

# BOSTON COLLEGE

## CENTER FOR WORK & FAMILY

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### Work-life balance

- Demographic and economic trends that impact work-life efforts
- Political and social context
- Shaping the work-life agenda
- Work-life best practices and recommended

are a few important examples. However,

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by brief stints of conservative governance. In the 1920's, the party laid the foundation for what many

a socialist system and a capitalist model (Sweden in Brief, 2009). Class distinctions were to be replaced by the "people's home", an egalitarian society that builds on cooperation and understanding. This was the start of universal health care and free education for all. It was also the beginning of the labor movement in Sweden. Labor unions

in Sweden have always played an important role in the development of government policy, and they lobby actively for more progressive legislation on a number

companies are by law obliged to ensure a work environment that supports work-life (Allard, Haas & Hwang, 2007).

Today, Sweden is governed by a conservative/liberal coalition<sup>1</sup>, led by the Moderate Party. The latter advocates for a welfare society, but wants to reduce people's dependency on state subsidies and place greater emphasis on entrepreneurship and increasing individuals' incentive to work (Moderaterna, 2010).

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*"I am reshaping part of Sweden, I am not tearing it down."*

– PRIME MINISTER FREDRIK REINFELDT,  
(WALL STREET JOURNAL, 2007)

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Not surprisingly, the Swedish tax burden is high, at 47 % of GNP in 2008 (Ekonomifakta, 2010). However, there is less "tax revolt" in Sweden compared to many other nations; most believe their taxes contribute to their own well-being and to good causes such as the welfare of children and elders. If the conservative/liberal coalition retains power in the elections in the fall of 2010, they will likely continue to press for lower taxes as well as a more liberal labor market and increased incentives for entrepreneurship. If the liberal Social Democrat Party-led coalition wins, they will likely work towards more work-family benefits such as an extension of parental leave to fathers, an increase in taxes on the wealthy, and higher wages

for younger employees. Unemployment, however, has to be considered: peaking at 9.2 % in July 2009 (Eurostat, 2009), it is the most pressing issue for voters in view of the upcoming election (41 % cited unemployment, followed by the economy, cited by 11 %) (LO, 2010).

## 6W aYdSbZ[Le

Sweden's population is just over 9 million. It has become a more heterogeneous society in recent decades because of a generous immigration policy. Almost a fifth of the population has roots in other countries (Background Note Sweden, 2009).

Swedish couples often cohabit, rather than marry; cohabitation has the same legal standing as marriage. Swedes tend to want to establish themselves in the labor market before becoming parents; the average Swedish man becomes a father for the first time at 31; the average woman becomes a mother at 29. Less than half (44%) of Swedish children are born to married parents (SCB, 2008).

The birthrate is high by European standards (1.9) but Sweden still faces a challenge in an aging population; about 18% of the population is over the age of 65 compared to only 13% in the U.S (OECD, 2009). Only 59 % of Sweden's population was of working age in 2001. This is lower than most OECD countries, and the figure is expected to drop to 54 % in 2030 (Eurofound, 2010).

Sweden has free higher education and the government provides easy access to financing studies, through educational grants and loans. Thirty two percent of the Swed-

ish population has completed higher education (Högskoleverket, 2005).

## Ei W[eZ Uj fgdW

Sweden is a highly individualistic society with low power distance (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). Class distinctions are few, wage differentials are lower than in most countries and most people would call the Prime Minister by his first name. Some argue that the drive towards equality has gone too far, hampering personal liberty and limiting the economic incentive for individuals. Not surprisingly, Sweden is a society characterized by modesty and understatement. This is perhaps best illustrated by "Jantelagen," a saying coined by a Danish author, that states; "do not think you are anything special" and "do not think you are better than anyone else" (Sverige Turism, 2010).

Sweden's strong egalitarian roots prevent many people from hiring others to do their housework, perhaps best illustrated by the controversy spurred by a new law allowing individuals to deduct household services from their taxes. While supporting working families, some critics argue that the law reinforces class differences by keeping low-earning workers in jobs of low status. It is easy to see how a resistance to delegate domestic services helps maintain the domestic burdens of a working couple with children.

