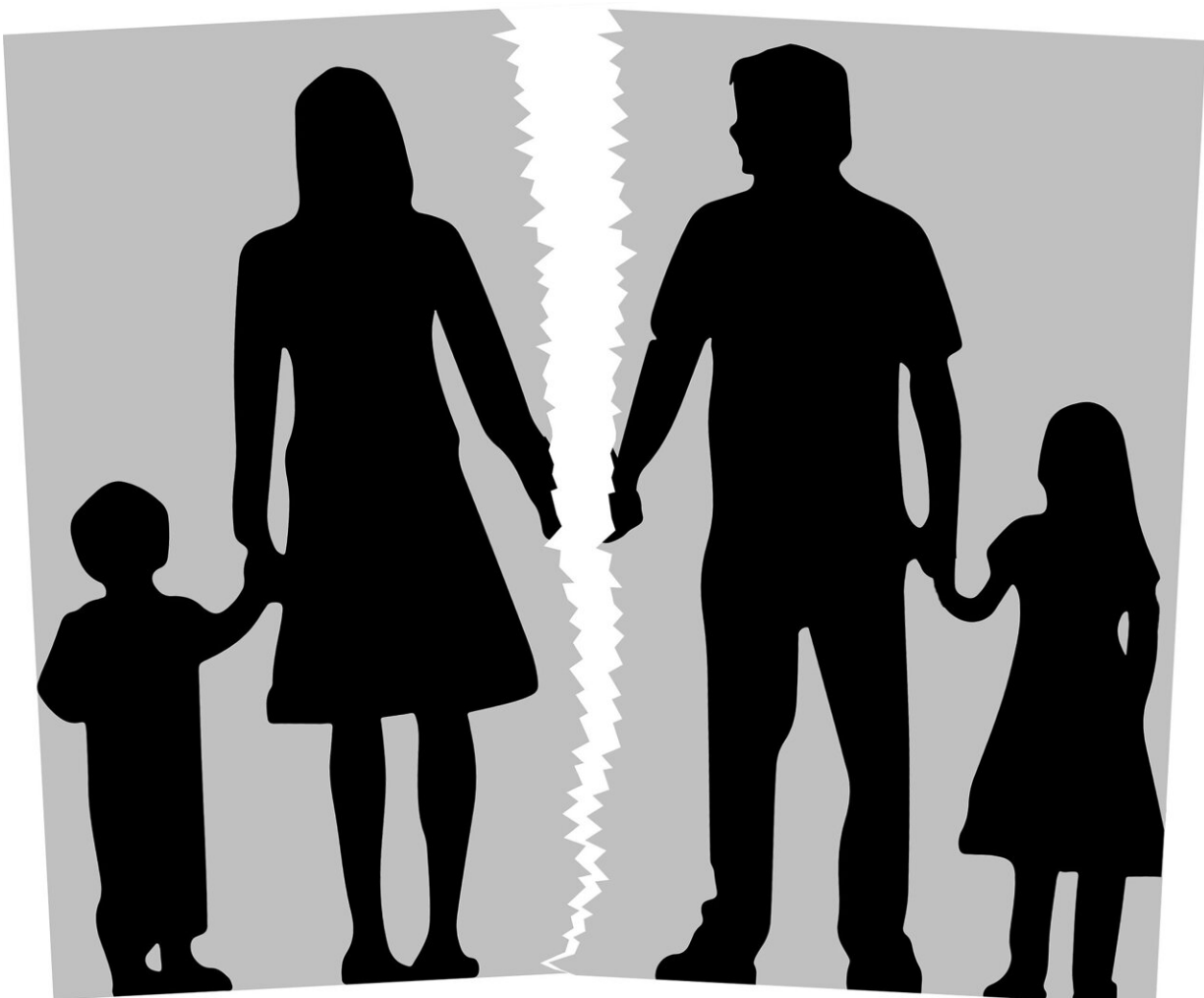


How divorce is boosting gender equality in Sweden—new study

June 28 2024, by Helen Eriksson



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Single mothers are one of the most vulnerable groups in societies around the world. In Sweden, the number of women with these care responsibilities [has nearly halved](#) over the past two decades. What has caused this change? Are we seeing a dramatic reversal in the global trend of increasing separations and divorce?

No, union dissolutions in Sweden are still [among the highest in the world](#). What we are witnessing is a change in the logistics of break-ups. Sweden not only holds a leading role in the rate of divorces, it is also world-leading when it comes to splitting child custody 50:50. Almost half of children with separated parents now split their time equally between the two households.

In our new study, [published in the journal *Social Forces*](#), we wanted to find out to what extent this remarkable change in living arrangements has changed the gender division of care work within the ex-couple.

We hypothesized that the effect of such union dissolution may lead to more gender equality than when children went to live only with their mothers.

Ultimately, 50:50 residence requires fathers to take full care responsibility for the child half of the time—something [few partnered fathers do](#). So it could push parents into a more egalitarian division of care work.

As a measure of care work, we examined one of the most stubborn inequalities between women and men in high-income countries today: taking leave from paid work to care for a child. We used administrative register data covering the entire population of Sweden—with measurements of leave-taking of each child's mother and father both before and after divorce.

Our results show that, in Sweden, divorce has led to an increase in fathers' share of days off work for care. We conclude that whereas divorces have for decades been slowing the gender revolution in Sweden—with mothers traditionally shouldering all the responsibility—they are now accelerating it.

World leaders?

We are not trying to argue that divorce is a good thing. We believe instead that divorces help expose the joint household as a highly gendered environment.

Opposite-sex couples in Sweden, and more broadly across the world, tend to fall into a manager-helper dynamics, in which the mother takes on the full administrative and mental workload and only delegates specific tasks for the father to fulfill. This is a dynamic that over time seems inevitable and impossible to break.

But 50:50 living arrangements turn this kind of dynamic on its head. Because it is no longer possible to take on these heavily gendered roles—the mother cannot plan her ex's household and the father cannot wait for it to happen—50:50 living arrangements seem to show the way to a more gender-equal division of labor in general.

The lesson is that men can and do look after children on their own. If Swedish men can do it, other men's inability cannot possibly be inevitable. Swedish men are not of a different biological make-up than other men, so it seems like cultural stereotypes are ultimately to blame.

The increases in divorce could change attitudes on a deeper level over time. The more we see men looking after their children, the more normal it will appear. Bosses might stop scoffing at fathers who take time off to stay home with their kids, and mothers may find it easier to trust their

partners to take on more childcare and housework.

The Swedish experience may tell where other countries are headed. That said, Sweden is ahead in many ways. For example, thanks to a generous set of family policies, Swedish fathers now take three months off work as [parental leave to stay home with their babies](#) while the mother returns to work—giving a crucial opportunity to bond and grow their confidence when it comes to childcare.

In several family-related changes—including a rise in divorce and fathers being more involved in childcare—Sweden [has been the forerunner](#) in trends later observed throughout Europe and North America.

Residency with the father following divorce seems to be another such development. Although other countries cannot observe the same reversal in the overall effect of [divorce](#) on care work just yet, couples practicing 50:50 living arrangements in those countries might have already begun to experience a more gender-equal division of care work following the separation.

And this is good news, not only for women [who suddenly proclaim](#) that "for the first time ever ... ex-husbands are doing their fair share" but also for men who no longer have to [deal with the pain](#) associated with the feeling of losing their children after a separation.

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