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Through the gender lens: a comparison of family policy in Sweden and China

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In this study, Sweden and China's family policies, with a specific focus on their effect on gender equality, are compared. We describe the different goals and objectives of parental/maternity leave and childcare policies. The effect of family policies on gender equality, indicated by equal employment opportunities for women and the gender division of labour in the family in the two countries, is also discussed. A systematic comparison revealed that both countries included the promotion of gender equality in their policy agendas, but they varied in design and implementation. Swedish family policies assume childcare is a public concern, and women's participation in the labour market and men's involvement in childcare are considered to be crucial to achieving gender equality. In contrast, China's family policies emphasize women's participation in the labour market, but overlook the gender division of household work and childcare at home.

摘要: 本文探讨瑞典和中国的家庭政策，特别是两国家庭政策对性别平等的影响。本文首先介绍两国父母/产假和幼儿照顾政策的目标，进而从妇女平等就业机会和家务分工两方面讨论政策对于性别平等的影响。通过系统的比较，研究发现瑞典和中国在其家庭政策中都寻求促进性别平等，然而两国在家庭政策的设计和实施中存有较大差异。瑞典的家庭政策视幼儿照顾为一个公共政策问题，并认为在妇女参与劳动力市场的同时，男性应该参与家庭育儿。这对实现性别平等是至关重要的。相比之下，中国的家庭政策强调妇女在劳动力市场的参与，但忽视了在家务和育儿上的性别分工。

Keywords: family policy; parental leave; maternity leave; childcare; gender equality; Sweden; China

Introduction

Family policies have become central to the social policy agenda for states today because women increasingly participate in the labour force, and demographic changes have taken place, such as decreasing fertility rates, a growing number of dependent elderly people and changes in the family structure (Taylor-Gooby 2004). In particular, the struggle to reconcile employment and family life, such as child rearing, has been a global social policy concern for numerous states (Gilbert 2008). Family policy often refers to a wide scope of policy schemes, varying from income support, education, health care and housing to family laws and laws on other social services that affect families and children (Gauthier 1999). In this article, we focus on maternity or parental leave and childcare policies and programmes. Parental leave allows mothers (and fathers) to take time off from work and care for young children without jeopardizing their position in the labour market, and childcare services support working parents. In most developed and developing countries,

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women continue to be responsible for the majority of unpaid reproductive work (Hook 2010). Parenthood has been found to have a negative effect on women regarding their employment status, career development and economic equality (Hook 2010; Van der Lippe *et al.* 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the various approaches to gender in policies and programmes aimed at families with dependent children.

Most comparative studies on family policy have focused on western European and North American nations. Few comparative studies on family policies focus on China and Sweden, which share some common characteristics. Female labour force participation is high in both countries, and both governments have adopted certain forms of state feminism, which is a system of state support that involves employing women in the state sector, making women's reproduction a public rather than a private concern, and instituting progressive state laws that guarantee women's equality with men (Yang 1999). Therefore, it is useful to compare Sweden and China, because both countries convey strong gender equality ideologies in their policy rhetoric, despite being embedded in dissimilar socio-economic, political and cultural contexts.

In a comparative study of Sweden and China's family policies, Adams and Winston (1980) contextualized the two countries as models of women's integration into the labour force, and examined how social policies have encouraged women to work outside the home, which was contrasted with the American system. However, both Sweden (post-1970) and China (post-1980) have implemented reforms in their family policies, so an updated study is warranted. Another study (Lin and Rantalaaho 2003) compared the family policies of Scandinavian and Confucian Asian countries, including Sweden and China. They characterized China as a Confucian and paternalist society, neglecting the socialist approach to gender present in China since 1949. In this article, we compare Sweden and China's family policies, with particular focus on urban China, and evaluate the effect on gender equality. We conducted an in-depth analysis of family policy development since the late 1970s, particularly policies and programmes involving parental leave and childcare, to analyse the agenda, regulations, implementation and effects of family policy in each country. This study was based on two research questions: (1) whether the making of family policy has the intention of promoting gender equality; and (2) whether the implementation of these family policies has adequately promoted the status of women in the labour market and at home.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. The first section provides a general profile of Sweden and China. The second section presents a review of the development of parental leave and childcare policies in each country. The third section provides an analysis of the extent to which the implementation of family policies has affected gender equality in the labour market and at home. The final section presents the conclusion and suggestions for further research.

