



***The changing face of motherhood in Western Europe:
Sweden***

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1.1 Sweden

1.1.1 Introduction

UNICEF ranks Sweden as the fourth best country in the world in which to be a mother¹ in its Mother's Index, a comparative study that takes into account factors such as female-to-male earned income, under-5 mortality rates, maternity leave policies, etc.

In Sweden, 'motherhood' is something that most women wish to experience at some point in their lives. As in the rest of Scandinavia, however, it is not seen as a choice that excludes women from finding fulfilment in other aspects of their lives, most notably a career. Indeed, this is reflected in the fact that while the average number of children has not gone down, women are nonetheless waiting until later in life to have them. Government policies such as generous and flexible parental leave and public child care provision have served to encourage mothers to return to the workforce. In spite of the opportunity for parents to split the state sponsored leave, however, it is still mainly the mother who uses it and research has highlighted the detrimental impact that this can have on her career prospects².

Despite the long history of equality between men and women in Sweden, there is evidence that traditional gender roles resurface when a couple begins a family. This, combined with lingering cultural notions of what being a 'good' mother entails, accounts for the prevalent attitude of 'first work, then children' and the fact that today's mothers are increasingly reporting a lack of ability to balance work and home life. Furthermore, it might explain why the career-orientation spurred by reforms in the 1970s is being countered today by a return to notions of the old 'housewife' role. Choosing to be a housewife has previously been seen to undermine steps towards gender equality. It is now becoming a socio-cultural trend supported by images of a more comfortable life-style as well as greater ability to be, and to be seen by others as being, a good mother.

1.1.2 Historical perspectives

In the old agricultural societies that used to dominate Swedish society, men and women farmed the land and cared for their animals together. In the 1930s, however,

when expansive industrialization caused people to begin to move in to the cities to look for work, the role of women was transformed from one of co-worker and joint provider to housewife and caretaker. While the husband went to work in the factories and new businesses that were beginning to be set up, the wife was made responsible for housekeeping and taking care of the children.

In the 1960s a lively equality debate began which challenged the notion of the family as a private sphere dominated by traditional principles. The role of women as housewives was increasingly portrayed as something which represented an archaic tradition. The aim of those advocating reform was to free women from their unpaid and unappreciated work within the home and allow them to enter the labour market. Many of the central arguments in the equality debate used economic problems as their starting point: the traditional family structure was seen as locking women to their husbands by denying them their own income, and indeed those women who did work were still primarily seen as wives and mothers. This system was perceived as underutilizing the available workforce and its continued existence was further criticized as being a 'parasite' of the welfare society.³

In 1971 a so called 'separate tax reform' was introduced to remove any financial incentives supporting the old family structure. The joint tax liability of husband and wife was removed.⁴ Building on this, 1974 saw the replacement of the old maternal insurance policy with the world's first parental insurance scheme that granted both employed parents a right to six months' paid leave following the birth of a child, during which they would receive 90% of their previous income. This served to further the overall goal of encouraging women to work outside the home. Paternal responsibility, however, was voluntary, which meant that the family, as opposed to the individual, continued to be regarded as an economic unit for the purposes of parental insurance. That is to say, women continued to be conceived of primarily as mothers, and as members of a domestic unit. Today, the total time has been increased to 16 months, of which two are now reserved separately for each parent.

1.1.3 Demographics

Compared with other European countries, the fertility rate in Sweden is high, with an average number of 1.9 children per woman. Indeed, for quite some time a 'two child norm' has existed and there is no indication that this will change in the foreseeable future.⁵ The high fertility rate is

¹ Save The Children (2011) *State of the World's Mothers Report*. Save The Children.

² Statistiska centralbyrån (2007), *Föräldraledighet och arbetslivskarriär: En studie av mammors olika vägar i arbetslivet*, Demografiska Rapporter: 3.

http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/BE0701_2007A01_BR_BE51S_T0703.pdf

³ *Populär Historia*, 3/2006

⁴ University of Lund (2006), *Lunds Universitet Meddelar*, Issue 3.

⁵ Statistiska centralbyrån (2009), *Barn eller inte? Resultat från en enkätundersökning om kvinnors och mäns inställning till barnafödande*, Demografiska Rapporter: 2.

http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/BE0701_2009A01_BR_BE51B_R0902.pdf

partly due to the changes made to parental insurance rules at the end of the 1980s which encouraged a shorter time-span between births. The brief downturn in childbirth during the early 1990s coincided with the financial crisis experienced in that decade, revealing the role that financial considerations play in the decision to have children.

The average age for when women have their first child has been rising steadily, from 24 in the 1970s to 29 in 2008. Furthermore, pregnancy is increasing the most within the cohort of women aged 30 to 39 years. Unplanned pregnancies are more common amongst younger women. Among women who have waited to have their first child until they are around 30 years of age, 90% have been planning for their pregnancy. Single mothers are also becoming increasingly common. Today around 20% of all mothers in Sweden are raising their children on their own.⁶ Despite this significant number, single mothers constitute the one demographic group whose welfare, in terms of household finances and living conditions, has remained the same or even deteriorated since the beginning of the 1980s, and they are as a result more likely to worry about their finances on a regular basis.⁷

1.1.4 Current debates surrounding motherhood

Recent surveys and opinion polls have shown that a substantial portion of women born in the 1980s view being a housewife as something positive, and even worthy of aspiration. This change in opinion is evident from the abundance and popularity of blogs⁸, radio programmes⁹ and TV shows¹⁰ which focus on baking, decorating and providing household tips.

Many authorities have sought to explain this shift in attitude and many recent articles and books analyse and provide (often critical) comments on what is often referred to as a 'trend'. One not uncommon explanation is that the focus on home-making is really a reaction to a growing perception that the world is an unsafe place. On this analysis, feelings of helplessness in the face of terrorist activities and financial collapse result in a reinvigorated focus on the home and the family as something that can be controlled and improved¹¹.

Another possible account has been given much media attention due to its endorsement by two famous female

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http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/LE0001_2010K02_TI_03_A05_T11002.pdf

⁷ One of the results highlighted in the survey 'Sweden Mother 2010' conducted by the leading family life website and with more than 9,000 participants. <http://www.familjeliv.se/files/sverigemamman.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.underbaraclaras.com/>

⁹ <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/default.aspx?programid=3999>: The Housewife School.

¹⁰ <http://www.leila.se/english/whats-cooking/index1,57.htm>

¹¹ Article published on 06.05.2010, <http://www.dn.se/insidan/insidan-hem/ny-trend-hemmafrulivsstilen-lockar-80-talisterna>

authors and journalists Edgren Aldén and Ernsjö Rappe. They argue that one very plausible factor behind the newfound housewife popularity is that those born in the 1980s were crucially affected by the 1970s reform¹². Unlike their own mothers, those born in the 1980s grew up spending more time at day care and more often experienced their parents getting a divorce. In this way, the housewife trend can be seen as a form of backlash to the liberation of the 1970s mother. Those becoming mothers now want to avoid what they see as their parents 'mistakes' of getting divorced, or spending insufficient time with their children. Equality is taken for granted and therefore not seen to be a modern topic of debate. This has led to the growing attraction of the role of housewife that is less political and more esthetical in its aspiration.

Another important and ongoing concern in Sweden at the moment centres around the increasingly common decision made by mothers to divorce. The publication of the controversial book *Happy, happy*¹³ in early 2011 has given rise to a heated debate on the extent to which the process of divorce entails a mother placing her own happiness above that of her children. The book is a compilation of real-life stories written by prominent women within the Swedish literary and cultural community, and it many ways challenges the notion of the 'perfect mother'. Indeed, divorce is not depicted as constituting a failure but rather the argument made is that a mother, in the process of making herself happy and realizing her own needs, also becomes a better mother to her children.

This message to mothers not to feel guilty, both in relation to divorce and in pursuing a career, is an extremely common one which is found in maternal magazines as well as various self-help and guidebooks. While divorce and full-time work are both common life-choices of mothers, all of these publications may nevertheless indicate a continuing discord between behaviour and emotion. The reassurance that mothers should not feel guilt suggests an ongoing perception that lifestyle choices that diverge from the being a housewife constitute acting 'wrongly'.¹⁴

1.1.5 Motherhood and Employment

As a result of the reforms in the 1970s, not only were women's rights to paid work given explicit legal recognition but, more importantly, combining motherhood with a career has become seen as a legitimate, stigma-free option. While only 25% of married women worked outside the home in the 1960s, that figure has increased to around 82% today. In contrast to other countries where a common position is for women to leave

¹² Interview can be found at: <http://www.dn.se/livsstil/reportage/satsa-pa-karleken-inte-fasaden> - Also raised in their co-authored book, *Skriet från kärnfamiljen* (2009) Albert Bonniers Förlag

¹³ Sveland, M. & Wennstam, K. (2011) *Happy, happy: en bok om skilsmässa* Atlas.

