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# Children's rights and gender equality in Swedish parenting support: policy and practice

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore how 'children's rights' and 'gender equality' are articulated in parenting support policies in Sweden, and how these policies are enacted in practice with respect to the two perspectives mentioned. The analysis builds on key policy documents and interviews with civil servants working on parenting support on local, regional and national levels. The results show that despite national ambitions to enhance and achieve gender equality among parents, gender equality are downplayed in local settings. Important reasons are to be found in a lack of concrete strategies and instructions how to work with gender equality perspectives in cooperation with children's rights perspectives, but also the different interpretations of gender equality and 'good parenting' made by the civil servants.

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## Introduction

Gender equality is a hallmark for the Swedish welfare state. Highly ranked in, for example, the Global Gender Report or by the World Economic Forum, Sweden has gained a world-wide reputation as among the most gender equal countries in the world. Its reputation can be explained by the long history of family and gender equality policies, facilitating for both women and men to combine gainful employment and caring responsibilities. Moreover, as argued by Anne-Lise Ellingsæter and Arnlaug Leira (2006, p. 7) 'gender equality is about more than equality of opportunity; equality of outcome is an important part of policy thinking. Ideologically, the promotion of gender equality policies is legitimated as central to the promotion of the continuing processes of democratisation'. This development has among other things resulted in a 'dual earner, dual carer family model' characterized by publicly funded childcare, the integration of women in the labour market as well as the discourse on caring fathers – as a means to enhance gender equality and at the same time support and sustain economic growth (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Lundqvist, 2011; Nyberg, 2012; Sainsbury, 1996).

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An important feature in the development of family policies has been the evolution of parenting support services, defined as: ‘an activity which gives parents knowledge about children’s health, emotional, cognitive and social development and/or strengthening parents social network’ (Swedish Government, 2009, p. 2).<sup>1</sup> In Sweden, such services have a long history, dating from the 1930s, mainly including state interventions in terms health check-ups of small children and pregnant women and, later in the 1970s, parental education (Bremberg, 2004). However, in the wake of the economic crisis in the 1990s and the deterioration of health among children, a reorientation of parenting support took place, where the parent–child relationship became more important, reflecting the ambition to allow the ‘responsible autonomous family’ to emerge (Lundqvist, 2015; cf. Rose, 1999). At the same time, emphasis on children’s rights gained increasing importance in political discussions, including parenting support. In fact, the child rights perspective has gained in importance ever since Sweden ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990. By 1993, the Ombudsman for Children, a state authority tasked with representing the rights and interest of children and young people, was established, and by 1998 Sweden had launched a strategy for implementing the UNCRC. By 2002, the Swedish parliament introduced a special position responsible for the UNCRC at the Government Offices, and the current government is working towards the UNCRC becoming law in Sweden by 2020. As we will see below, the importance of the rights and interest of the child is also fundamental to parenting support policies and practices in the Swedish context. Such perspective differs to a certain extent from the goal of gender equality in the sense that the children’s rights perspective focuses on the child–parent relationship while gender equality emphasizes the importance of creating equal conditions between the parents, which most of the time means between women and men. In Swedish parenting support policy discourse, the concept of ‘gender equal parenting’ is used as one way of transcending such differences. However, in parenting support practice such differences may be more difficult to reconcile.

As argued by Daly (2015), more critical research is vital with regard to potential tensions that are involved when parenting support policy is worked out in practice. In this article, we explore how the principles of ‘children’s rights’ and ‘gender equality’ are articulated in parenting support policy documents in Sweden, and how these perspectives are enacted in practice at regional and local levels. More specifically, we ask the following questions: How are the rights and interests of the child vis-à-vis gender equality framed and defined in parenting support policy documents in Sweden after the new Millennium? How are the two perspectives understood by practitioners engaged in parenting support services at regional and local levels?

The analysis will revolve around key policy documents as well as interviews with local, regional and national civil servants working on various parenting support activities. First, however, we will briefly define and frame the ways we analyse parenting support policies and practices. Also, a section on methods and data are included. The empirical analysis takes off with an overview of recent developments in parenting support policies, mainly focussing on how gender equality and children’s rights are articulated in key policy documents. It also analyses a number of civil servants’ narratives on how national policy guidelines and strategies are practiced in local settings. Finally, we sum up our findings in the concluding remarks.

