

Parental labour in Austria and Sweden: (De-)genderisation in childcare and parental leave policies between 1990 and 2023

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In her presentation at the Vienna-Kyoto Seminar 2024 ‘Solutions to demographic change from an interdisciplinary and international perspective’, Dr. *Sonja Dörfler - Bolt* presented gender inequality and the differences in parental part-time work and care arrangements in Austria and Sweden between 1990 and 2023. Both institutional and cultural approaches that contribute to the division of employment and raising children between women and men were analyzed.

The division of paid and unpaid work performed by parents still shows gender-specific patterns in all European countries. It is striking that mothers of children up to the age of 3 have a stronger connection to the labour market in Sweden (around 1/2) than women in Austria (around 1/3). In both countries, however, more fathers are employed than mothers, which in turn emphasizes the traditional gender roles that still prevail. It is also worth noting that the fertility rate in Sweden has been consistently higher than in Austria in recent decades.

In Austria, around a third of mothers take parental leave, in Sweden around a quarter. This reflects the different regulations in the countries regarding the length of parental leave. In Austria, significantly fewer fathers take parental leave. Dr. *Dörfler - Bolt* has analyzed two different approaches to gender inequality. Firstly, the institutional approach, which focuses on political decisions, laws, public infrastructure, etc., and secondly, the cultural approach, which looks at the division of family labour in connection with values, personal attitudes and gender roles.

An important point for creating gender equality in childcare are the regulations on parental leave. These can be divided into genderising and de-genderising regulations. In recent years, Sweden has increasingly pursued a de-genderising policy, for example the ‘paternity month’ model, which explicitly encourages fathers to take parental leave. In Austria, however, such regulations were only introduced later. Since the 1990s, childcare policies in both countries have developed in the direction of de-genderisation, with Sweden being more advanced. Public spending on childcare and the participation rates of children in childcare centers are higher in Sweden than in Austria. It was emphasized that the counselling groups in Sweden are smaller compared to Austria and that there are enough qualified workers in these facilities. In addition, the pension system in Sweden is very individualized and spousal support does not exist, which means that women return to work more quickly after giving birth. According to the seminar participants, this approach needs to be discussed.

To summarize, it can be said that gender roles in both countries have developed in the direction of a progressive division of parental work between 1990 and 2023. In Austria, this trend is at a statistically significantly lower level than in Sweden, which characterizes Austria as clearly more traditional than Sweden. The development of parental leave policy in Sweden has been far more straightforward in breaking down separate gender roles than in Austria, where policy has not been as clearly geared towards promoting de-genderisation.

Following the presentation, various points were discussed, on the one hand the negative consequences that mothers are confronted with after re-entering the labour market and on the other hand regulations on termination of employment or dismissal due to pregnancy. What can be recognized is that fathers, just like mothers, are confronted with problems when they take parental leave. However, a difference can be seen when returning to work, where fathers usually do not have a lower income than before, as they do not reduce their working hours, in contrast to many women, and do not leave work completely.