

Chapter 7

Families and Family Policies in Sweden

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Abstract Sweden is known as a social welfare state, whereby the people who reside in Sweden are entitled to certain public benefits at little or no cost to the individual. Over the past century, Sweden has reshaped its culture, growing from one of the poorest nations in Europe to a flourishing country that others emulate, especially with respect to their family policies. Sweden has developed several foundational family policies that have helped to encourage equality, while establishing a sense of individuality. Sweden has created similar rights for cohabiters/married couples, as well as for same-sex/opposite-sex couples. Parents receive a generous parental leave package, flexible employment choices, and there is a low gender wage gap, while children receive high-quality childcare, free health care, free dental care, free mental health services, and a substantial child welfare program. Swedish family policies encourage both parents to work and to help each other with household and childcare tasks. Despite the public benefits that Sweden provides for mothers, fathers, and children, there is still a need for further improvements regarding policies on domestic violence, poverty, and child welfare. Assessments of Sweden's family policies are discussed.

Keywords Sweden • Family policy • Parental leave • Marriage • Family-work balance • Child welfare • Families at risk

Introduction

Sweden, a Northern European country with a population of 9.5 million, is part of the Scandinavian Peninsula and borders Norway to the west, Finland to the east and connects to Denmark in the south via the bridge over Öresund. Sweden stretches far north above the Arctic Circle, but the majority of its inhabitants reside in the central and southern parts of the country, within or close to urban areas.

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Sweden has 1.1 million families with children between 0 and 17 years old (URL 1), and around one fifth of all children are of foreign origin (URL 2).¹ People living in Sweden tend to have a long lifespan, with the average life expectancy being 81 years old. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is around \$34,400 USD (URL 3), and Sweden's unemployment rate is around 8 % (URL 4). Sweden spends 20 % of its GDP on welfare services that are either free or inexpensive for the individual, thus adding to the individual's disposable income (Statistics Sweden, 2012).² During the past decade, families have increased their disposable income, and today, 41 % of children live in families with high-bracket incomes³ (Barnombudsmannen, 2010). However, monetary equality has changed in Sweden, as there are increasing gaps between different household structures (Fritzell, Gähler, & Nermo, 2007; Rädde Barnen, 2012).

One of the main reasons why more children are growing up in higher income families is because most parents in Sweden work and are well established in the labor market prior to having children. In fact, women with permanent employment are 20 % more likely to become parents compared to those who are either temporarily employed or unemployed, and very few become parents before the age of 20 (Barnombudsmannen, 2010; Statistics Sweden, 2002). The present mean age for first-time mothers is 29 and for fathers is 31 (Barnombudsmannen), but Sweden enjoys one of the highest fertility rates among industrialized countries, with 1.9 children per woman (URL 3).⁴ With both parents connected to the labor market, most parents go back to work after having children.

The Swedish welfare state is part of what can be called a social-democratic model, which is characterized by having universal benefits and emphasizes equality for all (e.g., gender, economic classes, racial/ethnic groups, and children) (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Estes, 2011). The current welfare system was initiated in the 1930s but took off after World War II with the Social Democrats leading the government for the past 70 years,⁵ where they enlarged the welfare state, while embracing capitalism to stimulate the taxes and revenues needed to fund the welfare programs. Using other countries as models, such as the USA, Sweden adapted new policies and streamlined them not only to be culturally relevant but also to function more easily. By doing so, people in Sweden prospered, living healthier lives, attending higher quality schools, and increasing their disposable income due to both genders participating in the paid labor force, with the state providing available high-quality childcare (Sandin, 2012).

This chapter starts with highlighting Sweden's sociohistoric, economic, and political contexts. Then we explore family characteristics and family policies under three themes: family policies targeting marriage, the family-work balance, and policies supporting families at risk. The ways in which Swedish family policies are implemented and assessed are embedded within the three policy themes so that a fuller picture emerges on the importance and effect those policies have on those living in Sweden. The chapter ends with a discussion about Sweden's family policies, recommendations for future family policy research, and a short conclusion.⁶

¹ Foreign origins meaning either the child or both of the child's parents were born in another country.

² Among the OECD countries, only Denmark spends more on individual public consumption: 22 %. The USA spends 7 % (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

³ A family with "high-bracket income" has the means to support another family while maintaining their living standard at a comparatively high level (Barnombudsmannen, 2010).

⁴ Around 86 % of women become mothers in Sweden, which is higher than many other European countries (Sobotka, 2004).

⁵ Right-wing governments led the country from 1976 to 1982, from 1991 to 1994, and from 2006 to the present. During World War II, a government consisting of left- and right-wing political parties was in charge.

⁶ Naturally, this chapter does not aim to be comprehensive, as entire books (i.e., see Lundqvist, 2011) have been written about Swedish family policy and even those books leave information out (Haas, 2012). However, it is the aim of this chapter to provide a coherent basic understanding of Sweden's family policies and their influences.

