

Challenges to the Welfare State

Family and Pension Policies in the Baltic and
Nordic Countries

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6. The sustainability of family support systems in the 21st century: comparing Sweden and Lithuania

Jolanta Aidukaite and Kristina Senkuvienė

INTRODUCTION

Family policies and policies that impact on families (such as health care, education and housing policy) have not been constant over time and space. Public support systems for families were transformed in reaction to socio-economic pressures, socio-demographic change, cultural norms and changes in family forms (Hantrais 2004). Today we live in a world where pressures on public support for families are especially high due to deinstitutionalisation of the family, ageing of the population and increased female education and labour force participation. Scientists and policy makers still pose a rhetorical question: What kind of family policy measures are best equipped to help families cope in 21st-century Europe? This study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges that public family support systems experience in the 21st century by closely focusing on two rarely compared country cases of Sweden and Lithuania. It asks questions: What are the challenges that the public family support systems experience in two countries? What are the differences and similarities? How do citizens evaluate the state support for families with children in Sweden and Lithuania? What could be learned from it?

To answer these questions, the authors of this study conducted 20 interviews with expert social policy makers and scientists in Sweden and Lithuania. Additionally, nationwide surveys were conducted in 2018 (December, in Lithuania) and 2019 (January, in Sweden), providing unique information on how citizens evaluate public support for families. The semi-structured expert interviews and nationwide surveys were conducted under the project Challenges to the Welfare State Systems in Lithuania and Sweden, financed by the Research Council of Lithuania, grant number No. S-MIP-17-130.

We chose to compare Sweden and Lithuania as both countries have rather generous parental leave policies, yet they are also compatible according to

the female labour force participation and fertility rates (see OECD 2020a). However, when it comes to child poverty, we see sharp differences, with Sweden being among a group of countries with the lowest child poverty, while Lithuania has the highest child poverty if Baltic and Nordic countries are compared (see Chapter 2 in this volume). This raises serious questions for social policy research. Lithuania has reformed its support system for families (especially parental leave policies), exporting many schemes from the Nordic countries. However, as stated by Ferge (2001, p. 145), there are “problems in family policy [in] that the outcome may not necessarily be what was sought or intended”. The analogous schemes do not necessarily generate similar results in different countries. Therefore, we raise the questions: How sustainable is the family support system in Lithuania? Do citizens approve of the public family policy system after 30 years of drastic reforms?

Methodologically, this chapter combines qualitative and quantitative data, which is not common in social policy research. However, its benefit is that we draw a broad picture of problems and challenges in Sweden and Lithuania, allowing us to hypothesise on the sustainability of the family support systems in two countries. Experts’ views allow us to delineate major challenges, and citizens’ attitudes allow us to test the legitimacy. According to Wendt, Mischke and Pfeifer (2011), there have been limited comparative studies analysing attitudes towards public support for family policies. This could be partly explained by the lack of data. However, the citizens’ attitudes are an important indicator for the legitimacy of existing institutions, and the citizens’ dissatisfaction should be understood as a mismatch between the public’s preferences and the institutional status quo (Wendt, Mischke and Pfeifer 2011).

The chapter is arranged as follows. First, some theoretical consideration is presented. Second, we provide the methodology of the chapter. Third, we present the comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in public support systems between Lithuania and Sweden. Fourth, we analyse the experts’ interviews. Fifth, we analyse a nationwide survey of 2018–2019 data on residents’ attitudes towards the public support system for families, and explore how much their attitudes mirror the experts’ views. Finally, we offer a discussion and conclusions.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social policy development has been driven by many factors, including structural (demographic, economic, technological), institutional (veto points, the impact of the World Bank and the European Union, or EU) and power-resource-related (unionisation, Left parties) (Brady and Young Lee 2014, Deacon 2000, Korpi and Palme 2003). Family policy, which is an integral part of social policy, has been influenced by similar forces. However,

it has been widely agreed that family policy, unlike other fields of social policy such as pensions or unemployment, is largely defined by cultural factors – predominant ideals and attitudes towards gender roles in society and family (Lohmann and Zagel 2016, O'Connor 1996, Orloff 1993, Sainsbury 1996). Therefore, it is important to examine not only real structures of support systems for families, their problems and the reasons behind their development, but also public opinions and attitudes.

Countries that hold more egalitarian views on gender roles have developed welfare and family policy systems involving support for female labour force participation and the redistribution of caring work within the family. Countries with more traditional views on women's roles in the family and society have developed systems that encourage homemaking. Nordic countries usually fall within the former category, while South European countries and Continental Europe fall into the latter cluster. Central and East European countries had inherited high female labour market participation rates since the fall of the communist regimes. Although under the communist regime women's paid work was supported and encouraged by the state, the unpaid work at home was not monetised and equally divided between the sexes, resulting in a double burden for women. They actively participated in the labour market on equal terms with men, but the unpaid household work and caring responsibilities were left to women only. Since the fall of the communist regimes, women have become even more familialised due to a collapse in social services (childcare and elderly care), a decline in wages and an increase in unemployment (see Pascall and Manning 2000). Nevertheless, this situation has been rapidly replaced by the necessity of the dual-earner family, due not only to low wages in many post-communist societies, but also to high female job aspirations and increasing gender-equality values coming from the West and emphasised by the European Commission. Gender equality has been increasingly taken into account in Lithuania and has been addressed to varying extents in the systems of support to families with children (Aidukaite 2016).

Korpi (2000) identified three types of gender/family policy models: general family support, dual-earner support and market-oriented policies. He focused on social insurance programs and the taxation relevant for children and parents, as well as on social services for children and the elderly.

