

Swedish Family Policy – Continuity and Change in the Nordic Welfare State Model

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Abstract

The main question addressed in this regional issue is whether or not the Nordic welfare states can still be considered a distinct welfare regime cluster given recent changes, such as the introduction of more private elements into the welfare state. The Nordic welfare states are often described as emphasizing full employment, economic and gender equality, and universal access to cradle-to-grave welfare state benefits and services. In the case of Sweden, often pointed to as the model of a social democratic welfare state, such elements remain intact in most aspects of the welfare state, even given the challenges presented by the global neo-liberal economic paradigm since the 1970s. One way to determine whether or not the Nordic welfare states remain a distinct cluster is to provide an in-depth examination of various welfare state policies in each Nordic country. To contribute to this analysis, an investigation of family policy in the Swedish context will be provided. Even given recent challenges, such as the introduction of private for-profit childcare providers and a home care allowance, I argue that Swedish family policy has remained largely social democratic in its underlying goals, and thus acts to support the case for a distinct Nordic welfare regime cluster.

Keywords

Sweden; Welfare states; Family policy

Introduction

The Swedish welfare state, as one of the Nordic welfare states, is often viewed as *the* model of a social democratic welfare state in the postwar period. The Nordic welfare states have traditionally been linked together as a distinct social democratic welfare regime cluster, which emphasizes full employment, economic and gender equality, and universal access to cradle-to-grave welfare state benefits and services (Esping-Andersen 1990). In recent years, many scholars have begun to question whether or not the Nordic welfare states remain distinct in the wake of the shift from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism

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as the dominant global economic paradigm (Ervik and Kuhnle 1996; Kautto *et al.* 2001; Greve 2004). When considering Swedish family policy, despite the introduction of private for-profit childcare in the early-1990s, as well as more recent reforms such as the 2008 home care allowance for parents who stay at home with young children, the underlying goals of economic and, particularly, gender equality, as well as full employment remain crucial. As such, I argue that Swedish family policy, while experiencing some challenges, has remained largely social democratic in its underlying goals, and acts to support the case for the continued existence of a distinct Nordic welfare regime cluster.

During the 1960s–70s, declining fertility rates as well as women's increasing labour force participation rates, were both important factors in the development of Sweden's public childcare system and the introduction of parental leave. As women's labour force participation increased, policymakers grew concerned about the corresponding decrease in fertility levels. These concerns were met with the development of policies that encouraged women to be both mothers and workers, and since the 1970s, Sweden has been at the forefront in developing programmes and services that help both women and men to balance family and paid employment. Family policy in Sweden has largely had a gender equality focus, particularly around women's labour force participation and men's role in childrearing. The childcare and parental leave systems in particular seek to encourage women's labour force participation while, at the same time, aiming for a more equal distribution of childrearing responsibilities between mothers and fathers. As such, these programmes address issues of gender equality, not only in redefining women's roles, but also men's roles.

Women's Employment

The history of social democracy in Sweden is rooted in a model of full employment, which has supported the development of a comprehensive social democratic welfare state. In postwar Sweden, open unemployment remained under three per cent (Esping-Andersen 1990), exceeding this benchmark only three times from 1950–91 (Olsen 2002). However, the model of full employment in Sweden has differed from other nations since the 1970s in that full employment applies to both women and men, as women's labour force participation is just as important and just as needed in the Swedish system. Until the 1960s, women were still largely viewed as housewives and mothers, and treated as such by the state (Jenson and Mahon 1993); however, beginning in the 1960s, Swedish women were encouraged into the labour force in order to fill Sweden's continuing postwar labour shortage. This marked the end of the male breadwinner model and the beginning of the dual earner model in Sweden.

During the 1960s, women's labour force participation rose to more than 50 per cent, increasing further to 63 per cent in 1970, and 81 per cent in 1980, where it has remained fairly constant ever since. The increase in women's labour force participation also included married women and women with children aged under seven, who saw their labour force participation rates rise from below 50 per cent in the 1970s to over 85 per cent in 1980 (Gustafsson and Jacobsson 1985; Hoem 1995). By the early-1990s, women constituted 48 per cent of the Swedish

labour force (Olsen 2002), the highest percentage anywhere in the world. In Sweden, as in the other Nordic countries, the welfare state became the most important female labour market, providing women with good pay, job security and flexibility, including quality part-time jobs (Esping-Andersen 2002).¹ As a result, women currently make up 74 per cent of public sector workers (Statistics Sweden 2010). As such, the welfare state not only provides family-friendly programmes, such as childcare and parental leave, but it also acts as an important source of employment for women.

