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CAN POLICY ENCOURAGE EQUAL PARENTING?

The possibility to achieve a basic change in the traditional sharp gender division of parenting-work is a central issue of feminist research; Sweden has pursued for the last 20 years a social policy, which has as one of its declared goals the achievement of equal parenting.

This paper shall begin by attempting to clarify the ramifications of the issue and of the goal, then describe and analyze the Swedish policy of legitimate and compensated parental leave for the home care of infants and the care of children when sick, of fathers' leave days, and of the legitimation of a 6-hour work day for all parents of children under age 8, combined with the goal of universal availability of subsidized daycare, starting at age 18 months; then answer the title question and several of its ramifications, using official statistics and existing research as well as early conclusions from an ongoing research project, as well as examining the longterm impact of this Swedish policy of facilitating the integration of work and parenting for both women and men, on the gender division of family work in general, and on the status of women in occupational work.

"Parenting" is a modern concept, tentatively transferring to both parents the traditional duties of the mother usually called "mothering"; parenting involves "primary-care-giving" or practical parenting including feeding, cleaning and clothing the child, providing shelter, ensuring the safety of the young child by constant supervision, and nursing the child when injured or sick. "Secondary" care duties are emotional/psychological and moral/educational; here I will not discuss the problems posed by the close ties between the physical comforting of primary and secondary care. In most societies in the course of human history the socially expected duties of fathers towards their children did include little or no primary care, and of the secondary care duties mainly some moral/educational ones, especially towards sons, the extent and kind of these paternal duties varying considerably from period to period and from society to society, and dwindling in some recent western societies to nearly nothing. "Fathering" was no parallel concept to mothering. Traditionally the father's central duty towards his children was of a third kind: to provide material/financial means for the performance of both primary and secondary care; the good father or "family-man" provided for the "upkeep" of his wife so she would take care of his children--alone or with unpaid or paid help, mainly female--and for all the necessary material means. A major purpose of work for most men was to earn enough to fulfill this duty.

In the traditional gender division of labour, primary and secondary parenting, as a major part of unpaid family work were nearly entirely performed by women. With the growing acceptance of women's demands - first for equal rights, then for equal opportunities and finally for de facto equal status in society - meaning equal access to resources, to autonomy and to political and economic power - it was realized by many that in order to achieve this goal, basic changes had to be made in the traditional gender division of labour, not only in the economic and political sphere but also in the domestic family sphere, not only in the female role, but also in the male role, first and foremost in parenting. The goal of "equal parenting" was the logical conclusion.

A strong array of pre-scientific and apparently scientific explanations, and most often also justifications, of the traditional gender division of infant and child care, were either opposed to any attempts at a change in the gender division of parenting-work and responsibility, considered full gender equality in parenting unachievable or undesirable, or at least argued that no change in the direction of more gender equality in parenting could be achieved by means of policy.

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These explanations of the status quo are religious, popular psychological and psycho-analytical, functional/sociological, Marxist and socio-biological, most providing justifications for the continuation of this division, and all claiming that any policies attempting to change basic gender roles would be doomed to failure.

In most societies, but not in Sweden, one of the most influential explanations of and argument for the status quo is that from religious tradition: God's will from the time of creation is that child care is woman's work; any change would be a transgression of the moral order. Popular psychology fosters concepts of sharply polarized ideals of femininity and masculinity according to which a woman who objects to any part of "mothering" is deficient in her feminity, and a man who occupies himself with primary child-care and especially with infant-care is deficient in his masculinity. These popular arguments for the status quo received a forceful pseudo-scientific support from the Freudian teachings of the radically different structure of the female from the male psyche. The classical sociological theory and justification of the gender division of tasks was that of functional analysis claiming that the essential basis of modern society is the nuclear family in which woman plays the expressive role, whereas man plays the instrumental role, outside the home, in the economy. The Marxist explanation of the fact that women perform housework and child-care work without pay in the private family household, is that it is in the Capitalists interest that women's "reproduce" their labour force without their having to pay for it. Consequently, there is no chance to change this gender division of labour without abolishing Capitalism. Though Marxism does not justify the status quo it certainly did not consider a radical change to be achievable by ways of policy in "bourgeois" society. Some socio-biologists consider any attempt at a radical change of the gender division of labour as futile because of the deeply ingrained different tendencies of men and women - men to economic adventurous activities in groups, and women to domestic and child-rearing activities at home - which are an indelible inheritance of mankind's (supposedly universal) early stage of large animal hunting. Some socio-biologists have considered only male infant-care a biological impossibility due to men's assumed inability to understand infants' body language, which they claimed to be caused by the absence of some "maternal" hormone.

