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**Latte Pappas on the rise: A comparative analysis of parental leave policies and gender equality in Quebec, the rest of Canada, and Sweden**

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Presented to

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, there has been an increase in fathers taking parental leave in some countries such as Canada and Sweden. The latter takes the lead, which has even earned Swedish fathers on parental leave the nickname *Latte Pappas*. Canada has also seen an increase in fathers taking some parental leave, with Quebec being particularly ahead of all other provinces. Despite this increase, mothers are still taking the majority parental leaves in both countries. Using feminist political economy theory, a policy analysis was carried out. This research attempts to examine if each country's respective gender equality policies are reflected in their current parental leave systems. When studying Canada, a special consideration has been given to Quebec, given its different parental leave system from the rest of the country.

Parental leaves are linked to gender equality, given that their initial goal was to even out the cost of reproduction and encourage mothers to re-enter the workforce. However, it is believed that family policies have moved away from gender and instead, focus on the family functioning along with participation in the labour market. This heavy focus on the workforce participation reinforces that family policies, including parental leaves, are a worker's right and are designed to increase the level of participation of all individuals, regardless of gender. Quebec, as well as the rest of Canada, and Sweden have developed at different paces with the influence of the unique social, economic and political factors influencing their gender approach to family policies. Some inequalities among diverse family structures and employment status have been identified as influencing their access to parental benefits.

This present study takes the form of a systematic policy analysis of parental leave policies and current agreed upon definitions of gender equality, finding that none of the jurisdictions have been able to fully incorporate all of their gender equality goals within their parental leave system. While all three promote an equal participation in the labour market as well as in childrearing, all struggle with how to address gender differences within the workforce that would achieve economic gender equality. Further, Sweden extends parental benefits to diverse family types while Quebec and the rest of Canada fall short on their commitment to a fuller concept of equity in policymaking processes.

*Key terms:* Parental leave; social policy; family policy; gender equality; Canada; Sweden; Quebec; feminist political economy; welfare state.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the Trudeau administration came to power in 2015, the parental leave<sup>1</sup> system in Canada has been subject to rising media attention (Press, 2018). In 2019, the current administration added additional weeks for the parent who has taken the least amount of time off in the hopes of increasing the number of fathers taking parental benefits (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). This was also an attempt to match Quebec's unique parental leave system, which has experienced the desired outcome of increasing father's involvement in childcare (Mayer & Bourdais, 2019). The Nordic<sup>2</sup> countries are also a region of interest pertaining to parental leave as they have been considered pioneers in the creation of egalitarian family policies. For instance, the concept of maternal leave has been present in Sweden for over a hundred years and was also the first country to introduce a gender-neutral parental leave system in 1974 (Datta Gupta et al., 2008, p. 69; Suwada & Plantin, 2014). The rising number of fathers taking a parental leave has given them the nickname *Latte Pappas*, due to their increased presence in coffee shops with their young children (Orange, 2017; The Economist, 2014). Both Canada and Sweden are capitalist societies but have different types of policies. The former's social policies are defined as liberal while the latter's reflect a social democratic approach, with Quebec having incorporated elements of both (Albanese, 2018; Esping-Andersen, 1990). With these different approaches, the two countries' parental leave systems have often been compared in the literature for their influence on the status of gender equality. Many sources argue that Canada will never have a parental leave system similar to Sweden's given the former's division

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of my research, I define parental leave as a period of leave of absence taken by an individual justified by the birth or adoption of a child.

<sup>2</sup> Nordic countries are composed of Iceland, Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden

of power between federal and provincial governments and the low provision of social services offered by the country's liberal welfare state regime. (Friendly, 2017).

The goal of parental leave benefits is to even out the costs of reproduction and to encourage mothers to re-enter the workforce in order to achieve gender equality (Hiilamo, 2004). Many studies have been conducted to assess social, political and economic factors influencing the status of gender equality in different regions of the world. An example is *The Global Gender Gap Report* which is done approximately every two years to examine and rank the progress of every country in the world in closing the gender gap. The report uses four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2020). The most recent report has established a clear difference between Sweden and Canada, ranking the former fourth in the world and the latter nineteenth for closing the gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2020, p. 9). Sweden scored higher than Canada for participation rate of women in the workforce and in managerial positions (World Economic Forum, 2020). However, this report does not take into consideration that both Canada and Sweden have established their own set of goals to achieve gender equality, but rather holds both countries to the same standards for assessing gender equality.

My research explores the parental leave systems of Canada and Sweden in relation to their own goals and objectives established in their respective gender equality policies. Special consideration is given to Quebec's<sup>3</sup> parental leave given that it has a set of policies distinct from Canada's federal system. Using feminist political economy theory, this research asks the

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of this research, Quebec is referred to as a jurisdiction separate from Canada to emphasize its differentiation from the rest of the country.

following research question: How well do the current parental leave policies enacted by Sweden, Quebec, and the rest of Canada embody their contemporary conceptions of gender equality?

I use feminist political economy theory with concepts such as social reproduction, sexual division of labour and collective responsibility of childcare to guide my analysis.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social policies can be defined as “principles governing actions directed towards achieving specified ends, through the provision of welfare, minimum standards of income and some measures of progressive redistribution in command over resources, in such a way as to shape the development of society” (Hantrias & Letabiler, 2014, p. 139). They reflect divisions of responsibilities between the private and public sectors (O’Connor et al., 1999). This division will vary according to the make-up of a nation’s welfare state regime, defined as “interventions by the state in civil society to alter social and market forces” (O’Connor et al., 1999, p. 12). The authors note that, though often used to address inequities, social policies do not always produce greater equality among citizens. The parental leave system is an example of an intervention that was implemented in an attempt to secure women’s place in the workforce during their time off to care for a new child (Hiilamo, 2004). As such, parental benefits are closely linked to gender equality given that their goal is to even out the cost of reproduction and encourage mothers to remain in the workforce (Hiilamo, 2004). These benefits are considered to be part of the solution to achieve equality between men and women.

However, the focus of many countries has switched in recent years, shifted from enabling women’s entry into the labour force to encouraging fathers to participate in childcare. Sweden, as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada have all seen an increase in fathers taking a parental leave. However, the extent of fathers’ involvement remains limited. In Canada (excluding Quebec), 60% of fathers took approximately only two weeks<sup>4</sup> from their allocated time off in 2019 (van der Gaag et al., 2019, p. 33). In Quebec alone, 79% of fathers took some leave (van der Gaag et

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that this allocated time is based on the “use it or lose it” option currently available to parents in Canada. The current parental leave system in Canada currently offers families an extra five or eight weeks (depending on the benefit plan selected) as long as they agree to share the time off.

al., 2019, p. 34). Even in Sweden where the percentage of fathers taking a leave in 2013 reached 90%, they only took on average 24% of their allocated time off (Fleischmann & Sieverding, 2015, p. 463; The Economist, 2014). To understand these results, areas of inequality in family policies will be examined in the social and jurisdictional contexts of Sweden, as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada.

### **History of Jurisdictional Differences**

Family policies have emerged gradually and continually change to reflect current social norms. As such, Daly (2011) explains that recent policies reflect social processes of individualization occurring in people's lives. In other words, the structure, role and content of families are changing towards more diverse forms, with greater independence to choose the course of their lives (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Daly, 2011). For instance, the women's movement in the 1970s pushed for women to pursue higher education and careers, leading them to enter the paid labour market and delaying, or even avoiding, family formation altogether (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). Family policies such as parental leaves, are a response to the growing plurality of needs of families in order to provide a solution to conflicts between family formation and workforce participation.

#### Pre-WWII (early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

Family policies can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when industrialization and urban living led to a worldwide decline in fertility (Gauthier, 1996). Gauthier (1996) highlights four reasons believed to be behind the family decline (p. 23). The first was the rise in feminism, where women were seeking independence through employment and thus postponing childbearing. The second was a decline in religious faith, which was believed to have created family disorganization and individualism. The third reason was an increase in the

cost of living and the cost of raising children; in part resulting from legislation implemented to abolish child labour and mandating compulsory education. Lastly, the decline has also been attributed to an increase in birth control methods and more liberal attitudes towards contraception in general (Gauthier, 1996, p. 23). Many nations, including Sweden, as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada then enacted family policies to provide their citizens with financial compensation to encourage them to grow their families and prevent any further declines in fertility. Thus, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the early discussions about, and in some cases implementation of, maternity leave in Western countries.

In Sweden, for instance, the concept of maternity leave has existed since the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Swedish women were allowed to take 4 weeks of unpaid maternity leave starting in 1901 (Datta Gupta et al., 2008, p. 69). Sweden is considered to be one of the first countries to acknowledge and protect women's place in paid employment while on maternity leave. This is partially due to the fact that women in Sweden have been granted the right to vote as early as 1862 and have also been involved in women's organizations, public debates, and parliaments (Lister, 2007). As such, with little resistance towards women's movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of their demands were implemented through progressive policies advancing gender equality (Lister, 2007). The ideology of protecting women in the workforce also coincided with the rise of the first Social Democratic government party in 1917 (Swedish Institute, 2015).

Plans for a reform of the Swedish welfare state were written during the 1930s and implemented during and after World War II (Swedish Institute, 2015). Among these planned changes were the implementation of a revised maternity leave to help women balance their roles in the private and public sectors as well as to reduce concerns of population decline (Lister,

2007). In 1937, the Social Democratic government established an unpaid maternity leave for three months (Seward et al., 2002). In 1939, the government made it illegal for employers to dismiss women for reasons related to marriage, pregnancy or childbirth, protecting mothers' employment status while on maternity leave (Gauthier, 1996).

During the same time, the concept of maternity leave was also making its first appearance in Canada in 1921 with the Maternity Protection Act of British Columbia (Legislative Assembly: Province of British Columbia, 2015). This act allowed working mothers to take a limited leave of absence of a total of 12 weeks, before and after giving birth without being dismissed from their employment. It also allowed women to take a 30 minute break, twice a day, to nurse their child while at work (Gauthier, 1996; Legislative Assembly: Province of British Columbia, 2015). Canada also had other family policies prioritizing the well-being of children, as they are considered an investment into the future of the country and "the source of renewal of human capital of an economy" (Rose, 2012, p. 88).

Canada's motivations behind various family policies have often revolved around economic factors. This notion can be observed historically as far back as the Second World War, when the liberal government implemented a "baby bonus" due to fears of an economic depression (Albanese, 2018; CBC Radio News, 1945). This consisted of financial assistance for the wives of soldiers, with a monthly allowance of a predetermined amount, varying with the age of the children (Albanese, 2018). This was given to all families to ensure their financial well-being during the wage freeze of the Second World War as well as for the post-war period that ensued. In both of these cases, children were seen as representing the future and family policies were enacted to protect them for the sake of a successful economy.

Though the idea of a paid maternity leave was on the Canadian policy agenda, no concrete implementation occurred in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including in Quebec. What stopped any further development of this idea was the reluctance of the government to consider pregnant women as being available and capable of fully participating in the workforce (White, 2006). As such, the Canadian government did not implement any maternity leave system through Unemployment Insurance (UI) (now known as Employment Insurance) until the post-WWII era.

