
Lessons from a land where women shine

Olle Folke⁺ and Johanna Rickne^ψ

Abstract

Unlike Japan, Sweden has achieved substantial gender equality in paid and unpaid labour, and women are increasingly occupying managerial positions. This paper describes key statistics for gender equality in Sweden and discusses three policies that were helpful to reach this point. We then draw on three examples of Swedish policy failures and remaining challenges to highlight some pitfalls that other countries could strive to avoid. Our overall objective is to facilitate cross-country learning from best and worst practices with a particular focus on facilitating Japan's ambition to Let Women Shine in the labor market.

Introduction

Sweden and Japan are similar in some aspects. It is not uncommon hear Swedes say that they identify with the emphasis on personal integrity and modesty in Japanese culture. The two countries also share the economic challenge of an ageing population. Fewer tax payers and more seniors will put pressure on public finances over the coming decades.

Family policy and gender equality are often discussed as tools to address the challenge of the ageing population. Family-demographers often assume that gender equality will have a positive impact on childbearing (e.g. McDonald 2000).¹ The idea is to move from an economic structure with single-earner families to an economic structure where dual-earner couples share both the paid and unpaid work. In this new equilibrium, both women and men derive the benefits of developing their talents on the paid labor market, as well as developing close relationships with their children in the household, thus increasing the incentives to have children among both genders.

⁺ Uppsala University, Department of Government, and Research Institute for Industrial Economics; olle.folke@statsvet.uu.se

^ψ Research Institute for Industrial Economics and Uppsala Center for Labor Studies; johanna.rickne@ifn.se.

¹ Research on Swedish couples have shown that more equal couples indeed have more children (Duvander and Andersson 2006).

Goldin (2006) describes the development over time toward gender equality on the labor markets of western democracies. Some countries have progressed further than others, and some important challenges remain. But despite the incomplete nature of the transition to economic gender equality, lagging countries can (arguably) learn from the successes and failures of the leading countries.

Relative to Japan, Sweden has come a long way toward gender equality in the labor market and in the household. This is evident from survey data on norms. In the most recent World Value Survey, 93% of Swedish respondents, but only 13% of Japanese, disagreed with the statement that men should be given priority to scarce jobs. Similarly, 90% of Swedes, but only 43% of Japanese, rejected the idea that women have lower abilities to be business leaders. Differing norms are also evident regarding the household. Asking Swedish and Japanese men if they thought that a situation where the wife's salary exceeds her husband's is "almost certain to cause problems", 77% of Swedish men disagreed, but only 18% of Japanese men.

Besides moving further toward gender equality in norms, Sweden has also made substantially more progress toward implementing a dual-earner economy in practice. The first objective of this paper is to describe this current situation in Sweden with respect to gender equality in paid and unpaid labor. The second objective of the paper is to discuss how Sweden reached its current level of equality. While some recent research has preferred to initiate this discussion in technology or culture that dates back thousands of years (Alesina et al. 2013), we restrict our discussion to the last fifty years. Out of the numerous Swedish reforms in the policy area of gender equality, we present three reforms that are commonly viewed as having had a great impact.

Our third and final objective is to discuss some remaining challenges that Sweden face in the area of gender equality. A closer examination of these challenges and/or policy failures are, arguably, equally or more important than the successes in terms of cross-country learning and comparisons.

1. Gender Equality in Paid and Unpaid Work in Sweden

1.1. Women going to work, and men going home

In the 1970s, Swedish women entered the labor market on a large scale. Between

1970 and 1990, the proportion of women in the labor force rose from 60% to above 80%. This development is depicted in Figure 1. The growth in labor force participation was cut short by Sweden's financial crisis in the early 1990s, but had at that point almost reached parity with men's participation rate.²

A striking feature of the types of participation of men and women is the larger proportion of part-time workers among women than among men. As Figure 1 shows, the growth in women's labor force participation between 1970 and 1990 consisted almost entirely by this type of employment. Since then, the proportion of women in full time jobs has increased, but even in the most recent statistics, one in three working women held a part-time job, defined as working less than 35 hours per week, compared to one out of ten. This can be seen by comparing Figure 1 to Figure 2, which shows the rate of labor force participation and distribution of participation types among men.

