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## **A review of policies and practices related to the 'highest-low' fertility of Sweden<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article reviews research on the role social and family policies play for fertility in Sweden. Swedish family policies are not directly aimed at encouraging childbirth. Their main goal has rather been to support women's participation in the labour force and to promote gender equality. They focus on enabling individuals to pursue their family and occupational pathways without being too dependent on other persons. The following measures have helped women to reconcile family and working life: individual taxation and individual-based social-security systems, which make gendered segregation of work and care less attractive for couples; an income replacement-based parental-leave system, which gives women incentives to establish themselves on the labour market before considering childbirth; and subsidised child care, which allows women to return to work after parental leave. Fertility has fluctuated during recent decades but—as in the other Nordic countries with similar welfare state setups—it has remained well above the European average. The Swedish institutional context clearly is conducive to such 'highest-low' fertility. My review documents the importance of institutional factors in shaping childbearing behaviour and demonstrates some specific impacts of family policies on demographic behaviour.

### **1 Background**

In demographic research, Sweden often stands out as a country of reference, because it combines the following two features: First of all, it has been a forerunner in the development of important aspects of family-demographic behaviour, and second, it has some of the best demographic data in the world to

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detect such developments. The Swedish experience is also of interest because it has been innovative in terms of policy development related to family life. In the 1970s and 1980s, changes in women's position in society motivated the introduction of a wide range of policies with the aim of achieving greater compatibility between women's role in the family and at work. Subsequently, public policies have continued to aim at promoting gender equality but then focused more explicitly on men and their reconciliation of family and work.

It is very common to associate the relatively high fertility in Sweden and its Nordic neighbours with its policies and the characteristics of the Nordic welfare regime. The recuperation of fertility levels in the Nordic countries during the 1980s is often thought to be linked with the introduction and extension of various family-related policies. In the early 1990s, the remarkably high fertility in Sweden at that time attracted particular attention. The role of higher compatibility between female employment and parenthood in Sweden—and elsewhere in Scandinavia—has been stressed by a large number of authors, as witnessed by a long sequence of pertinent publications during the last two decades: see, for example, Moen (1989), Sundström (1991), Haas (1992), Pauti (1992), Sundström and Stafford (1992), Bernhardt (1993), B. Hoem (1993), Ellingsæter and Rønsen (1996), Rindfuss and Brewster (1996), Hoem and Hoem (1996, 1999), Brewster and Rindfuss (2000), Oláh (2003), Rønsen (2004a,b), Hoem (2005) and Neyer et al. (2006). In the early 1990s, Bernhardt (1991) called the Swedish experience a positive example for other countries in Europe to follow, and according to Pinelli (1995) Sweden exemplified the possibility of encouraging fertility increase in a country. The importance of institutional changes that help women combine production and reproduction has also been stressed by Eurostat, which, in a number of population projections, has made future fertility levels in EU countries dependent on the implementation of such policies (for an early discussion, see Joshi 1996).

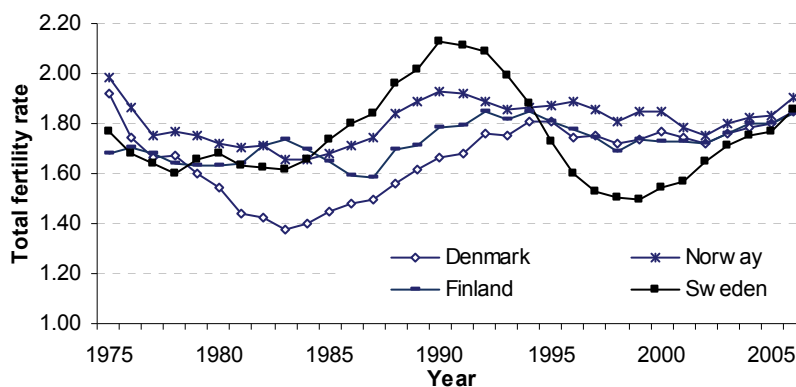
It is important to note that Swedish family policy has never specifically targeted childbearing but has rather aimed at strengthening women's participation in the labour market and promoting gender and social equality. The focus has been on enabling individuals to pursue their family and occupational tracks without being too dependent on other persons or being constrained by institutional factors. Policies are explicitly focusing on individuals and not on families as such. In terms of childbearing, the goal is to enable women and men to raise the number of children they want to have. Surveys on young Swedes reveal that, on average, Swedish women and men aspire to have well above two children (Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2001; Goldstein et al. 2003). In view of these results, Swedish authorities have become particularly concerned about childbearing dynamics when period fertility declined far below the population replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. This was the case at the end of the 1970s and, once more, in the mid to late 1990s. In both cases, the low fertility induced the Swedish authorities to investigate what could be done to help

