

OH...THOSE LUCKY LITTLE

NORDIC

BABIES



In Nordic countries taking care of the very young is considered a responsibility of society as a whole. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, have been considered the forerunners in designing family-friendly policies. They have been successful in maintaining a high rate of female labor force participation without reducing fertility to the low levels typical today in many other European countries.

There are generous parental leave schemes that include high compensation rates, which makes it possible for mothers to take considerable time out of work and return to their previous job afterwards. Formal rights to maternity leave make it easier for mothers to keep a formal attachment to their previous job and employer, and means that mothers do not have to start 'from scratch' when returning to the labor market after the childbirth and childrearing period. Career breaks, like when a woman has a baby, can have a devastating effect on her lifetime earnings, pension rights, promotion, and loss of seniority in a company. In fact, it is a clear trend in rich countries today, women are having children later in their lives and increasingly many are not having any children at all.

Studies comparing German, Swedish, British and Dutch women have found that family policy schemes have a large impact on the behavior of mothers with respect to returning to work after child birth. The right to paid maternity leave with job-protection speeds up the return to employment. Women who have this right are much more likely to resume employment.

Of the Nordic countries, Denmark is the one that spends the most money in child care, followed closely by the other four. France and Britain also rank high on the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) list. The US and Japan spend well below the average. In the US, women get no maternity leave at all. It is the only rich country where there is no national program.

Finland has excellent public child-care provision and generous family leave. Men also get a special leave when they become fathers, up to a month. Local authorities must guarantee a place in centers for every child under three and parents with low incomes get it free. Centers provide breakfast and lunch. School hours for older children have similar schedule to the parents' work day, unlike Germany, for example, where most schools finish at lunchtime, hours before parents get home from work. Finland regularly scores very high in the OECD PISA rankings for educational achievement.

Scandinavian mothers usually go back to work within a few months of giving birth. But this doesn't necessarily have to be negative for the children. In Denmark, where they have first-class child-care facilities with qualified staff, studies have found no ill effects on children's behaviour in their first year. Being in formal child care may actually be good for children, especially when they come from underprivileged background. This has proved to be true in France, for instance, where pre-school attendance at an *école maternelle* from age two seems to have a positive effect on later academic performance.

Despite having the highest taxes in the world -as the result of the expansion of the welfare state- Nordic countries are also among the richest in the world. Family-friendly policies might increase welfare because they ease everyday life for families with young children and they facilitate women's career plans. Iceland, for example, has both the highest employment rate (86%) and the second highest fertility rate. The policies also contribute to women becoming economically more independent of their husbands and reduce child poverty. Eurostat surveys always find Nordic countries at the top of the satisfaction scale as well, while Greece, Spain, Portugal, France and Italy appear as the least satisfied.

Sources:
Women and Work
Special Report by
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