

Nordic childcare model best for economic and social wellbeing^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There is no single utopian model of childcare and no society that, as Breda O'Brien suggests (Opinion and Analysis, May 28th)^[2], could be considered as a social utopia. Yet there are substantive differences across societies in their social and economic policies, with clear differences in outcomes.

The Nordic model may not be perfect, but as recent OECD/Unicef analyses indicate, Scandinavian countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark) consistently fare among the best internationally on all the indicators of children's wellbeing.

This is because their welfare policies emphasise the civic role of the state in facilitating quality of life and wellbeing among all its citizens.

Quality state-supported early childhood care and education is a core part of these welfare policies. Such policies are driven not only by a commitment to gender equality but also by the recognition that structured system-level investment in children and childhood yields long-term benefits. It does so for children themselves and for society as a whole.

It is no coincidence that societies that follow the Nordic welfare model also have among the highest levels of social trust and innovation - key indicators of economic and social wellbeing.

Modern life is stressful and made more so by the absence of structured supports that enable both men and women to combine their family and working lives.

Sweden has led the way internationally in investing in quality, accessible and affordable childcare. Combining this with generous parental leave - which replaced maternity leave as early as 1974 - the Swedish model facilitates women's participation in the workforce as much as it aims to improve men's involvement in child-rearing (known as the earner-carer model).

Moreover, in the Swedish system, generous parental leave is viewed as a complement to the development and expansion of the childcare system, with both aimed at helping mothers and fathers better balance work and family life.

It is no coincidence that societies such as Sweden have among the highest rates of women active in politics - a necessary precursor, it seems, for the development of child- and family-friendly welfare services.

That women may still find it challenging to achieve gender equality in societies such as Sweden does not undermine these policies. Rather, it highlights the entrenched nature of gender stereotypes and that there should be no complacency on how gender equalities can be achieved.

The system is not without its unintended consequences, however. The length of parental leave has worked against women's advancement in the workforce as employers in a globally competitive environment see the hiring or promotion of women candidates as a greater risk, and women face even bigger hurdles returning to the workforce after a lengthy period on leave.

This is undoubtedly related to the fact that despite efforts to make parental leave an equal entitlement of both parents, women still take the majority of parental leave in Sweden. Plans to further enhance opportunities for mothers' participation in the workforce and fathers' role in child-rearing continue to be developed.

Sweden has been highly successful at establishing what is largely considered a leading international model of childcare. This has been achieved with a clear focus on establishing minimum standards in childcare. The result is a high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare system.

In addition to the high rate of participation - 85 per cent of children aged under five years attend pre-school, and 74 per cent of children aged six to nine attend leisure-time centres that provide after-school care.

Universal entitlement means that all parents are guaranteed a childcare space without undue delay. The system is largely publicly run, with only 20 per cent attending private day care centres. In 2002 the state introduced a system of maximum fees that could be charged, making the system even more affordable as parents pay no more than 1-3 per cent of their income in childcare fees.

The daycare system is now more inclusive than ever, incorporating, for example, children whose parents are unemployed and on parental leave.

Unusually, the high level of participation of women in the workforce is matched by a high fertility rate among this group. Women who know they can balance being a mother with having paid employment have more children. This is especially important in developed societies that have also become "ageing" societies.

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It is surely not perfect - what system is? But given what we know about its significant merits, and the woefully inadequate, costly and inequitable Irish "system", it is simply not credible to reject it completely.

The move towards neo-liberal policies across western Europe poses the greatest challenge to the gains made in Nordic welfare societies. Policies that threaten universal welfare provision should be the focus of critique in debates about gender equality and the improvement of children's wellbeing.

- reprinted from the Irish Times

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