## Framing and analysing parenting support policies

In a European context, current parenting support can be seen as a response to the restructuring of the welfare state in the 1990s and to increasing ‘new social risks’ among children and their parents (Lewis, 2011; Crepaldi, Pasquinelli, Castegnaro, & Naaf, 2011; Molineuvo, 2013). ‘New social risks’ were not only connected to unemployment and rising poverty among families but also to the assumption that parenting had become more difficult due to new family forms and women’s employment. Thus parents were in need of support in raising their children (Gillies, 2005, 2012). In such a context children became the focal point in policy analysis: how should the state support families with children to avoid social exclusion and marginalization? A variety of interventions thus emerged, ranging from information and advice to education and training, and the underlying idea behind parenting support was to ‘engage parents in activities that seek to affect their awareness, knowledge of and competence in their child-raising abilities’ (Daly, 2013a, p. 159). The strong focus on parenting skills and the roles as parents thus informs many of the parenting support interventions introduced. It is also important to note that the term parenting ‘connotes a focus on the “doing” of parenthood’ (Daly, 2015, p. 598). According to Daly (2015, p. 599) parenting support thus ‘aims to better equip parents for their child-rearing role by providing them with a range of resources’. Such resources include mainly three types, *information and awareness raising, education and skills development, and provision of social support*, hence excluding other forms of family policy support such as parental leave insurance or child allowance. In addition, Daly argues that ‘... parenting support views the relationship between parent and child primarily in functional terms. ... parenting support as conceived here is more directly focused on the exercise or practice of parenting’ (Daly, 2015, p. 599).

Parallel to this development, and in the wake of the ‘turn to parenting’, the ideology of ‘intensive mothering’ was identified by Hays (1996), who suggested that mothers are expected to engage in a parenting style which is child-centred and expert-guided, as well as resource intense in terms of time, emotions and financial resources. Faircloth (2014) suggests that such intensive parenting has to be comprehended in relation to shifting perceptions of children, who are increasingly seen as vulnerable to various risks. Importantly, intensive parenting styles are highly gendered, and mostly concern mothers. Yet, interestingly, in policy definitions and debates on parenting support in a European context, gender relations are remarkably invisible. For example, a striking feature when studying structured parenting support programmes such as *The Incredible Years*, is the lack of gender(s). In fact, as Daly (2013b, p. 226) argues, ‘nobody has a gender’, there are only ‘families’, ‘parents’ and ‘children’. The language surrounding parenting support programmes is thus gender-blind, indicating that power relations between men and women are downplayed. Instead, the focus is on the parent–child relationship.

These perspectives are important in the following analysis. As stated in the introduction, the definition of parenting support services in Sweden ties well into the definition provided by Daly (2013a, 2015). In Sweden, parenting support services are mainly provided through universal services, but it also encompasses targeted measures, organized and financed by county councils or municipalities, including activities organized in cooperation with civil society organization. In Table 1 the main features of these activities are presented.

**Table 1.** Parenting support policies in Sweden.

Providers and organizers	Types and modes of services
Antenatal clinics; child health centres, organized by county councils (doctors, nurses, midwives)	Parenting groups/parenting education ( <i>föräldragrupper</i> ); health controls; various types of counselling/information
Open pre-schools, organized by municipalities and civil society, e.g. churches (pre-school teachers)	Structured parenting support programmes; information; counselling (often integrated in family centres)
Social services, organized by municipalities (social workers, psychologists)	Family counselling; consultation in the area of family law; structured parenting support programmes; counselling via telephone lines and Internet
Pre-schools and schools, organized by municipalities (pre-school teachers and teachers)	Cooperation activities between teachers, parents and pupils, e.g. through information meetings, etc.
Family centres = collaboration between antenatal clinics, child health centres, open pre-schools and social services, organized by the municipalities (nurses, midwives, psychologists, pre-school teachers, social workers, etc.)	Counselling; parenting groups; telephone counselling; structured parenting support programmes
Child- and youth psychiatry, organized by county councils (psychiatrists, nurses)	Counselling, family therapy, group treatment, counselling via telephone and Internet
NGOs, organized by civil society	Structured parenting support programmes; Counselling via telephone lines and Internet

Source: Lundqvist, 2015

In the following analysis, we take into consideration the whole spectrum of parenting support services (see below description of the data). In the analysis we depart from the analytical framework developed by Daly (2015), which consists of two levels of analysis; the policy form (content and change over time) and intervention (main claims and rationale of parenting support in practice). This frame provides an opportunity to understand the complexity to implement overarching perspectives such as gender equal parenting in local contexts: the aim of gender equality policies is to prevent inequities between women and men while the aim of parenting support is to improve parenting in the best interest of the child. As we will see, the goal of gender equal parenting as a way of securing the best interest of the child is not always an easy task for local practitioners.

