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# Sweden's Parental Leave Insurance: A Policy Analysis of Strategies to Increase Gender Equality

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*Sweden's parental leave insurance is recognized internationally as the premiere parental leave policy addressing gender equality. Since 1974, when the policy changed from maternal to parental leave, policy makers have employed a variety of strategies including inducements, rules, and rights, to increase more gender-equal leave taking. Using Stone's (2006) strategy conceptualization, together with the gender systems approach (Crompton, 1999) which frames the gendered and socially constructed nature of earner/caregiver, this analysis examines how each of Sweden's incremental reforms in parental leave policy moved toward the goal of gender equality, with particular attention to father participation in caregiving.*

*Key words: parental leave, gender equality, policy analysis, caregiving, strategies*

Sweden's parental leave insurance is recognized internationally as the premiere parental leave policy design addressing gender equality (Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2010). Situated in the policy context of Sweden's social democratic welfare system (Esping-Anderson, 1990), gender equality in caregiving responsibilities and participation and wage equity in the labor economy is the main focus of the policy (Palley & Bowman, 2002). The parental leave policy strategies have recently become increasingly gender specific, targeted at increasing fathers' participation. Literature about Sweden's parental leave insurance abounds, but what is missing is a theoretical analysis of the approaches used to increase father participation such as Stone's (2006) strategies conceptualization. The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, June 2013, Volume XL, Number 2

purpose of this paper is to use Stone's strategy conceptualization, together with the gender systems approach, to analyze Sweden's incremental reforms in parental leave policy, particularly the emphasis on father participation in caregiving and moving closer to the government's goal of gender equality in caregiving and labor market participation.

### History of Sweden's Parental Leave Insurance

Sweden is a social democratic welfare regime, according to Esping-Anderson (1990). Three key factors define Esping-Anderson's (1990) categorization of a social democratic welfare regime: universalism, social equality, and decommodification. Universalism characterizes the access to benefits, namely that all citizens are endowed with the same access. Universalism is the opposite of means-tested, where access is determined by income. Esping-Anderson (1990) asserts that universalism is used to cultivate cross-class solidarity. Social equality means that all citizens have equal benefits. Decommodification is the principle that citizens can freely opt out of work when they consider it necessary, without potential loss of a job, income, or general welfare. Sweden's welfare system demonstrates all three social democratic regime characteristic factors.

#### *Policy Overview*

When the Swedish government, headed by the Social Democrats, introduced parental leave insurance in 1974, it replaced the standing maternity leave policy. The legislation provided parents financial benefits to take care of their children for up to six total months, to be divided as decided upon by the parents. The parental leave policy uses gender-neutral language, providing support for same-sex parents as well as heterosexual ones. These benefits, known as parental leave insurance, were then and continue to be determined by a parent's employment income at the time of leave taking, or a low-base benefit for those not working (Forsakringskassan, 2010). In the 1980s and 1990s several iterations of the parental leave legislation increased the amount of leave time to twelve months and brought the earnings-related benefits to the current level of 80% of the income for parents working at the time of leave taking.

While the policy's aim from the beginning was to provide the opportunity for time at work and time taking care of children for both men and women, by the early 1990s men were only taking about 10 percent of the allotted time (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). Starting in 1995, several major reforms attempted to increase men's leave taking. A Liberal Party Minister introduced the first of these reforms in 1994, reserving a month of the given leave time for each parent; it was coined the "daddy month" and "mommy month," inferring that the reform was created to make the father take at least one month (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). If the designated parent did not use the month, then it was forfeited (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). A second reserved month for each parent was added in 2002, bringing the total leave time to 16 months. In 2006, another reform passed, targeting high earning fathers' participation by raising the income ceiling for benefits. In 2008, a gender equality bonus introduced by the newly elected Conservative-Liberal coalition government gave a tax credit which was paid into parents' accounts. The effect is that the more evenly distributed the leave taking is between parents, the more tax credit the parents receive (Swedish Government Offices, 2010).

