A stylized world map composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

# Sweden's Family Policy under Change: Past, Present, Future

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- Sweden has come to represent a modern variant of family policy, within the framework of which social rights were designed early on to encourage parents' labour force participation and the sharing of unpaid care work.
- Parental benefits, the expansion of public day-care, tax reforms and the enforcement of fathers' rights and responsibilities are central aspects which supported the development of the Swedish earner-carer model.
- It has been shown repeatedly that countries with earner-carer models have considerably higher levels of female employment than welfare states with other types of family-policy model. Swedish family policy is often thought to stimulate both fertility and women's paid work.
- During recent years the new turn in Swedish family policy has come to emphasize increased choice more than gender equality among all groups of parents. The major part of the parliamentary opposition (the Greens, the Left Party and the Social Democrats) favour a return to previous family policy paths and a reinforcement of earner-carer policy orientations.
- The history of Swedish family policy not only shows that the design of family policy has the potential to influence parents' behaviour and well-being, but also that it may take decades to change age-old gender inequalities through policy reform.





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Sweden has come to represent a modern variant of family policy, within the framework of which social rights were designed early on to encourage parents' employment and the sharing of unpaid care work. This earner-carer orientation of policy was gradually strengthened from the beginning of the 1970s through several major family policy reforms. These reforms included the expansion of public day-care; the extension of earnings-related parental leave for both parents; individualized income taxation of spouses; and joint custody legislation making shared responsibility for children the norm in the case of parental separation.

The earner-carer model of the type implemented in Sweden has been linked to a wide range of outcomes related to the behaviour, attitudes and well-being of both parents and children. Such policies have been shown to increase parents' options in reconciling paid work and family life, thus enabling the combination of extensive female employment and relatively high fertility, increasing fathers' participation in child-care and contributing to child welfare, mainly by lowering poverty risks. Such outcomes have increased the interest in Sweden's family policy among policymakers around the world.

The trajectory of Sweden's family policy reforms has been modified in recent years and the expansionary phase of the earner-carer orientation appears to have changed direction. After the Swedish general election in 2006 the winning centre-right coalition launched several reforms in the area of family policy, introducing new and partly divergent principles for the organisation of care and paid work in society. The past decade has been characterized by a new political orientation, aimed mainly at increasing parental choice in the short term. The extent to which this development implies a fundamentally new direction for family policy with new sets of consequences is the subject of debate. Only recently has policy research come into a position in which it can begin to evaluate these more recent family policy reforms, for both individual level outcomes and the broader functioning of family policy.

We shall start by discussing the development of earner-carer policies in Sweden during the expansionary phase and the most recent policy reforms. We then discuss the development of its use and the central social consequences. The paper ends with a discussion of future challenges and reform paths for Swedish family policy.

## The Expansionary Phase of Earner-Carer Policies, 1970–2005

The most consistent aim of modern Swedish family policy has been to encourage employment among parents. Initially, the key aim was to enable women to work, but increasingly the emphasis has been widened to encourage men to take equal responsibility over child-care. One example of emphasizing the equal responsibility and rights of the mother and the father is to consistently use a gender-neutral language in family policy legislation, including parental leave. Family policies are to a large extent individual and geared towards two employed parents. The basic pillars of family policy are commonly seen as earnings-related individual parental leave benefits with long duration; affordable full day public day-care from the child's first birthday; individual income taxation; and joint custody legislation, within the framework of which the custodial rights and responsibilities of fathers have been reinforced since the late 1970s.