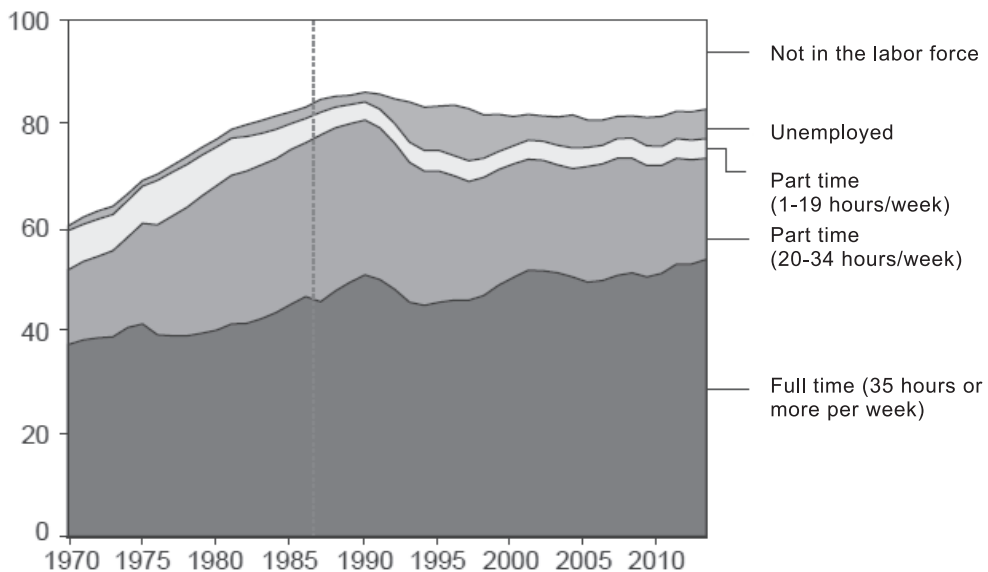


Figure 1. Labor force participation rates among Swedish women, 20-64 years old.

Source: Swedish Labor Market Survey (AKU), cited in Statistics Sweden (2014).

² Unless reported otherwise, the statistics in this section are drawn from the report "Women and men in Sweden 2014, Facts and Figures" (Statistics Sweden 2014).

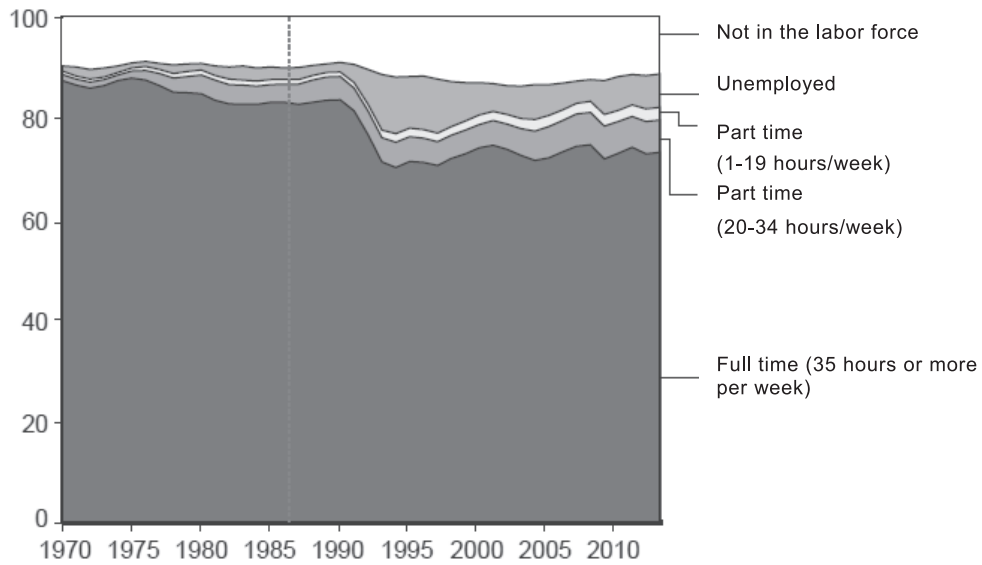


Figure 2. Labor force participation rates among Swedish men, 20-64 years old.

Source: Swedish Labor Market Survey (AKU), cited in Statistics Sweden (2014).

In time use studies, participants carry around a diary to log their activities over several days, giving us a snap-shot of how men and women spend their time across market and non-market work. The results of three waves of Swedish time use surveys are summarized in Figures 3, for a typical weekday, and Figure 4 for a typical day on the weekend.