Historical, Socioeconomic, and Political Context

In the nineteenth century, Sweden was one of the poorest nations in Europe, and a large proportion of the population sought a better future in North America. Emigration, high infant mortality, and decreasing fertility rates alarmed the ruling classes, and several political reforms were implemented and laws passed to secure the population stock. For instance, a law was passed in 1900 that prohibited women factory workers from returning to work earlier than 4 weeks after childbirth, with the aim being to provide some time off for the mother, as well as to help decrease infant mortality by trying to increase breastfeeding. The contraceptive law of 1910 prohibited sales of and information about contraceptives, but in 1938, the Swedish government repealed the law because it was not effective. Fertility rates continued to decline, and in the 1930s, Sweden had the lowest fertility rates in the world – a problem that came to engage all political parties, intellectuals, and debaters (Hatje, 1974; Hoem & Hoem, 1997). Other laws still in effect today from the 1930s include the prohibition of dismissing employed women due to marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth and free childbirth services and health care for mothers and children.

The nation prospered after World War II. Sweden grew from one of the poorest countries in Europe to a strong, vibrant nation with its commodities, industries, and infrastructure, all enabling the production and sales of necessities to a war-struck Europe (Therborn, 2004). Prewar plans to foster birth rates and public health through universal reforms that supported childbearing and families with dependent children were expanded in the postwar era of affluence, constituting the foundation of the Swedish welfare state and contemporary family policies. During that time period, several reforms were introduced that are still in effect today – reforms intended to facilitate childbearing, combining paid work with caring for a child to promote public health through free school meals and a general child allowance (1940s), 3 months of paid maternity leave for all mothers (1955) with remuneration based on the mother's previous earnings (from 1963), the introduction of the parental leave program (1970s), and the creation of available and high-quality childcare facilities at a reasonable cost for working parents (1970s and 1980s) (Björnberg, 2004; Hatje, 1974; Ohlander, 1994). These reforms laid the foundation for and are part of current family policies.

Historically, Sweden has led the way for many countries regarding family policy issues. Sweden has a history of passing reforms that were radical in their day, such as the abortion law of the mid-1970s that granted pregnant women the right to abortion up to the 18th week, the divorce law of 1974 that permitted divorce without a particular reason and without mutual consent, changing parental leave insurance in 1974, granting fathers the same rights as mothers to remuneration for leave from work to care for a child, and completely banning any person from using corporal punishment (1979). More recently, laws allowing homosexuals to adopt and receive insemination were passed as well as legalizing same-sex marriage.

State of Research on Families

Sweden greatly invests in family research, and politicians use that research to inform their policy decisions. In 2009, Sweden spent 3.59 % of their GDP on research and development, making it second only to Finland in spending money on research among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (URL 5).⁷ Family policy research is conducted in multiple arenas,

⁷ In 2009, Finland spent 4 % of its GDP on research and development, while the USA spent 2.8 %.

such as in the social sciences, medicine, and the public health fields. In doing so, the Swedish government puts forth effort in promoting and preventing children's and parents' health and well-being, while at the same time broadening the public's knowledge about the topic.

Family Policies Targeting Marriage

Swedish Family Law is a composite of three groups of laws, which are based around the Code relating to Parents, Guardians, and Children [Föräldrabalken], the Marriage Code [Äktenskapsbalk], and the Joint Homes Act [Lag om sambors gemensamma hem 1987]. The Marriage Code supports the rights of couples who are married, and the Joint Homes Act supports the rights of cohabiters (Björnberg, 2001). These codes are quite similar as marriage and cohabiting unions are widely accepted in Sweden (Duvander, 1999). Whether from married or cohabiting families, about three out of four children 0–18 years old grow up with both original (biological or adoptive) parents (URL 1). Of those who live together, Sweden is about evenly split between those who marry and those who cohabit, making it the country with the highest percentage of cohabiting unions (Kiernan, 2004). Many Swedish couples will cohabit, have their first child, and then marry, in that order (Björnberg, 2001; Duvander 1999). For example, according to Statistics Sweden in 2011, while the average age for marriage is 33.1 for women and 35.6 for men (URL 6), the average age of having their first child is 28.9 for mothers and 31.5 for fathers (URL 7). Despite Sweden's acceptance of cohabiting unions, marriages last longer (Duvander, 2008). In fact, of those couples with children, cohabiting couples are almost twice as likely to separate/divorce as married couples (URL 8).

If parents do divorce or separate,⁸ Swedish social services try to engage the parents in discussing custody and contact issues. For the most part, children who reside primarily with one parent meet regularly with the nonresident parent, encouraging divorced parents to share custody and childcare tasks, thereby creating a divorced-nuclear family (Barnombudsmannen, 2010; Eriksson, 2002; URL 9). Although this is a newer phenomenon, the sharing of parental responsibilities is made easier for most couples since 85 % of all separated/divorced parents live within 50 km (approximately 31 miles) from the nonresident parent. Of children with divorced or separated parents, two-thirds reside mainly with the mother, around one-fifth primarily with the father, and one-fifth spend an equal amount of time living with their mother and father (Barnombudsmannen). Five to eight percent of Swedish children live in families consisting of their biological/adoptive parents and a stepfather or stepmother (URL 1).

