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The unintended consequences of universal childcare: Lessons from Sweden

My story

I became a mother in 1989 and have now five children who are between 18-32.

Together with many other Swedish parents, mainly women, I experienced the difficulty in caring for my own children after the days of parental leave were finished. I struggled to work part-time, leaving my three little boys to childcare and got sick from stress. When I expected my fourth child, my only daughter, I suddenly realized how the state and the existing norms had made me go against my own wishes and what actually would work best for us.

I quit my job - stayed at home –despite that no one stood on my side, not even my husband at the time.

"We can't afford it". "People don't do that". That's what he said.

But he changed his mind. We managed, but got no support from the state and I spent some years working more intensely than ever before or after in my life, but in the statistics I was invisible. My work didn't count and I felt excluded.

This was a life changing experience that made me dedicate my work being an advocate for children and mothers.

It happened 21 years ago and I am still fighting for the rights for parents to care for their children for as long as necessary.

It is remarkable that we as a society accept a situation where care is not counted in the economy unless you pay someone else to do it. If another mother cares for my child it "counts" in the economy. If I do it myself, in the statistics in Europe I'm an "inactive person".

About me

My name is Madeleine Wallin, I'm Swedish. I'm the Secretary General of FEFAF (European Federation of Parents and Carers at Home) and also the International Coordinator and a board member of Haro (National Association of Stay-at-Home Parents) where I work with issues concerning families, children's needs, parenthood, motherhood, gender equality and unpaid caregiving work.

FEFAF is an umbrella organization with 19 member organizations and which is accredited at ECOSOC at the UN. We want leaders and policy makers to properly recognize that:

- *Unpaid care should be equally valued, protected and recognised on a human, social and economic level.*
- *That the care that children receive, especially during the first years of life impacts the whole of adulthood and must be prioritized.*



Madeleine Wallin,
secretary general of
FEFAF (European
Federation of Parents
and Carers at Home)

Responsibility shift

In 1934, the famous Swedish couple Gunnar and Alva Myrdal argued for the *value of sharing responsibility for child rearing between parents and society with trained teachers*. Alva created and developed the first day-care centers in Sweden with progressive ideas on how to support mothers and improve the lives of children built on modern psychology.

90 years later, their vision has become reality. Sweden has undergone a shift in responsibility for children: from parents to the state and now we see the individual as strong and the family as weak.

Stefan Fölster, the well known Swedish National Economist — and actually the grandson of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal — said: “It’s more socio-economically profitable for the state to compensate parents with two or more children to care for their children themselves than to pay for preschool or childcare.” (Almedalen 2011)

But the state provides a huge subsidy for childcare in Sweden — parents pay only 8% of the total \$18 500 USD annual per child. In 2019, Sweden paid \$10 billion USD for childcare.

There are now proposals to make preschool compulsory. But there is no support at all for parents who want to care for their children themselves.

Under Swedish and international law, the main responsibility for children belongs to the parents, but in Sweden, parents have become persuaded that experts and trained teachers will care for their child better than they do themselves.

Other consequences we see of the system Sweden has established is:

- A distrust in parents. The school, the healthcare system and the police have the obligation to report any case of concern to social security. There were 1000 reports of concern made daily in 2018 and that number has since increased, especially during the pandemic.
- Homeschooling has been forbidden since 2011. If you don’t take your children to school, you have to pay a fine and can even lose custody of your children.
- Even though women use almost 12 months of the parental leave when their baby is born, rates of breastfeeding have declined steeply over the past two decades. Today, only 75% of mothers even start



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breastfeeding, down from 93% in 1998 and in the same year 39% of mothers were still breastfeeding at 6 months compared to only 13% of women today.

Why parenting matters

Parenthood is transferred from generation to generation and we should protect this silently transferred, but highly important knowledge.

Before replacing parents and the home environment, we should be very aware of the effects it might have on children. A child needs a close, permanent emotional attachment during the first years. *A child’s healthy development is fostered through the adults they are deeply attached to and the consistent, intimate interaction between them.*

The first years in life have a huge impact on the rest of our lives. We have to see caring for young children as one of the most important societal tasks. It is work that requires emotional commitment and must be taken seriously. It is through early caring that children develop into emotionally responsive, empathetic people.

- The question has to be: *Who is responsible for the children and their emotional growth?* Is it the parents? or is it the state?
- This is a highly relevant question for deciding on policy. The child’s needs cannot be compromised with.

Denial of parents/mothers choice. Gender Equality

Parents role and wishes are now seen as secondary to the "public good". Not what many women want - e.g. reports

Sweden has a Feminist Government, which claims that, "Women and men must have the same power to shape society and their own lives. This is a human right and a matter of democracy and justice."

