

# Extension Amidst Retrenchment: Gender and Welfare State Restructuring in Australia and Sweden

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**EXTENSION AMIDST  
RETRENCHMENT  
GENDER AND WELFARE  
STATED RESTRUCTURING IN  
AUSTRALIA AND SWEDEN**

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by Sheila Shaver

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Tony Eardley  
Editor

## **Abstract**

European, North American and Australasian welfare states are not being retrenched as much as restructured. Gender relations and changes in the social construction of individuals and families form a key dimension of this restructuring. Significantly, social changes associated with gender have worked to extend and reshape welfare states, to respond to new claims and political constituencies, at the same time that other forces have sought to contract them. How secure are women's welfare state gains likely to be in an era of retrenchment and reform? This paper describes and compares the restructuring of the gender models of the Australian and Swedish welfare states in the 1980s and 1990s. It considers three questions in particular: how have the gender models changed in this period, how has the restructuring of gender been situated in wider social policy change, and how securely established are these changes?

# 1 Introduction

The changes in the European, North American and Australasian welfare states of the last two decades are qualitatively different from the patterns of their growth and development of the postwar quarter century. These changes are, first, not simply a reversal of that expansion, 'rolling back' the frontiers of state intervention, although there has been some of that. States have also taken on new roles in relation to both markets and families. Further, the changes are not simply the product of a shift in the balance of political parties in parliaments and government, though that is indeed part of the story. They also reflect changes within parties, and the emergence of social movements and interest group lobbies as new social policy players (Myles and Quadagno, 1991; Kolberg and Uusitalo, 1992; Burrows and Loader, 1994; Esping-Andersen, 1996).

Gender relations form a key dimension of this restructuring. The postwar welfare state helped to constitute and maintain the gender inequalities of its time, including an unequal division of labour between paid and unpaid work and men's disproportionate control over economic resources and political office. At the same time, it became increasingly important to women, because it intervened in and ameliorated many of those same inequalities. Social policy was both a focus of critique and a strategic resource for many of the women's movements emerging in the 1960s and 1970s. Profound changes in gender relations have given continuing impetus to contemporary welfare state restructuring in many countries. Most obvious among such changes are women's increasing participation in the labour force and the market economy, greater variability in the structures of marriage and family, and a new salience of gender divisions in national politics. Social policy institutions have been made to respond to these changes, adapting welfare state institutions to post-industrial employment and an increasing global economy, but also to changes in families and in the demands of women themselves for equality and independence (Wilson, 1977; Baldock and Cass, 1983; Hernes, 1987; Sassoon, 1987; Pateman, 1988; Jones and Jónasdóttir, 1988; Gordon, 1990; Ungerson, 1990; Lewis, 1993; Orloff, 1993, 1996; Sainsbury, 1994; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999).

Significantly, social changes associated with gender have worked to extend and reshape welfare states at the same time that other forces have

sought to contract them. The present historical moment of welfare state restructuring is a long one. Already under way since the late 1970s at least, it is clearly still far from over. It is too soon to discriminate surely between policy experimentation, short-term policy responses to the vicissitudes of party and parliamentary politics, and longer term reconstruction of policy regimes. One can, however, begin to address several questions. The first concerns similarities and differences in the way in which the gender structures of welfare states are being reconstructed, and what such similarities and differences mean for the understanding of social policy regimes. Are they indications of convergence among otherwise different types of regime, or rather of separate and parallel trajectories of welfare state development? A second concerns the relationship between expansionary and contractionary forces in welfare state restructuring, and the significance of the sequence and timing of gender reform in overall regime change. In short, how is gender reform related to changes in family structure and women's labour force participation, and does gender reform work to expand welfare states or to contract them? Thirdly, how proof are gender reforms against the rollback of welfare state provisions in a contractionary climate, and what makes them so? This concerns the conditions under which gender reforms may become institutionalised, and the feedback of gender interests in political support for social policy models supporting gender equality.

The welfare states of Australia and Sweden offer a promising comparison in this regard, for while there are obvious differences between them there are also some clear and interesting likenesses. Historically, the two have developed in similar situations, in small national economies depending substantially on exports. Presently, both face open exposure to globalising economic forces, losing control of their borders in the regulation of trade, finance and the value of the currency in the 1980s and early 1990s. There are also some similarities in industrial relations in the two countries, though these are stronger in kind than degree. Both have comparatively high levels of unionisation and until recently had institutional arrangements for central wage negotiation which effected some degree of solidaristic bargaining; both are now shifting away from this model. Both experienced an increase in income inequality during the 1980s (Saunders and Fritzell, 1995). Despite these similarities, their

welfare states are of very different kinds, and indeed are often considered polar opposites. Above all, they differ in scale relative to the national economy. Australia and Sweden have almost the smallest and the largest welfare states among OECD countries. They differ also in the institutional and political character of their social policy regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Australia's has the hallmarks of a 'liberal' welfare state. Its public interventions are limited and culturally devalued in favour of private action through the market and the family. With the exception of health insurance, its provisions are shaped by principles of (generously) means-tested entitlement. Sweden, in contrast, is the exemplar of the 'social democratic' welfare state. The defining principle of its social policy institutions is universalism, and these institutions have grown to 'encompass' all classes. Swedish policy institutions are strongly normative with respect to both paid work and family obligations, with overt commitments to social equality.

Above all, the Australian and Swedish social policy regimes are structured by contrasting gender logics. Historically, both began with the family model of male breadwinner and dependent female spouse at their centre. From the 1960s, Sweden moved to a model encouraging the partners of a couple to share responsibilities for both employment and parental care, actively supported by social policy measures to harmonise work and family life. Australian social policy has been much slower to adapt to increasing employment among the mothers of young children, and has only recently begun to restructure the family model at the centre of its social policy regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lewis, 1992; Sainsbury 1996; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999).

This paper describes and compares the restructuring of gender logic in the social policy regimes of the Australian and Swedish welfare states. It considers three questions in particular: how have the gender models of Swedish and Australian social policy been restructured in the 1980s and 1990s, how has the restructuring of gender been situated in wider social policy change, and how securely established are these changes.

## **2 Gender in the Australian Policy Regime**

The Australian welfare state followed much the same broad pattern of development as most others, but from its beginnings has been distinctive in important respects. Castles (1985, 1996) captures much of its peculiar character in his term 'wage earner's welfare state'. This has given greater priority to job security and wage levels than pensions and social services, and has entailed national barriers to trade and immigration. Historically, its centerpiece was judicial wage determination, setting minimum standards of pay and conditions for employment in Australian industry. While arbitration court decisions rarely strayed too far from what employers would tolerate, they were represented as including a social element reflecting workers' needs and community standards about an adequate minimum wage. This social element included assumptions about the relative needs of men as breadwinners and of women as supported by them, and even after World War II it was normal for lower wages to be set for women than for men. Similarly, it long set lower wages for Aboriginal workers than for white stockmen in the pastoral industry (Ryan and Conlon, 1975; Macarthy, 1976; Macintyre, 1985).

The postwar Australian welfare state developed on these foundations. It was predicated on trade protection for Australian industry; immigration policies which continued to be racially restrictive, but after the war actively sought to boost the population and labour supply; and Keynesian economic policies intended to maintain full employment among male breadwinners. Australia did not follow Europe and North America in the move to contributory social insurance. Instead, it built a modern system of social protection on social insurance foundations comprising pensions and benefits against loss of income associated with unemployment, sickness, widowhood or desertion, and old age (Kewley, 1973; Watts, 1987). These were low-level, flat-rate payments, funded from income tax revenues and allocated on the basis of need. From early in the war, governments also established and extended universal allowances to families to help them support their children (Cass, 1983; Watts, 1987). The development of income support services was accompanied by expanded public education, aged care services, and housing policies fostering home ownership supplemented by public rental accommodation, primarily for low-income groups.