Same-sex marriages have been legal in Sweden for several years, but as of May 1, 2009, same-sex couples were granted the right to marry either with the civil authorities or in a religious institution (i.e., church), so long as the religious leader agreed to marry the couple. At the end of 2011, around 4,000 women and 3,400 men were registered as official partners in Sweden, while around 2,500 women and 1,700 men were in same-sex marriages (URL 10). Around 1,300 children reside in homosexual families (URL 1). Same-sex marriage is accepted by the mainstream culture, although LGBT individuals may still face adversity from varying fringe groups.

⁸ For parents with dependent children, there is a trial period of 6 months after first filing for divorce. For the divorce to go through, one of the parties has to send a written confirmation to the authorities six months after the initial filing.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence was historically viewed as an unseen issue that researchers knew little about, but starting in the early 1980s, Sweden saw a boom of information and help for women who had experienced domestic violence. Women seeking refuge could find sanctuary in the shelters that sprang up throughout Sweden, while newspapers highlighted the dramatic impact of domestic violence (Peter, 2006). In 1993, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs created a Government Commission to address the domestic violence issue (Nylen & Heimer, 2000). A year after its creation, the Commission took a reactive approach to the current problem by recommending and securing the funds for the National Center for Battered and Raped Women which provided medical and social services, as well as police protection and legal support to battered women (Peter, 2006). Swedish family policy acknowledges the gendered bias of domestic abuse, as primarily women are victims of abuse (Eriksson, 2002).

In 1997–1998, a new proactive bill was passed called the “Violence Against Women” bill, which brought about a new penal code offense called the “gross violation of a woman’s integrity,” reflecting the state’s commitment to gender equality. This meant that in addition to charging any accused offender with any domestic charge, such as assault, coercion, sexual molestation, or sexual exploitation, the courts could also charge the accused with a gross violation of a woman’s integrity, thus not only protecting the woman physically, but also protecting her individual integrity. Attacking from these fronts, the Commission successfully made available needed funded agencies to help women reestablish themselves and move forward with their lives, while publically condemning domestic violence (Peter, 2006). During this same time, the World Health Organization [WHO] (1997) declared that violence against women is a health and human rights issue that needs to be dealt with decisively. Sweden is fighting against domestic violence (Edin & Högberg, 2002), viewing violence against women as a social problem (Eriksson, 2002) that needs to be tackled from multiple arenas so that each person’s health and human rights are fully protected (Peter, 2006).

Around the world, on average, one in four women has been sexually or physically abused by a man (Edin & Högberg, 2002). In a survey on around 15,000 people in Sweden, during the course of 1 year, around 2 % of the women and 3 % of men said that they had been physically abused one or more times.⁹ Two-thirds of the women said they knew the abuser, while a little more than a quarter of the men stated they knew the abuser. Not surprisingly then, more women said they had been abused in their home (31 % compared to 12 % of the men) (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2011).¹⁰

Family Policies Regarding Child Rearing and Family-Work Balance

Swedish family policies aim to support individuals rather than families, so as to create a more gender-equal society; therefore, women are encouraged to seek employment, while men are encouraged to contribute their fair share of housework (Bergman & Hobson, 2002). In Sweden, women and men participate in the paid labor force in near equal numbers (Statistics Sweden, 2011), and the wage gap is among the lowest in the world (Peter, 2006). In fact, Sweden strives for its citizens to be fully employed so that the individual is financially self-reliant (Haas, 1996). Additionally, women

⁹ However, other studies looking at people’s lifetime abuse rates show much higher numbers: for example, in a study on 2,755 separated or divorced women in Sweden, 35 % stated that they at some point were abused either through physical violence, threatening, or sexual violence (Lundgren et al., 2002).

¹⁰ Women tend to report abuse less often than men because more often than men, they know their abuser (Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2011).

constitute a majority of those enrolled in higher education (The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education and Statistics Sweden, 2007), with around half of all government seats being occupied by women (Peter, 2006). Over the past 20 years, women have decreased the time they spend on household chores and caring for children and relatives, and now, they spend more time on work in the paid labor market. Alternatively, men's time on paid work has decreased, and their time spent on unpaid work has increased slightly. In total, although both men and women work and help with household tasks, women spend approximately 45 min more per day on unpaid household duties (Statistics Sweden, 2011).

To help create a more equal division of labor, the Swedish government has incentivized the sharing of parental roles (Daly, 2011). For example, in order to help reduce the work-family conflict, Sweden has provided its citizens with a generous parental leave package, as well as providing subsidized high-quality childcare (Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2012). Moreover, many businesses in Sweden have flexible work schedules, allow people to work from home, and do not typically schedule meetings in the early mornings and late afternoons so that parents can tend to their family, if needed. In fact, parents overwhelmingly stated that if they had to tend to family affairs, then it was not a problem to refuse working evenings, weekends, or overtime, and many said they were not even asked to do so if the employer knew they had small children (Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2011). By implementing these family policies that affect both public and private lives, Sweden has developed a welfare model where parents can better manage their career and their family (Andersson, 2008).