Within Radical and Socialist Feminist circles, where the outright condemnation of marriage, of the nuclear family in general, and of the private family household in particular - as inevitably reactionary, bourgeois and sexist institutions - is prevalent, equal parenting - at least as generally understood - is ruled out as undesirable.

Some sociologists of gender raise doubts concerning the feasibility of equal parenting due to the recent social trends of increasing prevalence of divorce and of single motherhood; they argue that these trends render equal parenting less and less practical and perhaps even impossible.

The growing publicity concerning the prevalence of sexual abuse of children by fathers (and by other male relatives or care-givers) has strengthened the doubts as to the desirability of involving men in primary child-care, and thus has added another element to this long list of objections and reservations.

Nevertheless, equal parenting remains the goal of mainstream feminism. How then can a change towards equal parenting be achieved? Could it be achieved, encouraged, facilitated at all by social policies, and if yes - by what kind of policies?

Even among those considering it desirable and feasible, there are those who consider a long slow educational process necessary in order to change what they consider to be deeply ingrained tendencies, and are therefore sceptical about the chances of success to effect a basic change in human behaviour regarding child-care in general, and infant-care in particular, by means of legal decrees and by society-wide changes in economic and social institutional arrangements. Not many governments have declared equal parenting as one of their official goals. Very few have pursued such policies over a longer period. Those

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successive Swedish governments that did so, obviously had additional motives for their policies besides gender equality, such as counteracting the extremely low birthrate, the stress symptoms and overwork that had been documented among employed mothers, and the prevalence of "short-parttime" work among employed women, whose pay and status therefore remained very low.

The non-integration of occupational work (paid employment or otherwise income-producing work) with parenting work - due to the conflicting traditional institutional norms regarding the time and space demands of occupational/professional work with the needs of young children - was recognized as a chief obstacle both to women's progress in occupational work, and to men's participation in parenting. Policies were devised to overcome these obstacles. I intend now to describe the main parts of the Swedish policies. They are:

- a) the legalization of specific interruptions of occupational work which parents need for the home-care of infants and of children when sick;
- b) a number of compensated leave days (10) for all new fathers
- c) social insurance policies that compensate for loss of income incurred by these three kinds of interruptions of occupational work;
- d) the legitimation of voluntary reduction of working hours to six per day by all parents of young children;
- e) the provision of adequate, affordable daycare at the end of the period of legitimate, compensated parental baby-leave;

The "parental leave" policy has merged infant home-care - a major part of primary-care-parenting - into women's normal employment career. The declared intention of this policy was, and still is, that this rather long period of baby-leave should be shared among both parents, with the father taking at least one third.

The policy of providing subsidized daycare for preschoolers is of course a basic policy for the facilitation of the participation of the mass of mothers of young children in the labour market and the demand for it has preceded demands and plans for the encouragement of equal parenting, yet it is also an essential part of such a policy. The most expensive part of out-of-home daycare is that of babies, as their care is the most labour-intensive. One of the major arguments against a policy of publicly subsidized daycare has been the cost argument. Added to the cost argument are the manifold objections to the all-day institutional care of babies in their first year of life: the desirability of breastfeeding, the dangers of infection, the psychological and emotional importance of a sufficient period of one-to-one and relaxed care-giving and -receiving at this early stage for infant and parents alike. The Swedish solution was to dovetail the normal start of subsidized daycare to the end of compensated parental leave, and to charge progressive fees based on the combined income of both parents. (A smaller number of daycare-spaces for younger infants is maintained for special needs, especially for those of single mothers.)

Who looks after children who normally attend day-nursery or school, when they (or their normal caregiver) are sick? In 1976 Sweden instituted "temporary parental leave", granting both parents the right to share compensated leave for looking after sick children up to age 12, generously extending in 1990 the number of days for each child. This aspect of parenting is now near-equally shared by men and women.