While a Labor Government had presided over welfare state development during the war and in the immediate postwar years, the conservative Coalition Governments that followed accepted its basic outlines. By the early 1970s some important forms of social provision were being extended to middle-income groups, among them age pensions, nursing home care and support for home ownership (Kewley, 1973). The Labor years of the early 1970s brought a brief moment of social democratic universalism, in national health insurance and age pensions. Employment among married women, while low compared to many other countries, rose through the 1960s and 1970s. Much of this was in part-time work. In the early 1970s the wage arbitration courts began to accept women's claims to equal pay with men, and governments began to discuss policies for child care (Ryan and Conlon, 1975). The Coalition Government which took office in the mid-1970s continued to extend provisions for families, sole parents, and indigenous groups. It reduced support for the unemployed, especially the young unemployed, and dismantled Labor's health insurance program.

By the early 1980s, Australia had developed a relatively comprehensive, if low level, welfare state predicated on the expectation that male heads of households would have secure, full-time employment at wage levels enabling them to be primary breadwinners for families. This was underpinned by a safety net of income support, and basic services to families, children and the elderly. For most of the time since the war's end, these expectations had largely been fulfilled. There was sustained full (male) employment, with unemployment rarely rising above two per cent before the mid-1970s, though it rose steadily after that. Economic growth was rapid and steady, even considering Australia's high rate of immigration and population growth (Whitwell, 1989: 16-29; Collins, 1975). Rising real incomes blurred the older class boundaries.

The social security system is the centerpiece of the Australian welfare state, and the politics that shape it also flavour many of its other programs. This system has two key features distinguishing it from those in most other advanced capitalist countries. The first is its small scale. It represents a smaller share of GDP, for example, than the average of countries included in the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (see Scherer, 1997: 18-24). This reflects a narrow

functional concentration on the role of poverty alleviation, and an absence of concern with the maintenance of income or status in retirement, sickness or unemployment. Benefit levels in Australia are low, reflecting expectations that beyond a certain minimum standard individuals should be responsible for their own support and should make their own arrangements through private channels of the market and the family (Scherer, 1997: 25; Shaver, 1997: 72). The shaping of social security around this expectation, shared across party lines, is the main reason for its classification, with New Zealand, the United States, Canada and often also the United Kingdom, as one of a group of 'liberal' welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999).

The second is its extensive reliance on the use of means testing to determine benefit entitlements, in which it stands almost alone among advanced industrial countries. Australia has developed a distinctive welfare model designed to concentrate limited welfare resources on the individuals and families who most need them, while avoiding stigmatising those who claim its benefits. This involves the use of means tests which are generous enough that relatively large groups qualify for benefit, and yet not so generous as to direct resources to income groups clearly not in need of assistance. By and large Australians have viewed this as a fair and logical compromise between the equal treatment and minimum standards associated with citizenship and ideological dispositions to minimise state intervention and particularly tax burdens. The development of this system has reflected substantial consensus between the main political parties, and although both moved to ease means tests through the 1960s and early 1970s, both have subsequently reaffirmed their commitment to the principle (Shaver, 1991).

The gender logic of Australian social security is less internationally distinctive. Historically shaped in the terms of the 'strong male breadwinner model' (Lewis, 1992, 1997), it was designed to support a family when its head was temporarily or permanently without income from paid work. Thus pensions and allowances have provided for the support of a dependent spouse and/or children. From the 1970s, these payments have increasingly been defined in gender-neutral language enabling either of husband or wife to claim support for the other, and

further changes in the recent period will be discussed below. The partners of a heterosexual couple in a marriage-like relationship are expected to provide financial support to one another, and means tests for social security payments are applied to their joint resources. Bryson (1983, 1992) has pointed out that the provisions for dependency have served to uphold the role of the male as the family breadwinner even when he was unable to do so. In the case of sole parents, the same model assumes that a sole parent who repartners will lose income support, whether or not the new partner undertakes to support the sole parent's children. The familial basis of the system assumes that the income of members of the household is shared equitably, although this may often not be the case. It also tends to create disincentives to employment by the second earner in a couple, usually the wife (Edwards, 1984, 1995).

### **Australian Restructuring: Towards Liberal Individualisation of Entitlement**

The foundations of the Australian welfare state were moving under it even as it was taking shape. Reflecting the strength of the Australian economy in the 1960s, governments began to lower trade barriers and to dismantle the racial framework of immigration. An expanding service sector, employer demand for female labour, and the consumer-led economy were registered in rising levels of employment among married women. From the late 1950s and increasing through the following decades, women continued to work for longer periods after marriage and to return to employment as their children grew up. Changes in family structure also began to be felt, with rates of marital break-up rising visibly from the late 1960s. Most immediately critical for the welfare state, however, was the abrupt end of steady growth, low inflation and full employment in the early 1970s. Unemployment and inflation began to rise together, and continued at historically high levels throughout the 1970s. These high levels, and the government's manifest inability to control them, partly explain the election of the Labor Government in 1983.

During the 1970s especially there was also a new social consciousness of poverty in Australia (Henderson, Harper and Harcourt, 1970; Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975; Saunders, 1998). By the end

of the decade it was clear that the nature of Australian poverty was changing, and that while fewer old people were poor, poverty was now to be found among the unemployed and the prematurely retired as well as among sole parent families (Saunders, 1998). The end of the long boom also exposed extremes of poverty and social breakdown among indigenous Australians. Such high rates of poverty were a damning indictment of a social security system wholly focused on poverty alleviation.

Wider changes were also taking place - in Australian capitalism, the gender order, demography, and family structure. Several of the key presumptions of the postwar Australian welfare state now no longer apply. Globalisation and political decisions to open the Australian economy to world markets in trade and finance have eroded its protectionist foundations. Although still high by international standards, Australian immigration is now concerned with human and monetary capital as well as with the supply of labour. Marital partnerships are less stable than a generation ago, and there are many more sole parent families and single person households, with high rates of poverty among sole parent families especially (Cass, 1985, 1988). At the same time, young people are remaining in education longer, and living longer in the parental household. The Australian population is ageing, and birth rates are low, although both trends are moderate as compared with other OECD countries (Scherer, 1997: 26,).

Between 1966 and 1994 one quarter of Australian jobs shifted from manufacturing to the service sector (Gregory and Sheehan, 1998: 111). Job growth was particularly rapid in the 1980s under the Accord between the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Confederation of Trade Unions. Employment growth was much greater in the private than the public sector, and by 1994, 71 per cent of Australian employment was in services. The increase in female part-time employment was the third largest in the OECD. In 1992, almost one-quarter of employment was part time, three-quarters of that in positions held by women (OECD, 1994: 20; Pocock, 1995; Gregory and Sheehan, 1998; O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999). As in the US, Canada and the UK, most part-time jobs in Australia are 'bad jobs', restricted to the lower grades of unskilled occupations and offering few prospects of training or

promotion, though this is less true of public than private sector positions. Occupational segregation has remained high, with gains largely limited to women in full-time work and administrative or managerial positions. On the other hand, Australian women in full-time employment made significant gains in pay relative to men, their earnings reaching 84.4 per cent of those of men in the mid-1990s. Working class women have shared in these gains to a greater extent than their counterparts in Canada, the US or the UK (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999, ch. 3). Many people actively seeking work are unable to find it, and many people remain in this situation for much longer periods than in the past. In November 1995, 8.4 per cent of males and 7.8 per cent of females were unemployed (ABS, 1996, Tables 1 and 22). There is also substantial underemployment, with substantial numbers of part-time workers unable to work as many hours as they would like (ABS, 1991).

During its 13 years in office the Labor Government undertook continuing welfare reform. This was set in the context of its Accord with the trade union movement, which exchanged wage restraint (real wages fell) for the maintenance and expansion of the 'social wage'. A first wave of reform in social security was associated with the Social Security Review of the late 1980s (Cass, 1986), and a second with the Working Nation initiative of the 1993 election campaign (Australia, Prime Minister, 1994). Overall, there were three themes of Labor reform. An increase in targeting to low-income groups was in keeping with the traditional liberal character of Australian social security and its focus on poverty alleviation. The second pursued a reform agenda in the treatment of gender and family. The third addressed post-industrial changes in the labour market and the management of the unemployed. Since its election in 1996, the Liberal-National Party Government has maintained the first reform agenda, but re-oriented and redefined the second and third.

