Links Between Early Childhood Programs and Maternal Employment in Three Countries

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Abstract

Early childhood programs are usually viewed as a service that promotes children’s development. In addition, these programs often serve a broader purpose of enabling mothers with young children to join the paid labor force. Therefore, government policies relating to the provision and use of child care programs reflect such economic and social factors as the demand for women workers in the labor market; expectations of the relationship among government, family, and the private market; and the value placed on maintaining traditional family structures with a breadwinner, a homemaker, and children. This article examines the evolution of policies toward maternal employment and child care provision in the United States, Sweden, and the Netherlands—three countries that differ sharply in the extent of government involvement in child and family policy, and in the emphasis government leaders place on promoting or discouraging maternal employment. This analysis shows that child care policy is best viewed as but one element among many that make it more or less likely that mothers of young children will be employed and will need to rely on early childhood programs to care for their youngsters. The design of tax codes, labor laws, parental leave policies, and cash assistance programs combines with child care policies to shape women’s choices about employment.

Early childhood programs can promote the development of children, and—if they offer full-day child care—they can also facilitate the employment of mothers with young children. Social policies that establish child care which is widely available, of high quality, and affordable can promote employment among women by making it significantly easier for them to hold jobs while their children are young. Conversely, policies that restrict access to child care can play a part in a broader social scheme that encourages women to remain home with young children, relying on their husbands or partners to serve as breadwinners.
This article examines the relationships among policies affecting child care and maternal employment in three advanced, industrialized nations (the United States, the Netherlands, and Sweden) that have different patterns of maternal employment and reliance on out-of-home child care. The female labor force participation rate in 1988 was only 52% in the Netherlands, while it was 67% in the United States, and 80% in Sweden. The extent to which children participate in early childhood programs varies across the countries as well. In the early 1990s, only 2% of Dutch children under age four were cared for in child care centers; 31% of U.S. children under five attended center-based programs or family child care homes; and 47% of Swedish children under seven were in child care settings. In part, these child care attendance rates reflect differences in child care policies. The Netherlands offers little organized child care of any type; in the United States, parents are responsible for arranging child care for preschool children in the private market; and in Sweden, the community plays a major role by providing and subsidizing a system of child care services.

These differences among the countries are partly explained by ideologies and broad social orientations which have acted through recent history to shape each nation’s policies toward children and families. These policies are embodied in instruments as varied as tax law, social insurance programs, assurances of parental leave, and investments in child care programs and subsidies. Child and family policies reflect the nation’s traditional values and contemporary economic forces. In turn, they dictate the choices facing women with young children as these women determine whether and on what terms they can participate in the labor market.

Three Approaches to Social Welfare Policy

To understand how policies toward children and families differ in the United States, Sweden, and the Netherlands, it is important to examine the historical and ideological origins of the social welfare system in each country. (In this article, the term “welfare” is used broadly to refer to policies affecting the well-being of the citizenry. In the United States, the term is often used more narrowly to refer to the provision of cash assistance to poor children and families.) The three countries described in this article have taken different approaches to providing social protection, or social welfare, to the nation’s citizens.

Social welfare policies in the United States and similar countries, like Canada and Australia, reflect the belief that the unfettered market will bring well-being to the maximum number of citizens. Families are expected to care for their own members, seeking whatever assistance they need in the private market. Only if the family and the market fail does the state intervene to offer social welfare benefits, serving as a backup source of support, or a safety net. These failures are expected to be relatively rare. Consequently, social welfare benefits are typically means tested (available only to families whose incomes fall below a specified level), and they often carry a social stigma. More popular and universally applicable programs exist in the form of social insurance programs such as those that assist the elderly and disabled. These are based, at least in part, on contributions and payroll taxes, and are not regarded by the public as income transfer programs that carry with them the stigma of relying on government assistance.

A near opposite of the U.S. approach to social welfare is found in the social democratic welfare policies instituted in Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries. Here social welfare policy is fused with employment policy. The supports provided by the government are not treated as marginal or as required only by a few unfortunate individuals, but are considered essential to
enable citizens to achieve a basic standard of living. Thus, the government provides relatively generous benefits such as health care, pensions, and subsidized child care to all citizens, who are seldom obliged to meet income criteria to qualify for assistance.