Sweden is a highly secular country; only one in ten Swedes thinks religion is important in daily life (Sweden.se, 2009). At the same time, the country is characterized by a strong Lutheran tradition and high work ethic. Somewhat contradictory, the country has one of the world's highest numbers of people dependent on disability benefits, although the numbers have decreased in recent years (Sydsvenskan, 2007).

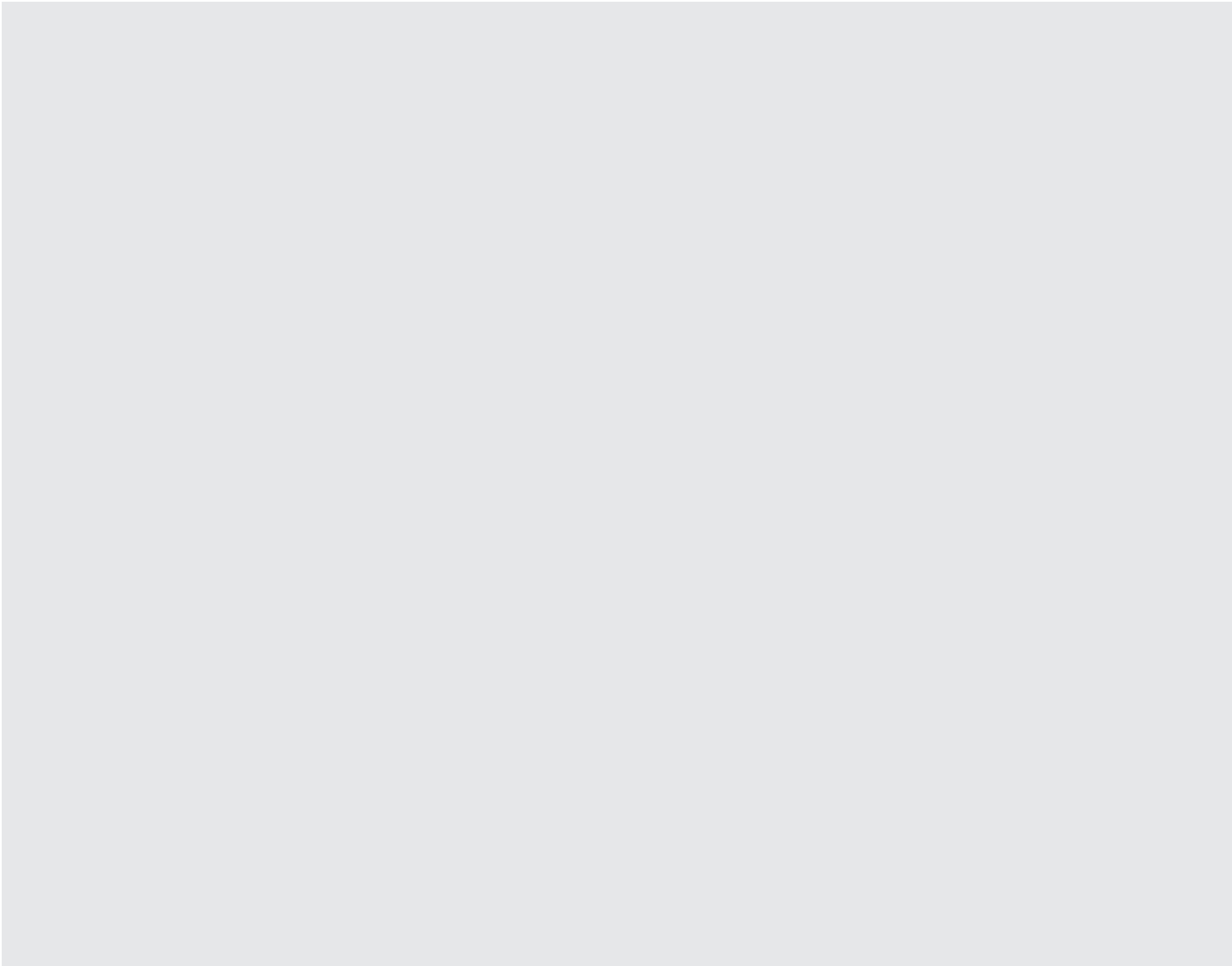
Since the end of the 1960s, policymakers have advocated for the development of a gender equal society (Alberg et al., 2008) and women are encouraged to see themselves as breadwinners and to safeguard their economic independence (Haas, 2010). Sweden has one of the highest proportion of working women in the world. In 2007, 81% of women ages 20-64 were in the labor market, compared to 87% of men (SCB, 2008). Many labor laws pertain to non-discrimination and equal opportunities and Sweden scored in fourth place in the latest Global Gender Gap Report, which assesses the extent to which societies divide resources and opportunities equally between women and men (World Economic Forum, 2009). One of the reasons the Nordic countries scored so high was that they "make it more compatible for women to combine family and