¹⁴ <http://www.dn.se/dnbok/bokrecensioner/happy-happy--en-bok-om-skilsmassor>

the workforce entirely when they have children, the more common approach in Sweden is for a mother to go on a relatively long period of parental leave, followed by a return to the same work, as opposed to switching to a different, perhaps less 'demanding' field. Under the current parental insurance scheme there is, however, great flexibility when it comes to how one makes use of parental insurance – instead of using all the leave in one go at the beginning one can, for example, take out the insurance for half, 1/3, or 1/5 days, thereby extending the period during which parental insurance can be withdrawn.

Despite the opportunity for parents to split the leave period, the average number of paid parental leave days used by women per year is more than one hundred, whereas the average for men is below thirty.¹⁵ Furthermore, mothers are more likely to work part-time than fathers. While this might enable mothers to spend more time with their children, the downsides are significant and include losing a substantial amount of money as well as rights to pension and sick-leave pay. Married mothers who subsequently go through a divorce may also, as a result, find themselves in an unexpectedly precarious financial position.

While the flexibility of the parental insurance scheme may be seen to encourage and facilitate women in combining motherhood with having a career, there is still much evidence to indicate that problems remain. Recent reports have suggested that one out of three mothers feels that she has seldom, if ever, experienced a satisfactory balance between work and family life. This feeling is particularly prevalent amongst mothers of 3-6 year olds, single mothers and highly educated mothers.¹⁶ Those who do take longer leaves of absence are less likely to be promoted, and among the possible explanations put forward are employers having doubts as to the genuine commitment of the mother to her work.

This arguably explains why women with 'high prestige' jobs tend to take less leave than those working in the public sector, and why they put their children into day care at an earlier age. While a quite common view is that the ideal age for a woman to have her first child is under 27, more highly educated women (defined as those with a University degree) have children later in life and both statistical studies and interviews in leading newspapers¹⁷ highlight that the reasons for waiting to have children include a desire to pursue other goals first, especially in

terms of education and careers. The family policy that is currently in place might even be said to encourage women to focus on their career before having children. If a parent has not had an income for at least 240 days prior to the birth of the child, the compensation that is available is very low. It is, therefore, likely that parental insurance is a strong contributing factor behind the decision of many to wait to have children until they are in stable employment with a sufficiently high income.

There has been some criticism of the extent to which the parental insurance scheme makes it very difficult to choose to be a stay-at-home parent. The chair of HARO,¹⁸ an organization that champions the rights of the stay-at-home parent, was quoted as saying in an interview with a leading newspaper that "motherhood is becoming extinct".¹⁹ Views of this sort partly explain why in 2008, there was a political reform which saw 104 of the 290 municipalities in Sweden (76% of all suburbs) introducing a 'care subsidy', offering one parent a monthly contribution of 3,000 SEK per child to stay at home. A subsequent study in 2009, however, showed that only 1.8% of those eligible actually used the support and that 90% of those who did are women.²⁰

The political impetus is now in favour of withdrawing the care subsidy. There have been many challenges suggesting that the reform is not so much providing a choice as preventing women from entering or returning to the work force. There is also the suggestion that it disproportionately impacts on immigrant mothers, which then exacerbates the problem of integration. The chair of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, Wanja Lundby-Wedin, has argued that it works against equality and hits working class women especially hard, and that in the long run it will widen the income gap between men and women.²¹

1.1.6 Childcare

As late as the 1950s, only 1.1% of children in Sweden were in some form of extra-familial child care; today, around 85% of all children are enrolled in public child care. The introduction of state-run day care centres, and the transformation of their use into a social norm, was an integral part of the equality reform initiated in the 1970s. The perceived advantages used to justify this reform were that such centres would provide children with a greater

¹⁵

http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/BE0701_2007A01_BR_BE51S_T0703.pdf

¹⁶ http://www.scb.se/Grupp/valfard/2008-3/LE0001_2008K03_TI_13_A05TI0803.pdf

¹⁷ Article published on 23.10.2011

http://www.svd.se/naringsliv/karriar/sa-planerar-unga-barn-efter-karriaren_6570785.svd

¹⁸ HARO's website can be found at: <http://www.haro.se/english/>

¹⁹ Article published on 07.09.2010

http://www.svd.se/nyheter/idagsidan/moderskapet-haller-pa-att-utplanas_5263331.svd#after-ad

²⁰ Statistiska centralbyrån (2011) *Nyttjande av kommunalt vårdnadsbidrag*: Statistik för perioden 1 juli 2009–31 December 2009.

²¹

<http://www.lo.se/home/lo/home.nsf/unidView/7D0CC4F038EB9B90C1257408002C1D98>

opportunity to develop into independent and self-sufficient individuals.

This view of childhood was recently confirmed by the UNICEF in its 2007 report on child well-being in Spain, the UK and Sweden, suggesting that the original justifications relied on to support the introduction of this expansive, public childcare scheme actually represents the views of parents today.²² Day care centres have been said to offer a more stimulating environment than the home: children were able to play pedagogical games and the empty space left by working mothers was to be filled by competent day-care personnel with the appropriate qualifications.²³ Furthermore, the idea of remaining at home with the mother has been suggested as hampering the development of independence and liable to lead to an excessive focus on the mother at the expense of personal development.

In 2005, 75% of all 1 to 3 year-old children were enrolled in pre-school, a proportion which rose to 97% for those aged 4 to 5.²⁴ It is often mothers with lower income who have their children start pre-school at a later stage. Despite the extremely wide-spread use of this state-provided service, it has been noted that an attitude towards motherhood still exists in many places in Sweden which leads to it being seen as inappropriate for a mother to be absent from work for too short a period of time.²⁵

Again, as noted above, there is an underlying tension between what women are being encouraged to do by state family policy and a somewhat conflicting and continuing public consensus regarding the large amount of time and commitment that motherhood inherently entails. On the other hand, bearing in mind the view that childhood fundamentally entails the development of the child into a self-sufficient adult, it might be suggested that any criticism that mothers with children in day-care may encounter might largely be confined to the time when their child is very young. Indeed, unlike for example Spain, the view on what constitutes a deprived child is less focused on the time that it spends with its family, and more on the physical safety of the child.²⁶

1.1.7 Motherhood and sport

The majority of Swedish parents have a very positive view on sports generally, and on those in which their children participate in particular. Although the level of commitment is somewhat greater on the part of mothers than fathers, most parents are happy with the way in which they engage in the recreational activities of their

children. Indeed, they see themselves as collaborators in their children's pursuits.

Many of the perceived advantages relied on to justify putting children into day care equally emerge when it comes to their engagement in sporting activities. Rather than focusing primarily on the physical health aspects, most Swedish mothers stress the importance of the social impact of sports.²⁷ Participating in a sport is in many ways seen as a crucial part of the social education process, with important lessons derived from it including team work skills and the ability to compromise. In this way, it is seen as a positive alternative to more isolated activities such as video and computer games. Just as with day-care centres, the opportunity provided to meet other children from different backgrounds and cultures is greatly valued by Swedish parents.

The fact that competitions and matches sometimes take place in a different city, requiring a night spent away from the home, is also seen as an important part of the upbringing of children and their development into independent and self-sufficient individuals.²⁸ This again ties in to the view that childhood is a time in which preparation should be made for responsible adulthood. As with being placed in child care, engaging in sports equally serves an important function in the development of children in that it allows them to be away from the home, and involved in social activity with others.

Aside from these educational factors, sporting activities are also seen as having an important role in ensuring that children are allowed to remain children. Matches and practice sessions are seen as letting a child to 'live in the moment' and able to forget any other pressures for a while. The main reoccurring negative aspect of sports that mothers identify, and which is most commonly reported in the media, is those instances where other parents or sports clubs are seen as encouraging what is perceived as excessive or aggressive competitiveness.²⁹

1.2 Swedish national survey

1.2.1 Introduction

A national survey of 1,010 Swedish mothers with at least one dependent child under the age of 16 years was conducted between November 20-30, 2011. The ages of the mothers included in the sample ranged from 16-60

²² Ipsos MORI (2007), *Child well-being in the UK, Spain and Sweden*, UNICEF.

²³ *Populär Historia*, 6/2006

²⁴ http://www.scb.se/statistik/publikationer/BE0701_2007A01_BR_BE51_ST0703.pdf

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ipsos MORI (2007) Op Cit

²⁷ The Swedish School of Health and Sport Sciences, http://www.gih.se/Documents/CIF/Tidningen/2011/1_2011/6.%20SVIF%20111%20s29-33%20Eliasson.pdf

²⁸ FoU-rapport (2004), *Den goda barnidrotten - Föräldrar om barns idrott*, Stockholm: 7.

²⁹ Examples of two articles from earlier this year which raise the issue of excessive competitiveness in child sport can be found at:

<http://helahalsingland.se/levabo/livsviktigt/1.3761911-hetsande-vuxna-problem-for-barnidrotten?m=print>,
<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=87&artikel=4613714>

years with three-quarters being between 25-44 years. Over 95% of the sample had between 1 and 3 children, with the average number of children per woman surveyed being 1.73.