#### Post-WWII (1940s-1970s)

The post-World War II era consisted of rapid changes for the maternity and parental leave systems in both Sweden and Canada. It became important for the welfare and gender equality policies to expand to include women as active contributors and receivers of welfare (Lister, 2007). The post-WWII economic expansion which occurred in most Western countries, also known as the Golden Age, created financial resources that were readily available to invest in social policy interventions (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2014). Daly (2011) identifies key driving factors such as the growth of unemployment and poverty, the aging population, the increase of lone-parenthood and most notably, the large-scale return of women to the labour market (p. 4). The increase in the number of mothers across socioeconomic classes in the labour market during this time had transformed the relations of family, work, and care, and had produced a higher demand for public policies to adjust to these changes from various women's groups (Lister, 2007). With the re-introduction of women with children in the paid labour force since the pre-industrial period, the family structure had shifted from a male-breadwinner model to a dual-earner model, bringing work-family conflicts to a contemporary era that needed to be resolved (Skrypnek & Fast, 1996). As such, a strong push from feminist activism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s that

focused on the welfare state by requesting equal pay, rights to child care, and financial independence (Williams, 2018, p. 38).

To accommodate for the sudden increase of female wage earners during this 'Golden Age', the Nordic countries made the decision to move away from old policies protecting wages earned by male breadwinners only, and adopted new policies to aim for a share of responsibility between state and families (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2014; Rose, 2012). During this time, Sweden's Social Democrat party executed a significant welfare state reform plan which led to a collectivist approach to family policies (Lister, 2007). Sweden was the first Nordic country to introduce a paid maternity leave in 1951, allowing mothers to take three months off with compensation (Datta Gupta et al., 2008, p. 69). In 1971, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce a split parental leave option between parents, replacing the traditional maternity benefits (Crisp, 2017). Since 1974, the country has been offering a gender neutral parental leave system, which allows for same-sex couples to obtain the same benefits as heterosexual couples (Suwada & Plantin, 2014). The rapid changes and developments to the parental leave system in Sweden can be traced to the Swedish government's desire to achieve greater gender equality for both men and women by facilitating the combination of work and family life. With a high female rate in trade unions advocating for the protection of women's employment, the public sector was dominated by women in the 1960s and 1970s and therefore, a move to a dual-earner model was both necessary and advantageous to balance fertility with workforce participation (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Duvander et al., 2010).

The first federal paid maternity leave in Canada saw the light of day in 1971, giving women 15 weeks of benefits through Unemployment Insurance (UI) if they had accumulated 20 weeks of paid work or more (Albanese, 2018). This came after the Royal Commission on the

Status of Women pressured the federal government in 1970 to endorse policies which supported women in paid employment in the form of maternity benefits (White, 2006). Also adding pressure on the Canadian government was a well-established women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s with much of their activism targeting state welfare programs (Williams, 2018).

In addition, of particular note in Canada is that parental benefits are divided between the federal and provincial or territorial governments. Given the differences in jurisdiction when it came to social policy, the provincial and territorial governments determined the length and the conditions of the maternity leave while the federal government established the compensation rates (Albanese, 2018). This would create some problems with Quebec, who wished to take a different path with their parental leave system later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Contemporary Policies (1980s-onwards)

The period consisting of the 1980s onwards was dedicated to reforming the parental and maternity leave systems currently in place in both Sweden and Canada. For instance, Sweden further developed the shared leave ideology and in 1995 introduced the concept of reserved months for each parent (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Following disappointing statistics of men not taking the majority of their allocated time, this was intended to encourage both to take a parental leave by making each parent's leave time non-transferable to each other. The Swedish state continues to share the cost of children with parents by alleviating the financial burden to encourage them to continue to have children. Hiilamo (2004) stresses that the Swedish government wants to encourage families to have more children but only through voluntary parenthood. As such, no measures are implemented to increase the population at the expense of the standard of living of low-income families. Instead, the Swedish government focuses its

family policies on improving the social circumstances of the working class with a better quality of life for children (Hiilamo, 2004).

During the same time period, many Canadians were not satisfied with only 15 weeks of maternity leave and continued to fight for longer leaves more. Bowing to the calls from the public, especially women's groups such as the National Commission for Women, the federal government transitioned from a maternity leave to a parental leave, allocating an additional 10 weeks of shareable leave between parents to the existing 15 weeks of maternity leave in 2001 (Albanese, 2018, p. 315). They also decreased the accumulated hours required to access the parental benefits from 700 to 600 hours and revised the Canadian Labour Code to protect employees from losing their jobs while taking a parental leave (Marshall, 2003).

Given Canada's political structure, Quebec was able to develop parental benefits different from the rest of Canada that ended up following a social-democratic system, similar to Sweden's. Gauthier (1998) points out that this different outlook on parental benefits originates from nationalist fears of what threat fertility decline might pose to provincial effort at protecting French culture. As a means to address linguistic inequality following the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, Quebec became a more secular state based on liberal values favouring the advancement of the French language and the equal access to education for men and women (Albanese, 2018, p. 77). As a result of this revolution, many changes occurred in family structures including a sharp decrease in birth rates where one woman was now having on average 1.37 children in 1987, compared to 5 in 1959 (Albanese, 2018, p. 330). To avoid the decrease of the French population and incite families to have more children, the Quebec government established family policies involving money incentives and began to design a parental leave that would encourage parents to take a *shared* leave.

Because parental leave compensation rates were originally determined by the federal government, Quebec made an attempt to gain control of the Employment Insurance (EI) funding in order to create a more generous parental leave program of their own (White, 2006). In 2004, the Quebec government won a court case that ruled the federal maternity and parental leave system as unconstitutional given that EI was being used to offer social benefits to programs under provincial jurisdiction (White, 2006). Following this court case, Quebec became the first province to offer a non-transferable paternity leave for fathers in 2006 under the Quebec Health Insurance Plan (QHIP) (Mayer & Bourdais, 2019).

The parental leave systems in each jurisdiction have developed at different paces with the influence of the unique social, economic and political factors defining Quebec as well as the rest of Canada and Sweden in various time periods. This research does not seek to determine the best parental leave model to follow between Canada and Sweden, but rather compare them to their own established gender equality objectives. It has been identified in the literature that all three nations are attempting to encourage fathers to take up more of the caring duties through various methods such as dedicated time off as part of the parental leave. Sweden's measures are considered to be closely linked to their goal to achieve gender equality. However, Daly (2011) makes the opposite argument and claims that family policies in Europe are no longer about gender but instead, focus on family functioning and labour market participation. Similarly, the parental leave systems in Quebec and the rest of Canada have been described as cultural and economic investments for the future and a matter of ensuring taxable income from the high participation in the labour force. This heavy focus on the workforce participation reinforces that family policies, including parental leaves, are a *worker's* right and are designed to increase the level of participation of all individuals, regardless of gender. Given this emphasis, the goal of

this research is to shed light on the extent of Sweden's, Quebec's, and the rest of Canada's gender equality goals within their parental benefit programs.

### **Parental Leave Policy Breakdown**

The current parental leave systems of Sweden, Quebec, and the rest of Canada are examined below based on information drawn from each nation's official documents made available to the public on their respective official government websites. These websites outline the various options that parents can apply for, the extent of leaves, and requirements for eligibility.

#### Sweden's Parental Leave System

The description of Sweden's parental leave system was found using the keywords: 'Sweden apply for parental leave' on the Google search engine. A website with the name *Försäkringskassan*<sup>5</sup> (Swedish Social Insurance Agency) was found to have comprehensive information on Sweden's parental leave. The information was organized into various subsections so that individuals can select what is appropriate to their situation. All of the subsections were consulted for my analysis. From there, I was redirected to a separate page on the parental benefits for adoptive parents, which was also used for analysis. Given frequent updates, to the policies and the websites, the information below represents what was published in the spring of 2020.

#### *Types of Benefits*

The number of days a parent is permitted to take depends on three factors: whether the two parents will share the days, sole vs. joint custody, and parity of children (e.g. twins, triplets).

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<sup>5</sup> The information on this website was available in both Swedish and English.

In addition, the benefit level is divided into two categories: the days at the sickness benefit level<sup>6</sup> (based on one's income), and days at the minimum level (standard rate for all individuals) (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). In the first case, when both parents are sharing the days, they are allowed to take a combined total of 480 days for one child (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). A breakdown of the parental benefits is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Breakdown of the allocated time for Swedish parental leave (Försäkringskassan, n.d.)**

	<b>Parent 1</b>	<b>Parent 2</b>
Days at sickness benefit level that can be transferred	105	105
Days at sickness benefit level that cannot be transferred	90	90
Days at the minimum level (SEK <sup>7</sup> 180 per day) that can be transferred	45	45
Total	240	240

The same system applies if the child is adopted. If a parent has sole custody of a child, they are entitled to all 480 days, where the first 180 days are compensated at the sickness benefit level and the remaining days are at the minimum level (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Parental benefits can be taken up until a child turns 12 years old. However, from the child's fourth birthday, the parent can have 96 days left (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Furthermore, if multiple children are born in one pregnancy, parents are entitled to more days. The same conditions apply if parents adopt more than one child at the same time. Table 2 illustrates this particular circumstance.

<sup>6</sup> Parental benefits at the sickness benefit level is parental allowance calculated based on a parent's income or a basic level of SEK 250 per day (approximately \$34.79 CAD). It is not necessarily taken by an individual who is sick. It is simply the name of this category of benefits, for employees needing to justify their leave of absence.

<sup>7</sup> Sweden's currency is the Swedish krona, characterized by the abbreviation of SEK.

**Table 2: Level of compensation and allocated days in Swedish parental leave (Försäkringskassan, n.d.)**

Number of children	Days at sickness benefit level	Days at minimum level	Total days
1	390	90	480
2	480	180	660
3	660	180	840
4	840	180	1020

Parental benefits received also depend on the number of hours worked and each parents' income prior to the birth/arrival of the child. If the parent has worked 240 consecutive days before the estimated delivery date with an annual income of SEK 82,100 (approximately \$11,424.34 CAD), they will be compensated at 80% of their regular income, with a maximum amount of SEK 1,006 (approximately \$139.99 CAD) per day (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Parents are able to obtain a flat rate of SEK 250 (approximately \$34.79 CAD) per day at the sickness benefit level for the first 180 days taken if they have worked less than 240 consecutive days (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). The remaining days at the sickness benefit level are based on the individual's income. The days at the minimum level are set at a flat rate of SEK 180 (approximately \$25.05 CAD) per day (Försäkringskassan, n.d.).

### *Eligibility Criteria*

Some eligibility criteria are presented below. To claim parental benefits, one must be:

- “[...] the child’s parent or have custody of the child
    - [In the case of adoption, one is a prospective adoptive parent]
  - [...] married or cohabitating with the child’s parent
  - [...] at home with the child instead of working, studying or seeking employment
  - [...] insured in Sweden, [either through residing in the country or working]
  - [...] the child lives in Sweden or within the EU or in Switzerland”
- (Försäkringskassan, n.d.)

### *Special Circumstances*

The Swedish parental leave system takes into account other particular situations. For instance, if an individual is unemployed, including unemployed students, or earns less than SEK 117,590 (approximately \$16,615.51 CAD) annually, the days at the sickness benefit level will be paid at SEK 250 (approximately \$34.79 CAD) per day, which equals to SEK 7,500 (approximately \$1,059.75 CAD) per month (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Self-employed parents also receive this flat rate, unless they make more than SEK 117,590 (approximately \$16,615.51 CAD) per month, for which they will be paid based on their income with a maximum of SEK 967 (approximately \$136.64 CAD) per day at the sickness benefit level (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Furthermore, parents also have the option of reducing work hours from full-time to part-time during or after being on parental leave. For instance, if a parent wishes to go from full-time to part-time hours, they must take at least two and half days of parental benefits per week. In addition, if a parent wishes to reduce their hours to 75%, they must take at least one and one-fourth days of parental benefit per week (Försäkringskassan, n.d.).