An intermediate approach to social welfare policy exists in the Netherlands and its European neighbors like Austria, France, Germany, and Italy. That approach relies less than the U.S. approach on the private market as a source of needed services, but it gives the government a more limited role than in Sweden. Policy is shaped by the interplay of powerful political interest groups. In the Netherlands, the rival Roman Catholic and Calvinist churches have played key roles in determining how the needs of Dutch families will be met, having created their own educational, welfare, media, and political organizations to meet the needs of group members. The role of government is a subsidiary one. The church groups emphasize traditional family structures, promoting a breadwinner ideology to ensure the high birthrates needed to maintain the groups’ strong presence in the Dutch population. Reflecting that ideology, the family breadwinner is treated as the recipient of assistance, and married women have been excluded from any personal right to pensions or unemployment benefits.

Patterns of Maternal Employment and Child Care Use

The impacts of these historical and ideological differences can be seen in the very different patterns of employment of mothers with preschool children which exist in the three countries. The labor force participation rates cited above include all women who engage in any paid employment, without distinguishing among occasional, part-time, and full-time workers. When one also examines the hours of employment and the age of the mother’s youngest child, the differences among the three countries appear in even sharper relief.

Table 1 displays these more detailed patterns of employment among mothers with young children, using data drawn from national labor force surveys conducted in Sweden in 1984 and in the United States and the Netherlands in 1988. The Swedish survey encompassed 290 mothers of preschoolers among 669 women ages 18 to 64 in 1984, and the Dutch survey included 563 mothers of preschoolers from a random sample of 1,642 women ages 18 to 65 in 1988. Data on U.S. mothers came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which included women ages 23 to 30 in 1988, of whom 2,650 were mothers of young children.1–4

Hours Worked by Mothers of Young Children

The first line under each country in Table 1 shows the proportion of mothers with children under six years of age who worked not at all, less than 20 hours per week, less than 35 hours per week, or full time. In the Netherlands, the normal pattern is that mothers care for their preschool children at home. About three-quarters of Dutch mothers in the survey did not work at all, and the 27% who were employed tended to work only a few hours in the week. In the U.S. survey as well, almost half of mothers with preschoolers were full-time homemakers. However, the United States also had the highest proportion of full-time workers, with 33% of mothers with preschool children working more than 35 hours per week. Relatively few U.S. mothers had part-time employment. Sweden had the fewest full-time homemakers: only one-third of mothers with young children were at home full time. Swedish mothers were most likely to work 20 to 34 hours per week, or “long part-time.” Only 19% of Swedish mothers with preschoolers worked full time.

Effects of Child’s Age and Child Care Availability

The U.S. women who were employed tended to return to work soon after giving birth: 55% of mothers with one-year-olds were in paid employment, many working full time. The rates of labor force participation by these U.S. mothers were well established in
In Sweden the employment rate among mothers nearly doubles after the child’s first birthday. In the 1984 survey, only 41% of mothers with infants under one year of age were employed. Because Sweden offers parents 12 months of paid parental leave, mothers can remain home for a year without jeopardizing their jobs or their incomes. However, fully 80% of mothers with one-year-olds worked outside the home. By the time their children are two years of age, many Swedish women have secured public child care, which is available for half of the nation’s two- to 6-year-olds. Even then, however, only 17% work full time.

The effect of the child’s age on patterns of maternal employment can also be seen in the Netherlands. Only when their children reached four years of age did more than 30% of the Dutch mothers work, and even then, few worked more than 20 hours per week. Child and family policies in the

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Hours of Paid Work per Week</th>
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<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Child’s age, years</td>
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<td>0 through 5</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<td>Under 1</td>
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<td>4 or 5</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
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<td>Under 1</td>
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<td>Child’s age, years</td>
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<td>4 or 5</td>
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Table 1

Links Between Early Childhood Programs and Maternal Employment in Three Countries

Netherlands resemble those in the United States, although the Netherlands offers 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, compared with the 12 weeks of unpaid leave recently assured in the United States. Neither country has an extensive system of public child care, but the Netherlands also lacks a well-developed private child care market. According to a report published in 1993, a tiny 2% of all Dutch children under four, and 3.7% of those with working mothers, were cared for in child care centers.6

In sum, the situation in the three countries can be described as follows: In the United States, there is private child care, and mothers usually work (often full time). In Sweden, subsidized, quality public child care is easily available, and mothers work “long part-time,” between 20 and 35 hours per week. In the Netherlands, until recently there has been little organized child care, and mothers have rarely worked outside the home. To explain these different patterns requires a fuller consideration of the historical background of child care and family policy in the three countries.