When introduced in 1974 the *earnings-related parental insurance benefit* was paid for six months after childbirth, entitling parents to share leave as they preferred. In the 1980s leave rights were extended in steps to a full year, and in addition a further three months paid at a very low flat rate. From 1995, one month of earnings-related leave was reserved for each parent, which means that one parent – generally the mother – could no longer use up the whole leave. The months reserved for respective parents – in Sweden referred to as »daddy-month« and »mummy-month« – were extended to two months for each parent in 2002. Since 2002 the total leave period is 16 months, of which 13 are subject to earnings-related taxable benefit, paid at 80 per cent of previous gross earnings. A large majority of parents meet the requirement of having worked for 240 days before using leave and thus claim earnings-related benefits. Parents who do not meet the requirement receive a low flat rate benefit that today is 225 SEK per day.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a majority of employees are covered by collective agreements, entitling them to additional benefits from their employer during leave.

Through legislated rights to flexible leave use it is possible to stretch leave to a longer period than 16 months by accepting a lower replacement rate. This option is often

1. In May 2013, 100 SEK corresponds to around 12 euros.



used and children typically start day-care around the age of one and a half years (Duvander 2006). Women use a longer part of this reduced benefit leave. It is also possible to save parts of leave to extend summer vacations or reduce working hours during the child's preschool years. The leave can thus be used in different ways and many short periods may have different effects compared to one longer period. The impact on the employer, future career and continued division of care are likely to be affected differently, depending on how the leave period is disposed. In addition, the temporary parental benefit for the care of sick children, paid at the same level as parental leave, is further aimed to facilitate the combination of work and child-care.<sup>2</sup>

*Public day-care* has been under expansion in Sweden for almost four decades. Several reforms have been implemented that have increased the pedagogical ambitions of public day-care and introduced guaranteed rights to participation in public day-care for all children (also those with unemployed parents). In 2002, low fixed maximum user fees for publicly financed child-care were introduced, abolishing most of the regional differences in price and availability that previously existed.<sup>3</sup> Even if the past decade has seen increased variety in the forms of child-care – such as cooperatives run by parents or other organizations or privately run day-care centres – they are all financed through public spending and follow centrally set curricula and other regulations. Almost all staff in Swedish day-care centres are trained to work with children. Pre-school teachers with a three-year tertiary degree make up around 60 per cent of the staff in centres; the rest of the educated staff have a secondary vocational training as child-minders (Swedish National Agency for Education 2006).

In the Swedish *income tax system* a series of reforms removed disincentives for two-earner families. The first and largest reform, implemented in 1971, was the introduction of individual income taxation. The income tax system was not fully individualised in this respect until the early 1990s, however, when a tax deduction for an economically dependent spouse was phased out. One implication of individual taxation in combination with a progressive

tax system is that it becomes economically advantageous to have two lower incomes (together) compared to one single (male) higher income.

The enforcement of *fathers' rights and responsibilities* over children is seen mainly in custodial rights and individual rights to parental leave. 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 typically led to maternal custody. The new custodial legislation of 1998 gave courts the power to issue a joint custody order against the objections of one parent. The Social Welfare Boards have the prime responsibility to guide parents to a voluntary agreement on the custody and residence of the child, and courts dealt with such issues only on rare occasions when conflicts could not be settled (Schiratzki 1999). This reflected an increased emphasis on the shared responsibility of parents to agree on the care of children and joint custody is today the default in the case of parents' separation.<sup>4</sup> Changes in the joint custody regulations initiated in 2005 again increased possibilities for a parent to gain sole custody through a court decision in cases when the other parent did not cooperate. Partly as a consequence of this reform the number of conflicts that have to be settled in court doubled over a few years (Rejmer 2013).

## New Family Policy Directions, 2006–2013

The currently governing centre-right coalition came to power in 2006 after twelve years of uninterrupted Social Democratic governments. During the election campaign of 2006, the coalition advocated a number of reforms to family policy, including a gender equality bonus in the earnings-related part of parental insurance; a flat-rate home care allowance; a voucher system in day-care; increased pedagogical ambitions in public day-care centres; and tax deductions for household services. Some of these reforms can be expected to strengthen the earner-carer orientation of policy, while others leave greater room for

2. Parents are entitled to up to 120 days per year and child until the child's twelfth birthday.

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

4. A related recent reform has made it possible to share child allowance if parents live apart, instead of paying it only to the mother. However, both parents have to agree to this and thus the mother retains a veto.



market solutions, as well as more pronouncedly traditional family orientations.