Labor moved to tighten the targeting of income support on low-income groups, while also increasing base levels of payments. For the first time since their introduction in 1941, a (relatively generous) means test was applied to family allowances. Child allowances to low-income families were extended, and a supplementary, means-tested allowance to families with low-incomes was added (Bradbury, 1996, 1997). These changes improved the circumstances of people with low incomes, and especially

of low-income families with children, though it is not clear that poverty among these groups declined (Harding and Mitchell, 1992; Saunders, 1994: 261-75). The government also undertook major reform of retirement income, tightening the targeting of the existing pension and mandating private pension coverage of all employees with earnings above a comparatively low threshold (Shaver, 1989, 1991; Sharp, 1995; Rosenman, 1995).

The effect of these changes was to improve the capacity of the social security system to alleviate poverty, particularly among sole parent families headed by women, but otherwise to make it more market conforming. The Howard Coalition Government has largely continued with this agenda. In new moves, it has excluded new immigrants other than humanitarian and refugee settlers from pensions and benefits during the first two years of residence in Australia, and imposed a tax on employer superannuation contributions in respect of high-income employees. In the 1998 election it foreshadowed the introduction of a goods and service tax, with compensating increases in income support payments. Contradicting the general move toward tighter benefit targeting, an associated package of tax and means test changes to retirement income includes proposals to raise the levels of private income at which retirees receive age pension income.

Changes in the treatment of gender in social security had begun a decade before Labor's election in 1983. During the 1970s support for widowed and deserted women with children was extended to single mothers, and then also to sole parent families headed by a man. These changes marked the beginning of a shift in social security from provisions defining the roles of men and women as different and complementary, to gender-neutral terms in which men or women might play roles of breadwinner or family caregiver. During the 1980s, Labor continued the translation to gender neutrality, but in terms which increasingly assumed at least part-time employment as the norm for all adults. This was signalled in 1987 in sole parent policy, which began to encourage sole parents to undertake employment (Raymond, 1987). Other changes withdrew income support for older widows and sole parents, removing provision for a distinctive female life course centered on marriage and child rearing (Bryson, 1992; Shaver et al., 1994; Shaver, 1995). Working Nation reforms have

extended the same employment expectations to dependent spouses (usually wives) of pensioners and allowees unless caring for dependent children. This development has been part of a more general change in social security to replace support provided on the ground of spousal dependence with support on the basis of parental responsibility. As well as easing of the income test for unemployment benefits, the effect of these changes was to increase the incomes of low-income couples with children, particularly those with only a single earner. The corollary was a new principle in social security, that all adults not caring for children are expected to be in the work force, whether or not they are married (Saunders, 1995; Bradbury, 1996). Further development of support for caring involved the replacement of the dependent spouse rebate with a parenting allowance paid to a partner caring full time for children in the home, and child care payments in respect of children in formal or informal child care.

The recasting of social security in gender neutral terms, placing expectations on both men and women to support themselves through paid work, moderates but does not fully dismantle the breadwinner model at the centre of Australian social security. This is rooted in its treatment of the married couple (*de jure* or *de facto*) as the basic unit of income support, and reflects the view that marital partners have an obligation to look to one another before claiming state support. In turn, this concern with marital obligation is directly connected to the narrow focus of Australian social security on poverty alleviation. Unlike the social insurance arrangements of many other countries, Australian income support gives neither partner unqualified, individual entitlement to support in illness, unemployment or old age, although each may have been employed and may have been an individual contributor to the funding of the system as a taxpayer.

Since 1994, changes have begun to individualise the entitlements of husband and wife, and to this extent to mark a fundamental break with the gender logic of the past. In principle, income testing for unemployment benefits now applies separately to husband and wife. However, a joint income test applies at higher income levels. The effect is for the spouses of high-income earners to lose their benefit entitlement, but the partners of those earning low incomes to retain at least partial

entitlement (Saunders, 1995: 8). Benefits are now (usually) directed to individual partners, with payments in respect of dependent children going to the primary caregiver, usually the mother. This addresses the problem of income sharing within the household to some degree, especially in ensuring access to resources for spouses without individual income. The couple nevertheless continues to be the means test unit for tests on assets for virtually all social security provisions, so that the social security system continues to assume some degree of financial interdependence between marital partners. To the extent that women's autonomy continues to be differentially limited by their having primary responsibility for the needs of their children, and that women continue to occupy weaker positions in the labour market, this arrangement fails to address their differential vulnerability.

The Howard Government has continued the longstanding process of gender reform in social security and taxation, but has reoriented this to reflect the higher valuation it places on the traditional asymmetric family and its division of labour between breadwinning and caring. The treatment of spousal dependency thus reflects considerable ambivalence. The sole parent pension has been integrated with the parenting allowance in a new single payment, now called 'parenting payment', providing for the support of people with child rearing responsibilities through the same benefit, regardless of whether they are partnered or not (Newman, 1997). Rates of payment and means test provisions will continue to distinguish between these groups, however. This move continues the long-term pattern of replacing dependency with parental responsibility as the basis of support.

The Government's 1996 family tax initiative reverses the long-term progression of changes recognising the dual-earner partnership as increasingly the norm, boosting support for families relying on a single income. It has re-established tax reductions for taxpayers with dependent children, which had been removed from the tax to the social security system by the Fraser Government in the 1970s. In parallel with social security means test arrangements for most payments, entitlement is based on the combined incomes of husband and wife. The measure has been designed to give markedly higher benefits to couples qualifying on the basis of a single income (Whithear, 1997: 124-5). Changes to

government support for child care have significantly increased its cost to parents and tightened the targeting of subsidies. In combination with increased support to parents supporting children on a single income, these increases have led to reductions both in women's employment and the use of formal day care. The labour force participation rate of women with children under 15 has begun to fall for the first time in five years (Horin and Loane, 1998). In the 1998 election the Government argued for mothers' right to choice about employment, while offering a policy package clearly favouring a sequencing of roles in which women withdraw from paid work with the birth of a child and subsequently return.

The development of the Child Support Agency and its role in enforcing the child support obligations of separated and divorced parents has proceeded under both governments. Initiated in the period of the Social Security Review, the policy has been part of the move to address high levels of poverty among sole parent families and, by drawing more effectively on the resources of non-custodial parents, to reduce expenditure on sole parent pensions. It reflects agreement across the parties that parents have continuing obligations after separation or divorce. A formula now applies in fixing the child support obligations of non-custodial parents, taking account of the incomes and dependent children of both parents (Funder, 1997: 36).

The third theme of the welfare reforms of the 1980s has sought to address changes in the labour market and the structure of employment, and associated problems in the working of labour markets. Conditioned by the Accord with the trade union movement, Labor's strategy aimed to refurbish the wage earner's welfare state with post-industrial education and training strategies. In social security, Labor adopted the OECD Active Society concept advocated by its own Social Security Review (Cass, 1988; Kalisch, 1991). This called for a change in the role of welfare away from passive support of economic dependency, and signalled closer and more active management of people claiming support with stricter job search requirements and heavy emphasis on training, both in job skills and in job search and self-presentation. Following the same logic, it made income support to young people contingent on their undertaking education or training. Unemployment benefits were broken

down to establish different provisions with different requirements according to the length of unemployment, and a regime of individual case management instituted for those unemployed for a year or more. The Working Nation program included a 'jobs compact' guaranteeing a period of employment experience to the very long-term unemployed. The reform program also initiated significant structural reform in government employment services, introducing contracting out and competition regimes (Eardley, 1997). Reforms under Working Nation sought to adjust unemployment assistance to a low-wage environment. Reducing disincentive effects of means tests, their effect was to make employment, including part-time employment, relatively more attractive (Saunders, 1995).