### Canada's Parental Leave System

For Canada, a search with the terms: 'Canada parental leave' was conducted on the Google search engine. A page on the official Government of Canada website explaining the parental benefits offered by Employment Insurance (EI) was found. The website presented the information in the form of different steps - a systematic way to facilitate individual navigation of the specific information. All the steps were followed to gather all information needed for my analysis. Employment Insurance (EI) offers parents both maternity benefits that are only for women who have given birth, and parental benefits to which any parent can apply. The page divides its information into 5 sub-categories: 'What these benefits offer', 'Eligibility', 'How

much you could receive’, ‘Apply’, ‘After you apply’ and ‘Special circumstances’. The sections ‘How much you could receive’ and ‘After you apply’ are not described below, as they do not provide any relevant details for this research and all required information was found in the remaining sections.

### *Types of Benefits*

Canada’s EI offers both maternity and parental benefits. Maternity benefits are reserved for the person giving birth and consist of 15 weeks at 55% of insurable earnings, with a maximum of \$573 per week (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). Maternity benefits can be taken as early as 12 weeks before the due date, in the case of health complications during pregnancy, or on the date a woman gives birth and as late to 17 weeks after the due date or the date of childbirth, whichever is later (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). For birth parents, maternity benefits can be followed by parental benefits. All other parents receive parental benefits only. Parents have the choice between two models, summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3: Summary of EI parental benefits (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015)**

<b>Benefits name</b>	<b>Maximum weeks</b>	<b>Benefit rate (%)</b>	<b>Weekly maximum (\$)</b>
Standard parental	40 weeks total (but one parent cannot take more than 35 weeks of standard benefits)	55%	\$573
Extended parental	69 weeks total (but one parent cannot take more than 61 weeks of extended benefits)	33%	\$344

Parents are restricted from changing plans once they have started receiving benefits. Individuals must choose one plan and cannot exceed the allocated number of weeks. However, it is possible for parents to take a non-consecutive parental leave, but, they must re-apply every time they plan on receiving the benefits. Parental benefits can be taken starting a week after the child was born or the date when a child was adopted. For the standard parental leave, the benefits

can be taken up until 52 weeks after the birth/arrival of a child, while the extended parental plan can be taken up until 78 weeks after the birth/arrival of child, as indicated in the ‘Apply’ section (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). It is important to note that the compensation rate a person will receive while on leave will depend on their insurable earnings. These include all income received from employment prior to applying for EI parental benefits, such as wages, tips, bonuses and commissions (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). A parent may also receive additional income from their employer in the form of a top-up. This amount varies for each employer and is not guaranteed. Other exceptions can be made for parents who changed employment before applying or who earn \$25,921 or less per year (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015).

### *Eligibility Criteria*

The ‘Eligibility’ section outlines the following criteria to qualify for EI maternity and parental benefits:

- “You’re pregnant or have recently given birth when requesting maternity benefits
- You’re a parent caring for a newborn or newly adopted child when requesting parental benefits
- Your regular weekly earnings from work have decreased by more than 40% for at least one week
- You accumulated 600 insured hours of work in the 52 weeks before the start of your claim or since the start of your last claim, whichever is shorter”

(Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015)

Some special eligibility criteria are also highlighted depending on the work-based status of the individual applying. If a parent is self-employed, they must have registered for special EI benefits for self-employed people and waited 12 months from confirmed registration to be eligible to apply for parental benefits. Also, the amount of hours worked must have decreased by

40% for at least one week because of pregnancy or care for a newborn/newly adopted child (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). The self-employed parent must have earned a minimum amount of \$7,279 (subject to change every year) of self-employed earnings in the last calendar year before applying for benefits (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). Finally, if a parent is not a Canadian citizen, they are still eligible to obtain these parental benefits as long as they have a valid social insurance number.

### *Special Circumstances*

EI maternity and parental benefits recognize special circumstances that can impact the individual applying for these benefits. For instance, in the case of a miscarriage, termination or stillbirth in the 20<sup>th</sup> week of gestation or later, women are eligible for maternity benefits but not parental benefits (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). In the case of multiple children born/adopted at once, the number of allocated weeks for maternity and parental benefits does not change. In the case of surrogacy, women who have given birth are eligible for maternity benefits only. Other special circumstances are highlighted on the website but only the ones pertaining to my research focus have been described.

### Quebec's Parental Leave System

For Quebec, no keywords were needed for the search, as the Canadian EI website contained a link redirecting to the page on parental benefits in Quebec, offered by Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP). The website illustrates the different conditions that apply based on employment status; whether the applicant is a “wage earner”, “self-employed” or both. All categories were consulted for this research in order to gain a full understanding of the options offered by the parental leave system. Quebec residents remain eligible for the Canadian EI maternity and parental benefits as well.

### *Types of Benefits*

QPIP offers a basic plan and a special plan for both wage earners and self-employed individuals. Parents must select one plan for the entire duration of the benefit period. Both parents must choose the same benefit plan even if they are separated and share custody of the child. Within these two plans are maternity, paternity, parental, and adoption benefits, which can be taken simultaneously or in succession. The benefits are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4: Summary of QPIP parental benefits (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018)**

Types of Benefits	Basic Plan	Special Plan
Maternity or Termination of pregnancy <sup>8</sup> before 19 <sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy (exclusively for the woman who gave birth)	Maximum of 18 weeks with weekly benefits of 70% of the average weekly earnings	Maximum of 15 weeks with weekly benefits of 75% of the average weekly earnings
Paternity (exclusively for the father)	Maximum of 5 weeks with weekly benefits of 70% of the average weekly earnings.	Maximum of 3 weeks with weekly benefits of 75% of the average weekly earnings)
Parental (may be shared between the parents)	Maximum of 32 weeks with 70% of the average weekly earnings for the first 7 weeks and 55% for the other 25 weeks	Maximum of 25 weeks with weekly benefits of 75% of the average weekly earnings)
Adoption (may be shared between the adoptive parents)	Maximum of 37 weeks with 70% of the average weekly earnings for the first 12 weeks and 55% for the other 25 weeks	Maximum of 28 weeks with weekly benefits of 75% of the average weekly earnings)

In the case of a same-sex couple consisting of two women, the types of benefits they obtain will depend on the circumstances under which they became parents. In the case of a lesbian couple, if one of the parent has given birth, they are eligible for maternity and parental benefits (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). The woman who has not given birth but appears on the birth certificate has access to the paternity benefits. For a same-sex couple consisting of two

<sup>8</sup> ‘Maternity’ benefits and ‘Termination of pregnancy’ (which includes abortion) benefits are two separate categories. Since they offer the same compensation rates and length of time off and cannot be taken simultaneously, they were combined together in the table.

men, they are only eligible for paternity benefits if one of them is the biological father. In both cases, parental benefits can be shared between both partners. Additionally, adoption benefits are available when both individuals adopt a child or when one adopts their partner's child (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). For all parents, benefits from either plan can be taken up until 18 weeks after the birth or adoption of a child.

### *Eligibility Criteria*

Outlined below are the eligibility conditions:

- “Be the parent of a child born or adopted on or after January 1, 2006
- Be a resident of Quebec on the start date of your benefit period (and on December 31 of the year preceding the start date of the benefit period)
- Have stopped working or seen a reduction of at least 40% in your usual employment income (salary)
  - [In the case of a self-employed individual:] Have ceased your business activities or reduced time spent on them by at least 40% [...]
- Have at least \$2,000 in insurable income or earnings (income considered for benefit calculation purposes) during the qualifying period, regardless of the number of hours worked
- Have paid or owe a QPIP premium during the qualifying period” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018)

When the parent is a wage earner, the time of the leave must be agreed upon with the employer. Earnings in the 52 weeks prior to the birth or adoption of a child are taken into consideration during the application process (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). QPIP also provides additional assistance with an increase in benefits for low-income families if their net family income is less than \$25,921 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). This additional amount is determined through other types of benefits. Additional special circumstances, however, were not relevant to my research objectives.

The parental leave systems in Sweden as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada have undergone multiple revisions after public outcry and to adapt to social norms of the time. To determine if the revised parental benefits are in line with modern conceptions of gender equality, the eligibility and special circumstances criteria as well as the type of benefits will be discussed in my analysis.

### **Inequality in Sweden, as well as Quebec, and the rest of Canada**

The jurisdictions of Sweden, as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada are examined in terms of other possible areas of inequality in each location to understand the social context in which the parental leave systems are structured in. In addition, while the consideration of gender differences is at the heart of this research, other factors must be acknowledged as well when discussing the existing inequalities in the parental benefits received by parents. It is important to consider intersectionality, which is defined as the ways in which “gender interacts with other inequalities such as social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality to produce different effects on people” (Lombardo & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016, p. 365). The concept of intersectionality highlights the importance of not only capturing the different experiences of men and women but also diversity of experiences within each group. Lombardo and Rolandsen Agustin (2016) emphasize the necessity of adopting an intersectional approach in policymaking. In order to expose the ways in which some policies can stigmatize certain groups of people more than others and to how context can shape the type of inequalities addressed in policies (Lombardo & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016). In other words, it serves to improve the quality of the policies and ensures an equal distribution of benefits to all groups of people. The literature points to some inequalities pertaining to employment, diverse family structures and immigration status in Canada and Sweden that can hinder individuals’ access to parental benefits in each nation.

## Employment Inequalities

Claims in the literature indicate that motherhood encourages employment among women with children (Boje, 2007). While there is evidence of high numbers of mothers in the labour market, some negative effects of parenthood still apply. The concept of a ‘motherhood penalty’ is discussed in the literature, and consists of a significant reduction in wages that is associated with having children (Budig & England, 2001). Many factors have been identified as contributing factors to this wage penalty.

According to recent statistics, the gender wage gap in Sweden remains lower than Canada’s. Swedish women earn on average 7.1% less than men, Canadian women earn on average 18.5% less than their male counterparts (OECD, 2020b). The gap is even larger for self-employed women. In fact, self-employed Swedish women make on average 17.2% less than men while Canadian women make 34.9% less than their male counterparts (OECD, 2020b). While the nature of the work performed is indicative of wage inequality, other factors have been identified that hinder women’s labour market outcomes.

On the other hand, Mandel & Semyonov (2005) claim that the gender earnings gap increases with the extent of family policies in a nation. They explain that family policies can actually limit occupational opportunities and earning capacities of women. Employer discrimination is another factor that has been associated with the ‘motherhood wage penalty’. With longer parental leaves and reduced work hours while on leave, employers in Sweden are generally more reluctant to hire women into high status and high paying jobs (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Yu & Kuo, 2017). In addition, the authors also identified some differences associated with a country’s welfare state regime. In fact, Mandel & Semyonov (2005) found that women in a liberal welfare state have a higher chance of obtaining a managerial job than those

living in a social-democratic regime. The former tends to offer shorter parental leaves, increasing the availability of women for employment and their likelihood to get promoted. These findings illustrate that extensive family policies might be partially contributing to the reverse effect of increasing the gender wage gap in employment and hindering women's career trajectories.

Furthermore, the literature also identifies that women and men seek different types of employment, creating a labour market that is segregated by gender (Borchorst et al., 2012). Women tend to be highly concentrated in the public sector where they are more likely to find flexible working hours and greater job security (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005). Women with children tend to seek employment that allows them to have more control over their work schedule, thereby reducing work-family conflict. In addition, they are also more likely than men to be in part-time employment in both Canada and Sweden in order to be able to care for dependent children (Boje, 2007). In Canada, 71.6% of women are employed, with 25.8% of them employed part-time (OECD, 2020a, 2020c). On the other hand, of the 77.1% of employed men in Canada, 12.2% of them were working part-time in 2019 (OECD, 2020a, 2020c). In Sweden, 75.4% of women and 78.7% of men were employed in 2018, 17.4% of the former worked part-time, compared to 10.3% for the latter (OECD, 2020a, 2020c). Furthermore, women perform more unpaid work than men, which includes routine housework, care for household members, and child care (OECD, 2018). In Canada, adult men spend on average 148 minutes per day performing unpaid work while adult women spend on average 224 minutes per day (OECD, 2018). In Sweden, adult men spend on average 171 minutes per day and women, 220 minutes per day performing unpaid work (OECD, 2018). These figures indicate that women tend to seek employment that allows more flexibility for family commitments and are still performing more unpaid work than men in both Canada and Sweden.