## Constructing Parental Leave Insurance as a Gender Equality Policy

### *A Problem Analysis*

Fundamentally, Sweden's parental leave insurance policy is not just about providing individual families with resources to make choices about employment and caregiving; it is a social policy with the defined aim of increasing gender equality for the Swedish people. The question remains: what problem is this policy is addressing? In other words, using Chamber's problem analysis framework (2008), what is the problem definition? What is the cause? What is the supporting ideology? And finally, who benefits and who suffers?

### *Problem Definition*

Although the problem's definition in the context of Sweden's family policy has been refined over time, there has

been one underlying theme: inequality is when women are primarily responsible for the care of children and leave the labor market, while men take care of the economic needs of children, but not the caregiving.

### *Cause of Problem*

Unequal responsibility for caregiving and labor market participation creates and perpetuates gendered parental care, and forces women to lose traction in the labor market (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). The cause of the problem is that without policy strategies that encourage fathers to leave the labor market, mothers do most of the leave taking. In addition, women who try to both work and raise children end up doing both, while the father's main task continues to be that of financial provider.

### *Supporting Ideology*

Haas (1992) asserts that Sweden's government developed the parental leave insurance policy based on three concerns: (1) worry over low birth rates; (2) the need to encourage women's employment; and (3) a desire to liberate men from gender stereotypes.

The issue of low birth rates was a reality for many countries in Western Europe, including Sweden during the earlier part of the twentieth century (Hajte, 1974 cited in Haas, 1992). Social scientists Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, who wrote the book *Crisis in the Population Question* in 1934, shaped the public discourse about population growth in Sweden and became the champions of state support for women in motherhood and employment (cited in Haas, 1992). The Population Committee of the Social Democratic Party created legislation supporting parents but also providing rights for Swedish children. The key point of the legislation seen from a historical perspective is the importance Sweden places on children. Haas (1992) argues that an attitude toward children as "precious national resources in need of economic security and nurturing by both parents" may be a prerequisite for the development of equal parenthood (p. 25).

Haas (1992) outlines how women's employment became a priority in Sweden in the 1960s. Although women were

granted employment rights in the 1930s, they often did not work outside the home. Not until the economic boom of the 1960s, when male workers could not fill the demand for labor, was women's full employment realized. Equality in the workforce came to the forefront as women joined men in the labor market. Since then, many changes in labor policies and government agencies have supported women and gender equality in the labor market. For example, in 1972 Social Democrats served on a special panel of the Advisory Council for Equality of Men and Women to oversee policies. Another example is a five-year plan designed by the government in 1988 to reduce sex segregation in the labor market.

The growing understanding of the need to liberate men from the rigid expectations of economic and social success developed out of Sweden's social and scientific discourse in the 1960's reexamining essentialist definitions of mother and father as pertaining to gender roles in caregiving and labor market participation (Haas, 1992). In addition to many labor policy changes, the ideological support for changing men's roles also gained traction, with a few men's centers opening to discuss the impact of traditional male stereotypes on men (Haas, 1992). This changing understanding of gender roles ultimately led the Swedish Parliament to appoint a family policy commission to investigate how to change the social policy to support fathers and mothers taking parental leave.

In addition to the concerns of low fertility, women's employment, and men's liberation from gender roles, Haas (1992) argues that additional political, ideological and economic factors played a role in the promotion of gender equality. The gender liberation movement was mainly organized by feminists (Crompton, 1999) but male activists also contributed (Haas, 1992). The political wave of change supporting gender equality in parenthood joined the ideological currents of thought, which provided the ongoing momentum.

During the last century, Sweden's Social Democratic party has dominated the political landscape, but gender equality has not been a one-party issue. Even Sweden's conservative parties have historically supported gender equality in parenthood. For example, in 1976 the most conservative party in the governing non-socialist coalition increased the commitment to

gender equality and specifically increased men's responsibility in the home (Haas, 1992). Although recently the Christian Democrats have attempted to return to more traditional roles by increasing advantages to women taking all the leave time (Duvander & Johansson, 2010), the trend has not changed from gender equality.