Taken together, the data demonstrate that women, even married women and women with young children, began entering the labour market in greater numbers prior to the development of childcare and parental leave policies in Sweden. However, it was then these women who were engaged in paid labour, as well as the trade unions that represented them, who pushed for the introduction and development of such family policies, which would help to strike a better work–life balance.

The Development of Swedish Family Policy

Childcare

In the 1960s, political parties were divided on the issue of childcare, with the centre-right advocating a care allowance and the Social Democrats advocating publicly provided childcare (Bergqvist *et al.* 1999). From the mid-1960s, the blue-collar Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) became the leading advocate for the expansion of public childcare (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001), as women workers continued to demand access to childcare services. Thanks to LO's strong ties with the Social Democratic Party (SAP), childcare was given a high priority and the number of publicly provided municipal childcare spaces increased rapidly from the late 1960s onward, from under 12,000 in 1965 to over 136,000 by 1980 to nearly 730,000 by 2002 (Curtin 1999; Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001; Mahon 1999; Swedish National Agency for Education 2003). This was partly the result of lobbying by key women in the trade union and political spheres, as well as the state's own agenda to foster an environment where women could work outside the home while still having children, thus achieving full employment and relatively high fertility rates simultaneously.

The Swedish social democratic welfare state, like the other Nordic welfare states, recognized access to reliable childcare as a basic requirement of a society in which the majority of both parents work outside the home. The state was thus prepared to provide working mothers and fathers with the services needed to allow them both to work in the labour market. This constitutes a crucial gender equality element that distinguishes the Nordic social democratic welfare states from other European welfare states. While women's employment has become increasingly important in many European countries since the 1970s, the liberal and conservative-corporatist welfare states have not been willing to provide universal access to public childcare or generous parental leave programmes to encourage the growth of women's employment. Instead, families are generally left to fend for themselves when it comes to

childcare, often relying on informal networks or on the market. While many European countries could today be described as 'dual earner' societies, or at least 'one and a half earner' societies (e.g. the Netherlands), it is the Nordic welfare states that first took active measures to achieve a dual earner society, and that have taken additional steps towards achieving an earner-carer society, where both mothers and fathers are expected to engage in paid labour and in unpaid domestic caring responsibilities.

In 1963, only three per cent of all pre-school aged children in Sweden were enrolled in public childcare, while over 35 per cent of all mothers of pre-school children were in the labour market (Nyberg 2004), which demonstrates the absolute need for expanded childcare at this time. Since the 1960s the state has exercised a great deal of power in its quest for a national model of childcare with minimum standards (Alvestad and Pramling Samuelsson 1999). For example, in 1966 state grants to full-time childcare centres doubled in order to encourage expansion and improve the quality of care, and in 1968 the government appointed the National Commission on Childcare, which laid the foundation for the pre-school model that exists in Sweden today (Nyberg 2004; Swedish Institute 2004a).

After more than two decades of long queues for childcare due to demand outpacing availability, the Social Democratic government introduced the Act on Child Care in 1995 under which municipalities became obliged to provide childcare without 'undue delay' (Bergqvist and Nyberg 2002; Swedish Institute 2004a), which generally translates into within three months of asking for a space. The result has been not only a high quality, accessible and affordable public childcare system, but also high rates of women's labour force participation, and a higher fertility rate than the European average. As access to childcare increased, the fertility rate in Sweden also increased from just over 1.5 in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to 2.14 in 1990 (Hoem and Hoem 1996). However, Sweden faced another decline in fertility rates during the 1990s, with the economic crisis, which brought with it increasing unemployment and uncertainty. Today, Sweden's fertility rate stands at 1.91, lower than the necessary replacement rate of 2, but higher than in most European countries (Statistics Sweden 2009). Research in industrialized countries has shown that such high fertility rates are linked with high female employment such as in Sweden, which goes against previous thinking that women who did not participate in the paid labour force had more children. Statistics and research suggest that today women have more children when they know they can balance being a mother with having paid employment (Alfredsson 2005). In Sweden, this is clearly linked to both the availability of childcare and the generosity of the parental leave system.