Historical Origins of Child Care Policies

During the past 25 years, labor markets in the United States and other industrialized countries have shifted to favor skilled workers with more education and work experience. To meet that demand, women have increasingly participated in the labor force. Their employment has provided a larger supply of skilled workers, but it has also posed new challenges for the family and other institutions responsible for the early development and rearing of young children. The United States, Sweden, and the Netherlands have used public policy in different ways to facilitate or discourage labor market activity on the part of young women, reflecting the basic approaches to social welfare policy described earlier.

The United States

While the United States was historically a leader in developing free public education, policies toward very young children have been shaped by an orientation toward the family and the private market of service providers. Government has stepped in only in special circumstances. The most visible public support for child care in the United States appears in antipoverty programs to ensure child development (such as Head Start and the state prekindergarten programs described in the appendix to this journal issue). Another justification for public investments in child care is that subsidies covering the cost of child care are necessary to help welfare recipients become self-sufficient.5

A focus of many U.S. social welfare policies is to help parents gain access to the private market of services. This approach grew out of an emphasis on individual choice first expressed in the nineteenth century by English reformers, who urged that social protection be offered through cash payments instead of the food and board provided in that era’s poorhouse.2 Accordingly, many government child care programs in the United States offer low-income families vouchers they can use to purchase child care in the private market. Tax credits reduce the impact of child care costs on middle-class family budgets. Both strategies minimize the extent to which government involvement constrains parents’ choices as child care consumers.

Aid to Families with Young Children

Historically, in the United States, the care of preschool children has been regarded as a public obligation only in cases of poverty, widowhood, or family abandonment. Near the turn of the century, the main question about child care and child welfare assistance was whether aid should be provided in institutions (an orphanage or poorhouse) or in the child’s own home. The Progressive Era (1900–1917) brought a shift away from institutions and toward an in-home approach that kept families together.7 Mother-only families were then able to receive cash benefits on condition that the child was living in a “suitable home.” Maternal employment was not a major objective of these early programs of aid to dependent children.
Later, federal programs were established under the Social Security Act to support the children of widows or families abandoned by their breadwinner fathers. (See also the article by Hernandez in this journal issue.) The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program remains the primary income support for poor U.S. families, giving mothers in eligible families cash benefits based on the number of children in their care. It has been argued that the design of this assistance program discourages maternal employment, leading to reform initiatives which emphasize the expectation that poor, single mothers will work outside the home to support their children.

**Policies Toward Child Care and Maternal Employment**

The emphasis on the private enterprise system in the United States can be seen in policies relating to both parental leave and child care. Limited legislation requiring employers to grant job-protected, unpaid leave to new parents was enacted in 1993, in the face of arguments that companies and employees should be allowed to form private agreements about such employee benefits.\(^8\)

The U.S. child care system is market- and family-based as well. The diversity of the system shows in the results of a 1990 survey which indicated that 30% of preschool children whose mothers worked were cared for primarily by a parent, 18% were cared for by another relative, 26% attended a center, and 19% attended a family child care home.\(^5\) In the United States, public support for child care is usually provided through government funding to programs that are operated by private agencies or schools at the local level. Sometimes these programs must offer prescribed sets of services, but in other instances they are subject to only minimal regulation by public agencies. (See the appendices to this journal issue for examples of federal and state funding for early childhood programs.) Tax policy is the main vehicle used to provide child care support: within limits, child care expenses can be deducted from family income on tax returns submitted to the federal government and to some state governments.\(^9\)

Contemporary U.S. policy initiatives to assist children and families have focused on market-based expansions of child care assistance for families deemed in need because of their low incomes. These include the Child Care and Development Block Grant passed in 1990 to provide child care assistance to low- and moderate-income families (subsidies that reduce the price of child care), the expansion of tax credits for low-income parents (that serve to increase family income), and added funding for Head Start (to allow more eligible children to attend this public preschool program for the poor).\(^10\) Consistent with long-standing traditions, these initiatives target families with limited incomes and promote the purchase of services through the market and not from government providers.