The Howard Government does not understand persistent high unemployment and labour market failure in the same terms, but rather as the consequence of an unduly rigid employment system. Its approach to assistance for the unemployed is thus closely associated with its industrial relations policies for deregulating wages and employment conditions. The Government stripped down Labor's array of labour market programs, replacing them with measures much more closely geared to employers' immediate needs. Social security changes have stressed the targeting of benefits and compliance with job search requirements. In the case of young people, these measures have included arrangements under which they may be required to perform community services ('work for the dole') and to depend longer on parental support. In employment assistance, the Government has embarked on privatisation to create a fully contestable market in employment services (DEETYA, 1996; Eardley, 1997).

In summary, Australian social security and its gender logic have undergone limited but nevertheless significant change in the 1980s and 1990s. The male breadwinner model has been redefined in gender-neutral terms, but has not fully broken with assumptions of asymmetry in the roles of primary breadwinner and primary caregiver. At the same time, the liberal character of the system has been intensified: while its effectiveness in poverty alleviation has been improved, its articulation with the labour market has been adapted to suit the post-industrial employment environment. These effects have been intensified since the

change of government in 1996, and its active employment strategy replaced with labour market deregulation and wage flexibility. The most recent changes in its gender model have been contradictory and conflicted. One set of changes has begun to accommodate the social security system to the dual-earner couple of primary breadwinner and secondary earner, reflecting and reinforcing a gendered labour market concentrating married women in part-time employment, much of it short, part time and insecure. More recent policy changes have begun to shift the balance of incentives to discourage employment by both parents of dependent children.

The restructuring of gender in Swedish social policy framework provides a sharp contrast, in terms both of the model of gender relations that has been adopted and the gender structure of employment that it has encouraged.

### **3 Gender in the Swedish Policy Regime**

Sweden is widely seen as the paradigm case for the social democratic welfare state. Its hallmarks are broad (largely universal) coverage of population groups and social risks, provision through both transfers and services, and high levels of benefits which, while differentiated, nevertheless serve to moderate social and economic inequality. Stephens (1996: 38) sees the policy framework governing labour markets as the point of integration for economic and social policy in the Scandinavian welfare state, most fully developed in the Swedish case. In Sweden, work and welfare are linked through historical commitments to full employment and active labour market strategies. Their mutual reinforcement is such that Olsson (1993: 21) describes this framework as 'a Swedish model of workfare'. On the economic side, these arrangements have worked to promote economic and employment growth and to contain welfare costs. On the social policy side, the combination of universal and wage-related benefits at standards acceptable to the middle classes have been effective in moderating wage and income inequalities (see also Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi and Palme, 1997).

The roots of this distinctive Swedish model lie in the 'red-green' alliance of the Social Democratic and Agrarian parties and the 'historic

compromise' between labour and capital in the 1930s. New social policy institutions were elaborated over the 1930s and 1940s on the model of the People's Home. This model pictured society and the state as a good family home, and the productive capacity of the nation as rightly for the benefit of people and their families. As Hobson and Lindholm (1997: 489-91) point out, it evoked solidarities going beyond those of class, and had an inclusiveness which enabled women to make claims to participatory citizenship. Women's right to paid employment was in question during the 1920s and especially in the unemployment crisis of early 1930s, when many married women were forced to give up their jobs. It was successfully defended by women's organisations by the end of the decade. Women's right to work was given new meaning in the writings of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal addressing the question of population decline, where they argued for policies enabling women both to have children and develop their own talents. In the 1940s this evolved into the concept of 'women's two roles' (Myrdal and Klein, 1956) in which women withdrew from paid work when they had children and returned again when their children left school. Social policy measures included public employment and manpower programs and a social reform program developing children's allowances, income security provisions and social services. Employment programs included an early countercyclical program for full employment of males. Income security provisions were modest flat-rate benefits in which a degree of universalism was achieved, though in some instances this was conditioned by generous income testing. Esping-Andersen (1992: 45) suggests that even this limited universalism began to frame a national solidarity, while also benefiting women by granting them a modicum of independence and status equality (Hirdman, 1987: 28-32, 35-40; Lewis and Åström, 1992: 64-6; Esping-Andersen, 1992: 43-7; Ohlander, 1992: 223-6; Olsson, 1993: 93-107, 109-11; Hobson and Lindholm, 1997: 485-6).

The Swedish welfare state began to take its present form in the 1950s and 1960s. Universality was extended, complemented by income-tested housing allowances, and health insurance was established. Labour markets were reshaped through the famous Rehn-Meidner model of solidaristic wage policy, designed to direct labour to areas of the economy where productivity was high, and were supported by active

labour market policy to reduce structural unemployment. Women, who were preferred to immigrants as a source of labour for the expanding economy, benefited from solidaristic wage bargaining. Urbanisation and the rise of a salaried and unionised middle class provoked the expansion of the pension system to accommodate middle class aspirations, erecting a second tier of wage-related (ATP) pension on top of the universal citizenship pension. The tensions surrounding this expansion brought an end to the red-green alliance in Social Democratic politics of that period. In the 1970s radical challenges to the prerogatives of capital led to initiatives for improving job security, industrial health and safety; radical programs for worker participation in decision making and especially the wage-earner funds were much less successful (Esping-Andersen, 1992: 47-53; Olsson, 1993: 53; Jenson and Mahon, 1993: 85-8; Stephens, 1996: 40-1).

The gender foundations of the contemporary social democratic model took their contemporary form with the massive expansion of its service sector in the late 1960s and 1970s. This rested on the establishment of universal rights to publicly provided services such as child and elder care enabling parents to manage the conflicting demands of employment and family life. From the late 1960s policies began to be reshaped around the norm of the working parent. Rapidly expanding health, education and social services were staffed predominantly by married women. Hirdman (1987: 40-4) sees gender discontents as a source of conflict through the period, emanating from the diverse currents of radical aspiration of the time in Sweden as elsewhere. These were expressed through the Social Democratic Party and its women's and youth organisations.

The introduction of separate taxation of marital partners removed strong disincentives to women's employment. Public day care was expanded dramatically. Parental leave and child sick leave provided wage-related paid leave from employment, with leave able to be taken by either parent. The maximum length and benefit replacement rates of such leave were extended a number of times through the decade. Women also acquired the right to early abortion on demand. Gender equality reforms continued after the Social Democrats lost office in 1976. The parents of young children gained the right to work reduced hours (at reduced wages), and the crediting of pension points for the care of children at home. In

addition, there was passage of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation. Policy also began to assert the parental rights and responsibilities of fathers as well as mothers. In 1979, parliament endorsed the concept of *jämställdhet*, referring ambiguously to equal status or sex/gender equality. There was, however, no response to the women's movement's repeated claim that gender equality should be based on a six-hour day for all workers (Ohlander, 1992: 231-5; Lewis and Åström, 1992: 67-71; Jenson and Mahon, 1993: 88-91; Florin and Nilsson, 1997).

By the 1980s, Sweden's welfare state was among the largest and most comprehensive in the OECD. Its foundations lay in the expectation of full employment of most citizens over most of their working lives, generously supported in unemployment, sickness, old age and the early years of parenthood. Central to these foundations was a 'productivistic' orientation in which social policy measures take the form of investment in human capital and economic growth. Its citizens have been entitled to claim substantial social rights, including universal and wage-related pensions giving high levels of retirement income, and services in health, education, day care and elder care, and labour market retraining, free or with a small co-payment. The Swedish economy grew rapidly through the postwar period. Growth averaged four to five per cent annually over the period 1950-1980, though it faltered in the late 1970s. The same period saw a structural transformation in production and employment away from agriculture and into industry and, from the 1970s, also into services (Olsson, 1993: 201-2). Unemployment was lower in Sweden than in most other countries throughout the postwar period, averaging less than two per cent over the period from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1980s (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1987: 56; Olsson, 1993: 174). Income inequality declined steadily over the same period, as did the salience of social class (Esping-Andersen, 1992: 51; Olsson, 1993: 181-4, 201-2).