Central to the dual-earner model are care facilities, available on a continuous basis, for the youngest preschool children, as well as earnings-related maternity and paternity leave. This model is found precisely in what is elsewhere known as social democratic welfare states. Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark are examples of dual-earner and social democratic models. Cash benefits to minor children and family tax benefits, given via tax allowances or tax credits, are a form of general family support, formally neutral with respect to the labour force participation of the spouses. However, the tax benefits to

housewives can be expected to encourage homemaking. Childcare services are underdeveloped in this model. The general family model is usually found in the conservative welfare states, and such countries as Italy, Germany, Austria and Holland are examples of both models. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia, where maximum private responsibility for childcare prevails, are described as having a market-oriented gender policy (Korpi 2000). Korpi's gender/family policy typology is useful in many ways, as it shows how gender relations are produced and reproduced by various welfare policies. The availability of public childcare, elderly services and generous maternity and paternity leave produces a most egalitarian society as it supports female labour market participation. However, other positive outcomes could also be observed, such as lower poverty among children and higher birth rates compared to countries that cluster into the traditional/general or market-oriented gender/family types. Thus, there seems to be a far-reaching consensus among researchers that is implicitly in favour of the dual-earner family policy model. The well-being of the children often depends on that of the parents, which becomes much easier to maintain if both parents participate in paid employment (Aidukaite 2004, 2006; Ferrarini 2006; Korpi 2000; Orloff 1993; Sainsbury 1996; Wennemo 1994).

In recent decades, the shift from dual-earner to dual-earner/dual-carer has slowly appeared in European countries. Sweden is known to have had a dual-earner/dual-carer family policy model since the 1970s (Duvander and Ferrarini 2013). The dual-earner/dual-carer model implies not only state support for both parents' (particularly the mother's) employment through various welfare provisions, but also encourages fathers' participation in childcare (Saraceno 2013). Fathers' participation in childcare is encouraged through shared parental leave and/or paternity leave policies specifically designed for the father.

In Western countries, the motives behind the introduction and extension of family policy were important for the establishment of benefits systems and the mixture of various forms of support for families (Wennemo 1994). Wennemo highlighted four main reasons that explicitly influence family legislation: population reproduction, poverty reduction, the breadwinner ideology and gender equality.

English-speaking countries, which, according to Korpi's typology, are mainly grouped into market-oriented gender/family policy model, put strong emphasis on poverty reduction. The reproduction of the population is an important reason that features in the general family support model. Scandinavian countries, which are classified as the dual-earner/dual-carer family support model, put strong emphasis on gender equality; another crucial role in these societies is played by poverty reduction, particularly among single mothers.

For the purposes of this study, we rely on Korpi's family support models. Korpi's typology allows us to observe major differences between countries in their support of the family's arrangements, and explains how these differences account for varying outcomes. To identify major challenges, we focus on exploring the major underlying motives behind family policy legislation in each country and how well equipped the family support systems are, according to the experts, to deal with poverty reduction among children, to solve demographic problems and to increase gender equality.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

As noted, this study combines qualitative and quantitative data to reach its goals. The qualitative approach helps to uncover major problems and challenges of family support systems. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with social policy experts conducted in 2018 in Lithuania and Sweden. Twenty interviews were conducted (10 in each country). The analysis of expert interviews passed through major stages of the qualitative analytical process as described by Meuser and Nagel (2009, pp. 35–36): transcription, paraphrasing, coding, thematic comparison, sociological conceptualisation and generalisation. This chapter displays the final stages of the interview analysis – the thematic comparisons, conceptualisation and generalisation. To maintain confidentiality and the anonymity of our experts, we assigned the codes *LT1–10* and *SE1–10* to our interviewees.

While examining interviews, we raise the following questions: What major changes were implemented in family support systems of Sweden and Lithuania over the last 10 years? How well does the family support system support the dual-earner family or dual-earner/dual-carer model in Sweden and Lithuania? What are the major goals of family support system reforms? How well do family support systems ensure gender equality, reduce poverty among children and solve demographic problems?

The citizens' attitudes (quantitative indicators) for this study come from a questionnaire carried out in Lithuania and Sweden. The questionnaire in Lithuania was administered and carried out in December 2018 by the market and opinion research centre Vilmorus. In Sweden, the identical questionnaire was carried out by NorStat. A multi-stage probability sample with a random route procedure was used for the survey in both countries. One thousand respondents were questioned in each country. The response rate was between 28 and 36 per cent, which is in a normal range. There was no representation bias (distributions regarding some socio-demographics that are similar to the population). In Lithuania, the questionnaire was completed through personal, face-to-face interviews at the homes of respondents by trained and supervised interviewers. In Sweden, the survey was carried out online. To capture the

citizens' satisfaction with the support for families, the respondents were asked "Generally how satisfied are you with the state support to families with children in your country?" and were asked to rate each family support scheme provided by the state (Very good, Good, Fair, Poor, Very poor, Don't know).

We grounded our methodology on comparative case study. Comparative case studies encompass the analysis of the differences and similarities across two or more cases that share a common focus. Comparative case studies usually use both qualitative and quantitative data. It is important in such studies to describe each case in depth from the beginning, as this enables a successful comparison (Goodrick 2014).

FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN LITHUANIA AND SWEDEN: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

Family policy in Sweden has developed consistently over time, placing a great importance on gender equality and individualism, and putting emphasis on providing public services instead of cash benefits (Hantrais 2004; Leitner 2003). Swedish family policy is also characterised by universal child allowances, weak pronatalism, a relatively good economic position of single mothers, income equality among families with children and a high level of female income from paid work (Hiilamo 2002a, 2002b). Gender equality has been a cornerstone of the family policy in Sweden. In support of gender equality, work–family reconciliation policies were developed to facilitate female labour force participation and to ensure gender equality within a family by incentivising fathers to take parental leave (Duvander and Ferrarini 2013, Grødem 2017, Tunberger and Sigle-Rushton 2011; see also Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Hence, the Swedish family support system exhibits a high degree of defamilialism, with highly developed public services for children and the elderly.

