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Convergence, continuity and contradictions:
a cross-national comparative study of family policy in
Sweden and the United Kingdom

Elin Ennerberg

Abstract

Family policy and its role in increasing female employment is a concern for national governments as well as supranational organisations such as the EU. The purpose of this thesis is to examine recent developments in family policy in Sweden and the UK, such as the introduction of a home care allowance in Sweden and proposals for flexible parental leave in the UK, to see whether there is policy convergence in the area of family policy between these two countries. Economic policy changes as promoted by international institutions have had consequences for national policy and it is therefore relevant to consider whether there are tendencies to policy convergence in the area of family policy. By using globalisation theories and Esping-Andersen's typology of welfare regimes, recent changes in the UK and Sweden are analysed. The analysis shows that there are important ideological contradictions in terms of female employment in both countries. It is also found that the countries are path dependent to a certain extent but, at the same time, there are tendencies to convergence in line with EU and OECD recommendations in some areas. However, institutional welfare changes such as privatisation may also affect family policy, especially in the area of childcare, and pose further questions regarding the legitimacy of public welfare and the support for welfare programs.

Key words: family policy, female employment, welfare regimes, globalisation, convergence.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Social policy can be seen as a practical tool to solve, or attempt to solve, political problems, particularly related to social welfare issues and risks such as unemployment, sickness and old age. Viewing social policy from a life cycle risk perspective (see Ferrarini, forthcoming), another area which is important is family policy and support for families with children. This can be seen as particularly important partly due to the fact that the Western world is facing an ageing population but also because investing in children is important for social outcomes later in life as well (see Esping-Andersen, 2009).

Comparing different welfare regimes has been a way to examine how areas such as social policy, ideology and welfare institutions vary between countries. One example is Esping-Andersen who in his welfare regimes model identifies three welfare models as universalist, liberal and conservative according to their ability to decommodify citizens¹ (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 2002, 2009). While these typologies cannot explain the differences in welfare systems fully and also ignore certain important contradictions and combinations (Clasen and Van Oorschot, 2002: 93), they can nevertheless be useful as they represent different welfare ideals. However, in recent years, there has been concern over whether national welfare states can still maintain distinctive social policies or welfare regimes, due to changing economic ideals and concerns regarding financial sustainability (Esping-Andersen, 1996, 2009). The question is then whether the typology presented by Esping-Andersen is still relevant for comparing contemporary welfare states.

Some fear, for example, that national policies are converging as a result of economic and social transformations caused by globalisation (Stryker, 1998). One example is the Washington consensus in the 1990s which promoted a certain set of economic policies (Nordhaug, 2002). Furthermore, some nation states have partly surrendered national sovereignty to regional institutions such as the European Union (EU). Here, economic policy convergence through binding regulation is a necessity for the functioning of institutions such as the Economic Monetary Union (EMU) (Kleinman, 2002).

Not only economic decision making, but also social policy has been a concern outside of national boundaries, where different international organisations are promoting certain policies also within the social policy arena (Deacon, 1997, 2008). The EU has been active in this area as well but has only limited law-making power in the area of social policy (Hemerijck, 2002, Van Langenhove and Macovei, 2010: 23). Nonetheless, as the EU as a whole has an ageing population, creating EU policies which can maintain current levels

¹ See definition of decommodification below.

of welfare in welfare states is considered essential (European Commission, 2008). One important partial solution to this has been the 'active society', where for example people outside the labour market are encouraged to find a job or participate in training (Larsen, 2005). Furthermore, the EU has often emphasised the need to increase female employment as a way to increase the current labour supply. It is important to consider whether changes such as these challenge the traditional institutions of welfare states or whether they are adopted to fit the purposes of national welfare ideals.

In this thesis, I want to look closer at family policy as a means to examine these trends. For my analysis, I have chosen Sweden and the UK. Sweden has been a model example of the universalist welfare model (see Esping-Andersen, 1990, 2002, 2009) and has also been a frontrunner in policies aimed at activating women and providing extensive welfare services for children. The UK, on the other hand, has been classified as a liberal welfare state and has often led the way in opening up for deregulation and privatisation. This can be seen in its family policy, which has, for example, traditionally trusted the market to meet the demand for childcare and been reluctant to interfere in family choices.

In Sweden, state subsidised child care is provided by municipalities and parental leave policies aim to make it easier for men and women to share the responsibility for children through remuneration parental policies which can be shared between parents. Recently, however, the state sponsored benefit home care allowance ('vårdnadsbidrag') was introduced. Rather than activating women to participation in the job market this benefit gives parents who wish to stay at home with their child a limited amount of money until the child is three years old (see Regeringen, 2007). Furthermore, private providers of childcare have become increasingly common as a part of the development of public-private partnerships in the 1990s. While this has not yet led to a privatisation of cost for the childcare services, it remains an important development (Blomqvist, 2004).

In the UK, families can get help with childcare costs through the state sponsored tax credits system. However, this benefit only covers part of the cost for childcare, which is often expensive. Women have traditionally had an option of staying home with the children, for example, single parents were able to receive the cash benefit income support up until their children were 18 years old, a way for the government to support family constellations other than the two-parent nuclear family model through taxes. Recently, however, the law has been changed, and single parents can only receive this benefit until the child is 7 years old (directgov.uk, 2010a). Furthermore, the three main political parties in the UK have recently launched policies which would encourage fathers to take up parental leave to a greater extent.

1.2 Purpose

As childcare and the participation of women in the labour market are seen as important issues within the European Union, I want to look closer at policy in this area. Previous research from Avdeyeva (2006) and Randall (2007) has pointed to limited convergence in the area of family policy in EU member countries, although there may be tendencies to convergence in the future. With the introduction of home care allowance in Sweden and the possibility of a changing parental leave system in the UK as well as new rules for single parents, it is worth examining these issues again. Furthermore, with the focus on only two countries, it may be possible to look deeper into these issues.

The questions I want to examine in this paper are the following.

- Are Sweden and the UK are moving closer together or following their chosen path in the area of family policy and childcare?
- What impact do regional policy initiatives and policy recommendations regarding active labour market policies have on national policies?

