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Fostering paternal involvement, gender equality and caring masculinities

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1. Introduction

Parenting policies affect how fathers perform childcare (Karu & Tremblay 2018). How can one create policies that simultaneously foster paternal involvement, gender equality and caring masculinities? This paper discusses recent parenting policies – parental leave and formal childcare policies – in comparison with Germany: the basic parental allowance (2007), the parental allowance plus (PAP) (2015), the partnership bonus (2015), and the expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (2013). I will however start by defining the three central concepts guiding this paper: parental involvement, gender equality and caring masculinities.

First, *paternal involvement* is a concept through which one can study the ways in which fathers care for their children, and children's (positive) outcomes of fathers' childcare (Pleck 2010). Second, *gender equality* is, here, understood as the (possible but not yet reached) equal *outcome* between men and women, especially as parents. Gender equality is a status-based right (Kantola & Verloo 2018), which 'refers to equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys' (UN Women n.d.). This definition of gender equality enables discussions about the effects of paternal involvement for not only father-children relations, but also for men/father-women/mother relations (Bekkengen 2006).

Third, I use the concept *caring masculinities* to discuss paternal involvement in relation to men (men as social category and men as individual agents), fathers (men who are either judicially, biologically, psychologically, or socially linked to children), and masculinities (cultural ideals connected to men and men's social practices) (Hearn 2014; Huttunen 2006; Pajumets 2012). Caring masculinities is a practice-based model of masculinity in which domination is rejected, while interdependence and relationality are incorporated in cultural beliefs on masculinities and/or in men's/father's social practices and identities (Elliot 2016). Finally, these concepts capture different relational aspects of fathers' childcare. Paternal involvement refers to interpersonal father-child relations; gender equality refers to structural men/father-women/mother relations; and caring masculinities refers to the internal processes within and between individual as well as groups of men/fathers.

2. The Swedish context

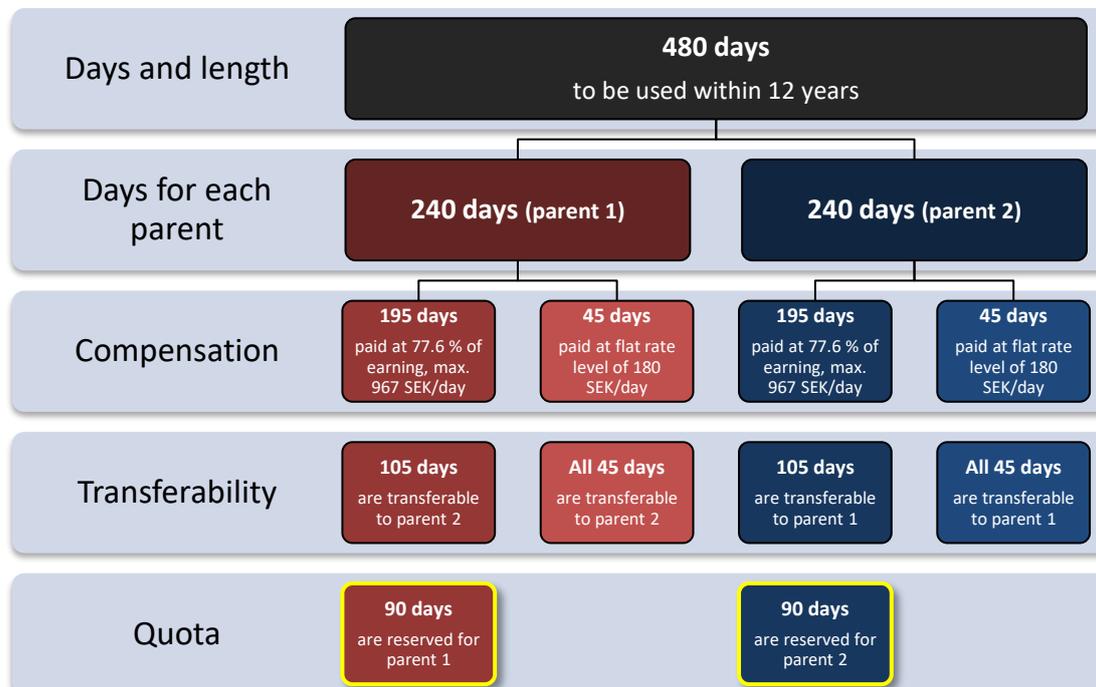
Sweden is one of the world's most gender equal countries, but it is not gender equal (EIGE 2017; World Economic Forum 2017). It is characterised by ideological support for gender equality (Johansson & Klinth 2008), which enables women/mothers to provide for themselves and men/fathers to act as primary caregivers (Hobson 2004). However, it is also problematic in that it: entails political correctness rather than change (Bekkengen 2006); takes heterosexuality and coupledness for granted (Andersson 2016); connects gender equality to Swedishness, whiteness, and

middleclassness (Bredström & Gruber 2017). In addition, the gender equality ideology is resisted among xenophobic movements, who use it in processes of ‘othering’ ethnic and religious minority groups or to oppose gender equality based on violent, essentialist and paternalistic understandings of gender (Mellström 2016; Towns, Karlsson & Eyre 2014). Gender equality policymaking, with all its flaws, must be defended against such attacks.

