

## *Gender Equality Revisited – Changes in Nordic Childcare Policies in the 2000s*

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### **Abstract**

*The Nordic childcare policy model is often reviewed and even recommended internationally for its contribution to gender equality, high female labour force participation and, perhaps more indirectly, to a high fertility rate. Nordic childcare services and parental leave schemes have thus been portrayed in the literature as policies which have managed to facilitate a work–family model of dual earners and dual carers. However, the recent introduction of cash-for-care schemes seems to go against the Nordic dual earner/dual carer model and ideals of gender equality, in supporting parental (maternal) care of the child in the home. At the same time, new upcoming trends of political fatherhood and the perspective of lifelong learning for the child are also changing the Nordic childcare model.*

*This article provides an analysis of how new childcare policy goals have been articulated into policies from the late 1990s to the late 2000s and how these may challenge the traditional goals of the Nordic welfare states.*

### **Keywords**

*Childcare; Policies; Gender; Equality; Nordic*

### **Introduction**

Comprehensive childcare policies have been claimed to be one of the cornerstones of the Social Democratic welfare model of the Nordic countries (e.g. Gornick and Meyers 2003; Kangas and Rostgaard 2007). As Anttonen and Sipilä (1996) note, the Nordic countries are primarily 'social service states' in which public social services are locally and universally provided, thus available for all and used without stigma or loss of status. The extensive and generous support for paid parental leaves, individual rights for fathers, together with generous and abundant public day-care for young children is claimed to be one of the main explanatory factors for the development of a

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dual earner/dual carer model in the Nordic countries where women and men share paid and unpaid work (Leira 2006). The political argumentations for generous paid parental leave and day-care services in these countries have, accordingly, been based on ensuring both parents have the possibility to work and care as well as to promote children's well-being and development (Eydal and Kröger 2009).

However, traditional policy concerns perhaps stand out today as 'a bit old and somewhat blue' as new policy concerns, especially the goals of flexibility and parental choice, are gaining ground. A closer look reveals that recent policy developments are somewhat contradictory to the dual earner/dual carer model. All the Nordic countries have in recent years implemented schemes of cash for childcare which support parental care (in practise often the mother) of the child in the home. This not only works against gender equality but also results in postponed take-up of day-care for the child, thus working against the investment in the child strategy. At the same time, the facilitation of fatherhood through the introduction of special quotas in the parental leave and an increasing interest in the educational investment in the early years of the child, promote gender equality and early take up of day-care.

The aim of this article is to take a closer look at what seems to be the somewhat contradictory aims of the Nordic policies of day-care, parental leave and cash-for-care as they have developed from the late 1990s into the 2000s. The full scope of Nordicness will be represented by the inclusion not only of the 'usual suspects' of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, but also countries which are more rarely included in comparative studies on Nordic childcare policies: Iceland and Finland.

The article concludes with a consideration of what the derived consequences are for the Nordic model as a unique policy regime and for the policy direction of the dual earner/dual carer model. The results show that the Nordic countries are still 'social service states' with generous and abundant public day-care and extensive and generous support for paid parental leave. This public support to parents of young children contributes to the continuation of the dual earner/dual carer model in the Nordic countries, which has in recent years been strengthened – in some countries – by the introduction of father's quotas in the parental leave. However, the cash-for-care schemes exemplify the variations in the promotion of gender equality and the dual earner/dual carer model across the Nordic countries, and – in addition – seem to work against another Nordic ambition, to provide equal opportunities for all children.

### **Old, Borrowed and Blue? The Traditional Policy Concerns behind Nordic Childcare Policies**

The Nordic countries are often singled out for their apparent success in increasing women's labour force participation and for creating a more gender equal society. In this sense, the Nordic way is often a 'borrowed' ideal model in the EU political agenda, but a closer look reveals some wearing out of the traditional policy agendas and some important differences between countries.

As shown in the following sections, traditional policy concerns of gender equality, female labour force participation and the interest of the child have shaped – and continue to – shape childcare policies in the Nordic countries. However, while these are supported by some of the new and upcoming policy ideals, they are challenged by others.