Gender inequality in parenthood is the problem Sweden's parental leave policy addresses. The cause of this problem is socially constructed gender roles that identify men with the labor market and not caregiving, and women primarily with caregiving and less with the labor market. These roles lead to fathers staying in the labor market and not taking parental leave, while women take most of the leave. Feminists and the social democratic party, as well as the economic conditions leading up to the policy changes, are the ideological forces behind the policy. Gender inequality in parenthood, specifically in the taking of parental leave, leads to the fathers' loss of caregiving opportunities; children miss the opportunity for primary care from their fathers, and mothers detach from the labor market.

## Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks help to analyze Sweden's incremental reforms in parental leave policy. The gender systems approach (Crompton, 1999) provides the needed lens to look at the gendered division of labor and gender relations. Second, a strategy analysis (Stone, 2006) assists in the identification of policy instruments Sweden used to target increasing paternal leave taking. These frameworks illuminate the ways Sweden's policy serves to change the behavior of parents with the goal of addressing the issue of gender equality in parents' responsibilities in child care and participation the labor market.

### *Gender Systems Approach*

What is paramount to Sweden's parental leave policy is the goal of gender equality; it is framed in a very particular way. In other words, the policy was not a way to just to pay women to stay home and care for children. The purpose of the policy from the beginning was to tie men to caregiving and

women to employment, by providing government support of time to care and time to work. Feminist policy analysts use a gender systems approach to elucidate the gender relations and gender division of labor embedded in policies. The gender systems approach (Crompton, 1999) helps to theoretically situate Sweden's parental leave policy and to conceptually represent the gender reconstruction embedded in the policy and its strategies.

A feminist analysis is relevant to the issue of gender equality in parenthood, as seen in the parental leave policies. However, feminists differ on how they approach the issue of work and motherhood (Ray et al., 2010). Several feminist welfare state scholars (Ellingsaeter, 1999; Pfau-Effinger, 1999; Sainsbury, 1999) in the last fifteen years, including Rosemary Crompton (1999), developed a gender systems approach through which to look at the formation of economic and social reproduction norms. A gender systems approach includes two central characteristics: "First, they recognize the complexity of the structuring of gender relations and the multiplicity of their origins; thus economic determinism is avoided. Secondly, gender essentialism is rejected, and gender relations are viewed as socially *constructed*" (Crompton, 1999, p. 204).

The gender systems approach posits a continuum of the gender division of labor (See Figure 1). In this continuum of the gender division of labor, there are several different pathways between the traditional male breadwinner and the female carer. For example, Pfau-Effinger (1999) suggests that Sweden can be described as moving from a 'male breadwinner/female carer' to a 'dual earner/state-carer' model. However, policies, political forces, and feminist political involvement change over time. With those changes come changes in gender relations and the gender division of labor. Gender systems theorists argue that the dual earner/dual carer model is "most likely to be associated with both gender equality and equality more generally" (Crompton, 1999, p. 208).

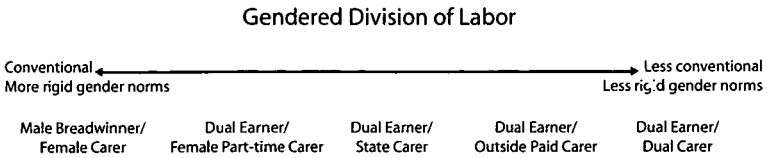
### *Stone's Solutions: Understanding the Policy Instruments*

Stone (2006) conceptualizes the ways policies affect change as strategies or solutions. These are ways "of exerting power, of getting others to do what they otherwise might not do" (Stone,



2006, p. 261). Stone frames this power dynamic as a relationship between the policy giver and the policy receiver. The most identifiable policy strategies that Sweden used in parental leave insurance policy are inducements, rights, and rules.

Figure 1. A Model of the Gendering of Earner and Carer (Adapted from Compton, 1999)



Inducements are penalties or rewards to act in ways that people might otherwise not choose. Stone (2006) asserts that one element in inducements is how the policy receiver and giver relationship changes depending on the kind of inducement. For example, if the inducement is a reward, then a bond is created when the policy receivers do what they are supposed to and the policy giver (the government) fulfills its promise. This fulfilled promise cultivates a sense of loyalty and mutual aid. In contrast, penalty inducements create an adversarial relationship between the giver and receiver, breeding resentment.

