

Challenges in Nordic Childcare Policies: With Special Reference to Finland

Mutsuko TAKAHASHI *

* Kibi International University, Japan; mutuko@kiui.ac.jp

Abstract: This article studies the challenges in the development of childcare policies in Nordic societies by focusing on Finland, where childcare schemes with multiple alternatives have been developed since the mid-1980s. In Finland, currently, parents with small children under three years of age can decide to either stay at home and tend to their children as long as possible or resume work by making use of child day care services provided by municipalities and private service providers. However, such a Finnish solution faces certain challenges in relation to issues pertaining to social justice for adult and young citizens. This article argues that developing childcare policies primarily for the convenience of adult citizens sometimes contradicts the entitlements of small children.

Keywords: childcare policy, Nordic welfare state, Finland

JEL Classification Numbers: J13, J16

1. Introduction

This article aims to discuss the challenges in the development of childcare policies in Nordic societies. It mainly focuses on Finland, where childcare schemes with multiple alternatives have been developed since the mid-1980s. The discussion first outlines the gender regimes reflecting different gender norms in order to facilitate a better understanding of the distinctive features of the childcare policies in the Nordic welfare states. It also explains the developments in these policies in the second half of the twentieth century. In Finland, nowadays, parents with small children under three years of age can decide to either stay at home and tend to their children as long as possible or resume work by making use of child day care services provided by municipalities and private service providers. The introduction of child day care schemes with multiple alternatives was considered a remarkable achievement of the Finnish welfare system in terms of securing freedom of choice for citizens with different ways of living and preferences. In this article, however, it is argued that such a Finnish solution involves certain challenges in relation to issues pertaining to social justice for adult and young citizens. It is pointed out that developing the welfare system only for the convenience of adult citizens sometimes contradicts the norms of social justice for children whose future will determine the sustainability of the whole

society.

2. The Nordic “dual breadwinner models”

The significance of reconciling work and family life has captured increasing attention in industrialized societies where sustainable social development and control of social risks are prominent topics of discussion (see for e.g. Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Bonoli, 2006 [2005]). In Nordic societies, family policy plays an important role in balancing work and family life, with the main essentials being time for childcare, cash benefits for parents staying at home and provision of day care services (Elingsæter, 1999). The composition of these elements in the framework of family policy differs in different societies, and the focus placed on a particular element depends on the gender relations and norms of a society (Ibid.). The emphasis may vary with respect to time, benefits or day care services because the ways of living, social values and norms change with time. Social policy develops through consensus, confrontation or compromise in the politics of welfare, and welfare regimes manifest complex of social norms. The gender policy regimes that consist of social norms on gender relations assign certain roles and tasks to men and women and can be classified into three categories—namely, male breadwinners, gender divisions of labour and gender task sharing (Sainsbury, 1999a, p. 5). Gender task sharing differs from the other two categories that divide the world of men and women; it represents the view that men and women should share duties and responsibilities in order to hold even and equal positions (Sainsbury, 1999b, p. 78–79).

The dual earner family policy model has been a distinctive feature in the Nordic welfare states (Korpi, 2000). The high rate of female participation in the labour markets of Nordic societies can be interpreted in different ways. Some highly acknowledge this fact as an outstanding success story of Nordic women, relating it to the excellent records of gender empowerment. It is reported that five Nordic countries—Sweden (1), Norway (2), Finland (3), Iceland (4) and Denmark (8)—continue to be placed among the top 10 with respect to the global gender gap index concerning the areas of political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity and health and educational attainments (World Economic Forum 2007, p. 16). Moreover, the absence of social institution of a housewife and the prevalence of full-time female workers in Finland are distinctive features in comparison to other societies where gender regimes maintain the gender norm of male breadwinners and assign the role of housewives to women. As shown in Table 1, the employment status of couples with children indicates the prevalence of full-time dual breadwinners in Finland where the part-time employment rate of women is relatively low at 15 percent (OECD, 2005, p. 17).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the social institution of a housewife was not prevalent in Finland because married women with smaller children were actively involved in the labour market. Elina Haavila-Mannio points out that a significant number of married women in Finland entered the

labour market in the 1950s and 1960s (Haavio-Mannila, 1970, p. 57, 172). With the development of industrialization and urbanization in the early stages of the latter half of the twentieth century, those married women who used to work in agrarian households as family members moved from rural communities to urban areas and became wage earners employed mainly in the tertiary industries (Rantalaaho, 1997, p. 26). However, it took a few decades before social support for households with small children in Finland began to draw more social attention. The absence of social support for child day care in the 1950s and 1960s led to a situation wherein working mothers often relied on informal care for their small children—namely, by seeking help from friends and relatives.

