

# Strategies to Separate Motherhood from Work

Maria JANSSON

## ***Abstract***

In 1969 the Swedish government opened up for municipalities to formally employ childminders. The history of this group of workers parallels the growth of women's participation in the labour force and Swedish gender equality policies. But the history of childminders is also a story of strategies to separate private motherhood from professional day care. As the work of childminders take place in private homes, and as childminders almost always have children of their own to take care of – the division between motherhood and work needs to be constantly negotiated.

Public record material, union-employer-agreements and in-depth interviews with childminders are analysed in this article. From this material it is possible to conclude that the public/private-split is, in different ways, upheld at the policy level, at the level of labour market as well as in the everyday work practises of childminders. The article argues that childminders take great responsibility for upholding the private/public division and that the institution and discourse of motherhood is congruent with the private/public split and thus can be used as a strategic tool to uphold this division.

## ***1. Introduction***

In 1969 the Swedish government opened up for municipalities to formally employ childminders. This was a shift in policy, as the social democratic government until then had argued that day care should only take place in pre-schools.<sup>1)</sup> At this point however, the supply of day care did not even come close to meeting the demand.<sup>2)</sup> Furthermore the demand for labour on the labour market was exceptionally intense the years around 1969.<sup>3)</sup> Since then childminders have been part of the publicly financed day care system along with pre-schools.

The history of childminders as employed workers parallels the growth of women's participation in the labour force and Swedish gender equality policies. But the history of childminders is also a story of handling dilemmas arising from the public/private-split, such as the separation of motherhood from day care as a professional activity. As the work of childminders take place in their private homes, and as childminders almost always have children of their own, the division between motherhood and work needs to be constantly negotiated. The mere existence of employed

childminders is a constant reminder of how thin and fragile the construction of difference between public and private is. Childminders have accordingly been used by politicians of various colours as examples in debates of motherhood and women's work, rising tricky questions such as: If one can get paid by the municipality to take care of other people's children, how come one cannot get paid to take care of one's own?

In this article I will show that the organisation of childminders' work offers a continuous challenge to the public/private split, and that childminders' working conditions and day-to-day practises are entrenched with the assignment to uphold and mark the border of what is private and what is public.

The main purpose of this article is thus to investigate how the public/private split is negotiated and dealt with in the case of childminders. I will show that the public/private distinction is negotiated on all levels from public policy to the day-to-day practises of childminders. The specific questions asked are:

- How are the boundaries of public and private constituted and upheld in the public debate on childminders?
- How is the public/private split dealt with in agreements entered by the parties on the labour market?
- How are public and private manifested and dealt with in the day-to-day practises of childminders?

The article is based on public record material produced from 1967 to 1999 – public inquiries (SOU), parliamentary debates (RD) as well as motions, propositions and decrees put forth by the government or by authorities, collective agreements and other material from the municipal worker's union ("Kommunal") and the municipal employers organisation ("Kommunförbundet"). In-depth interviews with childminders and representatives from unions and employers within three municipalities (Stockholm, Haninge and Luleå) are also part of the empirical material analysed in this article.<sup>4)</sup>

After a background on the Swedish discourse on day care, women's work and gender equality, and a short note on the feminist discussion on public/private I go on to analyse how the boundaries of private and public have been negotiated and re-negotiated in public policy, on the labour market and in the work of childminders.

## ***2. Day care, women's work and gender equality***

Since the eighties women in general seem to be stable participants on the Swedish labour market, while men have not increased their share of child care to the same extent.<sup>5)</sup> Researchers and opinion makers have pointed out that it seems to have been easier to make women participate in the labour market than to make men do household work and take responsibility for child care.<sup>6)</sup> At the same time gender equality has qualified as a Swedish trade mark and is seen as a constituent of Swedish national identity.<sup>7)</sup>

The issues of day care, women's work and gender equality have been tightly intertwined within the Swedish discourse. Gender equality was formed as a policy area of its own in the early 1970s. Links between day care, women's work, women's economic independence from men and gender equality were established during the 1970s, which also was the decade of the second wave women's movement, with its demands for day care.<sup>8)</sup> The main focus of the gender equality policies was formulated as a strategy with the twofold aim to (1) make it possible for women to take part in the labour market and (2) encourage men to take more responsibility for domestic work and childcare.<sup>9)</sup>

Reforms that have had impact on women's incentives and possibilities to participate in the labour market are, amongst others, the tax reform, implemented in 1971 – a change that individualised the tax system, the governmental financial support to municipalities for the building of day care facilities as well as for the payment of day care personnel, and the parental leave insurance that was launched in 1974.<sup>10)</sup>

The official Swedish history tells of a success-story where women's entry on the labour market was an effect of government-initiated reforms in response to claims for equality and day care during the early seventies.<sup>11)</sup> A popular explanation of the expansion in day care building is that it was part of an almost altruist strife for gender equality. This explanation has become so popular that it sometimes seems to be a political amnesia regarding other motives that were frequently referred to at the time the reforms were launched. Such motives were for example the class equalising effects of pre-schools and the demand for female labour power, or as it is put by one member of parliament in 1968: "Of the different factors that create the need for day care, the politics of the labour market is undoubtedly the most prominent".<sup>12)</sup> This remark is definitely in line with historian Yvonne Hirdman's conclusion that despite the event of gender equality policies, the dominant focus in politics during 1967-1976 was class.<sup>13)</sup>