The tax deduction for household services (2007) was the first of the proposed reforms to be introduced. It provides for a tax deduction of 50 per cent of the cost of such services up to a fairly high ceiling. The tax deduction is commonly used for cleaning, but can also be used for baby sitting. The motive is clearly to aid families where both parents are career-oriented and work full-time, as well as to create a formal market for care services. Critics of the reform point out that it is mainly high-income households that benefit from the tax deduction, while at the same time a labour market for low qualified and low paid »maid jobs« is being created.

Two new reforms concerning the parents of young children were introduced in July 2008: the gender equality bonus and the home care allowance. They are the result of a political compromise emanating from conflicting interests within the centre-right government, in particular between the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. For decades the Christian Democrats have, similar to several of their European sister parties, advocated a home-care allowance that favours parents (mothers) to stay at home instead of working and utilising public day-care, while the Liberal Party has been a long-standing supporter of greater gender equality and earner-carer policies.

The gender equality bonus was introduced in July 2008 with the aim of encouraging more equal sharing of parental leave. It is the reform that is most in line with previous decades' family policy development in Sweden. The bonus entitles parents with equal leave use to a tax reduction of 100 SEK per day. The bonus can be used for all the shareable earnings-related days – that is, nine out of the total 13 months, as two are reserved for each parent. If leave is shared equally between the mother and father the family receives a maximum of 13,500 SEK. In particular for families with fairly gender-equal low and medium wages, it is advantageous to share leave more equally. The gender equality bonus has received several lines of criticism: the bonus was paid only during the following fiscal year; the family had to prove that the other parent was in work while one was on leave; the family had to apply for the bonus; and perhaps foremost the application process was regarded as much too complicated. In 2012 the bonus was simplified so that it is

paid without application immediately in relation to leave use. The requirement of the other parent working was also abolished.

The home care allowance is an untaxed benefit of 3,000 SEK per month, designed to be used after the earnings-related parental leave period. It is paid to parents who want to extend their time at home and to delay the start of day-care. Although formulated in gender-neutral terms, allowing both parents to use the leave, 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 benefit, but it cannot be combined with other social transfers, such as unemployment or social assistance benefits for either of the parents. Lone parents may use the home-care allowance but the benefit level is too low to alone guarantee sufficient income and lift such households out of poverty. The home-care allowance is optional for every municipality and to date primarily municipalities with a centre-right majority have done so.

Another change in parental leave is an updating of the floor and the ceiling. The flat rate was as low as 60 SEK until July 2006, but has since been gradually increased to today's 225 SEK, partly reflecting that the level was long not updated in relation to wage or price increases. A higher floor in parental leave insurance not only raises benefits for non-working parents, but also weakens incentives to work before becoming a parent. The earnings ceiling was stable during the 1990s, so that an increasing proportion of parents did not in practice receive 80 per cent of earlier earnings. In 2006 the earnings ceiling was raised from 7.5 to 10 price base amounts, which increased the number of parents receiving it by 80 per cent, especially fathers, who typically have higher earnings.<sup>5</sup> The increase was motivated by limiting the economic reasons for not using the leave gender-equally.

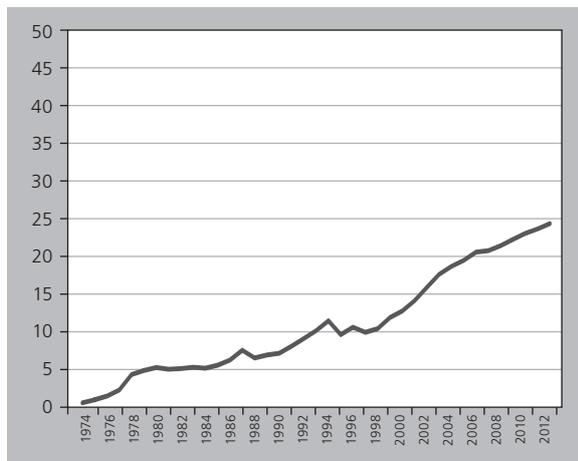
## The Use of Family Policy

Even if fathers have had the same formal rights as mothers to use parental insurance since the implementation of the programme, only a very small fraction of total leave days were used by fathers in the mid-1970s. Extension of