Table 1 Some indicators of employment, birth rates and public policy support (Sweden, Finland and United Kingdom)

	Sweden	Finland	United Kingdom
Maternal employment rate (children age 0-3)*	71.9	52.1	49.2
of which part-time %	37	na	61.1
Employment status of both parents (% of couples with children)**			
<i>Both in full-time employment</i>	39.4	58.9	28.3
<i>One parent in full-time employment</i>			
<i>with the partner in part-time employment</i>	39.1	5.0	36.3
<i>One parent in employment</i>	13	31.2	27.2
<i>No parent in employment</i>	2.9	4.8	5.6
Total fertility rate (2002)	1.65	1.72	1.64
Public spending on childcare , % of GDP	2.0 (2001)	1.1 (2002)	0.4 (2003)
Public spending on leave payments , % of GDP	0.81(2001)	0.62 (2002)	0.11 (2003)
Public spending on child allowances , % of GDP***	0.93	1.02	0.90

* Data concerns 2002 for Finland and 2003 for Sweden and United Kingdom.

** Full-time employment refers to at least 30 hours per week, and part-time working less than 30 hours per week, except for Sweden where part-time is less than 35 hours per week. Data concerns 2002 for Finland and Sweden and 2003 for United Kingdom.

*** Data concerns 2001 for all countries.

Source: OECD (2005, p. 17)

The significant share of full-time female workers in Finland is mainly attributed to the fact that the Finnish labour market does not offer part-time employment in general. It is important to

note that Finland has the lowest flexible employment as compared to other Nordic countries. –The rigidity of the employment index in Finland is 48, while it is 47 in Norway, 44 in Sweden and only 10 in Denmark (OECD level is 31) (World Bank, 2006, p. 98–100). Until the early 1970s, neither did Finland have a gender-neutral or women-friendly labour force policy nor was its existing family policy very supportive of women’s complete commitment towards their careers. In the 1950s, when the Finnish economy was experiencing rapid industrialization, the labour force policy initially expected contribution from women rather than immigrant workers. In contrast, other Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark had a different approach towards the labour force policy, which was evident in the fact that they accepted more immigrant workers than Finland did. In the 1950s, despite such differences in the patterns of female employment—either as full-time or part-time workers—and in the attitudes towards immigrant workers; on the whole, women in Nordic societies began to have opportunities to become breadwinners. Nevertheless, until the early 1970s, reconciling work and family life was considered to be the responsibility of working mothers rather than a social responsibility.

The prevalence of wage-earning women as full-time workers in the Finnish labour market was a phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century, whereas not a few Finnish researchers argue that women used to work hard in agrarian communities even long before Finland experienced industrialization and urbanization. The Finnish welfare society is based on the fact that women as well as men in Finland are deeply committed to employment and that self-reliance has been regarded as essential for being good citizens. This type of welfare society in Finland has a relatively short history. It is also important to take into consideration the social history of Finnish industrialization and urbanization during which women became wage earners. Finland was an agrarian society for a long time and in the 1930s and the early 1940s, female wage earners were limited to women belonging to the working class in urban areas. Other women, such as those belonging to the rural areas and urban middle class, were not actively involved in the labour market. Although Finland was considered to be a ‘welfare laggard’ in Northern Europe, it has been successfully catching up with her Nordic neighbours since the 1960s, owing to the development of its welfare system. At the same time, men and women who moved from rural areas to cities continued to be employed in the labour market throughout their life. Commitment to one’s career is regarded as an essential part of one’s identity and as an important aspect of one’s life as we develop social relationships with others through work (Hakovirta, 2008, p. 96).

Official statistics in Finland have categorized women differently at different times, which indicates the changes in the social recognition of women’s positions (Kinnunen, 1996, p. 47–48). From the late nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century, a category called ‘married women’ was included in the demographic statistics; however, this category was not formally included in the labour force statistics. It was in the 1950s, when women began to be treated on par with men, that official statistics concerning the labour force began to categorize

men and women equally according to their respective occupations and regardless of their marital status.