### Diverse Family Structures

Diverse family structures have resulted in a need for a wider variety of parental benefit options. Both countries have legalized same-sex marriage and the populations generally have a positive attitude toward the LGBTQ community (Klittmark et al., 2019). Family formation is occurring in many ways in LGBTQ families such as artificial insemination, surrogacy, adoption, and children conceived in previous heterosexual relationships. Many families have made use of in-vitro fertilization methods to conceive, which now accounts for millions of births worldwide each year (Eskew & Jungheim, 2017, p. 156). Both Canada and Sweden also have a significant rate of single-parent households. These various forms of parenthood can come with some challenges when applying for parental benefits.

One of the very few studies regarding same-sex parents' access to parental leave indicates that they can experience some disadvantage depending on their gender and their path to parenthood. For instance, Wong et al. (2019) illustrate that lesbian parents in Canada (excluding Quebec), where one of them is the biological parent, will benefit the same way as heterosexual couples having a biological child. On the other hand, gay male parents where one of them is the biological parent, will not have access to the full parental leave days offered by Employment Insurance (EI) because maternity leave benefits are only available to the biological mother (Wong et al., 2019). However, when gay or lesbian parents go through the process of adoption, they will obtain the same level of benefits as heterosexual adoptive parents. This study clearly identifies Canada's federal parental leave system is structured around providing full benefits for parents who have given birth and lesser benefits for parents who have not, including male same-sex couples and adoptive parents.

Furthermore, a study published by Henry & Wetherell (2017) claims that countries with greater gender equality tend to have laws and policies that are supportive of LGBTQ people. The level of gender equality reflects the gender norms association with masculinity and femininity. As such, the treatment of women is linked to the attitudes towards lesbian and gay individuals who challenge gender norms (Henry & Wetherell, 2017). These findings are in line with Wong et al.'s (2019) results about the extent of parental benefits received by same-sex parents. In fact, the gender-neutral nature of the parental leave system in Sweden allows for all parents, regardless of partnership status, gender or path to parenthood, to obtain an equal amount of parental benefits (Wong et al., 2019). While same-sex parents might still face challenges with heteronormativity in their journey to parenthood, Sweden's parental leave system eliminates it by offering all parents the same level of parental benefits.

Single-parents may also experience difficulty in obtaining full parental benefits due to their status in the workforce. Firstly, the majority of single parents are mothers. In Canada, single-mother households accounted for 81% of single parent households in 2014 (Statistics Canada, 2015). In addition, single mothers are less likely to work full-time, or at all, when compared with dual parent couples. In 2015, 33% of single mothers with a young child under 6 years old did not report any work activity (Statistics Canada, 2018). Similarly, 77.4% of single parent households were headed by a single mother in Sweden in 2018 (Statistics Sweden, 2019). Single mothers work on average between 20-30 hours a week while men work between 30-40 hours per week (Statistics Sweden, 2018). With only one parent involved in the labour market, it can be difficult for single parents to qualify for a parental leave if the requirements are based on the number of hours worked. With the higher rates of single mothers involved in part-time work, they are more vulnerable to this requirement. Thus, in the family forms presented in this section,

gender inequality persists leading to an unequal distribution of parental benefits between men and women.

### Immigrant Families

Sweden, as well as Quebec, and the rest of Canada, each have a parental leave system that is inextricably linked to the number of hours an individual has worked in the labour market. As such, recent immigrants who find themselves in lower-paying jobs will not have access to the same level of parental benefits. Although measures are in place to penalize discrimination in the Penal and Civil codes, the universal model offered in Sweden is not equally accessible to everyone, especially racial and ethnic minorities (Lister, 2007). Despite having the largest multicultural population of the Nordic countries, individuals from minority groups in Sweden are not well-integrated into the labour market (Lister, 2007). In fact, migrant and non-Swedish ethnic groups are more likely to live in poverty than native groups (Lister, 2007). Since the late 1990s, the employment rate for foreign-born persons living in Sweden between the ages of 20 and 64 years is about 20% lower than average (Ekberg, 2011). The most vulnerable people in this group are foreign-born women, with 67% employed compared to 87% of native-born Swedish women (Statistics Sweden, 2018). If women from the former group do not have a post-secondary education, they are more likely than the latter group to face unemployment with 32.5% of them being unemployed in 2018 (Statistics Sweden, 2018). As such, immigrant parents are more likely to receive limited parental benefits.

A similar situation can be found in Canada. Despite being highly educated, immigrants who seek work in Canada are often not able to benefit from their educational credentials compared to Canadian-born workers (Bauder, 2006). The specific number of Canadian immigrants who do not have their credentials recognized is unknown, however individual

provincial statistics show that less than 50% of immigrants are able to have their accreditation recognized in Canada (Bauder, 2006, p. 92). The process of deskilling discourages and prevents immigrants from working in their field of study. Other factors also play a role in the exclusion of migrant workers in Canada such as employers requiring their employees to have Canadian work experience. Their limited knowledge of workplace norms and expectations can often lead to immigrants finding themselves in jobs with lower salaries (Lai et al., 2017). This can influence immigrant parents' access to parental leave by limiting their chance to qualify for parental benefits.

These inequalities reinforce the importance of considering gender differences in various sectors when analyzing the parental leave system. Individuals' position in the labour market as well as the diversity of family structures can often be under-represented in the parental leave system, thereby introducing challenges in obtaining parental benefits to their full potential. The extent of their presence within Quebec, the rest of Canada, and Sweden reinforces the importance of considering each nation separately due to their different social contexts and social norms.

### **Gender Equality in Sweden and Canada**

Sweden and Canada each have an established gender equality policy, available to the public on their official government websites. My document search focused on highlighting the countries' objectives and strategies towards the achievement of gender equality. The keywords 'objectives' or 'goals' had to be present in the document. To find this document for Sweden, the terms: 'gender equality policy Sweden' were used in Google. This search brought me to Sweden's official government website page dedicated to information pertaining to the country's mission towards achieving gender equality. This is where the *Gender equality policy in Sweden*

was found. This online document was published by the Ministry of Gender Equality and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 2019. For Canada, similar key terms were used in the Google search engine. The key terms ‘gender equality policy Canada’ were used and provided me with various websites pertaining to gender equality in the country. The *Policy on Gender Equality* implemented in 2017 on the Global Affairs Canada website was selected, given its match to my established keywords prior to the start of my search. Although this online document outlines gender equality goals for international projects, it highlights the Canadian government’s conceptualization of gender equality. As such, it was pertinent to analyze this document to see if Canada incorporates nationally what it seeks to implement internationally. More key concepts were drawn from both documents in order to analyze their reflection on the parental leave systems of Sweden as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada later in the analysis section.

#### The Gender Equality Policy in Sweden

The *Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* was established by the Minister for Gender Equality and the Minister for Foreign Affairs as part of their commitment to a feminist government in 2019 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The policy document highlights their current objectives to achieve gender equality as well as future goals to acknowledge some identified areas of shortcomings. It also provides an analysis of different sectors pertaining to gender equality where progress and limitations are highlighted. The sections of this document considered in my analysis are *Feminist government, Three important welfare reforms to promote gender equality in Sweden, Labour market, Parental leave reform, Involving men and boys in gender equality and promoting healthier gender norms*. The sections *Gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting, Gender mainstreaming in government agencies, Health, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and abortion, Preventing and combating men’s*

*violence against women, Elderly care and women's pensions and Prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes* are not described because they provide specific details about policy-making processes that are not pertinent to my analysis.

The policy document recognizes that despite Sweden's improvement in gender equality matters, "women and men, girls and boys still do not have access to resources and power on equal terms"(Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). They also mention the importance of men and boys' involvement in gender equality work to achieve the main goal of the policy, which is to ensure "women and men shall have the same power to shape society and their own lives" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The *Gender equality policy in Sweden* claims that, as a feminist government, Sweden continues to realize their feminist agenda since "gender equality is not only a goal in itself but also a prerequisite for sustainable development" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019).

In addition to the main goal, the policy document also outlines six sub-goals:

- "Equal division of power and influence. Women and men must have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and to shape the conditions for decision-making.
- Economic equality. Women and men must have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to paid work which gives economic independence throughout life.
- Equal education. Women and men, girls and boys must have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to education, study options and personal development.
- Equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care. Women and men must have the same responsibility for housework and have the opportunity to give and receive care on equal terms.
- Equal health. Women and men, girls and boys must have the same conditions for a good health and be offered care on equal terms.
- Men's violence against women must stop. Women and men, girls and boys, must have the same right to and opportunity for physical integrity." (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019)

As a strategy to assess and eliminate gender inequality, Sweden uses gender mainstreaming<sup>9</sup> and gender-responsive budgeting. These strategies pertain to policymaking and budget processes, and thus, are not considered for my analysis.

Furthermore, the policy document briefly describes three important welfare reforms that helped promote gender equality in Sweden: separate income taxation for wife and husband (1971), public child care (government decision 1974) and gender-neutral paid parental leave benefits (1974) (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The policy claims that these “reforms pushed gender equality and increased women’s prospects to have the same opportunities as men to enter the labour market, and to remain and develop there” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). It also indicates that these reforms have encouraged and allowed for men to participate more in family life. It also helped women gain access to employment and financial independence because “parts of the unpaid household and care work, often performed by women, became the responsibility of the public welfare system” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The *Gender equality policy in Sweden* states that the “continued investments in the welfare system are essential for gender equality, as a well-functioning welfare sector enables both women and men to participate in the labour market on equal terms” and for parents, “to combine work and family life” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019).

The section titled *Labour market* discusses gender inequalities and the gender pay gap in the labour market. It acknowledges that women and men have different trajectories in the labour force, with mothers heavily involved in part-time work compared to men, as well as being more likely to “reduce their time in gainful employment” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The

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<sup>9</sup> This strategy is not defined in details in the policy document. Gender mainstreaming consists of internalizing gender during policymaking processes and moving away from a male bias (Lombardo et al., 2017).

policy also offers strategies to address this issue, which is not detailed as this information is not relevant to my research purpose.

In addition, *The Gender equality policy in Sweden* highlights specific areas in relation to the established goals (see p. 34), in which women are at a disadvantage, explaining the government's goals and measures put in place to eliminate this inequality (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). For the purpose of this research, only the *Parental leave reform* section has been examined in greater detail. The policy highlights that Sweden is very proud to be the first country in the world to introduce a gender-neutral paid parental leave benefit. This "family policy is aimed at supporting a dual-earner family model and ensuring the same rights and obligations regarding family and work for both women and men." (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019).

Despite this advancement, the policy document notes that "the usage of the parental leave is still unevenly distributed between women and men" and that "the equal sharing of parental leave is one important measure that could strengthen women's position in the labour market and benefit gender equality" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The section titled *Involving men and boys in gender equality and promoting healthier gender norms* similarly argues that "men also need to become much more involved in sharing unpaid domestic and care work, in breaking the gender segregation of the labour market[...]" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). In the end, the goal for the parental leave is to "better contribute to gender equal parenting and provide flexibility for various family constellations" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The sectors of women's health, domestic violence, elderly care, and prostitution are discussed in the policy document as being areas requiring improvement for the achievement of gender equality as well (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019).