Many U.S. economists see the rationale for public provision of child care as very weak, since the usual justification for government intervention is to offset problems that arise in a market-based system. It is not evident that the child care market is unable to meet demand (although concerns are often raised about the quality of the available care). In the United States, there is a market for child care. You get the child care you pay for, and the types and costs of child care as well as its quality differ according to family income.

**Sweden**

Although the public child care system in Sweden expanded most dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s, the ideology behind the system can be traced back to discussions held in the 1930s concerning the rights of women both to work and to have a family. At that time, Sweden had the lowest fertility rate in the world, and attention focused on ways of increasing birthrates. As was typical in many countries, child care institutions were considered not a support for working mothers, but an unfortunate alternative for poor children whose families could not care for them. Subsequent changes in policies toward children and women came hand in hand.
Addressing Problems of Fertility and Labor Supply

The linkage between child care, women’s employment, and birthrates was drawn in a pioneering book published in 1934 by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, called *Crisis in the Population Question*. These intellectuals sought strategies to increase fertility and improve the situation of the working class in Sweden, and they held that the remedy to Sweden’s population crisis was government support to families with children. Building on the Myrdals’ suggestion that relying on child care centers staffed by experts might produce “more children of better quality,”11 a 1935 population commission supported the then-controversial idea that the state should provide child care for all children, not just the poor and abandoned.12

The related question of married women’s employment was also controversial. Feminists argued that, if working women could be dismissed when they married or became pregnant, they would be unable to afford to marry and have children, and rates of illegitimacy, illegal abortion, and deliberate childlessness would increase. In 1939 a law was passed making it unlawful to lay off a woman because of marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth, effectively introducing unpaid, job-protected maternity leave well before such laws were considered in other countries.

Social democratic intellectuals saw the linkage between government supports for families and increasing birthrates as a means of winning political support for social welfare policies. However, the pro-natalist thrust of these ideas roused debate, since many in the working class believed that the only way they could improve their standard of living was by limiting family size.12 In 1943, legislation to establish state subsidies for child care was introduced but rejected in the parliament because of strong sentiments that mothers should be able to afford to be at home with their children. The 1950s became the decade of the housewife: more women married and had children, and joint taxation of incomes discouraged female employment. There was no organized child care and no paid parental leave. Labor force participation rates among married women were lower in Sweden than in Germany and France.13

During the 1960s, however, the Swedish government’s economic forecasters confronted a labor shortage. They identified married women and particularly young mothers as an important reserve supply of labor. Other European nations, like Germany and the Netherlands, responded to similar labor shortages by recruiting foreign immigrants who were regarded as guest workers, ineligible for most welfare benefits. In contrast, Sweden did not treat immigrants as temporary residents, but offered the workers and their families language instruction and full access to social benefits. As a result, it was more expensive to use foreign labor than to bring married Swedish women into the labor force. From the 1960s onward, Swedish economic policies have focused on the idea of encouraging married women to work and to bear children.

Policies Toward Child Care and Maternal Employment

The Swedish child care system is organized to accommodate the needs of the working mother, and it fits the description provided earlier of the social democratic welfare state. The nation’s goal is to provide universal access to child care that is of high quality and supported by the middle class.2 Municipalities operate child care programs that are supported by subsidies from the central government, by local taxation, and by very modest parent fees. Table 2 shows the development of the Swedish child care system from 1975 through 1985. For a child to get a place at the child care center, both parents (or the single parent) must be working or studying at least 20 hours per week. No income-related eligibility criteria are set, although the fees paid by parents usually reflect family income.