The figures show how the Swedish pattern of time use has become more gender equal over the 20 years between 1990 and 2010. Over this period, women increased their time in paid work by an average of 30 minutes, while men decreased theirs by an average of 45 minutes. In terms of unpaid work, women reduced their work time by 1 hour and men modestly increased theirs by 8 minutes.

In 2010, a situation was reached in which the overall time use is quite equal, in particular regarding weekend activities. On weekdays, the average woman still does more unpaid work and less market work, but the difference is much smaller than it used to be. Adding up the total number of hours over one week's time, the average women worked on the labor market for 30 hours and in the home for 26 hours (a total of 56 hours of work). The average man worked 37 hours on his job and 21 hours in the household (a total of 57 hours). One conclusion is that time allocations remain different, but the total number of hours worked (in paid and unpaid labor) is similar.

We can also take note that the work-weeks of paid labor are quite short from an international perspective.

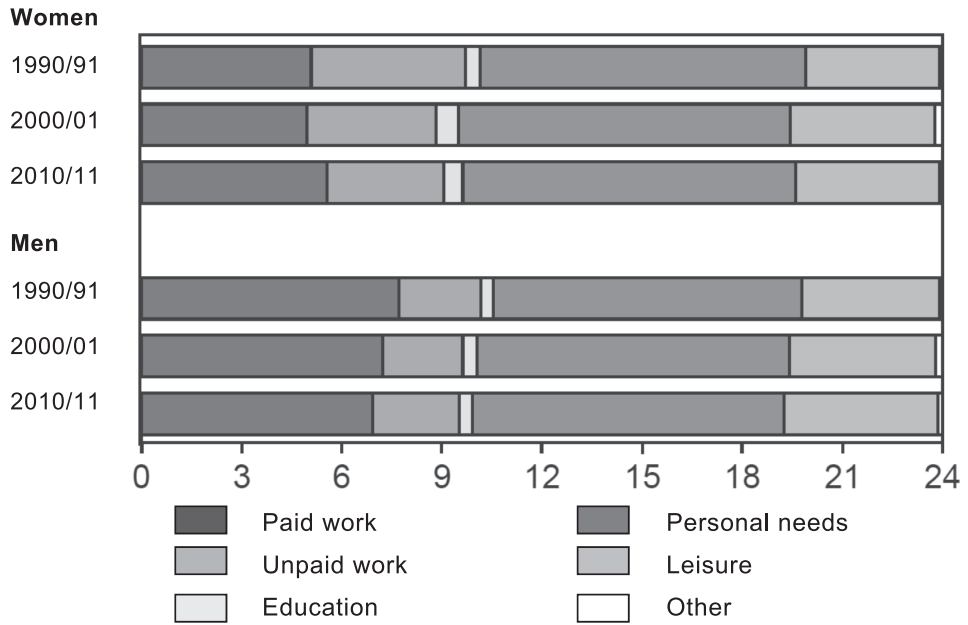


Figure 3. Time use during a weekday. Source: SCB (2014)

