

# Chapter 3. Gender equality politics: ideas and strategies

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## **A Swedish gender equality model<sup>1</sup>**

A century ago, at the time of the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, there were intense debates in progress about working women and mothers. This led to the politicisation of *womanhood* and *motherhood*. For example, many countries introduced the right to paid or unpaid maternity leave. The question of women's place in the labour force was the object of continual discussion and reconsideration.<sup>2</sup> The issue of working mothers has been the subject of particular debate. During the 1920s and 1930s, many countries simply imposed bans, prohibiting this group from working, although not in Sweden (Frangeur, 1998). With the passing of time, the discussion has focussed more on women's opportunity to combine labour force participation and family life. Nowadays, in most advanced industrial countries, the issue of women, work, and childcare comes high up the political agenda.<sup>3</sup> Further, issues concerning the rights and duties related to fatherhood have obtained greater immediacy within the framework of greater discussion of the changed nature of *masculinity* (Hobson, 2002).

Earlier than elsewhere, the Nordic countries drew attention to the importance of focussing not solely on the woman/mother but also on the man/father. Since the 1970s, the Nordic countries, and especially Sweden, have successively institutionalised an income-earner model based on equal rights and duties for women and for men, for mothers and for fathers. Here, there is a long-standing traditional view of equality that includes not only social class but also gender. This

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<sup>1</sup> A Swedish version of this chapter first appeared in *Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv* no. 1, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> If we examine the development of women's employment between 1910 and 1990 we find a U-shaped curve where the employment rate slowly declines between 1920 and 1950 only to increase dramatically after 1960 (Nermo, 1999). The exact shape of the curve depends on the definition of employment used. Researchers are in agreement that the women's employment rate has been underestimated in official statistics. (For a detailed discussion of this point, see Nyberg, 1994.)

<sup>3</sup> The reason for this can be found both in the new population crisis that is thought to be looming and in the demands of the women's movement for economic independence and gender equality (Bruning and Plantega, 1999; Hantrais, 2000). Within the EU the birth rate and size of the labour force have sunk to historically very low levels, which in the long term can lead to negative economic growth (Lindh and Malmberg, 1999).

model is founded on the principle that it is the individual rather than the family or married couple that forms the basic unit in the welfare system (Sainsbury, 1996).

Opportunities for combining paid employment with family commitments in Sweden can be traced to three fundamental political policies: separate taxation, well-developed and public-funded childcare, and the provision of public income-related parental leave insurance. These policies, introduced in the 1970s lie at the interface between several policy areas, such as the labour market, family, and taxation. The state's declared aim has been to increase gender equality through the encouragement of women's participation in the labour force, while increasing men's responsibility for the traditional female areas of home and children.

This model institutionalised the dual breadwinner as the official norm, in contrast to the previous norm of the single male breadwinner family (Sainsbury, 1996; 1999; Siim, 1997). I will henceforth refer to this labour market and welfare policy model as the *Swedish gender equality model*. This model is considered to be an important element in what Esping-Andersen refers to as the social-democratic welfare regime (1990).<sup>4</sup> I emphasise that I am talking about changes in public norms here, meaning those expressed through political reforms and legislation. It is not my intention to measure how far gender equality actually has come, but to analyse the ideas and strategies behind the introduction of a new gender equality model.

The primary aim of this chapter is to analyse the Swedish gender equality model's ideology, and also actors within the political arena at two points in time. Which ideas created the basis for formulating the policies? Which political actors were important for the radical decision in the 1970s to reject the single male breadwinner model in favour of the dual breadwinner model? The second point in time to be analysed is the 1990s when the Swedish gender equality model was brought into question. On the one hand, it was criticised by feminist groups for not being radical enough, on the other by conservatives and neo-liberals who asserted that the fundamental basis of the model should be changed. The so-called bourgeois block, which consists of the liberal and conservative political parties to the right of the Social Democrats, mobilised against the established model. In their eyes, it did not give families sufficient freedom of choice concerning the care of children. Nor, in their view, did the model provide enough

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<sup>4</sup> Sweden can be viewed as the prototype of the welfare-state regime within Esping-Andersen's classification, although Denmark, Finland and Norway can also be included in this category. This social-democratic regime type is characterised, among other things, by universalism, full employment, social-welfare services and social rights based on citizenship. The other two regime types are the conservative, with Germany as the type example, and the liberal, where the US provides an example. The conservative regime type is characterised by social insurance, whose eligibility is based on labour market participation, a high level of familism, and generous transfer benefits to the main breadwinner. In the liberal regime, it is the market, rather than the state, that is the foremost guarantor of individuals' welfare, and public sector welfare provision is means tested (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

room for private solutions and market forces. How was this expressed in the politics pursued and policies implemented? This chapter primarily consists of a comparison, in terms of politics and political actors, between the establishment phase of the 1970s and what can be characterised as the transformational phase of the 1990s. I will not analyse the issues of separate taxation and public childcare in any great detail; instead, I will concentrate on the issues of parental leave and childcare allowances. The analysis will, in the main, be limited to the debates and actors within the parliamentary arena.

