

Swedish childcare system is hardly a utopian model ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

See also: Response by Ursula Kilkelly, senior lecturer in the faculty of law at University College Cork and Dymphna Devine, senior lecturer in the School of Education at University College Dublin. "Nordic childcare model best for economic and social wellbeing ^[2]"

EXCERPTS

Scandinavia, and particularly Sweden, is regularly presented as a kind of social Utopia, especially for women. A headline from May 7th last in The Irish Times - "It's yummy to be a mummy in Scandinavia" - sums up the general view. The article mentions research that shows Norway and Sweden are the best places to bring up kids.

On Thursday, at a seminar at the Iona Institute (of which I am a patron), two people raised serious questions about that picture. Jonas Himmelstrand, a Swede, concentrated on negative outcomes for children, and the virtual eradication of the choice to be a full-time carer for your own children.

The other, Dr Catherine Hakim of the London School of Economics, demolished the idea that Sweden has achieved gender equality. The glass ceiling, she said, is harder to smash in Sweden than anyone imagines. Sweden has a highly segregated labour market, with women clustered in lower-paid public service jobs, while men are much more likely to be in higher-paid private sector work. The gender pay gap still remains.

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Himmelstrand explained that while he has great respect for spirituality, he is not himself religious or affiliated to any religious organisation. Religious belief motivates very few of the Swedish parents who question the expectation that virtually every child will go into childcare by 18 months while their parents return to work. Often, they are self-employed people. If they are not going out to work, they wonder why their child has to go to daycare. Most of them are shocked when they find their choice is seen as antisocial. Major pressure is put on people to conform.

Working as a management consultant, Himmelstrand heard from women how sad they were about leaving their one-year-olds in daycare. He began to notice there were no children in the playgrounds during the day. If you walked down the street with a three-year-old toddler, people were amazed and disapproving the child was not in daycare.

He also found educational standards were slipping in Sweden, and rates of psychological distress and psychosomatic illnesses among teens had gone up dramatically, not to mention disruptive behaviour in schools.

When he had children himself, two of whom have special needs, he and his Swiss wife were considered almost perverse to want to care for them at home.

In his presentation he was very fair to Sweden's achievements. Child poverty, at 10 per cent, is far lower than the EU average of 20 per cent. Life expectancy is high, and infant mortality low. Educational investment is a priority. But still he believes something is wrong. There is serious concern about slipping standards in daycare. The ratio of childcare workers to children has worsened.

A sick childcare worker is not replaced - and these workers already take more sick leave than anyone else. He believes research on raised cortisol levels on children in daycare under three are being ignored, despite the fact most Swedish parents would prefer to delay daycare until age three.

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In Ireland, we are told that if only we had a daycare system like in Sweden, all would be well. This is despite the fact substantial numbers of Irish women choose to stay at home, while many others try to replicate home-like conditions for their children, relying on relatives and friends for childcare.

Irish families don't want a Nordic model. They want flexibility, and respect for their choices.

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The dire economic situation means we can't replicate the Swedish model. Maybe we have had a lucky escape.

- reprinted from the Irish Times

Related link: "Nordic childcare model best for economic and social wellbeing" [2]

Region: Europe [3]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [5]

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