Country profiles

Sweden and China are vastly different regarding socio-economic development and demographic characteristics. Sweden is an economically developed country with a small population, and China is an enormous developing country with a population over 1.3 billion. However, women's participation in the labour force in both countries is among the highest in the world. Table 1 provides a brief profile of each country.

Sweden

The United Nations Human Development Report 2013 (UNHDR) rated Sweden 0.916, seventh of the 186 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) (United Nations

Table 1. Economic and demographic characteristics.

	Gross national income per capita (constant 2005 PPP\$)	Human Development Index ^a	Total population	Urbanization ^b	Total fertility rate	Female employment ^c 2010
Sweden	35,837	0.916	9.415 million in 2011	85%	1.9	77.2%
China	7476	0.699	1.344 billion	51%	1.64	71.1% (60.8% urban)

Source: [United Nations Development Programme \(2013\)](#).

Notes:

^aThe United National Human Development Programme computes the Human Development Index (HDI) based on measures of life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, mean years of schooling and income per capita.

^bReference to the set of data on urbanization in *World Urbanization Prospects, the 2011 Revision*, from the website of Population Division, Population Estimates and Projects Section, The United Nations: <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/Urban-Rural-Population.htm>

^cEmployment data for working-age women. Data for Sweden are reported for women aged 20–64 years from Eurostat; data for China are reported for women aged 18–64 years from the China Women Status Survey (third wave) ([All-China Women's Federation of China, and National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011](#)).

Development Programme 2013). Sweden's population is 9.4 million, and the majority (85%) live in cities. The fertility rate in Sweden is relatively high compared to other industrialized European countries, and has increased over the past decade from 1.5 in 1999 (the lowest) to 1.98 in 2010 ([OECD 2011a](#)). In addition, Sweden has a high female labour force participation rate, compared to other western European countries. By the early 1990s, women constituted 48% of the Swedish labour force ([Olsen 2002](#)), which was the highest rate in the world. In 2010, the employment rate for Swedish working-age females (20–64 years) was 77.2%, the highest among European countries.

Sweden has consistently been portrayed as a social democratic welfare state. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries spend, on average, 2.6% of their GDP on family benefits, whereas Sweden spends 3.75% in total on family benefits, including services (2.17%) and cash benefits (1.58%) ([OECD 2012f](#)). Government investment in childcare and preschool in Sweden reached 1.4% of the GDP by 2009 ([OECD 2012e](#)).

China

In contrast, China is a developing country with an HDI of 0.699, ranked 101 out of 186 countries according to the UNHDR ([United Nations Development Programme 2013](#)). China is the most populous nation in the world with more than 1.3 billion citizens, and over 50% of the population lives in urban areas. This figure increased from 10.64% in 1949, to 17.9% in 1979, to 51.3% in 2011 ([National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012](#)). Largely because of changes to family planning policies, from policies that encouraged women to give birth to children in the 1950s and 1960s to the 'one child' policy that was launched in the late 1970s, the Chinese fertility rate has changed dramatically. The total fertility rate has decreased from an average of 5.61 children per woman in 1960, to 2.54 in 1980, and finally to 1.78 in 2009, and the fertility rate in urban China is even lower ([The World Bank 2013](#)).

China also has a high rate of female labour force participation. In the early 1980s, over 80% of working-age women were employed in China. Substantial socio-economic development disparity exists between urban and rural China. According to China's Women's Status Survey (third wave) Report of 2011, 71.1% of women aged 18–64 years

across China were employed, and only 60.8% of urban women were employed (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012). Post-1949 developments have resulted in large and widening gaps between urban and rural residents in China, largely because of the *hukou* (household registration) system (Whyte 2010). The *hukou* system is linked to employment opportunities and social welfare, such as education and health care (Guo 2013; Whyte 2010). In addition, large urban–rural disparities exist in family policy (Zhai and Gao 2008). In this article, we focus on family policies in urban China, which is more comparable to Sweden than rural China is. A large migrant population moves from rural to urban areas in China, including families with young children. Often, migrant workers cannot change their *hukou*, and are therefore not entitled to various social welfare rights that benefit urban residents (Guo 2013). In this article, we do not specifically differentiate between migrant and other families.

Comparison of family policy

In this section, we offer a review of Sweden’s and China’s family policies from the following perspectives: (1) policy goals and objectives; (2) parental leave and childcare policy; and (3) impact on gender equality. To assess the impact of parental leave and childcare policy on gender equality, we used a disaggregated approach and emphasized the labour force participation of women with young children, and the gender division of household work.