## Methods and data

The analysis below builds on two types of data: recent key documents on parenting support policies and strategies as well as interviews with civil servants working on parenting support in practice.<sup>2</sup> The document analysis includes directives from the government, official governmental reports, Bills, The National Strategy and reports, evaluations and guidelines published by the County Councils and other state authorities (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2014; Länsstyrelserna, 2015; Statens folkhälsoinstitut, 2013). In all documents, we have been looking for the meanings and understandings of ‘children’s rights’ and ‘gender equality’ and how these two concepts have been defined in terms of implementation processes. All quotes are translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

In addition to the document analysis, we used interview material in order to find out how parenting support policies are enacted in practice. We carried out interviews with 18 civil servants (of whom two were men) working on parenting support services in 11 municipalities across Southern Sweden. The interviewees were selected in order to capture a wide range of different forms of parenting support activities and experiences, including civil servants working with parenting groups, family counselling, structured parenting support programmes and family therapy. Thus the interviewees held different

positions such as coordinators for parenting support services, family counsellors, social service managers, structured parenting programme facilitators, etc. Moreover, two representatives from a county council in Southern Sweden, and one representative at the Family Law and Parenting Support Authority in Stockholm were interviewed. The interviews were carried out between 2015 and 2016. In the interviews, we asked about the content and development of parenting support services and programmes offered, as well as what actors are involved in such activities and how they co-operate and coordinate among themselves. In addition, questions about ‘good parenting’, ‘gender equal parenting’, and what services are offered to reach out to mothers and fathers of different class and ethnic backgrounds were asked.

The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded in the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In the data analysis we have deployed a thematic analysis strategy (Bryman, 2012), and for the purpose of this article, we especially looked for how the interviewees articulate their view on how to best implement parenting support in local settings, with regard to both children’s rights and gender equality. We have also paid attention to what is *not* said in this regard (Blake & Pederson, 1998) as gendered assumptions about parenting are not always explicit. The findings of the analysis were subsequently presented to a group of 16 parenting support practitioners active at the municipality level (all 16 different from those interviewed) at a workshop organized by the County Council in 2017. No additional perspectives or themes came up in their feedback. Rather they could relate to the findings and conclusions. Yet, the practitioner’ accounts as presented in the analysis should not be regarded as representative of practitioners who work with parenting support services in general. More accurately, their accounts should be viewed as glimpses of how the child right perspective and the gender equality perspective are articulated when parenting support policies are enacted in practice.

### **Children’s rights and gender equality? Definitions and debates in parenting support policy documents**

In May 2008, the then centre-right wing government, in power between 2006 and 2014, appointed Christian Democrat, Inger Davidson (former home secretary), to head a commission to outline a national strategy for parenting support (SOU, 2008, 31).<sup>3</sup> The commission presented its report – hereafter referred to as the Commission Report – at the end of 2008, and it served as the basis for the *National Strategy for a Developed Parenting Support: A Win for All*, presented in 2009. The National Strategy’s main goal was to prevent ill-health among children and youth by offering parents support in the upbringing of their children. It strongly emphasized that the aim of parenting support was to facilitate for all parents to ‘provide for children to gain good health and a positive upbringing, and to prevent the child against ill-health and social problems’ (Swedish Government, 2009, p. 2).

The strong emphasis on public health grew out of the profound economic crisis in the 1990s and the restructuring of the welfare state. High unemployment, negative working conditions and austerity politics resulted in worsened living conditions of virtually the whole population, illustrated in increasing ill-health among the population including youth and children (Palme, 2002). To prevent the negative trends in public health, the

then Social-Democratic government initiated a reorientation in the field, aiming at enable the entire population – including youth and children – to gain good health on equal conditions (Bill, 2002/03:35). These goals were followed up in a new public health bill in 2008, by the centre-right wing government. The bill was particularly concerned with the alarming and increasing ill-health among youth and children. More children and youths than ever before, it was argued, experienced sleeping problems, depressions, headaches and so on (Bill, 2007/08:110). To halt this development, as just mentioned, the government appointed a commission in 2008 to investigate and follow up existing parenting support and to suggest a long-term ‘national strategy for societal support and help to parents in their parenthood’ (Bill, 2007/08:110). In the bill, the government especially stressed that children’s rights must be the starting point in all activities. Also, in the Commission Report from 2008, ‘the best interests of the child’ perspective was grounded with reference to the UNCRC.