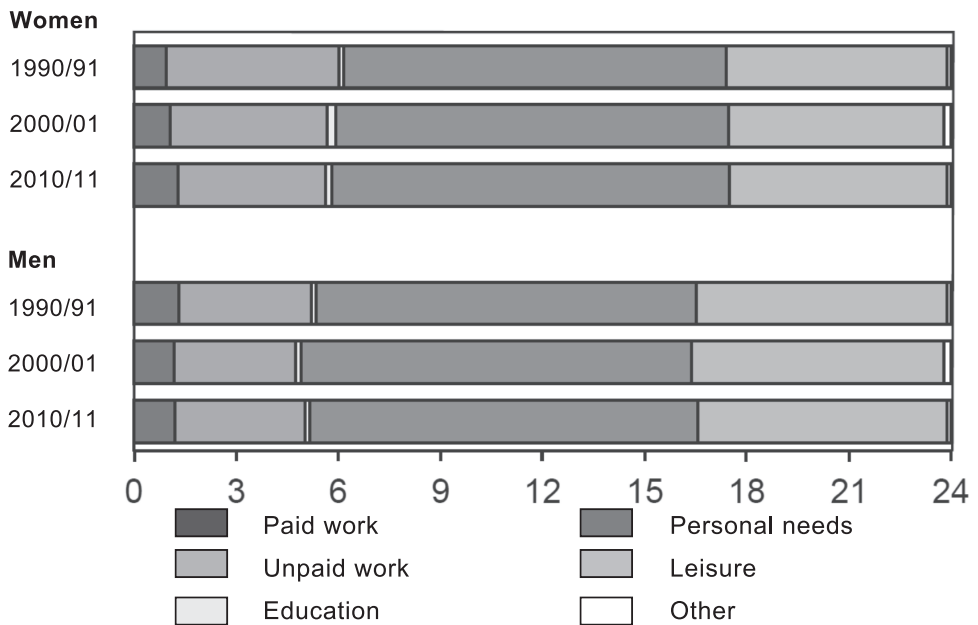


Figure 4. Time use during a weekend day (Saturday or Sunday). Source: SCB (2014)

1.2. Parental leave

In other countries, Swedish dads are sometimes depicted as relaxed guys holding a café-latte in one hand while pushing a baby stroller with the other. And indeed, men's uptake of parental leave has increased from zero in the 1970s to about one fifth of the total number of days of leave in 2013. This development is shown in Figure 5. As will be discussed below, reforms that introduced gender quotas in the parental leave insurance were of particular importance for this increase.

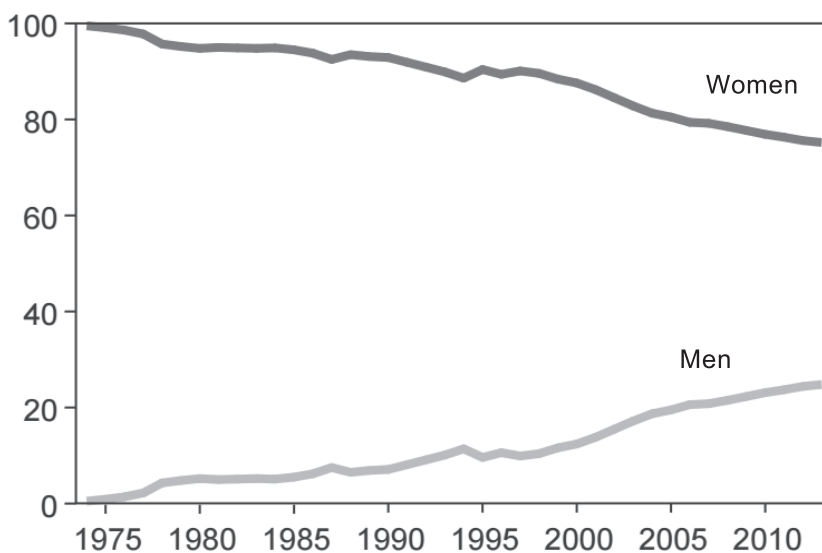


Figure 5. Women and men's percentage of the total days of paid parental leave, 1974-2013.
Source: SCB (2014)

Another key statistic is the number of days of parental leave that men and women take. Sweden's parental leave policy stands out in an international comparison by allowing a long period of leave. For each child, the parents can take a combined leave of 480 days (16 months). Out of these, and conditional on employment prior to the birth of the child, 390 days carry a wage replacement rate of 77.6%. The remaining 90 days come at a piece-rate payment of 180 SEK (18 Euro).

The vast majority of couples use at least 12 months of leave. The average number of days of leave are shown by the sex of the parent in Figure 6. We can see that the number of days of parental leave among men has increased over time, albeit slowly. Correspondingly, women's leave periods have been somewhat shortened, but a large gender difference remains in the number of days taken off from work.