Family policy in Lithuania has undergone dramatic reconfigurations over 29 years (1990–2019), especially in the early 1990s, right after the collapse of the communist regimes (Aidukaite 2006). The family policy in Lithuania has gone through many reforms, which have been described by a number of studies (see, for example, Aidukaite 2006, 2016; Javornik 2014; Stankūnienė 2001; Žalimienė 2015), and has been developed quite inconsistently. The means-tested benefits have been an important part of the financial support for families in Lithuania, together with earnings-related benefits. The emphasis was placed on financial support, while services have been not so well developed (Aidukaite 2006, 2016). The general reform paths have been observed from defamilialism (the Soviet system supported maternal employment through well-developed childcare services) to familialism (the period from 1990 to 1996 saw a massive decline in childcare services), and from familialism to defamilialism again (the period from 1997 and onwards, when

Table 6.1 Number of children in preschools in Lithuania

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Urban areas	92 836	96 838	99 465	100 699	101 470	103 688	105 089
Rural areas	11 694	13 287	14 192	14 875	15 344	15 648	15 763
Total	104 530	110 125	113 657	115 574	116 814	119 336	120 852

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019

Table 6.2 Number of preschool institutions in Lithuania

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Urban areas	547	563	581	614	633	639	632
Rural areas	113	112	109	107	104	99	99
Total	660	675	690	721	737	738	731

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019

emphasis was again placed on policies encouraging a mother's employment), with, however, some coexistence (or elements) of familialism at the same time (Aidukaite 2016). These changes in family policy in Lithuania are best illustrated by the change in the number of preschool facilities over the last three decades. The network of preschools has declined significantly since independence was restored. At the beginning of independence, between 1989 and 1990, there were 1808 preschools in Lithuania (1003 in urban areas and 805 in rural areas). In 2003 there were only 672 of the preschool institutions left (489 in urban areas and 183 in rural areas; Kavoliūnaitė-Ragauskienė, 2012, p. 26). Data provided by the Lithuanian Department of Statistics shows that the situation has improved in recent years: the number of children in preschool education increased by several thousand from 2012 till 2018, which can be considered a positive trend. In 2012, there were about 93 000 children in the preschool institutions in urban areas and almost 12 000 in rural areas. In 2018, there were 105 000 in urban areas and almost 16 000 in rural areas (see Table 6.1).

However, the development of these institutions in Lithuania remains uneven. If the number of preschool facilities in urban areas is growing steadily, in rural areas several such establishments are closed each year (see Table 6.2). During the period from 2012 to 2018, the number of preschool institutions increased from 547 to 632 in urban areas. But in rural areas, the number of preschool institutions declined from 113 (in 2012) to 99 (in 2018).

In Sweden, a heavy emphasis is placed on the provision of childcare institutions (nurseries and preschool facilities). According to the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data for the year 2016, the enrolment rate of children from 3 to 5 years old in Sweden was about 96 per cent, while in Lithuania it was 84 per cent. The differences are much higher if the enrolment rates of children up to 2 years old are examined. The enrolment rate for Sweden was 46.5 per cent, while for Lithuania only 23 per cent, which is lower than the EU (31 per cent) or OECD (33 per cent) averages.

But let us take a closer look into the current systems of support for families of Lithuania and Sweden in more detail.

The state support system for families with children in Lithuania comprises two main parts: universal benefits (paid irrespective of the family's assets and income) and the assistance paid to poor families according to their income level. In Sweden, most of the benefits are universal. That is why Sweden's public spending on family benefits is one of the highest in Europe – it totals 3.5 per cent of its gross domestic product (almost 1.5 per cent in cash and the rest in services; OECD 2020b). Spending in other social policy areas such as health and housing support also assists families but is not included here. Therefore, Sweden's support for parents with children is comprehensive and effective but expensive.

Both countries have similar parental leave systems with a slight difference in duration and flexibility. Though in Lithuania, parental leave is longer – it is one of the longest in Europe. Before 2019, if a one-year period was preferred, 100 per cent of the salary was compensated. If the benefit was preferred to be received for two years, during the first year (until the child turns 1 year old) the benefit was 70 per cent of previous salary and 40 per cent afterwards (until the child turns 2 years old). According to new amendments implemented in January 2019, a parent can choose to receive a benefit until the child is 1 year old (he/she will be paid 77.58 per cent of the compensated recipient's wages) or to receive a benefit until the child is 2 years old – from the end of the pregnancy and childbirth or the paternity leave until the child is 1 year old, he will be paid 54.31 per cent and later, until the child is 2 years old, 31.03 per cent (SODRA 2019). But there is no possibility to use the parental leave more flexibly as in Sweden (until a child turns 8 years old) (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2018). The main difference between the parental leave schemes of both countries is who can take the leave. In Lithuania, this leave can be used optionally by the mother or the father. In Sweden, each parent receives shareable 240 days (480 in total) of parental leave. Mother and father have an equal part of a non-transferable period of parental leave (90 days each – mother's quota and father's quota), which can be used in parts (months, weeks, days, hours), while the remaining 300 days (from which 90 days' flat rate is paid; it does not depend on previous salary) can be shared voluntarily, until the child is aged 12 years old (Aidukaite and Telisaukaite-Cekanavice 2020, MISSOC 2018, Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2018; see also Chapter 3). This means

Table 6.3 Parental leave benefits recipients by gender

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018	
	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year	1st year	2nd year
Women	16 368	13 550	17 364	12 747	18 628	13 877	18 839	15 318	18 345	14 907
Men	1539	4779	1656	6187	1670	7291	1480	8234	1409	8913

Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2019

that in this case fathers spend more time caring for their children and this promotes gender equality. Still, in general both countries have rather generous parental benefits.