A second aim is to critically appraise and discuss the question of *why* the Swedish gender equality model has its distinctive appearance. The explanations in most of the literature emphasise either socioeconomic factors, or aspects relating to the labour movement/social democracy's strength and politics. The first explanatory hypothesis regards gender equality politics as a result of structural relationships, such as good economic development and labour force shortages during the 1960s. According to this argument, the state invested in childcare because women were needed on the labour market. The second hypothesis is more actor-oriented. It regards the focus on childcare and gender equality as an effect of general social-democratic *equality* politics (Hinnfors, 1999). In neither of these cases was it argued that there was a significant gender-political dimension; nor were women's roles and strategies considered, which – as I will demonstrate – can lead to incomplete explanations. My hypothesis is that women as political actors and feminist ideas have had much greater importance for policy formulation in the area of gender equality than is usually recognised in research.

### **Gender equality – ideas and actors**

The body of literature that includes analysis of women's actions and strategies gives conflicting interpretations of the role played by Swedish women in relation to the gender equality model. In comparative studies of Sweden and other western countries, it has been asserted that Sweden pursues feminist policies without feminists. It is said that women have, in many respects, gained a lot from this, but – at least according to one researcher – it was 'not the results of their own efforts' (Gelb 1989, p. 173). In this research, the gender equality model is seen in part as the result of working-class power and special conditions in Sweden. Mary Ruggie, who compared Swedish and British gender and labour market politics, interprets the Swedish gender equality model as a 'by product of the broader configuration of state-society relations', where social policy and economic policy together 'happen to benefit women' (Ruggie, 1984, p. xiv). In this type of analysis, the origins of the gender equality model and its effects are put forward as being more or less unintentional, occurring almost by chance as the result of the power relationships between the social classes. But this conclusion is unjustified, in that it does not include the actions of women and women's

organised activities in the analysis (Mahon, 1997; Florin and Nilsson, 1999; Bergman, 2004). One interpretation is that power relations between the sexes and gender-political actors must be taken into account.

The research that underlines the importance of actors and processes, rather than structures, has shown that women's interests have made a breakthrough in politics. Women's organising, women as actors and women politicians have often had a special influence on policies relating to children and motherhood. Even before women obtained the right to vote, they were able to play a political role in this 'women specific' area (Bock and Thane, 1991; Skocpol, 1992; Koven and Michel, 1993). On the ground in Sweden, historian Renée Frangeur (1998) has shown that women as political actors were significant for the absence of a ban on married women working in the public sector. Another example is the early role played by women in the development of childcare (Hatje, 1999).

An important dividing line between the Nordic countries and other democratic welfare states is that women, earlier than the other countries, established themselves in the highest political organs and on the labour market. In Sweden, the proportion of men in the Swedish Parliament has declined from about 80 percent at the beginning of the 1970s to just above 50 percent at the end of the 1990s. The comparative figures for positions in the government in the 1970s and the 1990s are 90 and 50 percent (men) respectively. Already at the start of the 1970s, the proportion of women holding high political office in Sweden was far above the *current* average figures for other western democracies. Seen in an international perspective, for a long time there have been large, albeit declining, differences when it comes to women's and men's labour market participation. Sweden and the Nordic countries lead the way regarding employment frequency, although when it comes to the issue of leading positions in the working community, there is a long way to go before gender equality is achieved (Välfärd och levnadsvillkor i Västeuropa, 1994).

Many Nordic researchers emphasise that the development of a Swedish/Nordic gender equality model must be understood as a dynamic relationship between a strong, universal welfare state and the mobilisation of women, both on the labour market and in politics. Helga Maria Hernes has expressed this in terms of Nordic welfare policies having contributed to women being 'pulled' into the public arena, which made it possible for women to begin to 'push' for influence over policy developments in accordance with their own interests (Hernes, 1987, p. 9; see also Dahlerup, 1988; Siim, 1988; 1994; Borchorst, 1994; Bergqvist, 1994; Bergqvist et al., 1999; Florin, 1999; Wängnerud, 1999). However, time-wise the upswings in both women's political engagement and their employment rate occurred before the arrival of what I call the Swedish gender equality model (Bergqvist, 1994; Bergqvist and Nyberg, 2002). This contradicts Hernes's scenario, where policies came first and women later. However, it strengthens the

hypothesis regarding the significance of women's mobilisation to the development of the model.