## Canada's Policy on Gender Equality

Canada established the *Policy on Gender Equality* through Global Affairs Canada, as part of the country's funding plans for international initiatives. This policy document seeks to outline measures to support the achievement of equality between women and men as well as to achieve "a better world for all - a new world where inequality on any grounds, be it gender, class, race or ethnicity, is finally overcome" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). The document is divided into five sections titled: *Goal and objectives*, *Principles*, *Gender analysis as a tool*, *Good practices to promote gender equality*, and *Gender analysis guidelines*. The third and fourth sections are not described here since they provide details on gender analysis and the different levels of promotion for gender equality that are not relevant to this project. The sections identified above are further examined below for their relevance.

According to the *Goal and objectives* section, the main goal of the *Policy on Gender Equality* is "to support the achievement of equality between women and men to ensure sustainable development" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). The document outlines the objectives:

- "To advance women's equal participation with men as decision makers in shaping the sustainable development of their societies;
- To support women and girls in the realization of their full human rights; and
- To reduce gender inequalities in access to and control over the resources and benefits of development." (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017)

The document includes a sub-section entitled *Gender equity and gender equality* where the distinction between the two terms is outlined. It defines gender equity as "to ensure fairness [between men and women], measures are often needed to compensate for historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from otherwise operating as equals. Equity leads to

equality.” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). Gender equality is defined as “women and men enjoy[ing] the same status and hav[ing] equal opportunity to realize their full human rights and potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social and cultural development, and to benefit from the results.” Canada’s policy on gender equality acknowledges that giving men and women the same opportunity is not enough to achieve equality, given that similar treatment between the two “was not found to yield equal results” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). Instead, “gender equity” acknowledges that “women and men may sometimes require different treatment to achieve similar results, due to different life conditions or to compensate for past discrimination” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). The policy stresses the importance of valuing both the similarities and the differences between men and women in terms of the roles they undertake.

The section entitled *Principles* highlights the foundations in which the policy is rooted. The first one stresses the importance of incorporating gender equality by focusing on the needs and interest of women within all policies of Global Affairs Canada. Another one points to the fact that “every policy, program and project affects women and men differently” and that “policies, programs and projects must address the difference in experiences and situations between and among women and men” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). The last point clarifies that “gender equality does not mean that women become the same as men” but instead “one’s rights or opportunities do not depend on being male or female” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017).

This section also describes the concept of empowerment, defined as “taking control over their lives” and the ways in which it contributes to gender equality (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). It urges institutions to support processes that can contribute

to the empowerment of women. While some of the strategies proposed are not relevant to my research, others stand out, notably the concept of “promoting the equal participation of women as agents of exchange in economic, social and political processes [as] essential to achieving gender equality” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). It also highlights the fact “gender equality can only be achieved through partnership between women and men” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). In fact, it considers gender inequality as an issue which concerns both men and women and involves “changes in attitudes, behaviour, roles and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, in the community, and in national, donor and international institutions” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017).

The last section entitled, *Gender analysis guidelines* provides strategies to understand the source of gender inequality and potential solutions. It highlights the need to “gain an understanding of gender relations, the division of labour between men and women (who does what work), and who has access to, and control over, resources” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). It also proposes to “include domestic (reproductive) and community work in the work profile” and “recognize the ways women and men work and contribute to the economy, their family and society” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). Other solutions proposed were oriented towards policymaking processes and their future improvements.

### **Feminist Approaches to Gender Inequality**

As previously mentioned, parental benefits were an intervention that was conceived by states to encourage female workforce participation. However, gender equality remains unachieved in family life. Le Feuvre et al. (2012) introduced the concept of defamilialization, which refers to the extent to which the welfare state enables women to survive as independent

workers and decrease the importance of the family in women's lives" (p.73). Defamilialization encourages the commodification of care outside of the family sphere (Daly, 2011). To achieve this, gendered behaviour within the family sphere needs to be altered. To do so, Duvander et al. (2010) claim that more equity in the family can increase men's interest in children and lead to an equal share of the responsibility in the family sphere. However, many feminist critiques have affirmed that this is not enough to achieve gender equality. Various debates can be found in the literature on efficient strategies that would lead to a complete transformation of gender relations within the private sphere.

### Gender Sameness and Gender Difference Approaches

When examining the policymaking process, two major debates exist that both have the same goal of achieving full gender equality. The first one is the gender sameness debate, which argues that men and women should be given the same opportunities and considered on equal terms (Nash, 2000). Policies opting for special treatment for women would prevent them from achieving equality in the workforce and lead them to depend on men financially. Furthermore, with the greater financial value associated with work-related insurance, Nash (2000) emphasized that women would remain disproportionately represented in welfare recipients. O'Connor et al. (1999) claim that Canada applies the gender-sameness notion to their welfare system by encouraging women to be both parents and workers simultaneously. The policies were aimed at ensuring equal opportunity in the market as well as social protection. However, Le Feuvre et al. (2012) point out that the social protection women receive is very limited and prevents them from achieving economic equality with men. Women can receive three types of social protection where only one of them is related to their own labour market participation. The other two are dependent on their status as a spouse of an employed man and as a caregiver (Le Feuvre et al.,

2012). As such, the gender-sameness approach cannot always be successful in policymaking as it does not address the existing inequality of women in the distribution of welfare benefits.

The second debate in the literature is the gender difference approach which reinforces the importance of creating policies that cater to women's particular needs and aid them in getting on par with men. Nash (2000) uses the example of maternity leave to illustrate this issue. She claims that pregnancy is specific to women and thus cannot be described in a gender-neutral context. The gender difference perspective consists of the argument that for equal rights to be achieved between men and women, the state must recognize this specificity and create policies that will prevent women from being disadvantaged by it.

A movement that follows this ideology is maternalism. Maternalist discourse encourages motherhood and proposes the achievement of gender equality through care work within the public domain (Lister, 2007). An example of this can be seen in Quebec's pronatalist approach. Women were seen as essential in the continuity of the French population and much emphasis was placed on their ability to reproduce for the nation's survival. However, this has been criticized as being biologically-reductionist and as determining women's fates and identities for them (Maroney, 1992). O'Connor et al. (1999) state that neither gender difference nor gender sameness will lead to equality. Instead, this outcome depends on the orientation of the policies in place and on the consideration of the relationship between state, market and families (O'Connor et al., 1999). Thus, both the gender sameness and the gender difference debates have shortcomings where policies designed to achieve gender equality fall short of their goal.

### Gender Neutrality a Solution?

Family policies in the Nordic countries encourage a dual-earner family model, with equal contribution from both parents in terms of childcare and wage-earning. Sweden was also faced

with a high participation of women in the labour market, with 67.7% of them being mothers with children under 1 in 2007 (Duvander et al., 2010, p. 46). As a response, Sweden established gender neutral quotas, where both parents have an equal amount of allocated time from the parental leave. In fact, since the eligibility criteria do not require employment participation, this leads to most mothers taking benefits since all parents residing in the country are entitled to them (Duvander et al., 2010). However, Sweden considers employment as a means of self-fulfillment and thus seek to help parents, especially women, avoid having to choose between their employment and childrearing (Hantrias & Letabiler, 2014). Sweden's parental leave system has been described as being employment-oriented as well (Duvander et al., 2010). The possibility of working part-time hours while receiving parental benefits offered to parents gives them a strong incentive to return to work after their parental leave. Sweden conceptualizes parents as being citizen-earners and citizen-carers in an attempt to increase gender equality in families. However, while the concept of citizen-earners supports this goal, citizen-carers is where inequality remains and where Sweden focuses their policies (Lister, 2007).

With a gender-neutral parental leave, Sweden attempts to make an egalitarian work-family balance between men and women a norm instead of an option (Duvander et al., 2010). While this method might put Sweden on the right track to achieve gender equality, it will not happen right away. In fact, policies favouring gender equality need to be in place for some time before their effects can be noticed. Engeli & Mazur (2018) claim that these policies need to be assessed five to ten years after their implementation "to allow enough time for practices to take place in the household" (p. 121). Furthermore, Engeli & Mazur (2018) have been critical of the gender-neutral approach altogether. The authors call policies following this approach purely symbolic and claim that they produce no real outcomes because of the lack of human resources

and financial investment during the implementation process. Instead, they claim that the only way these gender-neutral policies will work is through a full transformation of dominant gender norms in public actions (Engeli & Mazur, 2018). In other words, creating policies that encourage both men and women to be caregivers and breadwinners will only work if it is put in practice in *everyday* family life.

In the end, the division of parental leave is often seen as an indicator of gender equality, however it is only the first step of a long process. This section illustrates that the different approaches used to modify gender relations do not always have the desired effect. Sweden, as well as Quebec, and the rest of Canada's paths towards gender equality are different and thus reinforce the need to compare them on the basis of their own set goals towards this achievement.

### **Marxist theories: Political Economy**

The industrial revolution was characterized by the movement of the workplace outside of the household, forcing men and children to sell their labour. To examine the effects of industrialization and the creation of both private and public spheres in society, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels created a political economy theory which consists of "people's relation to wealth, production and power influenc[ing] the way they view the world and live their lives" (Tepperman, 2009, p. 213). This theory also encompasses the idea that family formation is affected by laws and government programs, such as social policies. While exploring this new relationship between individuals and labour, both Marx and Engels examine the reliance of capitalism on social reproduction.

Marx's work on *Capital*, with the contribution of Engels as well, consists of exploring capitalism's effects on populations. Notably, they explain capitalism as being maintained by an essential two-fold character, in other words two main components (Marx, 2018). This consists of

the production of means of subsistence, such as food and shelter, and also the reproduction process to ensure the propagation of humankind (Marx, 2018). In addition, this process of production needs to remain continuous in order to sustain capitalism. This notion showcases that the maintenance of the structures of a capitalist society rely on population growth. However, they claim that reproduction, just like the economy of a society, must be planned and controlled by the state (Engels, 2010). Human reproduction will ensure efficiency in the process of labour production and the maintenance of capitalism. In the modern day, family policies influence parental choices and thus directly affect family life. Hence, political economy theory implies that the economy and the state are greatly connected to family life, making the private sphere, defined as the household, directly influenced by the public sphere, defined as the labour market.

Despite sharing interest in the same domains as Marx, Engels had a particular interest in the sexual and family relations in society. In his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, originally published in 1884, he also attributes the development of the division of labor to the arrival of capitalist modes of production (Engels, 2010). He pushes his analysis further and claims that women became domestic slaves and instruments for the production of children in capitalist societies (Engels, 2010). During the industrial revolution, they became in charge of the household, which was now considered the private sector, and were excluded from participation in public modes of production. If women did work in the public sphere, they could not perform family duties, thereby reinforcing men's role as sole earners for their families. In other words, Engels (2010) contends that gender inequality comes from the economic structure and will only cease to exist once capital exploitation is completely abolished and household work is transferred to the public industry.

## **Feminist Political Economy**

Feminist political economy began as a critique of Marx and Engels' gender-blindness in their work which alternatively ignored women or labelled them as victims, or actors, of their own oppression (Andrew et al., 2003). Thus, feminist scholars began to examine women's disadvantaged positions in the economy by "gendering" the concept of class, through the examination of gender inequality in the labour market (Andrew et al., 2003). According to a definition by Armstrong and Connelly (1999), feminist political economy focuses on the structures and relations that create, reflect and sustain class, gender and other inequalities (p. 1). In other words, class is to be reconceptualized through race and gender through different social contexts. All of these factors interact with class in various ways, as one factor can become more salient than others at different points in time, leading to a social relationship encompassing elements of labour, power, emotion, language (Armstrong & Connelly, 1999; Orloff, 2009).