5. The price base amount is used to adjust for inflation in benefit calculations and corresponds to 44,500 SEK in 2013.

the leave period in the 1980s contributed to fathers' increased leave use. The proportion used by fathers steadily increased and amounted to around one-quarter of all days in 2012 (see Figure 1). When parents are studying over the full eight years they can use leave: practically all mothers and nearly nine out of 10 fathers make use of parental leave benefits.<sup>6</sup> Fathers on average use 91 days of leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2012a).

Figure 1: Fathers' share of parental leave days (%)



A major change came with the introduction of the first reserved »daddy month«. Before 1995, 44 per cent of fathers used leave the first two years, but this share increased to 77 per cent in 1995. Fathers' days increased by 10 days immediately after the first month was introduced and seven days after the introduction of the second reserved month. The gender-equality bonus did not alter parental leave use (Duvander and Johansson 2012), however, for neither fathers or mothers. Few of those eligible even applied for the benefit, probably because it was complicated and also because the time span for applying was short (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2010). Altogether, there is a slow, steady trend of fathers' increased share of parental leave benefits and this trend continued after the bonus was introduced.

Even if gender equality of leave use is steadily increasing, the proportion of non-using fathers is not decreasing.

6. Paid leave is often complemented by extra benefits from the employer on the basis of collective agreements with unions. Sweden has a high level of unionization and supplements to state-legislated policies have often been subject to collective bargaining (Sjögren Lindquist and Wadensjö 2007).

There is a large overrepresentation of non-users among fathers with low or no income. These fathers obviously would receive a very low benefit if using leave and may thus not see any reason to do so. There may also be a lack of knowledge about the rights to leave benefits also for parents without income in these groups. The gendered division of the temporary parental benefit also seems to be fairly stable, and fathers here use just over one-third of the days. In addition, it should be pointed out that men on average still receive considerably higher benefits per day than women, a difference caused both by a selection effect into leave use and greater flexibility in its timing among fathers. Among some groups of women the share who receive benefits at the low flat rate is remarkably high. For example, among mothers born in Sub-Saharan Africa as much as two-thirds receive the flat rate amount (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2012b). There are few signs of these differences decreasing over time, which is problematic given the low employment rates and high poverty risks among several immigrant groups. Raising the floor in parental leave benefit may mean that some families in which the other parent is working are lifted out of social assistance. But at the same time incentives to find a job during parental leave are very weak and parents on leave have limited access to employment assistance. This may be especially important for newly arrived immigrants (SOU 2012).

Since the 1970s, the share of children attending publicly-financed day-care has increased and as day-care has turned into a rights-based pre-school activity it has become a central part of most children's lives. In 2012, 84 per cent of all children aged one to five were in publicly-financed day-care, ranging from 49 per cent of one-year-olds to 95 per cent of five-year-olds (Swedish National Agency for Education, see [www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se)).

Today, about one-third of Swedish municipalities have introduced a home-care allowance, among them the city of Stockholm. The use of the allowance was very limited during the first years but has increased somewhat. In 2011 the home-care allowance was used for 2.5 per cent of all children aged one to three, and for 4.7 per cent in the municipalities in which the allowance was available. The use is highest in the southern municipalities with small-scale private industry and in the immigrant-dense suburbs of Stockholm (Duvander and Cedstrand 2013). The home-care allowance has been associated with female labour market exits, long-term increase in poverty



and marginalization of already marginalized groups, such as women with low education and an immigrant background (Ellingsaeter 2012). Among the Nordic countries the allowance has been used most prominently in Norway and Finland and especially in Norway it has been related to a lack of child-care places. As an early start in day-care fosters social and intellectual skills there has been concern over the under-representation of certain groups in day-care (Ellingsaeter 2012). The allowance is generally said to give parents a choice of child-care solutions, but both lack of day-care places and labour market difficulties may in reality often make female homemaking the only option.