Other modifications on the success-story, also pointing in a less altruist direction, have been discussed by scholars with a gender perspective. Economist Anita Nyberg has shown that the great upsurge in women's participation in the labour market during the seventies must be modified as it

does not take into consideration that a large proportion of Swedish citizens was occupied in the agricultural sector until the 1960's and that farmer's wives were not counted as "working" within official statistics.<sup>14)</sup> The work of historians and political scientists also show that the demand for women's labour during the post-war period was urgent, that the housewife-ideal was challenged by culturally and politically active women already during its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s and that day care policies with state subsidies were launched already during the 1960s.<sup>15)</sup>

### **Neo-liberal challenges and institutional reform**

In the 1980s the lack of day care in conjunction with the fact that Sweden, as many other countries, was influenced by the economic and political theories of neo-liberalism led to a challenge of the dual breadwinner system.<sup>16)</sup> During the right wing coalition government 1991-1994 a so-called care allowance ("vårdnadsbidrag") was put forth to enable one parent to stay home until the child reached the age of three.<sup>17)</sup> This reform can be seen as an upswing for the ideal of the 'traditional mother'. Women on TV talk shows publicly admitted to feelings of being deceived of their children's childhood by conforming to the gender equality policies and the ideal of the working mother. Women who wanted to upgrade domestic work organised, and the right-wing parties celebrated the ideal of the nuclear family.<sup>18)</sup> The care allowance reform was annulled after only one year by the Social Democratic Party as they regained governmental power in the 1994 elections.<sup>19)</sup>

In the arena of day care, parents' right to choose was put on the agenda. Pre-schools with different educational approaches were put forth as examples of what the right to choose could hold. Studies were performed to find out the match between parents' ideas regarding their children's upbringing on the one hand and the curriculum of different forms of day care on the other.<sup>20)</sup> Most prominent, though, was the debate over ownership of day care institutions.<sup>21)</sup> Reforms to make it possible to run private childcare with tax money were put forth and in 1992 publicly and privately run childcare were made equally entitled to public funding.<sup>22)</sup>

The changes in the welfare system during the early 1990s have been described as a major shift with both ideological and institutional components and as a shift from values of democracy to a focus on efficiency. The ideological shift coincides with a drop in Swedish economy and cuts were made simultaneously as institutional reforms. Even if the reforms can be seen as a transfer of care responsibilities from the state to individuals and families, the possibilities of individuals to perform these tasks were not materially increased by, for example, tax-reductions.<sup>23)</sup>

At present, parents can choose between privately, publicly, or co-operatively owned day care which all charge the same maximum fees and which all are tax funded.<sup>24)</sup> During the 1990s a vast majority of the 289 Swedish municipalities could proudly report that all children who needed day care held a place in pre-schools or in family day care (childminders). In 1995 the government announced a day

care guarantee. In 1996 the Swedish parliament decided to move the political responsibility for day care from the social ministry to the ministry of education, and in 1999 a national curriculum for pre-schools was issued.<sup>25)</sup>

### **Childminders in the day care system**

The Swedish day care system today consists of two full-time forms of day care – pre-schools and childminders. In 2004, 364 045 children in the ages from 1 to 5 years attended pre-school and 36 970 children were in the care of childminders.<sup>26)</sup> Pre-schools are the most dominant form of day care and were also until the late 1980s the form of day care that was explicitly preferred by the Social Democratic Party. Pre-schools have a long history in Sweden and pre-school-teacher is since long an acknowledged profession. Childminders on the other hand, have a long informal history, but have only since 1969 been an official part of the system. The 1969 reform was explicitly said to be a temporary solution, and childminders were supposed to be phased out as day care institutions were built. However, the building of pre-schools took longer than expected, and childminders lingered on. Formally employed by the municipalities, childminders have been frequently used to cut demand-peaks. Initially the official number of childminders was rather low, but at the same time the number of childminders on the black market was probably high. The number of childminders peaked in the mid 1980's when around 30 000 childminders were fully employed only to decrease to around 15 000 childminders in the year 2000, and further dropping to today's number of 8 500 active childminders.<sup>27)</sup>

The debate on childminders has been coloured by right-left conflicts. While the right-wing parties have taken a pro-childminder line, the left-wing parties, including the Social Democrats which have been the most frequent party to form government,<sup>28)</sup> have taken a more negative stance towards childminders. The pro-argument from the Conservatives (“Moderaterna”) was for a long time that childminders were more in line with the “principle of the family”,<sup>29)</sup> an argument that in a rough sense can be seen as resisting the idea of a dual breadwinner system. Accordingly childminders have been used as examples when politicians have tried to put the “home-mother” or the parental allowance (“vårdsnadsbidrag”) on the agenda. This use of childminders as examples of mothers who wish to stay at home, has not facilitated the professional strives of childminders.