### **The political debate on the role of the sexes**

In the 1960s there was a dividing line in the party-political arena between those who favoured pursuing a policy of strengthening the *male breadwinner model* and those who preferred to go in the direction of an *individual model* based on two income earners. Should the state support a housewife model through childcare allowances, or should the conditions be created to allow a dual income-earner model through the expansion of childcare?

This dividing line existed at first even within the governing Social Democratic Party and its women's association, even though both of these organisations later came to advocate the dual income-earner model. One wing of the Social Democratic Women's Association argued that the housewife had often been perceived as a much sought after luxury by working-class women, and that investment in the housewife family would mean freedom from heavy industrial work. Housewives were an under-appreciated group in society, despite attempts during the 1940s and 1950s to give them a more professional image. The 1950s had been the golden age of the 'small nuclear family', where even working-class families had been able to live on a single wage (Karlsson, 1996, p. 226-234). Lisa Mattson, Member of parliament and Chairperson of the Social Democratic Women's Association, advocated the introduction of *childcare allowances* in a parliamentary debate in 1965. At this time, childcare allowances were seen as a sort of wage for motherhood, which would give housewives the opportunity to achieve a certain level of independence. At the same time as advocating childcare allowances, Mattson also took a position *in favour* of daycare. Therefore, she advocated the possibility of several models existing in parallel. In a similar vein to Ulla Lindström, the minister responsible for family policy, Mattson was able to support the idea of both models at the same time (Hinnfors 1992, p. 108-111).

The Right Wing Party, later the Moderate Party, first displayed a certain degree of scepticism about the idea of expanded public responsibilities for the family, expressing in 1963 a 'principle repugnance that the natural functions that parenthood entails shall be paid for by the state' (cited in Hinnfors, 1992, p. 99, my translation). The party therefore opposed the idea of childcare allowances. However, in the early 1970s, it reversed its view and became a proponent of childcare allowances. At about the same time, the Social Democrats adopted a negative perception of childcare allowances and favoured the expansion of daycare provision. In its support for childcare allowances, the Moderate Party was united with the Centre Party. Even the Liberal Party had advocated childcare allowances in certain situations during the 1960s, although not at the expense of the expansion of daycare. Later the Liberal Party came to prioritise the expansion

of daycare (Hinnfors 1992, p. 100-114). Therefore, there was no clear dividing line historically between the Liberal/Conservative and Socialist blocks.

The main arguments for childcare allowances concerned freedom of choice and justice. It was argued that women's (not men's) freedom to choose between home and work would increase. The justice argument meant that even families with housewives should have the possibility of being subsidised by society in the same way as those families who benefited from subsidised, public childcare. At the beginning the discussion only concerned women, but later the language attained a more gender-neutral direction, with talk about 'at-home parents' (Hinnfors, 1992, Chapter 4).<sup>5</sup>

According to the opposite line, as expressed in the dual income model, the possibility for all adult individuals, women as well as men, to support themselves provided the basis for individual independence and freedom. Old gender roles ought to be abandoned, and give way to new, equality based gender roles. Both women and men ought to have an equally great responsibility for both care and income, and ought to have the same opportunity to combine parenthood with paid work. On an ideological level, this required radical changes to public attitudes and expectations regarding the tasks and duties of the sexes. On a political level, it needed radical reforms to enable this new and modern life, one free from the handcuffs of traditional gender-roles. Such a reform required a massive expansion of public childcare to ease women's entry into the labour market. The report 'Equality' was produced by a working party led by prominent female politician Alva Myrdal, and made up of members of the Social Democratic Party and Trade Union movement. The report asserted that the 'continuing major expansion of childcare' was one of the most important reforms for increasing gender equality within the family (SAP-LO: working-party for gender equality issues, 1969, p. 97).<sup>6</sup>

After 1966 the Social Democrats began to concentrate on developing public services in order to give women the opportunity to become income earners without having to worry about childcare. They had the support of the Communist Party, who made clear their rejection of childcare allowances in favour of expanding daycare provision. The employment rate among women with children under the age of seven increased from 32 percent in 1960 to 50 percent in 1970, and to 60 percent by 1975 (Hinnfors, 1992, p. 289). Despite political opinion being in favour of daycare, together with the enormous expansion in the working fre-

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<sup>5</sup> The financial support that the proposed childcare allowances would give to recipients cannot be compared with a normal income.