Thus the child right’s perspective is central in the development of contemporary parenting support policies. However, gender equality goals are also highlighted and articulated as central in parenting support policies and practices. Actually, in Sweden, all policy discussions related to family life are firmly anchored in discourses on gender equality. In fact, the notion of the ‘gender-equal family’ has been viewed as a prerequisite in all family policy reforms ever since the 1970s, famously exemplified by the parental leave insurance. Today gender equality is considered to permeate all policy fields (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Lundqvist, 2011). Gender equality thus also influences work-life balance policies: a complex web of social policy services, insurances and benefits facilitate for both women and men to partake in paid labour, also when they have small children in need of care.

The importance of gender equality in policy discourse is also clear in documents related to parenting support policies. In the directive that preceded the Commission Report, the Commission Report itself, and the national strategy alike, gender equality and the children’s rights are emphasized as central to parenting support policies and practices. The directive set the policy ambition: ‘The Child Right Convention and its basic principles should form the point of departure in the work with parenting support. The work should also be marked by a gender equality perspective’ (Directive, 2008/67). In the 2008 Commission Report, there was a clear position that developing and expanding parenting support would lead to more gender equality, suggesting that children’s rights and gender equality overlap and have the potential to mutually reinforce each other:

Expanded parenting support, more than is currently the case, also supports fathers in their parental role and contributes to men taking an increasing share of parental leave, is probably one of the most efficient interventions to achieve more gender equality. (SOU, 2008:131, p. 129)

Moreover, the Commission report of 2008 devoted a full section to ‘A gender equality perspective on parenting support’, making reference to the policy goal that both women and men should be able to combine family and work life. In addition, pre-school child support services, parental leave and gender equality in the labour market are stated as important tools to achieve work-life balance, reflecting the ‘dual earner, dual carer’ family model. It also attributes the fact that fathers are increasingly involved in parenting to such policy tools (SOU, 2008:31). Moreover, referring to research showing that father

involvement promotes children's mental health and social adaptation (cf. Sarkadi, Kristiansson, & Bremberg, 2004), the Commission Report of 2008 argues that the development towards more gender equality is beneficial to the child's health. It is clear that both the children's rights perspective and gender equality are emphasized as central to parenting support policies and practices, and that gender equal parenting is in the best interest of the child is part of the Commission Report. This is particularly so in relation to fathers' involvement, which will be discussed further down. Moreover, the decision to move the parenting support mandate from the Public Health Authority to a new authority in September 2015 was also made partly with the hope that having all family and parenting support issues in one authority would strengthen the child rights perspective (interview, national level, 2016).

In the National strategy of 2009, which to a large extent follows the recommendations of the Commission Report, the two perspectives are still present but rather than articulating the notion that the two perspectives are mutually reinforcing, they are now placed on par with one another: 'parenting support should be grounded in a clear child rights perspective which departs from joint and gender equal parenting and responsibilities' (p 11). However, in the National strategy there is no mention of what gender equal parenting would entail. In the 2013 handbook *Parents Matter: Handbook in Local and Regional Parenting Support Interventions* issued by The Public Health Authority of Sweden to 'contribute with knowledge about how to ensure successful parenting support interventions' for 'decision makers, civil servants and practitioners' (Statens folkhälsoinstitut, 2013: preface, see also Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2014) the gender equal parenting perspective was dropped altogether, while the child rights perspective remained. In the document a gender-blind discourse is emerging, stressing 'families', 'parents' and 'children', rather than women and men, or boys and girls, a development with parallels to the European context described above (cf Daly, 2013b).

According to the analysis above it is clear that at the national policy level, the goal of gender equality as well as the children's rights perspective infuses the overarching aim of parenting support – but in documents directed towards decision makers, civil servants and practitioners the gender equality perspectives are somewhat downplayed (with the exception of a county council report, Länsstyrelserna, 2015) while the child right's perspective is seen as an obvious point of departure (cf. Statens folkhälsoinstitut, 2013; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2014). Such tension was also evident in the interviews with local practitioners, as will be further discussed below.

### **Gender equality and child right's perspectives in practice**

In the National Strategy, it is stated that 'parenting support should be based on a clear child right perspective and depart from a gender equal parenthood and responsibility' (Swedish Government, 2009, p. 5). In fact, the overarching aim of parenting support services should depart from the best interest of the child, and, as we have seen, 'provide for children to gain good health and a positive upbringing, and to prevent the child against ill-health and social problems' (Swedish Government, 2009, p. 2). To realize such ambition, gender equal parenting is articulated as an important driver. However, it is not clearly stated how gender equality *or* the child right's perspective should inform parenting support services in practice. Instead, the overall focus of the parent-child relationship



dominates the discourses surrounding parenting support services. According to the interviewees in this study, the lack of definitions makes it difficult to operationalize the two perspectives in practice.