Presented as a temporary solution to a crisis, childminders have constantly been construed as “the other” in relation to pre-schools.<sup>30)</sup> This can be seen in statements as well as in economic decisions, laws and regulations. In 1999 when pre-schools were given a national curriculum, childminders were not included, which must be regarded as a sidestepping of their educational status.<sup>31)</sup>

### ***3. The conceptualisation of public/private within feminist theory***

Within feminist theory public/private is one of “the classic debates”, as Anne Phillips labels it.<sup>32)</sup> For many feminist scholars the public/private is conceptualised as a difference in location and activity between the home (private) and the political and civil sphere (public) where politics, organising and work take place. In a marxist feminist tradition it can be put in terms of production (public) and reproduction (private). Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, for example, argue that the division between productive and reproductive work, manifested in the divide between “labourmarket” and “family” is a way of rendering the exploitation of women’s domestic labour invisible.<sup>33)</sup> In a more liberal terminology the political and the tax-financed sphere is often separated from the civil sphere where private ownership and agreements between individuals or parties are determinants. This has lead Carole Pateman to speak of a “double separation” where the civil sphere is denoted as private, but differentiated from the domestic, which thus become the “real” private sphere.<sup>34)</sup>

Patemans discussion is in line with Hannah Arendt’s argument that the antique differentiation of the private – as the household where maintenance of life was performed – from the public – where politics were done – changed with the event of liberal and marxist ideas of labour as a public activity.<sup>35)</sup> Put slightly different, to be able to “uplift” labour and make it part of the public, it was necessary to separate it from the domestic, and from sexual and bodily reproductive activities.<sup>36)</sup> Hence, the definition of labour as public activity rests on the definition of motherhood as private. This is further accentuated by the fact that motherhood, in difference to household work, loses its value and character if it is being paid, as Marty Grace shows.<sup>37)</sup> Dorothy Smith argues that the definition of work is modelled on male activity and that the concept itself is determined by the relations of ruling.<sup>38)</sup> Following her argument to its end would mean that a reconceptualisation of work is impossible within the existing system. Hence, the definition of work (and motherhood) is in itself a means of hiding patriarchal power.

The public/private split can also be understood in terms of mediation and visibility, as pointed out by Hannah Arendt: what is made public can be seen and/or heard by all. That, which we do not want to show others, we keep private. Some things are indeed so private that they cannot be mediated even if we would like to, Arendt argues and gives the example of severe pain. We cannot describe exactly what it feels like.<sup>39)</sup>

One of the functions of the split between public/private is to separate private interests from common interests. The state may not interfere with the private, according to liberal doctrine, and only what is of common interest is legitimately dealt with in politics. Thus, construing something as placed within the private sphere is a means of depoliticising it. When the second wave women’s

movement called out that “the personal is political”, it was as a cry for the possibility to politicise questions of male power that had been placed within the private sphere and thus were regarded as apolitical. In Catherine MacKinnons work the personal is equated with sex/body, which in turn is equated with structural power.<sup>40</sup> Thus she closes up to the idea of the private, not as a specific locality or as particular issues or means of ownership, but as located within and ascribed onto the body.

Power is deeply intertwined with the public/private split. The idea of this split holds different and sometimes competing notions of power: the limitation of state power (public) over the individual (private), the power of delineating what is political and what is not, it also works as a means of facilitating men’s structural power over women, and as a means of exploiting women’s work.

#### ***4. Domestic mothers and working women in the public debate***

The debate on day care and women’s work – closely tied to the idea of gender equality, as shown above – creates several dichotomies that correspond to the public/private split. Descriptions of the home are contrasted with descriptions of the public. Domestic work and motherhood is put up against gainful employment and working hours are separated from free time. But it can also be seen in differences in how women are addressed – as mothers, women and workers.

##### **The domestic vs. gainful employment**

When reading the public record material it is possible to sense the problem of speaking about domestic work. There is a need to get the women who have done home work on board, as they are the prime target of the policies. However, many descriptions of domestic work are belittling, talking of home-work as something repetitive and boring:

The situation of the home-working mother is characterised by dependence on the husband, social isolation, confinement to the home, lack of public esteem, lack of contact with what is going on and lack of influences that lead to development. Domestic work cannot give the mother the same satisfaction as gainful employment.<sup>41</sup>

According to this passage domestic work is characterised by dependence, isolation and lack of esteem and development. Implicitly all the opposite values – independence, fellowship, esteem and development – are to be found at work. Thus passages like this one create a hierarchy where domestic work is attributed negative values, and gainful employment positive.

Domestic work is further depicted as something belonging to the past and the “self-subsistent-household”.<sup>42</sup> Modern households could easily be kept while working outside the home, especially

if the husband did his share of the domestic chores.<sup>43)</sup> A problem due to unreasonable expectations was however yet to be solved: “Employed women [...] feel guilty about not caring for children and domestic work to the extent that are expected of them by their families.”<sup>44)</sup>

The logic of this discourse is that any reasonable person would prefer to be on the labour market. The problem for women to do this and the cause of the problem are described: “Women who want to work [...] do not apply for jobs because they are prevented by child care or domestic work.”<sup>45)</sup> When putting the problem like this, domestic work, and especially child care, is made legitimate in the sense that it needs to be done. At the same time it is said to be an insufficient solution that women who want to work need to be doing this. The organisation of work and child care is questioned and a dual breadwinner system is proposed to replace the old-fashioned male breadwinner system. There are of course opponents to these ideas, who argue that basically there is nothing wrong with women staying at home. However, even the opponents acknowledge the formulation of the problem and its cause – you cannot work and care for children at the same time:

We must not forget that anyone who have a child to a certain extent has made a decision – a decision that in its own inevitable way circumscribe the parents’ freedom of movement, for example on the labour market. I do not want to see it as a natural obligation for society to answer for the care of young children, as this primarily must be the responsibility of the parents, but I see it as equally self-evident that society must help to provide organisational and economical conditions to create good day care outside the home in the many cases where the mother needs gainful employment to support herself and her child [...]<sup>46)</sup>

In this consensual construction of the problem, child care/motherhood is turned into the opposite of gainful employment. My conclusion is that even if the debate seems to be about women’s work it is the organisation of motherhood that is at the centre of the debate and the target for change.

The massive attack on domestic work produced within the public record material during the 1970s must be understood in a context where the home and motherhood carries positive meanings in itself. The monologous character of this discourse must be interpreted as a row of counter-arguments to implicit arguments pro home-working women and motherhood. The whole set-up of the discourse is also built on the pre-supposition that women need to be *persuaded* to enter the labour market, and that motherhood and domestic work otherwise would be their first, or default, choice. This logic of the discourse leads to an institutionalisation of motherhood and work as conflicting, and it preserves rather than dissolves the ideal of the home-working mother and the notion of motherhood as private. Accordingly this ideal is easily picked up by the pro-home-mother-advocates in the 1990s debates on motherhood and women’s work.



### **Mothers and women**

Women are central to gender equality and day care policies. Women are the ones who shall be made to change their ways of living, but also the ones that are supposed to be “helped” by the governmental reforms. The construction of the problem, as well as the solution, is based on the premise that women are mothers.<sup>47)</sup> But at the same time a separation between women and mothers is crucial.

For example, employment leading to independence and emancipation is discussed in relation to women. By joining the labour force women will become part of the public. This will, in turn, lead to women’s contact with, and perhaps even engagement in, unions and politics. Work is depicted as a road to a broader societal engagement for women, while caring for children is an activity firmly put within the home: “Home-working [women] have felt devalued when they have stayed at home to take care of their children.”<sup>48)</sup> or “Pre-school shall be a complement to the home [...] The work of pre-schools must therefore be in close co-operation with the parents”<sup>49)</sup>

Mothers at home become women at work. This transformation is very smooth, but can be clearly seen:

The increased demand for day care can be explained by strong increase in births during the late 1980’s, by the increase in *employment frequency amongst mothers* of young children, by the increase in *working hours of women* [...].<sup>50)</sup>

*Mothers* increase their working frequency – i.e women are seen as mothers when the boundary between home and labour market is transgressed. On the labour market, however, they become *women* who increase their working hours.

In a few passages in the material the conflict or problem that women may “feel” when it comes to combining motherhood and gainful employment is addressed.<sup>51)</sup> This conflict emanates from classical ideals. As motherhood partly is seen as the praxis of caring, leaving the care of one’s child to someone else for a major part of the day is in a way destabilising the construction of motherhood. However, the worries that the “new” way of performing motherhood will hurt the children are countered. A bulk of work on children’s development is summoned to make it clear that children are not harmed by attending day care at a young age. And the ideal of the present mother is dismissed:

It is the quality not the quantity of contact between parents and children that is crucial. The traditional role of the mother, which is important, is overvalued. The risk of an overvaluation of the role of the mother is that children can become too protected and thereby lack initiative and

independence, which in turn can result in problems to handle their role as adults.<sup>52)</sup>

But the conflict between motherhood and work is also partly produced by the internal logics of the discourse itself. Women's emancipation as an argument for women to join the labour force, in combination with the ideal of the present mother, give rise to a conflict between self-interest and self-sacrifice. When liberation and self-interest is equated with work, which in turn is construed as the opposite of motherhood, an intrinsic weave of conflicting values is created as motherhood ideally craves self-sacrifice. I interpret this as creating an inherent conflict between the values of motherhood on the one hand and being a working (and emancipated) woman on the other.

During the 1970s this conflict is handled partly by denial and dismissal as in the quote above, and is often at the same time overcome by the argument that attending day care is good for children.

Children who do not get sufficient stimulation in regard to his/hers versatile development can later on have difficulties to compensate for lacks from the pre-school years. [—] Knowledge of children's environment and development points very strongly to the necessity to give all children the development stimulation that pre-school aims to give.<sup>53)</sup>

This way of dealing with the conflict also means that motherhood is construed as insufficient for children's well-being. At the same time this is a way to persuade mothers to work, by arguing that their working, and their children attending day care, is what is best for the children. The benefits for children includes, amongst other things, that they will develop better skills and their school achievements will be improved due to the professional educational training in day care institutions.<sup>54)</sup>

Bridging the conflict between good motherhood/self-sacrifice and working/self-interest is done by creating a situation where the best for children seems to be in line with the self-interest of the mother.