But why does this not extend to caring for our children? Article 25.2 in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that

"Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance." But when it comes to prescriptions for achieving gender equality, much of the feminist movement in Sweden and elsewhere neglect children and motherhood alike.

Unpaid care is invisible. But it's the foundation of everything.

In Sweden in 2021, though, full time employment outside the home has become the norm for all working people and is pushed, especially for women.

Women who choose to stay at home are seen as backwards. The work they do is seen as a waste of resources. They have even been called "brains in vain" by liberal female Ministers.

In European statistics you are referred to as an inactive person.

I participated at a meeting at EIGE - European Institute for Gender Equality- in Lithuania and a man from EUROSTAT used that term.

I raised my hand and said that it's not fair to call someone inactive, when she, as in my case, took care of a family with five children and all the domestic work it meant. It meant being present 24/7, no leisure time or vacation. It's challenging work and at the same time the most important and you are anything but inactive.

In order to make the care count, and to make the "inactive persons" a part of the system, we redistribute the unpaid work

and force separations between children and mothers.

If another woman cares for my child it is suddenly valued, but if I do it myself it's invisible.

The question is, do we get the same outcome?

The goal is economic growth rather than human wellbeing.

The European Union's so-called Lisbon Targets had an agreement to reach a 75% employment rate by 2020. That meant that women, whether mothers or not, are expected to go to work.

Care responsibility is the main reason why women in Europe don't work and therefore the EU loses 370 billions euro each year.

Because of that, in 2002, another agreement called the *Barcelona objectives* was made to support the employment of women. It stated that a specific percentage of children in Europe should attend childcare facilities, in order to support their mothers' employment:

- 90% of children from age 3 to school age; and
- at least 33% of children from birth through age 2.

But this disregards what women want.

A survey done in 2011 by MMM, Make Mother Matter, where almost 12 000 European women were asked about their preferences as mothers and they said that being a

mother was a source of enormous joy, but they experienced a lack of choice, time and recognition for their work.

- 26% said they wanted to take full time care of their families,
- 63% preferred a combination of part-time employment and family care and
- Only 11% wanted to work full-time.

Catherine Hakim from London Schools of Economics came with similar results in her Preference Theory 1998.

20% at home, 60% part-time work, and 20% full-time work.

At a side event at the Commission on the Status

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of Women at the UN, our former Minister of Gender Equality and now Deputy Executive Director for UN Women, Åsa Regnér was asked if Swedish parents don't get angry when you force them to share the parental leave: She answered, "No, no, it's not a parental choice, it's political will".

Consequences we see is that:

- Many Swedish women are increasingly ambivalent about becoming mothers. In 2019, the average age for a woman to have her first child was 29,6 years.
- We have fewer and fewer children and the birth rate was just 1,66 children per woman in 2020.
- Women are on sick leave more than men, especially between the ages of 30-40. The difference has grown steadily since the early 1980s until today, when women are on sick leave almost twice as often as men.
- Many women are sick because of stress. One out of 3 women between the ages of 16 and 29 reports feeling stressed. And sick leave in this group has increased by 370% since 2011.

Whatever decisions we make for our future we have to prioritize children and their wellbeing.

Effects on children

Just like the world now focuses so heavily on economic growth, there is a similar focus on the cognitive education of children. But it's at the exclusion of *children's emotional growth and wellbeing*, which is the prerequisite for cognitive development in the first place.

"The lack of emotional capital around the world should be a

high priority if we want human beings to develop and become more peaceful and caring than today"

Wendy Ellyatt, founding director of Save Childhood Movement Great Britain said: "There is nothing wrong with seeking high educational standards and accountability, but there is surely something very wrong indeed if this comes at the cost of natural development."

I would like to end with a story.

Max, my sister's first son went to preschool and it worked fine for him. For his younger brother Ebbe though, it was a bad experience. They went to the same preschool, but were separated into different groups — despite the security it would have given Ebbe to be with his brother. Ebbe was crying and very sad when his

parents left him, which the school always says is normal and will pass. But, one day when they got home, Max told his parents that when two-year-old Ebbe had to sit at a different table than him at mealtime, he had cried until he got a nose-bleed. Max couldn't understand why they treated his young brother that way. The teachers didn't tell the parents what had happened!

My sister and her husband took him out of that preschool immediately and had to manage the situation themselves. They worked in shifts and asked relatives for help.

In Sweden, the option to make a different choice in this situation does not exist. You are on your own.

Whatever decisions we make for our future we have to prioritize children and their wellbeing.

* Intervention of Madeleine Wallin in the webinar with the same title organized by AEI on March 2, 2021: <https://www.aei.org/events/the-unintended-consequences-of-universal-childcare-lessons-from-sweden/>