

The International Corner

Work and Family In Sweden

by Linda Haas, Professor of Sociology, Indiana University-Indianapolis, USA.



Linda Haas

Bio: Linda Haas earned a PhD in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is Professor of Sociology and Adjunct Professor of Women's Studies at Indiana University in Indianapolis, teaching courses on gender, family policy and families and work. She has received the Indiana University President's Award for Excellence in Teaching and the Bynum Award for Excellence in Mentoring. Her research interests focus on the linkages between gender, family and work in post-industrialized societies, with a focus on Sweden. She holds an honorary doctorate in social sciences from the largest university in Scandinavia, Gothenburg University. Books include *Equal Parenthood and Social Policy* (SUNY Press, 1992), *Organizational Change and Gender Equity* (with P. Hwang and G. Russell, Sage, 2000), and *Families and Social Policy* (with S. Wisensale) (Haworth, 2006). She has published articles in *Gender & Society*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Family Relations*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Community, Work & Family*, *Sex Roles*, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* and the *Review of Policy Research*, and has chapters in several edited monographs, including the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Women's Issues Worldwide*, *Work and Life Integration*, *Equity in the Workplace*, *Families in Multicultural Perspective*, *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, *Changing Men*, *Parental Leave and Childcare*, and *Men, Work and Family*. Currently, she is collaborating with Philip Hwang and Karin Allard on analyzing fathers' experience with work-family conflict in Sweden, and has recently completed in collaboration with Philip Hwang two new studies on Swedish companies' and unions' responsiveness to fathers at the workplace, particularly toward fathers' taking parental leave, replicating earlier work on these topics. She is active in the Parental Leave Researchers' Network based in the U.K. and has worked together with Graeme Russell of Macquarie University in Australia in promoting the integration of working and caring in Australian businesses.

The overall goal of Swedish social policy is to create a dual-earner/dual-carer society in which both men and women engage in paid work and caregiving and where gender equality and children's well-being are important cultural values. The Social Democrats have been in power the majority of the time since Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme stated this goal as a declaration to the United Nations in 1968. However, even when the Social Democrats have lost power, progress toward the dual-earner/dual-carer

society has not stalled significantly because of widespread agreement with this goal. This political consensus has developed over time, partly due to women's success in taking almost half of Sweden's Parliament and cabinet ministry seats. If the Social Democrat–led coalition wins the next election in 2010, Sweden will see its first female prime minister.

Women encouraged to be breadwinners

Swedish women are encouraged to see themselves as family breadwinners, both to be economically independent and to ensure children's economic security. Women's salaries are taxed separately from that of their partners, and employment rights are strongly enforced. Labor force participation rates of mothers are about the same as for other women, and women's pay is more equal to men's than perhaps anywhere else in the world. The Moderate-led coalition that has been in power since 2006 would like to see women have more of a choice whether or not to work for pay. Accordingly, they reinstated a "childrearing allowance" of \$415 a month to families in which one parent stays home. (The allowance can also be used to pay private child-care providers.) This allowance is likely to be abolished if the Social Democrat–led coalition returns to power.

Sweden's labor market is more sex-segregated than most others in developed nations. Women tend to fill jobs with reduced hours (i.e., 30 hours) that relate to health care, education, and social work in the large public sector, whereas men are more likely to work full time in the private business sector. (This hours gap, however, is shrinking.) Since Swedish women earn good salaries—partly because of union contracts that grant equal pay for comparable work—they may be less tempted to take a nontraditional career path compared to women in other countries where highly paid jobs are traditionally occupied by men. Swedish women are also reluctant to put themselves in employment situations where work is less flexible and the organizational culture is still less family-supportive than it is in the public sector. Although policy makers have expressed concern about labor market segregation and enacted measures to combat this (e.g., offering students priority access in education that is not traditional for their gender), little progress has been made.

Government policies encourage parent-provided child care

For mothers to retain a permanent attachment to the labor market and to simultaneously support children's welfare, the government provides parents with highly paid parental leave for the child's first year of life, unpaid leave until a child is 18 months, paid leave to care for sick children, and the right to reduce daily work hours from 8 to 6 (with an attendant drop in pay). The government also guarantees high-quality municipal child care at age 1 for about \$200 per child per month. Swedish child care is often rated as being of high quality, and the percentage of children covered by public child care from ages 1 to 6 is typically the highest in the world.

In 1974, Sweden became the first country to offer paid parental leave to fathers. Parents enjoy up to 13 months of parental leave, with at least 80% of regular pay. To encourage fathers to take leave, 2 months are reserved for each parent, with the rest to be negotiated. The Moderate-led government elected in 2006

raised the income ceiling on leave benefits, which ensures that fathers with higher incomes get a high proportion of their pay while on leave. They also instituted an “equality bonus” that offers tax rebates to couples who share parental leave more equally. These changes are likely to be kept by the Social Democrats if they return to power.

Fathers’ participation still lower than desired

Nearly all Swedish fathers take parental leave. Research shows that the more parental leave Swedish fathers take, the more active they are in childrearing after leaves are over. Swedish men appear to share child care responsibilities more than fathers elsewhere, and the image of hegemonic masculinity in society embraces fathers as caregivers. However, fathers take only 22% of all leave days available, which in Sweden is considered an important problem that needs to be solved. Parent education and widespread media coverage of fathers taking leave have been somewhat successful in encouraging fathers to take more leave. Neighboring Iceland offers more nontransferable parental leave to fathers than Sweden does and has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of leave fathers take. Swedish Social Democrats are interested in following Iceland’s example if they win the 2010 election.

Policy makers throughout Europe are concerned about low fertility rates that threaten economic productivity. Generous parental leave and child-care policies are often mentioned as the most important reasons why Sweden has a relatively high birth rate (1.9 children per woman). International authorities have rated Swedish children’s well-being as the best in the world.

Although Sweden has not yet reached its goal of a dual-earner/dual-carer society, it provides an intriguing example of a society that actively promotes the integration of work and family for both men and women and which strives to find a way to balance children’s well-being and the goal of gender equality without sacrificing either ideal.

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