work," according to one of the authors of the report (New York Times, 2010).

## EZSb[ Y fZW ad Ž[MSYWVS

As evidenced in Work-Life Provisions for Employees, the Swedish government provides many supports for employment that in the U.S. would be up to individual workers or employers to provide.

Women also tend to stay home with a sick child, and are more likely to work part-time. In 2006, women took 4.6 out of the total 7.3 temporary leave days taken per



European countries (including the Netherlands and the U.K.), Sweden experienced the least work-family balance (Van der Lippe, Jager & Kops, 2006). A government study conducted in 2003 found that 36% of mothers and 31% of fathers of children aged 3-6 said that they never or seldom experienced balance between work and family life. Mothers who worked full-time (who also tended to be

at a U.S.-influenced consultancy firm which demands long hours, or live in a family where one's partner is very ambitious so has little time for domestic work.

Social scientists attribute the gap between gender policy and practice in Sweden to the persistence of a traditional "gender contract" which permeates all social institutions, including the family and the economy. One important feature is the gender-based division of labor for income-earning and parenting, which Swedish policymakers have challenged more directly. The traditional gender contract, operating at the family and organizational level, however, is harder to tackle.

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Fertility rate	#Z+
Mean age of marriage	%\$
% of academic degrees held by women	(# .
Parliamentary seats held by women	&) .
Ministerial positions held by women	&* .
% of women who are legislators, senior officials & managers	%# .
% of women employed in top management positions	\$# .
Company CEO's who are women	\$ .
<i>Source: World Economic Forum &amp; SCB, Sweden.</i>	

*Family dynamics* The vast majority of Swedes say they agree that men should take on a bigger role in helping to care for children and doing housework, but equal sharing is still rare. Some researchers argue that while women have been encouraged to see paid work as an obligation, men's participation in active parenting is still seen as more of a choice (Alberg, et al., 2008).

Research shows, for example, that Swedish couples rarely report spending much time deciding how they will achieve the type of gender equality widely publicized as an important political goal and cultural value. In the absence of the detailed and difficult negotiations required for this to happen, it is easy for couples to fall back to traditional gender roles.

nappen", justified by its standing as a prime example of a parent-friendly company (Unionen, 2009). It has a generous policy for people who want to telecommute, flexihours (including the possibility of prolonged leave) and provision of household services. Salary review takes place during parental leave, and a career plan is established once the parent returns to work. CSC tops off the salary during parental leave and its equality policy emphasizes the following:

- The need for employees to control their working hours
- The need to schedule meetings at times that ensure everyone's participation
- The possibility for job-share at management level

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Written for an executive level audience, the Boston College Center for Work & Family Executive Briefing Series addresses topical and strategic issues of particular relevance to the current business climate. The series highlights research findings, data trends and best practices in a concise format, aiming to foster action-oriented dialogue within organizations. Each issue features