Sixty-three percent of those mothers polled had a youngest dependent child aged 0 to 7 years and over one-third were mothers of very young children aged 0 to 3 years. Over three-quarters of the mothers were in paid employment, of whom 70% worked full-time and 30% worked part-time.

1.2.2 Current free time and ‘me time’

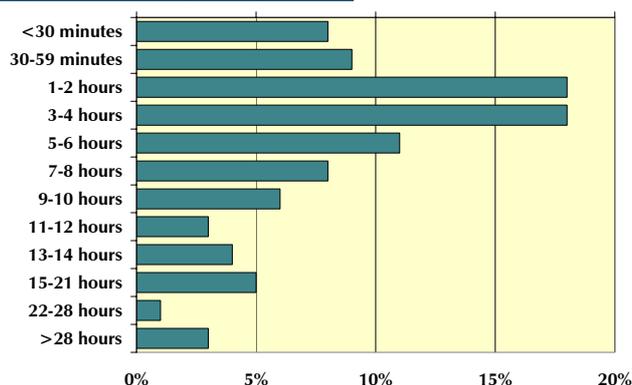
The notion that contemporary western societies are characterised by an increasing shortage of time is one that has fuelled much discussion among social theorists³⁰. The ‘harried leisure class’³¹, ‘time famine’³², the ‘time bind’³³, the ‘time squeeze’³⁴ are some among an increasing array of descriptors used to reassure us that we are in fact ‘busy’ people and that we are perhaps not alone in feeling that our lives are increasingly frenetic. Our perceptions, however, may not necessarily be evidenced in time-use surveys, some analyses of which have found that there have actually been some slight increases in leisure time since the 1960s, notably for women³⁵.

The preliminary sections of the survey explored a particular component of mothers’ leisure time – ‘me time’ or the time mothers actually have to themselves that is free from obligation to others. There was some considerable variation in the free time that mothers reported across the sample, as shown in Figure 1. The most frequently cited durations of weekly free time were 1 to 2 hours per week (18%) and 3 to 4 hours per week (18%). Over one-half of mothers (53%) said that they had less than 5 hours of free time in the average week.

The average free time across the sample, however, when taking into account those mothers who reported significantly greater quantities of time to themselves, amounts to 5.6 hours per week, or the equivalent of 48.3 minutes per day.

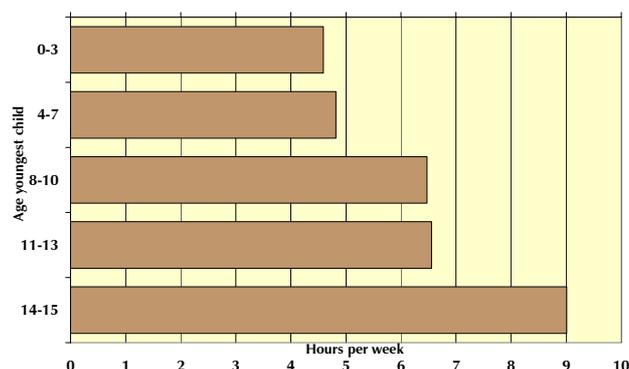
Swedish mothers have less than 50 minutes per day free time to themselves – those with children under 4 years old have less than 40 minutes.

Figure 1. Free time, hours per week



Free time for Swedish mothers is correlated with the age of the youngest child. Figure 2. below shows this relationship clearly. For mothers with an infant or toddler under the age of 4 years, free time is limited to 4.6 hours per week, the equivalent of less than 40 minutes per day.

Figure 2. Free time, hours per week by age of youngest child



Mothers of 4 to 7 year-olds reported a marginal increase in free time of two minutes per day more than that stated by mothers with younger children. The compulsory age for starting school in Sweden is 7 years and it is likely that the substantial rise in free time reported by mothers with children over that age is reflective of this. It is also likely that the 9 hours per week of free reported by Swedish mothers whose youngest child is in the eldest cohort, aged 14 to 15 years, coincides with their child’s adolescence – a life-stage characterised by greater autonomy and independence.

Mothers who are not currently in paid employment reported an additional hour of time to themselves (6.5 hours per week) when compared with those mothers who work full-time (5.5 hours per week), as shown in Figure 3. What perhaps is a little more surprising is that part-time-working mothers have less free time (5.4 hours per week) than those that have full-time jobs, although the difference is slight – less than a minute per day on average.

³⁰ Southerton, D. (2003) Squeezing time: Allocating practices, coordinating networks and scheduling society. *Time and Society*, 12 (1), 5-25.

³¹ Linder, S. B. (1970) *The Harried Leisure Class*. Columbia University Press.

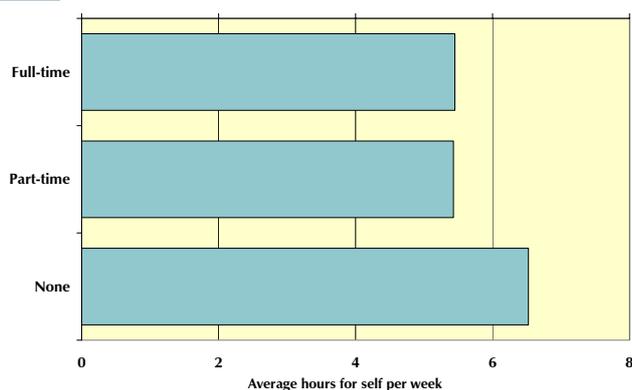
³² Roberts, K. (1976) The Time Famine, in S. Parker (ed.) *The Sociology of Leisure*. Allen & Unwin.

³³ Hochschild, A. (1996) *The Time Bind*. Henry Holt.

³⁴ Demos (1995) *The Time Squeeze*. Demos, London.

³⁵ Sullivan, O. & Gershuny, J. (2001) Cross-national changes in time use: some sociological (hi)stories re-examined. *British Journal of Sociology*, 52, 331-347

Figure 3. Free time, average hours per week by employment status



The tendency for mothers who work part-time to feel greater time pressures have been noted in other countries. In Finland, for example, the discrepancy between the free time reported by part-time-working mothers and those who work full-time was 1.4 hours per week on average. Various hypotheses have been put forward which may go some way to explaining this particular finding. For part-time working mothers the boundary between employment and family life is perhaps a little more blurred than it is for those working full-time. While women's participation in the workforce has increased, this has not necessarily been accompanied by a 'relaxation of expectations for the family or domestic activities'³⁶. It may also be the case that part-time workers are less able to justify or afford paid help with domestic work or childcare. Part-time work for some mothers, rather than delivering on its promise to provide the optimum work-life balance may, in reality, result in what Arlie Hochschild called the 'second shift'³⁷.

Swedish mothers who have part-time jobs have the least amount of free time.

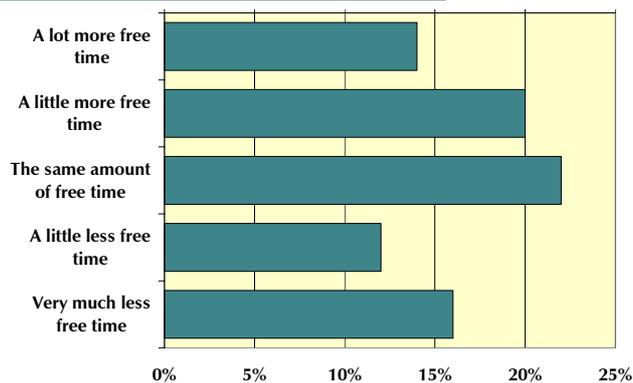
1.2.3 Generational comparisons

The survey examined the extent to which the amount of free time experienced by contemporary mothers in Sweden may differ from that of mothers from previous generations. Respondents were asked to compare their own free time with that of their own mothers. Fifteen percent of mothers struggled with this question and felt unable to provide an answer, but the responses from the remaining mothers are illustrated in Figure 4. Over one-fifth (22%) of mothers were of the opinion that their levels of free time did not differ from those experienced by their mother at the same life-stage. More respondents believed that mothers' free time had increased over a generation (34%) than those who felt it had reduced (28%).

³⁶ Sernau, S. (2006) *Worlds Apart: Social inequalities in a global economy*. Pine Forge Press, California.

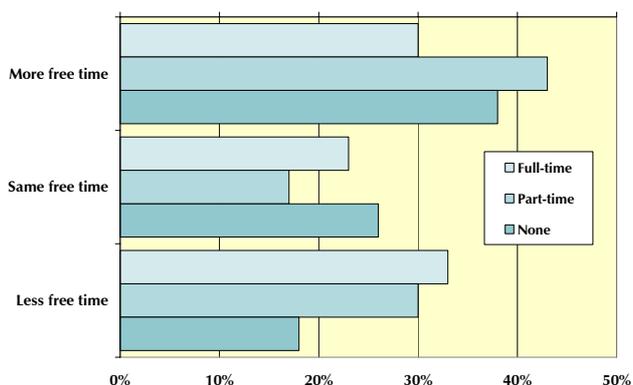
³⁷ Hochschild, A. (1989) *The Second Shift*. Penguin..

