

# In Sweden, Men Can Have It All

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

SPOLAND, SWEDEN — Mikael Karlsson owns a snowmobile, two hunting dogs and five guns. In his spare time, this soldier-turned-game warden shoots moose and trades potty-training tips with other fathers. Cradling 2-month-old Siri in his arms, he can't imagine not taking baby leave. "Everyone does." From trendy central Stockholm to this village in the rugged forest south of the Arctic Circle, 85 percent of Swedish fathers take parental leave. Those who don't face questions from family, friends and colleagues.

As other countries still tinker with maternity leave and women's rights, Sweden may be a glimpse of the future. In this land of Viking lore, men are at the heart of the gender-equality debate. The ponytailed center-right finance minister calls himself a feminist, ads for cleaning products rarely feature women as homemakers, and preschools vet books for gender stereotypes in animal characters. For nearly four decades, governments of all political hues have legislated to give women equal rights at work — and men equal rights at home. Swedish mothers still take more time off with children — almost four times as much. And some who thought they wanted their men to help raise baby now find themselves coveting more time at home. But laws reserving at least two months of the generously paid, 13-month parental leave exclusively for fathers — a quota that could well double after the September election — have set off profound social change. Companies have come to expect employees to take leave irrespective of gender, and not to penalize fathers at promotion time. Women's paychecks are benefiting and the shift in fathers' roles is perceived as playing a part in lower divorce rates and increasing joint custody of children. In perhaps the most striking example of social engineering, a new definition of masculinity is emerging. "Many men no longer want to be identified just by their jobs," said Bengt Westerberg, who long opposed quotas but as deputy prime minister phased in a first month of paternity leave in 1995. "Many women now expect their husbands to take at least some time off with the children." Birgitta Ohlsson, European affairs minister, put it this way: "Machos with dinosaur values don't make the top-10 lists of attractive men in women's magazines anymore." Ms. Ohlsson, who has lobbied European Union governments to pay more attention to fathers, is eight months pregnant, and her husband, a law professor, will take the leave when their child is born. "Now men can have it all — a successful career and being a responsible daddy," she added. "It's a new kind of manly. It's more wholesome."

Back in Spoland, Sofia Karlsson, a police officer and the wife of Mikael Karlsson, said she found her husband most attractive "when he is in the forest with his rifle over his shoulder and the baby on his back." In this new world of the sexes, some women complain that Swedish men are too politically correct even to flirt in a bar. And some men admit to occasional pangs of insecurity. "I know my wife expects me to take parental leave," said a prominent radio journalist who recently took six months off with his third child and who preferred to remain anonymous. "But if I was on a lonely island with her and Tarzan, I hope she would still pick me."

In 1974, when Sweden became the first country to replace maternity leave with parental leave, the few men who took it were nicknamed "velvet dads." Despite government campaigns — one featuring a champion weightlifter with a baby perched on his bare biceps — the share of fathers on leave was stalled at 6 percent when Mr. Westerberg entered government in 1991. Sweden had already gone further than many countries have now in relieving working mothers: Children had access to highly subsidized preschools from 12 months and grandparents were offered state-sponsored elderly care. The parent on leave got almost a full salary for a year before returning to a guaranteed job, and both could work six-hour days until children entered school. Female employment rates and birth rates had surged to be among the highest in the developed world. "I always thought if we made it easier for women to work, families would eventually choose a more equal division of parental leave by themselves," said Mr. Westerberg, 67. "But I gradually became convinced that there wasn't all that much choice." Sweden, he said, faced a vicious circle. Women continued to take parental leave not just for tradition's sake but because their pay was often lower, thus perpetuating pay differences. Companies, meanwhile, made clear to men that staying home with baby was not compatible with a career.