At the core of feminist political economy is the notion of contradiction found in state practices being essential to social structures and social relations. Women can both benefit and be hindered by the state practices. For instance, "feminists [...] found themselves looking to the state for employment, services and protection while attacking that same state for reinforcing patriarchy and the unequal relations among women through the same process" (Armstrong & Connelly, 1999, p. 2). The main components of feminist political economy research that have been used to guide my analysis of Sweden, as well as Quebec, and the rest of Canada's parental leaves and gender equality goals will be explored in this section.

### Social Reproduction

The main object of focus in feminist political economy theory is whether social reproduction is achieved through the division of labour or in the maintenance of the heterosexual

nuclear family dynamic (Andrew et al., 2003). Social reproduction revolves around three main aspects: the biological reproduction of the species, the reproduction of the labour force, and the reproduction and provision of caring needs within families (Bakker, 2007). All three of these concepts are present within family structures involving children and are argued to be at the core of gender inequality. With this argument in mind, the parental leave system can be seen as supporting reproduction to ensure the survival of humankind as well as the economy of a nation. However, the focus on social reproduction with the lack of provision of caring needs from the state creates gender inequality.

Furthermore, three representative models characterizing social reproduction were proposed by Bakker and Silvey (2008) explaining the relation between social reproduction and the state. The minimalist informal model revolves around basic public revenue sustaining social reproduction and very little recognition of the work and family balance, defined as the “recognition of duality of childbearing and labour market attachment” (p. 32). The “work and family balance” is defined as the ability for an individual to balance their time between parental duties and their role as a worker in the labour market. The regulationist model would allow for a high or significant degree of state support to aid in the work and family balance. This model recognizes the duality of childbearing and the labour market but still through a male breadwinner bias, with a clear separation of the production and reproduction spheres. Lastly, the integrationist model would offer adequately paid parental leave and would privilege social reproduction rights over capitalist rights, by requiring less hours in paid work and allocating a dedicated leave for fathers. Bakker and Silvey (2008) recognize that policy-making is part of social reproduction. The way they are conceptualized will determine the functioning of the state, the market, and the relationship these models have with social reproduction (Bakker & Silvey, 2008).

### Collective Responsibility of Social Reproduction

Feminist scholars using a political economy framework believe parental leave needs to be a “collective responsibility” between governments and employers (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006, p. 93). This means that all members of society should be collectively responsible for childcare and spread the cost of raising children between parents and non-parents (Luxton, 1997). Three main reasons for this logic are offered by Luxton (1997). She claims that children are the workers and taxpayers of tomorrow and hence, should be supported by the state to which they will contribute one day. In addition, Luxton (1997) argues that spreading the cost of child-rearing would help equalize the income of parents over their life cycle. Last, she claims that since childcare, to a certain extent, hinders the ability to pay taxes, there should be existing financial help for families to aid them in this process (Luxton, 1997). With parents having to be absent from work to care for children, Luxton(1997) believes they should be compensated accordingly. In addition, Bezanson & Luxton (2006) add that the biggest threat against family benefits is public service cuts and the increase of privatization because they decrease the availability of services and jeopardize working conditions and existing collective agreement (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006). In order to preserve current family benefits, pressure must be put on the government and the private sector of employment through union work for example. Feminist scholars argue that cooperative work between the government and the private sector is necessary to preserve and improve family policies. Thus, the extent of this share of responsibility between parents and the state is examined in terms of the measures implemented within the parental leave system, such as the allocated time and the compensation rates.

### Sexual Division of Labour in the Private and Public Spheres

The division of labour within the private sphere affects work performances and politics in the public sphere (O'Connor et al., 1999). Feminist scholars focus their work on the sexual division of labour and the separation between the public and private market spheres that continue to reinforce gender inequalities. Orloff (1993) affirms that social policies within a capitalist society reflect and reinforce relations of dominance and exploitation by using market-based processes to determine welfare outcomes. Since the market tends to ignore the contributions of women working within the private sphere, public welfare is hard to obtain. The provision of welfare only counts when it occurs through the state or the market. Therefore, the parental leave system is employment-focused and is reserved exclusively for individuals who can contribute economically to the state.

Feminist scholars highlight the irony of a state highly dependent on the unrecognized unpaid work of childbearing (Orloff, 1993). Orloff (2009) claims that this lack of recognition comes from the fact that care work is gendered. The invisibility of the private sphere hides the fact that husbands and fathers benefit directly from women's labour within the household. Feminist scholars propose to reduce this sexual division of labour by shifting policy focus on encouraging domestic work performed by public services or men (Orloff, 2009). This argument makes the claim that unpaid work is tied to the biological function of women to facilitate social reproduction. The parental leave system can be examined in terms of the measures implemented to ensure equal opportunity for both parents to partake in the private sphere. As such, this determines whether Sweden, Quebec, as well as the rest of Canada rely on women more than men to take time off for childcare duties.

### Parenting Stigma Reinforcing Gender Inequality

Feminist scholars claim that achieving gender equality lies in abolishing the double standard associated with parenting, created by both men and women (Hartmann, 2004). In other words, she claims that the task of parenting falls on women's shoulders because both men and women reinforce this ideology. Hartmann (2004) calls for an increase in male involvement in caring for children as well as women progressing in the workforce without feeling the guilt of being away from their children. Men are often called bad workers for taking time off to care for children while women are shamed for not doing so (Blair-Loy et al., 2015). Hartmann (1986) stresses the fact that family duties are important to both men and women and recommends that employers offer a flexible work schedule to allow families to balance work and family life. Abolishing a gendered division of labour will in turn, reduce the stigma surrounding childcare and reduce the gender inequality within the workforce and the state policies. Thus, creating greater opportunity for an equal share of the parental benefits between men and women, the parental leave system does not guarantee this outcome, which is crucial to fully achieve gender equality.

### **Esping-Andersen's Welfare State Model**

To understand the jurisdictional contexts of Sweden, as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada's social policies, their welfare systems must be characterized. Esping-Andersen's (1990) work introduced the path-dependency framework and categorized Western capitalist societies into three welfare state regimes: liberal, social democratic, and corporatist. The models differ in their state-market relations, stratification and the social rights they provide their citizens. Esping-Andersen (1990) incorporates some gender issues, such as women's labour force participation and the organization of care work and childbearing by linking them to the political and economic

outcomes of the nations (O'Connor et al., 1999). However, his work was heavily critiqued by feminist scholars in political theory because of his focus on women as workers instead of their complex relations with the state. To better understand where Canada and Sweden are situated within this work, a brief explanation of these models will be explained followed by the feminist critique of Esping-Andersen's (1990) work.

The first welfare state regime Esping-Andersen (1990) identified is liberal. This model can be identified by modest social insurance plans. The liberal model minimizes the de-commodification effects of social assistance provided by the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 49). A duality of both state and market provisions are maintained for citizens. This means that recipients of this type of welfare will only obtain the minimum of what they need, enough to keep them out of extreme poverty and maintain a certain equality among all citizens (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 50). Concerns about gender matter less than the quality of the market. Canada and the United States are countries following this type of welfare state model.

The second regime explained is social democratic which follows the principles of universalism and the de-commodification of social rights. This welfare state model promotes equality and every citizen is guaranteed access to the same quality of rights, independent from the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In other words, welfare not only benefits individuals from lower-income backgrounds but extends to people in the middle class as well. This regime is known for its egalitarian family policies which benefit the family unit as a whole (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The Nordic countries such as Sweden are examples of a nation following the social democratic welfare state model.

The third regime explained is the corporatist welfare state. This model is highly influenced by the Catholic Church where the traditional family along with the gender roles are

maintained (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 49). This model also tends to preserve distinct social classes, with privileges associated with the higher classes. The welfare is provided by the market with private insurances available to the ones who can afford it. That being said, the social insurance tends to exclude women who are not working in the public sphere to encourage the traditional role of housewife (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Any family service benefits are usually underdeveloped to further reinforce motherhood in the private sphere. For the purpose of this research, this model will not be considered as Canada and Sweden fall under the other two welfare state models.

### Feminist Critique of the Welfare State Models

Esping-Andersen's (1990) work was often critique for being shortsighted, as it focused mostly on women in terms of their financial contributions to the state. For instance, feminist scholar Sylvia Walby (2009) was dissatisfied with the lack of consideration of gender beyond the market in Esping-Andersen's welfare state regimes. She claims that the welfare that is provided by women's unpaid work was ignored and does not fit in any of the welfare state regimes he proposed. In his models, Esping-Andersen (1990) sees the decommodification of welfare benefits as a progressive way to eliminate class differences. He claims that individual financial contributions to the welfare state would not determine the extent of benefits received. However, the unpaid work of women in the private sphere is not commodified. Walby (2009) argues that women's unpaid work should be commodified to eliminate gender inequalities in the benefits provided by welfare. She introduces the idea of the gender welfare-regime in which women would be able to form and maintain an autonomous household (Walby, 2009). She argues that the separation of gender from family would allow the market to provide both employment and welfare to all citizens regardless of gender (Walby, 2009).

In addition, Orloff (1993), critiques Esping-Andersen's typology for failing to adequately incorporate gender. She agrees with him on the basis that the policies are framed on the welfare state in which they exist. For instance, the liberal welfare state model, under which Canada and the United States fall, tend to prioritize the market over the evidence of gender differences within it (Orloff, 1996). The responsibility of the care of children is seen as a private matter and there is a heavy reliance on private solutions such as nannies (Blair-Loy et al., 2015). In terms of parental leave in an American context, the benefits are distributed disproportionately to the ones who are further up in the wage scale and the quality varies by the amount individuals contribute in return (O'Connor et al., 1999). A similar pattern is seen in Canada, however Orloff (1996) and Hartmann (2004) acknowledge that the family policies reflect a reconciliation between the socio-democratic model and the liberal model. In fact, O'Connor et al. (1999) offer praise to a liberal regime as being a "viable foundation for women's claim to gender equality" (p. 63).

In the socio-democratic welfare state model, under which most Nordic countries fall, the cost of family-hood is shared socially and the provision of care is seen as a public matter, allowing gender differences in employment to diminish. The Nordic countries have also increased the ideal of sharing parental leave and focus on perceiving men and women as both workers and caregivers (Blair-Loy et al., 2015; Orloff, 2009). However, this does not mean that gender inequality ceases to exist. In fact, the social policies within this welfare state model do not consider the reality that women are heavily concentrated in part-time employment and domestic unpaid work (Orloff, 1996). The fact that women, more than men, tend to shape their employment behaviour around the requirements of caregiving is also ignored (Orloff, 2009). Despite the fact that there is a bridge between private and public life within the socio-democratic welfare state model, Orloff (2009) emphasizes that this model is not always as ideal as it seems.

O'Connor et al. (1999) highlight that there should not be any expectations for liberal countries and social democratic countries to have the same policies because their social contexts are different. Instead, gender equality depends on the capability of exercising social rights. Having egalitarian social policies in place for families does not guarantee their equal access to all citizens. In countries where gender neutrality exists within the parental leave system, access to these benefits varies with the position of the parents in the labour market. If little financial support for childcare is provided by the state, families are unable to exercise their social rights to the fullest. This reinforces the goal of this research to analyze gender equality within the parental leave systems and not to determine which of Canada or Sweden's system is better.