Parental leave

Parental leave was introduced in Sweden in 1974, replacing maternity leave, which had focused solely on mothers. Women's increasing level of employment, particularly married women and women with small children, was the impetus for the creation of the parental leave system. As mentioned above, at the time, there were differing opinions on how to best deal with the increasing

proportion of women and mothers in employment. The SAP was somewhat divided on the issue, but the unions advocated a comprehensive childcare and parental leave solution. The work of the LO's Family Council on this issue and its influence within the SAP led to the development of childcare and parental leave as the favoured option (Mahon 1999; Lindberg 2005). In the end, there has been a great deal of agreement among the political parties around the necessity of parental leave, but there remain differences of opinion when it comes to the details.

When parental leave was first introduced it comprised six months of leave per child, which parents could divide in any way, at a 90 per cent income replacement rate (Nyberg 2004). That this leave was now open to both mothers and fathers was at the time unique and very forward thinking (Wennemo 2005; Ferrarini 2005). The fact that the system was adopted with a great deal of consensus across party lines indicates the strength of the belief in the underlying objective to move Sweden from a male breadwinner to a dual earner society (Bygren and Duvander 2005), and even to an earner-carer model. The parental leave system was viewed as a complement to the development and expansion of the childcare system, as both were aimed at helping mothers and fathers better balance work and family life (Cohen *et al.* 2004). And further amendments to the parental insurance system were made to accommodate this goal. For example, in 1978 parental leave was extended to nine months, with the last three months paid at a flat rate; alternatively, the additional three months could be used to reduce the workday for one parent (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001).

The main objectives behind the parental insurance system in Sweden are the well-being of the child, women's economic independence, and the involvement of fathers in family and home life (Drew 2005). The last two objectives are related directly to gender equality, with an emphasis on an earner-carer model, which includes a more equal division of household responsibilities, particularly around childrearing. For even in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Family Policy Committee that proposed the parental leave system had discussed adopting an additional month reserved solely for fathers. In the end, the majority of the members of the committee voted against such an idea (Lindberg 2005), but the discussion had begun. This posed a serious challenge, since in 1974 only three per cent of those accessing parental leave were fathers, and fathers took less than one per cent of the total days available (Nyberg 2004). Over time this number has increased, but not as quickly as the architects of the system had hoped (Lindberg 2005). For example, by 1992, 48.3 per cent of fathers took an average of 63 days leave (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001). While this was an improvement, further reforms were taken in the 1990s and 2000s, which will be discussed in detail below, in an attempt to encourage mothers and fathers to share parental leave more equally.

Recent Family Policy Reforms

While the 1990s were, for the most part, a decade marked by welfare state contraction in Sweden due to a severe economic crisis, the childcare system actually expanded during this time, and is now more comprehensive than

ever. In addition, while benefit levels were decreased somewhat in the 1990s, the length of leave within the parental insurance system was extended, and increased individualization within the system is the focus of current debate in Sweden. However, there have also been elements introduced into Swedish family policy which challenge the social democratic goals of the system, such as private for-profit childcare and a home care allowance. Yet, the overall impact of these reforms has not been great as private for-profit childcare accounts for just a fraction of all available childcare, and only about one-third of all Swedish municipalities have adopted the home care allowance. As will be demonstrated below, the majority of the family policy reforms introduced in the past two decades are related to furthering the underlying social democratic goals of gender equality and full employment.

Childcare

Beginning in the 1980s, the Swedish state had to deal with initiatives for private for-profit childcare, mainly coming from the Swedish Employer's Association's (SAF) and the Swedish Federation of Industries' proposal for a private day-care company. In response to this proposal, Pyslingen, an Electrolux subsidiary company was created to open up childcare to the for-profit sector (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001; Strandbrink and Pestoff 2006). The challenge was launched by Sollentuna, a suburb of Stockholm, which attempted to contract out the provision of childcare to Pyslingen. In response, the Social Democratic government passed the *Lex Pyslingen* legislation in 1982, which banned all private for-profit childcare, and regulated the growth of other non-public forms such as parental cooperatives (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001). The SAP's concern regarding private for-profit childcare was that it would turn municipal institutions into ghettos for children of the low-paid or children with special needs, thus breaking with the universal principle of the Swedish welfare state.

However, when the SAP was defeated in the 1991 election, the ruling centre-right coalition abolished *Lex Pyslingen*, and the Social Democrats did not re-instate it when they returned to office in 1994, as their primary concern remained Sweden's economic crisis. Because several suburbs of Stockholm governed by centre-right parties continued to challenge the law, Pyslingen was ready to expand once it was legally able to do so in 1992 (Mahon 2005). Although private for-profit childcare centres are now allowed in Sweden, they must follow the same fee rules and curriculum standards as public centres in order to receive municipal subsidies (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001).