Figure 4. Free time, generational comparison



Despite the fact that mothers who work part-time reported having the least free time across the sample, it is they who were the most likely to say that they had more time to themselves than did their own mothers when they were at the same life-stage – a view shared by 43% of part-time-working mothers and shown in Figure 5. One-third of mothers in full-time employment felt that they had less time than did their own mothers, while those mothers who are not currently in paid employment were the most likely (26%) to be of the opinion that little had changed since the preceding generation.

Figure 5. Free time, generational comparison by employment status

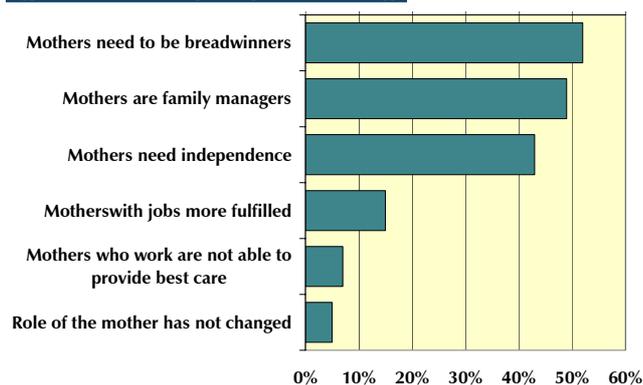


Having more free time than their own mothers was also more likely to be reported by mothers with fewer children. Thirty-nine percent of mothers with only one child, for example, believed they have more time to themselves compared with only fourteen percent of those mothers with four or more children.

1.2.4 Perceptions of change

Aside from their levels of free time and 'me time', and how these may have compared with their mothers' experiences, the respondents were also asked to consider the ways in which the role of motherhood in contemporary Sweden may have gone through fundamental changes. A series of statements on the changing role of motherhood were presented from which participants were invited to select up to three options. The results from this question are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Mothers' perception of change



Over one-half (52%) of Swedish mothers reported that there is today a greater need for mothers to contribute to the household income and take on the role of significant 'breadwinner'. There is, however, little by way of consensus that mothers today who have jobs and careers are more fulfilled than stay-at-home mums – this sentiment was expressed by only 15% of the sample. Mothers also gave little credence to the perhaps rather out-dated idea that mothers who work are not able to provide the best care for their children. There was greater support from 49% of mothers for the contention that modern motherhood involves a degree of family management that differs from that of the more traditional notion of 'housewife'.

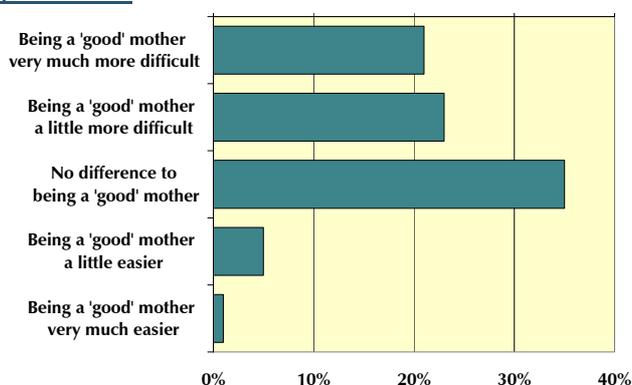
Swedish mothers today are expected to be breadwinners and family managers.

A significant proportion of mothers (43%) also identified with the statement that 'mothers today feel that they need the independence to pursue their own interests more than my own mother did'. Only a small minority of respondents (5%) held the view that the role of the mother in the average Swedish family has undergone no significant change since the time when their own mothers were bringing up children.

Younger mothers are less likely than their elders to subscribe to the notion that in today's society greater pressures are exerted on mothers to be breadwinners. In fact, agreement with this idea increases proportionally with the age of the respondent, from 40% of 18 to 24 year-olds up to 69% of those aged 55 years or above. It is likely that this reflects the significant differences in the life experiences of the respondents' own mothers. Mothers of the former cohort, for example, raising children in the latter decades of the twentieth century, would undoubtedly have had a very different experience of motherhood than mothers of the latter cohort who would have been bringing up their children in the 1950s and 1960s.

Further input from mothers was sought on the impact of current economic conditions on 'being' a good mother, the result of which are represented in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Impact of the current economic climate on 'being a good mother'



For 44% of mothers, the current economic conditions are making it more difficult to be a 'good' mother – 23% reported this to be 'a little more difficult' and 21% 'very much more' so. As one might expect, very few (6%) were of the opinion that the precarious state of the European economy is having a positive impact on their ability to be a good mother. More than one-third, however, felt that broader macro-economics had little bearing on their own abilities as mothers.

The current economic conditions have made being a 'good' mother more difficult for almost half of all Swedish mothers.

Mothers with four or more children reported feeling the impact of the economic conditions more than those charged with the welfare of fewer children. Nearly three-fifths (57%) of mothers with 5 children, for example, said that being a good mother in these times is very much more difficult, compared with only 17% of mothers with two children. Mothers with the eldest dependent children were also most likely to report the economic downturn's negative impact on their ability to be a good mother. More than half of this group (52%) felt that it had made being a good mother a little (24%) or very much more difficult (28%). This may reflect the increasing importance of consumer culture to the 14-15 year olds; a fundamental building block for social identity among adolescents³⁸. It may also be the case that for mothers with children in their mid-teens, the pending challenges of funding tertiary education or their offspring securing gainful employment may be a little more at the forefront of their minds.

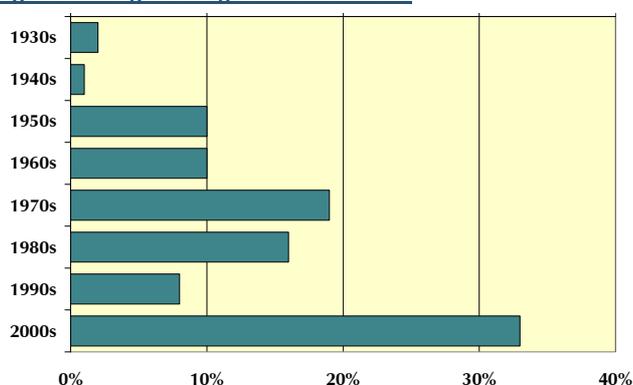
³⁸ Alexander, P., Marsh, P., & Bradley, S. (2009) Children and family life: socio-demographic changes. In D. Buckingham (Ed.) *The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing*, Department for Education, London.

The impact of current economic conditions on being a good mother is related to employment status; mothers in work being more neutral and less likely to rate the impact as negative.

1.2.5 Ideal decades

Although we are only a few years into the 2010s, the current decade has arguably been characterised thus far by economic crises and austerity. As noted in the previous section, a large proportion of mothers perceived that the current state of economies across Europe is having a detrimental impact on their ability to be 'good' mothers. We were keen to see which decade in recent history they perceived to be the best one in which to have been a mother and the responses to a question on this are summarised in Figure 8.

Figure 8. The golden Age of motherhood?



Interestingly, one-third of Swedish mothers, if they had a time machine, would choose to travel back only as far as the 2000s, while the 1990s had very few advocates (8%). The 1970s were favoured by nearly one-fifth (19%) of mothers, perhaps reflecting the fact that it was in this decade that tax reforms and parental insurances schemes were introduced that offered significant assistance to parents. The 1980s also curry favour with 16% of the sample.

The 2000s were the most popular choice of decade for being a mother for each of the age groups with one notable exception – the over 55 year-olds, 38% of whom said that the 1960s would be their decade of choice.

Few Swedish mothers would opt to go back very far in time to bring up their families – the 2000s is the preferred decade, followed by the 1970s.

1.2.6 Labour saving devices and impact on time-use

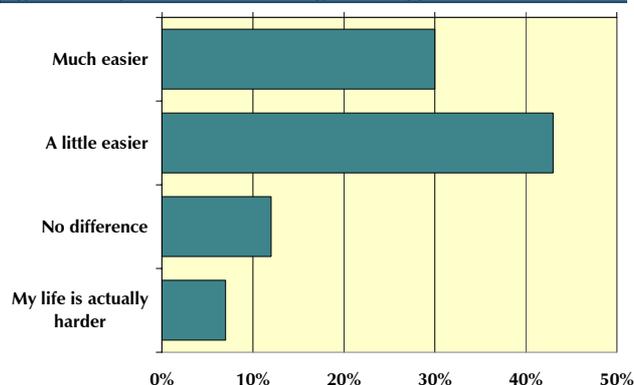
In section 1.2.4 we note there is a perception among one-third of mothers that they enjoy more free time than their mothers did at the same life-stage. The survey asked mothers to consider what impact of labour-saving devices and products may have had on their quality of life; the extent to which these items may have allowed them to

'free up' time which they could then spend on other activities, as shown in Figure 9.