Later on, when the great majority of women are employed, the conflicting values inherent in motherhood and work is voiced in terms of lack of time.<sup>55)</sup> It is difficult to find time to be a good mother and work full hours. Thus, the conflict can be perceived as a conflict between groups of different women – the ones at home and the ones on the labour market – but also as a conflict within individual mothers/women who ideally should be at home and at work at the same time. This also means that the line between working women and mothers is drawn between different functions rather than between groups.

When dealing with the conflict of motherhood and work the discourse upholds and refers to

already existing ideals. It is made clear that being a working woman does not overthrow the institution of motherhood, only adjusting it a bit to fit into new circumstances.

### **Motherly love and professional day care**

Day care is seen to bring about a dual commodity: education for children and day care as a service for parents. The persons performing this service are employed workers, but despite this fact a division between mother's care and day care work seems crucial to constitute day care as a professional activity. Such a division also serves as an assurance to mothers that they will remain mothers and not be replaced by a professional, which is important, considering that the aim of the policies is to convey mothers to get "out" of the home.

Day care workers do other things than mothers. The educational character of pre-schools is stressed in the 1972 committee report and the importance of education is brought to its head in the 1996 reform, moving pre-schools from the social ministry to the educational ministry.<sup>56)</sup> This process towards a more educational status is also enhanced by a national curriculum for day care.<sup>57)</sup> In contrast motherhood/parenthood is primarily depicted as emotional and personal: "Inherent in parenthood is to be the receiver of your child's emotions and to meet these with your own emotions, norms and values."<sup>58)</sup>

Day care workers are seen to be professionals, and their relation to children is formed as the educator's relation to her pupil. Compared to the idea of the mother's specific significance for her children, the day care worker's relation is instrumental. The importance of this separation seems to be acute when reading this passage: "The personnel should not compete with the parents over the children's love."<sup>59)</sup> This statement accentuates that mothers and professionals have different roles, at the same time as it makes clear to whom the child's love belongs. Love and other emotions are placed in the private while the goal-driven tasks, such as education, are placed on the professional arena.<sup>60)</sup>

An emphasis on the educational character and professionalism of day care is one way of creating this separation. Another simultaneous separation is made in terms of space – the pre-school's localities differ from home, it is specially designed for the educational and physical needs of small children. Further the construction of a link between day care and the public sphere is created to delineate motherhood and home (private) from day care (public). This is done by a simultaneous description of the child's separation from the mother when entering day care and the presentation of day care as a miniature public space. Children's interaction in day care is described as relating to equals – a parallel of the political interaction of citizens. Children will learn to solve conflicts and to be part of a group. This will also enhance equality as social differences in upbringing will be evened out by the fact that all children are professionally stimulated at similar institutions.<sup>61)</sup> So when day

care is pictured as a professional public environment with educational aims, the care provided by mothers becomes associated with unconditional love and the private sphere.<sup>62)</sup>

Day care is also confined in time; it has a beginning and an end, which makes it different from mothers' care that is construed as boundless. Time limits also constitute working hours of day care personnel. These limits in time parallel the limitations on day care worker's responsibilities. When working hours end, responsibility end. This differs from mothers'/parents' responsibilities that do not have limits in this way.

The differences in responsibility are linked not only to time, but also to the difference in activities. The responsibility of day care workers is also limited to their task. Hence day care is provided only when children are healthy, have proper clothes and equipment – i.e. when the conditions to receive the educational stimuli are met. When a child has a cold, the educational activity can not be achieved, thus the care must be given in private. The responsibility of day care workers is conditioned. Mothers on the other hand are constituted as having total responsibility for their children, even during periods when children are in the temporary care of others. This feature is stressed the more choices parents can make. Mothers are responsible for their children's whereabouts even if they themselves cannot supervise or affect the immediate circumstances.<sup>63)</sup> They are not present at the pre-school but they have the responsibility to make sure their children are taken care of.

### ***5. Being at home on the labour market***

Besides the separation of day care from mothers' care and the construction of day care as a commodity, a third feature is central to the construction of day care as work: the relation between employer and employee. The definition of a childminder has been relatively stable over the years and consists, according to the agreements, of two elements. A childminder is characterised by being employed to care for someone else's children in her home. To be employed and paid is especially important for the construction of childminders' work as work, because it cannot rest on the division of work and free time in terms of space, and the confinement in time is also a bit problematic. Working in their own homes has rendered it hard for childminders to be acknowledged as professionals, as the line between their work and "ordinary" house-work/child care has been perceived as floating and hard to draw.

In this section I will discuss issues that have been perceived as problems by the municipalities in regard to childminders as well as the questions that have come up as problematic when the municipal workers' union and the municipal employers' organisation have entered into agreements concerning childminders work.

