closely the utopian ideal of Sweden as a ‘woman-friendly’ state began to show some cracks. There still appeared to be a divide between the public and private sectors in regard to female employment and paternity leave, where the former seemed to offer more encouragement to participate.

Furthermore, despite the extensive provisions available in Sweden compared with their more frugal availability in Britain, we still found that traditional gender relations were reproduced within the home, not only by those using the ‘cash-for-care’ system, but also the more gender-neutral childcare facilities. Therefore, we must question the limitations of childcare policy in influencing practices within the private sphere.

Not only this, but even though opportunities of provision were open to both men and women, it was still the latter group who were more likely to care for children for extended periods. Whilst we found that British policy encouraged this, the extensive provisions to break down traditional caring roles in Sweden still reproduced and maintained them. Arguably, the choice placed on fatherhood as opposed to motherhood and the effect of discourses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers and fathers may have influenced the success of such policies. Therefore, one must ask, is policy sufficient to influence behaviour? Lammi-Taskula (2006: 96) has suggested that ‘it takes several, simultaneously supporting social and economic factors to involve men in the daily tasks and responsibilities of infant care’ and the degree to which these factors are evident in both Britain and Sweden is questionable.

At the beginning of the study we asked ‘how is care valued within both societies?’. If it is women who still care predominantly, then the degree to which this care is valued is of concern. Throughout the paper we have pointed to the predominance placed on ‘citizenship as
worker’ in the two countries, where rights and benefits are often attached to work. It is this emphasis which questions the notions of Sweden as a ‘caring’ and ‘woman-friendly’ state and undermines British policy from creating more equitable gender relations.

The idea then, that in Sweden, policies and provisions were introduced because of fears of a labour shortage, rather than from a base of feminist values, questions the very foundations of the ‘woman-friendly’ state. Yet, are we wrong to be dismissive if the predominant beneficiaries of these policies and provisions have been women, and are now promoted through the language of feminist rhetoric?

Nonetheless, moving beyond their origins, the policies themselves have limitations. As we have seen in both countries, they have not always served in the interests of all women and men, but for higher earners and those more educated; whilst, the predominance of women employed in care institutions has merely recreated traditional roles in a new format; where women are often poorly paid and seen as unskilled (particularly in Britain).

Furthermore, this emphasis on ‘citizenship as worker’ has often left women, rather than men, working a ‘double shift’. As Bowlby et al. (2001) observed,

> women are caught between a rock and a hard place! The ideological rock of gendered caring requires women to take responsibility for children [whilst]...the economic and legislative pressure for women to choose paid work is strong, but is a hard place for them to do justice to caring at the same time (Bowlby et al. 2001: 252)

To summarise, this study has sought to understand the contrasting welfare states of Britain and Sweden, to see how their differing policies and provisions for care have enforced or dissolved traditional gender relations. We have found that, despite the extensive provisions available to both men and women in Sweden, giving women economic independence, this has not always altered, as significantly as one might have hoped, the gender disparities within the private sphere of the home, or the unequal responsibility of the care of children.

It is with this in mind that the idealised image of Sweden in Britain, where here groups push for systems similar to those in the Nordic state, should do so with realistic expectations of what this policy can achieve. Nevertheless, despite its flaws, it would be wrong to dismiss the benefits such policies and practices have had for women and thus the extent to which this can challenge traditional gender relations.
In terms of gender, Sweden, which has often led the field in regard to its gender equality, has begun to slip. In the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap index Sweden has fallen from first (2006/2007) to fourth place (Almqvist 2010: 1). As Lister (2008: 216) accurately observes, it is a question of whether we choose to see the glass as half empty or half full. In our comparison with Britain, which lies fifteenth on the index, this becomes a little less problematic (Hausmann et al. 2010: 8). Although, should the ‘bench mark’ of ‘gender equality’ be so easily replaced by one of ‘comparison’ (Lister 2008: 217)?

Nonetheless, we began this paper by examining the dramatic effects the Coalition Government’s cuts in Britain would have for women. It is then, with this in mind, that we conclude, despite the blemishes in the ‘woman-friendly’ model of the Swedish state, comparatively speaking, the recent actions of the British Government could arguably assign this nation as ‘anti-woman’.

References


Parker, L. (2010) £26,000...the salary you need just to cover childcare. Guardian Money, 4 December, p.1-3.


http://www.bis.org/review/r090128d.pdf [Accessed 4 February 2011]