Sweden

Policy goals and objectives

Since the first half of the nineteenth century, the Swedish government has granted women equal legal rights to education, inheritance and to practice industrial professions and own businesses (Adams and Winston 1980). Particularly since the Social Democratic party rose to power in the 1930s, advocacy has focused on formal legal rights and support for women’s social conditions, especially their economic situation, and has gradually become the prominent doctrine in the twentieth century (Adams and Winston 1980). The Social Democrats’ commitment to ensuring the health and security of the Swedish population, especially by improving family welfare, has guaranteed a strong policy emphasis on social services and benefits for working women. Sweden’s family policies reflect the dominant influence of the social democratic ideology.

Today, the objectives of the Swedish government’s gender equality policy are to combat and change systems that preserve the gender-based distribution of power and resources at the societal level and to create conditions for women and men to enjoy the same power and opportunities to influence their own lives (Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality 2009). The following objectives indicate the direction of the government’s policy in the area:

- (1) Equal division of power and influence. Women and men must have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and shape decision-making conditions.
- (2) Economic equality. Women and men must have the same opportunities and conditions regarding education and paid work, which provide economic independence throughout life.
- (3) Equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care. Women and men must take responsibility for housework and have the opportunity to provide and receive care on equal terms.

- (4) Men's violence against women must stop. Women and men, and girls and boys, must have the same right to physical integrity (Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality 2009).

Government family policies clearly attempt to promote gender equality in all areas of political, social, economic and family lives based on the ideal that women and men should equally share paid work and family responsibilities. A dual-earner and dual-caregiver model is promoted by the Swedish family policy, which is based on a vision of a society where men and women engage symmetrically in both paid work and unpaid caregiving, and it also requires state interventions that support parental caregiving during children's earliest years (Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt 2010).

Parental leave and childcare policy

Parental leave. Family policies in Sweden started in the 1930s and have continuously changed and expanded. Sweden provides a range of public benefits, such as paid parental leave, children's allowances, public day care and cash-for-home care. Swedish parental leave policy comprises maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave, which encourage both mothers and fathers to take leave and engage in childcare responsibilities (Earles 2011; Haas 2003). Sweden was the first country to introduce parental leave. First introduced in 1974, parental leave replaced maternity leave, which only applied to mothers. The change from maternity leave to parental leave was indicative of the well-defined objectives of family policies in Sweden, which include the well-being of the child, women's employment, economic independence and the involvement of fathers in family and home life (Earles 2011; Haas 1992). When parental leave was first introduced, it involved six months leave per child, which parents could divide in any way they wanted, at a 90% income replacement rate. In 1978, parental leave was extended to nine months, with the last three months paid at a flat rate; alternatively, the additional three months could be used to reduce the length of the work day for one parent (Daune-Richard and Mahon 2001). In 1995, the first 'father's month' was introduced, which meant 30 days of parental leave was reserved for each parent. In 2002, this was extended to two months per parent. As a result, the system today offers parents 13 months of leave per child at an 80% income replacement rate, with an additional three months available at a flat rate. The total of 16 months currently available to parents includes two months reserved for mothers and two months reserved for fathers, leaving 12 months to be divided as the parents wish (Earles 2011; OECD 2012b, 2012c).

Childcare. In Sweden, childcare is clearly a national concern. Sweden developed a comprehensive system of public day care facilities, including day care centres, family day care, part-time preschool and after-school homes for preschool children and young school children of working parents (Sundström and Stafford 1992). Public childcare is mainly provided by municipalities and financed by government subsidies, as well as, to a minor extent, by parents' fees. Childcare has received high policy priority, and the number of publicly funded municipal childcare spaces has increased rapidly since the late 1960s (Earles 2011; Sundström and Stafford 1992). In 1968, the government appointed the National Commission on Child Care, which laid the foundation for the Swedish preschool model (Nyberg 2004; Earles 2011). The Swedish state subsidizes and regulates both family care homes and day care centres. Childcare provision is the responsibility of local government. Since 1992, the financing structure for Swedish childcare was revised from an

open-ended federal matching grant system to a close-ended block grant system (Gustafsson, Kjulin, and Schwarz 2002). The government introduced the Act on Child Care in 1995, which obligated municipalities to provide childcare without undue delay. Therefore, the government made a commitment to assure the availability of public childcare.