It should be mentioned that in Sweden, the maternity, paternity and parental leave policies are merged, while in Lithuania a clear distinction is made and they consist of separate schemes (see also Aidukaite and Telisaukaite-Cekanavice 2020). For instance, the paternity benefit reserved exclusively to the father is longer in Lithuania than in Sweden: 30 days at any time from the birth of a child until the child reaches 3 months. Paternity leave is becoming increasingly popular in Lithuania (see Table 6.3). In Sweden, this type of benefit is called temporary parental benefit – 10 days of leave can be used to be at the delivery or take care of other children (SODRA 2019, Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2018).

The data in Table 6.3 show that by the time a child reaches 1 year old, the number of women in parental leave exceeds the number of men by 10–13 times. For instance, in 2018, there were more than 18 000 women taking parental leave during the first year, while only 1400 men were on parental leave at the same time. In the second year (for the first to second years of the child's life) the recipients' distribution by gender is somewhat more even, and each year more and more men stay at home with their children till they become 2 years old. In 2018, there were about 15 000 women taking parental leave during the second year, with almost 9 000 men taking parental leave. According to Reingardė and Tereškinas (2006), the most common explanation by men who do not take parental leave is the financial reason; that is, men usually earn more than women, so women stay home. But there are also deeper cultural and ideological aspects in the understanding of gender roles and fatherhood as well as motherhood. For many men, such leave is beyond the scope of understanding of their masculine and paternal identities. Childcare is generally considered to be a “woman's job”. The understanding that a mother is the main carer for children is quite strong in Lithuania (Reingardė and Tereškinas, 2006).

Child benefit in both countries is universal – in Sweden slightly larger, but Lithuania has an additional amount for children from poor families. The same additional amount is paid for children from large families (three or more chil-

dren) in Lithuania, whereas Sweden pays a large family supplement for families with two children. An additional amount of money for large families is not only paid beginning from different numbers of children, but these amounts differ considerably (for example, for three children both parents receive EUR 60.42 (20.14 x 3) in Lithuania, and EUR 34 each (EUR 68 for both) in Sweden; for four, EUR 80.56 (20.14 x 4) and EUR 82 each (EUR 164 for both) accordingly; for five, EUR 100.7 (20.14 x 5) and EUR 141 each (EUR 282 for both) accordingly (SODRA 2019; Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2018).

In both countries the care conditions for a sick child are similar, with only a slightly higher percentage of salary compensated in Sweden (80 per cent), while in Lithuania from 1 January 2019 the sickness benefits to take care of a sick child make up 65.94 per cent of the recipient's compensated wage (Aidukaite and Telisauskaite-Cekanavice 2020; SODRA 2019; Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2018).

A comparative overview of both countries' benefits for and assistance to families with children shows some difference in their social support systems' orientation. The Lithuanian social support system is more oriented to support those in need. Therefore more assistance is paid to poor families according to their income level: additional child benefit; social benefit for low-income families; compensation for the costs of house heating and hot and drinking water; and social support for pupils from low-income families.

The Swedish social support system is more oriented towards gender equality: child allowance and parental benefit are obligatory and shared between the parents equally.

EXPERTS' VIEWS ON CHALLENGES TO FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN LITHUANIA AND SWEDEN

Advantages and Disadvantages of Family Support in Lithuania

What is strikingly evident from the expert interviews in Lithuania is that the family support system is very fragmented; namely it has been developed fragmentally, focusing on separate aspects of the family support system but not having a systematic, long-lasting view on how family policy should be reformed and which path (universal or targeted) it has to follow. Family support measures are targeted at the early life of children (infants and pre-school children) and families with small children; there is little support in the later stages of children's lives and little support to families having other special needs. As our experts note: "There is a big problem here, because we are still jumping from one measure to another, and in reality, no one sees an overall picture" (LT1); "Another thing that hinders our system is the lack of a systematic approach" (LT9).

The lack of systemic and long-lasting vision for family policy is partly explained by the fact that there is no separate institution to take care of family matters. Family policy problems are now being addressed by several institutions, which lack co-operation and co-ordination of their work. This situation is also confirmed by the research literature. According to Reingardienė (2004), the legal framework for family policy is in line with European standards, but it is not fully implemented. There are many reasons for this. First, there is no separate body responsible for the formulation and implementation of family policy, which leads to a lack of clear and common objectives for that policy. Second, the fragmentation and incoherence of family policy, which is often caused by the government's term of office, often lead to public distrust in the social system. Third, the orientation of family policy and its measures to families at social risk deprives other families of the feeling that the state supports them.

In the Lithuanian family support system, the means-tested benefits have played quite a significant role in supporting families since the 1990s. The experts see advantages and disadvantages in this. Social assistance benefits help families at a social risk. On the other hand, they create poverty traps, as in some cases it is better to live on benefits than to take paid work. The experts emphasised that the system itself does not encourage efforts, as minimum wages and social benefits are similar in size: "Why should I work if I get the same thing without working?" (LT9). The widespread view expressed among the experts is that the current social support system is not effective enough, creates poverty traps and dependency on benefits, and does not encourage people to return to the labour market soon enough.

The inefficiency of social assistance is also noted in the scientific literature. Previous studies (Gvaldaitė and Kirilova 2014; Stankūnienė, Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2013; Žalimienė 2015) stressed that when evaluating family policy measures to reduce child poverty, it should be emphasised that Lithuania does not follow the principle of universality – financial support (except child allowance) is almost always dependent on the income of family members. Such a policy boomerangs: benefits to poor families become their livelihood and raising of children becomes a means of gaining benefits. The financial costs the state bears and the results it gets are absolutely inadequate.