*The shared heritage of gender equality and the creation of the dual earner/dual carer model*

The Nordic family of nations shares both a historical and cultural heritage and has for decades worked explicitly on creating gender equality in work- and family-life, both in single country policies as well as in Nordic co-operation, such as the Nordic Council of Ministers (Arter 1999). As Leira (2006) notes, the gender equality model is the model that is predominantly being presented and promoted in Nordic parenthood policies. This model implies *the dual earner/dual carer model*, calling for men and women's equal sharing of the responsibility of care for children and paid work. The model may be said to connote a certain gendered citizenship model where the policy discourse is gender neutral – although there is some dispute over this among Nordic feminist scholars (e.g. Lister 2003) – with the explicit policy goal of promoting equality between men and women. Gender equality is in this way perceived to be more than equality of opportunity. Equality of outcome and especially the gendered division of unpaid and paid work is central (Leira 2006). An important part of the Nordic gender equality model is the facilitation, especially, of women's labour market participation – or what by Lewis (2001) has been named the Adult Worker Model, where men and women are considered equally employable and working full-time – but with the additional Nordic emphasis on equal sharing of care for children between men and women.

The comprehensive Nordic childcare policies play a special role especially with regard to the equal sharing of paid labour as it is one of the most necessary prerequisites for a mother's participation in the labour market (Bradshaw *et al.* 1996). Despite this importance of day-care for the Nordic dual earner/dual carer model, volumes of day-care differ substantially between the countries. Denmark has by far the highest coverage for children below one year (17 per cent) and for children aged one to two years (90 per cent), as table 1 on volumes of day-care shows. Iceland, Norway and Sweden have quite similar coverage with regard to the one to two year olds (70–79 per cent), while Finland has relatively low figures for this age (42 per cent). The Nordic countries provide day-care for 95 per cent of children aged three to five years old, except in Finland where only 73 per cent of children in this age group are enrolled in public day-care. And while cash-for-care schemes in many cases are mainly used by low income families, as we will show in the following section, day-care services are often a popular choice among other groups in society, e.g. as Kröger *et al.* (2003) note for Finland, middle and upper class families are typical users of municipal day-care.

Despite similar ideology and goals of public day-care, the difference in the coverage of children in day-care services is an indication of a different empha-

Table 1

Children aged 0–5 years enrolled in public day care in the Nordic countries in 2008, shown as a percentage of all children in the age groups

	0–1 years	1–2 years	3–5 years
Denmark	17	90	97
Finland	1	42	73
Iceland*	7	79	95
Norway	4	75	96
Sweden	–	70	97

Source: NOSOSCO 2009: 47.

Note:

\* = Figures for Iceland from 2007.

sis on female employment. The political agenda of facilitating parental labour force participation has been especially pronounced in Sweden and Denmark, where the goal of gender equality in work-life has, to a high degree, received broad political backing and has influenced the day-care service policies in the provision of full-time places and, with regard to Sweden, prioritizing provision for children of working parents (Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007). Gender equality in work-life has to a lesser degree been a concern in, e.g. Norway where the family policy model contributes to what Skrede (2004) terms ‘gender equality light’, in that it supports a highly gender divided work-life, where women more often are outside the labour market.

### *Increasing fertility*

Facilitating high female labour force participation is one thing, but achieving this and at the same time ensuring high levels of fertility is another. At the European policy stage, the Nordic countries are often cited as examples of countries that have achieved this combination of high female labour force participation without losing out in fertility (at a Nordic average of 2.0, compared to 1.6 in EU 27, 2007; Eurostat n.d.) (e.g. European Commission 2007: 77). While fertility was previously an important issue in all the Nordic countries, childcare policies have, however, not been designed with that in mind. As Ellingsæter (2009: 16) points out, the ‘Nordic parental leave policies are not intended as pronatalist measures, nor are they the direct cause of change in mothers’ employment and fertility practises’. Although fertility today does not play a significant role within the Nordic countries in policy debate, the collective evidence, however, seems to corroborate the fact that the Nordic welfare policies that enable parents to combine work and family life have a positive effect on the fertility rate (Ellingsæter 2009; Rønsen and Skrede 2010).