The rapid social transformation of Finland since the 1950s with respect to various social dimensions ranging from prompt urbanization and industrialization, increase in the number of female wage earners to individualization (for instance, the prevalence of nuclear families and divorce) is remarkable. Between 1970 and 2005, the number of single mothers increased from 61,000 to 103,000 and in 2005, families consisting of mothers and children accounted for 17.4 percent of the total families with children (Statistics Finland, 2006).

3. 'Defamiliarization' in the Nordic childcare policies

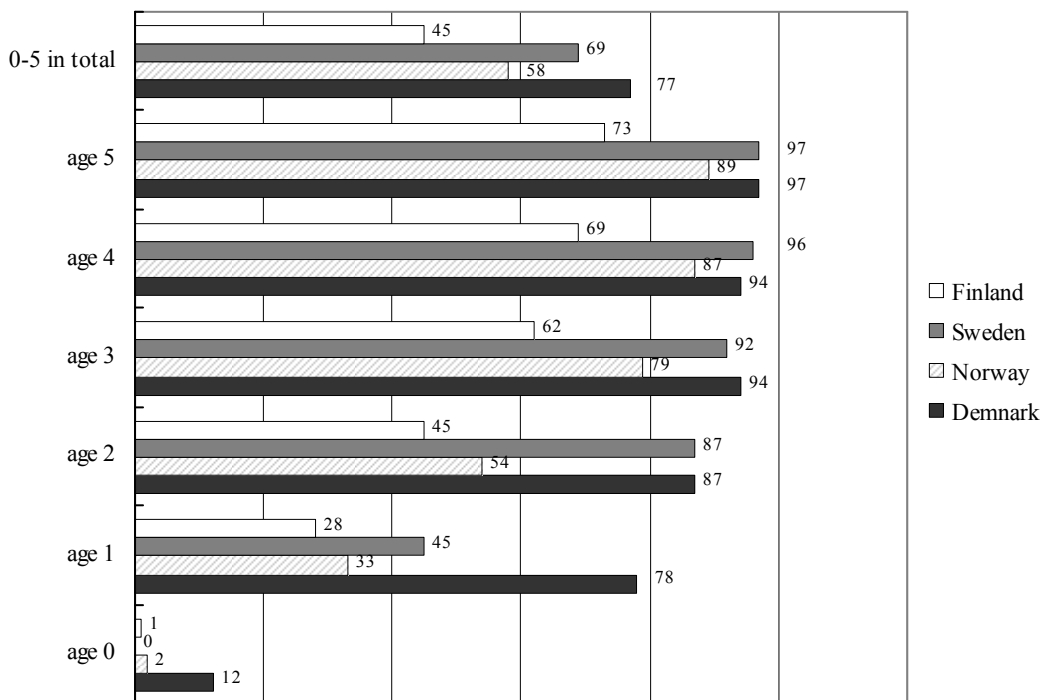
With regard to the long-term developments of day care for children below the school-going age (mostly below seven years of age) in Nordic societies, several researchers have discussed the development of family policies in terms of familiarization, defamiliarization and refamiliarization. Defamiliarization, according to Gøsta Esping-Andersen, indicates the degree of the availability of social care and support—help from outside home—for a family when at least one family member is no longer self-reliant and needs help (Esping-Andersen, 1999). The concept of defamiliarization—which Esping-Andersen has added as the third '*d*' in addition to the other two '*ds*', namely, decommodification and destratification—underlines the significance of social care with the aim of maintaining the dignity of each family member even in the event of dependence upon others. In addition, as caregivers, family members run the risk of getting completely exhausted owing to full commitment to family care unless proper help and support from non-family members is made available. Social care is expected to reduce this risk related to family/informal care so that the dignity of all the family members is maintained. In practice, the scope of defamiliarization includes care for the elderly, handicapped people and small children. With respect to care for children below seven years of age (before enrolment in primary school), defamiliarization refers to the availability of day care services outside home that enable parents to reconcile work and family life. The challenge lies in how families and society share the responsibility for childcare through the provision of social services and social security benefits.