Since the 1980s, private for-profit childcare initiatives have been introduced through subcontracting some municipal government childcare to private and commercial providers (Gustafsson and Stafford 1995). Recently, a cash-for-care home care allowance was introduced to provide cash payments to families not using public day care services (Sipilä, Repo, and Rissanen 2010). However, it has not been available in all local governments in Sweden and, in addition, the sums are rather small. In short, even with recent reforms, several studies have demonstrated that Sweden's childcare sector remains largely publicly funded and nationally regulated (Earles 2011).

Impact on gender equality

Labour force participation of women with young children. The labour force participation rates of Swedish women aged 16–54 years have risen steeply, from 59% in 1970 to 85% in 1989, and these figures have been associated with a rapid increase in the proportion of employed women working part-time, from 38% in 1970 to a peak of 47% in 1982 (Sundström 1991). Today, almost as many women as men participate in Sweden's labour market; however, most mothers continue to work part-time. In 2009, the female employment rate was 81.9% in women 25–54 years old. Maternal employment rates refer to mothers in employment as a percentage of the population with a particular focus on mothers with at least one child younger than 15 years who is living at home. The employment rate of mothers with at least one child younger than 15 years old was 80.3%. The employment rate of mothers with children under the age of 3 years was 71.9%, and 81.3% of mothers had children between the ages of 3 and 5 years (OECD 2012d). The employment rates of mothers are typically lower than those of women of childbearing age. The employment rate of women with young children in Sweden is high because of Sweden's comprehensive family policy. Importantly, mothers remain classified as full-time employees while on parental leave. This classification method contributes to the high employment rate of women with children under the age of 3 years, and the availability of childcare and part-time jobs are also crucial factors. The right to reduce daily work hours was first provided in Sweden in 1978 to help the parents of children younger than 8 years old to balance work and childcare needs (Hegewisch and Gornick 2011).

Access to part-time employment has played a vital role in increasing labour force participation among mothers in Sweden, which has increased the continuity of women's labour force attachment, strengthened their position in the labour market and reduced their economic dependency. More mothers with children work part-time than fathers do. In 2007, almost half of all women with children aged 3 to 6 years worked part-time (Duvander and Jans 2008). In 2010, 46% of women working in Sweden worked 40 hours or longer, 36% worked 30–39 hours, and only 18% worked less than 30 hours per week (OECD 2011b). The growth in part-time employment between 1970 and 1982 among Swedish women was driven by previously unemployed women, particularly married women and mothers of preschool children (Sundström 1991). Today, as a result of tax and social insurance policies and extensive childcare provisions, women of childbearing age no longer have higher rates of part-time employment than do other women, and the prevalence of part-time work has fallen dramatically since the 1980s (Hegewisch and Gornick 2011).

All eligible mothers use leave benefits (Allen 2003). Because mothers are still more likely to use parental leave than fathers are, the introduction of non-transferable ‘daddy days’ has resulted in fathers increasingly taking parental leave (Allen 2003; Duvander and Andersson 2006). For example, in 1974, only 3% of people using parental leave were fathers, and fathers took less than 1% of the total days available. By 1992, 48.3% of fathers took an average of 63 days of leave (Nyberg 2004; Earles 2011). By 2008, men were using 21% of the parental leave, which was an all-time high. An increased use of fathers’ parental leave can lead to further adaption to family life. A study on Swedish fathers and their paternal leave patterns found that fathers who took parental leave were more likely to have contact with their children later in the children’s lives. Swedish women do the majority of housework, but they are doing less, and their spouses are doing more, than in the past. Other studies have also indicated that Swedish social policy promotes women’s independence, and may also indirectly foster egalitarian attitudes towards the gender division of housework (Evertsson and Nermo 2004).

A high and increasing percentage of Swedish infants and toddlers are enrolled in childcare services. In Sweden, 46.7% of children younger than 3 years old used formal, non-parental care services, either childcare centres or family day care homes, and 91.1% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old were enrolled in formal childcare or preschool services (OECD 2012a). This was an increase of 31.8% in children younger than 3 years old in full- or part-time non-relative care, and 26.6% were cared for in public childcare centres in 1990 (Allen 2003). Given the extended parental leave benefits available for parents of children younger than 1 year old, a small proportion of children under the age of 1 were enrolled in public childcare centres (Sundström and Stafford 1992). Private childcare was almost non-existent until 1990, and currently accounts for only a small portion of childcare services (Earles 2011). Informal childcare provided by relatives, friends and neighbours in the child’s home or elsewhere was infrequently used because of the comprehensive and available public childcare in Sweden. Only about 1.5% of children younger than 3 years old and 0.5% of children between 3 and 5 years old were in informal non-parental care (OECD 2012b).

