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The concept of work-family balance seen from a Swedish perspective

In this brief presentation I will show some less known facts about the admired Swedish model of work-family balance. The model is not as successful as sometimes claimed. Rather there are some serious negative outcomes in several areas. A key problem seems to be that the model is governed by political ideologies, rather than by children's individual needs and the wishes and convictions of parents.

I am Jonas Himmelstrand. I represent the Swedish family organisation Haro. Haro is the leading Swedish family organisation with a critical view on Swedish family policies. I am the family research expert on the Haro national board. Haro is politically and religiously unaffiliated and Haro members are primarily motivated by the intuitive understanding of their children's needs – nothing else.

We are, of course, aware of the enormous difference between Sweden and other parts of the world. But Sweden is important because for decades Sweden has been considered the leading model in work-family balance with its highly subsidised and comprehensive day care scheme, the high percentage of women in paid work, and the strong focus on gender equality.

Common knowledge would suggest excellent outcomes for Sweden, especially considering that Sweden also is a rich nation with an all inclusive social security, a high educational spending, healthy life-styles, low child poverty, and one of the best health care systems in the world.

However, when we look at family related outcomes it is clear that the Swedish model has not been as successful as often claimed. Instead we see several disturbingly negative outcomes for children, parents, families, schools and even in public debate.

Swedish children typically do not suffer from material poverty, many more suffer from emotional poverty, an outcome which could be attributed to too much separation between children and parents at too early an age.

As you may know the Swedish family model has been in effect for more than 30 years and includes:

- Highly subsidised day-care at low cost to parents, originally of high quality.
- Financed by the world's second highest tax rate.
- A high level of female employment.
- A strong focus on gender equality.

The great Swedish statistics

Let us first look at the well-known Swedish statistics which have made Swedish social policies so famous and in awe of other nations.

Sweden has the among the lowest rates of infant mortality in the world, if not the lowest. In Sweden we take care of pregnancy relatively well and pregnant mothers will easily find support in our public medical system.

Swedish people enjoy a high life expectancy. A Swedish man lives on the average 79 years, and a Swedish women 83 years. Still, Japanese women live even longer with an 86 year life expectancy.

Sweden has a relatively high birth rate in the European context with 1.7 children per woman of child rearing age. But 1.7 is a quantity measure. Based on what I will share later it makes sense to also add a quality measure. Are we actually producing a next generation which has the psychological maturity, and the ability to handle stress, that life in a future knowledge society will require? I will let that be an open question for now.

Sweden has a low level of child poverty, only about half of the European average.

Sweden has a very comprehensive and highly subsidised day care system. Every child is guaranteed a place in day care within three months of application. From one year of age, day care is the norm in Sweden.

Sweden has a very high spending on education. It is among the highest expendi-

tures per child in the world, if not the highest, whether in day care or in school. But we do not have the best learning results in world.

Sweden has a strong culture of equality and gender equality. The Nordic countries have hardly ever had any class system, so there is a strong tradition of equality. Also gender equality has a very strong position in our public debate since about 30 years back and Sweden is very ambitious about it.

In the international debate Sweden claims to have the best parental leave. Swedish parental leave is 13 months at 80% of the salary up to a certain level, with an additional 90 days at a fixed lower level. This makes many people believe that Sweden is the best country for families. But the door closes at 16 months and day care becomes the only financially viable solution for most families.

Now let us take a look at the basic ingredients in the Swedish family model.

The Swedish Family model

- In Sweden there are no babies under one year of age in day care. This is due to our long parental leave of 13-16 months. It is a Swedish best practise. But after parental leave the picture changes dramatically.
- A full 92% all Swedish children 18 month – 5 years of age are in day care for various amounts of time. Day care from 14-18 months of age is a Swedish norm.
- Swedish day care is subsidised by taxes to more than 90%. Hence the cost for parents to use day care is very low, typically 120 USD a month for the first child depending on income. No family ever pays more than 350 USD per month, regardless of family income and the number of children in day care. This is called the maximum fee (maxtaxa), a limited fee especially constructed to encourage parents to use day care.
- The actual subsidie of day care in Sweden is more than 20 000 USD per year and child, according to the Swedish government research institute.
- There is no national home care allowance for those who choose home care. But since the 2006 election municipalities are allowed to offer an allowance of 400 USD per month which is low by Swedish standards. However, only a third of our municipalities offer it. The allowance can only be used when the parental leave has been used up and only until the child's third birthday – there are several rules making it difficult to use. This expressed political reason for these difficulties is the

fear among some political parties that the allowance would become too popular. All taxation is fully individualised and there are no tax reductions for families or for home care.