Established in the 1960s, the child care system expanded significantly in the late 1970s and 1980s.8 In 1975, 15% of all
children under age seven (when public schooling begins) had a place either at a child care center or with a family child care mother employed by the community. By 1987, that figure had risen to 47%. In communities that use a sliding fee scale, the families at the lowest income levels pay only 3% or 4% of the total cost of child care, while the highest-income families pay about 40% of the cost.

Another key element of Swedish policy relating to maternal employment and child care is the parental leave program instituted in 1974 and later expanded several times. Since 1980, the program has provided either parent a full year of job-protected leave at approximately 90% of previous gross earnings. The availability of this leave allows many employed Swedish mothers to remain home when their children are under one year of age, and it has been credited with creating a fertility boom that gave Sweden one of the highest birthrates in Europe in 1988. Swedish employers are also obliged to allow parents with children under the age of eight to keep their jobs while working only six hours per day. These policies all work together to encourage both fertility and a lifetime commitment to the labor force among Swedish women.

Recent Changes
As a product of the social democratic welfare state, the Swedish child care system has been threatened by political and economic changes that took place during the early 1990s, when political leadership changed hands and the country was hit by a severe depression. The more conservative political leaders introduced several changes. The first echoes the emphasis on private service providers that is salient in the United States and the Netherlands. For the first time, private organizations were allowed to compete with government centers for public child care subsidies. In addition, the conservative government established a care allowance for nonworking mothers which was later abolished. The effects of the economic depression are not yet evident, but high unemployment is likely to undermine public support for the child care system.

The Netherlands
As noted earlier, it is uncommon for mothers of preschoolers in the Netherlands to work more than a few hours per week, and less than 4% of preschool-aged children whose mothers do work attend child care centers. This pattern contrasts sharply with the higher rates of employment among mothers in both Sweden and the United States, and with the relatively high reliance of families in those countries on child care programs outside the home. As is true of the U.S. government, the Dutch government is reluctant to provide services directly, and it tends to intervene only when the family proves unable to care for its own members.
Church Interests in High Birth Rates
To understand these differences, it is important to take account of the role that religion has played in the development of Dutch child and family policy. Church leaders have placed an emphasis on preserving traditional family structures and encouraging motherhood. From the time of the Reformation in the mid-1500s until World War II, the Netherlands experienced a protracted standoff between Protestant and Catholic churches. For fear of losing political control, both factions resisted anything they perceived as reducing their constituencies. These political interests led to a collection of policies supporting a strong traditional family structure that both churches believed would promote high fertility. Labor market activity of Dutch married women was regarded as competing with these family values, and so it was opposed.

Competition for Jobs
Labor market policies have also played a role in promoting fertility by discouraging women from working in jobs needed by men. Policies encouraging or even forcing women to remain at home have been vigorously pursued in the Netherlands. Outright legal discrimination (for instance, forbidding work at night or underground) has been justified as protecting women. In 1924 married women were banned from taking public service jobs, including jobs as teachers. The Depression of the 1930s strengthened the breadwinner arguments for excluding women from the labor market, and legislation prohibiting dismissal on grounds of pregnancy, childbirth, or marriage was not introduced until 1973.

The Netherlands, Germany, and other European states reacted to rising unemployment in the 1970s by trying to decrease the labor supply (reducing the demand for jobs). Social democratic welfare states like Sweden, by contrast, attempted to increase the demand for labor by creating more jobs in the public sector, where 60% of Swedish women now work. The strategies used in the Netherlands and elsewhere to reduce the labor supply included efforts to promote early retirement, repatriate foreign workers, and encourage women to remain at home.

Provision of Child Care
Until 1965, child care in the Netherlands was considered a service for the poor and was provided primarily by church organizations. During a period of labor shortage preceding the oil crisis of 1973, corporations started to provide child care to attract female employees, and by 1973 they sponsored about 10% of the nation’s limited supply of child care. However, as the labor shortage relented and unemployment grew, public opinion turned against working mothers. By 1977 only 1% of child care places were in employer-supported centers. Employed mothers who wanted to continue market work turned to child care centers organized by the churches to serve the poor, which responded to the increased demand by accepting only women who had to work because of economic necessity.