The County council who is tasked with coordinating parenting support activities at the municipality level is well aware of these difficulties, as one of their staff explains:

The task means that [we have to ensure] there is focus on gender equal parenting and children's rights. These two goals are clearly indicated in the mandate of the County council; we should work based on these two perspectives. But it is up for discussion all the time, how should we interpret it? (Interview, County council, 2015)

The problems of how to interpret what it actually means to facilitate the two perspectives in practice was also noticed among local civil servants working with various forms of parenting support activities. Thus the idea that gender equal parenting is in the best interest of the child, and that the children's rights perspective and the gender equality perspective are mutually reinforcing discernible at the policy level, was not an idea easily transferred into practice according to the practitioners in this study. Rather, it was evident that children's perspective was seen as a 'natural' point of departure in parenting support activities when compared to the rhetoric of gender equality, mainly since securing the rights and interest of the child – and indeed the needs of children – is one of the main goal of parenting support services and programmes. Instead, gender equality was seen as more difficult to implement, in concrete terms, and thus became a problem in the enactment phase. When asked about what gender equal parenting entails, one practitioner who works as a social counsellor explains:

It is obvious that women and men have different roles, and that they attach importance to different things. Therefore I think that it is never going to be complete gender equality. We have different thoughts and ideas and the question is 'should there be equality [between women and men]?' Therefore I pose the question 'what does gender equality mean?'. (...) I think in terms of children's needs, they should have their needs met, regardless of if it is the mother or the father who makes it happen, regardless of the parent, regardless of the gender. They [the children] should have it [their needs met], they have these needs. And then that can be done in different ways, or that you [as parent] prioritise differently. That's the way it's always going to be. It has to do with women and men, but also with personalities, that women [amongst themselves] also do differently etc. So it is a complex question. (medium size, middle-income municipality, 2016)

The quotation above shows how discussions on gender equality sometimes fall into discourses on essentialism, but also how essentialism leads to a lack of awareness in terms of power relations between mothers and fathers. However, several practitioners interviewed also mentioned that gender equality-related issues often surfaced during discussions with parents on topics such as communication, division of roles and responsibilities, and parent-child relationships. Nevertheless, there was a general sentiment that it was difficult to engage in such discussions. Rather gender equality was often discussed in 'joking ways':

In both individual counselling and in groups do we discuss [gender inequality] in joking ways. Because you cannot talk about it in a serious way, but in joking ways you can talk about it. And the jokes are made from both sides [from both women and men], (medium size, low-income municipality, 2016)

Another reason why it was hard to discuss gender equality had to do with boundaries between gender equal parenting and 'gender-unequal' parenting, especially when

individual parents prefer a traditional gender division of parenting roles and responsibilities, where the mother is the main carer and the father then main earner: ‘Many women want to be home, want to be on parental leave. And some are very irritated about the “daddy month” (medium size, high-income municipality, 2015).<sup>4</sup>

In fact, most civil servants were unable to define what gender equal parenting would entail, even though they agreed that it was an important topic:

Gender equality is nothing that we work with, but it doesn’t mean that we do not think it is not needed. But it does come up for discussion. We do not have a specific theme on gender equality, but it always come up when we discuss about what different roles parents have, how you share etc. (...) it is not exactly a catchword that we have with us. (medium size, high-income municipality, 2015)

Lack of knowledge was also mentioned as an impediment to working systematically with the principle of gender equality in parenting support services and programmes:

I feel I have too little knowledge to work with gender-equal parenting. Should we integrate it in the structured parenting programmes, in the child health services, or how should we talk about it? What questions should be discussed? Is it about how much parental leave is being used? I mean, one can have a gender-equal relationship even if you don’t share equally in terms of parental leave. But it is an interesting question to lift with parents. What is a gender-equal parenting? What does it stand for? (...) I feel I am poorly informed about what the National strategy refers to in terms of gender-equal parenting. (medium size, middle-income municipality, 2015)

The difficulties in defining what gender equal parenting entails, and the ambiguities involved in drawing boundaries between what constitutes gender equal parenting and what does not, can be viewed as an example of how abstract the principle of gender equality is formulated; The importance of gender equality is emphasized as a goal in policy documents but not as a practice. Even if the principles of the child right’s perspective are formulated in equally abstract ways, this perspective was used as an obvious point of departure and not discussed in ambiguous ways among the interviewees in this study.

