Sweden's parental leave may be generous, but it's tying women to the home [1]

New parents are given 240 days off between them – but corporate pressure means it's men who then return to work

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EXCERPTS

Born and raised in Sweden by Polish migrants, I was always taught to cherish and appreciate Sweden's welfare system. It was something to be proud of when looking outward to the rest of the world. Just as Swedish, however, is the traditional family unit. I grew up surrounded by families with mothers who ran the household, as if things were just meant to be that way. Television advertisements always seemed to show the working man with his supportive wife. But as I grew older I started questioning some of this: for all the glorification of the "Swedish model", welfare didn't amount to equality. What had long appeared to be a forward-thinking, modern society in fact delivered some obvious contradictions.

Take the issue of parental leave: Sweden is consistently ranked as one of the best countries in the world on this measure. After the birth of a child, both parents are eligible for a total of 240 days' leave. I never gave this much thought until I returned to Scandinavia after living overseas for several years, and saw how all my female friends and colleagues who had started families were limiting their professional careers and slipping into gender roles reminiscent of past generations. Given that they had the freedom to choose, what explained the fact those traditional gender roles were so entrenched? And why was it that, despite having one of the world's most gender-equal systems, mothers were not re-entering the workforce at the same rate as men after parental leave? Could it be that a welfare system taking care of material needs had paradoxically produced a degree of complacency that allowed outmoded, conservative social expectations to prosper?

In a safe, stable and wealthy country such as Sweden, conforming comes naturally. Things work well if you follow the line. The Swedes have a word for this: "lagom": neither too much nor too little of anything. Government policies allow for flexibility in how couples decide to use postnatal benefits: while both parents are entitled to 240 days' leave, 90 of those days are earmarked as a minimum for each parent, and the remaining 150 days can be transferred to the other parent upon consent. This is where traditional expectations seem to come into play. According to a report in the Nordic Labour Journal, mothers often take the majority of that flexible leave. There seem to be two reasons for this: traditional gender dynamics within couples, and corporate expectations in which workplaces pressure fathers to take only those weeks specifically allotted to them.

So while family-friendly policies make Sweden stand out, they do not guarantee a more progressive view of a woman's place in society. And with current politics being influenced by rightwing forces, there is a trend towards returning "traditional family values" to the fore, as if preserving national pride hinged on this. Against that backdrop, there is a risk that rights once thought well protected might be reversed.

One way of preventing a traditional division of roles from becoming further embedded could be to simply change policies. Anne Lise Ellingsæter, a professor at Oslo University, has argued for a dual parental leave model: parents of a newborn baby would be provided with an equal number of weeks, none of which would be transferable. But limiting flexibility might also mean limiting people's ability to choose what is right for them. Instead, perhaps we need to look at educating families in gender equality, rather than taking choices away from them. Providing information about the benefits of equally divided parental leave, childcare and duties in the home would be a more sustainable solution.

Because their country is so often cast in a positive light on social issues, many Swedes find it difficult to express dissatisfaction, for fear of sounding ungrateful. This leaves us with a catch-22 situation, where the inequalities that exist are brushed to one side and never debated, because "we're lucky enough with things as they are".

Yet change is happening at a grassroots level. I recently came across a set of Swedish-language Instagram accounts dedicated to educating women (and men) about equality, family life and gender norms. One such account, @mansbebisar (translation: man babies) has gained a following of more than 70,000 people in just 18 months since its launch. The posts make it clear that Swedish households are anything but equal: women still take on the majority of the workload in the home, care for their children and project-manage the family. They also shed light on how taking up the bulk of parental leave means women find themselves financially disadvantaged – a frequent topic in social media discussions.

Accounts such as these help women and men understand how they need to change. It's as if progress was being mapped out by digital communities before – hopefully – reaching the political realm. There's no denying family policies are better in Sweden than in many other countries. But to think there's no room for improvement would be foolish. The Swedish model shouldn't be seen as perfect, but rather as a good indicator both of what works and what steps still need to be taken on the long journey towards a truly gender-equal society.

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