*Children's best interest and the perspective of the child*

A traditionally more explicit motive for Nordic childcare policies has been to ensure children's best interests. Childcare policies in the Nordic countries have also been influenced by the increase in children's legal rights that has set a clear mark on childcare policies, e.g. in the emphasis on children's voices and participation in decision making in day-care services (Eydal and Satka 2006), as well as in the introduction of child care guarantees for day-care provision (Eydal and Rostgaard 2010, in print).

**New Policy Concerns: Caring Fathers, Flexibility/Choice and Lifelong Learning**

While the above mentioned policy concerns have shaped and continue to shape the childcare policies in the Nordic countries, new policy concerns have within the last decades unfolded, of which some support the ideals of the Nordic dual earner/dual carer model, whereas others seem to go against these models, as this section will outline.

*Nordic fatherhood*

The importance of fathers as carers has been addressed both as a part of the Nordic policies on gender equality and as children's right to their fathers (Eydal and Gíslason 2008). However, the role of caring fathers and the extent to which the state should take actions, and which actions, to ensure fathers' participation in care has led to a heated debate in the Nordic countries during the past decades, culminating in the introduction of a father's quota in four of the five Nordic countries at present. The father's quota is an individual, non-transferable entitlement to a number of weeks of parental leave, based on the principle of use-it-or-lose-it, in order to stimulate fathers to take up leave (Lammi-Taskula 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Part of the explanation for the introduction of this quota was the male take-up of parental leave that remained low in the 1970s and 1980s in all Nordic countries. The idea of special quota for fathers was first discussed in Norway in the 1980s as a way to reduce gender inequality and strengthen the father-child relationship. Norway became in 1993 the first Nordic country to establish a father's quota of one month of parental leave (Brandth and Kvande 2003). The entitlements of fathers in Norway have gradually been increased and from 2011 the father's quota will be 12 weeks in all (Barne, Likestillings og Inkluderingsdepartementet n.d.). Both Sweden and Iceland later followed suit: in 1995 Swedish fathers became entitled to one month's father's quota, to be extended in 2002 to two months, and from 2008 bonus payments to parents who divided their parental leave equally (Duvander *et al.* 2008). In 2000, Icelandic mothers and fathers gained equal individual rights to paid parental leave of three months each and three months for either parent (Eydal and Gíslason 2008). In Finland, ideas about increased entitlements of fathers to paid parental leave have been debated for years, but no father's quota has been introduced so far. However, fathers in Finland can have three weeks by

Table 2

Parental leave in Nordic countries, percentage of income covered weeks of entitlements and the percentage of total number of benefit days used by fathers in 2007

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Percentage of income	100	70	80	100/80	80
Total weeks	50–64	44	39	42–52*	69
– only mother	18	18	13	9*	8
– only father	0	(2)	13	6**	8
– father with mother	2	3	0	2	2
Percentage of total benefit days used by fathers	6	5	33	9	20

Source: NOSOSCO 2009: 30.

Note:

\* = 56 weeks in total and 10 weeks for fathers from 2009.

\*\* = 10 weeks from 2009 and 12 weeks from 2011.

the end of the paid parental leave if they have used two weeks of the joint entitlements of the parents (Lammi-Taskula and Takala 2009).

Inspired by the neighbouring countries, Denmark in 1998 introduced a two-week father's quota, only later to be abolished as part of an extension of the parental leave period in 2002 (Rostgaard 2002; Borchorst 2006), the main political argument being that it is a private and not a state decision as to which parent should take the parental leave.

Table 2 outlines parental leave entitlements of Nordic fathers, and their use of leave days, as of 2007. Fathers in Iceland, Norway and Sweden use higher proportion of total days than do fathers in Finland and Denmark, and take-up suggests that Nordic fathers are first and foremost using their individual entitlements (quotas) while mothers use the lion's share or all of the joint entitlements (Eydal and Gíslason 2008).