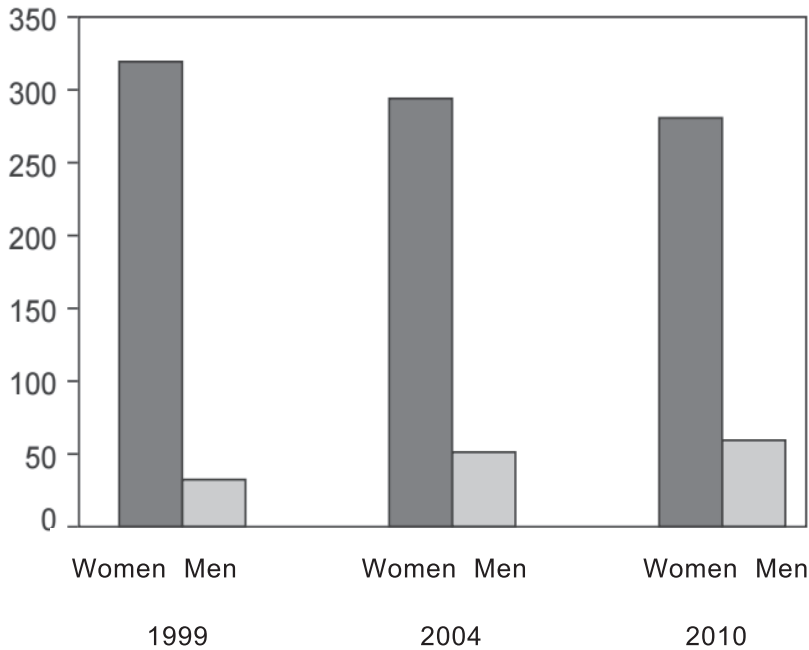


Figure 6. Days of parental leave in the child's first two years. Source: SCB (2014)

1.3. Management

Closing the gender pay-gap will require equal opportunities for men and women to be promoted to higher positions in their organizations (Goldin 2014). Swedish women have made inroads into management positions across the economy, but large discrepancies remain. Table 1 shows the gender distribution of managerial positions across aggregate economic sectors. These figures are based on data for all management positions, both higher and lower levels. The data show that the proportion of women among all managers reached 35% in 2012 (SCB 2014). In the public sector, the proportion of female managers was 65% in 2012, an increase from 43% in 1995.

Despite the apparent progress in women's access to management positions, substantial inequalities remain. A particularly important fact is that the proportion of women managers remains smaller than the proportion of women employees in all sectors of the table (not shown, but see SCB 2014). In addition, the proportion of female managers falls dramatically when the window of analysis is narrowed to the top management. For example, women account for less than 5% of the CEOs of listed companies.

Table 1. Gender distribution of managers by sector, 2012.

	Men (%)	Women (%)
Private sector	71	29
Public sector	35	65
... central government	56	44
... municipalities	33	67
... counties	28	73
Total	64	36

Source: SCB (2014).

2. Three Important Policies

The description above summarized Sweden's high female labor force participation rate, substantial inroads for women into management positions, and increased equality in unpaid work in the household. In this section we describe three policies which are commonly viewed as key stepping stones for that development.

2.1. Individual taxation

Sweden introduced individual taxation in 1971. Before 1971, the earnings of the two married spouses were added together and taxed according to a steeply progressive tax schedule. After the reform, each individual was taxed separately, regardless of marital status. This shift made women individual economic actors and signaled a change in social norms on family formation. Instead of basing the tax system on the male breadwinner, both persons in a couple became independent economic entities with respect to the government's income taxation.

Individual taxation led to a dramatic drop in women's marginal tax rate. For housewives, going into the labor force used to be subject to the "last dollar" marginal tax of her husband, a rate that was very high because of progressive taxation. By taxing the housewife's individually, her incentive to take a job increased since her marginal tax rate fell to the level of her own, individual, wage. Empirical studies on Swedish data have found that the tax reform had profound and positive impacts on women's labor supply, in particular for married women (Gustafsson 1992, Selin 2014).

2.2. Employment conditionality and protection in the parental leave policy

Two features of the Swedish parental leave system have been highlighted as particularly important for contributing to gender equality in the labor market. Both concern employment. The first is a rule that links the replacement rate for the parental insurance to employment prior to the birth of the child. The second is insurance's job-protection guarantee.

Consider first the conditionality of the replacement rate. Unless a person has worked more than six months with a wage above a certain floor, he or she is not eligible for the 77.6% replacement rate, only for the (lower) lump-sum payment. This rule incentivizes both parents to establish themselves on the labor market prior to having children, but is (at least in a transition stage) more important for mothers as they make the largest parental investments.

Consider next the job-protection rule. An employer is obliged to let mothers and fathers return to work after their parental leave. In other words, it is illegal to fire someone for going on parental leave (although it is legal to dismiss them for other reasons when they return to work). This policy feature has been studied by, for example, Rönksen and Sundström (1996) who find that the job-protection rule substantially increases the probability to resume employment.

Protected leave that lets the parent come back to the same employer matters for the gender wage gap and for the quality of matches between workers and firms. As argued by e.g. Waldfogel (1997), being forced to get a new job means the loss of tenure and firm specific human capital, undercutting the wage-earning potential of the parent. It also forces the parent into a period of unemployment and further loss of human capital by an even longer absence from the labor market. By not allowing firms to fire workers because of their parental leave, these losses are avoided, which is particularly important for maintaining women's wages as women are more likely to go on leave and to take longer leave periods.