The purpose of this thesis is thus to examine how family policy relates to social changes such as globalisation and international policy recommendations and whether there is a convergence. I am thus interested in changes in and challenges to welfare states generally, but also in how an area such as family policy fits current policy trends. I am concerned with the ideology of these trends, but also the practical contradictions and consequences at a national level. Examining these trends is important from a sociological perspective due to their relevance for political legitimacy in nation-states. Social policy can be seen as intimately related to political legitimacy, as individuals' support for social welfare systems depend on whether they feel that they get something in return for their contributions (Ferrarini, forthcoming). If global/regional policy is influencing national policy, how does this challenge state authority and citizens' claims on the state? How can citizens achieve or regain democratic control over policy if this is decided on a supranational level? While some commentators (Held, 2009, Falk and Strauss, 2001) see the solution as a form of global governance, as Mouffe argues (2005) these visions tend to ignore precisely issues such as democratic rights and accountability. A discussion of how these values can be maintained within nation-states in the context of contemporary political changes may therefore be more adequate. While I do not attempt to discuss these questions in this thesis, they are nonetheless important for understanding the context and purpose of the paper and their sociological importance.

1.3 Outline

At first I will discuss the methodology of the paper. Thereafter I examine the theoretical ideas of welfare regimes and globalisation trends in greater detail. Subsequently I review current legislation in Sweden and the UK as well as policy recommendations from the EU and OECD. Thereafter, I discuss relevant statistics on the topic to examine the current situation. After this, ideological considerations of national policies are considered. In the next part, I discuss to what extent there is a policy convergence and how this fits current policy ideals and trends. Finally, I give my conclusions on the topic.

2. Methodology

Policy research is a tool for understanding the ideas behind policies as well as their implementation. Kennett (2001: 38) argues that in order to understand contemporary social changes such as globalisation, cross-national social policy analysis is a vital tool. This argument is echoed by Becker and Bryman, who claim that "social policy students and researchers must embrace the need for comparative analysis to engage with the ideas and forces at work internationally" (2004: 12).

Comparative analysis regarding the area of social change has previously been conducted for example by Skocpol, who identified the factors different revolutions had in common and compared these with unsuccessful revolutions to explain the different outcomes (see Gomm et al, 2000: 240). This is in line with May's claim that one aim of comparative research is to "understand and explain the ways in which different societies and cultures experience and act upon social, economic and political changes" (1997: 182). Comparative research is thus suitable for researching phenomena such as globalisation and its effects on society. For Becker and Bryman, this research can range from description of characteristics, to classification of welfare systems, to explain these differences and finally to generate or test theories (2004: 126).

In order to conduct this comparative analysis, it is possible to conduct various qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, the use of quantitative methods to make a multiple regression analysis to analyse women's working patterns in different countries (see for example Meyers et al, 1999) is one option. Another appropriate methodology could have been to make a discourse analysis of EU and OECD recommendations as well as national policy documents.

For this thesis, however, I have chosen to use a documentary research method to conduct the analysis. This method "refers to the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon we wish to study" (Mogalakwe, 2009, citing Bailey) and is used to examine and classify written (or other) documents (Mogalakwe, 2009 citing Payne and Payne). According to Scott, documentary research should adhere to the

same research ethics as other types of methods. For example, the four criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning can be used to consider the quality of the documents which are being researched (Scott in May, 1997: 169). In this way, when the researcher checks for the document's authenticity, s/he examines whether the document is reliable and whether the source of the document can be verified (Mogalakwe, 2009: 52).

Furthermore, documents cannot be seen as independent, but "need to be situated within a theoretical frame of reference in order that its content is understood" (May, 1997: 171). Thus, in terms of examining and analysing policy documents, questions such as ideology and political context need to be explored (see Kennett, 2001: 46; Becker and Bryman, 2004: 30). Additionally, when using harmonised statistics, it is important to note that methodological issues arise with this type of data as well. For example, how the data is harmonised and the fact that national contexts can affect the way statistics is collected or measured are issues that should be considered (Becker and Bryman, 2004: 130).

In this thesis, I will use the documentary research method to conduct a comparative analysis of social policy. I believe that this method is suitable as, following Becker and Bryman, it will allow me to explain differences/similarities between countries and also to test the relevance of theories of globalisation and policy convergence as well as the welfare regime typology.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Welfare regimes

Esping-Andersen's (1990, 2002, 2009) three welfare state typologies include the liberal, corporatist (conservative) and social-democratic model². These models are explained from a historical perspective and represent ideal types of welfare states which nonetheless are more or less valid for different developed countries. Esping-Andersen discusses these three types in relation to how far they manage to de-commodify citizens, i.e. enable them to access basic social rights without relying on the market. The UK is one of the examples of the liberal model and Sweden according to this typology belongs to the social democratic welfare regime. The liberal model is characterised by targeting resources to the poor. Social welfare benefits are often means-tested to be directed to those in most need whereas the middle and upper classes are expected to protect themselves by purchasing private insurance. In the social democratic model, social welfare benefits on the whole are universal. Here, benefits are provided to all regardless of income and the middle classes thus have a stronger investment in the welfare state and less incentives to buy additional insurance on the private market. In

² Other authors have criticised his typology and also expanded it to include different regimes. See for example Wood and Gough (2006) and Arts and Gelissen (2006).

the corporatist model, benefits are often linked to employment and the state only provides minimal cover to those outside the labour market while the family plays a more supportive role. It is important to note that these ideal types have been criticised for failing to provide an accurate image of the countries' policies. For example, although the UK is labelled a liberal welfare state, health care is a universal service. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the liberal and the social democratic regimes as these are the ones relevant for discussing the UK and Sweden.

There have been important feminist criticisms of the welfare typologies as Esping-Andersen's work builds on paid employment and does not take account of existing gender structures and gender equality (see Daly and Rake, 2003; Sainsbury, 1999). For example, Lister (cited in Kilkey and Bradshaw, 1999: 154) claims that defamilialisation needs to be considered in welfare regimes, measuring to what extent women can achieve economic and social independence through employment or social security provisions. Other writers claim that women's roles as mothers and carers have not been significantly rewarded in the welfare state and that their rights and claims to citizenship have been limited by this (O'Connor, 1996).

Social and political changes have also challenged the viability of the welfare regime typology. In the next part, it is therefore important to review these trends.