When childminders became municipal employees the transformation of their status was a fact. However, as yet of today childminders report that people often ask them when they will get a real job. In 1969 childminders were eager to fight for their status, and in October 1969 an interest organisation of childminders was started. The organisation lasted until May 1970 when it was affiliated with the municipal workers' union.<sup>64)</sup>

The introduction of childminders as municipal employees was a venture with complications, not least for the union.<sup>65)</sup> The municipal workers' union was at the time reluctant to having childminders as members. They complained that childminders were lonely workers, and thus problematic to unionise. They further complained that childminders were low paid, and would put downward pressure on other groups of workers within their organisation.<sup>66)</sup> On the other hand, the union did not want a group of un-unionised workers, and in 1969 the first collective agreement for childminders was entered by the union and the employers' organisation.<sup>67)</sup>

### **Time and space as problems**

Childminders were excluded from the regulations on working hours with the argument that they were working at home. One striking example of this is that until 1977 childminders were not paid if the children were ill or for any other reason did not show. The union chairman explains that: "childminders have the advantage that they can do home-work at the same time as they are caring for the children".<sup>68)</sup> Hence the possibility of mixing private home-work with the assigned work got to explain extra-ordinary conditions of employment.

The idea that childminders are "looking after" children while doing something else (i.e. something private), is also a form of accusation that childminders do not perform the job they are paid to do to 100 per cent. This accusation is intertwined with the problem of supervision. Working in their own homes makes the employer's possibility of supervision limited. Even though all childminders are certified and controlled by the municipal authorities/employers initially, the means for continuous supervision on a day-to-day basis are non-existing. Thus, the employer has no means to control what a childminder is doing during the time she is working. Combined with the fact that childminders work in their own homes, the suspicion of them doing private chores during work-time constitutes a problem for union representatives as well as employers. Hence, the agreements are construed so that the number of children present at the same time constitute a benchmark for the amount of private home-work estimated to squeeze in. Full time meant four children for eight hours or a number of "caring hours" (i.e. one child, one hour = 1 caring hour) amounting to 120 hours/week, which of course could be distributed in any way during the day.<sup>69)</sup>

Still in 1999 many municipalities argued that childminders had to work for longer hours than eight

a day to get a full time wages. Nowadays this is primarily motivated in terms of necessity, as day care service need to be long enough to cover parents' 8-hour workday and the travels to and from work. Childminders were also used by the municipalities to meet the need for "day care" for night-shift workers and workers with irregular working hours. When childminders in some municipalities during the 1990s were given a 40- or 50-hour week this was made possible by introducing work-teams where four or five childminders that were living closely geographically formed groups that could take on each other's day children part of a day, or sometimes whole days.<sup>70)</sup>

This new way of organising work was not seen as unproblematic by all childminders and childminding advocates. Some of them meant that this would endanger the unique qualities of childminding, as for example that the care is conducted by only one person and that the relationship between childminder and child is continuous. The regulation of working hours was also launched in times when municipalities were cutting down on childminders in favour of pre-schools.<sup>71)</sup>

### **The Uppsala model**

Confinement of time and space are important features to mark the separation of work from private chores. However, the issue that perhaps was the most infected came to be, and still is, the question of the childminders relation to their own children.

During the 1980s the lack of day care became acute. Several municipalities looked to childminders as a solution. At the same time, the supply of women who wanted to work as childminders was low. In the municipality of Uppsala a model was developed in 1988 to attract women to work as childminders. It built on the condition that childminders would get paid for caring for their own children as well. This model was (and is) widely debated as it was claimed to clash with a law that forbids municipalities to pay citizens for the care of their own children. Accordingly it was sent to the Supreme Administrative Court for trial. In 1991 the court ruled that paying childminders for caring for their own children was to be equalled with the right of parents to day care when working.<sup>72)</sup> Thus, since the early 1990s it is stated in the agreements for childminders that the municipality has the right to decide if childminders should be paid for caring for their own children. In accordance with the court-ruling it also states that wages for caring for own children can only be paid for hours when the childminder are caring for other children as well.<sup>73)</sup> Another way to put it is that childminders can be paid to care for their own children, only when they are "at work". This also means that the line between work and free-time is rather fictional. A childminder can be doing exactly the same thing in her free-time as she is doing at work – caring for children, cooking etc. – only she will not get paid to do it.

Another issue, related to the difference between childminders' own children and day children is that several municipalities have a specific three-hour activity for children who do not attend day-care. In a number of municipalities this activity has been offered to children who go to childminders as well as children who are staying at home with their parent (i.e. mother). In other municipalities this activity is only offered to children who do not attend any form of day care. In these cases, however, childminders' own children are seen as not attending day care and thus offered the three-hour activity. In both cases this has been a key to annoyance amongst childminders, who see the offer of the three-hour activity as a way of construing the care/education that they provide as less valuable than the care/education that is provided by pre-schools. And indeed, one of the arguments for offering the three-hour activity to day children is that they will not get the right educational stimuli at the childminders'. However, when only including childminders' own children, the argument is not educational but psychological, stressing the separation from the mother, which, in turn, is seen to be the same as entering the public sphere.

### **6. At home – or at work?**

All of the childminders I have interviewed have developed strategies to deal with the issues that are found problematic within the policy-discourse and in negotiations on the labour market. Many of them find statements by politicians and union representatives offending in the sense that their work is described in condescending ways. They are very sensitive to the ways in which their work is perceived and are concerned to act in a way that supports an understanding of what they do as professional work.