Together, the rules of job-conditional replacement rates and job-protection in the Swedish parental insurance has incentivized parents to establish themselves on the labor market before becoming parents, and also ensures them that their job will still be there when they return.

2.3. Universal childcare

Table 2 shows statistics that describe the expansion of child care in Sweden. In 1972, only 12% of children below the age of six years were enrolled, but by 2013, the proportion had reached 87%. When considering this number, it is also important to recall that nearly all couples use one year of parental leave per child, dramatically reducing the proportion of children who are in public child care in the first year of their life and pushing down the enrollment rate in the 1-5 year bracket.

Table 2. Children enrolled in pre-school or comparable care, 1972-2013.

Age	1972		1980		1990		2000		2013	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1-5 (1)	689	12	604	36	641	57	471	65	572	87
6-9 (2)	360	6	338	22	289	50	482	62	432	83
10-12	316	1	332	3	294	7	367	6	300	20

* The number of children are measured in thousands. Source: SCB (2014)

(1) In 1972, 1980 and 1990, this category corresponds to 1-6 years of age.

(2) In 1972, 1980 and 1990, this category corresponds to 7-9 years of age.

Public childcare lowers the cost to labor market entry for the parent that carries the largest responsibility for the care activities in the household. Consequently, studies have found positive impacts on the expansion of public childcare on women's labor force participation rates (e.g. Andresen and Havnes 2014, Bauernschuster och Schlotter 2015). Studies also show, however, that the early stages of expansion mostly crowded out informal care, for example by grandmothers (Havnes och Mogstad 2011). When considering these effects, it is important to keep this time dimension in mind, especially since grandmothers' labor force participation is also a goal in itself. As women's participation rates go up across cohorts, informal care is no longer available on large scale, making formal care even more crucial for releasing labor from households.

3. Three Challenges

3.1. Women work as nurses, men as truck drivers

Sweden's labor market is highly segregated by gender. Women work in certain occupations and men in others. Among the 30 largest occupations, only three have a

gender split that is considered equal (40-60% of each sex). By this definition, only 14 percent of all working women and 13 percent of all working men are employed in occupations defined as gender equal. Moreover, the most gender-skewed occupations have very small proportion of the under-represented sex. In some of the largest occupations among women, nurses and nurse assistants, more than nine in ten employees are women, and occupations like child care workers and pre-school teachers come close to this level. Among men, private sector occupations in construction or mechanics are nearly 100% male.

There are various reasons why the gender segregated labor market is hurting Sweden's economic and social development. Given that talents and abilities are equally distributed among men and women, restricting half of the labor market to either gender is hugely inefficient from a labor allocation perspective. By making the entire market available to both genders, a larger pool of labor becomes available to employers and there can be better matches between talents and jobs. Quite notably, a large literature in behavioral economics has investigated gender differences in personality traits such as risk-taking, competitiveness and other-regarding abilities, but there are strikingly few studies that have been able to link gender differences in the lab to labor market outcomes (as recently summarized by Bertrand 2010). In other words, there is little evidence that some biological trait is driving the occupation choices of men and women, or that such biological differences could be used as an argument about the efficiency of the dramatic gender-occupation segregation.

Gender segregation in the labor market also feeds into other aspects of inequality. The gender-pay gap in Sweden stems to a large part from pay-differences across sectors (public or private) and occupations. The public sector also offers less lucrative career paths, feeding into the substantial gender gap at the higher end of the wage distribution (e.g. Albrecht 2003). Recent government inquiries into the large gender difference in sickness absence has also tied this pattern to the different work environments across male and female dominated jobs.

3.2. Economic incentives for gender equal parental leave

In the last decades, the Swedish political left and right have agreed on the need for policies that incentivize more gender parity in parental investments. But the two political blocs have been divided over which kinds of reforms to use. The left has

favored quotas in the parental insurance, while the right has favored economic incentives. Both types of reforms have been introduced and evaluated by researchers.

Social Democratic governments have gradually introduced quotas. In 1995, one month of leave reserved for each parent and these days were forfeited unless used by that same person. A second reservation month was introduced in 2002 and a third month in 2016. Evaluations of the first two reforms on men's parental leave showed a sizeable positive effect from the first reserved month, and a modest but clear positive effect of the second month (Duvander and Johansson 2012).