Swedish people have the number of children they claim they want to have. (For the most recent study, see Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2001.) On both occasions, low fertility was considered a welfare issue, and the purpose of the investigations was to detect the obstacles in society that might prevent individuals from pursuing their desired life goals. In the Swedish debate, the desirability of higher fertility as such was articulated more explicitly during these two periods than at other times. In both cases, fertility started to increase again shortly after the investigations had been carried out.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Recent childbearing trends in Sweden

The fact that fertility is generally high in Sweden has been obscured by the strong fluctuations in childbearing in recent decades. A presentation of aggregate trends in childbearing in the four main Nordic countries as they show up in period Total Fertility Rates (TFR) reveals that Swedish fertility has exhibited a roller coaster pattern (Hoem and Hoem 1996) with undulations around the average of the other Nordic countries (see Figure 1). The general picture of Nordic fertility shows an increase during the 1980s followed by a convergence between countries towards the present Nordic average of a TFR around 1.8 children or more per woman. In an international comparison, such a fertility level can be labelled as highest-low: it is below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman but still high as compared to many other developed countries.

**Figure 1:**  
Period Total Fertility Rate of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, 1975-2006



Source: Nordic Statistical Central Bureaus

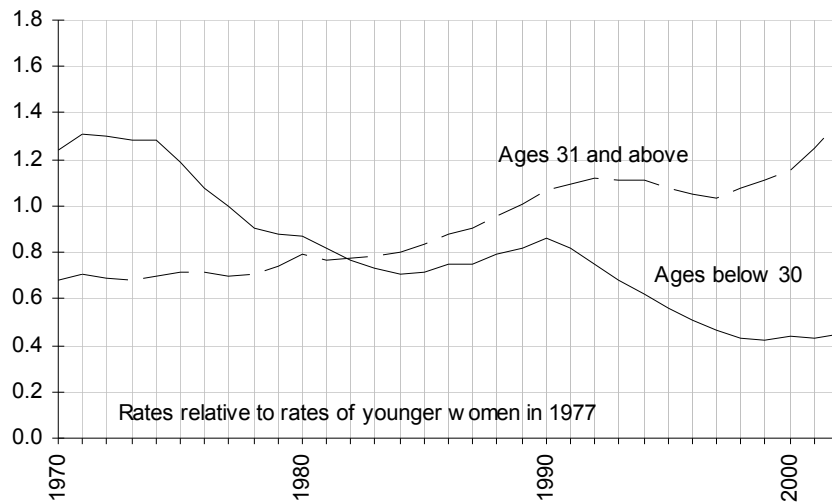
<sup>2</sup> The investigations have a historical predecessor in an ambitious study of fertility and family policies carried out by Myrdal and Myrdal during the 1930s. They resemble their predecessor in their 'fertility-stimulating' effect: fertility started to increase shortly after the Myrdals had published their work in 1934.

