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Gender Equality: Integrating Work and Parenting

"Integration of Work and Parenting" is a fashionable new slogan. The concern of this symposium is organizational design in the interest of human well-being. In order to integrate work and parenting, certain changes in work organizations are needed, yet, to succeed, these have to be combined with specific public policies recently tried in several countries of the "Welfare State" type, especially in Sweden. 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, and the legitimating of voluntary reduction of working hours by all parents of young children;
- b) social insurance policies that compensate for loss of income incurred by such interruptions of occupational work;
- c) the provision of adequate, affordable daycare at the end of the period of legitimate, compensated parental baby-leave;
- d) a number of compensated leave days for all new fathers.

In Sweden, these policies, starting in the mid-seventies, were explicitly aimed at the integration of work and parenting for both genders, and thus at a revolutionary change in gender roles: the equalization of occupational-work-roles and child-care-roles. In due course it became apparent that in addition to gradual upgrading of these services and policies special moves were needed to encourage fathers to use these provisions more fully, to prevent de facto pressures against fathers, and also any de facto discrimination against women while they still perform the lion-share of parenting. Much effort was invested in an explanatory educational drive directed at men. The main demand for reform in work organizations was for greater flexibility in working time. The recent late onset of the economic recession in Sweden also raised there the demand to adapt these policies to the need for public frugality and for economic efficiency. I shall return to the Swedish experience later on.

The existence of a serious conflict between work and parenting all over the industrialized world was noticed only towards the very end of the twentieth

century; in order to understand this new social problem, a short historical digression is in order. What is meant by integrating work and parenting? By work is usually meant occupational work; the work place is distinct from the home, and work is performed and coordinated with others; usually, the working person is an employee, though the problem concerns also small entrepreneur, self-employed, free-lancers and free-professionals. "Parenting" is a modern concept, tentatively transferring to both parents the traditional duties of the mother 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 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 hardly anything. "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. This provided a justification for many men's putting-up with physically demanding, overly stressful, boring and even demeaning work, with long hours of work including "overtime", night-shift, even prolonged absences from home--all in the line of "providing" for the children. As long as this traditional gender-work-role model remained influential, the male world of work was expected to be different and separate from the world of child-care, and integration was deemed neither necessary nor appropriate.

The situation was different for women. Before high industrialization in western countries the majority of mothers in the farming population looked after children and household, and also performed much "productive" work for family consumption and often also for sale or barter; many wives of artisans, merchants, shopkeepers and doctors worked as unpaid assistants to their husbands; although much of this work was performed in the home or in

its vicinity, the conditions of women's productive work were often not ideal for childcare, but nobody cared. A powerful social norm demanded of urban married women "not to work" i.e. not to work for pay, at least not openly. Thus, even the possibility was denied that--barring misfortune--conflict between women's work and child-care could ever arise. With the appearance of many new--mainly clerical--jobs deemed suitable for women, millions of young women entered paid employment, instead of working as unpaid family workers or domestic servants of all kinds; yet regular fulltime employment ended for them at marriage or even at engagement; this remained public and private policy until after WWII. Many unmarried mothers, and in Europe also wives of low-paid industrial workers, were employed fulltime in industry even while having young children; they were considered either an abnormality to be abolished, or a specific social problem demanding extraordinary measures.

After WWII, ever-growing numbers of "normal" women wanted and needed to continue working outside the home after having children. The first policy-steps taking note of this fact were rather negative, such as outlawing the most harmful working conditions during advanced pregnancy and the institution of an obligatory period of "maternity leave", during which employment was illegal for both employer and employee. In most industrialized countries considerable labor union pressure was needed to expand the concepts of pregnancy protection and maternity leave to include also the legal protection of women from dismissal due to pregnancy and childbirth, as well as adding some-leave before and after childbirth, in addition to the minimal period needed for strictly medical reasons. Women's jobs were supposed to be "kept open" during this absence. Yet In many countries this somewhat longer protected leave remained uncompensated, thus putting mothers before the choice between economic hardship and endangering their own health and the health and welfare of the baby by returning too early to the job. Another policy that is more recent is state payment to mothers. of a flat-rate, usually a very low sum equivalent to the minimal welfare benefit, on condition that they agree to stay home during a longer period; recently a number of European governments formally called this a "parental" leave, as fathers may also apply; understandably hardly any ever do. As long as this state of affairs prevails, no basic step towards genuine integration of work and parenting has been taken. A precondition for this is generous parental leave compensated on the basis of the employed parent's previous income, to be paid not by the employer but by a public insurance fund. When the percentage of the compensation is high (in

Sweden it is 90% of previous salary, and limited by a ceiling) this may mean near-complete maintenance of previous income during the period of interruption, and the leave-taking parent is considered continually employed. As a minimum period of continuous employment before the birth is demanded, a new Swedish national norm has evolved: young women tend to complete their education and work fulltime before embarking on motherhood; after baby-leave they tend to continue working in the same work organization and in the same position as before, a place for the child being available at subsidized neighborhood daycare, as soon as the period of compensated parental leave ends, when the child is 18 months old. This policy merges 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 the leave should be shared between both parents, with the father taking at least one third. As this is not yet so, even here this aspect of parenting has obviously not been fully integrated into men's work life.