The development of joint custody as default has contributed to a larger share of children living in joint custody after separation, increasingly meaning shared physical custody; in other words, children spending half the time with their mother and half with their father (Statistics Sweden 2007). In 2006, 28 per cent of all children with parents living apart lived half the time with the father and half with the mother, and 10 per cent lived mainly or only with their father. It seems that shared physical custody is related to better psychological health, less risk of bullying and less perceived stress compared to living with only one parent after separation (Turunen 2013).

The few indications of the utilisation of the tax deduction for household services point to moderate use, even though the frequency is increasing. In 2010 around 4 per cent of households used the deduction. Whereas 1.6 per cent of households with dependent children in the lowest income quartile make use of the tax deduction, it is almost ten times as common among such households in the highest-income quartile. The latter group utilise around two-thirds of the total deducted amounts (Statistics Sweden 2011). One recent study indicates that the tax deduction may positively affect female earnings (Hall-dén and Stenberg 2013). The tax deduction for household services has increased demand in certain parts of the service sector, but studies indicate also that the ambition behind the reform to increase the number of formal jobs has not been entirely successful (Gavanas 2010). On the whole it appears that the reform has improved in particular the career opportunities of higher-income households.

## Earnier-carer Policies and Their Consequences

Sweden's family policy is often commended for its ability to create possibilities for work–family reconciliation and an increasing number of studies investigate various outcomes of specific policies, at both the micro- and macro-levels. The approaches to analysing links between policies and outcomes are not self-evident, however, and it should be noted that it is sometimes difficult to isolate causal effects from particular policies on specific outcomes. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that the main effects of such policies affect behaviour in the long term, not least when it comes to policies operating through gender-role-norm systems. Another reason is the sometimes complex interplay between different policies and their multiple effects on behaviour. It should be kept in mind that such interplays and indirect effects are not considered in the few studies that aim to capture the direct effects of specific policies (see, for example, Ekberg et al. 2012; Duvander and Johansson 2012).

It is worth briefly reviewing earlier studies of links between family policies and their intended outcomes, namely, female labour force participation, fathers' child-care, relatively high fertility and children's well-being.

It has been shown repeatedly that countries with earner-carer models have considerably higher levels of female employment than welfare states with other types of family-policy model. Swedish family policy is often thought to stimulate both fertility and women's paid work, not least by reducing the cost of having children (Ferrarini 2006). The female labour force increased from around 50 per cent in the mid-1960s to over 80 per cent in the early 1990s, when the participation rate among women nearly paralleled that of men. The cross-national differences in labour force participation are most substantial among women with children and low and medium education – groups who in this respect are favoured by earner-carer policies (Korpi et al. 2013). Affordable public child-care with high availability for the youngest children in the Nordic countries has also been shown to increase employment among mothers (Kangas and Rostgard 2007). The introduction of the maximum user fee in Sweden did not seem to have any major short-term effects on female labour force participation (Lundin et al. 2007), which may have to do with the already large number of children covered by such services.

An increasing literature points to potential unintended negative effects of earner-carer policies on women's career chances. Due to the attraction of large numbers of women with low education and weak career attainments into public sector employment, labour markets are held to have become increasingly segregated and employer statistical discrimination widens gender wage gaps at higher earnings levels in gender egalitarian countries (Mandel and Semyonov 2006). It has, however, been shown that several of the previous analyses of such effects have come to premature conclusions about links between gender egalitarian policies and women's career chances, mainly by restricting the analysis to working women. Bringing women who are outside the labour market into the analysis obliterates differences in women's representation in top wage positions, as well as gender labour market segregation. For example, the likelihood that any woman of working age is in the highest wage quintile is around 10 per cent in Sweden and most other rich countries (Korpi et al. 2013). The latter indicates that gender wage gaps in higher positions are determined by other factors than differences between countries' family policies. However, within Sweden it has been shown that women taking longer leave face limited chances of upward career movement when returning to the labour market (Evertsson and Duvander 2010).