Sweden is one of the world’s most father friendly countries. Father friendliness encompasses: 1) equal formal rights and obligations for fathers and mothers regarding economic provision and care for children, 2) normative support – or even normative pressure – for fathers to take on caring responsibilities for children (Hobson 2004), and 3) fathers strivings for intimate relations to children, and 4) societal-political demands for gender equality between women/mothers and men/fathers. Needless to say, ideas around such *involved fathering* are strongly linked to the gender equality ideology (Gottzén & Jonsson 2012).

3. Parental leave and ECEC in Sweden

In relation to the German policies that this paper comments on, the most relevant Swedish policies are parental leave and early childhood education and care (ECEC). The following model illustrates the central aspects of paid parental leave in Sweden. Note that the model only shows how parental leave works among couples. Other aspects of the parental leave allowance are not brought up in this paper.



The parental leave insurance in Sweden is an insurance for parents of children aged 0 to 12. It is calendar day based, income related, and combines transferable with non-transferable days. It is a flexible system and allows for full-time, half-time, quarter-time or one-eighth time leave days; combining paid and unpaid leave, thus enabling parents to stay home longer; and taking up to 30 days of joint paid leave during the child’s first year (see Duvander & Haas 2018 for more information).

Longitudinal data of men's share of the total amount of paid leave days, from the launching of gender-neutral paid parental leave in 1974, shows a positive pattern. Men's take-up has gradually increased (Statistics Sweden 2018). The 30 days quota – non-transferable days – in 1995 and the 60 days quota in 2002 are important reasons for this development (Duvander & Johansson 2012). 28 per cent of the total amount of leave days were paid to men in 2017 (Statistics Sweden 2018), and a great majority of eligible men take at least some leave (Duvander & Haas 2018). It is yet to be studied how the latest quota regulation, the 90 days quota in 2016, will affect men's take-up.

Using other measures, a more pessimistic pattern appears. Only half of eligible men use paid parental leave during year one (SOU 2017:101).¹ Men take 18 per cent of the total parental pay during year two (Försäkringskassan 2016).² Only 17 per cent of heterosexual couples share parental pay equally during year 0–2 (Försäkringskassan 2018).³ Moreover, social divisions such as age, level of education, income, and country of birth creates inequality structures among men eligible for paid parental leave (Försäkringskassan 2013; SOU 2017:101).

In Sweden, children may start preschool/ECEC centre at age one. Since income based parental leave pay lasts for at least 13 months, there is no time gap between parental leave pay and ECEC entitlement (Duvander & Haas 2018). Most children between 1 and 5 are enrolled in ECEC: around 50 per cent of one-year-olds, 80 per cent of two-year-olds and more than 90 per cent of three to five-year-olds attend ECEC (Skolverket 2017). Approximately 40 per cent of ECEC staff are trained preschool teachers, 10 per cent have other pedagogical backgrounds, and around 20 per cent have upper secondary school level training related to children. An approximate 30 per cent lack education related to children. Just over 4 per cent of the personnel are men (Skolverket 2017). For the scope of this paper, the most important thing to underline is that ECEC functions as an extension of and a complement to the childcare performed by parents during parental leave: childcare is familised through parental leave and defamilised through ECEC (Leira 2006).

4. What is going on in Sweden?

Parental leave and childcare policies are more or less always up for discussion in Sweden. First, concerning *parental leave*, two governmental reports on a revised parental leave model were recently presented (SOU 2016:73; SOU 2017:101). The final report suggests the following changes:

- *Days, length and days for each parent*: From 480 to 460 days of paid leave (230 for each parent) *to be used within 10 years*. 390 days must be used between ages 0–3; the remaining 70 days can be used between 4–10.
- *Compensation*: From a combination of income related paid leave days and paid leave days of a flat rate level, to *income related paid leave days only*.
- *Transferability and quota*: From 90 to 130 days reserved for each parent. The remaining 100 days/parent are still transferable between parents (SOU 2017:101).

¹ Refers to fathers of children born in 2012.

² Refers to fathers of children born in 2014.

³ Refers to parents of children born in 2015. The percentage of parents who share parental leave equally is however increasing.

The suggestions resemble research criticising Swedish parental leave for being too flexible (Duvander 2013). Whether the suggested changes above will be implemented is yet to be seen. Several political parties would though like to gradually expand the number of reserved days in the parental leave insurance.

Second, concerning *ECEC*, a new preschool curriculum was adopted in August 2018. From a gender perspective, it is interesting to note that gender equality has a slightly different and more prominent role compared to the previous curriculum. Preschool personnel shall 'challenge children to broaden their capabilities and interest without being limited by gender stereotype perceptions', and head of preschools shall include 'gender equality in the systematic quality work' (Regeringskansliet 2018: 3, 10). Both the old and new curricula underline that preschools ought to cooperate with parents. However, while policy relating to preschools' and parents' care of children respectively integrate a gender perspective, there is no gender perspective integrated in the relations between *ECEC* and parents. Although both interventions serve the same need – children's need for care – they do not really 'talk' to each other. While the best interest of the child and gender equality among parents are constructed as important topics in parental leave policy-making, *ECEC* curriculums *do* gender *children* but *do not* gender *parents*.