Not only are there gender differences in take up, there are also differences in take-up according to socio-economic status. Research has shown that fathers with low income tend to take shorter leave than fathers with high education (e.g. Eydal and Gíslason 2008; Lappegård 2008; Olsen 2005). Hence it has been pointed out that policies on the father's quota fit well with the ideas and lifestyles of middle class families while they, to a lesser extent, accommodate working class families (Stefansen and Farstad 2010).

### *Facilitating flexibility and choice*

Along with the political project of the caring father, there has simultaneously been another competing discourse growing – that of free choice of parents to choose the form of care they believe is best for their children (Moss and Kamerman 2009). Schemes of cash-for-care have accordingly been implemented in all the Nordic countries, but at different points in time, providing

parents with a cash amount if they do not take up day-care. In all countries, we therefore find the paradoxical development of father's quota policies clearly indicating which parents should take leave (the father), and cash-for-care policies opening up parental choice and user sovereignty, but as we will show, this also results in it mainly being the mother who stays at home.

These cash-for-care schemes are different in character, organization and take-up, and their importance vis-à-vis the day-care services also differs in the Nordic countries (Eydal and Rostgaard 2010). Finland had enacted a cash-for-care scheme by 1985 and Norway in 1998 (Salmi 2006). The remaining three Nordic countries have, until recently, to a greater extent promoted the dual earner/dual carer model, implying that mothers also work when their children are young. However, in 2002 Denmark enacted new laws that made it possible for parents to apply to the municipalities for cash-for-care (Dagtilbudsloven nr. 501 06/06/2007) and in 2008 Sweden enacted laws on cash-for-care (Cronholm 2009). By late 2009 about one third of Swedish municipalities had either introduced cash-for-care schemes or planned to do so (Nyberg 2010). Iceland differs in that there are no national laws on cash-for-care, but since 2006 some municipalities have nevertheless implemented local schemes and, by late 2009, 11 out of 77 Icelandic municipalities had enacted cash-for-care schemes (Rannsóknastofnun um barna- og fjölskylduvernd 2010).

The political motives behind the schemes differ among the countries, although a common goal is to ensure parental choice in childcare arrangements, as table 3 shows. In Norway and to some extent also in Finland, equality between parents who use day-care services and parents who do not was an additional argument for implementing the cash-for-care, i.e. in these two countries principles about fairness and equal distribution of resources was also at stake. Furthermore, in the case of Norway, an important goal was to provide parents with more time to spend with their children (Ellingsæter 2006; Rantalaiho 2009). In Denmark, the concern has also been to provide municipal flexibility in the provision of day-care services (Dagtilbudsloven nr. 501 06/06/2007). Furthermore, the timing and institutionalization of the cash-for-care schemes differ between the countries, as table 3 shows.

The cash-for-care schemes have been proposed and enacted by parties right of the centre and as Ellingsæter (2006) points out with regard to Norway, the preceding political debate clearly exposed the various parties' family ideals, illustrating that the 'main dividing line is between different ideal models of early childhood: family based care versus a parent/institutional care mix' (2006: 41). However, the schemes have received more public support in Finland compared to Norway, where the two discourses of political fatherhood and choice are clearly competing (Rantalaiho 2009).

Table 4 shows the rules regarding eligibility to cash-for-care and amounts paid in the Nordic countries, and in the case of Denmark and Iceland, the rules of the capital cities. There are substantial differences in entitlements, e.g. in Finland, Iceland and Norway, all parents are entitled to the cash allowance, while the Danish allowances are only paid to parents outside the labour market. In Sweden, parents receiving certain social benefits cannot receive cash-for-care, and Swedish and the Norwegian schemes are most flexible,

Table 3  
 Law in cash-for-care (CFC), goals, financing and the administrative level of the schemes in the Nordic countries, 2009

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Laws on CFC?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Year introduced	2002	1985	(2006)	1998	2008
Financed by	Municipalities	State/municipalities	Municipalities	State	State
Implemented by	Municipalities	State and municipalities	Municipalities	State	Municipalities
Main goals	Increase choice	Increase choice (originally also: equality)	Equality/to close the care gap	Increase choice/ equality/more time for family	Increase choice

Source: Eydal and Rostgaard 2010.

