

Migration background and parental leave uptake in Sweden

Eleonora Mussino, Ann-Zofie Duvander | June 20, 2016



Introduction

Family policy in Sweden is designed to strongly encourage parents (and especially women) to combine work and family formation. The parental leave system makes it profitable for people (women) to work before becoming a parent, and this results in a number of advantages for society: for instance, labour-force participation is very high (in general, and among mothers in particular), and child poverty is low (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010). However, for women who are unable to find stable employment before childbearing, the same system may have negative implications.

As those with the greatest difficulty in finding employment in Sweden are immigrant mothers, it may be worth investigating the differences in parental leave uptake between native and immigrant mothers, and the connection to labour market attachment. We do this by analysing the pattern of leave use over time for a sample of immigrant and native mothers of children born in the month of December, in the years 1997 to 2004.

Parental leave in Sweden

Parents residing in Sweden receive 480 days of paid leave per child. For the first 390 days, they receive about 80% of previous earnings and for the last 90 days they are paid at a flat rate (approximately 25 euro per day). Labour market legislation allows for job-protected leave for the child's first 18 months and during any parental leave taken within 8 years of the birth (within 12 years since 2014), which is the time limit for using the leave. It is thus possible to extend days of leave over a longer period by mixing paid and unpaid days during the first 18 months, and using paid leave when the child is somewhat older.

Each parent receives half of the leave days, but days can be transferred between parents. However, since 1995, to ensure that rights are gender-neutral, a non-transferrable quota has been reserved for each parent (to encourage fathers to participate more in family life); during

the observation period the quota was 1 month up to 2002, 2 months up to 2015, and 3 months since 2016. The sharing of leave uptake between parents is based on their knowledge of the system and the availability of family resources to meet their preferences.

Substantial differences persist between immigrant and native parents in the use of parental leave, due largely to the difficulties encountered by the immigrant population in the labour market. First, lower income entitles to a lower level of benefits. Second, if the parent is unemployed, he or she may be encouraged by the social welfare officer to use up all the parental leave before using unemployment benefits or other economic support. This restricts opportunities to take advantage of the system's flexibility.

Results

In Sweden, immigrant mothers use more parental leave during the first year after childbirth compared with native mothers (who may use it later on):¹ among recent immigrants (up to 5 years in the country), for example, the median number of days used is 278, versus 228 among Swedes. This finding is in line with studies indicating that immigrants receive lower benefits during leave, and thus can less often afford to stay home without pay. By contrast, native mothers use a large share of the parental leave benefit days in the second year after childbirth (79 versus 42 for recent immigrants).

However, there is substantial variation in the immigrant group, and longer residency in Sweden makes the pattern more similar to that of native mothers, which points to the existence of a process of adaptation (at least, in parental leave use). Indeed, immigrants who have been in Sweden for more than 5 years use more leave during the second (as opposed to the first) year after childbirth, similarly to native mothers.

In addition, as origin is strongly associated with the cause of migration, a plausible underlying factor for variations between groups is that some women more often immigrate for work reasons (e.g. women from other Nordic countries) while others do so for family reasons or as refugees (e.g. women from the Middle East). The difference in leave use between groups may also be affected by lack of knowledge of the various parental leave regulations, especially the different options for flexibility.

When mothers' labour market status is controlled for, the differences between immigrant groups diminish. Both native and immigrant mothers quite often use just a few days, but their reasons are probably different. Among native mothers, using few days is likely to be linked to a high level of household economic resources rather than to a situation of disadvantage. In couples with high household income, the woman is able to stretch the leave period by mixing paid parental leave benefit days with unpaid days. Thus, fewer days do not necessarily mean a short leave period. Among immigrant mothers, however, the use of just a few days is likely to reflect the fact that they cannot afford to take a longer (and poorly-paid) period of leave.

Policy recommendations

Even taking labour market status into account, immigrant women more often take many days of leave in the first year after birth and fewer in the second year. In short, immigrant women are less able to exploit the flexibility of the parental leave system, a disadvantage that is clearly linked to their weaker socio-demographic and economic characteristics, especially in the labour market. This suggests that the system needs to be improved, for instance, by providing information on rights and benefits to all parents in Sweden.

Even more importantly, as labour market participation is found to be crucial for leave use, attention must be focused upon the interaction between labour market and family policy. Our results show that immigrant mothers who participate in the labour market tend to use the leave in much the same way as native mothers do. This is especially important for groups who run the risk of marginalization, such as newly arrived immigrant parents. Thus, labour market integration is central to overall integration in Sweden, including when it comes to using family policy effectively.

References

Ferrarini, T., Duvander, A. (2010) Earner-carer model at the cross-roads: Reforms and outcomes of Sweden's family policy in comparative perspective. *International Journal of Health Services* 40(3), 373-398.

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Footnote

¹Our study was limited to the first three years after the birth, however.