3.2 Globalisation and social transformations

As noted above, an important concern regarding social transformations and welfare states is the challenge of globalisation and regionalisation on nation state sovereignty. While theories of globalisation take account of social, economic, political and cultural processes which according to some challenge national identities, culture and powers³, for the purpose of this paper the most relevant topic is how economic and political changes challenge national welfare. Here, the debate concerns both global institutions and regional decision-making bodies. Globalisation theory could be relevant for a discussion of the success of neoliberal ideology, whereas from a perspective of political governance, regionalisation as a process has been successful at least in terms of the EU. Through the EU, national sovereignty is being traded in for deeper regional integration in areas such as trade, but also economic policy and regulations in various areas (Kleinman, 2002).

As a result of processes such as regional integration and globalisation, there has been a discussion of the streamlining of policies in different national contexts. Through the 1980s and 1990s, certain neoliberal policies such as economic liberalisation, a roll-back of the state and fiscal responsibility were promoted globally by the World Bank, IMF and others and have constituted the dominant economic doctrine since, albeit to different degrees (Stiglitz, 2002).

³ See Held and McGrew (2003) for an overview.

In the EU, economic stability was declared to be of overriding importance through the Growth and Stability Pact in Maastricht, 1997 which regulated governments' budget deficit and which had the macroeconomic goals of low inflation and price stability (Kleinman, 2002). These goals have also been adopted in the EMU, although they have not always been fully implemented, as countries such as Germany and France have been allowed greater budget deficits without being subject to fines. Economic policy in the EU is thus an example of where international discourse exists alongside binding EU treaties which necessitates the implementation of these regulations for EU countries.

In many cases, globalisation debates have promoted a view that welfare state retrenchment and fiscal responsibility is inevitable. For Stryker (1998: 9), one of the most important factors regarding policy convergence is this ideological commitment to neoliberalism where national governments are no longer seen as being able to challenge the notions of neoliberal economics through national policy. In terms of national politics, one important development has been the Third Way politics, introduced by Tony Blair and the New Labour party with an influence on social democratic parties internationally (Clasen, 2002), which adapted the neoliberal commitment to the market, and also heavily emphasised individual responsibility (Dwyer, 2008, Jordan, 2006, Vij, 2007).

One important trend in welfare management is for example the use of activation policies and a view of welfare benefits as conditional. This strategy originated in the US, where there was a concern that single mothers were living on state benefits and needed to participate in the labour force (Brennan, 2007). In the UK, the New Labour government introduced Welfare to Work programmes which were more broadly aimed and required individuals to participate in certain activities such as education or meetings with job advisers to be able to continue to claim benefits (Evans and Millar, 2006). New Labour was thus keen to "use social policy to reward worthy citizens and discipline irresponsible ones" (Dwyer, 2000: 80). In Sweden, active labour market policies have traditionally been an important part of the welfare state but have in recent years taken on a more disciplining approach similar to activation trends in the rest of Western Europe (Johansson and Hornemann Møller, 2009).

Furthermore, fiscal constraints have decreased the ambitions of the state to create for example full employment, especially as this counters the binding goals of price stability and low inflation and is hard to achieve in an open deregulated international market (Helleiner, 2008). Additionally, governments almost exclusively focus on supply policy for labour (van Apeldoorn, 2009: 26). This is thus an important example of how, for example, EU regulations in terms of economic policy have important consequences for social policy constraints nationally. In this way, responsibility for employment has in some ways moved from governments to individual citizens (Dwyer, 2000, Jordan, 2006).

In line with the neoliberal argument, Third Way politics have also continued the commitment to privatisation of welfare services and regarded a strong state as undesirable in line with public management theories. There may thus also here be a convergence towards the liberal welfare state model where a strong state is seen as obsolete and private interests are better suited to run certain welfare services (Whitfield, 2001, Jordan, 2006).

In terms of the EU, social policy has not traditionally been a prioritised area, but one where national governments have not been willing to give up political power (Mosher and Trubeck, 2003: 66). Nevertheless, the EU has gradually increased its stake in the social policy area, for example through the Open Coordination Method which is meant to promote best practice in member states. The OMC includes guidance from the EU commission and Council on policy areas without having formal powers of enforcement, as well as participatory policy-making strategies (Mosher and Trubeck, 2003: 64). Furthermore, the Lisbon Strategy set up social policy goals which are meant to complement the EU's economic commitments and drive the development of a Social Europe which would modernise social protection (Daly, 2006: 465). In the EU as well, an important part of this agenda has been the discourse of active citizens and an active society as a key to increasing employment (Daly, 2006: 466). However, these EU goals are not compulsory for member states and are of course also affected by the strong commitment to fiscal stability.

3.3 International organisations and policy convergence

For Deacon, international organisations other than the EU have also begun to play a greater role in terms of promoting global social policy (1997). He is referring to organisations which aim to influence policy but also intergovernmental cooperation whereby policy is developed by national representatives learning from each other. One example is the way international organisations such as the World Bank promoted a certain model of pension reform which was subsequently adopted in various countries (see Orenstein, 2008). In the case of the OECD, country surveys and recommendations are ways to push agendas in member countries and to be an "ideational" authority (Marcussen, 2004). In the last decades, the OECD, IMF and the World Bank have promoted neoliberal policies, but according to Deacon (2008: 33), there may be a change in this trend, resulting in a greater interest in social democratic ideas.

Many commentators have resisted the idea of policy convergence, arguing instead that countries are path-dependent, above all in terms of social policies. Pierson mentions the 'stickiness' of welfare states, referring to the ways nation-states often fail to achieve policy reform (Pierson, 1998: 552). Additionally, in a more general social policy perspective, different studies point to continuous high levels of social spending in welfare states and argue that globalisation has a limited impact on national policy (see Navarro et al, 2004; Starke et al, 2008). On the other hand, some argue that this type of

studies which mainly focus on social spending patterns fail to take account of institutional changes in welfare systems such as privatisation and changing benefit structures and thus fail to notice essential structural changes in the national social welfare systems (Ryner, 2009; Clayton and Pontusson, 1998).