Since the early 1990s, the popularity of private childcare has increased only somewhat in Sweden. In 1994, there were 27 Pyslingen childcare centres in and around Stockholm, by 1999 there were 40, and in 2009 there were 77 (Strandbrink and Pestoff 2006; Mahon 2005; Pyslingen n.d.). Yet public provision has remained the norm in the rest of Sweden. In 2008, while 34 per cent of all children in Stockholm county were enrolled in some form of private pre-school, including parental co-operatives and private for-profit childcare, the percentage was as low as five per cent in other counties, making the

national average 18 per cent (Statistics Sweden 2010). The numbers continue to indicate that private for-profit childcare has not really taken off in Sweden. There are many theories as to why, from citizens' existing satisfaction with the public childcare system to the fact that it is difficult to make a profit when following state regulations in order to receive funding. In addition, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has the ability to issue injunctions and withdraw operating permits if private childcare providers do not meet national standards (Ministry of Education and Research 2010).

The childcare system that exists in Sweden today also contains many recent developments that reinforce the social democratic nature of Swedish family policy. First, as mentioned above, every parent in Sweden is now guaranteed a childcare space without undue delay, making the system extremely accessible. Second, in 2002 the state introduced a system of maximum fees that the municipalities could charge for childcare, which made the system even more affordable, as parents are now charged no more than one to three per cent of their income in childcare fees, depending on the number of children in the family who are enrolled in childcare (Swedish National Agency for Education 2007). Parental fees currently make up approximately ten per cent of the gross costs of childcare, with the state and the municipalities covering the remainder (Swedish National Agency for Education 2009a). Third, the system is now more inclusive than ever, incorporating more categories of children, such as children of the unemployed (since 2001) and children of parents who are on parental leave looking after a sibling (since 2002).

The childcare system has also taken on an increasingly educational focus since 1996 when the responsibility for childcare was moved from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science. As a result, in 1998 a new pre-school class for six-year-olds was introduced, which is technically voluntary but 95 per cent of all six-year-olds who have not yet started compulsory school attend (Swedish National Agency for Education 2009b). And, in 2003 all children aged four to five became entitled to 525 hours of free attendance in childcare per year, something which has recently been expanded to include three-year-olds as well. These free pre-school hours are a reflection of the state's attempt to encourage more children to attend pre-school to start to engage in the process of lifelong learning from an early age.

These changes have resulted in a more universal childcare system, and one that the OECD (2001) supports as a model for other countries. Today in Sweden, more than 85 per cent of children aged one to five attend pre-school, and 74 per cent of children aged six to nine attend leisure-time centres, which provide care for school-aged children before and after school (Government Offices of Sweden n.d; Ministry of Education and Research 2008). This illustrates how a public childcare system marked by low fees and a high level of legitimacy, quality and accessibility is now an integral feature of Sweden's welfare state (Swedish Institute 2004a). The system also offers parents, and particularly mothers, more opportunities to engage in paid labour, whilst also having children, the result being high labour market participation rates for women and relatively high fertility levels.

Care allowance

An ongoing challenge to the economic and gender equality aspects of the Swedish social democratic welfare state is reflected in recent attempts to introduce a care allowance in Sweden. The Christian Democratic Party (KD) was one of the four parties that formed the governing centre-right coalition in Sweden from 1991 to 1994. One of the most important beliefs for the KD is that 'The family is the most important social unit', as it promotes 'concepts based on the Christian ethic' (Christian Democratic Party n.d.). The party is in favour of more 'choice' for parents to decide how to raise their children, which is a principal argument in favour of care allowances (Bergqvist *et al.* 1999). As a result, the KD was in support of a care allowance, which would make it possible for parents of young children to stay at home longer than the time allotted by the parental leave system, or to employ a domestic nanny rather than to place their child in public childcare.

Once elected in 1991, the centre-right coalition was divided on the issue of a care allowance. Through several rounds of negotiations with its governing partners, the Christian Democrats were eventually successful in implementing a care allowance in July 1994 (Bergqvist *et al.* 1999). However, when the Social Democrats returned to power just a few months later they immediately abolished the allowance (Bergman 2004), which meant that it existed only for a few months in 1994. The Social Democrats disagreed with the allowance because of its potential to encourage women to stay at home to take care of their children, thus reinforcing stereotypical notions about gender and care. In addition, the allowance allows parents to hire working class women to take care of their children as nannies, thus reinforcing gender stereotypes, and exacerbating class tensions among Swedish women.