- Day care and a dual-earner household is strongly encouraged by the government, for example during medical check-ups of babies, on government institution home pages and through media.
- Similarly home care is strongly discouraged in Sweden. The strongest reasons for this is gender equality, every child's "right" to go to day care and that parents are said to do better in the labour force than in the daily care for their children, which in turn is said to be done better by trained pre-school teachers.

A smaller issue is that home schooling, rapidly growing in most of the western world, is in effect illegal in Sweden, which illustrates the Swedish government view on family.

The envisioned outcomes of the Swedish family model

The basic outline of the Swedish family policies of today was written in a political programme by the Swedish Socialdemocratic Women's Organisation in a document published 1978 named "Familjen i framtiden – en socialistisk familjepolitik" (Eng. "The Family of the Future – A Socialist Family Policy"). At the time the Socialdemocratic Party totally dominated the Swedish political scene having ruled Sweden with few exceptions since 1932.

The envisioned outcomes stated in the programme has since pretty much dominated Swedish family policies regardless of which side of the Swedish political spectrum has been in power.

Greater gender equality can be said to be the first objective of the family policies inspired by the programme. This has been successful to the extent that more women are in employed work in Sweden than in most western European countries, if not the most. However, the Swedish labour market is highly segregated and most Swedish women work in low paid jobs in the public sector such as day care, school and medical care. Sweden has much fewer women on high management positions than many other countries, for example the US. Although the gender equality in the Swedish parliament and government is relatively high, Sweden has not yet had a woman prime minister.

The programme states that day care is necessary for a child's development. It ar-

gues that the nuclear family is unable to give children what they need in social development. Society has to give children what they lost in the agrarian society. It is also stated that adults need to be in employed work in order to grow and be happy.

The philosophy of the programme comes from Alva Myrdal, the famous Swedish author who wrote several books together with her even more famous husband, Gunnar Myrdal. Alva Myrdal formulated her ideas about family and day care already in 1935 and these ideas are still highly alive in Sweden, in spite of the fact that attachment psychology, neurobiology developmental science and evidence based research on day care show that it is clearly not an ideal solution for every child, especially if not of highest quality.

It is hard to avoid sensing strong anti-family sentiments in the programme. Expressed opinions include that families are not trustworthy, that they may teach children other values than politically decided in parliament. Even well-to-do families cannot possibly give children what they need for their development, says the programme. Besides, home care impedes the parents personal growth. Explaining the roots of these sentiments require an historical analysis for which there is not room here.

Finally both sides of the political spectrum in Sweden agree on the "work policy" which means that all adults should be in employed work, and all children in day care for the age of one. This is also expressed in the programme. In this respect home care is not considered work.

However, 35 years of realising this programme has proven it wrong in almost all respects.

I will now present these less pleasant outcomes of the Swedish model. Please remember that this is a country with high material wealth and a low child poverty.

Actual Swedish model outcomes

- **Strong decrease in psychological health in youth.**

Many Swedish studies put emphasis on this fact, and concern is expressed. Psychosomatic disorders, mild psychological problems and continuous stress related problems such as worries, anxiety and physical pain is growing at a faster rate in Sweden than in any of 11 comparable European countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Wales, Spain and Scotland.

Since the 1980-ties this has tripled in girls and today one out three female adolescents exhibit the symptoms. All according to a Swedish government study.

- **School results – from top to average in 35 years**

Sweden used to have the best school results in the world 35 years ago. Today Sweden is merely average, and actually below average in maths, according to the PISA report.

- **Serious discipline problems in Swedish schools**

According to the TIMMS report Sweden has among the most serious discipline problems in schools in Europe including, truancy, tardiness, disturbances in classrooms and bad language.

- **High rates of sick leave among women.**

Again, this is among the highest in Europe according to a study in 2005 in the Swedish medical journal *Läkartidningen*: "Who can work until 65 years of age? – not the women, more than half quit work life early". Many Swedish women who have had full-time employment while having small children retire between ages of 55-60 because of various medical psycho-social reasons. This is the first generation of Swedish women trying out the Swedish model of work-family balance.