<sup>6</sup> The report comes from the Socialdemocratic Workers' Party's and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation's (SAP-LO)'s working party for gender equality issues, and was presented at the Social Democratic Party congress in 1969. The same views were put forward in the Women's Association's programme *In favour of socialist family politics (För en socialistisk familjepolitik)*, 1969.

quency of mothers with young children, actual expansion of public childcare did not take place until the 1970s. In 1966, for example, 90 percent of children under the age of seven did *not* receive childcare outside the home. By 1979 this figure had fallen to 61 percent (Hinnfors, 1992, p. 49).<sup>7</sup> Timewise, many mothers entered the workforce long before any public childcare was available.

Women dominated the political documents and debates that formed the basis for the parliamentary decision that led to investment in public childcare. Extensive state inquiries and surveys found many women to be positive to the expansion of daycare, not just for reasons of gender equality but also for social and educational reasons (SOU 1967:39; 1972:26; 1972:27). As previously mentioned, Swedish women were relatively well represented in politics at this time compared with their counterparts in non-Nordic countries. Between 1965 and 1970 approximately 15 percent of members of parliament were women. In the Social Democratic parliamentary Group about 20 percent of members of the second chamber were women. The government of 1970 contained two strong campaigners for equal rights and conditions for women and men, Alva Myrdal and Camilla Odhnoff, who were responsible for family policy (Bergqvist, 1994; Hinnfors, 1992).

Emil Uddhammar (1993) has shown that, despite certain differences of principle, there has – on the whole – been an amazing level of agreement concerning the state’s economic undertakings relating to childcare. Even if parties in the Liberal/Conservative block have frequently questioned different aspects of childcare policy, as a rule they have not opposed the increasing public costs. It was really first during the latter part of the 1980s that the Liberal/Conservative block, and even the Moderate Party within it, have questioned public expansion in this area (Uddhammar, 1993, p. 250). As well as agreement across party lines, we find agreement between women and men, albeit with certain differences of emphasis with regard to the arguments. For women’s groups the gender equality argument weighs heaviest, while men usually indicate that women are needed in the workforce. It is reasonable to think that the effect of high prosperity in the economy, together with labour shortages, created the positive conditions that were instrumental in framing the policies implemented (Hinnfors, 1992). But, that the structural conditions were advantageous ought not cloud the fact that the policies were also in the direct interests of large groups of women. The issue of support for public childcare was a long-standing women’s issue that had existed since industrialisation.

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<sup>7</sup> These figures include children in part-time childcare and playgroups.

## From maternity leave to parental leave

Carole Pateman writes in her article, 'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy', that today – for the first time – western feminists are working on the creation of a theory regarding social practice that equally includes women and men. According to Pateman, it means that, at an immediately practical level, women and men must share household duties and caring for children. Pateman asserts that the opportunities for achieving gender equality in couple relationships are related to the organisation of working life and the public sector (Pateman 1989, p 135; see also Okin, 1989 for a theory of justice between the sexes).

Swedish legislation covering opportunities for parents to share caring for newborn babies fits in well with what Pateman describes as practical feminist politics. When parental leave legislation was introduced in 1974, it was said that it would contribute to equality between men and women. It was based on the idea of a dual earner family where the partners were seen as economically independent individuals, both of whom had rights and duties both towards children and on the labour market. The parental leave was rather generous and income related to assure the family against losses of earnings.

The transition from *maternity* to *parental* leave meant that a new view of the relationship between the sexes was institutionalised. The feminist idea that not just mothers, but also fathers, can and should care for newborns was regulated by the state. This idea broke with centuries of tradition and practice, yet received only modest attention from welfare-state researchers.<sup>8</sup>

By legislating on the issue of parental leave, the government took a huge step away from the idea of the single male breadwinner. In practice there might have been a long way to go before gender equality was achieved, but the most important principle of the reform was that it opened up the *possibility* of more equal parenting, something that was previously made difficult by gender specific legislation in this area. The fact was that women's and men's opportunities to combine parenthood and paid employment had increased.<sup>9</sup>

The idea and implementation of shared parental leave affects the private sphere in a more obvious way than public childcare policies. Childcare and *maternity* leave can be seen as measures designed to support women's possibility of combining motherhood and paid employment without actually affecting

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<sup>8</sup> An exception is Ann-Sofie Ohlander who writes: 'seen historically this is an extraordinarily meaningful change. The conflict between reproduction and production has become visible, not just as a problem that is the responsibility of women, but also as a conflict and responsibility for men. It is too early to say anything about whether increasing the visibility of the basic conflict in a society that does not acknowledge the central role of reproduction in reality will lead to a corresponding societal change' (Ohlander 1989, p. 186 (my translation); see also Leira, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> The parental leave legislation has, however, been criticised by some Swedish feminist researchers for the fact that the gender-neutral formulation did not make a sufficiently radical contribution to a more gender-equal division of labour.



private relationships between the sexes or perceptions of fatherhood. At a strategic level, reforms to support women and children *may* have certain emancipatory effects, giving rise to increased autonomy and gender equality, but not if traditional gender-related divisions of labour in the home hinder changes in the public sphere. The basic idea underlying shared *parental* leave can be viewed as that of evening out the consequences that unequal gender relationships have for women's and men's opportunities, eg advancing at work. If it were assumed that there was an equal probability that a father of young children would take as much leave as a mother, it would be likely to have consequences for workforce organisation and perceptions of gender. The following section analyses how the vision of gender equality in parenting became a Social Democratic reform policy.