In summary then, there have been many developments in European welfare states in the last decades, partly due to regulations such as the EU and partly due to changing ideologies and commitments by national governments, often to some extent aligned with recommendations produced by international institutions. However, some believe that welfare states do retain their individual differences. It is therefore interesting to see whether recent changes in the UK and Sweden point to greater convergence or are indeed path dependent and whether any changes are in line with EU recommendations and other policy trends.⁴

4. Empirical material

Family policy can be seen as important in terms of reducing risks related to childhood, such as child poverty (Ferrarini, forthcoming). However, this policy area is also related to other issues such as female employment, which will be the main focus of this paper. When analysing policy, it is important to identify the problem which the policy aims to solve (Bacchi, 2009). In this case, it is seen as a problem that women do not participate in the labour market to the same extent as men. Firstly, this has been framed as a problem from a demographic perspective. The EU has an ageing population one way to soothe this problem would be to activate more women in the labour market. From a feminist perspective, it can be seen as problematic that women do not fully participate in the labour market as it gives them less economic and political power compared to men. Finally, from an economic perspective it can be seen as a waste of resources that women who are educated and/or skilled do not make full use of their potential. In this way, the same problem may take on different meanings and thereby perhaps different solutions.

There is also an opposing policy perspective which is prominent in the debate. In Sweden, this has been framed through a discussion of the difficulty to balance working life and family life. One solution is to produce policies which help families find a life-work balance through providing more choice for parents. The same discussion has been prevalent in the UK through a discussion of flexible working for parents and choice for

⁴ This is particularly relevant in light of the economic problems in the EU countries Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain. Here, economic constraints imposed on a supranational level are forcing national governments to reduce spending in traditional social policy areas such as pensions, threatening political legitimacy. While this is outside the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless relevant for my argument.

families. Here, it is thus seen as a problem that women, and to a certain extent men, do not have the opportunities to combine family and work life in a desired way. Rather than activating women, there is thus a different and simultaneous policy aim to provide choice for families. In this way, it seems as if there are contradicting policies in the area of labour market and family policy.

Considering legislation and institutions of social protection, in this case family policy, is important as institutional arrangements affect individuals decisions and possibilities, but also reveal historical and cultural choices in terms of policy (Esser et al, forthcoming). In the next section, I will look more closely at policy recommendations, national policy and national statistics in order to analyse these policy trends more closely.

4.1 Policy recommendations in the EU and OECD

As mentioned earlier, social policy has not been a prioritised area within the EU. Nevertheless, there have been various policy documents from the 1970s which have tackled the area of childcare and employment for women (see Randall, 2000: 355). Work on female employment has continued and the EU has framed this as an issue of gender equality, but also as a solution to changing demographics and an ageing population. For example, in the 'Road Map to Gender Equality' report, it is stated that "Better work-life balance arrangements are part of the answer to the demographic decline by offering more affordable and accessible childcare facilities" with targets of childcare provisions for 90% of children between 3 years old and school age and 33% for children under the age of 3 (European Commission, 2006: 8). Furthermore, flexible working arrangements are encouraged as are men's ability to take parental leave and share responsibility of childcare with women (ibid).

OECD also makes recommendations regarding family policy. Here, one aspect which is highlighted is the importance of parents' paid employment for reducing child poverty (2008: 2). Furthermore, fertility rates are linked to high rates of female employment. The OECD similarly to the EU encourages governments to ensure that childcare provisions exist and above all that it is affordable and match the needs of parents who are in employment. While the OECD commends the Nordic model of childcare, it acknowledges the high costs involved and therefore argues for private childcare provisions in other countries, such as the UK (OECD, 2005: 12). Paid protected employment leave which is shared by both parents is also seen as a measure which could strengthen women's attachment to the labour market, and the organisation emphasises the role of fathers in spending time with their children and, for Sweden, recommends an introduction of a bonus to encourage more equal uptake of parental leave (2005: 14). The right to ask for flexible working is also a measure promoted by the OECD. Furthermore, it acknowledges that some parents will want to stay at home with their children, but leaves it up to national governments to decide whether this should be subsidised (OECD 2008: 6).

It is interesting to note that the EU and the OECD provide very similar recommendations in this area. While there may not be a direct link between the OECD's recommendations and changes in national policy (Armingeon, 2004), and the same may be concluded for the EU in most social policy areas, it is interesting to use OECD and EU policy partly as examples of how international organisations attempt to influence policy and in which ways EU and OECD policies are aligned, as well as considering whether these policy recommendations are similar or different from national policies.

4.2 Family policy in Sweden

In order to be able to discuss policies in both countries I will summarise the main laws and regulations regarding childcare and support for parents with children.

In Sweden, childcare for children between the ages 1-12 is regulated by law and municipalities are required to offer all children childcare which is subject to "reasonable" fees. Also children whose parents are unemployed or on parental leave due to caring for another child have the right to participate in childcare (Skollag, SFS 1985: 1100). From when children are four years old⁵ they should be offered a place in pre-school if they are not participating and have the right to up to 15 hours a week of free childcare.

The majority of the childcare cost is covered by the state, but providers can be both public and private. Since 1991, local councils were able to give funding for private providers which fulfilled certain minimum standards (Vamstad, 2007: 112). Introduction of the maximum fee (maxtaxa) for childcare providers also means that these providers cannot take out very high fees. Furthermore, as part of New Public Management trends, some municipalities have chosen to contract out welfare services such as childcare (Nilsson, 2007: 11).

Maternity leave can be taken by the mother in connection to the birth of the child with seven weeks before and seven weeks after the birth. The father or another person is also entitled to 10 days leave in connection to the birth of the child. Thereafter, both parents have the right to be on full leave from work for up to 18 months. Parental leave benefit ('föräldrapenning') is paid out for a maximum of 480 day per child. If the parents have joint custody of the child, they are entitled to half of the days each. For 390 days, the benefit is calculated depending on the parent's income but cannot exceed 901⁶ SEK/day, thus offering a rather low replacement rate. For the remaining 90 days the lowest payment (which is guaranteed those on low incomes for the full period) of 180 SEK/day is paid out. 60 of the days are reserved for each parent and cannot be transferred. To encourage fathers to take out more than the 60 days parental leave which is non-transferrable, from 2008 an equality bonus was introduced. This can be

⁵ This will change to when children are three years old in July 2010.

⁶ Approximately...

paid out to a maximum of 13.500 SEK/child if the parents have split the days in half, effectively taking 6.5 months each (Försäkringskassan, 2010a).