Approximately three-quarters (73%) of Swedish mothers thought that their role as a mother has been made easier or richer because of labour saving devices and products which were not available to their own mothers or grandmothers. Only twelve percent said the availability of these domestic technologies had made little impact on their lives.

Labour-saving devices and products have made life easier and richer for three quarters of Swedish mothers.

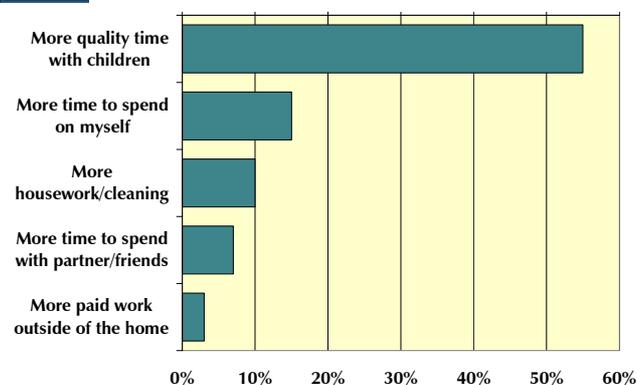
Figure 9. Impact of labour saving devices/products on mothers



The extent of the impact was reported as being greater among the older respondents whose parents or grandparents looked after children in an era when these products and devices were less prevalent – 41% of the 45 to 54 year-olds and 53% of those aged 55 years and over said that their lives were 'much easier', compared with just 24% of 25 to 34 year-olds.

A majority of Swedish mothers (55%) said that they use the time gained through labour-saving devices and products in the home to spend more quality time with their children, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Use of time saved by labour-saving devices and products



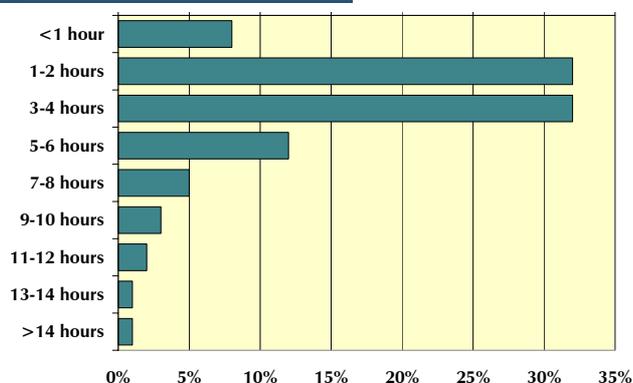
Swedish mothers use the time gained through labour-saving devices to spend more quality time with their children.

Significantly fewer mothers (15%) choose to spend this appropriated time on themselves. For one-tenth of the respondents the availability of labour-saving devices and products may, in reality, be a mixed blessing; the time recouped being used to undertake more cleaning and housework. A further 3% of mothers used this additional time to do more paid work outside of the home, a situation which could be viewed in both positive and negative terms. The latter two responses may also go some way to explaining why 8% of mothers believe that their lives are actually harder as a result of labour-saving devices and products (see Figure 9).

1.2.7 Time with children

Approximately two-thirds (64%) of mothers reported spending between 1-4 hours in the average day on active time with their children, as shown in Figure 11. Active time in this context comprising activities such as reading, writing, playing, washing and dressing. On average, Swedish mothers in the sample spend 3.7 hours, or 222 minutes, per day of active time with their children. Comparing this figure with the results from other 11 other European countries, Sweden ranked in ninth place.

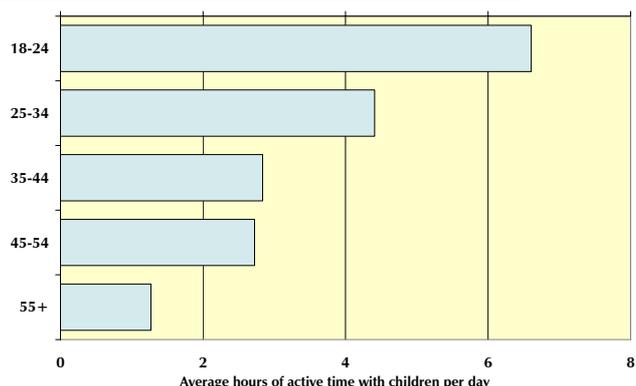
Figure 11. Active time with children



The average Swedish mother spends 3.7 hours per day reading, playing, dressing and otherwise being active with her children.

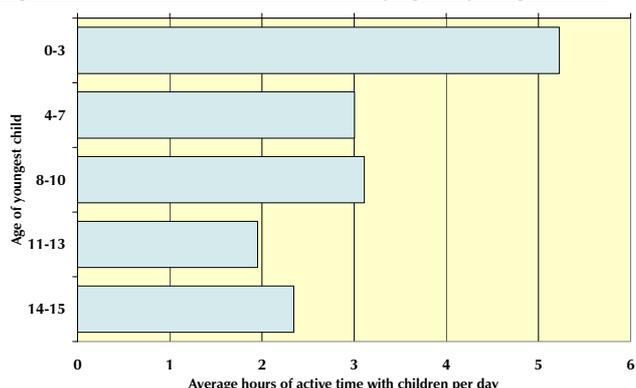
Active time with children decreases proportionally with mother's age. This linear relationship can be seen in Figure 12, and indicates that for mothers under the age of 25 years 6.6 hours or 396 minutes of their average day is spent on active time with their children.

Figure 12. Active time with children by mother's age



This falls to just 76 minutes per day for those mothers aged 55 years and over. Younger mothers are the most likely to have younger children who require more active care and this factor could account for much of the difference in active time with children reported by the different age groups. On average mothers whose youngest child is aged 0-3 years spend 313 minutes a day reading, writing or playing with their children and/or washing and dressing them, as shown in Figure 13. Sweden's generous and flexible parental leave policies also result in more mothers of very young children being at home and having time available to spend being active with their children than in many other countries in the EU. Very few children aged 0 to 1 years in Sweden are enrolled in formal childcare. Studies have reported that while there is a 'general acceptance' in Sweden of the use of childcare for children over the age 1 year, there is also an 'informal norm' that children should not spend too much time in childcare³⁹.

Figure 13. Active time with children, by age of youngest child



The amount of time that mothers invest in actively engaging with their children reduces dramatically among those with 4 to 7 year-olds to an average of 180 minutes per day. This coincides with the increasing enrolment of children of this age in day care centres and nurseries or the likelihood that they are cared for more informally by friends or family members. While the use of informal childcare is low in Sweden, over 90% of children aged 3

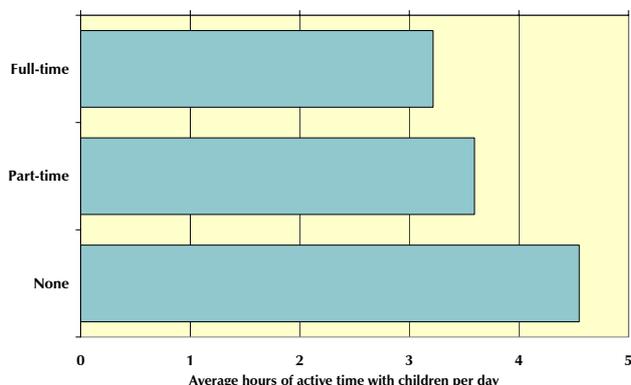
³⁹ European Commission (2009) *The provision of childcare services.*

years to mandatory school age make use of formal childcare arrangements.

Mothers' active time spent with their children increases marginally when they are aged 8-10 years and are in the early stages of formal education. This stage may require mothers to set aside additional time, for example, to assist their children with academic work or school projects.

There is a correlation between mothers' working hours and the active time that they spend with their children. Full-time working mothers reported spending 193 minutes per day 'actively' with their children compared with 215 minutes stipulated by part-timers and 273 minutes by those not currently working, as shown in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Active time with children, by employment status



1.2.8 Help in the home

1.2.8.1 Childcare

Analyses of time-use surveys consistently point to the fact that mothers across Europe spend more time on childcare, and domestic work more generally, than fathers or partners. Swedish women, living as a couple and with children under the age of 6 years, for example, undertake two-thirds of all childcare. Almost all Swedish mothers (96%) are involved in childcare on a daily basis whereas this is true for less than four-fifths (79%) of Swedish men. While the disparity is evident, it is less marked in Sweden than in most other European countries. In France, for example, women do three-quarters of the childcare and only 55% of men do any childcare on a daily basis⁴⁰.