Nevertheless, the universal child allowance (in Lithuania it is popularly called "child money") has been paid out to every child since its introduction on 1 January 2018. The experts' views of this are divided. Some see it as the state's attention for every child: "universal child money, I would regard this as an encouragement rather than a child support. Because it is, after all, a gesture of the state, a gesture of respect for every citizen" (LT1). Others expressed an unequivocal opinion on universal allowance. The decision to introduce a uni-

versal child benefit by cutting an additional tax-free income sized for working parents is called a mistake by some experts:

These are different tools. ... These are different things, completely different. They cannot be opposed. The Tax Exempt Income is one, and if we look at all the more successful countries in the European Union that are slightly more successful, then there are the tax measures. ... And there is no need for opposition, it cannot be: this or that. In the case of a crisis, it is possible to remove one or temporarily remove it, but they should work together anyway. It's just that I think it's a mistake to separate them. (LT6)

Not everything is viewed so negatively by the experts. Speaking about advantages of the family support system in Lithuania, most experts mentioned first of all the long duration of parental leave: “the childcare leave system is probably one of the best in Europe” (LT5); “We are leaders here” (LT10). Bearing in mind that both mothers and fathers can choose to take parental leave in Lithuania, this measure is seen by the experts as “both family consolidation and gender equality” (LT4).

Another advantage of the parental leave system in Lithuania, as seen by the experts, is the possibility for grandparents to take parental leave (amendments to the law became effective from April 2018), as well as one month's paternity leave for fathers: “They contribute when it is the most difficult – just after the birth” (LT4). The paternity leave is viewed positively by scholars as it contributes to gender equality in childcare. However, the grandparents' involvement in childcare is seen as contradictory. A recent study (Aidukaite and Telisauskaite-Cekanavice 2020) claims that in Lithuania the state intentionally supports kinship familialism as grandparents are entitled to take parental leave.

How family support system in Lithuania ensures gender equality

When it comes to ensuring gender equality, the experts first of all emphasised the opportunity for both parents to take parental leave and the possibility for fathers to take paternity leave. This allows the father to participate more actively in the child's upbringing, and the mother to return to the labour market more quickly. The Lithuanian experts emphasise that access to childcare and education facilities is another tool that enables women to return to the labour market more quickly, and at the same time promotes gender equality. Unfortunately, the issue of preschool institutions is not fully resolved; this problem is particularly relevant in the largest cities of the country, where thousands of children are waiting for places in state care institutions.

Another measure to promote gender equality and women's participation in the labour market is, according to the experts, the creation of opportunities to reconcile work and family responsibilities: “It should be possible for parents

raising children to choose flexible working hours, part-time work” (LT3); however, there is still much room for improvement here.

Previous studies (Bučaitė-Vilkė et al. 2012, Jančaitytė 2006, Reingardienė 2004) assessing the impact of family policy on women entering the labour market concluded that measures to combine professional and family commitments are not sufficient in Lithuania. Limitation of childcare services is the main concern. The conditions for parental leave are fairly good, but other family-friendly policy measures (part-time work, work at home, childcare centres at the work place) are not developed for a variety of reasons (economic family status, the unfavourable attitude of employers, and so on).

During the interviews, several experts, when speaking about gender equality, drew attention to the difference between the salaries of women and men in Lithuania, which, according to one interviewee, “differs even in the public sector or state institutions” (LT1). This trend leads to the fact that, for example, the mother with the usually lower income is most likely to take parental leave.

Previous studies (Maslauskaitė 2004, Reingardienė 2004, Šarlauskas and Telešienė 2014) support the experts’ view. Although there are more and more men taking parental leave, the process is not as fast as expected. Faster implementation of the gender-equality principle is largely impeded by cultural clichés still attributing the care of family members to women.

How the family support system in Lithuania reduces child poverty

Speaking about child poverty reduction measures, the experts emphasised the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for children regardless of the family’s financial capacity. However, the social assistance support could be stigmatising for families receiving it. For instance, due to the fact that services such as free lunches are received only by children from poor families, children receiving them experience social exclusion. As one of the experts states: “There are certain tables in the schools’ restaurants reserved for children who receive a free lunch subsidised by the state, everyone sees for whom they are. It stigmatises. Most of those children, even if they are hungry, do not eat at school” (LT4). Free school lunches were mentioned by many experts as an important child poverty reduction measure. But it was also mentioned here that differentiation of services stigmatises children from vulnerable families, they experience social exclusion, and this problem should be best addressed by the introduction of free meals for all preschool children.

Some of the experts suggested that the universal child allowance should also contribute to the reduction of child poverty, but also expressed doubts as to whether the money is used for the intended purpose in families at risk. Even a small amount is quite significant in families experiencing poverty, but when people do not have social skills, money is often wasted on secondary things and does not actually reduce poverty.

There was widespread awareness among experts interviewed that the problem of child poverty should be solved primarily by “enabling parents to work and earn money” (LT4). It was also proposed “to reform the tax system so that families with children would have more money to meet their basic needs” (LT6). And, as with the promotion of gender equality, almost everyone has emphasised that the problem of child poverty should be addressed through education and training. As one expert summarised, “cultural poverty is much more dangerous and deeper than economic poverty” (LT10).