Since the 1970s, the Nordic municipal governments have been encouraged to improve child day care services. In other words, the 1970s and 1980s represent the defamiliarization in family policy, when the main emphasis was on municipal day care services. As a matter of fact, it was not until 1973 that the act on child day care was promulgated in Finland, clarifying the responsibility of municipal governments (*kunta* in Finnish) for providing child day care services to local residents. Much before the above legislation was passed in 1973, a significant number of mothers with children were an essential part of the Finnish labour market.

Defamiliarization assumes that the socialization of care-giving work is completely accepted

with trust in professional care workers. Harriet Silius claims that the Nordic welfare states share a common view on social responsibility for care-giving work, including child day care, which is why a considerable amount of care-giving work has been conducted by care professionals with competent vocational education and training (Silius, 1995, p. 59). This explanation reminds us of an important aspect of defamiliarization that it does not only refer to the socialization of care that enables mothers to work but also to the creation of employment opportunities for care professionals and the professionalization of care-giving work. The defamiliarization in Nordic childcare systems matured between the 1970s and the 1990s, accompanied by the development of vocational training of care professionals and the employment of women in the care section of labour led by the public sector. The professionalization of care work has been an essential part of the Nordic welfare states and has been the subject of critical discussion by feminist researchers in terms of state feminism for the last two decades (see e.g. Hernes, 1988; Rantalaio, 1997; Leira, 2002a).

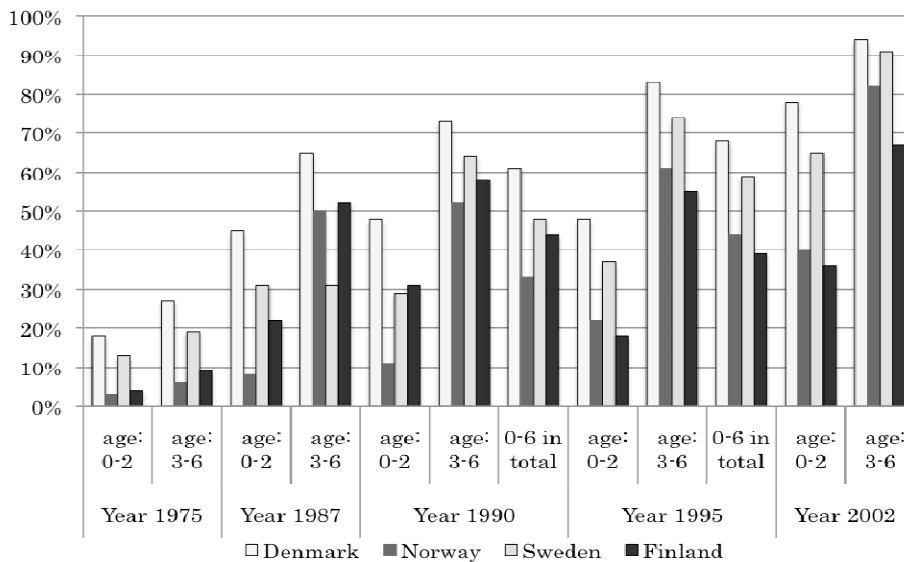
Figure 1 Use of day care services for children below the school-going age in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway (2004, %)



Source: Nordic Statistical Yearbook (2005)

In reality, despite sharing a common view on the socialization of care, Nordic societies show considerable divergence in the usage patterns of day care services (see Figures 1 and 2). For instance, as shown in Figure 2, in 1975, Finland had the lowest usage rate of the municipal day care services, with 4 percent of the children below three years of age and 9 percent of them between three and six years of age. In 2002, the percentage of those who use municipal day care has substantially risen to 36 percent for one- and two-year-old children and 67 percent for three- to six-year-old children. Nevertheless, in comparison to other Nordic societies, municipal day care in Finland has remained relatively inactive, mainly owing to the emergence of multiple childcare schemes since the mid-1980s.

Figure 2 The use of municipal child day care services in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (1975–2002, %)



Source: Leira (2006)

4. Refamiliarization: Gender divisions of labour and gender task sharing

It is important to note that refamiliarization—calling parents back home to children—indicates different trends, as it places emphasis on motherhood as well as on fatherhood. When childcare policy focuses on the family, particularly towards mothers, it tends to reinforce the gender divisions of labour rather than task sharing between partners. When fathers are encouraged to

spend more time tending to their small children, the highest priority is given to gender task sharing, which reduces gender segregation.