One can ask what was gained by forcing child care and work at the same time, if one anyway loses ten years of work because of early retirement?

- **Day care staff top the sick leave statistics.**

Swedish day care staff top the sick leave statistics, especially when it comes to long-term sick leave. Three Swedish experts, among them acknowledged Swedish psychiatrist Magnus Kihlbom, recently wrote a book on the situation in Swedish day care, "Förskola för de allra minsta – på gott och ont" (Eng. "Day care for the smallest children – for good and for bad"). They write that the high level of sick-leave in day care staff is likely due to "the lack-of-meaning syndrome" which in turn is caused by the deteriorating quality of Swedish day care. Day care personnel were trained for a job they cannot perform because of too big group sizes and too high child-to-adult ratios. This lack of meaning wears many of them out.

- **Deteriorating parental abilities, even middle class**

An EU-sponsored study by Swedish school researcher Britta Johansson showed that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties in being parents today. According to her they lack knowledge about children's needs and cannot set limits. She writes (my translation):

The public offer of full day child care seems to make many parents loose the grip of their own responsibility. They believe/want that their children are fostered by the pre-school/school and believe that the experts on their children are found there.

She also says that pre-school/school cannot fill the gaps caused by lack of time and trust in parenthood from the parents.

- **Quality in Swedish day care is deteriorating.**

Three Swedish experts, Magnus Kihlbom et al, write in recent book that the quality of Swedish day care is no longer high, and that some children will have their development impaired because of this lack of quality.

- **Highly gender segregated labour market**

Sweden has one of the most gender segregated labour markets in the world – not only the western world. Women work in the caring and lower educational professions, Men work in industry and higher administrative positions. In day care 97% of all employees are women. The Swedish model did not produce gender equality, many other nations do it better with other models.

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The problem seems to be that the Swedish political leadership ignores the importance of the child-to-parent attachment. Modern attachment psychology says clearly that the emotional bond child-to-parent cannot be replaced with even the best curriculum, learning or pedagogical methods.

One could say that the basic problem with Swedish family policies is that individual child care has become a state political decision based on political ideology, rather than a parental decision, based on the needs of the individual child.

Swedish day care today

Swedish day care has the reputation of being the best in the world. This may indeed have been true during the 1980-ties when there where regulations about group sizes. Groups of smaller children where not allowed to be bigger than 10 children, and groups of bigger children not bigger than 15 children.

Since the Swedish financial crisis in the early 1990-ties the group sizes have grown considerably. Magnus Kihlbom et al write about this in their book. Small children under three years of age are often in groups of 14 and sometimes up to 17 chil-

dren. For older children group sizes can be upwards 25 and even 30 children. The average child-to-staff ratio in Swedish day care is 5:1 but there are individual day care centres with 7:1 or even 10:1. The fact that Sweden today has a very strong economy has not changed this fact.

One could ask: If a rich country with the second highest tax rate in the world can't provide subsidised comprehensive day care of high quality, then who can?

A Swedish day care group typically has three staff, of which one may be part-time. When one of the staff is on sick-leave, which is common among day-care staff and pre-school teachers, there is often no replacement, for financial reasons. There are even situations where there could be only one staff for 17 small children below three years of age.

There are no regulations on group sizes or child-to-staff ratios today in Swedish day cares. This differs from for example England where the child-to-staff ratios are regulated. Also in the US there are recommendations on group sizes and child-to-staff ratios. Recommendations which a few states actually follow, but which Sweden does not comply with. Thus there are a few states in the US with higher quality day care than Sweden.

The quality of Swedish day care has by law to be of "good quality", but it is up to every municipality to decide what "good quality" means. In actual fact local economics play a greater role in determining group sizes and child-to-staff ratios.

The pedagogics of Swedish day care in the early years were famous by the focus on play, rather than on curriculum, based on a developmental view rather than on an educational view. A definite change came in 1998 when the responsibility of Swedish day care was shifted from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education. From this point all day care was renamed pre-school. (For purpose of clarity I stick with the term day care in this paper.) Swedish day care was then given a curriculum focusing on learning. The word attachment is not used even once in the entire national curriculum for day care. The new Swedish school law puts even greater emphasis on day care being an early school. A Stockholm politician said recently: "We have to find measures of quality in day care other than group size and child-to-adult ratios." Of course, this is not possible as group size and child-to-adult ratios are key quality measures.