Overall, there was a great concern among the experts interviewed about child poverty in Lithuania, and that the family support system should somehow intervene and help families to cope. However, there is also a lack of understanding that poverty is a structural problem, not only an individual one, and that universal measures could solve poverty more effectively than targeted ones.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Family Support in Sweden

In Sweden, our experts were mostly concerned with two major challenges affecting family policy: ageing and migration. Both social phenomena pose serious problems to ensure a smooth financing of the family support system, and to ensure the accessibility and quality of care services. Interestingly, these two problems are important in the Lithuanian case, too; however, experts in Lithuania have not mentioned them as a challenge to the family support system. Both Sweden and Lithuania are rapidly ageing societies (see Chapter 8). Both experience the migration challenge, too, but from different angles. Sweden is a receiving country with a high influx of migrants in recent years, while Lithuania is a sending country and outward labour migration poses serious challenges to the sustainability of public welfare financing, including family policy.

When it comes to the ageing problem, Swedish experts have highlighted the problem of a shortage of workers in the care sector: “Well, the aging population, of course, which is a problem we share with many other countries. That’s a challenge, of course. And we are trying to combat that by employing people in the care sector or both care for the elderly and also healthcare” (SE1).

Migration is seen, on the one hand, as a blessing to solve the shortage of care workers in the service sector. As one expert noted: “It’s a sort of a gift getting these people [recent migrants] and getting the opportunity to school them or to introduce them to sectors where we really need the labour force” (SE1). On the other hand, it is seen increasingly as a challenge to the sustainability of the Swedish welfare state model. A number of experts also expressed the concern

that massive immigration of refugees, especially during 2015, created a lot of pressure on public finances and led to a change in the concept of solidarity:

there has been this very shift in this notion of solidarity and who the welfare state should include in its people's home. ... [A] sense that those people who are not like us will be taking benefits away from Sweden has been a discourse that has given some right-wing [parties] a lot of discursive space and [votes] because it resonates in Swedish society. (SE5)

Despite some challenges expressed by the experts, the Swedish model still successfully holds to its gender-equality goal. According to most experts, the main advantage of the Swedish family support system is the emphasis on equality. As gender equality has already become a norm for many people in Sweden, it is natural that equal parenthood dominates in families with children, and many experts have identified that equal parenting is a priority of the country's family policy: "to work for an equal parenting, equal responsibility between men and women, or whatever gender you might have ... to increase equality between parents" (SE1).

Another important advantage highlighted by the experts is that the family policy system is perceived by the population as a guarantee of security. Everyone knows that the state will take care of you in emergency situations: "you can feel safe in different stages of your life. If the economy is bad or if you have a disabled child and so on, they should know that the state helps in those situations" (SE2). Certain elements of the family support system are immovable, irrespective of changes in government or other factors, and these are shared parental leave and childcare services: "Well, I think that certain things are untouchable. Nobody could take away the day care, it's just like a sacred cow. That's also true of parental leave and daddy leave. I don't think anybody's ever going to touch that" (SE5). The experts emphasised that there is great support for the Swedish welfare state model and for the family support system. This is confirmed with enthusiasm by numerous experts: "I think that most people here are fans of the welfare state" (SE1); "People are happy about the system, they like it. Most people do" (SE2); "Well, I think there is a very strong support for welfare state" (SE3); "Actually there is very, very strong support for the model in Sweden among families" (SE6).

How the family support system in Sweden ensures gender equality

Almost all of the experts, when speaking about the benefits of a family support system in Sweden, first of all emphasised the implementation of the principle of gender equality, which has become a norm in this country: "Gender equality is very, very normative in Sweden" (SE4). This has been one of the key prior-

ities of the country's social policy for many years; therefore, excellent results have been achieved in this area:

We have worked with this since the sixties or something like that, with different family policies during different years. So, as you remember, in the fifties we had like over one million housewives in Sweden and today you can hardly find anyone. So, the society has changed from like [a] one-breadwinner system to [a] two-breadwinners system, I would say. (SE2)

Although much has been achieved, the experts are reluctant to idealise the situation, and think there is still room for improvement here: "we have a problem, that we always had – that of inequality between men and women, which is a high priority here, in Sweden" (SE1); "I would say that we haven't succeeded in it like a hundred per cent yet. ... We talk a lot about gender equality and so on, but I would say that maybe we have come half-way or something like that, but not more" (SE2).

Essentially, gender equality is implemented through greater involvement of women in the labour market and more active involvement of men in house-keeping and childcare. A majority of the experts see the fathers' involvement in childcare as a success of Swedish family policy:

I think if we want to talk about something that has been successful in the Swedish family policy it is really this engagement of fathers in parental leave, because they are using a lot of leave, it is increasing all the time. ... So I think this is a successful policy. (SE4)

Despite the results achieved, some experts believe that changes could be faster: "It's really the division of labour inside the families. It's changing slowly, of course, but in a more gender-equal direction, and you are seeing fathers, they are really doing more of the housework" (SE6). It is also acknowledged that the situation in some cases depends very much on the father's background, social class and labour market participation: "Probably it's a question of a class. ... I think that the norms in the new middle classes in Stockholm [are] probably much more favourable in this direction, but I can imagine in the countryside that there is some resistance to this" (SE3); "Well, fathers who don't have a job and are outside the labour market, they don't use the parental leave to the same extent. So they are outside the social insurance system and they're outside the labour market, so they become marginalised in that way" (SE4). This situation is especially applicable to migrant families. Previous studies (Ma et al., 2020) have also acknowledged this situation, referring to the finding that migrant fathers take parental leave less often than native-born fathers. Experts expressed concern that the issue of gender equality takes on a completely different character when it comes to immigrant families living

in Sweden. In some cases, such families adhere to a patriarchal worldview and to a single-breadwinner model: “in areas where you have a fairly strong representation of newcomers to Sweden, because ... females coming recently to Sweden with children, they don’t work to the same extent” (SE3).