China

Policy goals and objectives

Since 1949, the promotion of equality between men and women has been one of the People’s Republic of China’s main national policies. The Chinese Constitution explicitly states that ‘women enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, social, and family life’, and contains ‘the law to protect the rights and interests of women, equal pay for equal work, training and selecting women cadres’ as well as ‘the law to protect marriage, family, mothers and children’. Under the Constitution, the Women’s Rights Protection Act and the Marriage Law, as well as the Inheritance Law, Election Law and other laws and regulations, have been formulated to provide institutional safeguards to ensure women’s equal education, employment, election, marriage and inheritance rights.

During the Mao era (1949–1978), the state argued that the ultimate means to achieve gender equality was to have both men and women participate in the labour force and provide for their family (Zuo and Jiang 2009). Therefore, the state greatly emphasized the mobilization of women to participate in the paid labour force. Large-scale political campaigns, such as ‘To Liberate the Productivity of Female Labours’ and ‘To Liberate Women from Their Families’ were organized to expand the urban female labour force (Lee 1992; Zhai and Gao 2008). The Chinese state promoted women’s rights in the public

sphere, and included women in the labour force; however, a traditional orientation towards gender division of labour within the family, emphasizing women as the primary caregivers, remained (Zuo and Jiang 2009). Therefore, the state prescribed a double labour burden for women that involved working in the formal economy as well as performing reproductive labour.¹

Family-related policies only focused on involving and securing women's positions in the public sector, but did not promote gender equality in families. Laws were made to protect women from being laid off during pregnancy, childbearing and breastfeeding. Women were also granted protection during menstruation, pregnancy, birth and nursing, and were not allowed to perform work detrimental to their health (such as mining) during these phases (Qin and Zhang 2011). Public childcare services were also implemented as a practical step to allow women to work outside the home (Lee 1992; Zhai and Gao 2008). No policy has been formulated to encourage men to undertake greater household and childcare duties.

Since market reforms were launched in 1979, the state has focused on economic growth to direct China's modernization and development. The state no longer officially allocates jobs and extensive welfare benefits to the public. Socialist work units were transformed into financially independent players in the market. To be more competitive, numerous work units closed down affiliated nurseries and kindergartens. Childcare gradually became privatized and the responsibility thus shifted to private families and the market. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education emphasized the agenda of reducing public funding for kindergartens and preschools and encouraged the private sector to provide care and education for children 5 years old and younger (Zuo and Jiang 2009). However, in 2010, the State Council argued in favour of non-profit preschool education that was universally accessible and proposed building more public kindergartens; the goal was to promote comprehensive early education for preschool-aged children (Cook and Dong 2011; Zhang and Maclean 2012).

Parental leave and childcare policies

Maternity leave. As early as the 1950s, the Chinese state formulated regulations prohibiting work units to discriminate against hiring pregnant women, which was the predecessor of China's maternity leave policy. In the Labour Insurance Regulation of the People's Republic of China, initially issued in 1951, regulations about the length of maternity leave, compensation during maternity leave and medical expenses for women workers and employees were elaborated. Women were allowed to take 56 days of maternity leave with the possibility of extension with a doctor's notice. The state financed the work units to cover related medical expenses, compensation and other costs incurred during women workers' pregnancy, the birth of the child and early childcare.

Since the reform, maternity leave policies have been further clarified and extended. In 1988, the 'Provisions Concerning the Labour Protection of Female Staff and Workers'² stated that the maternity leave of female staff and workers must be 90 days, including 15 prenatal leave days, and an additional 15 days were granted in the case of dystocia. The newly amended 'Provisions Concerning the Labour Protection of Female Staff and Workers',³ issued in April 2012, increased the maternity leave from 90 days to 98 days, and the new law applies to all companies and institutions. However, the funding mechanism for reproductive care has changed. With few exceptions, the state does not directly fund enterprises and institutions. Instead, a new reproductive care insurance policy was implemented in 1994, which required employers to pay part of the premium

for female workers to receive maternity benefits. This reproductive insurance, however, only covers medical expenses and compensation for maternity leave. Other related expenses, such as post-maternity childcare leave, supplementary labour costs and employees' sick leave during pregnancy and breastfeeding, which were covered by the state, are now the responsibility of employers (Qin and Zhang 2011). By prioritizing the productivity of the enterprises and economic growth, the central government does not enforce rigid implementation of the maternity leave policy. Therefore, local governments and employers often circumvent these national policies. Most public sector employees have maternal leave benefits; however, in particular private enterprises, employers either disfavour hiring female workers or compromise women's maternity benefits (Wang 2000).