The center-right government of 2006-2014 argued that quotas in the parental leave insurance were an infringement on families' right to choose, opting to instead introduce a so-called Gender Equality Bonus. This bonus was put in place in 2008 and took the form of a tax credit to parents who shared the parental leave more equally. For every unit of time that is split equally, the bonus grows by about 100 SEK (approx. 10 Euro) per day. At most, parents who split the full leave period equally can receive a sum of 13 500 SEK (approx. 1,350 Euro). All parents who are entitled to the bonus receive a letter from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency to encourage them to apply.

Evaluation studies of the Gender Equality Bonus have compared parents to children born immediately before the introduction of the bonus (late June of 2008) to parents of children born immediately thereafter (early July 2008). These studies have not found any effect of the reform bonus (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2010a, Duvander and Johansson 2012)

Why did the Gender Equality Bonus fail to affect parental behavior? One contributing factor could be that parents had to apply for the bonus rather than receiving it automatically. Parents had to submit documentation from the employer to the Social Insurance Agency, a rule that made the bonus more difficult to utilize. Survey of parents have confirmed that many perceive as complicated (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2010b). Other explanations for the failure of the bonus to impact on behavior is that economic incentives, at least of the size offered by the bonus, are not powerful enough to overcome the strong gender norms around parental leave use (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2010b).

Another explanation could be that the equality bonus does not function as an efficient

bargaining tool for father vis-a-vis their employers. Compared to the reservation month(s), where time with the child would be lost unless it was used, the equality bonus only meant the loss of money (as reasoned by e.g. Hobson and Fahlén 2009). Thus, the failure of the Gender Equality Bonus to change behavior may be related to the capability to claim the right to parental leave from the employer. These claims matter less for mothers, who the employer expect to take leave anyway, but are more important for fathers for whom, in contrast to mothers, parental leave is a question of negotiation (Bygren and Duvander 2006).

3.3. The marriage market and the gender-career gap

In many ways, gender equality in the labor market starts in the household, making it interesting to study the marriage market as a source of the gender-career gap. In a recent descriptive study on Swedish Data, Boschini et al. (2011) uncovered the interesting finding of increased negative assortative matching over time. As Swedish women's rates of higher education and labor market participation converged with men's, marriages became more unequal. The difference in age and education grew within couples so that the average woman became younger and less educated compared to her spouse.

The finding of increased negative assortative matching is important in understanding the overall impact of gender equality policy. A back lash of this type, leading to families where husbands earn more, are older and more educated and their wives, mean that families become more likely to focus on his career and make gender unequal decisions about the division of unpaid work. Although the roots of the increase in negative assortative matching are not yet understood, they indicate that gender norms on family formation are very difficult to change and even reverse to more traditional patterns as a response to macro reforms that raise women's economic status.

Underscoring the severity of this backlash is recent research of ours that connects a single-earner family structure to gender inequality in careers. Folke and Rickne (2016) find that Swedish women pay a price of promotion, which is a dramatically higher risk of divorce when a woman is promoted to a top job. For men there is no such an effect. One likely mechanism behind these results is the fact that the men who are candidates for the top jobs often have a single-earner family structure. The women, on

the other hand, are implementing the dual-earner model, where two careers appear to over-burden the couple with stress and trigger divorce.

We show the main findings from the paper in Figure 7. The sample includes the 1,215 men (shown in the right figure) and 630 women (shown in the left figure) that competed for being promoted for the first-time to parliamentarian or mayor, and were married 5 years prior to the election. The lines show the share that remain married in each year, starting 5 years prior to the election. In the gray line we can follow the development for those that failed to win the promotion, while the black line shows the development for those that won the promotion. Up until the election (shown by the black line) the two groups of women follow a similar trajectory. However, directly after the election the lines diverge and at the end of the election period (year 3) there is a gap ten percentage points in the share that remain married. For men the trends are similar for the two groups both before and after the election. Thus, the results show that women pay a price of promotion in terms of divorce, while men do not.

These findings are also crucial in pointing out the importance of work conditions that allow the dual-career family to become reality. If work environments are too demanding on individual's time, pressure and stress bears down heavily on these families. Indeed, Swedish data show that sickness absence from common in dual-earner couples where both participate about equally in the paid labor force (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2015).