Table 4  
 Nordic countries – cash-for-care, rules for eligibility and amounts as a percentage of average wage (AW), 2009

	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Copenhagen	Reykjavik
Age of the child?	1-3 years	1-3 years	250 days-3 years	6 months-3 years	6/9 months-2 years
Part-time day care + partial payments of cash-for-care?	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Can be used to pay others for care?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, but other schemes for that	Yes
Universal, for all parents regardless of type of income?	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cash-for-care benefits as a percentage of AW*	10.8	9.4	10.7	24.8	12

Source: Eydal and Rostgaard 2010.

Notes:

\* = AW 2007 is calculated by NOSOSCO (NOSOSCO 2009: 212-13).

For further information on NOSOSCO AW calculations, see <http://nososco-eng.nom-nos.dk/filer/publikationer/tabeller/descriptyp07.pdf>.

since parents can combine part-time day-care and partial allowances. Overall, benefits are rather low, representing between ten to 12 per cent of an average wage, only in Denmark is the amount higher than this (25 per cent).

The cash-for-care has been popular especially among parents in Finland. In 2008, more than half of the children under three years of age in Finland (56.9 per cent) were in care supported by cash-for-care allowances (Kela n.d.), reflecting public constructions of childhood which has changed in recent years to positively stress homecare as the proper care solution for children under three years of age (Hiilamo and Kangas 2006; Repo 2010). In the case of Norway, the cash-for-care scheme became popular immediately after being implemented. In 1999, 74.3 per cent of children aged one to three years old were cared for by the support of cash-for-care, but by 2008 this percentage was down to 34.9 per cent (Statistics Norway 2010), partly explained by the simultaneous increase in day-care places (e.g. Ellingsæter and Gulbrandsen 2007). However, in both countries, it is mainly mothers who use the cash-for-care scheme and often for longer periods of time (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006; Rantalaiho 2009; Repo 2010; Salmi 2006). Furthermore, in the case of Norway, take-up rates of the cash-for-care benefit are higher among migrant than non-migrant families (Rønsen and Kitterød 2010). At present, there are no studies comparing take-up rates in Swedish and Icelandic municipalities, which renders it difficult to evaluate and project the popularity of the schemes there. In Denmark, the allowance was only paid to 700 children in 2006 (Rantalaiho 2009).

Hence, it is too early to declare that the cash-for-care schemes have had impact in all the Nordic countries, but they nevertheless stand out. The (previously) service-intensive Nordic welfare states have now also introduced cash-for-care with regard to care for children, despite the idea that a child should be cared for at home, usually by the mother, until the age of three, which is in sharp contrast to the Nordic tradition of gender equality policies that have aimed at ensuring both parents the opportunity to participate in labour market and care for their children. The evidence of the gendered outcome is clear for the three countries where data is presently available: it is overwhelmingly women who use the scheme. The introduction of cash-for-care schemes has accordingly been criticized as they are feared to contribute to a backlash for mothers in the labour market and for fathers in the families (Sipilä *et al.* 2010), as they consolidate the traditional division of labour and economic gender inequality. The result for women may be longer absences from the labour market and a subsequent reduction in human capital, employment opportunities and earnings as well as pension contributions (Sipilä *et al.* 2010). It is a policy which is in line with present tendencies to introduce elements of user-empowerment and consumerism as the cash benefit can also be used for the purchase of care from other side, and a policy which reflects the ethos of individualism which has gained ground especially in the middle class (Sipilä *et al.* 2010). It is however, also a policy which reflects the trend towards re-familialization of care (Lister 1994; Sipilä *et al.* 2010), and a policy which risks generating polarization between families, due to the low and not income-related amount which is more favorable for low-income and migrant families.