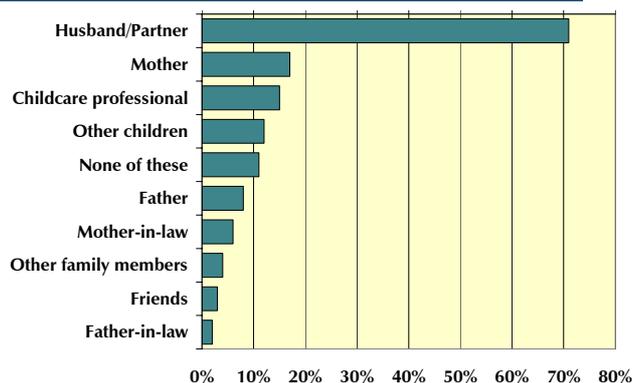
Partners, of course, are not the only source of support for mothers when it comes to the day-to-day care of children and the SIRC survey sought to explore the other people in mothers' lives who helped most with this task. It should be taken into account that the survey allowed participants to choose up to three options meaning that the total percentages may exceed 100%.

From Figure 15, it is evident that the majority of Swedish mothers (71%) are helped most by their husbands or

partners. The respondents' other immediate family members were also cited as valuable contributors to childcare arrangements; of whom mothers' own mothers (17%) and other children in the household (12%) were felt to provide the most help (17%). Fathers, in-laws and 'other family members' were also reported to play some role, but in a diminished capacity (fathers: 8%; mothers-in-law: 6%; other family members: 4%; fathers-in-law: 2%).

More formal help with childcare was reported by Swedish mothers, 15% of who said that they relied on help from childcare professionals such as childminders or nannies.

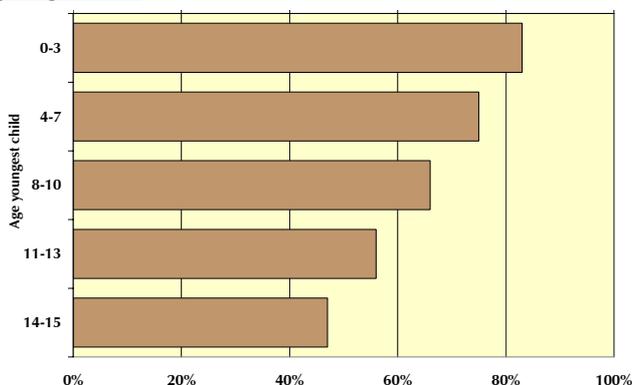
Figure 15. Sources of most help with childcare in the home



Husbands or partners are by far the greatest sources of help with childcare for Swedish mothers.

Husbands and partners, according to the mothers polled, are the most helpful when the children are very young. More than four-fifths (83%) of mothers with a youngest child aged 0-3 years said that husbands or partners helped them the most with childcare. As the children grow up, however, partners' and husbands' involvement in childcare declines, as shown in Figure 16.

Figure 16. Partner/husband's help with childcare, by age of youngest child



Less than half of the mothers whose youngest child is aged 14-15 years, for example, say that they receive most help with childcare from their partners or husbands. This may indicate that older children require less care, but equally it

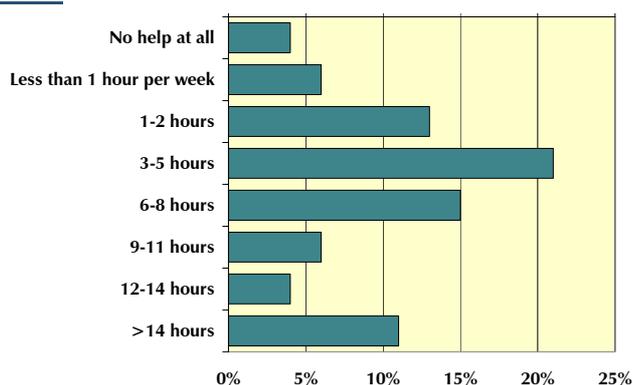
⁴⁰ Winqvist, K. (2004) *How Europeans spend their time: Everyday life of women and men*. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg.

could signal partners and husbands adopting a more ‘back seat’ approach to help in the home with children.

1.2.8.2 Domestic work

Husbands and partners are then, according to Swedish mothers, a significant source of help with childcare. But how much time do they actually spend on childminding and domestic chores? Again we turn to mothers to quantify partners’ and husbands’ levels of help and support. Figure 17 shows the wide distribution of time spent by partners and husbands.

Figure 17. Time spent by partner on childminding and domestic chores

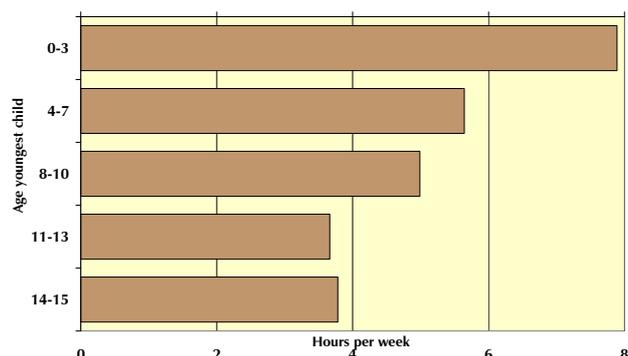


The largest proportion (21%) of mothers reported help from their partners or husbands totalling 3 to 5 hours per week. A significant number also said that they receive assistance from their partner/husband in excess of 14 hours per week. At the other end of the spectrum, 6% of mothers reported partners/husbands who contribute less than one hour per week to childminding and domestic chores – 4% received no help at all with these activities from their significant others. On average, partners and husbands in Sweden indicated a figure of 6.3 hours of help from their partners on a weekly basis.

Husbands/partners provide a little over six hours per week of help with domestic chores.

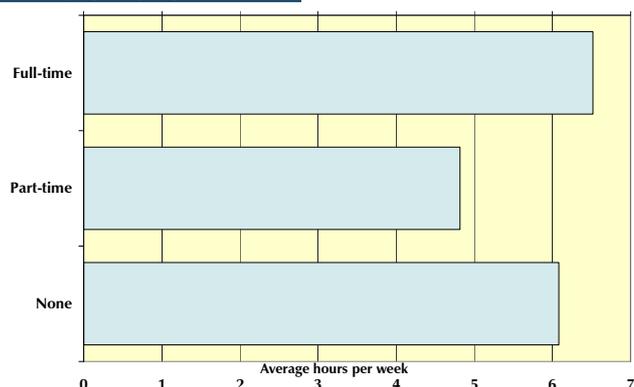
There are some significant variations in partners’ helpfulness around the home by age, age of youngest child, number of children and by maternal employment status. Partners, for example, tend to respond to the more intensive needs of very young children; their level of support with domestic chores and childminding are highest when the youngest child in the household is aged 0 to 3 years, as shown in Figure 18. Mothers with the youngest children reported that their partners spend, on average, 7.9 hours, or 68 minutes per week on domestic chores and childminding. This figure reduces by more than half to 31 and 32 minutes per day when the youngest dependent child is aged 11-13 years and 14-15 years respectively.

Figure 18. Time spent by partner on childminding and domestic chores, by age of youngest child



As previously noted in section 1.2.2 above, the amount of free time reported by mothers varies little between those who work part-time and those who are full-time. Figure 19 gives some additional insight into why this may be the case. Part-time mothers receive the least help from their husbands or partners, 4.8 hours per week (41 minutes per day), compared with the 6.5 hours per week (56 minutes per day) reported by those mothers in full-time employment.

Figure 19. Time spent by partner on childminding and domestic chores, by employment status



On average the youngest cohort of mothers aged 18-24 years receive the least help from their partners of any age group responding to the survey – 34 minutes per day. Given that this cohort is the one that is likely to have the youngest children, who as we have noted earlier receive the most help from husbands, this would seem to imply that 18 to 24 year-old mothers are particularly unsupported by their husband and partners.

1.2.9 Role of the father

The overwhelming majority of Swedish mothers (87%) were of the opinion that fathers are now more directly involved in the day-to-day care of children than they were in their own parent's or grandparent's day; over one-half (53%) said that fathers were now ‘very much more’ involved and 34% said they fathers were now involved ‘a little more’. Only a small minority perceived there to have been little change in the last one or two generations (5%),

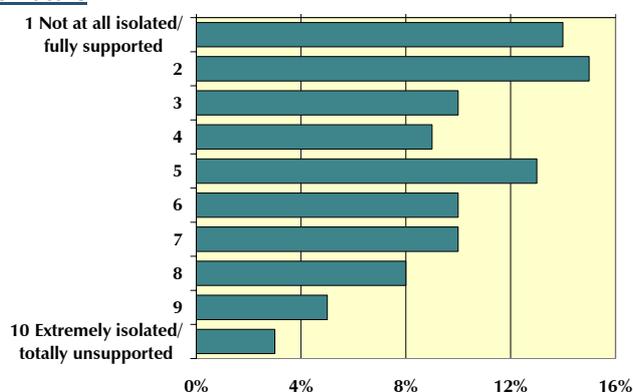
with fewer still of the opinion that fathers are now less involved in the day-to-day care of children.