There exist two phases in the development of the Nordic childcare policy, which present different perspectives with respect to the gender divisions of labour. In the first phase, the gender divisions of labour in childcare were not considered as an issue related to gender relations. Little attention was paid to the imbalance in task sharing at home, and women were considered responsible for homemaking and childcare even when mothers actively participated in the labour market in Finland. Defamiliarization as a means of social care aims at enabling mothers to reconcile work and family life by providing families with small children with municipal child day care services (Miller and Warman, 1996, p. 31). Although the socioeconomic contribution of working mothers in the labour force was recognized, the gender divisions of labour at home was taken for granted, especially with respect to childcare in a country like Finland, where the social institution of a housewife did not exist.

Table 2 Statutory maternity leave—duration and compensation (some European countries)

Duration ¹⁾	Compensation as % of pay		
	Under 80%	Between 80% and 100%	100%
14-15 weeks	Belgium		Germany, Slovenia
16-18 weeks	Finland ⁶⁾	Denmark	Austria, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain
21 weeks		Italy	
24 weeks +	Hungary, Ireland, UK ²⁾	UK ³⁾ , Slovakia ⁵⁾ , Sweden ⁴⁾	Norway ⁴⁾

1) For the first child - may be longer for the second and subsequent children (Poland) or the third child (France and Spain).

2) For 20 weeks after the first six weeks.

3) For the first six weeks out of a total 26 paid weeks.

4) No specific maternity leave - mother's leave is included de facto in the parental leave scheme available to the two parents.

5) Compensation as a percentage of income is very low for vast majority of employees because of a very low ceiling on compensation.

6) The compensation level varies, and is actually 100 % for some for some mothers.

Source: EIRO (2004, Table 2)

Simultaneously, familiarization through the social security scheme was meant to grant time and

day allowance for parents to look after their children. Familiarization implies establishing maternal and parental leaves in Northern Europe as well as in other industrialized societies (Table 2). In practice, although parental leaves are basically gender-neutral, they tend to be used mainly by mothers. Paternal leaves have also been introduced in several societies; however, even if they are available, they tend to be considerably short (Table 3). In Finland, the duration of childcare-related leaves have constantly been prolonged from 1964 to the 1990s (Table 4), covering both the phases. The second phase is characterized by refamiliarization that involves more or less contradictory perspectives. One perspective encourages paternal commitment towards childcare by extending the duration of parental and paternal leaves, and the other introduces the child home care allowance, which although is gender-neutral, tends to be used by mothers. In addition, in the second phase, it can be pointed out that implicit contradictions have arisen between defamiliarization and refamiliarization in Finland.

Table 3 Statutory paternity leave schemes (some European countries)

Scheme	Country
No leave	Austria, Germany, Ireland
Very restricted leave	Italy, Poland, Slovakia
2 days	Spain, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands
5 days	Hungary, Portugal
Around 2 weeks	Belgium, Denmark, France, Slovenia ¹⁾ , Sweden, UK
3 weeks or more	Finland, Norway ²⁾ , Slovenia ¹⁾

1) 15 paid days and 75 further unpaid days.

2) No specific paternity leave - paternity leave included de facto in parental leave scheme.

Source: EIRO (2004, Table 3)

In Norway and Sweden, promoting paternal commitment towards care-giving work for children at the earliest stage of childhood has been a significant topic of discussion. This means to be policy prevention into social norms—family and gender norms in particular—through attempt of encouraging paternal responsibility towards childcare. The policy prevention into parenting is named *papa quota*, and it was first introduced in Norway in 1993 and then in Sweden in 1995 (*papa & mama quota*). It aims to discover a new form of gender task sharing model by seeking gender equality in parenting instead of maternal dominance in caring for infants. Denmark followed Sweden and Norway by introducing the *papa quota* in 1997 but scrapped it in 2002. In the case of Denmark, it is pointed out that the politics of welfare under a conservative government had such an impact on family policies as withdrawal from *papa quota* since the conservative wing insisted that the division of labour in parenting depended on freedom of choice exercised by each couple and that policy intervention was incompatible with parenting (Borchorst,

2006).