## **ANALYSIS**

This present study takes the form of a systematic policy analysis of the parental leave policies and current agreed upon definitions of gender equality. It examines Quebec, the rest of Canada, and Sweden's respective parental leave systems according to their established goals in their gender equality policies. Quebec's parental leave system is explored apart from Canada's, given the significant differences compared to the federal system. However, Quebec will be examined under Canada's policy on gender equality, since it falls under its jurisdiction. One main question will be used to shape my research:

- How well do the current parental leave policies enacted by Sweden, Quebec, and the rest of Canada embody their contemporary conceptions of gender equality?

In line with the findings in the literature, three themes are used in this analysis for all three jurisdictions. The first is 'Equal participation in both public and private spheres', where the parental leave systems are examined in terms of the possibility of balancing childcare and workforce duties for both parents. The second theme is 'Acknowledgement of the gender differences in the labour market' which determines if the parental leave systems consider the different work patterns between men and women. Lastly, the theme of 'Extension of benefits to all families' identifies if all family types can obtain an equal amount of benefits from the parental leave systems.

### **The Policy on Gender Equality in Quebec and the Rest of Canada**

*The Policy on Gender Equality* seeks to establish "a better world for all - a new world where inequality on any grounds, be it gender, class, race or ethnicity, is finally overcome" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). The objectives of this policy pertain to ensuring an equal participation for men and women in positions of power and an equal

opportunity to achieve full human rights (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). Quebec's provincial and Canada's federal parental leave systems promote an equal share of duties in both the private and public spheres but fail to acknowledge the gender differences in employment patterns and fall short on their commitment to the concept of equity in policymaking processes.

### Equal Participation in Both Public and Private Spheres

Canada's *Policy on Gender Equality* is committed to "promoting the equal participation of women as agents of exchange in economic, social and political processes [as] essential to achieving gender equality" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). The parental leave systems in Quebec and Canada (at the federal level) are designed to encourage both parents to remain employed during their parental leave and to get back to work as soon as possible afterwards. As such, the objective of ensuring the participation of both men and women in the labour market is fulfilled, with some shortcomings.

Canada's parental leave system (through EI) offers some flexibility, allowing parents to make decisions pertaining to the use of their parental benefits. Two plans are available: the standard plan, providing parents with 55% of their regular income with a maximum of \$573 per week for a duration of 40-55 weeks, and the extended plan, allowing parents to obtain 33% of their regular income with a maximum of \$344 per week for a duration of 69-84 weeks (detailed breakdown on p. 22) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). The minimum wage differs from one province to another but when looking at Alberta, one of the provinces in the higher range with \$15 per hour, an employee earning this amount of money can be disadvantaged by the parental benefits (The Canadian Payroll Association, n.d.). A full-time employee working at approximately 40 hours per week with this salary would earn \$600 which

is more than the maximum amount one can receive during parental leave. This indicates that employees earning more than the minimum wage and who do not obtain a top-up of their regular salary from their employers do not receive nearly as much as they do when actively working in the labour market. Therefore, Canadian parents receiving parental benefits are not always receiving their full income replacement and the parental leave structure encourages them to remain active in the workforce while caring for a new child to avoid losing a significant amount of income.

Quebec's parental leave system (through QPIP) also offers two plans; the basic plan providing parents with 55%-70% of their average weekly earnings for a duration of 37-55 weeks, and the special plan allowing parents to obtain 75% of their average income for a duration of 28-43 weeks (detailed breakdown on p. 24) (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). Despite giving parents some level of control in selecting a plan, choosing an option that involves returning to paid employment more quickly may be more financially viable. For Canadian women, who still make 34.9% less than their male counterparts, taking a longer parental leave with a lower compensation rate of their regular income may not be possible (OECD, 2020b). Mother's urgency to get back to work as soon as possible is not necessarily a matter of choice but rather of financial circumstances. Therefore, the parental leave system in Quebec and the rest of Canada reinforces an equal participation in the labour market but ignores the driving factors leading women to remain employed while caring for children.

*The Policy on Gender Equality* recognizes that gender inequality is an issue which concerns both men and women and involves "changes in attitudes, behaviour, roles and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, in the community, and in national, donor and international institutions" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). To

encourage fathers to take more of the parental leave, both Quebec and the rest of Canada have established measures to obtain this desired effect. However, they both fall short of this objective.

For instance, Canada offers maternity benefits, reserved for women who have given birth, and parental benefits, that can be shared between both parents. In addition, EI has recently introduced an additional five or eight weeks (depending on the benefit plan chosen) for the parent who has taken the least amount of parental leave, usually the father as shown in statistics (see p. 9) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). Quebec's QPIP goes a step further and offers paternity benefits. However, the concepts of shared leave and paternity leave have not had the desired effect and fathers are still not equally dividing parental leave time with their partners in heterosexual relationships. While men's involvement in parental leave might have increased in both Quebec and the rest of Canada, the objective to change the gendered norms surrounding childcare is not achieved. Fathers are still not taking most of their allocated time, thus reinforcing the division of labour in both public and private spheres.

#### Acknowledgement of Gender Differences in Employment

Canada's *Policy on Gender Equality* states that "every policy, program and project affects women and men differently" and that "policies, programs and projects must address the difference in experiences and situations between and among women and men" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). As such, "to ensure fairness [between men and women], measures are often needed to compensate for historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from otherwise operating as equals. Equity leads to equality." (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). However, the parental leave system in Quebec, and the rest of Canada does not reflect this objective. The gender differences in

employment patterns are ignored and both men and women must meet the same requirements and receive the same compensation rates while on parental leave.

The requirements to qualify for parental benefits in Quebec and the rest of Canada revolve heavily around the working status of a parent. For instance, to qualify for parental benefits in Canada, one must have accumulated 600 hours of insurable labour income in the 12 months preceding the application (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). While on leave, both parents receive up to 55% of their regular income. In Quebec, the requirement is based on a monetary amount. QPIP requires that applicants for parental benefits must have accumulated \$2,000 of insurable income in Quebec to receive up to 75% of their regular income (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). What is important to note is that parental leave benefits are based on employment income. This entrenches inequalities in several ways: a higher percentage of women (compared to men) are employed in part-time work in Canada (see p. 29) and therefore, may not have accumulated enough work hours or money to qualify or will receive maternity/parental benefits based on their part-time salaries. Furthermore, the gender pay gap persists, with men earning more than women for similar jobs (see p. 28). As such, women are more likely than men to receive a lower compensation rate, and are increasingly subject to the ‘motherhood penalty’. Therefore, the different experiences of women in the workforce are not acknowledged by the parental systems of Quebec, and the rest of Canada since both genders are subject to the same eligibility criteria to qualify for parental benefits.

In addition, *The Policy on Gender Equality* seeks to “include domestic (reproductive) and community work in the work profile” and “recognize the ways women and men work and contribute to the economy, their family and society” (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales

Canada, 2017). However, this is not in line with the current parental leave systems in Quebec, and the rest of Canada as employment is a requirement to qualify for parental benefits.

While Quebec and the rest of Canada provide some additional financial assistance to low-income families earning less than \$25,921 per year, unemployed parents remain unqualified to receive parental benefits (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). Benefits offered by the welfare state are reserved for individuals who contribute to the country's economy through the workforce, thereby potentially keeping non-working parents under the poverty line. As indicated in the literature, women, more often than men, spend time doing unpaid work in Canada (see p. 29). As such, having a child without being involved in the labour market puts women at a disadvantage when applying for parental benefits. This can create a financial dependence on men, and thus reinforcing a male breadwinner model in families. The concept of equity is therefore not reflected in Quebec's provincial and Canada's federal parental leave systems given the lack of consideration for gender differences in both unpaid and paid work.

#### Extension of Benefits to All Families

*The Policy on Gender Equality's* commitment to equity is limited to gender differences, despite highlighting a desire for "a better world for all - a new world where inequality on any grounds, be it gender, class, race or ethnicity, is finally overcome" (Global Affairs Canada-Affaires mondiales Canada, 2017). While Quebec, and the rest of Canada also support different family forms through their parental leave programs, some inequalities exist for some families. For lone-parent families, only single, biological *mothers* have access to full maternity and parental benefits. In addition, given the different gendered categories of parental benefits offered, Canada and Quebec's systems create a disadvantage for gay and lesbian parents who do not obtain the same extent of benefits than heterosexual couples (see p. 22 and p. 24) (Employment

and Social Development Canada, 2015). For instance, given that maternity benefits are reserved for the biological mother, they are not available to adoptive mothers or the biological father (i.e. in a two male parent households). While they are not explicitly excluded, gay and lesbian parents, as well as single fathers, are not provided the same amount of benefits as heterosexual couples.

In Quebec, the parental benefits allocate a different amount of time off for different family forms. For instance, adoptive parents are allocated more time off through adoptive benefits (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). In addition, special circumstances are granted for gay and lesbian parents. For instance, lesbian parents are allowed to take the paternity benefits, which would normally be reserved for the father. However, each family type still benefits differently from the parental leave system (see p. 24 for detailed breakdown). The parental leave systems of Quebec and the rest of Canada provide the maximum amount of benefits for the birth parents, without allocating other forms of parental time off to non-biological parents to ensure all families receive equal benefits. This indicates that the parental leave systems in Canada and Quebec are designed primarily for heterosexual couples who have biological children. While, the parental leave system may be reflective of the lack of consideration for other groups in need of equity to compensate for past and present discrimination, this can still be identified as a shortcoming of both *The Policy on Gender Equality* and in Quebec and the rest of Canada's parental leave systems.

### **Sweden's Gender Equality Policy and Sweden's Parental Leave System**

*The Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* believes that “the equal sharing of parental leave is one important measure that could strengthen women's position in the labour market and benefit gender equality” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). However, the policy recognizes

that “women and men, girls and boys still do not have access to resources and power on equal terms”(Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Sweden’s parental leave system is designed for both parents in all families to equally balance childcare and their participation in the labour market. However, in the distribution of benefits, gender differences in the workforce are not fully addressed and Sweden’s goal for economic equality is not achieved.

### Equal Participation in Both Public and Private Spheres

The *Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* states that the “continued investments in the welfare system are essential for gender equality, as a well-functioning welfare sector enables both women and men to participate in the labour market on equal terms” and for parents, “to combine work and family life” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Sweden’s current parental leave system reflects this goal to ensure a collective responsibility between families and the state with flexibility and generous compensation rates offered to parents.

Sweden’s parental leave system is both lengthy and flexible. Each parent is entitled to the same amount of parental benefits, which are counted in days and can be taken up until the child turns 12 years old (with a maximum of 96 days available after the child’s fourth birthday) (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Sweden’s parental leave system also offers parents the ability to reduce their hours of work while receiving parental benefits (more details p. 20). As such, Sweden implements measures to ensure active participation in the labour market and allows for parents to choose their preferred way to make use of their parent leave days.

In addition, *The Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* highlights that the parental leave system is a “family policy [...] aimed at supporting a dual-earner family model and ensuring the same rights and obligations regarding family and work for both women and men.” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The policy document also makes the claim that “men also need to

become much more involved in sharing unpaid domestic and care work, in breaking the gender segregation of the labour market[...]" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). The Swedish parental leave system consists of both transferable and non-transferable days to encourage both parents to take an equal share of the allocated time. The non-transferable days operate as a 'take-it-or-lose-it' option (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). Despite the higher number of fathers taking a parental leave, they are only taking a small portion of their maximum time off and women still find themselves performing unpaid work more often than men (see p. 29). As such, Sweden's current parental leave fulfills the objective to create a system allowing for an equal balance of childcare and workforce participation between men and women but does not ensure this desired outcome.

#### Acknowledgement of Gender Differences in Employment

*The Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* is committed to achieve economic equality, where "women and men must have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to paid work which gives economic independence throughout life" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). Sweden's parental leave system extends benefits to unemployed parents but fails to acknowledge gender differences in the labour market that could prevent full economic equality to occur.