The changes towards choice and plurality regarding day care have opened possibilities for childminders to market themselves. The flip side of this coin is that they started from a rather disadvantageous position – construed as the “second best” in relation to pre-schools. To survive on this market childminders' strategies have been to point out their uniqueness in terms of home-environment and continuity in person. Hence, at the same time as they need to relate to and adjust to the idea of what a “proper” job is, they wish to maintain their “uniqueness”, which is intimately connected to mothering and the idea of the home. Accordingly there are much ambivalence regarding motherhood/work and private/public with which they have to struggle on a day-to-day-basis. In this section I discuss how childminders deal with the division between what is work and what is not. The discussion is primarily based on a series of in-dept interviews with 15 childminders conducted between 1995 and 1998.<sup>74)</sup>

#### **Drinking coffee and cleaning**

To adjust to the norm of “proper” work, childminders need to show that they actually are doing something. That they are not only “housewives doing their nails and talking on the phone” as one

childminder puts it. How they do this differs, but all of the interviewed childminders do relate to this problem. Many of them do it in a humorous way and joke about it. One of them says that she never sits down while having coffee in the play-ground. Even if childminders, as all workers, must be allowed to take a break, this must not be shown in public.

To put up an impeccable façade of serious work seems to be important, even if there is nothing to hide. Several childminders also report that they feel watched by neighbours and other people, who seem to have taken as their job to be supervisors, commenting on how “tax-paid trolleys” are used, or on the childminders being lazy. At times when the day care supply is high, childminders also argue that what they do in the play-ground can be important to attract new children. They live on a market, but are often seen as non-workers.

Another thing that the interviewed childminders think is important is to separate private chores from tasks that are connected to their work. All of the interviewed childminders give an explicit description of exactly how they have dealt with these issues; they have formulated their own rules as to what is related to work and what is not when it comes to things like shopping, cooking and cleaning. They are ready to account for their reasons and judgements on these issues. Often childminders consider it better to do things after or before work than to risk being accused of doing private things during the work-day. All of the interviewed childminders avoid doing vacuum-cleaning or other “heavier” cleaning when day children are at their house. These chores are accordingly done outside working-hours, even if they all agree that they have to do more cleaning because of their work and that it really should be part of the job. Many of the interviewed childminders also do the shopping and cooking for day children outside working hours, as they think that the activities during the day should be all educational. The childminders that do cook during the day, often make it part of the education, letting the children cook with them. The efforts made to show that they are working, as well as locating chores such as cleaning and cooking to out-of-work hours, are strategies to relate to accusations of doing private tasks on paid work-time. What is going on is to a great extent a process of self-disciplining. The fuzzy border between work and private chores actually forces childminders to guard themselves and to uphold the line between domestic work and paid work even more efficient. Their fear of being accused of using the “advantage” of working at home to do household work, results in a practise where they actually do work tasks in their private (free) time.

Childminders do also need to show that they are education-professionals, and not “just ordinary mothers” or “housewives” taking on some more children. To do this they often do meticulous planning of activities and present lunch-menus for long periods of time. They also work with documentation and portfolios for the children to show educational progress. Many of the interviewed childminders want to improve their skills and attend evening classes and different



courses offered by the employer.

The strategies for achieving professionalism also contain restrictions of time and space. Many childminders deal with parents who do not respect leave and pick-up times. Some of the interviewed childminders are very firm on this point and keep the parents “on a short leash” when it comes to their working hours. Others are more generous and argue that it is not a big problem if parents are a bit late, as long as “it does not intrude on my private life”. Both strategies do seem to be a bit problematic, and perhaps this is one of the more tricky features of their work. There is a time-zone when their home goes from being their work-place to becoming their private home.

### **My kids and yours**

All childminders that I have spoken to say that the trickiest thing in their work has been when their own children were young and when they had to deal with caring for them at the same time as they were caring for day children. They all seem to have been doing a lot of thinking in terms of how to treat their own children in relation to day children: should they be treated the same or different? Some of them look back and say that they can now see that their own children sometimes had to step back in favour of day children. One childminder puts it like this:

At night I often felt that my own son always came in second. Sometimes it gave me a bad conscience.[—] But now I have spoken to him, and he is a bit older, so now, I feel that when I am at work, I am at work. And when he comes from school, he'll have to wait until my job's finished before I can focus on him.

Others tell that for example they would correct their own children more harshly than they did day children. A problem that often comes up is how to do with toys. If their children have toys they don't want to share with day children – is that OK? Or if their child wants to stay in her/his room with the door shut, is that OK? Most childminders mean that these problems are difficult to deal with at the time, and that it takes a great deal of pragmatism to solve these conflicts. In dealing with these issues it seems not to be as easy to formulate rules and stick to them as when dealing with household work.

The childminders I have spoken to seem to be more worried about putting their own children second, than to favour them. This is in line with how they deal with house-work: they tend to let their working tasks intrude on their private life rather than the other way around. But when it comes to childminders' own children the situation is more complex than when it comes to cleaning. To clean or shop for work on free time can make childminders feel that they are exploited, but favouring day children before their own gives them a bad conscience. My interpretation is that the issue of how to treat the children also includes a collision between public and private notions of

what is morally just. A professional worker treats all clients the same. On the other hand a mother treats her children differently as she has different moral obligations towards her own children than she has towards others' children.