### **The parliamentary debate on shared parental leave**

On 1 January 1974, *maternity* leave was replaced by *parental* leave (when a child was born or adopted). Leave was initially for a period of six months, but was increased to seven months just a year later. Parents could decide themselves who should stay at home and for how long. There was also the opportunity to share the parental leave period. The basic principle, still valid today, is that the parental leave benefit represents compensation for loss of income up to a certain ceiling. In addition, there is a low, general guaranteed amount received by those who have not earned enough to give an entitlement to sickness benefit, eg for students and home-workers.<sup>10</sup>

The introduction of the parental leave reforms clearly marks a developing change in perception of the relationship between the sexes. The reforms were both an expression and an institutionalisation of two radically new ways of regarding gender relationships: first, that not just mothers but also fathers can and ought to care for young children; second, that there should be a shift away from the male-breadwinner model in favour of the dual-breadwinner family. The first step in this direction had been taken with the separate taxation reforms of 1970/71. These reforms were instrumental in changing the institutional conditions for gender equality.

The issue of parental leave had been carefully considered by the Family Policy Committee in its report 'Family Support' in 1972. In this report, the committee argued that it was positive for parents, and especially for women, for parental responsibilities to be shared. Parental insurance would probably lead to a more equitable division of labour in the home, and therefore better opportunities for women to improve their position on the labour market. The report expressed a hope that more fathers would stay at home, although recognised that it was likely to be mothers who took the greatest responsibility. Despite this, there was no

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<sup>10</sup> Parental leave payments are based on the level of sickness benefit payments that an individual would be entitled to receive.

recommendation that the way the parental allowance was divided should be regulated; instead, this was considered an issue that parents ought to decide between themselves (SOU 1972:34). Camilla Odhoff, the minister responsible for submitting the report, supported the committee's finding. She stated that all the comments received from interested parties, including the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Swedish Employers' Association (SAF), had supported the main conclusions. Odhoff argued for the gender equality aspects of the findings when submitting the report:

‘The division of labour between men and women that currently characterises society locks men as well as women into separate roles and obstructs free personal development. Therefore, demands for gender equality are not only concerned with changing women's conditions but also men's. This change is about, among other things, giving women an increased opportunity to undertake paid employment, and for men the opportunity to take an increased responsibility for children. The state must take action in the different areas of public life actively to work to change men's as well as women's positions’ (Prop. 1973:47, p. 35, my translation).

The quotation above illustrates the founding principles within the new policy area that was taking shape, namely gender equality and family policies based on the individual income-earner model. The central concept in these policies was that of gender neutrality. Instead of talking about *women's* equality or *women's* policy, the notion of gender equality was central to the discussion. The simultaneous expansion of political boundaries, together with the redefinition of the reproductive sphere to cover both women and men, demonstrated an ambition to break down boundaries and discard traditional perceptions of differences between the sexes.

Compared with other countries, Sweden's parental leave legislation was unique and radical when it was introduced, and remains so today. However, there was one aspect that was not in accordance with the Swedish income-related social insurance model, where compensation rights are based on the individual. A wholly individual and gender-neutral formulation would have meant that each parent had an independent right to a certain number of months, not transferable to the other partner. As previously mentioned, it seemed that everyone was in agreement that parents should be able to decide between themselves how the parental leave should be divided. It is therefore interesting that, in 1973, two Centre Party members, Karin Andersson and Elvy Olsson, were the first parliamentarians to demand that neither parent should be allowed to take out the whole parental leave entitlement alone. Their motion asserted that – taking into consideration pay disparities, promotion opportunities, and also other gender-related differences – it was probable that it would be mothers, in the main, who stayed at home. The result of this, according to Andersson and Olsson, would be that an

essential policy goal would not be attained. Their suggestion was that allowances should be given for twelve months, and that no one parent should be able to use more than eight of these months. An exception to this rule should be made for single parents (Mot. 1973:1686).