While the care allowance existed in Sweden for only a short time in 1994, it is an issue to which the Christian Democrats have remained committed. When the centre-right coalition returned to power in 2006 the care allowance re-emerged on the political agenda. In 2008 the government, again, introduced such an allowance, granting municipalities the ability to provide an untaxed benefit of SEK 3,000 per month for a 'parent'² to take leave with a child between the ages of one and three rather than to utilize the public childcare system. There is no previous work requirement for the allowance, although it is to be used after parental leave has been exhausted, and requires that the other adult in the house be engaged in either employment or education. The experience of other countries with similar allowances, such as Norway, indicates that it: (1) is mainly used by mothers, not fathers; and (2) can lead to further labour market marginalization of those lower educated women who tend to take advantage of the leave (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010; Westlund 2007), thus demonstrating both the gender and class implications. The introduction of such a leave appears to go against the dominant gender paradigm in Sweden, which encourages full employment throughout one's adult life, with the exception of periods of parental leave, for both women and men.

By encouraging (particularly) women to detach from the labour force for several years, the home care allowance threatens women's economic inde-

pendence while, at the same time, reinforces the notion that child-rearing is predominantly a woman's responsibility. In fact, the Left Party argues that the home care allowance is a 'direct anti-feminist reform that encourages women to stay at home and be supported by their husbands' (The Local 2009). Thus, it does nothing to encourage men's role in child-rearing, which, again, goes against the direction of previous family policy initiatives (Westlund 2007). In addition, the allowance has not proven to be popular with Swedish-born parents, but is becoming more popular with immigrant women who face greater labour market marginalization. This was the fear of the Swedish Teachers Union, which issued early warnings about the allowance's potential for segregation and isolation among immigrant communities in Sweden. The fact that the allowance has only been adopted by 100 of Sweden's 290 municipalities (Landes 2010a) supports this fear of segregation, while, at the same time, demonstrates the limited impact of the reform to date. As such, the home care allowance could prove to be detrimental to the gender equality project in Sweden, which has, for more than 40 years, tried to move away from traditional gender roles and norms. It may also have broader implications for gender equality among immigrant communities, as well as employment levels among immigrant women.

Parental leave

Over time, the Swedish state has sought to increase men's role in childrearing by encouraging a more gender equal sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers. In 1995, the first 'father's month' was introduced, which meant that 30 days of parental leave was now reserved for each parent (Nyberg 2004). In 2002, this was extended to two months per parent (Berg 2005). As a result, the system today offers parents 13 months of leave per child at an 80 per cent income replacement rate, with an additional three months available at a flat rate. The total of 16 months currently available to parents includes two months reserved for mothers and two months reserved for fathers, leaving 12 months to be divided as the parents wish. The parental leave system is very flexible, allowing parents to use parental leave until the child's eighth birthday in a variety of ways, from full-time leave to part-time work and part-time leave (Swedish Institute 2004b). Due to the generosity and flexibility of the parental leave system, fathers have been increasingly taking up more leave; by 2008 men were using an all-time high of 21 per cent of parental leave, an increase of 11 per cent in just 11 years (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2010). While this is not anywhere near equal, there has certainly been movement in a positive direction since the introduction of both reserved months.

In April 2004, the government appointed the Thorwaldsson Commission to examine the parental leave system, to determine whether the system works in the best way for children and contributes to greater equality between women and men. On 15 September 2005 the Thorwaldsson Commission presented its proposals, which included a recommendation to increase paid parental leave to 15 months which would be divided into five months for the mother, five months for the father, and five months for the parents to split as they wished;

in addition, all mothers would have the right to 30 days leave before the birth, and the parents could take 30 days leave together after the birth (Berg 2005). These recommendations are very controversial, supported by some, but lacking support in the general population.

One of the major issues behind the current debate over parental leave is the fact that the system has actually had some unintended negative side effects for women's labour force participation. While parental leave has been successful in ensuring women's labour force attachment before and after having a child, because women take the majority of parental leave, employers seeking to hire new employees or to promote employees see women as more of a risk, leading to statistical discrimination. The Ministry of Finance in Sweden found that employers exclude women from occupations where absence is costly, resulting in a gender-segregated labour market (Nyberg 2004). This is cause for concern, as gender equality and full employment are two underlying goals of the Swedish welfare state. Anna Thoursie, an economist at the LO and Thorwaldsson Commission member, suggests that if both mothers and fathers had a fixed number of months under the parental leave system, then employers would be forced to adjust their expectations (Thoursie 2005).