Even women who were not employed began to question their traditional “duty of presence,” the expectation that Dutch
mothers would be available to their families 24 hours a day. Women’s demands for relief from the isolation of full-time homemaking were partly met by creches (child care centers), which supplied child care by the hour for the children of shoppers. The most prevalent form of early childhood program in the Netherlands is the play school that offers learning and social experiences on a very part-time basis to children whose parents are free to serve as volunteer staff.

Recent Changes
Although paid work is still regarded as far less important for women in the Netherlands than in Sweden, things are changing rapidly. A recent survey indicates that in 1992 almost 43% of Dutch mothers of preschoolers had paid employment, although most still worked for only a few hours a week. In 1990, legislation came into force to stimulate the growth of child care. This policy change responded to both the rise in maternal employment and the concerns among government authorities that the number of welfare beneficiaries was growing while the tax base shrank.

The Child Care Stimulation Act of 1990 is the first government action in the Netherlands which explicitly caters to the needs of working mothers by providing subsidies that can be used to pay for various forms of child care. The act gives municipalities the duty to supply child care and the funds to do so, envisioning that child care should be financed equally by the state, parents, and employers. Municipalities cannot raise taxes to pay for child care, but they may use state funds to subsidize companies and make company child care costs tax deductible. Thus, this legislation reflects the Dutch emphasis on the role of the private sector in providing services with government support.

Having children under the age of three significantly reduces the likelihood of labor force participation for mothers in all three countries.

Effect of Child Care Subsidies on Mothers’ Employment
All three countries have been concerned about the relationship among child care needs, child care subsidies, and the likelihood that women with young children will be employed. Using data from the three national surveys described earlier, it is possible to examine how much the presence of young children who need child care influences rates of maternal employment.

Labor Force Participation
As mentioned earlier, having children under the age of three significantly reduces the likelihood of labor force participation for mothers in all three countries, but why that is true may differ across nations. For example, in Sweden, the generous, job-protected parental leave program appears to encourage mothers with young children to stay at home. In the United States, mothers with infants and toddlers may stay at home because good child care options for such young children are lacking or costly—both of which are often cited as major child care problems in the United States. In the Netherlands, it appears that traditional values motivate the majority of mothers to remain at home.

Survey information from the three countries shows that the presence of children ages three to five has a far smaller impact on labor force participation, in part because child care for preschoolers is more readily available. Finally, only in the Netherlands does having school-aged children significantly decrease employment. This finding supports the suggestion that the labor market behavior of Dutch women is dominated by the long-standing belief that full-time mothering is preferable, regardless of children’s ages.

Child Care Subsidies and Use
If women are prevented from working by the lack of suitable and affordable child care, there may be an economic rationale for subsidizing child care. Proponents of Sweden’s heavily subsidized child care system have argued that child care promotes economic goals by giving women the benefit of current wages and the opportunity to invest in human capital (education and experience).
that can increase their future earnings. In the United States, child care subsidies have been offered as a way of increasing the economic independence of single mothers whose earnings are so low that they cannot cover both living expenses and child care fees. In the Netherlands, the recent Child Care Stimulation Act assumes that the availability of child care subsidies will increase women’s participation in the labor force. The evidence supporting those arguments is reviewed briefly below.

The design of the 1988 survey of women in the Netherlands made it possible to examine whether the price of child care was a significant factor in women’s decisions about employment and child care use. The survey included the following question about the cost of child care: “Would you use more day care if the price were lower?” Analyses compared the responses to that question given by women in differing circumstances. Results showed that more affluent women (those whose husbands had higher incomes) were the least likely to respond to price reductions by using more child care. Church attendance had a similar effect. Both affluence and religion apparently reduce Dutch women’s willingness to use child care (irrespective of price) and discourage employment. Those women who were already using child care, however, indicated that they would consume more care if the price were lower.

Studies conducted in the United States and Sweden have also found that lowering the cost of child care primarily affects the behavior of those who are currently using that care. For instance, one American study indicated that women benefiting from higher subsidies for child care return to work more quickly after giving birth. Another found that policies reducing the price of child care increase its use, whereas policies that increase the quality of child care do not increase use. Finally, a third study showed that the primary benefit of more generous subsidies is to allow users of good care to purchase slightly higher-quality care. In general, this research in the United States, Sweden, and the Netherlands indicates that the price of care is most important to women who are already placing their children in child care programs.