This issue was later investigated by the Family Support Commission that had been appointed at the time parental leave was introduced. The Social Democratic government gave the commission the missions of carrying out a preliminary examination of the new rules and of investigating a possible increase in the length of time for which allowances were paid. Following a request from the Social Democratic Women's Association, the commission of inquiry was also given the task of evaluating whether expanding the payment period could be combined with demands that a certain amount of time *must* be used by fathers. The recommendations of the Family Support Commission were in agreement with the Women's Association, recommending an increase in the payment period to eight months, conditional on neither parent alone utilising more than seven months (SOU 1975:62).

During the spring of 1976, the Social Democratic government made preparations to extend parental insurance to eight months. The proposal did not take account of demands that the increase should be combined with the introduction of a so-called 'daddy month', as recommended by the Family Support Commission. This was considered a betrayal of gender equality by a large number of Social Democratic women members of parliament, and they responded by staging a 'women's coup'. The coup is described in detail by historian Gunnel Karlsson (1996), who describes it as a unique occurrence. To put it briefly, the 'women's coup' was a very strong protest by women against the party leadership. This was totally against the prevailing norms within the Social Democratic government and its parliamentary group. Eighteen of the parliamentary group's 36 women submitted a joint motion calling for a 'daddy month'. The reason that this was regarded as a coup-like action was that the women submitted the motion directly to the parliamentary secretariat, without informing the party leadership. Thereby, they acted against the Social Democrats' previous rejection of the 'daddy month' proposal. According to Prime Minister Olof Palme, this was the first time that a 'major faction within the group had gone against the parliamentary group's representative council's rejection' of a proposal (cited in Karlsson, 1996, p. 293, my translation). Gunnel Karlsson describes the 'women's-coup' as:

'A strategy of disobedience that was a sensation within the party, where party loyalty and party unanimity, usually also for these women, was the principle value. The fact that the coup was staged in [what was called] a "lottery parliament" where the Socialist and Liberal/Conservative blocks each held 175 seats, did not make the situation any less sensational. Olof

Palme considered the action more or less as a stab in the back' (Karlsson, 1996, p. 293-294, my translation).

The Social Democrats did not manage to make any changes to parental insurance before the election of autumn 1976. After 44 years of Social Democratic rule, it was the Liberal/Conservative block that formed the new government. Despite the change of government, there were no major changes to family policy, and the programme started by the Social Democrats was actually strengthened. During the time of the Liberal/Conservative coalition government, which lasted until 1982, no government bills were submitted with regard to the introduction of childcare allowances (Hinnfors, 1992, p. 166). To the contrary, the Liberal/Conservative coalition proposed an extension of parental insurance to nine months, albeit without a compulsory 'daddy month'. This government bill gave rise to a motion from Olof Palme and several other Social Democrats calling for an obligatory division of the parental leave period (Mot 1976/77:1572).

In conclusion, this analysis illustrates that women have been actively involved in the creation of the Swedish gender equality model. Despite women being marginalised within many areas of politics, this was not the case for issues relating to care and equality (Bergqvist, 1994; Wängnerud, 1999). This does not mean that having a high proportion of women in politics automatically leads to certain types of policy. Different women's groups have differing interests, and women politicians naturally act to represent their own party's programme as well as having different opinions regarding the substance of policy.

### **The 1990s – new actors and old ideas**

The issue of which direction family policy should take, and more generally, which welfare and gender equality model was preferable became a controversial political issue again towards the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s. Following the period of relative consensus that had prevailed since the 1970s, when the dual income-earner model was introduced, childcare allowances were introduced for the first time in 1994. The early concept of childcare allowances, already discussed in the previous section, conformed with the idea of a male breadwinner model. The new variation had a gender-neutral appearance.

After the election of 1991, a Liberal/Conservative government came to power. In contrast to the previous three-party governments of the 1970s and 1980s, the new government included the Christian Democrats (for the first time). This meant that the Centre Party had gained an ally to support the introduction of childcare allowances. The Liberal party, as previously, supported a continuation of gender-equality and family policies according to the model established during the 1970s, which – to a large extent – coincided with the policy of the Social Democrats. The Moderates had developed from a traditional conservative party into a free-market, neo-liberal party. They had not regarded family policy as a

central issue during the 1980s, and were prepared to make deals and coalitions with both right and left. Accordingly, there was no agreed family policy within the governing coalition, and there were family-policy proponents of each of Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes. The Centre party and the Christian Democrats stood for the conservative regime, the Moderates for the liberal regime, and the Liberal party for the social-democratic regime.

Also, the Swedish elections of 1991 resulted in a reduction of women representatives in parliament from 38 to 33 percent. One reason for this was that the Moderates had had, for a long time, a lower level of women representatives than the other parties. In addition, the Christian Democrats and also New Democracy – a populist, anti-immigration party – both won seats in parliament. Both of these parties had a lower proportion of women in their parliamentary groups than other parties (Bergqvist, 1994, p. 41-43).