Rights as a policy strategy are more subtle in their definition. Stone (2006) identifies two traditions of rights, positive and normative. Positive rights are those backed by the state. There is an expectation that the right will be upheld, based on past tested claims. Normative rights, on the other hand, can be understood as rights that people may have but may not actively claim or enforce, as well as rights that derive power from outside enforcement, such as religion.

The last of Stone's (2006) strategies are rules, which are both informal and formal. Stone (2006) argues that policy analysis must account for the interaction of these informal and formal rules. Rules "prescribe action to be taken in certain situations or contexts" (Stone, 2006, p. 286). The political nature of rules acts as a force to include and exclude people from different treatments or activities.

## Policy Analysis of Parental Leave Insurance: Gender System Approach and Strategies

Using both the gender system approach and Stones' (2006) conceptualization of policy strategies, the following analysis frames how Sweden's parental leave policy design strengthens men's ties to caregiving and women's ties to employment, in a 'dual earner/dual carer' model. This section will analyze each policy and reform, looking at how it attempted to increase gender equality, and second, will suggest which of Stone's strategies the policy exemplifies (See Table 1). The purpose of this analysis is to examine how the policies were tweaked multiple times to create change in fathers' leave taking, which was not naturally occurring.

Table 1. Gender Systems & Strategy Analysis of Parental Leave Reforms

Year	Legislative Reform	Gender System Approach	Stone's Type of Policy Strategy
1974	Paid parental leave	Introduces a change in construction of gender in labor and caregiving	Inducement
1996 & 2002	Reserved Months	Deconstructing parenting/caregiver roles as female only	Rights (Father, Mother & Child) & Inducement "Use it or lose it"
2006	Increase Earnings Ceiling	Removing barriers to father caregiving	Rules
2008	Gender Bonus Tax	Ideal example of the dual carer/dual earner model	Inducement

In 1974, when the parental leave insurance was introduced, fathers' participation was recognized as a potential issue in the effectiveness of the policy. However, specifying fathers' leave taking was deemed to be too radical and was dropped from the proposed policy (Klinth, 2002, cited in Duvander & Johansson, 2010). The gender systems approach recognizes the

complexity and multiple constructions of gender (Crompton, 1999). From this approach, the policy is a step toward changing the construction of gender in labor and caregiving, specifically men as 'breadwinner' and women as 'carer.' Indeed, a majority of the reforms have targeted increasing men's attachment to caregiving and creating state supports to encourage breaks from breadwinning.

In addition, the benefit in 1974 encouraged women, who were assumed to be the ones taking the leave, to gain employment prior to becoming pregnant in order to receive the 90 percent earnings, rather than the low flat rate provided for non-working parents. Again, the policy attempts to change women's behavior to see work and family, together, as the ideal, rather than work or family, moving closer toward the 'dual earner/dual carer' gender systems model.

The 1974 legislation is the first clear example of Stone's inducement strategy. Parents either receive a percentage of their income from their employment at the time of leave taking (which has ranged from 70 to 90 percent) or a low flat rate. This inducement is what Stone (2006) would describe as a reward, meaning that if policy receiver does the intended behavior (i.e., takes the leave) the policy giver (i.e., Swedish government) offers a reward (i.e., parental benefit). As Stone (2006) suggests, this reward-based relationship between the policy giver and receiver can create a bond. Clearly, if a parent is working at the time of leave taking, the economic benefit is not equal to full employment, but is a reward in the context of not working.

The addition of reserved months for each parent was the next major policy reform. In 1995, one month was introduced, and in 2002 another was added. These reserved months are to be used by each parent. If they are not used by the designated parent, they are forfeited. These designated month reforms are ways of deconstructing parenting/caregiver roles as female only. The parents still can decide how to divide up the rest of the allotted leave time, and of course, they can decide when each parent takes the leave. For example, a heterosexual couple could decide to have the father take the leave after productive breastfeeding is established.

