

Comparing the Societal Impact of Parental Leave Policy in Sweden and Italy

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ABSTRACT

This work analyzes differences in policy, specifically parental leave, between societies whose cultures have been dominated by social-democratic and Christian-democratic governments. It examines the effects between two drastically different positions from the developed world on the issue, specifically the traditionally gendered policies of Italy as well as the comparatively gender-neutral arrangement found in Sweden.

Keywords: parental leave, social policy, Christian Democracy, Social Democracy, comparative politics

Introduction

The transition to the financial security of new mothers being assured by the state began in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1919, the International Labour Organization came to the resolution that a mother should be guaranteed twelve weeks of paid leave by the state as well as inalienable job security upon her eventual return to work.¹ European nations would accomplish this goal using very different approaches and today every European state offers the opportunity for new mothers to take paid leave, via maternity leave, a program whose origins stem from protecting a mother from potential workplace strain or injury during a period of time which should be geared towards recovery and self-care, or gender-egalitarian parental leave, a relatively modern concept emanating from the protection of societal expectations and obligations concerning neonatal child-rearing.² This paper will explore the different origins and subsequent societal effects of adopting parental leave in Italy and Sweden, such as the retention of women in the workforce or the prominence of fathers employing their privileges to access parental leave.

Policy Breakdown and Origins

In Italy, five months of maternity leave is compulsory by law for all new mothers. Traditionally, this was divided into two months of prepartum leave and three months of postpartum leave.³ This was changed, however, in the 2019 national budget and mothers can now elect to take their five months of leave exclusively postnatally.⁴ In this five-month period, mothers receive at least eighty percent of their previous salary which is funded exclusively by the National Institute

¹ Convention concerning the Employment of Women before and after Childbirth, International Labour Organization § C003 (1921).

² Prpić, Martina. "Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave in the EU." European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2017.

³ Saurel-Cubizolles, Marie-Josèphe, P. Romito, and J. Garcia. "Description of Maternity Rights for Working Women in France, Italy and in the United Kingdom." *European Journal of Public Health* 3, no. 1 (March 1, 1993): 50.

⁴ Webster, Fiona, and Stephanie Rousseau. "Italy: Women Can Now Work Up to Childbirth Then Take Maternity Leave." GRIST Law & Policy Group, Mercer, April 23, 2019.

for Social Security.⁵ New fathers are also subject to an obligatory leave of five days during which they receive the entirety of their usual salary.⁶ In addition to the standard maternity and paternity leaves, Italians also have a gender egalitarian parental leave option at their disposal. Each parent can take advantage of as many as six months of leave so long as the total leave does not reach ten months jointly for any individual child. As long as the child in question is less than six years old when this leave is employed, parents are entitled to thirty percent of their previous salary which is provided by the public purse in a similar fashion to that of maternity leave.⁷ Adoptive and foster parents are entitled to the same benefits as natural parents.⁸

Sweden’s approach to parental leave is much more gender egalitarian than the orthodox vision of distinct maternal and paternal leaves. Mothers are obligated to take two weeks of maternity leave and pregnant women may also benefit from an optional leave of sixty days (or, for more laborious work, the entirety of the mother’s pregnancy) during which they are guaranteed 77.6% of their previous earnings by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Fathers receive an optional ten days and are paid similarly to mothers during this timeframe by the same ministry.⁹ That said, what makes Sweden stand out writ large is its extensive, egalitarian, gender egalitarian parental leave policy.¹⁰ Upon the birth of their child, both a mother and a father are each eligible to take as an individual entitlement eight months of parental leave during which they would be paid 77.6% of their former earnings for 195 days and a flat rate of 250 kronor every day thereafter. The parents do not have to take their leaves concurrently and, as such, it is possible for a child to be in the exclusive care of at least one of the parents for a full sixteen months.¹¹

The maternity leave regulations currently employed in Italy originate from the 1971 enactment of Law 1204.¹² The matricentric approach featured in Italy’s policies is somewhat typical of Christian Democratic administrations.¹³ In the second half of the twentieth century, Italy’s government was dominated by the Christian Democracy Party who were responsible for the 1971 implementation as well as its less effective 1950 predecessor.¹⁴ The infamous fascist regime that preceded the redemocratization of Italy pushed a natalist policy which exclusively advantaged women in their roles as child-bearers.¹⁵ Though the contemporary Italian state seems to be advancing towards gender egalitarianism in terms of their familialist policies, they are largely still rooted in the traditional values of male-breadwinner familial models. The specificities of how

⁵ Addabbo, Tindara, Valentina Cardinali, Dino Giovannini, and Sara Mazzucchelli. “Italy: Annual Review & Report.” International Network on Leave Policies & Research, April 2019, 2.

⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁷ Ibid, 4-5.

⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁹ Duvander, Ann-Zofie, and Niklas Löfgren. “Sweden: Annual Review & Report.” International Network on Leave Policies & Research, April 2019, 1-2.