### **When the child right’s perspective meets gender equality ... and the ‘Problem’ of dual earners**

Even if the practitioners articulated a number of problems in relation to how to implement gender equal parenting, it did not mean that they did not talk about it. One theme that emerged from the interviews was for parents to act role models for their children in gender equal ways, and to consider ‘what signals we send to the children’ if there is lack of gender equality. This was especially obvious in relation to structured parenting support programmes. The one municipality that offered a structured parenting support programme (Familjeverkstaden) with a module on gender equality, showed a film, which instigated discussions about what a gender equal role model – when departing from the best interest of the child – can be:

There are many parents who recognise themselves, and I think that helps many. All cards are put on the table, and then parents can say ‘oh, I do it like that too’. And then you can talk about alternative ways of doing. But we don’t sit here as experts, who point out what is wrong and tell people what to do. (...) we discuss how parents engage with their children

based on the child's gender. It is more about bringing stuff to the surface, to get them [parents] reflect about how things can be, or 'oops, I do it like that too' (...) it's also about relations between parents, and role models there ... How you behave towards the child, who takes more responsibilities for parenting, and what the child learns if only the mother takes the main responsibilities. (...) It raises many questions. Because some things are just done automatically. Like 'this is the way it is'. But when you watch [the film], when we start to discuss, then 'oh, that's right', 'why do we do it like that', or 'can we do it another way?', or 'what do the children learn when we do it like that? Is that what we want the children to bring with them?' (small size, middle-income municipality, 2016)

As the quotation suggests, gender equal parenting was discussed as something which would be in the best interest of the child; Transferring gender-stereotypical caring patterns to the children was regarded as problematic for the interest of the child, hence, by improving gender equal parenthood the child right's perspective was also emphasized. Moreover, interestingly, and as evident in the quotation above, discussions about gender equal role models took place among the parents, without any explicit leadership by the group facilitator, who had more of a moderating role. In other words, the group facilitator did not have to worry about drawing boundaries between gender equal parenting and gender-unequal parenting, something which was a difficulty that practitioners in other municipalities mentioned as a challenge to working on gender equal parenting in practice.

However, with regard to gender equal role models, one theme was problematized from the perspective of the rights and interests of the child, namely the dual-earner family. According to the practitioners, the dual-earner model was not always regarded as something to aspire for, at least not with regard to full-time dual earners. This is – in contrast to general welfare policy rhetoric – mentioned in both parenting support policy documents and in the interviews (cf Littmarck, 2017). In for example the 2008 commission report, it is noted that it is

Parent's need to know that if they take parenting seriously, it is not only meaningful and life changing for the children but also an important contribution for society. It is no catastrophe if other demands have to stand back during some periods in life. To the contrary it can be good and necessary' (SOU, 2008:131).

Although there is no mention of compromising the principle of gender equality in the report – nor the 2009 strategy – it was obvious that for some practitioners, paid work could pose threats to the interest of the child. In particular, seemingly based on the assumption that women have the primary care responsibility, the fact that many mothers nowadays are engaged in paid work was mentioned as a reason for children not having an 'adult at home': 'In the past women stayed at home as housewives. Today we work, we stress, we look after the home, and we are supposed to look after ourselves'. (large size, middle-income municipality, 2016)

There was also a sentiment that dual-earner parents focus too much on their careers and one informant explained how some parents let their children spend 10–12 hours in kindergarten, something that was considered to not be in the best interest of the child.

It was not only the practitioners who problematized the dual-earner model. Also, as argued above, the 2008 Commission Report implicitly critiqued the dual-earner model:

Everybody is expected to work full time from when the child is just over one years old, to have a rich social life, have time to develop themselves, have a beautiful home and at the same time

be a perfect partner and parent. That equation is impossible to solve even if two share the responsibility. (SOU, 2008:131)

Although there was no differentiation between problematizing mothers and fathers spending too much time at work, it was noteworthy that few of the practitioners in the study problematized the time fathers devote to caring for their children, as discussed in more detail below. Hence, while the problem of dual earners was problematized with an implicit understanding that women's work posed a problem for the families, the lack of dual carers was not identified as a key cause of concern for good parenting.

### **Gender equal parenting means father involvement in the best interest of the child?**

Another theme that emerged from the interviews and the key documents analysed was that the gender equality perspective often tended to be included especially when fathers were discussed, as a way to include them in the services provided.