Childcare. During the Mao era, childcare facilities were mostly provided by the parents' work units and were part of workers' welfare benefits. To reduce female workers' reproductive care burden, the state encouraged and funded work units and urban communities to establish childcare facilities (Lee 1992; Kilburn and Datar 2002; Zhai and Gao 2008). In 1956, there were more than 26,700 nurseries and kindergartens in urban China, which was 260 times more than in 1949, and a total of 1.25 million preschool-aged children were enrolled (Zuo and Jiang 2009). Mothers were able to send their children to nurseries immediately after their maternity leave, which was usually around 56 days. The working hours of the nurseries and kindergartens were normally longer than most work units so that women could send their children before work and pick them up after work. Work units were largely responsible for the institutional childcare charges (Zuo and Jiang 2009).

Since the market reforms were introduced, childcare responsibility has become mainly a private concern. Nurseries caring for children younger than 3 years old almost disappeared because of the high risk and low profit. Kindergartens and preschools that were traditionally managed by work units and community organizations gradually disappeared and private childcare centres rapidly proliferated (Zhai and Gao 2008; Zhang and Maclean 2012). The number of kindergartens directly funded by the central or local governments has remained relatively stable since the early 1990s (Zhang and Maclean 2012); however, these subsidized childcare facilities are largely reserved for public sector employees. In other words, only public sector employees have access to high-quality and affordable subsidized childcare in urban areas.

In general, the number of kindergartens for children between the ages of 3 and 5 years old has dropped rapidly from approximately 181,400 in 1998 to 111,700 in 2001 (Ministry of Education 1998, 2001). In 2008, it once again increased to 133,700, but 62% of all kindergartens were private and received little government funding (Ministry of Education 2008). Because of the increasing number of private childcare facilities, the cost of childcare has also increased dramatically. In 2007, the monthly charge of an average-quality kindergarten in Beijing (including publicly funded kindergartens) was between 800 and 1200 RMB, which was approximately 60% of the salary of a reproductive-aged urban woman. In addition, kindergarten hours were reduced, which created time conflicts for parents between work and child pick-up (Zuo and Jiang 2009). Therefore, kindergarten enrolment fell from 24.03 million in 1998 to 20.21 million in 2001. It slowly bounced back to 24.75 million in 2008, but still included less than half of the 52.4 million Chinese children aged 3 to 5 years (Ministry of Education 2008). Government subsidies are not provided to families relying on private childcare services.

In 2010, the State Council issued the document ‘Opinions of the State Council on the Development of Preschool Education’⁴ and emphasized that preschool education should be non-profit and universally accessible. Local governments were required to increase preschool education spending, build additional public kindergartens and support private childcare centres through means such as tax breaks, government purchases and reduced rents. As a result, local governments have developed detailed plans. For instance, the municipal government of Beijing has allotted a budget of five billion RMB to building and expanding 600 kindergartens by the end of 2015.

Impact on gender equality

In the early 1980s, female labour participation in China was among the highest in the world. According to the 1982 census data, 81.55% of Chinese women between the ages of 15 and 54 years participated in the labour force, which fell to 73.09% in 2005 (Li 2010). The employment rates for both men and women have reduced over the past 30 years because of additional years of schooling and the downsizing of state-owned work units. Additionally, the gender gap in labour force participation has increased. The employment rate for women between the ages of 25 and 34 years dropped by approximately 10% between 1990 and 2010, but it has remained relatively stable for men. Importantly, because of women’s withdrawal from the labour force, the income gender gap has also grown in urban China since the late 1980s. Urban household surveys indicated that an average woman’s income was 15.6% lower than a man’s income in 1988. The gap increased to 19% in 1995, and then to 24% in 2002 (Li and Gustafsson 2000, 2008). The gender income inequality, however, is less extreme in the state sector than in the private and other sectors (Cohen and Wang 2008), which we suggest is partly because state employees have superior maternity leave and childcare benefits. Because of the decrease in women’s employment rates, and the widening gender income gap, married women’s economic dependency on husbands has also increased in urban China from 0.124 in 1995 to 0.163 in 2002.⁵ The level of wives’ economic dependency in urban China, however, is considerably lower than that in western European countries, and slightly lower than that in Sweden (0.23 in 1995) (Li and Gustafsson 2008).⁶