Swedish experts emphasised that family policy in Sweden is largely about ensuring gender equality in work and family life, about equality in childcare and household shared traditions. This kind of discourse was hardly prevalent in the Lithuanian expert interviews.

Despite long-standing efforts by the state and the results achieved in the area of gender equality, some experts believe that women are still responsible of the majority of household duties:

The real question is how much does parental leave, which is a year and a half per child, affect the larger relationship in the family around paid and unpaid work. And that has not changed, the amount of unpaid work. Still mainly women take the lion’s share and tend to work part time. (SE5)

Men, despite family-friendly policies and widely accepted shared parental leave practices, still spend more time on paid work:

[There] is that kind of workplace culture about expectations that men will work more and they have more flexibility to work longer hours and they do work longer hours than women. And Sweden actually has a high proportion of men to work over 40 hours a week. Given the fact that there’s this family friendly policy. (SE5)

How the family support system in Sweden reduces child poverty

Another important priority of Swedish family policy is to ensure the equality between families with and without children. This is achieved by a universal child allowance, which is shared equally by both parents. Child allowance is seen as a means of redistributing money between families with and without children. The experts are aware that because child allowance is universal, it prevents stigmatisation of poor people and at the same time reduces child poverty in low-income families. This discourse was not prevalent among Lithuanian experts, where in many cases poor families were blamed for depending on a social assistance system instead of working. Both Swedish and Lithuanian experts share the same understanding that the best policy to reduce child poverty is to ensure that both parents are working. However, many Lithuanian experts, contrary to the Swedish, see preschool as a means to ensure the parents’ (usually the mother’s) participation in the labour market, but not so much as a means to reduce poverty among families with children and without.

Swedish experts stated: “pre-schools [are] always like the key to good economic standard” (SE1). In addition, generous parental leave support

encourages people to work and earn money before they have children, which also prevents child poverty:

I think the parental leave is good in reducing child poverty because, normally, it really means that you wait before having children, until you have a job. So both of you have a good benefit while at home. But you have a job to go back to. So children don't live so often with unemployed parents. Of course, it's going to reduce poverty." (SE4)

None of the Lithuanian experts mentioned that the generous parental leave is a means to reduce poverty among children; it is seen more like a means to ensure childcare.

True, given the high level of the Swedish economy and the generous social system in the country, the problem of child poverty exists only relatively. This is not the absolute poverty when the minimum needs of the child are not met. Experts pointed out that families in which parents have a weak attachment to the labour market and poor skills and education are most vulnerable to falling into the poverty trap:

But of course we have a group that ... have a very weak position at the labour markets and the poverty among children is among groups that haven't, that don't have any work and perhaps haven't, the parents haven't worked either, earlier on ... So of course, among migrants who haven't succeeded in getting established in the labour market ... a lot of them are poor, I would say, according to our way of measuring poverty. (SE6)

Experts also point out that the problem of child poverty is more relevant in families where one parent is raising children, as the economic situation of two-breadwinners families has improved significantly more than in single-breadwinner families.

PUBLIC OPINION ON FAMILY POLICY SUSTAINABILITY

In this section we review citizens' attitudes and opinions on family support system in Lithuania and Sweden to see how much they correspond to the experts' views and problems raised during the interviews.

We asked whether the respondents are in general satisfied with the state support for families with children in their country. Figure 6.1 displays the results. The contrast between Lithuania and Sweden is striking. In Sweden, more than a half of the interviewees reported that they are very satisfied with the family support system, and more than 80 per cent are satisfied (Very satisfied + Satisfied). In Lithuania, slightly more than 1 per cent of respondents

reported that they are very satisfied with the family support system. Those who are unsatisfied (Not really satisfied + Not at all satisfied) comprise a slightly larger group of 35 per cent than the satisfied group (Very satisfied + Satisfied), which amount to 31 per cent.

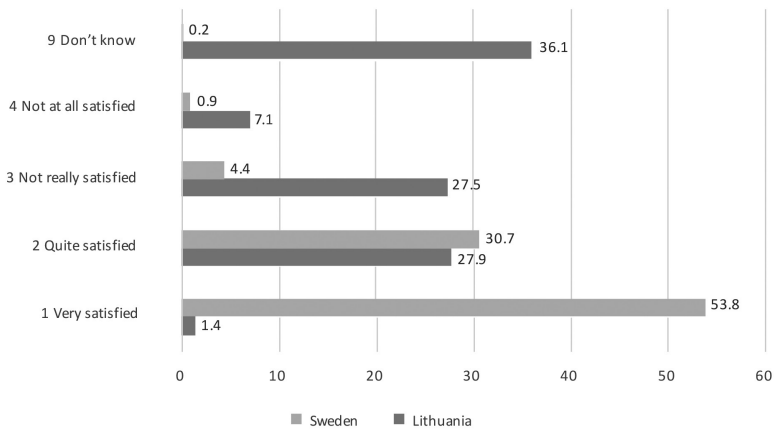


Figure 6.1 Satisfaction with the family support system in general in Lithuania (N1000) and Sweden (N1002)

The first data inspection tells us that family policy is a matter of national pride in Sweden, well entrenched in the social policy system and sustainable in the future. The case of Lithuania shows that the family support system is not backed up by citizens' expectations; it divides society into supporters and critics of the system. But let us look at how each family support scheme is rated; this will provide us with more accurate information on satisfaction with the system.

The ratings of each family support scheme are provided in the Appendix, in Table 6A.1 for Lithuania and Table 6A.2 for Sweden. In Lithuania, parental, maternity and paternity leaves are rated rather high by respondents. More than 40 per cent rated them as "Good" and about 10 per cent as "Very good". About a quarter rated them as "Fair". Together with a birth grant and sick leave policy related to children, these public support schemes have rather high approval among the population, while support schemes that rated "Poor" and "Very poor" are social assistance benefits (maintenance support and housing assistance) and support services for elderly care.