As shown above, father involvement is seen as a key component of gender equal parenting in the Commission Report of 2008. The report problematizes the fact that fathers take only about 20% of parental leave days, and that no more than 20% of fathers take part in parenting support groups offered by the child health services. The report therefore concludes that, 'from a child-, family- and gender equality perspective is it important to reach fathers with parenting support activities' (SOU, 2008:131, p. 55). This position is also present in the 2009 National strategy: In fact, the only time the strategy makes reference to mothers and fathers – rather than to the gender-blind term 'parents' – is when it states that parenting support is to be designed so that both fathers and mothers want to participate.

How to reach fathers was a common cause of concern for the practitioners interviewed, especially at local and regional levels. The benefit of having fathers join parenting support groups was observed by the practitioners, and most had a sense that more and more fathers joined to services and programmes offered, even if mothers still dominated in most instances. One practitioner explained the benefits the following way:

When we work with parenting groups (föräldragrupper), we can see that the fathers step up. Many fathers think they do a lot of things, but then we ask them to write it down [before we meet next time], to do their homework. Something happens there. They say that they have played with the Barbie. They become more equal when they come to the course. Something happens with them, so they take a step forward and become more visible in parenting practices. (medium size, high-income municipality, 2015)

Yet, typically, women constituted two thirds or even three quarters of participants in parenting support activities, ranging from structured parenting support programmes to open lectures. Interestingly, there was a sentiment that even if men only made up one third or one fourth of participation in parenting support services and programmes, from the practitioners' point of view this was not an indicator of gender inequality or cause of concern from a gender equal parenting point of view. This suggests that the ideology of intensive mothering prevails to some extent, and that the notion of a dual carer model is not as firmly anchored in parenting support practice as the general welfare policy rhetoric implies. The poorly anchored dual carer model among the recipients of

parenting support activities also infused discussions about father involvement and gender equal parenting, and led to disturbance on part of practitioners:

It often ends up with ‘fathers should help more with laundry, cleaning and cooking, and not just cut the lawn and fix the car’. But it is about much more than that ... to be ... I still hear mothers say ‘he *baby-sits* the children while I do the grocery shopping’. I get panic when I hear that. (medium size, low-income municipality, 2016)

When discussing the possibility of daddy groups with the county council representatives, they expressed reluctance towards the concept, but also frustration over how to get fathers who really need it involved:

It feels like it [daddy groups] is not the right way to go. There are very few who have participated in these groups. And the fathers who join are perhaps not the fathers who truly need parenting support, because they tend to be involved fathers anyway. It seems there is a much bigger step for fathers to join parenting support services and programmes. (...) or perhaps they don’t demand it. Maybe they don’t want parenting support. (Interview, County Council, 2015)

Interestingly, the concern that parents who take part in parenting support activities are not the ones who actually need such support was not raised for mothers, as if mothers – as opposed to fathers – are natural carers. One reason for not wanting daddy groups was related to scepticism towards separatism, and the idea that if daddy groups were offered, it would be politically incorrect not to offer mummy groups. However, father involvement – and the lack thereof – also seemed to relate to different parenting styles among mothers and fathers, where fathers were not so keen on intensive parenting styles as the mothers. Speaking about the lack of father involvement one practitioner said:

Fathers need to step up and take more space of course ... there is much to consider. It is not so easy to come and claim your space either ... and we need to discuss this in a humble and good way. (medium size, low-income municipality, 2016)

Father involvement – and indeed fathers’ ideas about the needs and interests of the child – could differ from how mothers wanted the fathers to be involved. The ‘clash’ between intensive and ‘low-intensive’ parenting styles was described by a practitioner:

One father said ‘I don’t demand that the food should be ready when I come home [from work] and the house clean and tidy. I never said that, it is not my wish’. And then the mother says ‘you don’t know how much that needs to happen’. ‘But skip it then, skip the cleaning’ [says father]. ‘No I can’t!’ [says mother]. And then when the father is at home [on parental leave] he thinks it is better if the child is out and about, and he skips cleaning up the mess. I feel fathers have a more relaxed approach, it is more important that the child gets out of the house. Women put a lot of pressure on themselves, (...) In general, it is not the fathers who say that it should be in a certain way. It is the mothers’ own demands. (middle size, middle-income municipality, 2015)

To sum up: according to policymakers, father involvement in caring responsibilities must increase in order to achieve gender equality in the best interest of the child. This is also an argument put forward in other family policy debates, such as in the on-going discussion regarding the unequal use of parental leave days (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Duvander, Ferrarini, & Johansson, 2015). However, local actors also spoke of difficulties to engage fathers in activities, in turn resulting in an even greater effort to

involve them. Such efforts might be at the expense of the mothers, who tend to be conceptualized as natural carers of the children. At the same time speaking, the expectations on part of parents to part-take in parenting support activities further increases intensive parenting styles, which given current care arrangements may fall more heavily on women, contributing to upholding the intensive mothering ideology.