Magnus Kihlbom et al point out that the curriculum for day care does not acknowledge the great difference in development between a one-year-old and a three-year-

old. A three-year-old has more in common with an adult than with a one-year-old. This is typical for the entire Swedish day care system, not to acknowledge the special needs of small children below three years of age.

The conclusion of Magnus Kihlbom et al is that Swedish day care is no longer of the quality required for a healthy development in every child. They say that sensitive children are at risk. It should be added that these Magnus Kihlbom and his colleagues all hold a positive general view on day care.

Swedish day care today costs about 20 000 USD per child and year. If improved to match the quality that the Swedish experts recommend, which is similar to US recommendations, then the cost for children under three years of age would probably rise to 30 000-35 000 USD per child and year. At that price tag it is questionable if day care is worth it when the parents are willing to do the care. At that price a very generous home care allowance could be paid, and the child would in most cases, according to many studies, get an even better quality care.

Possible causal explanations

We know today from attachment psychology and neurobiology that early separation of infants from parents can, in some children, create chronically low thresholds for stress. This can lower the threshold for anxiety for the rest of the child's life. Early separation would be expected to lead to a less resilient future generation. Medical technology today can actually measure stress levels in the saliva easily and clearly, making stress research easy to perform, also in small children.

Evidence based research of day care show that increased exposure to day care during the first 54 months correlates with increased behavioural problems, even if day care is of high quality (NICHD). This is confirmed by other studies.

We also know today that early exposure to large groups of peers leads to peer-orientation, which has detrimental results on psychological maturation, learning, and the transference of culture between generations. Canadian psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld has in detail explored the causal connections in these phenomena. His work is reported in his book "Hold on to your kids – why parents need to matter more than peers". He shows that peer-orientation is the root of bullying, teen age gangs, promiscuity and the flat-lining of culture which are all visible to various extent in most western countries.

How does peer-orientation happen? Consider a typical day in the life of a ten year old in a Stockholm suburb. The child is left by his parents just before 7.00 in the

morning at the school for before-school-child-care. When school actually begins the child is already tired and hungry. After a long day in school there is after-school-child-care while the child waits for the tired parents to return at perhaps 5.00 or 6.00 in the late afternoon. In the evening the child may be having another activity outside home, which most ambitious Swedish parents believe is good for their children. Where does the child find emotional security? One needs someone for comfort and closeness, especially in distressing situations, which are common in school. The parents are inaccessible for too long. In the best case scenario there will be a caring adult in school. But for most children it will be a peer or a gang which offers emotional support during school hours. This is the genesis of peer orientation. It fills the lack of meaningful relationships with mature trusted adults who have an interest in the development of the child. The problem with peer orientation is that peers, especially during the teens, do not have the maturity themselves to handle the difficult feelings about differences, conflicts, failure, rejection and deceit. The limited maturity of peer-orientation results in conformism, gangs, bullying, aggression, and sometimes violence. Also as youngsters attach themselves to peers, they emotionally detach themselves from the adult world, including their parents.

The culturally endorsed separation of infants in Sweden causes stress in parents, manifested in many parents as disease and sick-leave. According to a meta-study by Dean Ornish high-quality, close relationships are the strongest health factor, superior to and more important than all other health factors combined. In Sweden we don't have much time for close relationships in families. The high frequency of stress related disease can be seen as a consequence.

According to research by Sir Michael Marmot too little control over one's personal life situation is another risk factor to health. Through its family policies Sweden has given the State a controlling position in the home of every Swedish family – a clear risk factor to health.

High levels of state intervention in family life reduce parents' sense of responsibility for their children. Swedish governmental agencies have been very successful in promoting the idea of day care as more than a convenience and as the best child care solution for everyone. Unfortunately, unintended drawbacks and consequences have not been anticipated. When parents lose their sense of responsibility, they do not develop in younger years the strong relationships with their children which are essential for them to provide guidance to them, especially through adolescence.

What do Swedes want

- A large number of studies during the last decades show that a great majority of Swedish women and families want more time with their children.
- A recent study showed that seven out of ten mothers want to be home longer with their children. Young mothers want it more than older.
- More than half of the mothers believed that more mothers would want to be housewives, if they could.