Above all, the Swedish welfare state is 'institutional' in the terms of Titmuss' (1974: 23-32) social policy models. Most of its provisions are universal rights of citizenship, defined in terms of residence, with relatively few other qualifying rules. This describes both the basic, flat-rate pension in old age and child allowances. The system provides

income security for the working population and wage-related income of a high standard in sickness and old age. Taking the age pension and sickness insurance arrangements as their models, Korpi and Palme (1997) describe Swedish arrangements as 'encompassing': such a system combines basic security for all citizens with earnings-related benefits for the economically active part of the population. Because this combination reduces the demand for private insurance, it counters the class dualisms of poverty alleviation and income maintenance functions and the division of social protection into public and market sectors. Because it fosters employment of both sexes over the life course, it also counters gender dualisms between support attached to employment and dependency, though to a lesser extent. It is strongly redistributive, with redistribution effected both through taxes and transfers and the provision of public services. This is the case notwithstanding the large share of benefits enjoyed by its middle class constituency (Sainsbury, 1996; Stephens, 1996: 37; Korpi and Palme, 1997).

Sweden's extensive service sector is doubly linked with Sweden's high rates of female labour force participation: these services both enable women to work and provide the jobs in which they are employed. The service sector and women's employment grew together, their coincidence a reflection of the dual policy goals of gender equality and expansion of labour supply. Support for the care of children is a key factor. Between 1965 and 1980 day care places increased ten times, with the number of children cared for through parental leave also growing spectacularly (Olsson, 1993: 135-6). Over much the same period (1965 to 1984) total government employment doubled, almost entirely a result of expansion in education, health and social welfare. Women occupy three-quarters of these jobs (Esping-Andersen, 1992: 60-1; see also Olsson, 1993: 123-4). In the result, Swedish labour markets are among the most gender segregated in the western world, with women concentrated in caring and service work and greatly under-represented in manufacturing and business services (Jonung 1984, cited in Lewis and Åström, 1992: 72; Esping-Andersen, 1992: 62). This result was clearly foreseen in the employment and gender equality strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, a consequence of both the productivist bias of Social Democratic social policy where there is a need to maximise the number of taxpayers, and the exclusive focus of equality measures on increasing labour supply

(Hirdman, 1987: 43; Lewis and Åström, 1992: 73-6; Esping-Andersen, 1992: 60-2 ). By 1980, 74 per cent of women aged 16 and over were in the labour force. Just over 45 per cent were in part-time jobs, but unlike part-time workers in most countries most of these women worked 'long part-time', commonly three-quarters of normal full-time hours, and enjoyed job security and pro-rata entitlements.

The gender logic of the Swedish welfare state reflects the shift away from the male breadwinner model taken with the gender reforms which began in the late 1960s, establishing the policy expectation that women as well as men, mothers as well as fathers, will be employed. Sainsbury (1996: 190-4) sees these reforms as having moved Sweden close to the individual model, at the opposite end from the male breadwinner model on her spectrum of variation in the gender dimensions of welfare states. Both tax and benefit systems treat the partners of a couple as individuals. Because they are largely indifferent to the legal basis of unions, policy arrangements are accommodating of diverse family forms. The basis of benefit entitlement on citizenship, defined in terms of residence, provides a basic level of security to men and women on the same and equal terms. Provisions to harmonise employment with family responsibility, such as paid parental leave and child sickness days, are defined largely in gender neutral terms with the intention that men and women will share the roles of both earning and caring. The incorporation of these provisions in the social insurance system values caring work in the same wage-related terms that apply to other causes of absence from employment. Siim (1990) and Hobson (Hobson and Takahashi, 1997) have aptly termed this a 'parent-worker model'.

### **Swedish Restructuring: 'Equality' in Retrenchment**

The strategies underpinning Sweden's three decades of economic growth began to falter in the 1980s, and moreover to become sources of tension in their own right. Kjellberg (1998: 77-8) points to a widening discrepancy between the growing economic significance of the sector competing on international markets and its declining share of the labour force. Sweden's economy is both centralised and internationalised, and the oil shocks and international recession of the 1970s were quickly and strongly felt. Unemployment remained low by international standards

throughout the 1980s, but budget deficits mounted in the 1970s and early 1980s. The radicalisation of the 1970s and accelerated internationalisation provoked employers to break away from the solidaristic wage regime. Meanwhile, the expansion of public sector and white collar employment was creating new divisions within the union movement. During the 1980s, an inflationary environment, pay competition and wage rises eroded the competitiveness of Swedish exports. Financial markets were deregulated in 1985, weakening government control over the economy. The productivist orientation of social policy weakened in the context of unemployment pressures and budget constraint, while Swedish multinational industry exported manufacturing jobs to lower wage countries (Esping-Andersen, 1992; Stephens, 1996; Kjellberg, 1998).

Returning to office in 1982, the Social Democratic Party sought to manage these contradictions with its policy of the 'Third Way'. This combined support for savings and capital formation with policies securing increased work effort. Devaluation of the krona and negotiated wage restraint restored the competitive position of Swedish industry, and with improving international conditions, brought a profits boom and large increases in private wealth. With unemployment again low and its budget in surplus, Sweden seemed the exception to the welfare state crisis experience of the period (Bergström, 1992: 165-6; Jenson and Mahon, 1993: 93; Stephens 1996: 44-5). As the decade ended, a sudden change from boom to recession dispelled this belief. Unemployment rose from 1.6 per cent in 1990 (2.1 per cent when active labour market measures are taken into account), to 7.7 per cent in 1993 (a total of 12.5 per cent). Economic growth was negative for three years (Stephens, 1996: 45). The economic crisis forced the Social Democratic Government into an accord with the Liberal Party, tax reform lowering marginal rates and shifting the burden to VAT, and an announcement that Sweden would join the European Union. The Social Democrats lost office in their worst poll result since 1928. The Conservative-led minority coalition which followed was beset by currency crises, and despite a number of austerity measures was forced to float the krona in 1992. The Social Democratic Party returned to (minority) government in 1996 (Stephens, 1996; Olsson, 1993: 349-81).

During the 1980s and 1990s the policy framework governing labour markets became more decentralised, with wage bargaining taking place at the enterprise level in the context of national industry agreements. Union membership is high but volatile. There has been a long-term increase in union membership among female workers, including both part-time workers and women in manual occupations, and women now make up a majority of active union members (Kjellberg, 1998: 92). In politics, a gender gap reflects women's interest in defending public employment and the welfare state sector, and the union movement has fostered a new cross-class alliance among women (Jensen and Mahon, 1993: 93-9; Kjellberg, 1998: 101; see also Lewis and Åstrom, 1992: 78-9).

Welfare state restructuring had begun before the advent of the crisis at the end of the 1980s. It was continued and intensified during the 1990s. Although there have been some policy switches with changes between Social Democratic and Conservative Coalition Government during this period, there have also been substantial continuities in both areas and directions of reform over the period. The changes made to the Swedish welfare state have followed four broad patterns. There have, first, been changes to restrain welfare state growth both immediately and over the longer term. A second series of changes has sought to address claims that the work-reinforcing nature of Swedish social welfare provisions had been eroded. Thirdly, there have been both extensions and retrenchments in policy provisions supporting employment of parents of children and the dual-earner household. Finally, there have been changes in the way services are delivered, reshaping roles of central and municipal government and public and private providers.