The LO, the Left Party, the Green Party, as well as the Social Democratic Women's Federation and the Social Democratic Youth League all believe that parental leave should be divided equally between parents in order to remedy this situation (Berg 2005), as does the ombudsman for gender equality, Anne-Marie Bergström (The Local 2008). The SAP, however, was more hesitant about the commission's recommendations, as it feared the Swedish people were not behind such a reform (Berg 2005). In the case of parental leave, popular opinion has constantly lagged behind more progressive politics. For example, before the first father's month was introduced, surveys showed a majority were not in favour; similar results were found before the second father's month was introduced, although a majority was now happy with the one month that had already been introduced (Ferrarini 2005). As such, politicians have had to walk a fine line when it comes to how far to push their citizens in the direction of gender equality, although the citizens do tend to support such changes after they are introduced. A recent report by the Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees indicates that, at the current pace of change, it would take another 51 years before Swedish parents would achieve an equal sharing of parental leave (Vinthagen Simpson 2010).

While the SAP did nothing to implement the proposals of the Thorwaldsson Commission prior to losing the 2006 election, the party has, more recently, spoken out in favour of increasing individualization within the parental leave system. For example, in 2008 SAP leader Mona Sahlin stated:

The question is not whether we are going to share parental leave, but how . . . I don't think that we can get at the statistical discrimination currently experienced by all women of a fertile age in Sweden unless dads also have their foreheads tattooed so that employers can see and realize that this man could also be away, this man could also become a father. (O'Mahony 2008)

The solution proposed by the Social Democrats is to increase the individual quotas within the system in the short-term, leading to an outright individualization in the long-term (Vinthagen Simpson 2008).

Upon winning the 2006 election, the current centre-right government proposed and then introduced an equality bonus for couples that share parental leave equally, which came into effect in July 2008. The bonus encourages the lower income earner (usually the woman) to return to work earlier and the higher income earner (usually the man) to take their share of parental leave (Ministry of Finance 2007; The Local 2007). For low and medium income families, the bonus meant that it became more financially advantageous to share leave more equally than not (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010). The gender equality bonus in parental leave continues the tradition of encouraging female employment and fathers' involvement in child-rearing, while also fitting neatly with the neo-liberal 'freedom of choice' concept of the centre-right parties. As such, the policy has few detractors. However, as Ferrarini and Duvander (2010) point out, the bonus is technically complicated and it can take a year before couples receive payment. As such, to date the reform has not had the desired result of a more equal sharing of parental leave, and the Moderate Party has promised to revise the bonus, as part of its 2010 election platform (Landes 2010b).

Conclusions

While Swedish family policy has been challenged by neo-liberalism in the past two decades, and has even incorporated certain neo-liberal elements during this time, it largely remains social democratic, in that the underlying goals remain centred on equality and full employment. In addition to some neo-liberal reforms, such as the introduction of private for-profit childcare and a home care allowance, there have been many changes in the past two decades that are more in line with social democratic values. Such changes include the introduction of the first and second 'fathers' months', as well as the recent introduction of the gender equality bonus in the parental leave system. During this time, the childcare system has also expanded greatly, to include all children in need of a space, even those of parents who are unemployed or on parental leave with another child. The childcare system has also taken on an increasingly educational focus during this time, and remains a model for other countries.

It is clear that the neo-liberal elements that have been introduced into Swedish family policy in the past two decades are minor and their impact has been limited. The fact that private for-profit childcare has not expanded much beyond the wealthy suburbs of Stockholm, and that only about one-third of Sweden's municipalities have even implemented the home care allowance demonstrate the limited impact that these reforms have had on Swedish society and the social democratic welfare state. When comparing such reforms to those more in line with the equality goals of social democracy, such as the gender equality bonus introduced into the parental leave system, as well as the expansion of childcare to increase the system's accessibility and affordability, it becomes clear that the underlying social democratic goals of Swedish family

policy remain intact and exemplify the continued relevance of the Nordic welfare regime cluster in terms of its focus on full employment, equality and universalism in welfare state services.

Notes

1. The vast majority of women who work part-time in Sweden work what is called 'long part-time', or 20–34 hours per week, and only a small percentage work 'short part-time', or 1–19 hours per week (Statistics Sweden 2010).
2. The home care allowance is framed in gender-neutral terms as though men and women will be equally enticed to use the allowance.

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