This gave an opportunity for the Centre and Christian Democratic parties to gain government support for the introduction of childcare allowances. A government bill on childcare allowances (Prop 1993/94:148) was presented late in 1993, but the allowances were not introduced until July 1994 when it was nearly time for the next election. The childcare allowance was in an amount of SEK 2,000 per month for each child between the ages of one and three. At the same time, the parental leave period was reduced from 450 days to 360. Thus, childcare allowances took effect after a year of income-related parental leave payments.

The most common argument put forward in favour of childcare allowances was that they increased freedom of choice for parents to decide for themselves how their children should be cared for. Although advocates of childcare allowances attempted to 'dress-up' their arguments in gender-neutral language, we can derive the origins of the allowances from the debate of the 1960s concerning the separate spheres of the sexes. The Social Democrats and the Left Party (the former Communist Party) argued in strong terms against the notion of childcare allowances. However, the history of childcare allowances was short-lived as the Social Democrats were once again returned to government in the autumn of 1994. Quite simply, they abolished the allowances, which they had always opposed on principle (Bergqvist, 2005).

### **The 'daddy month'**

Parallel to discussion about childcare allowances ran a debate more in line with what might be called a 'vision of gender equality'. This debate concerned the low utilisation of parental leave by fathers. Despite campaigns aimed at giving information and changing public opinion, the proportion of parental leave days taken out by fathers remained low, even at the start of the 1990s. In 1977 fathers took out 2.2 percent of the total number of days, and in 1994 11.4 percent. However, the number of fathers who took out *some* parental leave increased from

7 percent in 1977 to 28 percent in 1994. It was interesting that, at this time, the issue was pursued more by men who were themselves fathers than by women in parliament or the women's associations of the political parties. Of central importance was the so-called 'fathers' group' within the parliamentary Gender Equality Unit.<sup>11</sup> This unit consisted of seven men, some with political connections, others with positions in the mass media or other industries. In a report they discussed their 'vision of the present father'. This included, among other things, that children should be able to experience that 'maleness can also be warm, caring and responsible', that 'both parents should share in both the responsibility and happiness from the start', and that 'a new parenthood role would be a merit in the labour market and that it will revolutionise working life'. One of the civic actions that the fathers' group recommended was a minimum period of three months for compulsory paternity leave (Ds 1995:2).

Also, a government inquiry into salary differences between the sexes (SOU 1993:7) and a working party within the Ministry of Social Affairs (Ds 1993:87) considered the introduction of compulsory division of parental leave as a means of achieving greater gender equality. In February 1994 the same government that planned the introduction of childcare allowances also proposed a compulsory division of parental leave payments between parents, known popularly as the 'daddy month'. This proposal was implemented in January 1995 and meant that, in principle, parental leave days were split between parents. Although parents can decide to transfer most of the days to the other partner, there are 30 days for each parent that are tied to the individual. If any one parent fails to use their minimum 30 days, these days are lost. At the same time, the payment level was reduced from 90 to 80 percent of earnings, apart from for the daddy/mummy months (prop. 1993/94:147).<sup>12</sup> Within the Liberal/Conservative government it was the Liberal Party, and in particular the Minister of Social Affairs and Gender Equality, Bengt Westerberg, who became the driving force behind the policy.<sup>13</sup> The succeeding Social Democratic governments have retained the 'daddy month'.

In this brief outline of the 1990s, I do not claim to have covered the political debate surrounding childcare allowances and parental leave in full. Despite this, the account suggest that men were brought into the debate regarding gender equality and parenthood in a new way. In the 1970s it had been women and women's groups that had been the driving force, even if they had the support of many men. During the 1990s men took a more active role in the discussion and formulated their own demands and visions of equal parenting. One possible interpretation of this is that childcare and parental leave had become an issue for both

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<sup>11</sup> The government's gender equality unit has had a working party on the male role since the beginning of the 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> There are certain special rules applicable to single parents.

<sup>13</sup> Westerberg himself is one of a growing band of well-known Swedish men who have taken parental leave.

of the sexes, in accordance with the 1970s vision of gender equality. Combining working and family life in a modern dual income family is no longer merely a 'women's problem' but also an issue for men.

In the parliaments' and governments' of the 1990s there were almost as many women as men, with women to be found in all the political sectors (Bergqvist, 1994; Wängnerud, 1999). The failure to introduce childcare allowances and the commitment of new groups of men demonstrate that the ideal of gender equality that began in the politics of the 1970s retains a strong degree of political legitimacy today.