Recent fluctuations in Swedish period total fertility show an upward trend from 1983 to 1990, a sharp drop from 1992 to 1997 and a recovery from 1999 to the present day: monthly statistics from Statistics Sweden reveal that by the beginning of 2008 Swedish fertility was still increasing. As fertility measure, however, the TFR is a very crude indicator. It is better suited to describe the completed childbearing of cohorts of women and men than the fertility developments during a period. In various publications, I have instead presented period trends in childbearing at different birth orders of women in Sweden (see Andersson 1999 with an update in Andersson 2004a) and other Scandinavian countries (Andersson 2002, 2004b) by applying more advanced statistical methods to longitudinal population register data. Following an approach first suggested and described by Jan Hoem (1991, 1993a), this amounts to a modern version of indirect standardisation, which allows for (i) a disaggregated description of demographic change, displaying trends in childbearing for important subgroups of women, (ii) the efficient use of available data, controlling for compositional changes over the demographic categories at hand, and (iii) the use of a metric that is appropriate for a period-based analysis, giving information about changes over time in the propensity of the different groups of women to give birth. In practice, it amounts to applying event history techniques (in the form of proportional hazards models) to the childbearing histories of Swedish women and presenting relative risks of childbearing for different subgroups of women by a variable that represents the effect of calendar period.

Figures 2 and 3 describe Swedish childbearing dynamics by means of a set of standardised annual birth rates of childless women and mothers, respectively. Figure 2 shows how first-birth fertility of women at ages below 30 decreased up to the mid-1980s. This decline was followed by a marked increase in the first-birth fertility of older women, together reflecting general postponement of entry into motherhood. During the Swedish baby boom of the 1980s, birth propensities also increased strongly for mothers at different parities (Figure 3)—as well as for younger childless women. By contrast, the 1990s showed strong declines in birth risks. As in the 1980s, practically all demographic subgroups of women followed these trends. In relative terms, the drops were strongest in first-birth rates of younger women and in third and fourth-birth rates. Another clear trend reversal in birth propensities occurred after 1997. It is interesting to note that the increase in childbearing propensities in 1998 and 1999 is not evident in aggregated TFR data. The TFR of Sweden was recorded at 1.50 in these two years, the lowest level ever registered. With our presentation, we can get at the dynamics underlying the childbearing of different subgroups of women and reveal more accurately when important changes in childbearing behaviour occurred.

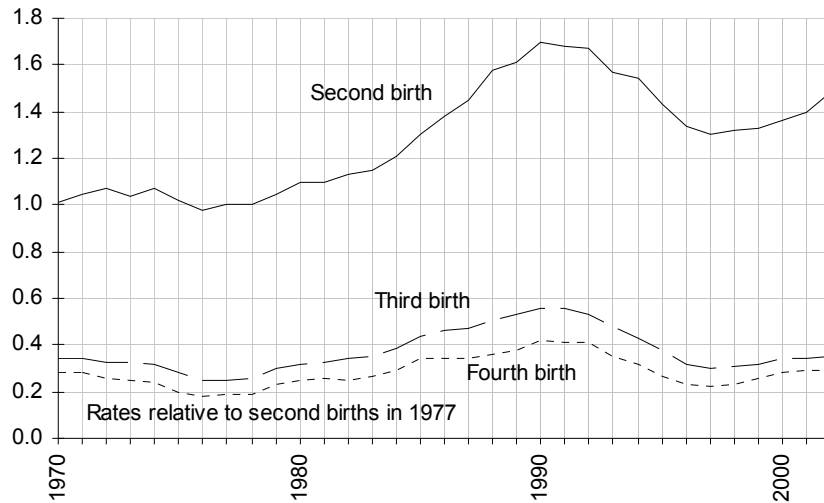
A comparison of the childbearing dynamics in Sweden as expressed in Figures 2 and 3 with those in other Nordic countries reveals many similarities in patterns and trends. It also shows that Swedish fertility has fluctuated more strongly than the corresponding birth rates of its neighbours (Andersson 2002, 2004b; Neyer et al. 2006).