Table 4 Development of family policy in Finland

(Year)

- 1948 Child Allowance was first introduced.
- 1964 Maternal leave (through reform of social insurance for sickness; at the beginning 18 days prior to childbirth and 36 days after childbirth, later prolonged)
- 1973 The Children's Daycare Act was promulgated, clarifying the responsibility of municipals to provide necessary child daycare for local communities
- 1985 The Law on Child Home Care Allowance and Parental Leave was promulgated. Unconditional entitlement to municipal daycare services was guaranteed for children under the age of three.
- 1996 The Law on Private Daycare Allowance was promulgated. Children's unconditional entitlement to municipal daycare services was extended to all the children under school age
- 2000 The early childhood education was institutionalized nation wide for children of six year old.

Source: Takahashi (2007, p. 166)

The Nordic child day care models were classified into two groups, as a substantially larger number of children aged three and above in Sweden and Denmark use municipal day care services as compared to Finland and Norway. The home care allowance is made available for households with children aged three and below in Finland and for those aged two and below in Norway. In recent years, the situation in Finland has become extremely different from that in Norway, and the common feature among the Nordic childcare schemes is reduced to the point that children aged below one are being tended to at home (Anttonen and Sointu, 2006, p. 57).

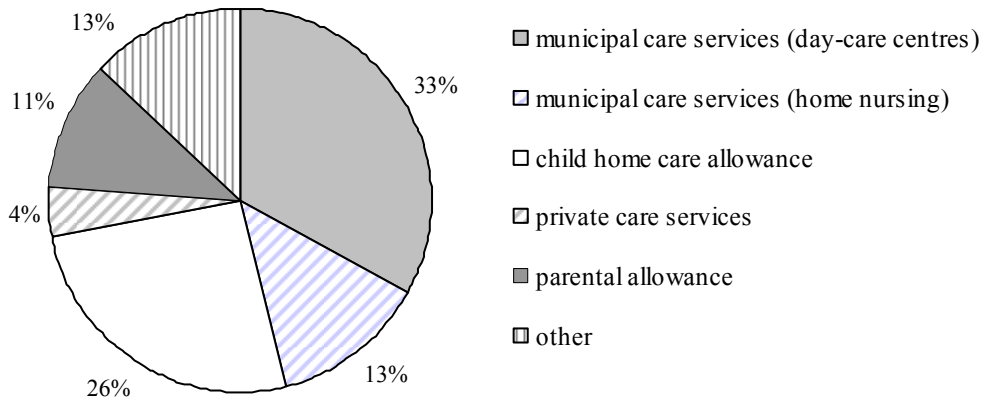
5. Childcare in welfare politics in Finland

The early 1980s, when home care allowance was newly introduced to aid the childcare scheme, can be regarded as a watershed in Finnish childcare policies. Home allowance provides cash benefits to parents raising their small children below three years of age at home on the condition that the child does not use municipal day care services. Currently, the basic part of this allowance on a monthly basis is 294.28 euros.

In the political arena, it was the Centre Party (*Suomen keskusta*, earlier Finnish agrarian party) that promoted the home care allowance by arguing that the childcare scheme should include some alternatives for self-employers, as the municipal day care services—based on the Childcare Act of

1973—mainly benefited wage earners. In the early 1980s, Finland had a coalition cabinet, with the SDP and Centre Party as the main parties, and it introduced home care allowance through political bargaining. Similarly, in the mid-1990s, the National Coalition (*Kokoomus*) succeeded in adding the private childcare allowance. Meanwhile, in Norway, the child home care allowance was introduced in 1998, and it is more or less regarded as a gift from the Norwegian welfare state to the patriarchal families whose main breadwinners are men. It is pointed out that Norwegian family policies have failed to provide appropriate child day care services on a nation-wide basis (Leira, 2006, p. 42).

Figure 3 Shares of various childcare services for children aged between 0–6 in Finland (2005, %)



Source: Kansaneläkelaitos (2006)

In both Finland and Norway, the official statement legitimizing the home care allowance is freedom of choice, that is, ‘to offer multiple alternatives so that parents with small children can choose the most suitable childcare arrangement’ (Anttonen and Sointu, 2006, p. 57). In practice, the multiple alternatives have been more realistic in Finland than in Norway, as the introduction of home care allowance in Finland was accompanied by the reinforcement of municipal day care services as children’s entitlement and no longer that of parents. According to this amendment, children below the school-going age are entitled to municipal day care services regardless of the employment situation of their parents and the presence of other small children within the same household. It was owing to the initiative of the left-wing cabinet parties (SDP and the Greens) in the early 1980s that children’s entitlement to municipal day care was acknowledged. In 1985, at the same time as the introduction of home care allowance, children’s entitlement was first made

applicable to children below three years of age. In 1996, it was extended to children below seven years of age along with the introduction of private care allowance. In this sense, defamiliarization (reinforcing the municipal day care services) and refamiliarization (introducing the child home care allowance) clash with each other, reflecting the competition in the politics of childcare between the left and conservative wings. The shares of various childcare services in Finland in 2005 are shown in Figure 3.