In the 1980s the Social Democrats pronounced the Swedish welfare state 'mature' and sought to fix the share of social expenditure in national income. In the event, the decade mixed constraint and across-the-board cutbacks with limited expansions, particularly at the end of the decade. The Third Way program had curbing of public expenditure as one of its main goals. Swedish universalism was reflected in across-the-board cuts in benefit levels and indexation, as it also was when no compensation was made for the devaluation of the krona. Compensatory measures for vulnerable groups, principally pensioners, families with children, students and the unemployed, made greater use of income-testing than in

the past. These included the introduction of a universal supplementary benefit for large families. Other changes improved sickness benefits for part-time, part-year and casual workers. The budget was restored to surplus by the end of the decade, and some of the cuts were reversed. As will be discussed below, the government then embarked on further significant extensions of day care and parental leave, though it was unable to fulfil all the commitments it undertook (Olsson, 1993: 355-6; Sainsbury, 1996: 217-21; Stephens, 1996: 43-4; Palme and Wennemo, 1998).

Pressures for constraint were reasserted with the sudden advent of economic crisis and the fall of the Social Democratic Government in 1991. According to Sainsbury (1996), the whole cash transfer system has been affected, and because many benefits are universal cutbacks have affected the daily lives of all citizens. The 1994 election saw both sides advocating continued constraints, cutbacks and/or tax increases. A minority Social Democratic Government was returned, and it has continued to pursue tough fiscal policies, including increases in taxes and social security contributions. It has cut transfers in preference to services, arguing that service cuts could have irreversible effects while better times might enable cuts to benefits to be restored. The whole transfer system has been affected. The 1995-96 budget foreshadowed a reduction of three per cent in the disposable incomes of households. Effects were greatest on the lowest income groups and families with children, and included a reduction of 16 per cent in child allowances and the elimination of the supplementary allowance for large families. Some part of these cutbacks have since been restored, with the 1997 budget bringing benefits back to 1995 levels (Sainsbury, 1996: 217-21; see also Stephens, 1996: 48-9; Palme and Wennemo, 1998). In the 1998 election the Social Democratic Party had its worst poll result ever. Increases in votes went to both the Left (formerly Communist) and Christian Democratic Parties. The Social Democratic Party has formed government in coalition with the Left and Green Parties.

One of the austerity measures of early 1990s was an increase in the retirement age from 65 to 66, starting in 1993. Reform of the age pension system had been under discussion since the mid-1980s, to address the rising costs associated with maturation of the system, demographic

ageing of the population, and lower levels of economic growth. All parties have agreed to far-reaching changes to the system. In the future, the universal pension based on residence will be paid only to those with little or no entitlement to an earnings-related pension. The earnings-related pension (ATP) is to be put on a 'defined contribution' basis, with funding shared between employers and employees rather than by employers only as in the past. A full pension will now require 40 years of contributions, and will be based on income over the whole of working life rather than the present rule of best 15 years. Credit will be given for periods spent in child care, studies and compulsory military service. Senior and intermediate level white-collar workers will lose from these reforms, as will women, especially those who work part time after their children have grown up, and part-time workers without young children (Ståhlberg, 1995; Stephens, 1996: 45-6; Palme and Wennemo, 1998: 20-7).

A second dimension of welfare state restructuring, also under way since the late 1980s, has sought to maintain and strengthen the role of employment in the Swedish social policy model. These changes addressed claims that the 'work line' of Swedish social welfare had been eroded, and that welfare state provisions were now undermining work incentives (Marklund, 1992). The main area of reform has been in sick pay and work injury insurance, where the accessibility and generosity of support were said to be causing high levels of absenteeism. Work line reforms have sought to encourage workers and employers to seek rehabilitation rather than dependence on disability benefits provided through social insurance. They have included the re-introduction of waiting days for sick pay, substantial reductions of sick pay replacement rates especially for short-term absences from work, and changes to work injury insurance to reduce the relative attractiveness of long-term injury compensation. Support for early retirement has also been curtailed. Employers have been made responsible for the cost and administration of sick pay for the first 14 days. Reforms to unemployment insurance have re-introduced waiting days and reduced replacement rates. Expansion of active labour market measures has been accompanied by youth employment programs at less than market wages (Olsson, 1993: 355-63; Stephens, 1996: 46-8; Sainsbury, 1996: 217-19; Palme and Wennemo, 1998: 12-18).

Much of this general line of reform has continued through the succession of Social Democratic and Conservative Coalition Governments of the 1990s, but there have also been significant differences in party approach. Although the Social Democrats had opposed the re-introduction of a waiting day for sick pay, they have retained it in government. They first continued to lower benefit replacement rates, but in September 1997 brought them back to 80 per cent. High and continuing levels of unemployment have put new pressures on Sweden's traditional preference for active employment measures, and while experiments with new variations of such measures are under way the balance between active and passive support has shifted toward benefit reciprocity (Palme and Wennemo, 1998: 27-9, 31-6).

The dramatic policy shift of the 1970s to support for women's employment and the dual-earner household was largely sustained during the 1980s, even with the move to contain the growth of the Swedish welfare state. In counterpoint, women's entitlements as wives began to be abolished or phased out (Olsson, 1993: 32; Sainsbury, 1996: 194). Public day care continued to expand through the 1980s, until by 1988, 54 per cent of children aged six and under were in public child care (Hobson et al., 1995: 8). In 1986, a change in parental leave provisions individualised the entitlements of mothers and fathers. This enabled fathers to claim leave at wage-related replacement rates even if the mother would have been entitled only to a flat-rate benefit (if, for example, she had not been employed for a year before the birth) (Hobson et al., 1995: 16). At the end of the 1980s parental leave was extended to provide 12 months of paid leave with a wage replacement rate of 90 per cent and a further three months paid as a flat-rate benefit. In the 1988 election the Social Democratic Party committed the government to extend the total duration of parental leave to 18 months, and to provide public day care places for all pre-school children of more than 18 months of age by 1991. It abandoned these promises in the recession that followed. Palme and Wennemo (1998: 14) take this moment as marking the end of the expansion of the Swedish welfare state. Not long after, the government responded to the shortage of day care places by lowering the age of school entry from seven to six (Olsson, 1993: 358).

In 1994, the Conservative Coalition Government made a number of changes to parental leave and child care policy. With the intention of increasing fathers' use of parental leave, one month of leave was reserved for the father and one month for the mother. Except for these months, the replacement rate for parental leave was reduced from 90 to 80 per cent, matching the reductions applying to sick pay and unemployment insurance. Responding to its Christian Democratic Party coalition partner, the government abolished the three months of parental leave paid as a flat-rate benefit, and substituted a care allowance paid to parents of young children not in public child care. Paid at a flat rate, this allowance broke with the employment-based model of Swedish family policy (Palme and Wennemo, 1998: 16-18). Although the allowance was small, it threatened to begin the reinstatement of the male breadwinner policy model. With its return to office, the Social Democratic Party Government has abolished the care allowance and reinstated the earlier provision of parental leave with flat-rate benefit. It further reduced replacement rates for parental leave to 75 per cent, but has recently brought them back to 80 per cent, with this rate also applying to the two reserved months. It also reformed the maintenance guarantee provisions giving single mothers an advance on child support payments, in significant part to improve collection of monies owed by separated parents to the state. This sets maintenance according to the income of the parent not living with the child, and does not take account of the income either of the parent who lives with the child or of a new spouse of either parent (Palme and Wennemo, 1998: 29-31).

The close link between gender, welfare state development and public sector employment has continued through the 1980s and 1990s. As personal social services to children and the elderly expanded through the 1980s, so also did the employment of women in the work of the welfare state. The cutbacks of the 1990s have had the opposite effect. Most personal social services are provided by municipal and regional authorities, and while the supply of services has continued to grow, albeit more slowly, national governments have placed limits on the revenue raising of local and regional authorities and forced them to cut costs. Between 1990 and 1994 municipal employment fell by 11 per cent, and the trend continued thereafter (Gonäs, 1997: 115).