**Figure 2:**  
**Standardised annual first-birth rates. Swedish childless women, 1970-2002, by group of ages, standardised for age in single years**



Source: Andersson (2004a)

**Figure 3:**  
**Standardised annual second-, third-, and fourth-birth rates. Swedish mothers, 1970-2002, by birth order, standardised for age of mother and duration since previous birth.**



Source: Andersson (2004a)

The recent stability and similarity in the fertility of the other Nordic countries suggests that their fertility levels somehow reflect an underlying Nordic fertility regime at the beginning of the 21st century. Finally, the image of very volatile Swedish fertility withers if we look at the completed childbearing of Swedish cohorts of women (Andersson et al. 2008). Statistics of this kind show that each female cohort born in 1935 and later has achieved an ultimate number of children within the narrow range of around 1.9-2.1 children per woman. (For information on patterns in cohort fertility in the Nordic countries, see Andersson et al. 2008; Frejka and Calot 2001; Björklund 2006.) The combined information of different fertility statistics indicates a long-term relative stability of Swedish fertility, with short-term period fluctuations occurring both around its own long-term cohort fertility level and around a recent average of Nordic period fertility. When comparing cohort fertility measures of the Nordic countries, Sweden is the country with the most stable ultimate number of children born.

### **3 Swedish childbearing dynamics**

Both the relatively high fertility of Sweden and its recent fluctuations need to be seen in the light of the specific setup of the Swedish welfare regime. Its general orientation is to make family activities and the labour force participation of women and men compatible. This is evident in both the fairly high fertility and in the strong labour market attachment of Swedish women and men. For women, reconciling family and working life is facilitated by (i) individual taxation and an individual-based social-security system, which makes gendered segregation of work and care less attractive for couples, (ii) an income-replacement based parental-leave system, which gives women incentives to establish themselves on the labour market before considering childbirth, (iii) the flexibility of this system, which allows parents to divide the leave between them on a full-time or part-time basis at any time until the child turns eight, (iv) subsidised child care, which allows mothers to return to work after parental leave, and (v) the right to take paid leave from work to care for a sick child. The latter option is shared more equally among fathers and mothers than parental leave. The sharing fits reasonably well with the Swedish policy focus on gender equality, which aims not only at enhancing women's position on the labour market but also at encouraging men to engage more actively in childrearing tasks within the family.

In general, it is difficult to determine exactly to what extent family policies or packages of such policies truly affect childbearing behaviour in a country. In empirical research, such policies would be treated as macro-level factors, and it is often impossible to isolate the effect of one such factor on individual-level behaviour from the possibly competing impact of other macro-level factors. Cross-country comparisons of the gendered patterns in labour market activity and family dynamics in different welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990) of

Europe nevertheless lend some support to the role of political and institutional factors in explaining childbearing behaviour (for empirical examples, see various contributions in Andersson and Neyer 2004). We find further support for the importance of such factors by a detailed examination of patterns in the childbearing of women in Sweden. Andersson (2000) and Hoem (2000) demonstrated, for example, that women who are well established on the labour market and have a decent level of income are much more inclined to become a mother than childless women with a weaker attachment to the labour market. This pattern underlines that Swedish women by no means consider parenthood and work as competing activities. The pattern is probably strengthened by the design of the Swedish parental-leave system with its distinct income replacement character, i.e. a leave allowance amounting to 80% of a person's earnings prior to childbirth. This system seems to be conducive to higher fertility levels in that it raises the compatibility of childbearing and employment. For a woman in Sweden, a decent level of income is nowadays considered a prerequisite for her childbearing and certainly not as an obstacle to it. Evidently, this system is also sensitive to economic trends. Andersson (2000) and Hoem (2000) demonstrated that recent variations in the business cycle have fuelled the roller coasters in Swedish fertility. In particular the economic downturn in Sweden in the early 1990s triggered the subsequent fertility decline during much of that decade.