Parents also have the right to reduced employment hours up until the child is 8 years old. The employment reduction can be maximum 25% of the regular employment hours. Parents also have the right to paid leave⁷ in on the grounds of temporarily caring for a sick child if the child is less than 12 years old. Normally a maximum of 60 days per child and year is allowed.

From 2008, parents can also claim the “vårdnadsbidrag”, home care allowance if the local councils offer this benefit. This consists of 3000 SEK/month and child and is paid out to parents who have children between 1 and 3 years old who do not take part in publicly financed childcare. This is aimed to give one of the parents the opportunity to stay at home with the child for a longer period of time, alternatively to take part in employment and use the money for other childcare alternatives than the publicly supported day nurseries. This benefit is not paid out to individuals who simultaneously use other benefits such as unemployment benefit, parental leave benefit or benefits due to long-term illness. Individuals who receive social assistance benefit can receive the care allowance but the allowance will count as income, hence effectively cancelling out any gains as the social assistance benefit will be reduced (ibid).

4.3 Family policy in the UK

In the UK, children between 3 and 4 years old are entitled to 12.5 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks of the year. This can take place in a number of childcare settings. Childcare can be provided by nursery schools or classes, pre-schools and playgroups, childminders or nannies (directgov.uk, 2010b). The Labour government has also created Sure Start Children centres which have been targeted to deprived areas. These centres are available to all in the catchment area regardless socioeconomic background but aim to improve chances for children living in poverty. Besides from childcare the centres also provide support for parents, parenting advice and employment advice (Stewart, 2005: 146).

Parents who work can claim tax credits for childcare costs. Single parents need to work a minimum of 16 hours a week to be able to claim and parents in a couple both need to work 16 hours a week minimum. The amount received is means-tested and depends on your earnings and the maximum amount for those with very low earnings is £140/week for one child and £240/week for two or more children. It is also possible to claim child tax credits for the costs of looking after a child who lives with the parent up until the child is 16 years old or 20 years old and in full time education or training (directgov.uk,

⁷ Note that this paid leave does not offer full wage replacement but is either calculated as a certain percentage of the individual's expected wage or for individuals with a low income or no income consists of a low benefit.

2010c). Due to the wide variety of childcare providers, there has been concern regarding the quality of the childcare provided and to which extent these childcare providers can cover the need for childcare (Lloyd, 2008).

Working mothers-to-be can claim Statutory Maternity Pay 15 weeks before the date the baby is due. Statutory Maternity Pay can be paid for a maximum of 39 weeks and is for the first six weeks paid at 90% of your gross weekly earnings. For the remaining 33 weeks it is paid at 90% of your weekly earnings or £124.88/week, whichever is lower. Maternity leave can be taken for up to 52 weeks (directgov, 2010d). Fathers can take two weeks of paid paternity leave subject to the same financial rules as for Statutory Maternity Pay from the date the baby is due, the date of the child's birth or on a day that has been decided together with the employer (Directgov, 2010e).

Parents have the right to ask their employer for flexible working, including for example part-time working, although the employer has no obligation to grant this (Directgov, 2010f). Both parents have the right to take parental leave of up to 13 weeks per child until the child's fifth birthday. These weeks are not transferrable and must be taken out as full weeks, not individual days. The parental leave is unpaid (Directgov, 2010g).

Single parents who are not working have also been able to claim the benefit income support on the grounds of being single parents. Now, changes have been introduced which has introduced an age limit where from October 2010 single parents can only claim income support if their children are aged 7 or younger. Previously the age limit was 18 and the changes were phased in with the age limits of twelve, ten and seven over three years (Directgov, 2010a). The Labour government introduced these changes arguing that "helping more lone parents into work will reduce child poverty" (DWP, 2008: 50). This was part of broader changes to conditionality on benefits which place higher demands on job-seekers and individuals on incapacity benefits, requiring individuals to take part of full-time voluntary work if failing to find employment.

Another interesting policy development has emerged in the last few years in the UK. When in opposition, the Conservative party introduced a proposal to make parental leave more flexible, allowing parents to share the leave and/or take parental leave simultaneously, which was also part of their recent election manifesto (Conservative Party, 2010). The Labour government subsequently proposed 26 weeks of Additional Paternity Leave, which would be able to be taken by fathers when the baby is six months old, (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009), although this was not implemented before the election. In their election manifesto, also the Liberal Democrats promised that parents would be able to share parental leave in any way they preferred (Liberal Democrats, 2010). The newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has included a pledge to "promote" a flexible parental leave system in their coalition programme (HM Government, 2010: 20), in what thus seems to be a step towards a more flexible parental leave system.

5. Discussion and analysis

In the discussion part, I will firstly discuss the most interesting aspects of the statistics and national policies to draw out the similarities and differences more clearly. Thereafter, I will discuss the current political motivations and contradictions in these policies to see whether a clear picture emerges in regards to the two countries' strategies. Finally, I will discuss to what extent a convergence can be seen in the area of family policy.

5.1 Statistics: what conclusions can be drawn?

After looking at national regulations, I want to look closer at recent statistical figure to get an understanding of how the situation is for parents, and particularly women with children, in Sweden and the UK.

Employment is one of the most important factors for analysing family policy. As we can see from table 1, both Sweden and the UK have relatively high employment rates. Men in the UK and Sweden have very similar employment rates whereas the employment rate for women in Sweden is 6.3% higher in Sweden than in UK. Thus, there is also a greater difference between the employment rate for men compared to women in the UK than in Sweden.

Table 1

Table 1 Employment rates 15-64 year olds, 2008		
	Sweden	United Kingdom
Total	75.7%	72.6%
Men	78.1%	78.5%
Women	73.2%	66.9%

Source: OECD (2010a)

A further employment indicator is given by the OECD which looks at rates of maternal employment, looking at women with children under the age of 16. Here, we notice that there is a greater difference between women in Sweden and the UK, particularly for mothers with children under 5, whereas the employment rate for women who have children aged 6-15 is considerably smaller. No similar figures were available for fathers.