Parental Leave

Sweden has one of the most comprehensive parental leave programs in the world (Haas, 1996; Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2010). Wanting to create a gender-equal society, expand individual freedoms, and balance the family-work conundrum for both mothers and fathers (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Thomas & Hildingsson, 2009), parental leave was introduced in 1974. Sweden then became the first country in the world to allow both parents to take time off of work to care for their child, promoting men to increase their involvement in childcare and mothers to work in the paid labor market. Initially, the leave comprised of 6 months, but it has been augmented and extended further up to the present. From 1975 onwards, the parental leave days and remuneration could be used part time, thus enabling parents (who can afford it) to extend their period of leave. Parental leave is tied to previous earnings, but offers a low flat rate for those who did not work prior to having the child¹¹ (Bergnehr, 2008; Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). Parental leave permits the parents to take a maximum of 480 days off from work. The remuneration is tied to their previous earnings (the salary) for the first 390 days of leave and consists of a low flat rate for the last 90 days (in total for both parents). Parents are eligible to receive 80 % of their salary if they have either worked for 6 months prior to their child's birth or for 12 full months over the past 2 years¹² (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012). A person that has been away from work due to parental leave has the right to return either to their same or a comparable position, while receiving the same salary.

¹¹ At the present, the low flat rate for parents who did not work prior to having a child is 5,400 SEK (approx. \$840 USD) per month before tax. However, the government has proposed a raise to 6,750 SEK (approx. \$1,050 USD) per month, being introduced in January 2013.

¹² There is a cap of 440,000 SEK per year (approx. \$65,170 USD). Therefore, people earning a higher yearly salary than this will only be compensated during their parental leave at 80 % of this amount (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012). However, due to agreements between many unions and employers, the employers add remunerations to the insurance, which can give parents on leave more than 80% of their salary.

Swedish parental leave is particularly flexible. During the first 2 weeks after the birth of their child, both parents are entitled to parental leave so that they can help manage and be there for their new child (Fägerskiöld, 2008). After the first 2 weeks, only one parent may utilize parental leave at a time,¹³ but they are entitled to use their parental days until the child's first year at school.¹⁴ Additionally, parental leave can be used in different increments such as taking off of work in full, three-quarter, half, one-quarter, or one-eighth of a day (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012). Consequently, parents can choose who uses parental leave and for how long they use it for. However, 2 months out of the 390 days of the higher remuneration cannot be passed on to the other parent. These months were added to the insurance in two steps, in 1995 and in 2002, and are informally referred to as the “daddy months” since the political aim was to increase the fathers’ parental leave take-up.

Today Swedish fathers use 23 % of the parental leave days. Fathers who have a higher education take more parental leave than fathers with a lower education and vice versa for mothers (The Social Insurance Agency, 2011a). Although the fathers’ take-up could be seen as rather high compared with other countries, the discussion in Sweden continues on how to achieve a more even division between mothers and fathers. In 2008, the gender equality bonus was introduced, aimed as an incentive for parents to divide the insurance more equally. For the first 390 days of parental leave, parents can receive a 50 SEK (approx. \$7.40 USD) bonus for every parental leave day they use that is over the two nontransferable months (the “daddy days”) (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012).¹⁵ However, at the present, few parents have claimed the bonus, and it appears to have had a minimal impact on fathers taking more parental leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2012).

Work-Family Balance

For the past four decades Swedish family policies have actively promoted the dual-income, dual-carer model (Allard, Haas, & Hwang, 2011). Sweden has promoted this model by encouraging gender equality through education and paid work (i.e. financial independence), while promoting both parents to share household tasks and child rearing responsibilities. In part, the political goal has been realized – women attend higher education to the same extent as men and work almost as many hours in the paid labor market. Of parents who have children under the age of 18, 91 % of fathers and 81 % of mothers are employed (Barnombudsmannen, 2010), and women have some of the lowest wage gaps in the world, receiving 94 cents on the dollar compared to men, after controlling for occupation, education, age, and working hours (Ekberg, 2008). In 1979, the right for parents with preschool children to decrease their work by 25 % was introduced and is still in effect. This reform helps parents to balance the duties of everyday life, that is, paid work and caring for children. About half of the mothers with preschool children decrease their working hours in paid labor due to this reform, while only a small percentage of men do (Statistics Sweden, 2009); therefore, we can still see a gender difference despite the family policies. But Swedish family policies do support families in combining

¹³When the child is under a year old, parents may take “double days” up to 30 days, where both parents are using parental leave at the same time. However, once the child is a year or more, only one parent can use parental leave at a time (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012).