Furthermore, while the cash-for-care schemes provide an alternative to the norm of full-time day-care services, this policy development may not always be in line with parental preferences. When asked about their preferences for various choices between policy options, parents in Denmark are least likely to support the combination of a choice between public day-care and cash-for-care support for privately organized day-care solutions (Finansministeriet 2005). Likewise, research among Norwegian mothers of young children in 1999 showed that although they did indeed want more time with their children, they would prefer longer paid parental leave and shorter working hours to a cash-for-care option (Hellevik and Koren 2000). Also, the relatively high take-up of the cash benefit in Norway is indeed not only the result of parents exercising their choice, but also due to the fact that public day-care has not met the demand and parents have, accordingly, used cash-for-care to bridge the gap between paid parental leave and day-care (Leira 2002; Lauritzen 2005).

### *Day-care as a right for and investment in the child*

As an interesting parallel development to the introduction of more choice for parents, more focus has at the same time been given to the advantages of these services for the individual child, as well as for society. Across the Nordic countries, the provision of day-care has as an important goal to create equal opportunities for children, regardless of their background. The Nordic day-care model is seen as a way to positively shape the life chances of the individual child by ensuring that the child experiences a good, socially developing and educational environment before starting school (Borchorst 2002; Sipilä 1997).

The quality of the pre-schools and the outcomes for children have accordingly gained increased attention and the educational as well as the pedagogical role of the day-care services is recognized, thus relating directly to the field of educational and equality policies, not least after the OECD PISA studies indicated that children who participated in kindergarten or pre-school education achieve better results in school (Bennett 2008). The provision of day-care is also believed to be of vital importance for the integration of migrant children and serves the purpose of integrating disabled children (OECD 2001). The best interest of the child is in this way not only a question of whether care in the early years takes place in the family or an institution, but has also become a question of providing the right stimulus and challenges to ensure that the child has the best chances in life.

In acknowledging the importance of day-care, all Nordic countries except for Iceland today provide a legal right to day-care for children, following the end of the parental leave, introduced in Denmark in 1998, Finland in 1990, Sweden in 1985, and Norway in 2009 (Eydal and Rostgaard, 2010 in print), and this is rarely found in other comparable countries (Lohman *et al.* 2009).

With the introduction of the cash-for-care schemes, it has accordingly been debated whether such schemes work against the best interest of children, e.g. it has been argued that the importance of day-care is such that it is not acceptable to deny children this public good (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006;

Rantalaiho 2009; Repo 2010). Only in Norway and Sweden is it at present possible to combine part-time day-care with a partial payment of cash-for-care (see table 4).

### **New Agendas, New Directions? The Nordic Model under Scrutiny**

What then are the implications of these developments in Nordic childcare policies for the individual child, families and society, and also for the understanding of the Nordic welfare states as a particular cluster with regard to childcare policies?

The differences between the countries have been increasing over the past few years, facilitating different childhood and parenthood models. The following overview (table 5) shows how the policies provide care support for care of children according to age.

Overall, countries seem to share a concern for the investment in the child and the importance of high quality day-care for children in their early years in order to stimulate early learning, whereas gender equality and the support for the dual earner/dual carer model comes in various versions, and with different emphasis on either the dual earner or dual carer model. Different views on familialism also seem to accommodate different ideals about when it is best for the child to start in day-care. As shown in the article, these ideals are not only related to the national child policy model, but also seem to be related to social class and ethnicity.