It has also been argued that women’s dual burden of work and childcare has increased in the reform era (Cook and Dong 2011). The labour force participation of married women with children was substantially lower than that of unmarried women of the same age group (Ma *et al.* 2011). In 2012, the employment rate of mothers between the ages of 25 and 34 years with children under the age of 6 was 72%, which was 10.9% lower than that of women of the same age group without children (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2012). Furthermore, findings from the data analysis demonstrated that married women’s employment status was not correlated with their husbands’ income and occupation. Parenthood and the number of children were significant indicators of married women’s employment (Ma *et al.* 2011). Child rearing was a primary reason for the decrease in employment rates among Chinese women, especially those with young children.

In addition, because of the dissolution of care services for children under the age of 3 years, younger children were predominantly subjected to informal family care. Many women became full-time housewives because of childcare demands (Ma *et al.* 2011). A survey on Chinese women’s social status indicated that mothers (63.2%) mostly cared for children younger than 3 years old. Furthermore, grandparents also provided informal care for younger children in families (Chen, Liu, and Mair 2012; Chen, Short, and Entwisle 2000).

In China, both partners in couples increasingly contribute to household chores. However, income disparity between men and women, as well as the revival of traditional gender ideology, reinforced the gender division of labour in the family since the economic reform was implemented (Shen, Li, and Zhao 2009). A large-scale 2008 survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that, in 60.6% of the 4016 families surveyed, the wife handled the majority of household chores (Ma *et al.* 2011). A recent survey on gender attitudes revealed that most Chinese citizens today believe that housework and childcare are primarily women's work (All-China Women's Federation of China and National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011).

Discussion

We introduced this article by posing two questions, namely, 'Do governmental policies in Sweden and China have the intention of promoting gender equality?' and 'Have these family policies enhanced the status of women's employment and home status?' The examination of the policy goals and objectives demonstrated that both Sweden and China have introduced policy goals to promote gender equality and protect women's equal rights in political, social, economic, cultural and family life. However, different perceptions of gender equality exist in the two countries. Sweden's parental leave and childcare policies are part of a comprehensive package of explicit family policies that aim to provide family support and promote gender equality in both public and private spheres. However, the parental leave and childcare policies implemented in China are part of broad social policies rather than explicit family policies. In Sweden, gender equality involves not only women's equal rights in and access to education, employment and other aspects of public life, but also an equal gender division of labour within the family. The Swedish government considers the conflict between work and family for women when formulating family policies, especially regarding mothers with young children. In contrast, the Chinese government tends to primarily perceive gender equality as women having equal rights and opportunities in the public sphere. Efforts to transform traditional gender roles in the family have not been adequately addressed.

Therefore, the two countries pursue gender equality in different ways. Swedish family policies include regulations to encourage men's involvement in child rearing and family care, as well as detailed procedures to protect women's employment and balance formal and reproductive labour. As a typical Nordic welfare state, Swedish family policy emphasizes full employment, economic and gender equality, and universal access to welfare benefits and services. The parental leave policy in Sweden was initially developed with the distinct goal to address women's labour force participation, and was further modified to promote men's involvement in child rearing. The parental leave policy enhanced fathers' involvement in active parenting, and the provision of subsidized public childcare enabled women and men to reconcile employment and parenthood. In Sweden, the maternal employment rate is clearly linked to the availability of childcare as well as the generosity of the parental leave system. The policy emphasis was extended to a more equal division of household responsibilities, particularly child rearing. The public childcare system facilitates continuing a career after parental leave, and the availability of flexible work, such as part-time jobs, also allows family and work. Therefore, extended parental leave and the availability of public childcare, as well as flexible working hours, have facilitated the labour force participation of women with young children and a more egalitarian division of labour within the family.