¹⁰ Almqvist, Anna-Lena, and Ann-Zofie Duvander. “Changes in Gender Equality? Swedish Fathers’ Parental Leave, Division of Childcare and Housework.” *Journal of Family Studies* 20, no. 1 (April 2014): 19.

¹¹ Duvander and Löfgren, 3-4.

¹² Giorgio, Adalgisa. “Motherhood and Work in Italy: A Socio-Cultural Perspective.” *Journal of Romance Studies* 15, no. 3 (January 2015): 6

¹³ Häusermann, Silja. “Different Paths of Family Policy Modernization in Continental Welfare States.” *Swiss Political Science Association*, November 2, 2006, 14

¹⁴ Giorgio, 3-6

¹⁵ Ibid, 6-7

parental leave in Italy came about are predominantly due to the dominance of center-right policies espoused by the Italian government from the 1950s to the 1990s.

Contemporaneous to the dominance of the center-right in Italy was the paramountcy of the Social Democratic Labour Party in Sweden.¹⁶ The egalitarian parental leave policy, known as *Föräldraförsäkring*, for which Sweden is renowned worldwide came about in 1974 during the administration of the Social Democrats, though the move was supported almost universally. Prior to the adoption of this policy, Sweden operated on a traditional matricentric system of maternity leave.¹⁷ Part of the rationale for the policy’s enactment was actually to encourage dual-income households as opposed to the orthodox view of single-earner families.¹⁸ The push for such a policy long preceded its 1974 enactment, as in 1966, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation came to a resolution supporting a gender-egalitarian parental leave policy and spearheaded the promotion of dual-income families.¹⁹ The push for the inclusion of women in the workplace and dual-income families in Sweden is not limited to their policies concerning parental leave and is but a mere part of its larger familialist policies of gender egalitarianism at-large. Being steadfast in their ideals that the state should strive for universal equality, the revolutionary approach Sweden adopted in regards to parental leave is, in large part, the product of center-left Social Democratic governance during the second half of the twentieth century.

Effects

The societal impact that the two different approaches to parental leave have imparted upon Italy and Sweden respectively is substantial, particularly in the outcomes concerning the presence of women in the active workforce. In 2016, 51.6% of women and 71.7% of men in Italy participated in the labor force. That same year, 79.2% of women and 83.0% of men in Sweden participated in the labor force.²⁰ The percent differences in between men and women in the Italian and Swedish workforces are 20.1% and 3.8%, respectively. The contrast, however, is not only limited to female participation in a professional capacity, as there is a distinct difference between Swedish and Italian fathers who take advantage of their legislatively guaranteed leaves. Roughly nine out of every ten Swedish fathers take advantage of at least part of their leave, with the average new father taking seven weeks of leave.²¹ Italy, on the other hand, has a high participation of men in the very brief obligatory postnatal leave, while only 7% take advantage of the optional parental leave, due in part to the imbalance of funds available during leave as opposed to working full-time.²² Moreover, in one study, 20% of men in Italy appeared to have no knowledge of the

¹⁶ Palmowski, Jan. “Social Democratic Labour Party, Sweden.” In *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁷ Duvander, Ann-Zofie, Tommy Ferrarini, and Sara Thalberg. “Swedish Parental Leave and Gender Equality: Achievements and Reform Challenges in a European Perspective.” Working Paper. Institutet för Framtidsstudier, 2005, 8

¹⁸ Almqvist and Duvander, 19-20

¹⁹ Lundqvist, Åsa. “Towards Gender-Neutral Ideals and Gender Equality Policies.” In *Family Policy Paradoxes: Gender Equality and Labour Market Regulation in Sweden, 1930-2010*, 1st ed., 61–82. Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2010, 65

²⁰ “European Semester Thematic Factsheet: Women in the Labour Market.” European Commission. Accessed March 2, 2020.

²¹ Hedlin, Simon. “Why Swedish Men Take So Much Paternity Leave.” *The Economist*, July 23, 2014.

²² Catalino, Lidia. “Paternity Leave Made Difficult in a Country of Empty Cradles.” Translated by Anna Martinelli. *La Stampa*, January 16, 2018.

existence of any program that would give them the opportunity to take leave.²³ This falls in line precisely with the variations of familialism used in Italy and Sweden, and the differences in the way they employ traditional familial and gender egalitarian policies respectively, and the related expected outcomes.

The gender egalitarian policies, striving to support dual-income households, espoused by Sweden in their hopes of revolutionizing the structure of the family, could ultimately be deemed a success. Alternatively, Italy, and its espousal of a more traditional familial base for its leave policies, appears to have worked similarly in a way to give preference to families whose sole breadwinner is the father. The different approaches to parental leave found in Sweden and Italy have had deep societal impacts that are clear byproducts of their very different familialist ideals.

²³ Bertolini, Sonia, Rosy Musumeci, Manuela Naldini, and Paola Maria Torrioni. “Working Women in Transition to Motherhood in Italy.” *Journal of Romance Studies* 15, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 65.

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