Denmark stands out as the country that provides most support in line with the dual earner model, even for parents of young children. The organization of the day-care services provision today is set up to match parents' need arising from their participation in the labour market, providing full-time, full-year provision. Despite the introduction of the cash-for-care scheme in recent years, the Danish model is based on (women's) early return to the labour market. Last but not least, what distinguishes the Danish policies from the other countries is the fact that from 2000 there has been no father's quota. Except for two weeks of paternity leave immediately after the birth, fathers and mothers in Denmark can decide themselves which parent should use the parental leave – with the result that it is the mother who takes the majority of leave days. Gender concerns are in this way mainly related to the equal participation of men and women in the labour market and less concerned with equal division of care work in the family. This is still regarded as a private decision for the individual family to make – and may be less of a concern here than in the other Nordic countries, due to the short duration of the parental leave. At best, one may say that Denmark takes a gender neutral stand to the equal division of care work between men and women. Often, the mother is therefore the main carer in the first year of the child's life in Denmark and thereafter childhood for most children comprises institutional or family day-care outside the family, where one in six children under the age of one are in day-care.

In the case of Norway and in particular in Finland, the cash-for-care schemes contribute to long-term absence of mothers from the labour market.

Table 5  
How are the policy goals translated into childcare policies in 2008 in the Nordic countries? (percentages)

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
0-1 year	Paid parental leave (50-64 weeks) Day care services (17)	Paid parental leave (44 weeks) Day care services (1)	Paid parental leave (39 weeks) Day care services (7)	Paid parental leave (*42-52 weeks) Day care services (4)	Paid parental leave (69 weeks) Day care services (-)
1-2 years	Day care services (90) (Cash-for-care)	Cash-for-care Day care services (42)	Care gap - private solutions Municipal schemes of cash-for-care Day care services (79)	Cash-for-care Day care services (75)	Paid parental leave Municipal schemes of cash-for-care Day care services (70)
3-5 years	Day care services (97)	Day care services (73)	Day care services (95)	Day care services (96)	Day care services (97)

Source: NOSOSCO 2009.

Note:

\* = in 2010, 42-52 weeks.

However, when the day-care volumes for the one to two year olds are examined, it is clear that the consequences of the cash-for-care scheme are dramatically different in these two countries. Only 40 per cent of the one to two year olds are in day-care in Finland, compared to 69 per cent in Norway (table 5). Where the popularity of the cash-for-care scheme in Norway has dropped alongside the increase in the day-care service provision, it is difficult to establish whether the high take-up of cash-for-care in Finland is due to new familism or due to the relatively low provision of day-care services. The cash-for-care scheme has existed since 1985 in Finland and seems to be an important component in the childcare policies. As Kröger *et al.* (2003) note, the cash-for-care along with the right to day-care services represent in Finland a new form of universalism, as they in combination provide a right to day-care services and compensate parents who do not make use of day-care services. Nevertheless, the cash-for-care benefits do not reinforce public care service production either and seem to be a choice or option particularly for low income groups. Children of low income families are thus more likely to be cared for at home. The gendered consequence, in addition, is that women and especially low income women – perhaps with precarious labour market positions – take long absences from the labour market. Along with the lack of the father's quota in parental leaves, gender equality seems less of a concern in Finland than in the other Nordic countries, both with regard to the sharing of paid work and caring.

In Norway, the cash-for-care scheme has, as mentioned, signalled less emphasis on gender equality and it does not support the dual carer model. On the other hand, Norway has, like Sweden and Iceland, introduced the father's quota. As discussed above, take-up ratios of fathers show very clearly that fathers do tend to use their individual rights – the use-it-or-lose-it idea actually works. Thus on this point, the development in Norway – along with Sweden and Iceland – has been more in line with the gender equality goals of the Nordic model than is the case in both Finland and Denmark, with regard to shared caring.

In Sweden, the contrast between central and local policies is remarkable. Gender equality and the dual earner/dual carer model has traditionally stood strong in Sweden, resulting in the father's quota, gender equality bonuses, generous provision of day-care services and a right to day-care, but policy pragmatism may – like in the other countries – have caught up with the ideals as municipalities are now able to offer local schemes of cash-for-care which may work against the equal sharing of work and care between men and women. In addition, the relatively long parental leave may disadvantage women in their return to the labour market.