China's policies on women's rights emphasize equal rights, and legally (through the Constitution, marriage and other laws) guarantee women the same rights as men. The focus of the Chinese government has been almost exclusively on women's inclusion in the labour market rather than reshaping gender roles, such as redistributing housework between women and men. Childcare and domestic chores are presumed to be women's work and the work–family balance is considered a women's problem. Although the state helped reduce women's burden by funding public childcare facilities during the Mao era, families have always been encouraged to be self-reliant and seek help from kinship networks. The state has also become less involved in enforcing women's rights in the labour market by favouring economic productivity (Wang 2000). Finding a balance between work and parenting was relegated to the family and private sector during the market reform era. Therefore, the implementation of maternal leave policies is often the responsibility of employers. In addition, employment is less flexible in China than it is in Sweden. Part-time jobs are not commonly available, and many jobs require long working hours. Xiao and Cooke (2012) found that Chinese organizational leaders and workers tend to take work–family conflicts for granted; therefore, employees are required to adopt their own coping strategies. Employers are not likely to adopt family-friendly policies, which has disadvantaged women in the labour market and reinforced a gender division of labour within the family over the past three decades. Although the majority of Chinese women continue to engage in formal employment, an increasing number of urban women with young children do not, which reduces the opportunities for equal career development for women.

Numerous studies have suggested that modern welfare states have shaped the needs and rights of caregiving, and a major concern has been whether care should be regarded as a private or public responsibility (Daly and Lewis 2000; Knijn and Kremer 1997). In both countries, the national governments are committed to the policy goal that every preschool child of working parents should have access to sufficient childcare. Sweden has a public policy commitment to make public childcare available as a right for all citizens. China's government has not committed to the same goal. Sweden views childcare as a public responsibility and, therefore, developed public childcare facilities and public subsidies. By contrast, childcare, particularly for children younger than 3 years old, is considered a private responsibility, mostly assumed by families in contemporary China. Delegating early childcare to private homes and commercial services causes affordability and accessibility issues for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Recently, the Chinese government has indicated its intention to increase public funding to build more kindergartens and preschools. However, this approach is primarily defined as an early childhood education programme, and its association with women's employment and gender equality in the workplace has been downplayed in policy discourse. The lack of public support for families with children younger than 3 years old must be adequately addressed.

Conclusions

When interpreting these results, several factors must be considered. In the country-level comparison, we were unable to focus on in-depth country-specific variations. For example, this article primarily focused on the Chinese family policies affecting urban families, which has limited implications for the vast needs of rural families. In addition, the situation of migrant families, which was beyond the scope of this article, requires further research.

Considering these caveats, this article described the development of parental or maternity leave and childcare policies in Sweden and China. Despite both countries' intentions to promote gender equality as part of their policy agendas, variations exist between the two nations in how gender equality and the public responsibility of care are perceived, as well as how policies are implemented. The article also addressed the impact of family policies on gender equality as demonstrated by equal employment opportunities for women and the gender division of labour in the family in the two countries. In Sweden's family policy, childcare is regarded as a public issue rather than a private issue, and women's participation in the labour market and men's involvement in childcare are crucial for achieving gender equality. Therefore, a comprehensive package of family policies was designed, issued and enforced in Sweden. In contrast, China's family policies focus on women's rights and women's participation in the labour market alone, and overlook the gender division of household work. To sustain high female labour force participation and promote gender equality, Chinese policymakers must improve the design and implementation of maternal leave policies, expand public childcare facilities and re-conceptualize family care and gender roles.

Notes

1. However, in the socialist period, because the state encompassed all aspects of life, maintaining a family, albeit of less importance, was perceived as contributing to the building of socialism. Women were often given special treatment and lighter workloads in the workplace to accommodate their family demands. Therefore, women's double burden was never perceived as the issue of work/family balance, and the conflict between work and family was not as severe for women as it was in the post-socialist era.
2. For more information, see the original document ([The State Council 1988](#)).
3. It had been renamed "Special Provisions Concerning the Labour Protection of Female Staff and Workers." See the original document ([The State Council 2012](#)).
4. In Chinese this is "Guo wu yuan guan yu dang qian kai zhan xue qian jiao yu de ruo gan yi jian".
5. Women's economic dependency is measured by the difference in income between the husband's and the wife's relative contribution to the household income. $DEP = (\text{his earning} - \text{her earning}) / (\text{his earning} + \text{her earning})$.
6. Multiple factors contributed to a relatively lower economic dependency among women in urban China compared with that in Sweden. Most urban Chinese women work full-time because flexible employment is less available in China. As a result, although the percentage of wives who have no earnings is comparable in both Sweden and urban China, the percentage of Chinese women who have equal earnings to their husbands is dramatically higher in urban China (47.7% in 2002) than in Sweden (15.5% in 1995). Additionally, the one child policy may also contribute to women's relatively higher earnings in urban China. The typical mother in Sweden has two children, and has interrupted her work career twice, whereas in China there is typically only one interruption caused by childbirth.

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