In Sweden in the early '70s, after the reform of the tax law, women's employment rate rose steeply to 85%, but for a time 50% of all employed women worked part-time, most of these "short part-time", i.e., 20 hours a week or less, whereas hardly any adult men worked part-time. In Sweden where both gender equity and a high labour force participation of women were official goals, this situation led to the enactment of the provision for the entitlement of parents of any children under age 8 - under age 12 in the case of public sector employees - to demand of their employers to work a 6-hour day, making illegal any detriment to their standing and opportunities at work, and granting them the right to return later

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to fulltime work. This, however, is not a benefit policy, as parents are not paid for the two hours not worked. Yet this parttime work - even a prolonged period of it - will not affect the employee's "supplementary pension", as this is calculated according to the 15 best years of employment remuneration. This policy was a major attempt at the integration of work and parenting; both parents are entitled to continue as "normal" workers in any occupation, while having enough time and energy for performing their parenting duties adequately. As a consequence of this law, the majority of Swedish mothers of young children now work a 6-hour day in any of the organizations and occupations in which they previously had worked full-time, including also in supervisory and other positions of responsibility. Yet, as only a small minority of fathers use this provision for the choice of more family time, the effect of equalizing the gender division of paid and unpaid work was smaller than hoped for.

Now, to answer the title question literally: 20 years of these four Swedish policies aimed at the facilitation and encouragement of equal parenting, certainly have not achieved equal parenting there. According to a recent - rather incomplete - official statistics, approximately 44% of (married) fathers of babies born in the late 80ies took some baby-leave; this is up from a mere 2% during the first year after the enactment of this policy in 1974. Thus, although this is a considerable increase in the participation of fathers in the full-time care of their infants, it has to be remembered that fathers still take on the average much shorter periods of baby-leave than mothers; a special policy of bonuses aimed inducing fathers to take three consecutive months of baby-leave, has been experimentally tried in a large insurance firm. A special public commission looking into the matter was worried enough by the lack of equality, to suggest a possible departure from the complete voluntariness of the policy, should a considerable increase in fathers' participation in baby-leave not have been reached by late 1993. In the spring of 1994 Parliament passed a law that provides for the shortening of a family's compensated parental leave - should the father not take at least one full month of baby-leave.

Although the baby-leave is perhaps the crucial pioneering Swedish policy, the provision for voluntary reduction of the working hours of all parents of young children could greatly affect the gender division of family work, if fathers would take advantage of it. Yet, whereas most mothers of young children choose a 6-hour day, very few fathers do.

The situation is very different concerning the other two policies: Fathers take nearly all their 10 "daddy days" at the time of the birth of their child. Even more significantly, fathers take nearly half of all leave-days for the care of children when sick;

In both these cases only relatively short periods of absence from work are involved in order to participate in parenting work.

What causes the reluctance of so many men to interrupt or reduce work for longer periods? Recent research in the Nordic countries found that there is little macho opposition, even in male-dominated work-places, to men performing child care; little outright pressure of employers on men not to take baby-leave. or not to choose the 6-hour day, has been reported. Apparently men consider themselves much more essential at work than women do, and are more reluctant to diverge from full-time and overtime patterns. It may well be that certain organizational arrangements prevalent more in male dominated work places and occupations may support these attitudes.

Who then are the fathers who seriously participate in baby-leave? Apparently neither occupation nor level of education of fathers are a significant factor; it is the man whose partner has

a responsible and/or promising position, who is ready to make this decision, so as to shorten her period of absence from work.

Incidentally, besides these policies, there is in Sweden a good deal of state-subsidized educational activity in parenting classes, and in men's groups, explaining the financial advantages of sharing parenting, and advocating men's involvement in parenting for the improvement of their own lives.

While there certainly no equalization of gender roles has yet been achieved, apparently the shift towards men's participation

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in all kinds of parenting work has been greater in Sweden than in any other industrialized society.

What do we know about the wider effects of these policies on Swedish society? Women's participation in the labour force remains very high; the previously very low birth rate has risen significantly to be the second highest in Europe after Ireland; women embark on motherhood later than before; many more women work fulltime before their first birth; more work a 6-hour day, much less work 4 hours or less, than before; the majority of children 18 months to 10 years are cared for in some form of municipal daycare (including after-school-care for young school children); women are less stressed and have nearly as much (though somewhat more fragmented) free time as men; men do more parenting work than before; women still do about double the routine housework; the gender pay gap has narrowed, yet gender occupational segregation apparently is as high as before.

The purpose of my present research project is to examine in detail, when and how, and to what extent, Swedish women have been able during the last 20 years to make use of these policies in order to reduce their traditional handicaps in the labour market, and what the impact of this use, and of the relative participation of their partners in parenting, has been on their occupational careers as compared to those of their male partners and to those of men of the same age groups. Thus it will hopefully be possible to evaluate the potential contribution of the Swedish family policy to the economic empowerment and independence of women.

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