The reserved months are examples of the strategy of rights, both positive (supported by the state) and normative (not

enforced by law, but by society). By designating those times for each parent, each parent has a positive right, supported by law, to take that given parental leave time. Ferrarini and Duvander (2010) argue that fathers' custodial rights are one of the main pillars of Sweden's dual earner/dual carer model. Normatively speaking, this is also an example of a right that could now be referred to in society and gives support to an alternate division of leave taking. This reform is particularly important in the reframing of caregiving in gender equal ways; fathers now have a law to both change their behavior and support their behavioral change in society.

In addition, these reserved months can also be framed as the child's right to have access to both parents and, specifically, children's rights to their fathers' time (Duvander and Johansson, 2010). This right of the child ties directly to the importance Sweden's society places on children as a resource of the future (Haas, 1992).

The last two policy instruments implemented were the raising of the income ceiling for benefits and a gender equality bonus. In 2006, the raising of the income ceiling for benefits was introduced to increase fathers' participation, because fathers are more likely to have high incomes. The argument was that if the income ceiling were raised, fathers with high incomes would be more likely to take the leave, because they would get more of their income in benefits (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). This raising of the income ceiling exemplifies a rules strategy used to decrease barriers to father participation in caregiving, particularly for high income earning fathers.

The last reform, the gender equality bonus introduced in 2008, attempted to incentivize the equal sharing of leave. It is a perfect policy example of the dual carer/dual earner model, because it tries to support parents creating that dual role in a monetary way. Because fathers are slow to take leave, the bonus is an example of an inducement that specifically targets changing the behavior of fathers; more specifically, the inducement encourages fathers to take off more time, which in turn theoretically stimulates mothers' participation in the labor market.

## Conclusion

Overall, each of the policy strategies attempts to increase the gender equality of parenthood, specifically labor market participation and caregiving, recognized as the dual earner/dual carer model. In the framework of the gender systems approach, Sweden's parental leave policy is reconstructing the gender roles previously prescribed. In addition, the gender systems analysis of iterations of the parental leave policy revealed that since the conception of its parental leave policy in 1974 and with each of the four subsequent reforms and additions to the policy, Sweden has been slowly and steadily making its way from the conventional end of the gender systems continuum to the less conventional. And lastly, the analysis shows that the parental roles of caregiving and wage earning are mitigated by complex and multiple constructions of gender. Therefore, in policy creation, targeted aims at the barriers to the dual carer/dual earner ideal must be precise in order to make the desired change.

Sweden's parental leave policy was framed in a very compelling way from the very beginning as gender equality in parenthood. This policy was intended to change the gender balance of caregiving and earning by using the strategies of rules, rights, and inducements in a variety of ways and over decades. Each policy reform effort attempted to increase children's access to both of their parents and to tie men to caregiving and women to participation in the labor market, thereby achieving the aim of gender equality.

Clearly, Sweden's diligence in increasing the gender equality of parental leave taking and parenthood in general demonstrates the country's commitment to its goal. However, policy implementation is only one way to make social norms change. Even in the context of Sweden's socially progressive and social democratic welfare regime, the goal of gender equality in parenthood is yet to be fully realized.

Thirty years after the first parental leave legislation, Sweden's government, which supports gender equality in many overarching social policies, is still trying to encourage parents to take leave more equitably. In 1974, fathers used 0.5 percent of all parental leave days available (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). By 2009, fathers increased their use to 22.3

percent (Duvander & Johansson, 2010). This change in paternal leave taking shows that strides to toward the dual earner/dual carer model in Sweden are being made. However, the reality that Sweden's fathers do not yet take 25 percent of the leave available indicates that in addition to identifying and implementing particular policy strategies that increase paternal leave taking, society must remove social, economic and workplace barriers, such as non-father friendly workplaces (Haas & Hwang, 1995), and continue to address the complex and multi-layered constructions of gender that perpetuate more rigid gender parenting roles.

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