Table 2

Maternal employment rates 2007		
	Sweden	United Kingdom
Total	82.5%	67.9%
Women, children under 3	71.9%	53.8%
Women, children aged 3-5	81.3%	58.9%
Women, children aged 6-15	76.1%	73.2%

Source: OECD (2010b)

One of the most important conclusions we can gauge from the statistics is that in general, female employment is higher in Sweden than in the UK. Especially interesting for this thesis is the marked difference between employment figures for mothers with small children. Children in the UK normally start school at 5, and it seems that before children reach school age, mothers are less able or willing to take up employment than in Sweden.

Looking only at employment rates can however be misleading as this does not take into account *how much* men and women in employment actually work. In table 3, we can see that women both in the UK and Sweden work part-time to a very similar extent and to a much larger extent than men.

Table 3

Part time work rates, 2009		
	Sweden	United Kingdom
Men	13.3%	11.3%
Women	41.4%	41.8%

Source: Eurostat (2010a)

To understand the figures in even more detail, another indicator that will give us information about employment patterns is the average hours of workers in part-time jobs. For women in the UK, average hours worked/week for part-time workers are 19.1 whereas Swedish women work more, averaging 24.8 hours a week.⁸ Men in the UK worked part-time on average 18.8 hours a week the same quarter and Swedish men averaged 23.7 hours (Eurostat, 2010b). The greatest difference here is then that both Swedish men and women who work part-time tend to work longer hours than men and women in the UK who work part-time.

It is also interesting to see how wages differs between the two countries. According to Eurostat figures (2010c), the gender pay gap for full-time employees was in Sweden 2006 16% whereas the figure was 21% in the UK. As we are interested in gender as a demographic issue as well, it is useful to look at fertility rates. In 2009 the rates for Sweden and the UK are almost identical with 1.85 for Sweden and 1.84 for the UK (OECD 2010c).

On some of these accounts, greater differences between the countries could have been expected, considering that Swedish family policy is more comprehensive. For example, fertility rates in Sweden and the UK are almost identical, although it might have been expected that, for example, a more comprehensive childcare system would have increased fertility rates in Sweden, as parents do not have to give up their careers due to a lack of affordable and accessible childcare. Furthermore, although Swedish women work more than women in the UK, women in the UK and Sweden work part-time to the

⁸ Figures from 4th Quarter, 2009.

same extent. Here is one of the most interesting contradictions of Swedish family policy, in that so many women fail to take up full employment, something that has been noted in many studies (Daly and Rake, 2003, Hetzler, 2008).

Conversely, in the UK, however, the current tax credit system seems to encourage part-time work to a certain extent. Here, many individuals in low-paid employment are eligible for additional tax credits to top up their wage if they work at least 16 hours a week. This may explain why both men and women who work part-time in the UK tend to work shorter hours than part-timers in Sweden, as individuals who do not work have an incentive to work 16 hours a week to receive the extra benefit, while those in work may reduce the hours worked and still receive this top-up as long as their weekly hours worked is over 16 (see Blundell, 2000). While this may partly explain why women in the UK work part-time, it is harder to see a clear relationship between female employment patterns and policy in Sweden in relation to part-time work.

When looking at the use of parental leave, it is women who still take the greater responsibility for looking after young children. In Sweden, men in 2009 took out 22.3% of parental leave days, with women taking the majority of the days (Försäkringskassan, 2010b: 14). Furthermore, an analysis the Swedish social insurance agency shows that the introduction of the equality bonus in 2008 has failed to encourage more men to take up parental leave (ibid). Unfortunately, no reliable statistics have been produced regarding the use of the newly introduced home care allowances. Figures from a similar benefit system in Norway as well as statistics from a short period where home care allowance was introduced in 1994 in Sweden suggest, however, that mothers take out up to 95% of the benefit (see Widman, 2006; Håkonsen et al, 2001). There is thus some reason to expect that the effect will be that women take an even greater responsibility as a result.

In the UK, take up of the statutory two-week paternity leave has been near-universal, with 56% taking out longer leave than the two weeks by using holiday and other entitlements (BERR, 2008: 351). However, despite this, parents have very limited choice leaving women to take the majority of paid leave. Another great obstacle to female employment in the UK is thought to be the lack of affordable and accessible good quality childcare (OECD, 2005). Although the Labour government set out to change this, and has provided additional places in for example Sure Start centres, childcare fees remain high in the UK. Studies show that the unwillingness of New Labour to increase public childcare places and rely instead on the market and community groups has led to patchy services where poor families are not always able to access free childcare and middle class parents pay high fees and do not always receive the free hours of childcare they are entitled to (Lloyd, 2008; Ball and Vincent, 2005). Furthermore, there are concerns over poorly trained staff and difficulties to recruit qualified staff (Stewart, 2005: 158).

According to Ball and Vincent (2005), attempts to target poor and relying on the market have failed to produce universal and high quality childcare.

Thus, there is an interesting difference between the two countries. Women in the UK currently have greater responsibility for children through the current system of maternity leave. Moreover, less developed childcare provisions limits female employment. In Sweden, however, despite more formal possibilities for women to participate in full time employment due to subsidised childcare and the possibility to share parental leave with their partner, many women do not work full time and still take out a greater proportion of the parental leave than men. Furthermore, provisions such as the Swedish home care allowance contradict the aim of full female employment, although its consequences are not yet possible to analyse due to a lack of statistic data.

Summarising, we can see that there are some great differences between women in the UK and Sweden, as well as some similarities. Furthermore, it is safe to say that there remain great differences between men and women's employment patterns within the countries. It is important to note, however, that we should be cautious in drawing too great conclusions between statistics and policy. Findings that mothers in Sweden work more than British mothers implies that Swedish family policy is effective in enabling mothers to work, but it is important to remember that other factors such as cultural ideals and individual preferences can play a part.

5.2 Ideological and political perspectives

As noted in the methodology part, policy research also needs to take account of the political and ideological contexts (Becker and Bryman, 2004: 30). Social welfare systems should not be seen as neutral, but as institutions which reflect historical and cultural traditions, as well as reflecting power balances and impacting redistributive outcomes (Esser et al, forthcoming). In order to discuss the question of policy convergence, I will therefore consider the different political contexts of the family policies in the UK and Sweden. By contextualising national policy motivations, it will be possible to discuss whether similar concerns determine policy in the UK and Sweden, and whether these concerns are aligned to motivations and arguments put forward by the European Union and the OECD.