Swedish people clearly want parents to have the choice to care for their children themselves at home. This is also the conclusion in a European study made by Mouvement Mondial des Mères, "Realities of Mothers in Europe".

A few of these Swedish parents have gone to action. After 40 years of family policies based on day care and full-time women employment we see a movement beyond this model, a new family paradigm coming from pioneering families, with new solutions to motherhood, fatherhood and work-family balance.

These parents want both to care for their children and to work, but they do not want it at the same time. *They do not want to have to work and have small children at the same time.* In fact they want one parent to be home for the first 3-5 years in a child's life and then work part-time until their children are 18-19 years old.

What is interesting is that these pioneering Swedish families are not coming from traditions or from religion. That is gone in Sweden. They are solely motivated by the experience of attachment with their children, and their observations on how well this makes their child develop.

Here are some characteristics of this new family paradigm – which can be identified in small numbers around Sweden.

- **Mother & Father, equally committed, entire childhood.**

Father and mother are equally committed to the care of the child, both in time and in emotional commitment, on an 18 year basis – not just an 18 month basis.

- **Early home care by mother, supported by father.**

The value of early motherhood and breast-feeding is acknowledged in these families. Also acknowledged is the support which the mother needs in her small child mother role, a support the father will provide.

- **Conscious father care growing from 2-4 years of age.**

These parents agree that the mother does the early child care, with the support of the father, and that the father starts taking a bigger role at around 2-4 years of age, an age when other children go to day care. From the perspective of an 18 year old childhood their parental contributions will be both substantial and equal.

- **Strong emphasis on parental emotional attachment.**

These parents have discovered the power of emotional attachment in parenting, as is well expressed by Canadian psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld in his book “Hold on to your kids – why parents need to matter more than peers”.

- **At school age, many mothers start their own business.**

When the children all go to school many mothers start working part-time, in their own business, in voluntary work, in politics or in a regular job. These mothers come with power and conviction into work and into society with deep personal experiences which are hard to find anywhere else.

- **Family receives children directly from school**

They use no out-of-school activities. Mother, father, relative or neighbour receives child directly after school and talks about what happened during the school day.

- **Some parents even home school their children.**

Some parents, because of life-style or because of having highly sensitive children or otherwise, choose to home school their children. This is a fast growing educational movement in many western countries. Research show that the results are excellent both academically and socially.

- **These are large families, typically with 3-6 children.**

When demography is an issue these families have to be understood and supported. They often have many children, and they take good conscious care of them.

No research has yet been done on these pioneering families. But if one puts together international research with the Swedish experiences, the outcomes seem clear. These children typically do very well emotionally, socially and in school.

Conclusion

The Swedish model teaches us that child care is not a suitable area for political decisions and political ideology. Child care must be decided by parents based on their child’s individual needs. Therefore any government support of child care must fairly support the choices of the parents whether it be day care, child-minder,

home care, granny care, neighbour care or otherwise, never favouring home care less. Every parent must feel that they are making the decision for the care of their child. This is a key existential question for parents. It will impede adult growth to take this decision away from them.

What concerns us in Haro deeply is when we read general positive statements on work-family balance. It is naive, as the concept quickly becomes a political issue, rather than a parental issue. As a political issue the work-family balance opens for a Pandora's box full of problems of psychological, social and political nature. Problems that eventually comes in the fringes of political reach, gaining a life of their own. This is what Sweden presents today.

The concept of work-family balance must never come in between parents and their understanding of the needs of their children. This means that work-family balance can only be achieved in ways parents want it through personal awareness and choice in a free world of possibilities. It can never be achieved through persuasive or coercive measures of the state.

Also implied in the idea of work-family balance is that "family" – care for children – is not "work". The lack of acknowledgement of the unpaid work at home becomes especially problematic in countries like Sweden which gives high subsidies to day care and not to home care. Caring for children is always work, whether done at home by parents, or by day care staff at day care.

The root of the Swedish problem is that our government uses the concept of work-family balance to force Swedish families to conform to an ideology of family that a great number of Swedish parents don't want.

The consequences of Swedish family policies should therefore be investigated through thorough, comprehensive, and comparative procedures conducted by research institutions outside Sweden before any other nations attempt to copy the Swedish family policies.

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