Finally, Iceland has been the newcomer in the Nordic country group of generous and universal childcare policies, but has within a couple of years taken the lead and inspired other countries, also outside the Nordic group, in the progressive approach to equal sharing of parental leave between men and women with the father's quota of three months. Iceland has, like Denmark, promoted the early return to the labour market, through a relatively short parental leave, however without the similar coverage of day-care services (7 per cent) as in Denmark (17 per cent) for children below one year. Even

Table 6

Care policies that support or work against the dual earner/dual carer model

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Supportive					
Paid parental leave/entitlements connected to labour market participation	×	×	×	×	×
Father's quota			×	×	×
Legal claim right to day care	×	×		×	×
Not supportive					
Long paid parental leave (more than a year)					×
Cash-for-care	(×)	×	(×)	×	(×)
Care gaps between paid parental leave and day care			×		

though Iceland provides for a relatively high proportion of the children aged one to two years (80 per cent) (table 5), a care gap exists in the period from the end of the parental leave to the age of one year.

Summing up, table 6 provides an overview of the various policies that support or work against the dual earner/dual carer model and how the countries place themselves according to these policies. As the table shows, there is no clear direction in the policy line, and a country may have implemented policies that both work against and support the dual earner/dual carer model.

All countries offer paid parental leave where entitlements are connected to labour market position, which has a positive effect on the return to the labour market of women. Iceland has installed a day-care guarantee which should smooth the transition from parental leave to labour life. However, all countries have also introduced the cash-for-care, although the schemes seem to be of less significance in Denmark and, so far, are not widespread in Iceland and Sweden. The countries generally also seem to be upholding their course as no reforms or substantial changes have been introduced in the wake of the financial crisis; however, Iceland has recently reduced the level of the benefit in the parental leave and, in Denmark, municipalities have for a number of years cut down the opening hours in day-care in order to cut costs.

## Conclusion

The Nordic countries have traditionally stood as the proponents of gender equality and the dual earner/dual carer model in their childcare policies. The Nordic countries are still 'social service states' with a widely available provision of day-care services to children from the age of one. Services remain

publicly subsidized and parental costs are income-related, also allowing for the participation of children from low-income groups. The extensive and generous support for paid parental leave together with generous and abundant public day-care for young children is likely to contribute to the continuation of the dual earner/dual carer model in the Nordic countries, although the countries have from the beginning had different emphases on dual earning vs. dual caring.

New policy agendas of fatherhood have contributed to the traditional policy agendas of gender equality and the dual earner/dual carer model. Fatherhood has been politicized, resulting in the father's quota in three of the five Nordic countries and this has strengthened the gender equality goal. The traditional focus on the involvement of the child has also been continued and the rights of the child have gained ground in recent years, as has emphasis on the investment in the child.

The question is whether the introduction of the cash-for-care schemes has changed the direction of the Nordic childcare policies. The new cash-for-care schemes now introduced in all five countries all provide an alternative to day-care outside the family, but have come into life from different agendas of parental choice/municipal flexibility/fairness, and their importance varies greatly across the Nordic countries. The cash-for-care schemes seem to accentuate the inherent differences between the Nordic countries and in this way emphasize the variations in the promotion of gender equality and the dual earner/dual carer model across the Nordic countries. However, the introduction of the schemes also suggests that the childcare model which has been the trademark of the Nordic countries is ambitious, but perhaps to some degree also unrealistic to uphold, with parents requesting individualized care solutions and municipalities looking for less expensive approaches to providing day-care. Most importantly, however, the new schemes also seem to create a new social divide between children of lower income and/or migrant background who are more often cared for at home, and children of middle and upper income background who are more often in public day-care, a divide which is not easily combined with another Nordic ambition, to provide equal opportunities for all children.

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## Note

1. It is thus different from the so-called paternity leave, which is also given to the father. The paternity leave is aimed at relieving the mother, rather than giving the

father individual responsibility for the care of the child, and is usually taken within the first weeks of the birth of the child, while the mother is also on maternity leave. In the Nordic countries, the paternity leave has a duration of two to three weeks (see also table 2).

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