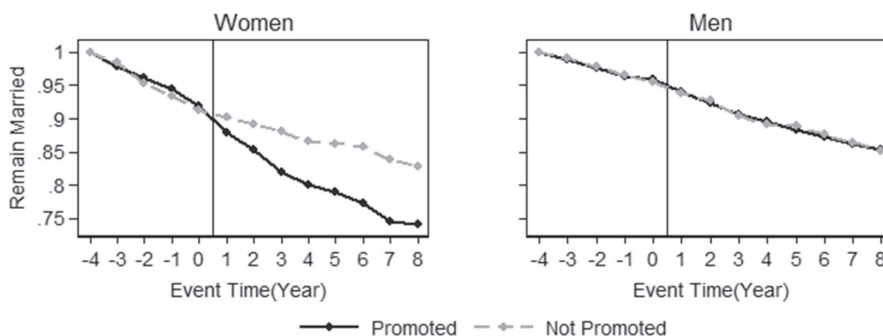


Figure 7. Promotion (event time = 0.5) and the probability to remain married, by gender.

Source: Folke and Rickne (2016). The data sample includes 1,845 men and women that previously have not been a parliamentarian or mayor and who were married 5

years prior to the event of competing for the promotion to mayor or parliamentarian. Data is from the 1991-2010.

Discussion and Conclusion

Sweden is a country with strong norms of gender equality and decades of continuous reforms aimed at creating a level playing field for men and women in the labor market. This agenda has been mainly pursued by left-wing governments, but also expanded by recent right-wing governments under the banner of economic efficiency, putting all talents and ambitions of the population to good use. These policies have created one of the world's more equal divisions of paid and unpaid work.

In the 1970s, Sweden introduced individual taxation and built a system of universal childcare. These two policies provided a foundation for women's economic independence and labor market participation. The parental leave insurance also contained important provisions related to employment. By conditioning the replacement rate on employment prior to childbirth, mothers (and fathers) are incentivized to gain a foothold on the labor market prior to becoming parents. A job-protection rule then ensures that the job will still be there after the leave is over.

Despite the path breaking advances toward gender equality, critical challenges remain. Perhaps most importantly, the transition of childcare from the private to the public realm came at the price of a dramatic gender segregation at the labor market. Women entered the paid labor market, but became highly concentrated in the public sector and in care-related occupations in child care, elderly care, and health care. This segregation has shown to be extremely persistent over time, and is cemented early in life by the choices across high school education programs of young men and women. The horizontal segregation of the labor market translates into gender gaps in wages and pensions as women-dominated sectors have low pay-levels and returns to experience.

Another challenge to gender equality in the Swedish labor market is the failure of women's career attainments to catch up with men's. Despite the fact that education attainments and labor force participation rates converged already in the 1970s, women leak out of the career pipe and fail to reach the top levels of most sectors in the economy. The fact that women still make substantially larger parental investments

than men partly is clearly a contributing factor to this situation (Angelov et al. 2013; Albrecht et al. 2015). Moreover, some reforms aimed at increasing father's parental investments have failed, most notably the introduction of an economic incentive in the Gender Equality Bonus.

A factor that contributes to gender inequality in the labor market, but which has not been the subject of much research, is the way that couples form on the marriage market. The men are older and make more money than their wives. These status differences within couples have become larger, not smaller. In other words, women's advancement in higher education and labor market participation has been counteracted by increased gender inequality within the household. These developments indicate a back lash that is worth further studies.

The importance of the marriage market as a challenge to bridging the gender-career gap is underscored by the importance of family structure for women's and men's career success. While men continue to benefit from single-earner families where their career takes priority and their spouse works part time, this path is largely closed to women. Women who reach the top of organizations often have a dual-earner family where their spouse also has a demanding job, family structures where promotions add substantial stress. Symptoms of this problem include the fact that women's marriages are destabilized when they are promoted, while men's are not, and the higher rates of sickness absence in dual-earner families. Another symptom is that women who are promoted become substantially more likely to see their marriage fall apart, while the marriages of promoted men become more stable.

All in all, Sweden's development toward gender equality in the labor market shows that rapid progress is possible. But the Swedish experience also shows that a high level of support for gender equality in the paid labor market are not necessarily accompanied with changing norms in gender roles for care giving. Sweden continues to struggle with a gender segregated labor market where women work in care giving occupations and take the lion's share of parental leave.

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