### **Unintended effects or political strategies?**

In conclusion, I would like to reappraise the factors that may lie behind the establishment of Swedish gender equality policies, based on the individual and the dual income-earner models. On one viewpoint, the most important factors were the power and strength of the working class, combined with advantageous economic conditions and labour market shortages. This historical assessment contends that the previous focus on labour immigration was abandoned in favour of concentrating on Swedish women. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the labour market's need for workers had shifted from industry to the strongly expanding public sector. On this perception the expansion of childcare and gender equality policies can be viewed as a response to structural change (Ruggie, 1984; Haas, 1991).

As previously mentioned, the increase in the rate of mothers of young children taking paid employment came before the major expansion of childcare. Jonas Hinnfors shows that the initial build up of local government funded childcare did not occur at the high point of the economic cycle, but rather when 'the national budget was showing signs of stagnation' (Hinnfors, 1999, p. 295). Hinnfors describes the expansion of local government childcare from 18,000 places in 1965 to 125,000 places in 1973 as 'one of the most extensive public-sector expansions in the world' (1999, p 293). His conclusion is that the formidable enlargement was an unintentional consequence of class-based political decisions that were not the result of gender equality or women's demands. Hinnfors analysed the parliamentary debate from a party-political perspective, which of course is important, but perhaps not sufficient to obtain a full understanding of the development. In order to acquire such a full understanding, a gender equality perspective is required.

The issue of publicly funded childcare and maternity/parental leave has been on the agenda of the women's movement from the time of industrialisation. During the 1960s and 1970s, Swedish women came to constitute a reasonably large proportion of political decision-makers, especially within social and family policy. This fact is often overlooked by researchers who seem to assume that the

presence of women is irrelevant when formulating empirical studies. Hinnfors (1999), for example, emphasises the fact that important gender equality decisions were taken by a large majority of men. It is a paradox, writes Hinnfors (ibid, p. 307) that ‘early major decisions behind the individual model of welfare state with its gender equality implications were in fact made by an almost all-male Social Democratic leadership’. As the analysis presented here shows, this is a rather strange conclusion. First, it is clear that several of the ministers responsible for these policies were women, strongly committed to gender equality. Second, there were many women involved in the official inquiries and reports that preceded the major decision on local government funded childcare and parental leave. It was often women who were the active driving force for change in parliament, writing motions and participating in parliamentary debates.<sup>14</sup>

My study does not reject the notion that labour market shortages, Social Democratic policies of gender equality and welfare, together with the expansion of the public sector, were *beneficial* in aiding the development of the Swedish gender equality model. However, it does reject the conclusions of researchers who contend that the institutionalisation of the Swedish gender equality model was just a more or less unintended consequence of these other conditions. If we regard the whole ‘package’ of political actions and policies that were introduced during the 1970s – such as separate taxation, expansion of childcare and extending parental leave – it is clear from the various public inquiries, reports and political debates that these reforms were the result of a conscious vision of radically changing the relationship between the sexes. It is also clear that women from all parts of the political sphere played an active role; even if they were not always in agreement, they had in common the goal of improving the situation for women. However, some of the more radical ideas about ‘daddy months’ took a long time to gain political acceptance.

The conclusions I draw from this is that it is of great importance to identify and investigate political actors from a gender perspective in order to gain a full understanding of the Swedish gender equality model. This means that it is not just women who should be studied, but rather the *dimensions* of gender politics. What were the gender-based interests? Which demands were formulated in terms of the gender specific experiences of both women and men? What views of the relationship between the sexes were expressed in various political proposals? Although men have had a traditionally privileged role as superior to women, it is seldom that their interests have been expressed in terms of gender. Accordingly, we are not used to analysing and appraising the political actions of men in this way. However, this is an area that is in the course of change, both on a theoretical level through new research on masculinity and also in the political actions of

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<sup>14</sup> Hinnfors’s analysis here is surprising, given that his own, first-rate, doctoral thesis clearly demonstrates the prominent role of women in the area of family policy.



men. Analysis of the 1990s' debate on the 'daddy month' can be seen as an example.

## Summary

When it comes to the possibility of combining labour force participation with a family, in Sweden there are three political foundations that can be discerned: separate taxation, well-developed, public funded childcare, and gender-neutral parental insurance. These policies were introduced during the 1970s with the stated objective of increasing gender equality by encouraging women's participation in the labour force and men's responsibility for the home and children. The origins of these state-led feminist policies, regarded internationally as unique, have frequently been presented in terms of advantageous socioeconomic factors and a strong labour movement. Accordingly, the political participation of women has been undervalued. My hypothesis is that women have a greater significance as political actors than is usually claimed when it comes to the formulation of policy in the field of gender equality.

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