While policies encourage fathers to use parental leave, it is also important to know whether fathers' leave use has long-term consequences, primarily for future father-child contact. It seems that fathers' leave is associated with a closer relationship with the child later on (Haas and Hwang 2008) and with continued contact in cases where the father separates from the mother and does not live with his children. Also, fathers who have used parental leave seem to work fewer hours when the child is older (Duvander and Jans 2009). It is thus plausible that fathers' patterns of parental leave use affect other aspects of male care.

While fertility has decreased in many European countries, fertility rates have been kept relatively high in Sweden, for which earner-carer policies are often held to be a major explanation (Neyer and Andersson 2007). Comparative studies of links between family policy transfers and childbearing indicate that gender-egalitarian policies may simultaneously increase fertility rates and female employment (Ferrarini 2003). After experiencing a drop in fertility in the aftermath of the 1990s financial crisis,

Sweden's fertility rates have been close to 1.9 children per woman during the past decade, while many Continental European countries have had considerably lower fertility rates (in Germany, for example, the corresponding figure has been around 1.4). The income level of both men and women has been positively associated with the propensity to have a child, which is likely to be influenced by the earnings-related part of parental insurance benefit. There may also be an association between increased gender equality in the household and fertility. A positive association has been found between fathers' leave use and continued childbearing (Duvander and Andersson 2006). This may be caused by shared parental responsibilities facilitating a higher number of children, fathers' increased child-orientation or by a selection effect into parental leave among fathers. Most likely a combination of the mentioned interpretations are at play.

The increasing delay of first births, partly driven by the extended length of education in combination with work requirements for receipt of parental insurance, is of concern as it shortens the length of the reproductive period and thereby reduces the number of children women may choose to have. Given that fecundity declines with age, the need for assisted reproduction may increase. This is costly and associated with health risks for the mother and the child. Delayed childbearing may lead to increased childlessness in society. Nevertheless, it seems that the highest shares of childless through the reproductive years are not found in countries with typical earner-carer family models, and childlessness does not seem to be increasing in Sweden. There is still a strong two-child norm, even if childbearing tends to be postponed.

A fundamental aim of Swedish family policies has been to increase gender equality without risking children's 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 the income of families in two ways: directly through highly redistributive earnings-related transfers, and through the increase in earnings that occurs due to the family-policy model's support of both parents' paid work. It has been shown that Sweden and other countries with highly developed earner-carer policies also have the lowest relative poverty rates of households with children (Kangas and Palme 2000; Bäckman and Ferrarini 2010). Nevertheless, for parents who have difficulties getting into the labour market, the long leave may be-



come an obstacle. Poverty may have substantial long-term life-course effects (Bäckman and Nilsson 2011), and it may also affect the choice capacity of parents-to-be (Ferrarini 2006). In recent years it has become obvious that income differences in Sweden have increased and especially young individuals and individuals with foreign backgrounds are lagging behind (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2012).

Another important aspect of children's well-being concerns time spent with parents and time in public day-care. Whether time with parents is preferable depends both on the quality of parents' care and the quality of other child-care. Brooks-Gunn (2003) finds positive effects from high quality child-care on performance later in childhood; better school-related achievements that are strongest for children from less privileged backgrounds. Studies of parents' choices between work and family in Sweden do not support the idea that parents choose out-of-home child-care as a substitute for their own time with the children, and no statistically significant difference can be found in joint activities with children between families with and without out-of-home child-care (Hallberg and Klevmarken 2003).