“Society is a mirror of the family,” Mr. Westerberg said. “The only way to achieve equality in society is to achieve equality in the home. Getting fathers to share the parental leave is an essential part of that.” Introducing “daddy leave” in 1995 had an immediate impact. No father was forced to stay home, but the family lost one month of subsidies if he did not. Soon more than eight in 10 men took leave. The addition of a second nontransferable father month in 2002 only marginally increased the number of men taking leave, but it more than doubled the amount of time they take. Clearly, state money proved an incentive — and a strong argument with reluctant bosses. Among the self-employed, and in rural and immigrant communities, men are far less likely to take leave, said Nalin Pekgul, chairwoman of the Social Democratic Party’s women’s federation. In her Stockholm suburb, with a large immigrant population, traditional gender roles remain conspicuously intact. But the daddy months have left their mark. A study published by the Swedish Institute of Labor Market Policy Evaluation in March showed, for instance, that a mother’s future earnings increase on average 7 percent for every month the father takes leave. Among those with university degrees, a growing number of couples split the leave evenly; some switch back and forth every few months to avoid one parent assuming a dominant role — or being away from jobs too long.

The higher women rank, the more they resemble men: few male chief executives take parental leave — but neither do the few female chief executives. Parents may use their 390 days of paid leave however they want up to the child’s eighth birthday — monthly, weekly, daily and even hourly — a schedule that leaves particularly small, private employers scrambling to adapt.

While Sweden, with nine million people, made a strategic decision to get more women into the work force in the booming 1960s, other countries imported more immigrant men. As populations in Europe decline and new labor shortages loom, countries have studied the Swedish model, said Peter Moss an expert on leave policies at the University of London’s Institute of Education. The United States — with lower taxes and traditional wariness of state meddling in family affairs — is not among them. Portugal is the only country where paternity leave is mandatory — but only for a week. Iceland has arguably gone furthest, reserving three months for father, three months for mother and allowing parents to share another three months.

The trend is, however, no longer limited to small countries. Germany, with nearly 82 million people, in 2007 tweaked Sweden’s model, reserving two out of 14 months of paid leave for fathers. Within two years, fathers taking parental leave surged from 3 percent to more than 20 percent. “That was a marker of pretty significant change,” said Kimberly Morgan, professor at [George Washington University](#) and an expert on parental leave. If Germany can do it, she said, “most countries can.”

If the Social Democrats win Sweden’s election on Sept. 19, as opinion polls predict, they will double the nontransferable leave for each parent to four months, said Mona Sahlin, the party leader who would become Sweden’s first female prime minister. Mrs. Sahlin, who had three children as a member of Parliament with her husband sharing the leave, knows that this measure is not necessarily popular. “Sometimes politicians have to be ahead of public opinion,” she said, noting how controversial the initial daddy month was and how broadly it is now simply expected. The least enthusiastic, in fact, are often mothers. In a 2003 survey by the Social Insurance Agency, the most commonly cited reason for not taking more paternity leave, after finances, was mother’s preference, said Ann-Zofie Duvander, a sociologist at Stockholm University who worked at the agency at the time. Ann-Marie Prhat of the TCO employee federation said she had been determined to share the parental leave with her husband. After many discussions, “we practically signed a contract — six months for me and six months for him.” Five months into the leave, she was enjoying her son. Could she stay home a couple of months longer, she asked her husband? “In the end,” she said, “I negotiated one extra month.” Eight in 10 fathers now take a third of the total 13 months of leave — and 9 percent of fathers take 40 percent of the total or more — up from 4 percent a decade ago. The numbers tend to look more impressive in urban areas, like Stockholm, but there are some surprises. Owing to extensive government campaigns, the northern county of Vasterbotton, where the Karlssons live, has repeatedly topped the “daddy index” of average leave the TCO federation publishes every year, says its president, Sture Nordh. For Carlos Rojas, 27, a Swedish-Spanish entrepreneur who runs one of a host of new father groups campaigning for more paternal say at home, that is not enough. His 2-year-old twin sons, Julian and Mateo, call him Mama. He and his now former wife shared parental leave by alternating days at work and at home. Fathers at home “are still often second-

class parents,” since the mother usually stays home first and establishes routine, Mr. Rojas said. “How many dads cut their children’s nails?” he asked, admitting that he does not. “I know she’s going to do it and so I don’t bother. We have to overcome that if we truly want to share responsibility.” In Sodermalm, Stockholm’s trendy south island, the days of fathers taking only two months are clearly over. Men with strollers walk in the park, chat in cafes, stock up at the supermarket or weigh their babies at walk-in daycare centers. Claes Boklund, a 35-year-old Web designer taking 10 months off with 19-month-old Harry, admits he was scared at first: the baby, the cooking, the cleaning, the sleepless nights. Six months into his leave, he says, he is confident around Harry (and cuts his nails). “It’s both harder and easier than you think,” he said.