In both Sweden and the UK, there seems to be somewhat contradictory family policies regarding female employment. Traditionally, Sweden has adopted a perspective grounded in gender equality and a dual earner model that women should be in employment and have directed policies towards providing women with the opportunity to work full-time outside of the home. The introduction of the benefit home care allowance, however, challenges this perspective. Instead, it promotes a more conservative perspective, where parents are seen as the best carers of small children

and also emphasising parents' rights to choose whether to work or to care for their children. Whereas this policy is framed in the notion of "parental choice", it seems modelled on a traditional breadwinner model, where the father in the couple works full-time whereas the mother stays home to look after the children. Even if this does not have to be the case, as either parent can take up the benefit, evidence from other countries imply that mothers will be most likely to take up this offer. This also makes sense from an economic perspective, as men are likely to earn more than their partners and men have a tendency to work full-time to a larger extent.

While introducing this type of conservative family policy, which has mainly been promoted by the Christian Democratic party, there has also been a gender equality bonus for parents who share parental leave, in line with OECD recommendations. This can be seen as an attempt by the liberal coalition parties in the right-wing Alliance government to counter the effects of the home care allowance and to show a commitment to the Swedish perspective of shared responsibility for parents, while resisting calls from opposition parties to individualise the parental insurance, something which would limit parents' choice and split parental leave into a strict 50/50 division.

Interestingly, the policy of home care allowance also contradicts the current Swedish government's emphasis of the 'work line' ('arbetslinjen'), a political commitment to cut income taxes for those in employment while reducing unemployment benefits in an attempt to give individuals a stronger incentive to enter the labour market, following traditional economic theory. This approach is in line with OECD recommendations and EU active employment policies which promote increased engagement of unemployed citizens. Thus, in Swedish family policies, the perspectives of activation, gender equality and choice are all present, while also being challenged by a more conservative family ideal.

The development of childcare outside of the public sector is also a development which builds on the values of "consumerism, individual rights, economic efficiency and private initiative" (Blomqvist, 2004: 151). The promotion of these values can be understood from a changing view of the role of the state as promoted by privatisation and new public management discourse in the 1980s and 1990s and thereby constitutes a break from a tradition which focuses on values such as equality and democracy.

In the UK, family policies have focused on free choice for families rather than aims regarding gender equality (Kremer, 2007; Lewis and Campbell, 2007). Mothers had the opportunity to stay at home with their children up until 1996 and to receive unemployment benefit for this if meeting certain eligibility rules related to previous employment (Kremer, 2007: 122). Increasingly, however, mothers have been encouraged to take up work. The Labour Party's policy of increasing childcare has been one response to this, while also emphasising education, better life chances and well-being for children as a priority (DFEE, 1998). Changes in parental leave policy which have

been promoted in the recent election campaign can be seen as part of achieving gender equality but is first and foremost framed in a discourse of liberalism, i.e. parents' right to choose. However, this does constitute a clear break from the traditional family policies which have explicitly targeted the mother in terms of being responsible for childcare. Now, parents in the UK may soon be able to split the parental leave.

A similar ideology can be seen in the right to request flexible working for employees. This has been seen as a policy which would enable parents, but women in particular, a chance to combine work and family life (Lewis and Campbell, 2007). While both parents are eligible to ask the employer, there seems to be an implicit understanding that this policy intends to give women the opportunity to combine work and family life. Hence, women are still seen as the main carers. Promotion of this policy thus does not encourage women to work full time, but gives them the opportunity to cut their working hours. This could be seen as positive as women in well-paid jobs could stay in the job and not change jobs to more low-paid employment in order to work part-time. However, it could also be seen as problematic if it increases women's economic dependence on their male partners or reduces the economic power of single women. Furthermore, the view that British women would prefer to work part-time limits the pressure on the state in enabling women to work full-time to a larger extent, by for example providing more universal childcare.

In the UK, there has also been an acceptance of single mothers' need to take care of their children rather than take up employment. This group has therefore been able to claim income support rather than actively seeking work. Considerable economic help has also been directed to this group during the Labour Party's time in government (see Morgan, 2007). Hence, while there is an emphasis on 'activating' single parents further, there is also recognition that single parents should have the opportunity to look after their children up to the age of 7, before becoming active in the employment market. For single mothers, then, contradictory ideologies have been in place in terms of emphasising activation or choice for mothers, where activation is becoming more important. This has also often been framed in a discourse of child poverty, rather than in moral terms.

Interestingly, there is no such provision for single parents in Sweden. Most notable is the fact that the home care allowance benefit through its design largely excludes single parents and is primarily directed towards nuclear families. The same is obviously true in relation to the gender equality bonus, which gives couple families a possible bonus. Certain family policies in Sweden are thus not primarily directed to single parents, but to nuclear families, whereas many family policies in the UK are directly targeted to this group. An interesting question here is whether the perspective of gender equality within male-female relationships has been promoted on the expense of failing to direct resources to single parents, thus favouring gender equality over income equality. This is

an important consideration, especially as there is recent evidence that single parent families are falling behind economically (Försäkringskassan, 2009).

In summary, when looking at these policies more closely it becomes evident that the different family policies reveal different expectations about who should work and who should care for children. In Sweden, emphasis is partly on achieving a gender-equal work and care balance, partly on activating workers, and partly on providing an opportunity for (primarily) women in couple families to choose family life over work for a limited period. Here, there are thus conflicting perspectives at force regarding the role of mothers, something that explains the contradictions in national policy initiatives. In the UK, mothers are expected to be the primary carers through the design of the parental leave system. However, women are increasingly expected to work albeit not necessarily full time, whereas limited policy is directed to fathers' family and caring responsibilities. From the UK perspective, family policies should mainly be seen as a choice/activation target and a tool to tackle child poverty and have less emphasis on gender equality or changing fathers' behaviour.

The discussion of ideology is important as it can affect gender ideals and cultural expectations. Kremer (2007) notes that policy comparisons sometimes neglect cultural ideals in explaining women's choices over childcare and work, expecting women to respond more 'rationally' to policy changes and economic incentives. For example, she describes the childcare ideal in Scandinavian countries as one where professional care in the form of day care centres is strong. In the UK, the full-time mother ideal has been more popular, but may under the Labour Party's emphasis on women in work be changing to one of professional care.