¹⁴As of January 1, 2013, parents have to use 80 % of their parental leave days by the time the child is four years old (or they lose those days) but are permitted to use the remaining 20 % until the child is 12 years old.

¹⁵For example, if one parent took 160 days of parental leave and then the other parent took 70 days of leave, that family would receive a 50 SEK per day bonus for 10 days (bonus=500 SEK), as the first 60 days were guaranteed to that parent to begin with. Since you can only receive the bonus for 390 days of parental leave, if all days were used and split completely evenly (195 days per parent), the maximum bonus would be (195 days – 60 guaranteed parental leave days) * 50 SEK = a bonus of 6,750 SEK, (approx. \$1,050 USD).

paid work and parenthood. For instance, the parental leave insurance, the right to work part time when children are young, the right for parents to take time off from work to care for sick children with governmental remunerations compensating loss of salary, and providing subsidized and available childcare are all ways family policies support the work-family balance¹⁶ (Andersson, 2008; Allard et al., 2011).

Sweden offers subsidized childcare when children are between 1 and 6 years old and free public schooling, including university studies. Not only are childcare programs subsidized, but each child is guaranteed a spot in a childcare setting (Daly, 2011). If parents do not want to use childcare, municipalities can offer a child home care allowance that entitles one parent to stay home with their pre-school child. If families take the child home care allowance, the family would receive a tax-exempt payment of up to approximately \$387 USD per month to provide childcare for their child. However, very few parents have done this because the money they receive does not compete with their salary from full-time employment. Also, this reform has been criticized for encouraging mostly the unemployed and low-paid women to stay at home to care for their household and children. This runs counter to the gender equality policies that promote the participation of mothers in the paid labor market (Duvander, 2008).

Children's Rights

Several countries in Western Europe, including Sweden, view children as their own person with their own rights (Daly, 2011). In 1979, Sweden became the first country in the world to completely ban corporal punishment. Known as the *aga-law*, the ban aimed and later achieved its goals of reducing the use of physical punishment towards children, offering parents and professionals a set of acceptable parenting practices, and detecting child abuse more quickly (Durrant, 1999). To further help ensure children's rights, the Swedish government has created a law entitled the Code relating to Parents, Guardians, and Children (Föräldrabalken) (1983), which states in Chap. 6 paragraph 1 that "children are entitled to care, security, and a good upbringing. Children are to be treated with respect for their person and individuality and may not be subjected to physical punishment or any other injurious or humiliating treatment." Children's policies in Sweden are aimed at creating equality between children by ensuring that they receive proper health care, adequate housing, good parenting, suitable education, and assistance if they have a special need (Haas, 1996).

Children living in Sweden have a right to receive a strong education throughout their lives. From the year that the child turns three, children receive up to 15 hours of free early childhood education (förskola) per week (URL 11). Moreover, Sweden's childcare programs are said to be of high quality, due in part to considerable policy efforts over the last 40 years (Andersson, 2008; Andersson, Duvander, & Hank, 2004). In 2010, with these policies in place, 83 % of children between 1 and 5 years old were enrolled in childcare in Sweden (almost 95 % of all 4–5 years were enrolled) (URL 12). These Swedish policies not only make it possible for all young children to receive a high-quality early childhood education, but also serve as a backdrop to Sweden's social-democratic welfare system by promoting the family's fertility rates, as well as the dual-earner model and therefore encouraging

¹⁶The municipality receives government funding to keep the childcare fees down. The fees to the families are wage-/income-related, but the state directives/regulations are that a family/household should never pay more than 1,260 SEK/month (\$188 USD/month) for the first child in childcare, 840 SEK/month (\$125 USD/month) for the second child, and 420 SEK/month (\$63 USD/month) for the third childcare and never more than 3 % of the household income for the first child, 2 % for the second child, and 1 % for the third child. The fees for children in after-school childcare are lower. The maximum fee the municipality can charge is 2 % of the household's income and 840 SEK/month (\$120 USD/month) for the first child and 1 % and 420 SEK/month (\$63 USD/month) for the second and the third child (URL 13).

gender equality (Andersson). In fact, in the United Nations Children's Fund of 2008, Sweden ranked first in early childhood education and care (Bremberg, 2009). Additionally, Sweden also has high rates of youth independence, where, for instance, affordable and available public housing and free higher education have enabled an early departure from the parental home (Therborn, 2004). Moreover, parents are obliged to financially provide for their child up to the age of 18, or 21 if they are still in high school.¹⁷

Swedish children's rights expand into divorce as well, as these family policies state that the courts must do what is in the best interest of the child and that the child's views should be considered (i.e., for living arrangements). Joint custody is the current interpretation of what is typically considered in the child's best interest. The Code relating to Parents, Guardians, and Children adheres to divorced parental collaboration, aiming to create a divorced-nuclear family paradigm (Eriksson, 2002). However, failure to include the child's views is shown in investigations of matters concerning custody and the child's living arrangements after divorce/separation (Dahlstrand, 2004; Eriksson & Näsman, 2008; Rejmer, 2003). In 2006, the child's right to express his or her views was emphasized in the Code relating to Parents, Guardians, and Children, but there is no indication of an increase in cases where children are allowed to state their views in family law proceedings (Röbäck, 2011). In addition, many children with divorced parents appear to face recurrent conflicts between the parents, which in some cases leads to the child and residential parent (most often the mother) not receiving the entitled child support by the nonresidential parent (i.e., the father) (The Social Insurance Agency, 2011b).