As might be expected, this 'downsizing of the public sector' has had greatest effects on women's employment. Unemployment among women rose sharply in the early 1990s, and although women's rates remain below those of men, the gap has narrowed appreciably through the 1990s (SCB, 1996: 52). Women are under-represented among people involuntarily working only part time. The fall in employment has been most severe among young women. As local authorities have reduced staff, workers with least seniority have been most likely not to have their contracts renewed. As permanent positions have been reduced, there has been an increase in temporary employment, with women more likely than men to be employed as substitute workers and on-call in the public sector (Gonäs, 1998: 47-50). The Social Democratic Party's policy of cutting transfers before services clearly has the employment consequences of service cutbacks in mind. The most recent budget bill grants additional funds to municipalities and regional authorities on a continuing basis to address concerns about the quality and accessibility of health care, social services and schools. The associated National Employment Action Plan notes the extreme gender segmentation of Swedish employment (Information Rosenbad, 1998: Budget Statement: 16-17; Employment Action Plan: 20-1).

Cutting across this employment picture has been a second line of change opening the delivery of health, education and welfare services to private providers. Beginning in the 1980s, this line of development has carried two agendas, one in response to citizen dissatisfaction with a remote bureaucracy and lack of choice in the content of services and the manner of their delivery, and the other in pursuit of efficiency gains and cost reductions. Its Conservative Party inflection has sought to frame reform in terms of privatisation and market competition, while the Centre and Social Democratic parties have favoured decentralisation and devolution to lower levels of government. Devolution is consistent with the subsidiarity principle of the EU, which holds that the functions of the state should be performed at the lowest possible level, and is a common trend across the EU. The two sides of politics agree that citizens should have an opportunity to choose between public and private services, but differ over whether to permit the development of superior private provision. Private service sectors, with public financial support and/or regulation, have developed in education, day care and medical practice

(Olsson, 1993: 245-87, 363; Stephens, 1996: 46-8). All still small, these are not yet significant as areas of growth in private sector employment or challenges to the gendered division of public and private employment. At the same time, government policy expects most employment growth to come in the private sector.

In summary, the gender model at the centre of the Swedish welfare state has been retrenched but, with the reversal of the Conservative Government's care allowance, not significantly reshaped. This is a parent-worker model, formally gender neutral but in practice strongly inflected by a traditional gender division of labour assigning the larger share of breadwinning to men and caregiving to women. On its transfer side, its key parental leave provisions are embedded in the social insurance system, treating leave for family purposes in much the same terms as short-term sickness and unemployment. In the main, such leave is paid and wage-related. On the service side, entitlements to services supporting the dual-earner family are established social rights but are also the basis of a highly gender-segmented labour market. The changes of the 1980s and especially the 1990s have seen the provisions supporting this model extended, but their substance also thinned. The employment consequences of welfare state retrenchment have increased unemployment and underemployment among women, particularly young women. At the same time, the gender segregation of employment and the concentration of women's employment in the public sector have insulated them from the harsher conditions of post-industrial employment experienced by Australian women (and men) in the 1990s.

#### **4 Gender and Restructuring: Australia and Sweden Compared**

The restructuring of gender relations in Australian social policy came very late: only in the late 1980s did the Australian gender model begin to break with the assumptions of the male breadwinner model and its gender logic of asymmetric partnership of spouses. During the expansionary phase of the Australian welfare state, social security entitlements were rewritten in gender neutral terms, enabling men and women to claim support as earners and dependants and hence to reverse or share roles, within the narrow limits set by Australia's limited social security safety

net. The employment of women with children increased during this period, facilitated by a limited supply of subsidised child care but with little support of other kinds. The new reform agenda beginning in the late 1980s has been replacing support attached to spousal dependency with support predicated on the principle of care, and most recently has been individualising the entitlements of husband and wife. These changes have come in the wider context of welfare state retrenchment.

In contrast, Swedish welfare state development broke with the male breadwinner model far earlier, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in more propitious historical circumstances. The critical steps in gender reform, such as the shift to individual taxation and the creation of entitlements such as paid employment leave and publicly supported child care, came as integral parts of welfare state expansion, closely and strategically allied with the economic development of the period. Its gender logic identifies both men and women as workers, and both male and female parents as potentially carers of children. Attached to it is an explicit, if unrealised, ideological agenda for gender equality in which mothers and fathers have the same, and shared, responsibilities. The parent-worker model is closely articulated with the national economy, in labour costs, taxation and the development of a large and gender-segregated service sector. It has been widely credited as the basis of Sweden's high rate of labour participation among women with children, and until recently also with that country's high fertility rate.

Although moving in the same broad direction toward individualisation of entitlements, the gender models of these two welfare states remain very different. They express different concepts of gender equality, and are set within larger welfare state structures of very different kinds. Levels of support and generosity of provision are also very different. These differences do not appear to be narrowing to any significant degree.

The concept of gender equality underlying Australian reform is a liberal understanding. Its terms are individualistic, and its approach universalistic in the narrow sense of treating all individuals in the same way. Its gender terms are fraught with 'Wollstonecraft's dilemma', in which demands for gender-neutral inclusion on equal terms with men seem to be in conflict with needs and claims stemming from gender-specific differences (Pateman, 1988). The move to replace spousal

dependency with the principle of care in social policy is part of a wider evolution in Australian liberalism to recognise the separate and equal personhood of women. Such personhood is individual, however, and the terms of reform have remained within an equal opportunity vision of freely made 'choices' about employment and child care. It has relied on gender-neutrality and the prohibition of discrimination as reform strategies. There is comparatively little scope for the development of social policy arrangements bridging the divide between the family and the market, or for a role for the state in the inequalities of personal and domestic life (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999).

The concept of equality in the Swedish gender model is very different. This is officially stated as a policy goal, under the name of *jämställdhet*. The term is distinct from *jämlikhet*, the term used to refer to relative equality of social groups. Referring to an equal relation between women and men, it is variously translated as equal opportunity, sex/gender equality and equal status (Florin and Nilsson, 1997). It is represented in social policy in a gender-neutral framework of social insurance and family services, facilitating the combination of family responsibilities with employment, and enabling parents to share the roles of earning and caring. The norm of the dual-earner couple is well established, and the pattern of women's labour force participation over the life course is little different from men's. Women also have relatively greater wage equality with men than in many other countries (Sainsbury, 1996: 111).

Judged absolutely, however, the picture is much less flattering. There remain substantial inequalities between men and women in employment, income and the division of labour in housework and child care. Although more than a quarter of the claimants of parental leave are now men, by far the greatest proportion (some 89 per cent) of such leave is taken by women. Child sick leave days are more equally shared (SCB, 1996: 36; see also Sainsbury, 1996: 191-4). When part-time work is taken into account, the life course profile of women's employment is much less like men's. Charted in terms of hours per week, Swedish women's work has an M-shaped profile of withdrawal from and return to employment during the years when they have young children, much like that found in countries outside Scandinavia (Gönas, 1998: 45-6). Unpaid work is also unequally divided between men and women, including in

households where both partners work full time. In households with children, women put in 75 per cent of the time spent on housework, 70 per cent of the time spent on child care, 58 per cent on shopping and 28 per cent on maintenance work (Lewis and Åström, 1992: 72; Nyberg, 1998: 66, figures apply to 1990/91). Even when the equalising effects of the welfare state are taken into account, women's (disposable) incomes are only three-quarters of men's (Nyberg, 1998: 39-40).

On this account, the Swedish model of gender equality has been given two rather different readings. Jenson and Mahon (1993) interpret the distinction between *jämställdhet* and *jämlikhet* as revealing a policy agenda aspiring to a different but still unequal form of gender relations. Lewis and Åström (1992: 71-9) interpret it as an equality strategy which, while incomplete in its achievements, also has the virtue of recognising and accommodating gender difference. The welfare state restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s has retained its parent-worker model, though cuts in the levels of provision may have made its vision harder to achieve.