Understanding what it is to be home with a child may help explain why divorce and separation rates in Sweden have dropped since 1995 — at a time when divorce rates elsewhere have risen, according to the national statistics office. When couples do divorce or separate, shared custody has increased. Fredrik and Cecilia Friberg both went part time soon after their daughter Ylva was born last Christmas Eve. He works Monday, Wednesday and every other Friday, his wife the remaining days. It helps that both are civil servants. “I wanted to be there from the start. So much happens every week, I don’t want to miss out,” said Mr. Friberg, 31. Every once in a while, former traditions surface. “I get complimented on how much I help at home, Cecilia gets no such gratitude,” Mr. Friberg said.

Some, however, worry that as men and women both work and both stay home with kids, a gender identity crisis looms. “Manhood is being squeezed” by the sameness, argued Ingemar Gens, an author and self-described gender consultant. So is the Swedish taxpayer. Taxes account for 47 percent of [gross domestic product](#), compared with 27 percent in the United States and 40 percent in the European Union overall. The public sector, famous for family friendly perks, employs one in three workers, including half of all working women. Family benefits cost 3.3 percent of G.D.P., the highest in the world along with Denmark and France, said Willem Adema, senior economist at the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#).

Yet Sweden looks well balanced: at 2.1 percent and 40 percent of G.D.P., respectively, public deficit and debt levels are a fraction of those in most developed economies these days, testimony perhaps to fiscal management born of a banking crisis and [recession](#) in the 1990s. High productivity and political consensus keep the system going.

“There are remarkably few complaints,” said Linda Haas, a professor of sociology at [Indiana University](#) currently at the University of Goteborg. With full-time preschool guaranteed at a maximum of about \$150 a month and leave paid at 80 percent of salary up to \$3,330 a month, “people feel that they are getting their money’s worth.” Companies, facing high payroll taxes and women and men taking leave in unpredictable installments, can be less sure. Tales of male staff members being discouraged from long leave are still not uncommon, although it is not fashionable to say so. Mr. Boklund said his office “was not happy” about his extended absence.

Bodil Sonesson Gallon, head of sales at Axis Communications, an IT company that specializes in video surveillance, admits that parental leave can be disruptive — for careers and companies. She laments that with preschools starting at 12 months and little alternative child care, there is huge pressure for parents to take at least a year off. Small businesses find it particularly tricky to juggle absences, said Sofia Bergstrom, social insurance expert at the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, which represents 60,000 companies. Worse than parental leave, she says, is the 120-day annual allowance for parents to tend to sick children, which is impossible to plan and which is suspected of being widely abused. “The key issue for business is planning ahead,” said Ms. Bergstrom.

But in a sign that the broader cultural shift has acquired a dynamic of its own, a survey by Ms. Haas and Philip Hwang, a psychology professor at Goteborg University, shows that 41 percent of companies reported in 2006 that they had made a formal decision to encourage fathers to take parental leave, up from only 2 percent in 1993. Some managers try to make the most of the short-term openings to test potential recruits. Others say planning longer absences is easier and encourage fathers to take six months rather than three.

A system of flexible working hours has evolved. Even senior employees may leave at 4:30 p.m. to collect children from school, but are expected to log on at home at night. A growing number of employers top up the salary replacement the state pays parents to 90 percent of their salary for several months. For many companies, a family-friendly work pattern has simply become a new way of attracting talent. “Graduates used to look for big paychecks. Now they want work-life balance,” said Goran Henriksson, head of human resources at the cell phone giant Ericsson in Sweden, where last year 28 percent of female employees took leave, and 24 percent of male staff did. “We have to adapt.”

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