Family Policies Supporting Families at Risk

During the past century, Swedish family policies have been centered on universal health-promoting services, the goal of which is to decrease social stratification and to promote the prosperity of each individual and the nation as a whole. A general child allowance,¹⁸ wage-related childcare fees, free education, free health and dental care for children below 20 years of age, free healthcare check-ups at child health centers, free counselling for parents, student health services including vaccinations for school children, free parental cooperation talks offered by the Social Services in case of divorce or separation, and free child and adolescent psychiatry are all important parts of the Swedish welfare support system for families. In addition, families with special needs can receive aid for in-home care of children or adult family members who suffer from long-term illnesses as well as handicap benefits and disability pensions. Sweden's family policies also protect children if their parent's die before they turn 18 years old by providing them with a children's pension (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012). If a child's parent dies, then the child is guaranteed a minimum of 1,467 SEK/month (approx. \$200 USD),¹⁹ which consists of a children's pension based on the perished parent's pension (i.e., previous earnings and/or additional governmental support for children who receive a very low pension) (The Swedish Pensions Agency, 2012).

¹⁷ Swedish high school ends at age 19 for most students.

¹⁸ All children up to the age of 16 receive the general child allowance of 1,050 SEK/month, around \$145 USD, tax free. This is done so as to help even out the financial inequalities between those with children and those without children. In addition, parents with two or more children receive a large family supplement, the amount depending on the number of children. A family with two children receives 2,250 SEK per month (approx. \$330 USD), while a family with three children receives in total 3,754 SEK/month (approx. \$517 USD), with four children 5,814 SEK/month (approx. \$800 USD), and with five children 8,114 SEK/month (approx. \$1,118 USD). When the child turns 16, the child allowance is transferred to the student allowance for children attending high school (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2010).

¹⁹ Many children receive more than this amount, as it is based on the parents' pension.

Children and Poverty

Physical and mental well-being among Swedish children and adults are high by international comparisons (Lindgren & Lindblad, 2010; Save the Children, 2010). Events such as family dissolution, unemployment, and death may push families into poverty, but for most Swedish families, financial hardship is temporary (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012). However, close to 10 % of all children in Sweden live in underprivileged areas, characterized by having a low mean income, high unemployment rate, and low parental educational levels (Statistics Sweden, 2007). The majority of the disadvantaged families are comprised of single mothers and/or are of foreign origin (Rädda Barnen, 2012). For example, among children residing with single parents, 28 % live in poverty compared to 9 % of children living with two parents. Among children of foreign origin, 32 % live in families with low-bracket incomes (Rädda Barnen). These percents are important since those family structures are overly represented among the chronically poor (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012).

Single mothers and immigrant families also have a higher propensity to experience health issues compared to coupled mothers and nuclear families of Swedish origin (Fritzell, Ringbäck Weitoft, Fritzell, & Burström, 2007; Ringbäck Weitoft, 2003; Ringbäck Weitoft, Haglund, & Rosen, 2000; Ringbäck Weitoft, Haglund, Hjern, & Rosen, 2003). In fact, about 20 % of single mothers depend on social benefits (Stranz & Wiklund, 2011); therefore, it may not be hard to understand that besides the elderly, the parents with dependent children (single parents in particular) rely the most heavily on Sweden's welfare system (Statistics Sweden, 2012). However, Swedish family policies have resulted in higher rates of employed mothers and thus lower levels of poverty among single mothers than in, for example, Great Britain (Burström et al., 2010; Fritzell et al., 2007; Statistics Sweden, 2012). Still, for many single mothers, financial pressure is high.

One corrective measure to help children rise out of poverty is to provide them with a good education, as successful school achievement tends to affect well-being positively (Gustafsson et al., 2010). However, Sweden, over the past 15 years, has witnessed an increase in the proportion of children who do not reach the established educational goals (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009). This is especially true for children residing and attending schools in disadvantaged areas, where they experience a 50 % higher risk of school failure, as compared to children from higher socioeconomic status areas (Statistics Sweden, 2007). Additionally, children in out-of-home care, such as institutional or foster care, are also particularly vulnerable; they have high risks of physical and mental health problems and school failure (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2012; The National Board of Health and Welfare & Swedish National Institute of Public Health, 2012).