## Future Challenges for Swedish Family Policy

What challenges can be expected in the years to come for Sweden's family policy? Compared to most other European countries, female employment is extensive and male shares of unpaid care work are comparatively high and have an upward trend. The financial crisis has not dramatically affected the fertility rate, which is around two children, while rising unemployment has come with rising poverty also among families with children. Still, substantial gender differences in employment outcomes as well as care remain. For nearly four decades, policies were increasingly calibrated to increase gender equality among all parents with children. During recent years the new turn in family policy has come to emphasize increased choice more than gender equality among all groups of parents. While this development may increase parental choice capacity in the short run, it may also come with increased polarization between men and women from different social groups, as the different reforms hit parents from different social strata differently.

The new orientation of policies may well mean that we are heading towards increased gender equality in the labour market among those with higher education, who share leave to a greater extent and who can afford to purchase fiscally subsidized household services. Note, however, that even for this group parental leave use and wages are far from gender-equal. There are also hidden gender inequalities operating through women's unpaid care work, during leave as well as after the leave period. Another difference can be found in men's much more flexible leave use during the child's post-infant ages. Among households with lower wages there is an enhanced option to choose a less gender-egalitarian distribution of work. We know that such choices often come at the price of worsened labour market prospects and lower old age pensions later in life, enhancing female life-cycle poverty risks. Such risks are particularly common with low flat-rate child-care leave benefits, of the type represented in home-care leave and certain aspects of flexible earnings-related leave. A gender-unequal division of work may not be perceived as a choice as the family economy and workplace situation for many couples encourages women's care work and responsibility rather than men's. One extreme example is recently arrived immigrants with children. The labour market policy would facilitate integration in the labour market, but it seems that many municipalities make gendered decisions where women are encouraged to use leave and remain in the home (also with somewhat older children), while men take part in various labour market integration programmes (SOU 2012). A more gender-unequal distribution of work may thus be involuntary, but disguised as choice.

The increased number of family policy programmes not only affects the choice capacity of different social groups differently, it also increases the complexity of the family-policy system, for citizens as well as policymakers. Less transparent family-policy systems make it more difficult to weigh direct and future consequences of individual choices and family policies. Complexities within particular programmes may also affect use of benefits, something that is clearly illustrated by the 2012 reform, which aimed to simplify the gender equality bonus. Studies at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency also show a clear lack of knowledge of parental leave rights, especially among fathers (National Social Insurance Board, 2003; Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2010a).

The future path of Swedish family policies is far from settled. Family policies are surrounded by a large number of goal conflicts and trade-offs, both at the individual and the societal level. Within the governing centre-right coalition, there is a goal conflict between the Liberals, who historically have been strong champions of gender-egalitarian policies, and the Christian Democrats, who support policies sustaining more traditional gender divisions of labour. Among the political opposition, the far-right populist party the Sweden Democrats is in some ways quite close to the Christian Democratic position, supporting more traditional gender roles. The major part of the parliamentary opposition (the Greens, the Left Party and the Social Democrats) favour a return to previous family policy paths and a reinforcement of earner-carer policy orientations, not least when it comes to increased individualization of parental insurance and abolition of flat-rate home-care leave benefits. The future of the tax deduction for household services is more uncertain; the

views of the political opposition range from abolition to reforms making it less beneficial for high-income earners. In any case it is likely that the balance between different goals in family policy will continue to be a battleground for fierce political debate also in the coming decades. The history of Swedish family policy not only shows that the design of family policy has the potential to influence parents' behaviour and well-being, but also that it may take decades to change age-old gender inequalities through policy reform. Here it is important to remember that short-term interests aiming to increase parents' choice capacity may collide with long-term interests to increase gender equality. For example, when the state actively supports female domestic care work this has repercussions not only for women's future careers but also impacts on gender inequalities and poverty risks in old age, as retirement pensions are strongly linked to previous life-time earnings.

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