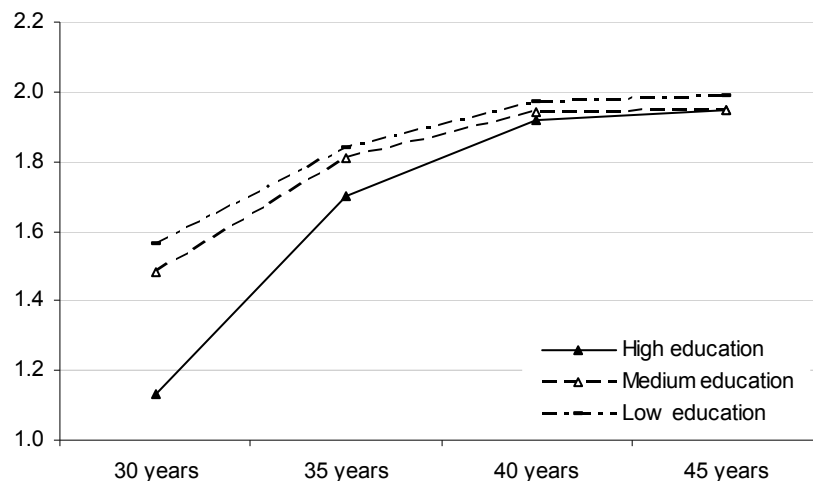
Moreover, studies of childbearing patterns in relation to the labour market attachment of Swedish parents by Andersson, Duvander and Hank (2005) and Andersson and Scott (2007) reveal that the impacts of female and male earnings on a couple's childbearing behaviour are fairly similar. This suggests that there is at least some degree of gender equality in the way Swedish couples deal with building their families.

Figure 4 provides further suggestive evidence of the equalising effects brought about by the Swedish policy setup as reflected in the childbearing dynamics past age 30 of Swedish women at different educational levels. The figure reveals that the average number of children born to women at age 30 is much lower for those with a post-secondary education than among those with shorter educations. This is not surprising as highly educated women have had less time to establish themselves on the labour market and are likely to commence childbearing later than women who only have primary or secondary education. What is more interesting is that the highly educated women manage to recuperate their fertility at subsequent ages so that educational differences in ultimate fertility (Figure 4) and ultimate childlessness (Andersson et al. 2008) have vanished by the time the women reach the end of their reproductive years.

The importance of institutional factors in shaping childbearing behaviour is further highlighted by in-depth studies on the childbearing dynamics of foreign-born women in Sweden. If cultural factors were most decisive for childbearing behaviour, one would expect quite different dynamics for women and men from widely different countries of origin. However, the opposite holds true. Swedish

and foreign-born women exhibit remarkable similarity in the way they respond to recent period effects in Swedish fertility (Andersson 2004c) and in the interaction between their attachment to the labour market and their childbearing behaviour (Andersson and Scott 2005, 2007). Furthermore, foreign-born women with widely different cultural backgrounds exhibit a striking similarity as regards their childbearing dynamics in Sweden. We take this as evidence for the relative importance of institutional factors in shaping childbearing behaviour.

**Figure 4:**  
Cohort cumulated fertility at age 30 and above, by educational level at age 30, women born in Sweden in 1950-54



Source: Andersson et al. 2008

#### 4 Consequences of family policies: facts or artefacts?

When studying the possible impact of family policies on childbirth, one ideally considers the whole package of measures in their particular context. A specific policy cannot be seen in isolation, and in another context its effect might be completely different from the one in which it was first introduced. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile examining the extent to which specific policies can truly be shown to affect individual childbearing behaviour in a certain context. This can be achieved if a policy is depicted in such a way that there is some variation between individuals regarding its actual implementation. In this manner, I have studied how different aspects of the Swedish parental-leave and child care systems have been related to the childbearing dynamics of Swedes.

The parental-leave and child care systems of Sweden are certainly key elements of its family policy. The parental-leave system offers slightly more than



one year of paid leave from work after the birth of a child, which can be shared between parents and used in a very flexible way. The allowance paid during this leave is based on the income earned prior to childbirth in the same manner as income replacement is offered to individuals who take sick leave or are unemployed. At present, 80% of the previous earnings are replaced up to an annual ceiling of around 32,000 Euro (counted as earnings before tax but after social-security contributions). In addition, the scheme comprises generous offers for staying home to take care of sick children after the end of parental leave.

The Swedish parental-leave system was established in the 1970s and extended in the 1980s, with the other Nordic countries following the same development though at a somewhat slower pace. A specific component of the present Swedish system, the so called 'speed premium', was also introduced in the 1980s and contributed to the fertility increase during that decade. It creates incentives for women to have their children at relatively short birth intervals (Hoem 1990, 1993b; Andersson 1999; Andersson, Hoem and Duvander 2006). A cross-country comparison of the period effects in childbearing of mothers in Sweden, Denmark and Norway by the time since their last previous childbirth (Andersson 2002, 2004b) offers the rare opportunity to demonstrate a clear causal effect of a policy intervention on childbearing behaviour in a developed country (cf. Ní Bhrolcháin and Dyson 2007).