Single-Parent Families

In the beginning of the twentieth century, laws were passed to secure the rights and living conditions of children born out of wedlock and children in residential care. Local authorities were obliged to establish a children's welfare board, with child welfare officers who inspected foster homes and secured the rights of children born out of wedlock (Bergman, 2011). For children of unwed mothers, the welfare officer was made responsible for establishing who the father was, seeing to it that the father paid the mother child support, and ensuring that the mother took sufficient care of the child. In 1938, a law was passed that gave single mothers financial support from the state in case the father did not pay (Bergman, 2003). In practice, this system is still in effect. Current policies state that children who live only or most of the time with one parent are entitled to child support from the nonresident parent (most often the father). In case child support is not paid, the resident parent is entitled to maintenance support paid by the state: 1,273 SEK/month (approximately \$170 USD) (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2008). The standard for maintenance support is comparatively low, and the state

has neglected to raise the amount over the years. However, the general child allowance, housing allowance for families with low disposable income, and other universal benefits (such as free health and dental care for children, free education, wage-related and subsidized childcare) add to the financial support the state provides – support that is of great importance to families with dependent children and single parents in particular.

Child Welfare

The Swedish child welfare system (i.e., the Social Services), is obliged to protect children from harm and abuse and to support families. The Social Services Act (SoL) and the Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (LVU) regulate these services, including residential and foster care and non-institutional measures, but the local authorities are in charge of deciding which services and measures to prioritize (Östberg, 2010). As previously mentioned, children in out-of-home care are a vulnerable group with high risks of failure at school, health problems as children and in adult life, criminality, and dependence on social benefits (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2012; Sundell, Egelund, Andréa Löffholm, & Kaunitz, 2007).

The number of children in care outside the parental home declined steadily during the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, mainly young children lived in foster or residential care, but this has changed, and today, mostly older children are in out-of-home care (Bergman, 2011). At present, around 25,000 children, 1 % of the 0- to 20-year-olds, lives in out-of-home care, for longer or shorter periods, with foster care being the most common. Besides out-of-home care, around 28,000 children are subjects of noninstitutional care provided by the Social Services. Such care comprises structured care programs, personal support, contact person/family, and treatment (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011).

Institutional and noninstitutional care under the Social Services Act and Care of Young Persons Act are interventions that follow report and investigation. Most children are subjected to an investigation after a report is filed by a professional (such as teacher, police, social worker) or other person (such as family member, relative, neighbor). Reported and investigated children often live with single parents (i.e., mothers) and/or in households with low disposable income (Östberg, 2010; Sundell et al., 2007). The reason for reporting a child to the Social Services may concern a young person's behavior (e.g., antisocial, criminality, self-harm) and/or suspicion of neglect and/or abuse in the home (Sundell et al.,).

But a report does not necessarily lead to an investigation—on the contrary, many do not. A recent study on child welfare assessments and decisions shows that an investigation was more likely to be undertaken if the child was a girl and in cases where the report came from a professional. Parental incapacity to care for the child (i.e., parental antisocial behavior, drug or alcohol addiction, and recurring conflicts) was not a strong reason for initiating an investigation, but antisocial and self-harming behavior of the youngster was (Östberg, 2010). Unclear definitions of a child at risk and when the risk may be of such a degree that interventions are required are a problem that may lead to children and parents not getting the support they need. Estimations of the child's needs and risks vary across agencies and social workers, and in viewing the child's development, the risks are narrowly defined and focused on the current situations, which neglect long-term solutions. The result is reactive child welfare measures, with a focus on acute interventions and less on providing proactive support (Östberg, 2010; Sundell et al., 2007).

Furthermore, studies suggest that investigations often exclude the child's and his/her parents' wider social network (i.e., potential or real support). There are also indications that children and parents are not being included in the investigation process to the required extent, in accordance with the right to participate as stated in the Social Services Act (Sundell et al., 2007; see also Eriksson, 2009).

In addition, there is a need to improve the support given to children in residential care or foster care when they make the transition to adulthood and no longer are entitled to child welfare services (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2011). To sum up, although Sweden is referred to as a country where the children have many rights, there are important improvements to be made in the field of child welfare.

Discussion and Recommendations

Swedish family policies aim to create individual (economic) freedom and a gender-equal society where children are granted similar opportunities regardless of their economic, social, or cultural background. Sweden has a history of universal benefits and health-promoting policies, providing a social security system that supports parents and children. In short, like previous reviews have found (e.g., Duvander, 2008; Haas, 1996), Sweden is a good example of what family policy can accomplish for the individual.

However, the Swedish system has its flaws, and some political initiatives have not (yet) gained the desired effect. For instance, family policies aiming to achieve a gender-equal society in terms of women and men participating to the same extent in the paid labor market and taking an equal share in domestic duties are, after four decades, still not fulfilled. Indeed, we have witnessed large changes in gender roles and women's and men's family practices, but still, men work more hours in the paid labor market and have higher salaries than women. Also, mothers do more for their children, relatives, and household compared to fathers.