In Sweden, we find that the worst rating received for support services was for the elderly care as well as care services and financial support related to

disabled children. The latter were also rated low in Lithuania, but not as low as support services for elderly care. The highest approvals were received for parental leave, universal child allowance and sick leave policy related to children. Overall, in Sweden the public support schemes were rated much better than in Lithuania, as expected. There were only about 5 per cent on average who reported “Poor” and “Very poor” ratings for each scheme, except for elderly services and support for a sick child, where more than 20 per cent reported dissatisfaction. In Lithuania, dissatisfaction was ranging from about 7 per cent for parental benefits to up to 30 per cent for elderly care. The satisfaction (Very good + Good) was ranging from more than 80 per cent for parental leave to about 35 per cent for elderly care and support for a disabled child in Sweden; in Lithuania, from 55 per cent for maternity leave to less than 20 per cent for maintenance support.

Overall, we see similar patterns for both countries – paternal leave policies are on the top of ratings, elderly care and disabled children’s support at the bottom. Yet in Lithuania means-tested benefits got very poor approval from the population.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Lithuanian and Swedish family support systems are at very different stages of development. Lithuania is still shaping its own system due to the lack of a systematic approach and strategic direction, which was developed in Sweden decades ago. Meanwhile, in Sweden family support is sustainable, generous and valued by the country’s own population. Sweden is facing “new” challenges in this regard: problems caused by massive immigration and possible difficulties in financing the country’s support system. Lithuania is still facing “old” challenges: combating child poverty and helping parents to facilitate work–life balance.

Despite the new challenges faced by the welfare state in Sweden, the family support system is very sustainable, and much appreciated by the population. Evaluation of the family support system in Lithuania shows ambiguous results. Some parts of the family support system have quite high approval among the population, especially parental leave policies (parental, maternity, paternity). However, since they are not backed up by other complementary policies such as childcare services, they contribute neither to the overall higher approval of the family support system nor to gender equality awareness or practices.

Striving for gender equality is still the cornerstone of the Swedish family system. Despite high achievements in this field, the policy makers and the general population see possibilities and the need for improvements. Lithuanian experts, while talking about gender equality, were more concerned with measures to ensure mothers’ participation in the labour market; less concern

was expressed about fathers' engagement in childcare. Gender equality was not mentioned as the goal of the family support system. However, the parental leave system was evaluated as contributing to gender equality by the Lithuanian respondents to a greater extent than by the Swedish residents. This allows us to make the assumption that the framing is important in family policy reform. In Lithuania there is little discourse about the gender (in)equality and how and why it is important to address it in reforming family policy, while in Sweden there is a high awareness among policy makers and the general public about gender (in)equality issues and what negative/positive outcomes they generate for individuals and society.

The findings of this study show that in the 21st century, the policies that address gender equality, such as parental leave policies, are highly appreciated and needed. However, they have to be backed up by care services. The low ratings of elderly care and disabled children's support shows that in the future policy makers in both countries have to fulfil the increasing demands for them if they want to have sustainable family support systems. In Lithuania, the emphasis on means-testing in family support systems does not prove to be a sustainable strategy. Despite the long-lasting tradition in supporting families according to proven need, the respondents view the means-tested benefits as the least adequate support.

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APPENDIX

Table 6A.1 Evaluation of family support schemes in Lithuania (answers in per cent)

Family support scheme	1 Very Good	2 Good	3 Fair	4 Poor	5 Very poor	9 Don't know
Parental leave	6.1	40.6	24.4	5.7	1.8	21.4
Preschool facilities	3.7	31.4	32.7	11.4	2.0	18.8
Child allowance	5.9	35.7	27.7	9.8	2.9	18.0
Paternity leave	8.4	42.9	19.8	4.7	1.0	23.2
Maternity leave	10.2	45.3	20.0	4.3	1.2	19.0
Birth grant	8.9	40.2	24.0	5.3	1.7	19.9
Maintenance support	2.5	17.3	31.2	20.3	7.6	21.1
Housing assistance	3.1	23.3	32.9	14.0	5.8	20.6
Possibility to work flexible hours	5.7	26.3	21.2	14.0	1.6	28.2
Possibility to work from home	6.4	26.7	19.8	12.5	4.4	30.2
Sick leave policy related to children	8.9	40.7	21.1	7.2	2.3	19.8
Support services for elderly care	2.3	16.8	27.7	22.1	7.6	23.5
Care services and financial support related to disabled child	4.2	19.3	23.1	13.1	5.2	35.1

Table 6A.2 Evaluation of family support schemes in Sweden (answers in per cent)

Family support scheme	1 Very Good	2 Good	3 Fair	4 Poor	5 Very poor	9 Don't know
Parental leave	53.8	30.7	4.4	0.9	0.2	10.0
Preschool facilities	27.4	44.6	11.9	3.9	0.4	11.8
Child allowance	36.6	40.1	9.9	3.3	0.9	9.2
Maintenance support	14.1	26.5	14.6	3.2	0.4	41.2
Housing assistance	15.9	32.6	15.7	4.5	0.7	30.6
Possibility to work flexible hours	24.8	35.9	11.8	3.1	0.9	23.3
Possibility to work from home	22.0	34.9	15.6	4.6	1.6	21.4
Sick leave policy related to children	44.1	37.2	6.0	1.1	0.5	11.1

Family support scheme	1	2	3	4	5	9
	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Don't know
Support services for elderly care	9.1	26.2	21.2	15.1	5.0	20.5
Care services and financial support related to disabled child	11.8	22.9	15.3	16.0	6.8	27.3