A Common Policy Challenge: Single Women with Young Children

A growing proportion of children in all three countries live in mother-only families, and the relation between child care and the employment prospects of these particular parents is a second pressing policy issue. Data from the national surveys discussed throughout this article show that 6% of Dutch preschoolers, 11% of Swedish preschoolers, and 28% of U.S. preschool children (whose mothers were relatively young) lived in single-mother homes.

To women who find themselves solely responsible both for earning an income and for bringing up children, how the government deals with the combination of paid work and child care is a matter of vital importance. Social welfare systems based on the idea that motherhood is a full-time job are less likely to meet the employment-related needs of single mothers than are those based on the idea that mothers are likely to be working women. In the first instance, the government may choose to provide income supports that permit the single mother to remain at home; the latter system would more likely provide high-quality subsidized child care to help her manage employment.

Fully 53% of single mothers in the United States live below the poverty line, compared with only 8% in the Netherlands and 6% in Sweden.

Indeed, employment rates among single mothers vary across the three countries. In Sweden and the United States, the rates of employment among single mothers are very similar to those among women who are married or cohabiting. In Sweden, 89% of both groups are employed; and in the United States the figure is 66% for both single and married mothers. In the Netherlands, only 24% of single mothers are employed, compared with 30% of their married counterparts. Single mothers in these countries differ as well in their incomes and the government support they receive. Fully 53% of single mothers in the
United States live below the poverty line, compared with only 8% in the Netherlands and 6% in Sweden.26

How can these differences be explained? Single mothers in the Netherlands are the least likely to be employed, yet relatively few of them are poor because their incomes are supported by government subsidies. There, the single-parent family structure is seen as anomalous: the mother is fully occupied within the home, but the family lacks a breadwinner. The government, therefore, acts as breadwinner and provides a minimum income to the family, although the Dutch government is beginning to encourage single women with children ages five and over to participate in the labor market to reduce the demand for government assistance.

Swedish single mothers receive some government subsidies, such as rent allowances, but few of them are poor and most are employed. Earnings typically make up more than 60% of their total income.27 Because conscious government policies facilitate the employment of mothers, if a Swedish woman with young children finds herself alone, she is likely already to have an earned income and access to child care. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Swedish policies assume that every married woman with children is a potential single mother, and these policies have considerably reduced the chances that single mothers will find themselves below the poverty line.

By contrast, American single mothers seldom manage to earn enough to rise out of poverty and—unlike their counterparts in the Netherlands—they are not helped to escape poverty by government support. Jobs permitting them to combine work and child care do not pay well, and the welfare benefits provided to those who do not work are meager. For many American women, marriage to an employed partner is the best way of escaping poverty.28

As these examples show, national policies on single mothers have incorporated ideas of motherhood and paid employment in different ways. The growth in marital and partnership breakdowns presents particularly serious problems in the United States, where around one-third of mothers bring up their children alone at least for a time.29 (See also the article by Hernandez in this journal issue.) Providing supports that encourage single mothers to participate in the labor market can help those women and their families to escape the poverty that many confront in the United States, or the dependency on welfare payments that they face in the Netherlands. Child care plays a vital role in making that employment possible.

**Conclusions**

The United States, Sweden, and the Netherlands are industrialized countries that have dramatically different patterns of child care and maternal employment. As this article has shown, these differences are partly the result of historical differences in broad social institutions.30 These social forces not only shape contemporary child care policies but also influence the complementary elements of an entire system that dictates the choices facing women with young children and that determines whether and on what terms they participate in the labor market. To understand how child care policy will affect women’s decisions about employment, it is important to consider the full range of incentives and barriers to maternal employment that are embedded in the nation’s social system.
several subsequent years on a sample including 1,184 women and 1,114 men. The data from the Netherlands come from the Organisatie voor Strategisch Arbeidsmarktonderzoek (known as OSA), a survey conducted in 1985, 1986, and 1988 on a random sample of 2,000 households. In each household, all the adults between 16 and 65 years of age were interviewed.


