

Why Swedish family policy is a poor role model for other countries

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Since Swedish family policy is falsely marketed as the “flagship of Swedish social welfare” and often referred to as a role model in many countries, we find it important to reveal the true picture also abroad. This article summarises the serious problems that we have been addressing for years and now target in our independent petition Power to Parents 2018, which aims at putting family policy and freedom of choice on the agenda for the Swedish elections on Sep 9.



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While Sweden’s international reputation for social welfare has been severely tarnished during the last years, the government has managed to keep its most prestigious sector out of the spotlight – until now. In nation-wide protests preschool employees are finally speaking out about the stressful conditions for them and the children. The situation has been alarming for decades, but systematically silenced and covered by authorities and scientists.

In May and June, manifestations were organised all over Sweden against the strained working conditions in the state-subsidised early childcare institutions, where 93 per cent of children aged 2-5 years and 48 per cent of 1 year olds spend their days. The Preschool Riot, consisting of 26,000 supporters, mainly employees, had been building up momentum for the demonstrations by previously publishing 1,600 appalling testimonies from its members gathered under the hashtag #pressatläge (#underpressure). They reveal an impossible work equation with large

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groups of children and lack of staff, making them cry and vomit at work, failing to meet children's basic needs and even losing some outdoors.

Paradoxically, the government-loyal labour unions cooperating with the Preschool Riot uphold a very different picture of the Swedish preschool system on other occasions, calling it "an international role model". And state-funded preschool professors supporting the protestors and speaking at the manifestations call it – when debating elsewhere – "the flagship of Swedish social welfare". These contradicting pictures perfectly illustrate the root of the problem: a one-sided childcare system based on political interests, not children's or employees'.

The system is rooted in the socialistic view that "one size fits all", meaning that all children should be placed in institutional childcare as early as possible. This idea was introduced in the 1930s by Alva Myrdal, a leading member of the Social Democratic Party, and has been successively implemented in Swedish family policy during the party's long possession of power (69 of last 86 years). In 1975 the Social Democratic government started a ten-year expansion of public preschools, resulting in a sharp decline in childcare at home and subsequently also in family day care. Today the preschool system is subsidised with SEK 70 billion per year and working parents are offered further economic incentives, while parents taking care of their children at home do not get any subsidies and are punished by the taxation and pension schemes. These strong drivers have made preschool almost a mandatory "choice" of childcare for children from the ages 1-2 years.

Although single critics, reports and statistics have pointed at problems with this system for many years, they have been systematically silenced and concealed by an unholy alliance between government, authorities, scientists and labour unions. All of them having one thing in common: financial and/or ideological ties to the government.

Since the early 1990s, Sweden has experienced a sharp increase in mental illness among adolescents and young adults that is unprecedented internationally, according to the Public Health Agency of Sweden. This increase coincides with the first large cohorts from institutional childcare becoming teenagers. As an affiliated researcher put it: "the increase began with the children born in the mid-70s". However, the Public Health Agency has refused to investigate if Swedish family policy could be one of the causes, despite failing to find it elsewhere for decades.

In parallel, an increase in sick leave among Swedish women compared to men started in the mid-1980s and has been twice as high since 1999. The increase has been established as a direct consequence of women's rising participation in the labour market. Today, mental illness is the most common sick leave diagnosis and women aged 30-39 years (the typical ages for mothers with young children) are the most affected.

Already in 2000, the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden (Barnombudsmannen, BO) warned about preschools' low staffing levels leading to children not receiving sufficient care and stimulation in their development. Since then, group sizes and staffing levels have worsened and preschool staff is more sick than most other professional groups, but the BO authority has stopped talking about the situation.

In the meantime, a tremendous development has taken place in scientific research regarding what children need in order to reduce the risk of future mental illness. Findings within e.g. attachment research, neurobiology and developmental psychology indicate that children need more time and care from their parents than what is possible within the narrow frames of Swedish family policy. But parents are not informed about these findings by the authorities and any attempt to do so in public debate is heavily repressed by parties tied to the government.

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Instead they domestically and internationally praise Sweden's one-sided childcare system as "world class" and encourage other nations to follow example. Unfortunately, they seem to have been quite successful in this marketing. Recently, the OECD concluded that this system had enabled the high level of female employment, which had contributed to about 10-20 per cent of GDP per capita growth in Sweden (and the other Nordic countries) over the past 40-50 years. However, the OECD report does not take into account the costs for the system and its negative health effects.

As these costs, health statistics and scientific research are becoming increasingly harder to hide and insiders are finally speaking out about the problems, the story of Sweden's self-proclaimed flagship of social welfare resembles that of the famous Swedish royal Vasa ship of the 17th century. A construction project steered by the rulers' vanity rather than expert knowledge of stability, and pursued in fearful silence at high human costs. The Swedish one-sided childcare system has evidently been taking in water for a long time and governments considering copying it should not follow in its wake. The system is bound to sink just like the Vasa ship did, unless it is redesigned with a broad basis of childcare alternatives meeting children's individual needs according to modern scientific knowledge.

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