In Sweden's parental leave system, unemployed parents can still be eligible to obtain parental leave benefits but only if they are insured by residing in the country. Unemployed individuals are granted parental benefits at a flat rate of SEK 250 (approximately \$34.79 CAD) per day or SEK 7,500 (\$1,059.75 CAD) per month. To qualify for this flat rate, applicants are required to be insured, either through residing in the country or working (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). For individuals who do not have Swedish citizenship, such as immigrants, they must demonstrate that they have contributed to the welfare state through employment to qualify for

parental benefits. Within this population, immigrant women are less likely than native Swedish women to meet requirements for a parental leave, given their lower rates of employment (see p. 32). As such, unemployed immigrant women who are not insured within the country or European Union are more at risk of being denied benefits. While Sweden's goal for "economic independence throughout life" for both men and women is applied in their parental leave system, it does not extend to unemployed or uninsured immigrant women (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019).

While extending benefits to individuals outside of the labour market falls in line with the universalism of the social democratic welfare state regime, Swedish employed parents are still at an advantage compared to unemployed, eligible to receive 80% of their income with a maximum of SEK 1,006 per day (approximately \$139.99 CAD) (Försäkringskassan, n.d.). With average monthly salaries being SEK 46,300 (approximately \$6,596.59 CAD) for private sector and SEK 35,300 (approximately \$5029.37 CAD) for the public sector, the maximum amount of parental benefits remains close to the average income from 2018 (Statistics Sweden, 2019a). However, women still earn less than men and are more likely to be involved in part-time work, thus obtaining less financial support while on leave (see p. 29). While Sweden does offer an opportunity for unemployed individuals to earn parental benefits, the parental leave only provides income replacement to parents who are in the labour market and does not recognize gender differences in the workforce.

#### Extension of Benefits to All Families

*The Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* states that the country is committed to "better contribute to gender equal parenting and provide flexibility for various family constellations"

(Government Offices of Sweden, 2019). As such, Sweden's parental benefits extend to diverse family structures to ensure an equal distribution of benefits for all.

Sweden recognizes many different family forms in its parental leave system. One concept of particular note in the Swedish parental leave system is that single-parent families can receive the same amount of parental benefits as two-parent families. In fact, the parent is able to take the entire amount of days. As identified in the literature, women make up a larger proportion of single-parent families (see p. 31). Furthermore, Sweden's gender-neutral system allows for all parents to equally access parental benefits, regardless of gender. As such, gay and lesbian parents receive the same amount of benefits as heterosexual parents under this model. Parents who are adopting a child are also equally covered by this system. As such, this supports Sweden's commitment to equally support all family types and ensures social reproduction beyond the heterosexual nuclear family.

In addition, families who conceive through in-vitro fertilization may be confronted with different challenges than other families. It has been indicated in the literature that there has been a growing use of in-vitro fertilization treatments, increasing the chances of having multiple children through one birth (Eskew & Jungheim, 2017). Sweden's parental leave system adjusts in the case of multiples at birth and offers parents a longer paid leave. As such, accommodating the parental benefits for parents of multiples increases their likelihood of remaining in the labour force and reinforces Sweden's commitment to creating an equal balance between childcare and workforce duties.

## **Discussion**

After a careful examination of the parental leave systems of Sweden, as well as Quebec, and the rest of Canada, and the two countries' respective gender equality policies, I come to the

conclusion that none of the jurisdictions have fully incorporated all of the gender equality goals within their parental leave policies. This can be partially explained by the ties between the parental leave system and the labour market. All three parental leave systems are designed to promote equal participation in the labour market. They each offer parents different benefit plans, where the financial support increases the sooner the individual decides to get back into the workforce. This thereby ignores the gender pay gap as a barrier preventing women from taking a longer parental leave, as well as the cost and challenges associated with finding childcare for infants. In addition, the types of benefits offered in all three jurisdictions do not *ensure* an equal participation of both men and women in family and workforce duties.

Gender differences within the workforce are not fully reflected in the criteria for parental benefits, especially in Quebec and the rest of Canada's parental leave systems. The required minimum accumulated hours are not reflective of the reality that women are more involved than men in part-time and unpaid work (see p. 29). As such, women with newborn infants who find themselves in these types of work are often excluded from obtaining parental benefits and may not have the opportunity to balance employment and childcare in the early years of their child's life. In addition, with the assumption that women with young children are not fully committed to their jobs, they may be overlooked for employment advancement opportunities, thus leading to the 'motherhood penalty' (Budig & England, 2001). Therefore, women are not always given an equal opportunity to achieve economic equality and are unable to escape the 'motherhood penalty'. Last, while not explicitly excluding diverse families, parental benefits in Canada do not equally extend to families beyond the heterosexual nuclear dynamic, therefore not meeting the goal of eliminating all inequalities on different grounds, as outlined in the *Policy on Gender Equality*. With gender neutral benefits and special consideration given to families with multiples

(e.g. twins, triplets), Sweden's parental leave system fulfills the objective of catering to all family types. In the end, Quebec, as well as the rest of Canada, and Sweden have all implemented parental leave systems that are directly linked to the labour market, thus privileging the status of the 'worker', rather than the 'parent' in maternity/parental leave programs.

### Supporting Social Reproduction

Parents taking a parental leave in Quebec, in the rest of Canada, or in Sweden are granted some level of income replacement from the state with a cap on the amount they can receive. The strict eligibility criteria to qualify for parental leave supports Orloff's (1993) claims that social policies in capitalist countries consist of the exploitation of a select group of workers. Parental leave systems privilege the employment status over the demands of family well-being. This is illustrated with the highest benefits reserved for employed individuals who receive a top-up from their employer. With the gender wage gap in the workforce (see p. 28) and no higher compensation rates for women on parental leave, women are more likely to receive lower parental benefits than men. The most vulnerable population are immigrant women, who are less likely than native women in both Sweden and Canada to be in the labour market at all and may not be insured in their host country. With all three jurisdictions ignoring gender differences in the workforce, family policies in capitalist countries maintain gender inequality and reinforce the ties to employment before, during and after parental leave.

In addition, all three jurisdictions support social reproduction beyond the heterosexual nuclear family, though not to the same extent. With a gender-neutral parental leave system, Sweden supports all family dynamics, including gay and lesbian parents as well as single-parent households. This support for social reproduction is also highlighted through the accommodations provided to parents of multiple children from one pregnancy. Quebec's provincial and Canada's

federal parental leave systems struggle to fulfill their goal for gender equity in different contexts. Same-sex parents and single-parent households do not receive the same amount of parental benefits as two-parent heterosexual families and no special consideration is provided for multiple children at birth. As such, Canada's goal to eliminate inequalities on all fronts remains unachieved while Sweden's commitment to representing all family dynamics is reflected in the parental leave program.

#### Division of Labour and Collective Responsibility of Childcare

The separation of the private and the public spheres can still be seen in all three jurisdictions examined. Women in both Canada and Sweden find themselves doing more unpaid work, which includes childcare, and are more likely to work part-time to balance employment and family demands compared to men (see p. 29). As outlined by O'Connor et al. (1999), the division of labour is not only maintained in the household but also translates into the public sphere as well. Canada's goal to consider unpaid work under the broad definition is clearly not implemented in the parental leave system. Thus, parental leave systems may *advance* gender equality in both spheres but it is not sufficient in changing social norms and transforming gendered practices that would lead to an equal share of the tasks associated with childrearing.

Moreover, it has been identified in the literature that children are considered future contributors of the economy, which some feminist scholars have pointed to in their calls for a collective responsibility for childcare between families and the state (Luxton, 1997). While all three jurisdictions' parental leave programs do fulfill this to a certain extent, not all parents have their financial burden alleviated by the state. Parental benefits are strictly reserved for parents who balance leave with work. Sweden allows for non-workers to receive some benefits at a flat rate to reflect the universalist approach of their social democratic regime. Quebec, and the rest of

Canada exclude the non-taxpayers from being entitled to the state's help with childcare duties.

Canada may provide its citizens with a minimum of welfare benefits to keep them above the poverty line, as dictated by the liberal regime under which they fall, but the parental leave system remains very selective in financial provision for parents. Thus, the parental leave systems are not designed to eliminate the sexual division of labour in either the private or public spheres despite promoting a collective share of childcare duties.

In the end, a government's approach to gender in policymaking processes is not the determinant of the achievement of gender equality goals in a jurisdiction. As pointed out by feminist scholars, neither gender difference nor gender sameness guarantees these results. Instead, the orientation of the policies in place will lead to this achievement. Sweden's gender-neutral system still struggles with an unequal share of childcare duties, disproportionately affecting mothers. The same issue persists in Quebec and the rest of Canada who both still have a gendered parental leave system. With this issue persisting across different welfare state regimes, it is clear that the current parental leave systems in all three jurisdictions do not sufficiently change the gender norms associated with parenthood. A recent increase of fathers' involvement in Sweden, as well as in Quebec, and the rest of Canada as a result of parental leave reforms indicates that future family policies in all three jurisdictions could provide stronger incentives to equalize childcare duties for all parents, regardless of gender and working status, to ensure equality for all.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has examined the gender equality objectives of Canada and Sweden, while analyzing their parental leave systems (examining Quebec's program separately due to its distinctive features from the Canadian system). This allowed me to determine if current parental benefits offered by all three jurisdictions are reflective of contemporary conceptions of gender equality. Three key themes were used during this policy analysis of Sweden, as well as Quebec and the rest of Canada's parental leave systems alongside their respective goals to achieve gender equality. First, the equal participation in both public and private spheres, was examined in terms of the possibility of balancing childcare and workforce duties for both parents. The acknowledgement of the gender differences in the labour market determined if the parental leave programs consider the different work patterns between men and women. Lastly, the extension of benefits to all families identified if all family types can obtain an equal amount of benefits from the parental leave systems. These key concepts were used to answer the following research question: How well do the current parental leave policies enacted by Sweden, Quebec, and the rest of Canada embody their contemporary conceptions of gender equality?

Through a feminist political economy lens, my research determined that Sweden and Canada each conceptualize and apply gender equality in different manners in their parental leave systems. However, both still struggle to fully meet their goal to achieve equality between men and women. While all three parental leave systems promote an equal participation in the labour market, this desired outcome does not occur. In addition to reserving the highest benefits to employed parents, the gender differences within the workforce are not considered in the eligibility criteria and the benefit plan options, leaving women to be excluded from obtaining full benefits. The parental leave systems *advance* gender equality in both spheres but are not

sufficient in changing social norms and transforming gendered practices that would lead to an equal share of childcare duties. Additionally, all three jurisdictions support social reproduction beyond the heterosexual nuclear family, though not to the same extent. Sweden's parental leave caters to all family dynamics while Canada does not equally extend its parental benefits to diverse families, thus not meeting the goal of eliminating all inequalities.

This research differs from any other as it does not seek to determine the best parental leave model to follow between Canada and Sweden, but rather compare them to their own established gender equality objectives. The social, political and economic contexts of each jurisdiction identified in the literature review section was considered, establishing the need for individual analysis. With parental leave policies emerging before any official document pertaining to gender equity, it is important to continually assess their effectiveness by comparing them alongside their gender equality objectives. This research highlights that jurisdictions from different welfare state regimes can still struggle to achieve gender equality despite their different approaches to parental leave policies. Future research avenues might include a study of different nations by selecting countries belonging to a corporatist welfare state regime. Furthermore, with this research identifying the relation between gender inequality and the labour market, future research should focus on policymaking processes pertaining to employment participation that will lead to an equal share of the parental leave between men and women. As both gender equality conceptions and family policies are continually revised, it is important to observe if they will ever concord harmoniously.

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