Nearly two-thirds of Swedish mothers (63%) said that broad changes in gender roles in society have contributed to fathers' greater involvement in day-to-day childcare (see Figure 20). Nearly two-fifths (39%) perceived these changes as 'small', while approximately one-quarter viewed them as more 'fundamental'. Across all countries in the study Swedish mothers are the least likely to feel that there has been a 'fundamental' change in the role of their husbands or partners. This, of course, may reflect that the Swedes have had more 'enlightened' attitudes towards gender roles for a longer time and have, therefore, witnessed less change over the previous generation.

Swedish fathers are now very much more involved in child care than in previous generations – a change reflecting shifts in gender roles in Swedish society.

Over one-fifth of mothers (21%) suggested that in contemporary Swedish society there is increasing pressure on mothers to fulfil a role of 'breadwinner', one of the consequences of which is that, through necessity, men have had to partake more in childcare.

Figure 20. Reasons for fathers' increased involvement in childcare

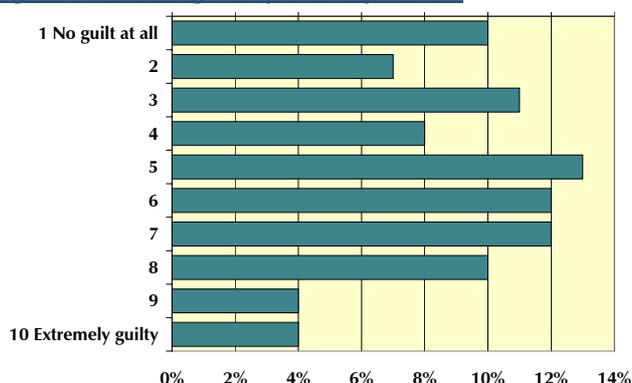


1.2.9.1 Maternal Guilt

It is not uncommon for mothers, facing the many challenges that they do in contemporary western societies, to experience feelings of guilt. Often attributed to the idealisation of motherhood in these societies, in which mothers are held ultimately accountable for the needs, health and development of their children⁴¹, feeling guilty, as some suggest, is a 'normal condition of motherhood'⁴².

Mothers in the survey were asked to consider the issue of maternal guilt and rate their own feelings on a ten-point scale. Figure 21 illustrates the range of responses.

Figure 21. Levels of guilt expressed by mothers



For 10% of Swedish mothers guilt is not an issue, but for the remainder it affects them with varying degrees of severity. Four percent reported feeling 'extremely' guilty, the same proportion who ranked their levels of guilt 9 out of 10. The most common response, cited by 12% of Swedish mothers, is in the centre of the scale, 5 out of 10. The average 'score' on this ten-point scale for Swedish mothers is 5.1. While this does not seem to suggest that Swedish mothers experience particularly significant levels of guilt, the average score in Sweden is the second highest in the 13-country sample. Guilt is higher among mothers who work full-time (average: 5.46) than it is among part-time workers (average: 4.64) and those not in paid employment (average: 4.43).

Ninety percent of Swedish mothers experience at least a degree of guilt concerning their work/home life balance.

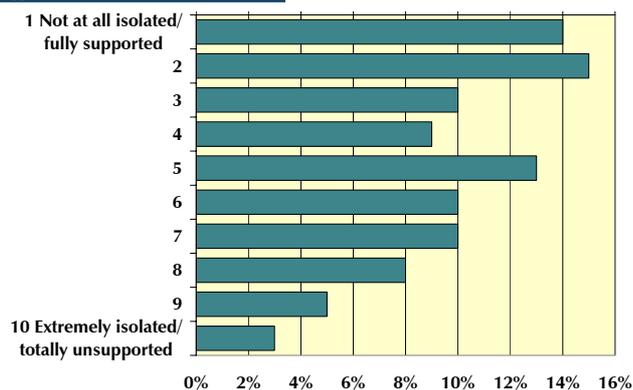
1.2.10 Maternal isolation

While most mothers receive at least a degree of help and advice from various sources, some to a greater extent than other, many still feel isolated and unsupported in their daily role. The way in which Swedish mothers rate their sense of isolation on a ten-point scale ranging from '1 – Not at all isolated' to '10 – Extremely isolated' is illustrated in Figure 22.

⁴¹ Seagram, S. & Daniluk, J.C. (2005) It Goes with the Territory: The Meaning and Experience of Maternal Guilt for Mothers of Preadolescent Children. *Women & Therapy*, 25(1), 61-88.

⁴² Heffner, E. (1978) *Mothering: the Emotional Experience of Motherhood after Freud and Feminism*, Doubleday.

Figure 22. Maternal isolation

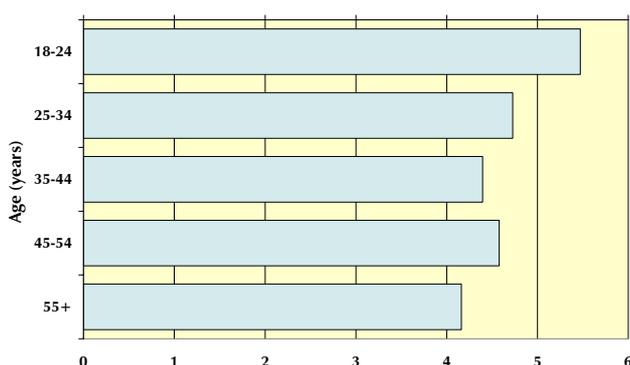


Fourteen percent of Swedish reported feeling no sense of isolation and perceived themselves to be fully supported. The most frequently cited score, chosen by 15% of mothers, is 2 out of 10. Only 3% suggested that they feel ‘extremely isolated/totally unsupported’. On average, mothers sense of isolation as measured on this ten-point scale is 4.47, placing Sweden in eight position (from most to least isolated) in the sample of thirteen countries.

Comparing self-reported levels of isolation with mothers’ age, again we note that the youngest group in the Swedish study appear to find being a mother particularly challenging. The 18-24 year-olds rank their level of isolation at an average of 5.44, significantly higher than the eldest age group, those aged 55 years and above, who reported an average score of 4.15, as shown in Figure 23.

Most Swedish mothers experience a degree of isolation and lack of support – particularly younger and non-employed mothers.

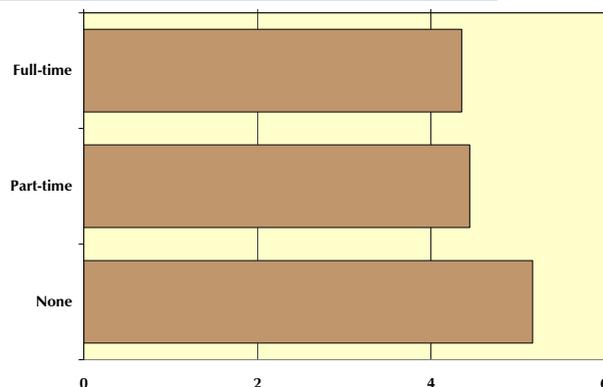
Figure 23. Mothers isolation, by age



Working, either full-time or part-time, also provides some respite to feelings of isolation among mothers, as one might expect. Mothers in full-time employment reported being the least isolated, scoring an average a rating of 4.35; those working part-time scoring 4.45 (see Figure 24). For mothers currently not in work, who do not benefit from the extended support network provided by colleagues and who may have fewer opportunities to

undertake activities unrelated to childcare, feelings of isolation are more prevalent (5.17).

Figure 24. Maternal isolation, by employment status

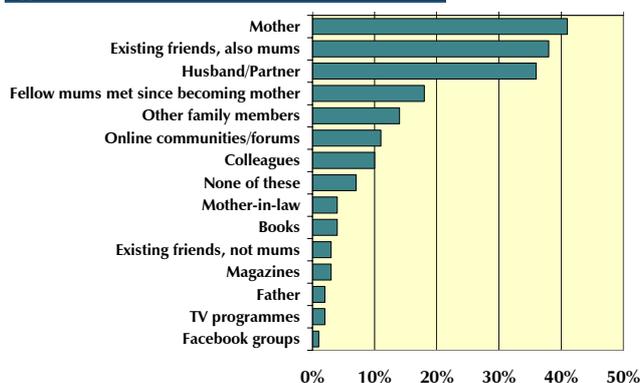


1.2.11 Support and advice

As noted in the previous section, the majority of mothers reported being in receipt of help with domestic chores and childcare from a variety of different sources – rarely is being mother a solo activity, although some continue to feel a degree of isolation. But to whom do mothers turn when they need support and advice on being a mother? And how, if at all, do they choose to communicate with their support network?

The most significant source of advice on motherhood, reported by 41% of Swedish mothers, are maternal grandmothers. Other mothers too, are cited by significant proportions of the mothers polled in the survey as providers of support and advice; both existing friends who are mothers (38%), but also mothers with whom they have come into contact since becoming a mother themselves (18%). Aside from maternal grandmothers, husbands or partners are the family members who function as the most important source of advice on being a mother (36%). Other family members are also cited as being useful in this context (16%). For fewer, but still significant proportions (11%), online forums provide a platform for the exchange of guidance on being a mother and for those who are in work, colleagues can also be of assistance in this regard (10%).