In sum, the Finnish childcare reform in the 1980s and 1990s sought legitimacy from the freedom of choice for parents, adult citizens, and not small children. Further, since the late 1990s, the perspective on children's rights attracted more social attention with respect to early childhood education. Before discussing this point, however, the freedom of choice in childcare needs more critical assessment by focusing on the different aspects of social justice.

6. Relocating children in childcare policy in Finland

The child home allowance has been attracting women rather than men, and therefore, it tends to endorse the gender divisions of labour between men and women and the socioeconomic gaps among women. The latter implies that those eligible for the home allowance represent two different groups of mothers: one is the group of mothers in the highest strata of income level, while the other group belongs to the lowest strata. Many of the mothers in the lowest rank of income level are often faced with the difficulties of being employed mainly because of lower education background, thus living with the combination of childcare and unemployment instead of reconciling work and family life (Salmi, 2006, p. 155). The longer they remain unemployed, the harder it is for them to find work even though these mothers might be satisfied with motherhood by staying with their children (Hakovirta, *op.cit.*, p. 98–99). This may sound contradictory to the situation in Finland where the dual breadwinner model is prevalent and multiple alternatives for childcare are available. The concept of freedom of choice in childcare does not always offer real choices.

The issue of social justice is not limited to concerns about parents' (mothers') working status; rather, it is associated with concerns about access to early childhood education for small children. In recent years, the question of how to guarantee opportunities for children with respect to early childhood education prior to basic education in primary school has attracted increasing social attention. In view of this, the focus is on equal opportunities for children with respect to early childhood education that is provided mainly in municipal day care centres by kindergarten teachers with formal qualifications. Since 2000, early childhood education for children aged six has been made available nationwide to everyone. By 2006, about 96 percent of six-year-old children attended pre-schools in their local communities (four hours daily, from Monday to Friday). This education is free of charge and optional.

Early childhood education in Finland is mostly being carried out in municipal day care centres with a dual-structured staff, child nursing staff and child education staff. Therefore, childcare and early childhood education cannot be treated separately. In Finland, the day care centres have been performing the dual functions of childcare and early childhood education for many decades. However, there is regional disparity in the availability of municipal day care centres, as they tend to concentrate on urban areas. In rural areas, municipalities operate on a small-scale basis and can afford to provide only home day care services available at nurse's house. In such rural settings it is childcare nurses but not kindergarten's teacher who take care of children.

Although a vast majority of children aged six nowadays attend pre-school in Finland, and the children below six years of age are in different positions in terms of care arrangements and childhood early education according to the choice made by their parents from among the multiple alternatives in childcare schemes. In this sense, these small children are one of the weakest groups in society because of their dependency upon others, namely, parents or equivalent adults. On the other hand, the development of childcare policies in Finland has been strongly influenced by party politics, reflecting the policy preferences of adult citizens but not children's entitlement to early childhood education.

The Finnish Government takes some critiques mentioned in policy recommendations by the OECD reports such as *Starting Strong I* (2001) and *Starting Strong II* (2006) seriously. In relation to childcare and early childhood education, the search for social justice and the preference to freedom of choice thus concern many citizens in different socioeconomic strata, different areas of residence and different generations. Often, children are regarded as 'future citizens' rather than current ones. In particular, the perspective of distributional justice tends to limit its scope for adults, thus disregarding children. The discussion on human capital usually values children mainly as the object of social investment in order to make them productive adult workers (see Gordon, 2008, p. 166). However, this approach does not strongly appreciate children's rights for being acknowledged as current citizens, and this apparently explains the welfare politics in which children tend to merit lower priority. Although in Finland, there is no urgent crisis related to child poverty, the earliest stages of the lives of small children are affected by the socioeconomic condition of their families. The Finnish welfare state faces a new phase of seeking proper balances in childcare policies by considering not only the interests of adults but also the current citizenship of children.

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