### **Concluding remarks**

The overall purpose of this article was to explore how ‘children’s rights’ and ‘gender equality’ are articulated in parenting support policies in Sweden and how these policies are enacted in practice at local levels. Historically, Swedish family policy, including parenting support, is firmly embedded within a framework emphasizing gender equality – as a means to enhance economic growth as well as democracy. In parallel, as has been argued throughout this article, perspectives on children’s rights have emerged as an equally important point of departure in parenting support services, especially since the early 1990s.

It is clear that key policy documents emphasize the importance of both children’s rights and gender equality. Yet, although the civil servants interviewed for this study all expressed an interest in and commitment to both children’s rights and gender equality, they had a number of difficulties to address how they actually worked with integrating the two perspectives. This was especially obvious with regard to operationalizing gender equal parenting while the child right’s perspective was to a large extent taken for granted – or seen as a point of departure in their activities – by the practitioners.

A number of problems appeared, related to how to interpret the ambition to achieve gender equality but also how to address it with the parents. The difficulties in knowing how to interpret gender equal parenting might on the one hand be a consequence of the lack of outspoken strategies or instructions how to actually implement gender equality, resulting in insecurity among practitioners. In this sense, the gender equality perspective became a lip service, more than a concrete measure for the civil servants to work with. On the other hand, some practitioners interpreted the notion of gender from an essentialist point of view, downplaying power relations between mothers and fathers, making any gender equality policy interventions difficult in practice. Departing from the notion of the best interest of the child, some civil servants argued that parents who work full time might not be as good carers as when one or two parents work part-time. This was also expressed in policy documents, contradicting general welfare policy rhetoric, including family policies. However, the fact that part-time parents consists of mostly mothers was not problematized. Rather than bringing to the fore the lack of dual carers, where fathers and mothers take an equal share and responsibility for child care, fathers were addressed in discussions on how to include fathers in parenting support activities, where father involvement in parenting support activities was seen as an expression of gender equality. This points at potential conflictual agendas between the child rights perspective and gender equality, conflicts that are hidden at the policy level through the ambition of gender equal parenting, but becomes discernible in practice. Moreover, one main obstacle for gender equal parental services has to do with traditional norms of the practitioners. Traditional gender norms appear to hinder gender mainstreaming of the parental services and are as such a challenging issue for policymakers. This evidences that a major challenge for parenting support policies is a weak(ening) of gender

mainstreaming, suggesting that more attention should be given to the normative underpinnings of the remit by the public authorities. Yet, what appears to be happening is that over time, the gender equality ambition seems to be losing in prominence at the policy level which further undermines gender mainstreaming in local practices.

## Notes

1. Family policy measures such as child allowance, parental leave insurance or financial support offered in cases of divorce (e.g. child support) are not included in the conceptualization of parenting support. Instead it includes a number of high-profile health-promoting interventions, mainly provided through universal services, but it also encompasses targeted measures (Lundqvist, 2015).
2. The empirical data has been collected within the framework of the research project ‘The Politics of Parenting Support. Developments, Forms, Actors’, (financed by Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, led by Åsa Lundqvist), which aim is to enhance and deepen our understanding of how the forms and content of parenting support have emerged, as well as to define and analyze the driving forces operating within the field since the late 1990s.
3. As noted in the Introduction, parenting support policies is not a new policy field in Sweden. Its roots goes back to the 1930s, however, a shift in goals and to some extent also practices was taking place in the late 1990s, in turn shaping the policy field in partly new directions during the 2000s (Lundqvist, 2015; Littmarck, 2017). The analyses made in this article are mainly concerned with the development in the new Millennium and onwards.
4. ‘Daddy month’ refers to the 1994 reform in parental leave use (implemented in 1995), where it was decided that at least 30 days of parental leave days must be used by one parent or else the leave days cannot be transferred to the other parent. The length of conditioned parental leave was expanded to 60 days in 2002 and 90 days in 2016. It is worth noting that term ‘daddy month’ not only reflects the fact that mothers are the prime takers of parental leave (Duvander et al., 2015).

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