5. Germany and Sweden compared

The *basic parental allowance* in Germany has several similarities with the Swedish parental leave allowance. Both systems have quotas; both are long, so that there is no time gap from the end of parental leave and start in *ECEC* (at least formally); and both are income related.

Parental leave allowance plus (PAP) has made the German parental leave allowance more flexible in that it encourages and enables part-time work *and* use of parental leave (Reinschmidt 2018). Although some degree of flexibility seems to be a precondition for increasing men's take-up of parental leave (Haas & Rostgaard 2011), it also maintains the gender asymmetrical take-up patterns of paid parental leave (Duvander 2013). The right to reduce the number of working hours while having children aged 0 to 8, which can be combined with paid or unpaid leave, is commonly practiced among many mothers and a few fathers in Sweden (for detailed numbers, see Statistics Sweden 2018: 60). The flexibility of the Swedish parental leave scheme and the German PAP intervention create possibilities for mothers to combine family life with paid (part time) work. Men do indeed have the right to use these flexible arrangements, which they also do to some extent. However, the flexibility of parental leave is mainly used by women in order to manage the conflict between paid work in the labour market and unpaid work in the home (Reinschmidt 2018; Statistics Sweden 2018). Men/fathers remain still relatively non-addressed in both Germany and Sweden.

Just as PAP, the German *partnership bonus* has been added to the basic allowance in order to make it more flexible (Reinschmidt 2018). Gender equal decisions, through simultaneous part-time work among couples, are rewarded with extra months of paid parental leave. This way of constructing the bonus differs from the former gender equality bonus in Sweden, which was launched in 2008 and abolished in 2017 (Regeringskansliet 2015; Statistics Sweden 2018). The bonus gave economic rewards to parents who shared parental leave equally. It had, unlike quotas, no effect on the number of paid days used by men (Duvander & Johansson 2012). One of many reasons is that household economy is an overrated mechanism for explaining why

parental leave is unequally divided (Bekkengen 2006). Is *time* more important? Duvander and Johansson (2012: 328) indicate that this might be the case: 'To have more time with your child at the expense of work seems to be a more valid claim than earning a bonus (or losing less income).'

Concerning *ECEC*, both German (since 2013) and Swedish (since 1995) children have a legal right to preschool from age one (Lundgren 2017; Reinschmidt 2018). In the Swedish case, a main challenge is the lack of trained preschool teachers and, although generally well appreciated by parents, the uneven distribution in terms of quality and equivalence throughout the country (Skolinspektionen 2018; Skolverket 2017). Lack of places is not as acute in Sweden as in Germany.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Can parenting policies support paternal involvement, gender equality and caring masculinities? Yes, but with some limitations. First, concerning *paternal involvement*, the parental leave systems of Germany and Sweden foster caring relations between fathers and children. Generous and gender-neutral parental leave systems enable fathers to care (Karu & Tremblay 2018). Second, gender-neutral parental leave is one of many interventions in the field of parenthood politics (Leira 2006). It is an imperfect but progressive instrument for increased *gender equality* between women as mothers and men as fathers. Third, gender-neutral parental leave can foster *caring masculinities*, especially on the level of cultural beliefs, but less so in fathers' social practices and identities (Axelsson forthcoming, 2019). (Re)constructing masculinities, connecting it to (child)care rather than domination, is clearly desirable and important (Elliot 2016). Such processes, however, are complex, time consuming, culture specific, and do not (dis)solve inequalities as such between women as mothers and men as fathers. The main problem with most parenting policies is that fathers, as men, are not explicitly targeted as a gendered and powered category.

I will finish this paper with a few practice-based thoughts and recommendations:

- In order to make *PAP* successful, and for increasing its potential transferability to other countries, one needs to: 1) closely follow how *PAP* is used by men in general and especially among marginalised groups of men; 2) set children and their needs of care in the centre of the policymaking, hereby not only legitimising men's part-time work and childcare but also to support it institutionally and normatively.
- In order to increase the efficiency of the *partnership bonus* as an instrument for gender equality among parents, the number of fathers using the basic allowance and *PAP* over longer periods will probably need to increase substantially. As far as international comparative research on leave take-up among fathers show, quotas combined with income related parental leave pay is the most effective instrument (Karu & Tremblay 2018). However, for those countries who still would like to use more 'gentle' interventions, like bonuses, it is probably wise to simplify such bonus systems and to reward parents with time *and* money.
- *ECEC* should be more closely connected to gender equality policy. In addition to solving all practical issues (trained personnel, a sufficient number of *ECEC* centres, low and equivalent fees etc.), one needs to view *ECEC* and parental leave systems as integrated interventions for providing paternal involvement, gender equality, and caring masculinities.

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