Much of the present debate on the parental-leave system in Sweden focuses on the relatively low uptake of the leave by fathers (Haas and Hwang 1999; Sundström and Duvander 2002; Bygren and Duvander 2006). Swedish fathers do take close to 20 per cent of all parental leave, which is considerably higher than in any other country except Iceland (see Gislason 2007), but Swedish authorities still see the slow progress towards a further increase in paternal involvement in the parental-leave scheme as an obstacle to gender equality. It is also commonly assumed that increased paternal involvement in childrearing is related to higher fertility. A study by Duvander and Andersson (2006) suggests that there is indeed a generally positive relationship between the father's uptake of parental leave and a Swedish couple's propensity to have another child.

In Sweden, public day care for children is regarded an essential component of the overall welfare system and its orientation towards a dual-breadwinner model, gender equality and the promotion of equal opportunities for children of all social backgrounds (Bergqvist and Nyberg 2002). The provision of public child care improved substantially during the 1970s to 1990s, when the expansion of such services became a generally accepted policy objective. At present, practically all children in Sweden have access to subsidised high-quality child care. A study by Andersson, Duvander and Hank (2004) examines if the local variation in child care characteristics can be related to the childbearing dynamics of parents in different Swedish municipalities. They find no such indication and interpret the absence of effects as a reflection of the generally very appropriate level of child care in Sweden. They conclude that "despite some regional variation in the

quantity, quality and price of day care, the overall coverage with affordable, high-quality child care opportunities is apparently on a sufficiently high level as to allow parents to make their fertility decisions relatively independent of the specific characteristics of their local area". For a related study on Norway that indeed finds positive effects of child care availability on fertility, see Rindfuss et al. (2007).

## **5 Family policies and fertility: an assessment of different policy options**

In this review, I have demonstrated how childbearing patterns in Sweden are related to the setup of the Swedish welfare state. Policies aimed at strengthening women's labour market attachment and promoting gender equality have made it easier for women to combine work and family life. In such a setting, fertility has remained relatively high.

The policies that have been most important in creating such a setting are the specific combination of individual taxation, a flexible parental-leave scheme based on income replacement and a system of high-quality full-time day care. Together they support the present dual bread-winner model of Sweden. I have not paid attention to the existing scheme of child allowances since the levels of such allowances do not largely deviate from those in other developed countries. While being helpful in alleviating some of the direct costs of having children, it is debatable whether they are likely to promote childbirth as such. In the Swedish context, childbirth is supported by providing an infrastructure that allows women and men to pursue their individual life goals in terms of family and professional life. In economic terms, Swedish families base their affluence on own earnings rather than on allowances.

An important aspect of Swedish policies is that they target individuals and not families as such. They have no intention of supporting certain family forms, such as marriage, over others. An analysis of crude birth rates and various other crude indicators of the family dynamics of European countries suggests that this might be a wise strategy if one is interested in higher fertility. There is a very clear pattern that countries with more traditional family behaviour, such as a high propensity for marriage, low divorce rates and low levels of out-of-wedlock childbearing, have the lowest fertility while countries with greater diversity in their family dynamics have the highest fertility (Billari and Kohler 2004). Evidently, in a context that confines childbearing to a restricted set of conservative family forms, there will always be a fraction of the population that tries to avoid getting trapped in such a life situation. A persistent focus on gender equality in public as well as in private life (McDonald 2000a, 2000b) seems to be a better strategy for policy makers who want to create an environment where women do not see childbearing as a step towards reducing their personal freedom.

A final suggestion based on our study is that the fertility levels of the Nordic countries at the beginning of the 21st century are useful as a benchmark when making forecasts about the fertility that is likely to appear when a society tries to reconcile the active labour force participation of women and men with their activities and responsibilities as childrearsers.

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