In many countries, struggling for equity for women, the women's movement concentrated more on the goal of providing generally available, affordable quality daycare, from the baby-stage onwards, to the right to compensated parental baby-leave. This goal was rarely achieved, as the obstacles are manifold. The cost of quality daycare is usually too large a part of the low incomes of many mothers. Recession and the rising national debt bring governments to declare the expense of subsidized public daycare as unaffordable. Its most expensive part is the care of babies; added to the cost issue are the manifold objections to the all-day institutional care of babies in their first year: the desirability of breastfeeding, the dangers of infection, the psychological and emotional importance of a sufficient period of individual and relaxed care-giving at this early stage for infant and parents alike. The Swedish solution was to dovetail the later start of subsidized daycare to the end of compensated parental leave, and to charge progressive fees based on the combined income of both parents. (Special support is provided for genuinely single mothers).

Who looks after children who normally attend day-nursery or school when they are sick? Traditionally there was no provision for this. Employed mothers either used their own "sick days" or stayed home unpaid and often unauthorized, incurring loss of income and risking dismissal. In a forward move a few compensated days were reserved for mothers for looking after a sick child--in many countries not more than 6 per year; this major item of parenting remained unintegrated into occupational worklife. Due to this lack of integration women workers with children were considered potentially

unreliable; in most countries they still are.

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 parents and thus fully integrated into the work life of both genders.

Two additional important continuous parenting tasks invite concern: the constant daily need for the housework connected with childcare, and the need to attend to and supervise young children in the mornings and later afternoons, before and after day-nursery, kindergarten or primary school on each week-day. These tasks clash with the widespread pressure on workers to work overtime, shift, weekend, and out-of-town work, and even with the traditional norm of the 8-hour work day.

First housework: domestic appliances and partially pre-prepared food have considerably reduced the time and effort needed for some domestic chores required in any household with children, yet other daily chores still continue to claim much time and effort. At the peak time in the family-cycle it is doubtful if two full-time employed parents can manage all the required housework, even if they share it. Two parents working a fixed fulltime workday cannot possibly adequately perform the main routine primary childcare chores for toddler, preschooler, and young school-child, as these are tied to the opening times of day-nursery, kindergarten, or primary school. At these times at least one parent should be available, preferably unhurried and attentive to the child's emotional needs. Could two fully sharing parents manage while both work full time, given that both have flexible work hours? Just probably. Yet even then such an arrangement would mean rather over-long hours in an institutional setting for toddlers, preschoolers and even for young school children; also the parents' free time, especially their time together, would be very limited.

In most places this option is unrealistic: most work organizations have inflexible work hours; most fathers will not share daily child care equally; in most countries places in all -day nurseries are not sufficient and almost no kindergarten or primary school will look after children in the afternoons; in some countries children still cannot eat lunch at school! To prevent the danger of neglect, mothers who have neither help of relatives. nor the means to engage private childcare, must drop out of the labor market for years or opt for usually inferior, very short, or evening- or weekend-jobs.

In Sweden in the '70s, after the reform of the tax law, women's employment

rate rose 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. Although any employment improved women's overall economic position, in Sweden just as anywhere else, gender-specific part-time work, especially short part-time work, was a major cause of the persistence of a sizable gender income gap, the concentration of women in the lower occupational ranges, their scarcity in supervisory positions, and their concentration in those lower paying "women's occupations", that customarily offer part-time work. In most western countries neither the force-force participation rate of women nor the percentage of those working part-time was ever as high as in Sweden; frequently employers consider the mere fact that part-time and irregular jobs are offered to women a positive contribution to the integration of work and parenting. Feminists, however, rightly tend to denounce much part-time work as inferior.

In Sweden where both gender equity and a high labor 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 for 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 to fulltime work. This is not a benefit policy, as parents are not paid for the two hours not worked. Yet part-time 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 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 of more family time to achieve more gender equity, the effect was smaller than hoped for.

It is difficult to evaluate the effects of 18 years of these 4 Swedish policies of the integration of work and parenting, based on the facilitation and encouragement of equal parenting, and aimed at giving women a real chance at economic equality: basic statistics are still incomplete. My specific research project is still in an early stage. What we know is: women's

participation in the labor force remains very high; the previously very low birth rate has risen considerably; more women work fulltime, more work 6-hours, much less work 4 hours or less than before; the majority of children 18 months to 8 years are cared for in some form of municipal daycare; women are less stressed and have nearly as much free time as men; men do more parenting 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; approx. 44% of (married) fathers take some baby-leave, but for much shorter periods than mothers; fathers take nearly all their daddy days; fathers take nearly half of all leave-days for the care of sick children; most mothers choose a 6-hour day; very few fathers do. Research found that there is little macho opposition in male-dominated work-places to men doing child care, and little outright pressure of employers on men not to take baby-leave or the 6-hour day has been reported. What then causes the reluctance of so many men to interrupt or reduce work for longer periods? Apparently men consider themselves much more essential at work than women do, and are more reluctant to diverge from full-time and overtime patterns.

The question should therefore be asked, which organizational patterns, prevalent more in male-dominated occupations and positions may support this attitude? My tentative candidates are: individual responsibility of employees for specific tasks or clients, rendering their longer absence to be considered harmful; "project-work" that involves periods of intense effort and overtime for those chosen for the project team; all-male semi-autonomous teams with group productivity bonus, where one member's dropping-out may harm the rest; these three organizational patterns are parts of past reforms, meant to raise workers' interest and involvement. Others are traditional e.g. uniform and obligatory shift work; over-long working hours for persons in some supervisory, managerial, and professional positions. All these obstacles to many men's fuller use of their opportunities to become equal parents, could be overcome.

Who performs the tasks of fathers on longer baby-leave, is central to efficiency and competitiveness. Recent accounts of tasks simply being shelved or intended to be picked up by fellow employees, are unconvincing. One solution could be the full legitimating of the status of temporary workers and their employment, in addition to internal substitution and rotation.

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