The restructuring of gender logic in Australia and Sweden needs to be seen in the context of wider differences in the two social policy regimes. The limits of Australian gender reform are set by the narrow functional confines of its social security system to poverty alleviation. On one side, the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s have helped to reduce the gendered concentration of poverty in Australia, especially that among sole parents and their children. At the same time, the selective basis of the system means that the gender-equalising effects of removing support for dependency and individualising social security entitlements are largely confined to low-income groups. In effect, the Australian agenda for gender reform through the social security system is directed primarily to lower and working class women. The individualisation of entitlements to unemployment assistance applies only where the joint income of the couple is relatively low. One outcome has been to force vulnerable groups of women into the labour market in times of high unemployment and underemployment. This has been true of older sole parents, and except where there are dependent children, the wives of unemployed men (Shaver, et al., 1994; King, Bradbury and McHugh, 1995). In the deregulatory mode of present policy especially, this contributes to gendered distributions of casual employment and underemployment.

With the increasing importance of occupational pensions in the retirement income system, gender-based income inequality in working life will be carried over into old age.

While the selectivity of the Australian welfare state has tended to limit the effects of gender reform in social security to low-income groups, the universalism of Swedish social provision has worked to extend them to all sectors of Swedish society. Equally, the universalism of the Swedish model has meant that cutbacks in provision have been widely and rapidly felt. Palme and Wennemo (1998) identify families with children as the group experiencing greatest losses in the period of crisis since the beginning of the 1990s, having been affected by benefit cuts, tax increases and the loss of income through unemployment. In this sense, gender reform in social policy has cut across class divisions in a way not true of Australia. At the same time, the concentration of women's employment in the public sector and in service occupations has had very significant consequences for Swedish class structure. This is reflected in high rates of union membership among women, and in the development of cross-class activism among women in blue- and white-collar unions (Jenson and Mahon, 1993: 96-8).

Although there have been significant cutbacks to Swedish social provision, the basic structures of its gender model remain unchanged. This is not for want of trying: the Conservative Government experiment replacing a part of parental leave with a care allowance might have begun the reinstatement of the male breadwinner model, and the success of the Christian Democratic Party in the 1998 election suggests that such a possibility remains. So far, the parent-worker model prevails. Cuts in replacement rates for parental leave have been shared with sickness and unemployment benefits. Perhaps the main exception to this is in age pension reform, where structural changes are weakening parts of the pension system which are significant for gender equity (Sainsbury, 1996: 219-21; Palme and Wennemo, 1998: 20-7). Elsewhere, the effects of welfare state restructuring have rather been felt incrementally, in benefit cutbacks and the erosion of service standards. Even incremental change may have structural effects: it is said, for example, that reduced replacement rates for parental leave may make it harder for couples to afford the greater loss of income that is usually experienced when the

father rather than the mother takes the leave. There may also be threshold effects associated with incremental reductions in the quality and accessibility of services. Generally, however, there has been retrenchment but not restructuring in the Swedish gender model.

Swedish gender reform preceded the crisis and retrenchment of the Swedish welfare state, and its parent-worker model was already institutionalised when the crisis of the Swedish welfare state finally came. Universality of entitlements and the unionised base of its large service sector have served to build constituencies for its policies and provisions, and especially to secure the electoral loyalties of women. It is hard not to believe that this fortunate timing is significant for the relative stability of Sweden's gender model to date. The retrenchments of the 1980s were reversed and the model extended. Although the larger part of the extension then promised has never eventuated, the model itself has support across political parties and has been sustained through changes of government. Stephens (1996: 58-9) forecasts that while job creation through the expansion of the public sector cannot continue, the policy framework supporting the dual-earner family is unlikely to change. The commitment of the present government to cut transfers in preference to services clearly reflects political judgements as much as value choices. Some part of the cutbacks to parental leave and municipal funding have recently been restored.

Compared to Sweden, the move away from the gender model of breadwinner and dependant has not gone very far in Australia. The individualisation of entitlements has been applied only in limited parts of the social security system, while the substitution of the principle of care for that of dependency continues to support an asymmetric family of primary earner and primary caregiver. In social security, this model structures support to families with children in the case of unemployment or sickness of the primary earner. Taxation has long been put on an individual basis, and its provisions supporting spousal dependency were briefly removed. The model of breadwinner and dependent spouse has recently been reinstated in the family tax provisions of the current Conservative Government. Unlike social security, income taxation applies universally, extending its gender model across the spectrum of income and class.

The turnaround from expansion to contraction of the Australian welfare state began in the late 1970s, much earlier than in Sweden. Gender reform, and especially its most recent and significant phase, came in an historical conjuncture dominated by retrenchment and restructuring. The reform agenda, always more limited in any case, has been developed in the context of budgetary constraint. It has proceeded furthest in areas where pressures to curtail expenditure have been greatest, particularly sole parent support, unemployment assistance and, over the longer term, retirement income and the development of private occupational pensions. This context has increased and entrenched the role of targeting in its selective framework, and made the alleviation of poverty a more salient goal than the support of families at large. The politics of reform have worked through policy trade-offs in which the price for additional support for some groups has been tighter targeting of the benefits received by others. Political impetus for gender reform in social policy has come primarily through a loose alliance of feminist groups in electoral, bureaucratic, and grass-roots settings with women in trade unions and the Australian Labor Party (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, forthcoming, 1999, ch. 6). The gender gap in which women more than men have tended to vote for the Coalition parties seemed to be closing in the 1980s, but has reopened in the 1990s. Women support 'women's issues', such as equality policies and services closely associated with women's needs and opportunities, but the Labor Party has not been successful in mobilising this support electorally. Gender politics remain divided in party terms (Sawer, 1991; Renfrow, 1994; Curtin and Sawer, 1996). Such reform as has been achieved is, hence, far less securely institutionalised, and much more vulnerable to reinterpretation and rollback, than is the case in Sweden.

## **5 Conclusion**

There are notable similarities in the restructuring of gender logic in the Australian and Swedish welfare states. Most obvious among them is the move away from the male breadwinner policy model to treat marital partners as individuals, but also apparent are policy adaptations to widening inequality of income and opportunity and policy developments linking benefit entitlements to labour market performance. However, it is important to recognise that such similarities are greater in direction

than in degree, and that Australian and Swedish social policy remain very different from one another. Common directions in social policy generally represent responses to similar national circumstances, including the forces of globalisation and post-industrial development, common social trends in family structure and personal aspiration, and similar political developments including the increasing salience of social movement politics. At the same time, changes in gender logic are set within and conditioned by the established frameworks of national social policy regimes and thus reflect national differences in history, culture and politics. Australian and Swedish social policy are almost polar opposites in these terms, and are following separate and parallel, rather than converging, developmental paths.

The Australian and Swedish comparison suggests that the moment clearly matters for change in the gender logic shaping social policy. This point has already been made in discussion of gender reform, ironically with respect to explaining the relative success of Australia's women's movement as compared with those of other English-speaking countries. Sawyer (1991) attributes this to the Australian political tradition in which radical groups look to the state to satisfy their demands, Australia's institutional basis of centralised wage determination, a lack of effective opposition and, critically, a favourable moment of political opportunity. As she observes, reform in Australia has nevertheless lagged far behind that achieved in Sweden. This is not the place to consider the adequacy of Sawyer's terms for explaining gender reform in Sweden, but political choices to promote women's labour force participation were a further critical factor in the Swedish equation.

This in turn points to the importance of historical conjuncture and the far more favourable prospects for gender reform in circumstances of welfare state expansion than in those of contraction. In both Australia and Sweden, gender reform has extended the role of the welfare state to meet new kinds of needs and to new beneficiary groups, but Australian expansion has been constrained by the more general context of welfare state retrenchment in a way that Swedish entitlements were not. It also points to the role of policy feedback (Pierson, 1994) in the capacity of welfare state programs to translate the interests they serve into constituencies able to defend them. Sweden's parent-worker model has

been in place for almost a generation, long enough for women who have grown up with it not only to take it for granted but to be critical of its shortcomings. The present conjuncture favours retrenchment over expansion in both countries, but Swedish reforms have shown themselves as far more durable than those more lately begun in Australia.

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