The importance of cultural ideals could be one explanation to why policy changes are not always followed by practical changes on the individual level. For example, the professional ideal of childcare in Sweden may not be completely successful, if women choose to work part-time to be able to look after their children. Furthermore, in this discourse, the Swedish ideal of professional care may be challenged by the home care allowance, which suggests a return to an ideal of a full-time mother. Similarly, in the UK ideals of professional care may fail to take hold due to a lack of trust in the childcare system, as reports on low quality result in parents being hesitant to use these facilities (Ball and Vincent, 2005).

Considering ideologies in terms of female employment and caring is important as it provides an additional explanation in terms of what affects women's choices. The ideals discussed each have a strong ideological base and are in conflict with each other. To summarise the points, the chart below describes the three different ideological bases and their related ideals and policy choices. Acknowledging these different ideologies is important for understanding both individual choices and contradictions in policy, but also for understanding the cultural and historical contexts of welfare institutions.

Table 4

Ideology	Ideal	Policy
Conservative	Full-time mother, Male breadwinner model.	Home care allowance/income support.
Activation/workline	Shared parental responsibility, Double earner model, Professional Childcare	Extensive childcare facilities, Shared parental leave.
Liberal	Choice. Families decide with little involvement from the state.	Policy mix.

5.3 Policy convergence?

In this part I want to return to the research questions posed in the beginning of the thesis. First, is there evidence for policy convergence between Sweden and the UK? There is no clear and straightforward trend found in the data, but the findings show a complex picture of family policy in both countries. In one way, the countries are still path-dependent in the sense that Sweden still retains a largely universal system in the family policy area, in particular through providing and financing universal childcare. Furthermore, the childcare system in the UK is still very reliant on the market for supplying childcare, even though the government is attempting to affect supply. Additionally, many benefits directed at families are targeted rather than universal, such as tax credits.

On the other hand, it seems as if the UK has been adopting some policies in line with recommendations of the OECD and the EU, such as adopting policies of flexible working and perhaps also introducing flexible parental leave. Furthermore, there have been significant attempts to increase childcare places and the country does seem to move more towards Sweden in these regards. Nevertheless, there has been a market-based approach to the introduction of these policies, for example only giving the right to parents to ask for, not demand, flexible working, reflecting the institutional tradition in the UK in only regulating the market to a limited extent.

The Swedish family policy system has already had most of the recommended OECD and EU provisions in place, although the Swedish government introduced an equality bonus in line with OECD recommendations. In terms of the home care allowance benefit, it may thus seem as if the government is taking a step back. On the other hand, choice is a popular discourse in terms of family policy in the EU and OECD. Furthermore, the privatisation of childcare services may be seen as in line with contemporary challenges to the welfare states, threatening in the long run to undermine the support for public services if it means compromised quality as it has in other countries (Penn, 2009). In one way, changing this type of welfare institutions may be a significant threat to the support for publicly provided childcare, and may lead to a segregation of childcare alternatives as well as demands for privatisation of costs (Blomqvist, 2004).

As to the second research question, do international organisations have an impact on national policy-making? While it is impossible to prove a cause and effect between EU and OECD recommendations and changes in national welfare policies, the data does point to a clear alignment in international recommendations and national policy documents and aims. The strongest ideology seems to support activation policies for women and a mixed welfare economy and welfare services. On the other hand, gender equality is considered, particularly in the OECD document 'Babies and Bosses' (see Mahon, 2009), but is not as strongly argued for in the UK (Lewis and Campbell, 2007). In Sweden, this perspective is however supported in national debates, but is challenged by a conservative ideal which is promoted less in the EU and the OECD. If considering the home care allowance from a perspective of choice, however, this is supported by international welfare ideology.

The EU and the OECD thus do seem to argue for similar measurements regarding family policy which can be seen as positive for increasing female employment. However, one of the ironies of this may be that these goals become harder to achieve in some instances such as childcare, which is one of the most essential measures for increasing female employment, through a reliance on private alternatives in line with EU/OECD recommendations. By a commitment to third way policies of a greater reliance on private alternatives rather than extensive and expensive public childcare provision, both quality and coverage may be compromised. Furthermore, as Esping-Andersen argues, public and universal coverage can also be seen as a question of social justice, as it offers all children similar chances and good quality care. For example, evidence from the US shows that more market based systems leave poor children with low quality childcare, whereas wealthier families are able to pay for better quality childcare. Hence, too large differences in quality in childcare ultimately lead to uneven outcomes and life chances (Esping-Andersen, 2009: 96). As Ball and Vincent (2005) note, mothers in the UK often do not trust the childcare system, and do not always feel confident leaving their children in these facilities. In this sense, poor quality may be a serious obstacle to increase female employment and instead reduce women's willingness to up caring responsibilities in favour of employment.

Thus, the most important obstacle to the type of reforms which are promoted by the EU and the OECD may be the type of economic policies which have generally been favoured by these and various other international organisations i.e. emphasising limited public spending and privatisation of public provisions. The importance of these reforms should be seen in the light not only of singular effects in social security systems or privatisation. Instead, it is important to also consider how these changes affect national political legitimacy in a greater perspective, especially if leading to deeper institutional changes. Will the social contract between states and citizens survive expenditure cuts and retrenchment? And how will trust in political institutions change if privatisation of welfare service leads to quality being compromised on the expense of efficiency? From a

sociological perspective, these are of course essential questions in relation both to global and regional policy impact and on national policy and welfare administration.

6. Conclusion

Comparative research in the area of social policy convergence has been a popular research topic in recent decades. While many of these studies have compared several countries, this study has had a smaller focus on two countries and used a documentary research method. This method is an adequate method for explaining similarities and differences between national policies. The findings in this thesis are important on a sociological level, as they show that economic incentives in family policy are not sufficient for fully affecting behaviour in the labour market. Institutional, ideological and historical contexts are also important for understanding women's working patterns, although it is clear that a comprehensive family policy system is important for enabling women with children to participate in the labour market. Additionally, this paper would suggest that comparative sociology and social policy studies need to take consideration of welfare reforms such as privatisation, as well as focusing on social expenditure levels, as the quality of welfare services also is important for political legitimacy and people's support. Ultimately, this also affects the success of and trust in these welfare services as well as the welfare system as a whole.

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