Figure 25. Sources of advice on motherhood



The mother's own mother is her greatest support in the Swedish family.

Mothers who work full-time report a greater reliance on colleagues than those that work part-time (15% and 10% respectively). Full-time mothers also depend on both existing friends who are mothers and their husband/partners more than they do their own mothers. In fact, full-time workers have a more extensive network of people from whom they seek counsel on aspects of being a mother which perhaps may go some way to explaining why it is that this group of mothers feel the least isolated.

Maternal grandmothers, in general, are consulted less by mothers as the ages of their dependent children increase – they are gradually substituted by friends who are also mothers as the primary source of advice on motherhood.

Phone calls and texts are the preferred methods of communication for mothers' to exchange ideas on childrearing with their peers, reported by over one-third (34%) of all mothers in the sample. Only small proportions of respondents cited face-to-face meetings as the most likely way in which they communicated with their support networks as a mum; either impromptu (7%) or arranged (6%) one-on-one meetings, or arranged meetings with a group (1%). Arranged face-to-face meetings are most common among mothers who work part-time (8%), while unplanned in-person interactions are more the domain of full-time working mums (9%).

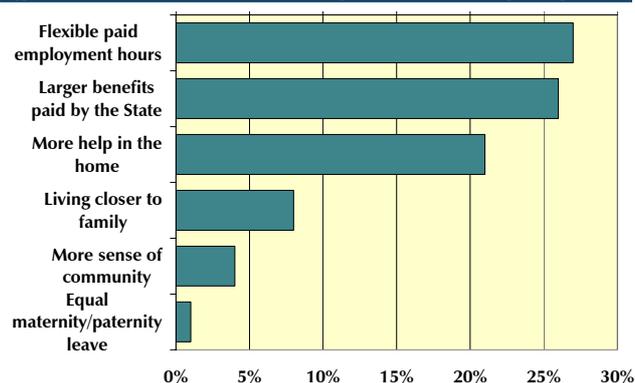
Swedish mothers keep in touch with their support networks through phone calls and texts rather than face-to-face meetings.

Social networking sites are also favoured by a similar proportion, although still a small minority, of mothers; those sites with a dedicated mother-focus, however, are less popular (5%) than non-mother-specific or more general sites such as Facebook (8%).

1.2.12 Improving the quality of life

The data discussed thus far illustrate just some of the complexities inherent in contemporary motherhood in Sweden. Despite the fact that most mothers have people around them who offer support and advice and that partners now help out more with domestic chores and childminding more than was the case in previous generations, some still feel isolated and experience guilt. So what might improve the quality of mothers' lives? The responses to this question are illustrated in Figure 26.

Figure 26. Factors which would improve mothers' quality of life



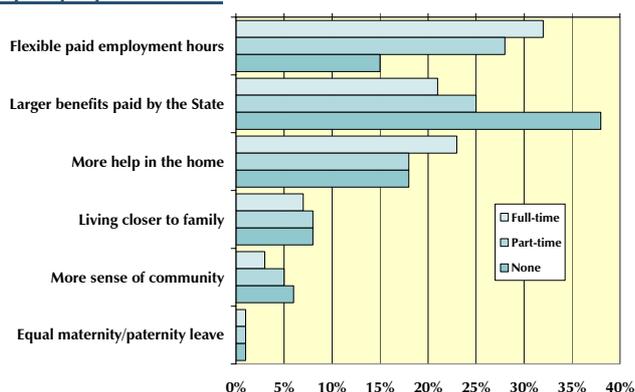
The most frequently cited response in this context was greater flexibility of paid employment hours (27%). Over one-quarter (26%) were of the opinion that larger benefits paid by the state would have a tangible benefit on their quality of life. For approximately one-fifth of mothers (21%) less fundamental shifts in employment and fiscal policy were required to improve their day-to-day situation as mothers; favouring more help in the home.

Unlike some other countries in the European study, living closer to family was not viewed as an issue of particular importance. This perhaps reflects the fact that Swedish mothers rely less heavily on family to assist with childcare than is the case in, for example, countries in the southern Mediterranean.

There are some variations in the perceived impact of flexible working hours, greater state benefits and help around the home on life-quality according to mothers' age, employment status and the age of their youngest dependent child. Many of these are to be expected. Greater benefits, for example, are more of a priority for those mothers not currently in paid work (38%) while flexible hours are more important to those mothers who are (32% for full-time; 28% for part-time; 15% for not working). It is also the full-time working mothers who felt that they would benefit the most from more help around the home (see Figure 27).

Flexible working hours and larger state benefits are seen by my Swedish mothers as ways of improving their lives.

Figure 27. Factors which would improve mothers' quality of life, by employment status

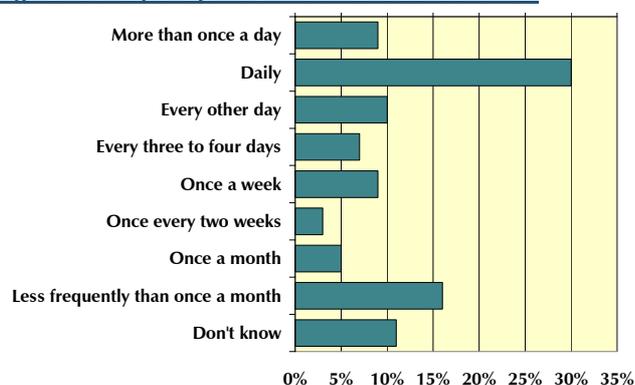


The youngest group expressed the need for greater flexibility in their (paid) working arrangements (37% of 18 to 24 year-olds, compared with just 15% of those aged 55 years and above). Those with the youngest children, aged 0 to 3 years, were the most likely to perceive larger state benefits as improving their quality of life (29%).

1.2.13 Attitude to gratitude

Mothers, when asked to think about the frequency with which they are thanked as a mother, reported quite varied levels of gratitude from other family members. While 30% of mothers reported receiving some acknowledgement on a daily basis for their 'work' as a mother, the majority were appreciated on a less regular basis (see Figure 28). On average, Swedish mothers are thanked only once every 9.93 days.

Figure 28. Frequency with which mothers are thanked



Swedish mothers receive thanks for what they do every 10 days.

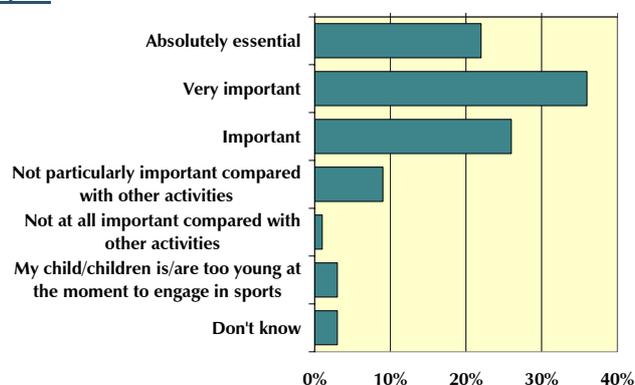
Mothers were also asked to provide some indication of the ways in which they most liked to be thanked. A hug, the universal demonstration of gratitude, is the preferred token of appreciation for one-third of the mothers polled, while a simple 'thank you' suffices for a further 15%. For other mothers, a little help with domestic chores and childcare (14%), a block of time to themselves (12%) or even the odd day or evening free of the responsibilities of childcare (7%) are all ways in which they liked to be

thanked. Flowers, gifts and cards, although appreciated by a small minority, are not part of the gratitude 'agenda' for most Swedish mums.

1.2.14 Sport

The vast majority of Swedish mothers (84%) are in favour of encouraging their children to participate in sport and physical exercise, recognising the contribution that it makes to their development, well-being and health, as shown in Figure 29. Despite this seemingly high level of agreement, mothers in Sweden, however, are the least likely in SIRC's pan-European survey, to support their children's participation in sport. Mothers in Spain were the most supportive; 97% of whom were of the opinion that encouraging sports' participation is 'essential', 'important', or 'very important'.

Figure 29. Importance of encouraging children's participation in sport



Of those mothers who recognised the importance of sport the majority (52%) said that they wish they had more time with which to encourage further their children's participation; a sentiment that was cited, unsurprisingly, most by mothers who are in full-time employment.

Swedish mothers are overwhelmingly in favour of encouraging their children to engage in sports.

Given that only a relatively small proportion of mothers were of the opinion that sport is not important when compared with other activities, the reasons offered for this viewpoint are a little difficult to analyse conclusively. What is apparent, however, is that there is some support (32%) among this group that too much emphasis is put on winning in children's sport. There is even greater consensus (45%) among these mothers that they would prefer to encourage academic success, rather than focusing too heavily on sport.