When it comes to parental leave, introduced in 1974, fathers take no more than 23 % of the days, despite recurring campaigns and reforms promoting a more gender-equal division. A big question has been why? Previous research suggests several influencing aspects. One is family economics: most fathers earn more than the mother, and therefore, financially, it makes more sense for mothers to use more parental leave. Increasing the ceiling of the salary cap may therefore encourage higher income fathers to utilize more parental leave, although at the present, the highly educated fathers are actually those who use most parental leave days. Another explanation is that fathers may feel pressured to continue working instead of taking (more) leave due to employers' attitudes towards gendered roles. Much research indicates that notions of the father as the main breadwinner and the mother as the primary parent continue to be evident and influence men's and women's parental leave take-up. For instance, maternal gatekeeping tends to occur partly because of the strong social pressure to be a good, attentive mother (and woman) (e.g., Allard et al., 2011; Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). Other studies suggest that due to social norms on how fathers and mothers should behave, men have the possibility to opt out of parental responsibilities, while mothers do not (e.g., Bekkengen, 2002). Thus, traditional attitudes towards the genders continue to influence family practices in Sweden.

Further work to change gendered perceptions could be vital in creating an environment where mothers and fathers feel they are supported and encouraged to divide paid labor and domestic duties equally. A recurring discussion in Swedish politics is whether to extend the "daddy months" to further encourage fathers to increase their parental leave take-up. After 40 years of promoting an equal division of parental leave, perhaps this would be the most efficacious incitement.

There are more signs of Sweden not being the gender-equal society it strives for. After divorce or separation, most children have the mother as the primary carer and sole breadwinner, although the number of children staying an equal amount of time with their mother and father has increased from previous decades. While the majority of single mothers do work, many struggle financially and do not always get the child support that they are entitled to receive. In addition, being a single mother increases the risk of physical and mental health problems. Thus, there tends to be a great need to develop Swedish family policies to better support single mothers and their children.

Swedish laws and regulations promote the involvement of both parents in their child's life, regardless of whether the parents live together or not. Very seldom is sole custody given to one of the parents in

case of divorce or separation. This is sometimes problematic, for instance, in cases when the father has been physically and/or mentally abusing his partner (i.e., the mother). The societal emphasis on the importance of the father (e.g., the standard procedure of joint custody) gives the father the right to an equal part in parental decisions about the child and the right to spend time with the child, regardless of his (previous) actions towards the mothers and, in some cases, regardless of the child's wishes (see Eriksson, 2002). This suggests that societal support to families (fathers, mothers, and children) that experience domestic violence could be further improved and developed, and children's views in matters concerning custody and living arrangements should be increasingly acknowledged. Having said that, domestic abuse appears to be far less common in Sweden than in many other parts of the world, as measures have been taken over the past 30 years to bolster the victims of domestic abuse, and the child's right to express his or her opinion is emphasized in Swedish law (i.e., the Code on Parenthood and the Social Services Act). Clearly, however, more can be done to set laws and regulations into practice.

This also goes for policies aiming to reduce the number of families that experience poverty. Despite the social-democratic model with an extensive welfare system, many children and parents face poverty, and we witness an increase, especially among single parent families and families of foreign origin. Swedish labor market and family policies promote dual-earner families. Regardless of the economic aid and the social services families receive, the unemployed, parents with lower educations, and single parents all face greater adversities compared to dual-earner families, leading some researchers to call for greater safety nets to be put in place (e.g., Bull & Mittelmark, 2009). Important for future research is to widen our understanding of the most appropriate and effective support for these (different) groups of families, including the perspectives of children as well as those of the mothers and fathers.

One of the ways to help reduce poverty is to provide all children with a quality education throughout their entire childhood. School failure increases the risk of physical and mental health problems for children and in adult life (Gustafsson et al., 2010), but during the past 15 years, Sweden has witnessed an increase in the proportion of children who do not reach the established educational goals (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009). Policies that strengthen the school system and student health services appear to be vital in promoting children's health and future prospects. It is also of great importance to widen our understandings of the schooling situation for children subjected to child welfare measures (e.g., investigations, residential or foster care) and how it can be improved (Eriksson, Bruno, & Näsman, 2011; Hedén, Höjer, & Brunnberg, 2011). In addition, in order to make the needed policy changes to further support families and children at risk, more research is required on social workers' as well as on children's and parents' views and experiences of the child welfare system and on how local and national policies influence the child welfare agencies (i.e., consequences for children and parents) (Sundell et al., 2007).

Conclusions

Sweden's family policies are a huge undertaking, affecting all aspects of the family's life. Over the past 40 years, Sweden has developed and tweaked its family policies to try to make family life more equal, while stressing each person's individual rights. The Swedish model emphasizes the dual-earner, dual-carer family; therefore, families with only one salary (or none) and/or with only one carer generally struggle compared to those who follow the Swedish model. Some challenges for the Swedish welfare system are to reduce the number of families that experience poverty, to further support families at risk, and to better take into account the views of children. There are also rising educational issues, as more children are failing at school. Despite these shortcomings, Sweden has helped lead the world in family policy and is often viewed as a model to emulate.

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