### ***7. Caring for the public/private split***

It is obvious that childminders do stir up a need to mark the line between work and motherhood/domestic work. Their entrance into employment gives them a formal status as employed. My interpretation is that it is this formal status that craves a discussion that clearly marks what is work and what is not.

To be included as workers, childminders have to adjust to definitions of what work is. This is clearly seen in their meeting with the union.<sup>75)</sup> This includes construing their activity as a commodity, as service to parents, and as education for children. It also includes the separation of work-time from free-time and work from private activities.

The problem, I would say, is not so much what they do (even if that is discussed too), but where and when they do it. It is primarily their working in their homes that brings up problems. Perhaps this is most clearly illustrated by the fact that pre-school workers do not pose the same challenge to ideas of what work is and what it is not, even though basically they perform the same activities. However much education is stressed in the discourse, caring for young children must always include things such as feeding, changing diapers, putting on clothes and shoes, putting children to rest etc. etc.

The problem of working at home also holds the suspicion that private chores may be performed during work hours, a suspicion that is enhanced by the problem of supervision. This seems to be very upsetting for politicians, union representatives and neighbours. But why is this so important? Of course there is a moment of injustice that is relevant here – why do some workers have this advantage, while others do not? I would however argue that this issue has a much deeper relevance, as it touches the core of the definition of work as public. If domestic work can be paid, then what cannot be paid?

Childminders deal with all these problems by adjusting their activities so that they, as far as possible, fit into the model of “proper” work. The result of this is a process of self-disciplining and creating a boundary within their homes, their time and their lives. The constant acting on this boundary is what the boundary is made of. Therefore childminders are crucial for its creation, supervision and reproduction. And they know that someone might be watching. The panoptical function is performed by the common perception of childminders as a group that are “not really

working”, by neighbours worrying about tax-money and by union representatives and politicians saying that this is not as good as pre-schools. To uphold the idea of what work is, to see to that it is not mixed with the private, to make sure that the activities performed are always impeccable, becomes more important to childminders than to other groups of workers.

In a similar way, to uphold the values and ideals of motherhood becomes more important when central features of motherhood are challenged. In the western world, Adrienne Rich notes, motherhood is formed as private and mothers are confined to the home, with the husband/father of the child as the link to society.<sup>76)</sup> This construction serves to render motherhood apolitical, individual and gendered, as opposed to work, the public and men. This opposition is maintained in the public discourse on day care and gender equality as well as in the negotiations of childminders’ work and childminders’ day-to-day practises.

As work and motherhood are systematically put up as opposites, to work and be a good mother at the same time is complicated. The change in ideal, that many would say has taken place in Sweden the last thirty years, from the mother who stays at home to the working mother, is a dramatic change. One could even speak of it as an institutional shift. It is definitely true that most Swedish women today are gainfully employed, which can be seen as “proof” of such a shift. However, the ideal of the present and accessible mother is not really overthrown. Instead I would argue that it is more proper to speak of women working *in spite* of the ideals of motherhood. My analyses also show that crucial elements of the motherhood-ideal based on the mother who stays at home are left untouched, or are even intensified.

In childminders work the tricky question of how to treat their children marks the last outpost of the border between work and motherhood. The need, or really the urge, that is felt to deal with this in thinking and in practice – a need that all mothers, not only childminders, feel sometime – is what is really constituting the border that separates motherhood from work. This is how the public/private split is cared for.

Finally, it can be argued that childminders, neither as individuals nor as a group, asked for a position to challenge the definitions of motherhood and work. Rather they found themselves in a position where they were called upon to adjust to norms and definitions already set. However, their existence did in itself cause a challenge that brought to the fore, and made explicit, central issues and definitions of work and motherhood, public and private.

## Notes

- 1) I use the term ‘day care’ for pre-schools and accredited childminders, i. e. professional care for children conducted while parents work. The term ‘child care’ is used as a broader and more general term for the

care that children need and which traditionally has been assigned to mothers.

'Pre-schools' denote professional day care that is conducted in specific localities, often specifically built or designed for the purpose. Childminders are women who perform professional day care in their own homes. This form of care is also called 'Family day care'.

- 2) SOU 1967:39.
- 3) Florin 1999 p. 124.
- 4) The material was originally collected for my theses; some complementary material has been collected for this article. For further discussion of the material see Jansson 2001. I have also used statistic information from Statistics Sweden (SCB). Swedish laws are referred to as SFS.
- 5) SOU 1998:6, SCB 2005, SCB 2000.
- 6) SOU 1998:6.
- 7) Towns 2002, Jansson et. al. 2005, Jansson & Wendt Höjer 2006.
- 8) Kyle 1979.
- 9) See for example SOU 1976:6, 1979:89, 1990:41, Fürst 1999, Klinth 2002, Bekkengen 2002.
- 10) Florin 1999 p. 131, Fürst 1999 p. 15.
- 11) Fürst 1999.
- 12) Motion AK 1968:417 (Soc.Dem.).
- 13) Hirdman 1998 and 2001.
- 14) Nyberg 1993.
- 15) Hirdman 2001 pp. 155, Lindvert 2002 p. 101-112.
- 16) A discussion on the neo-liberal influence can be found in Boréus 1994.
- 17) Regeringens proposition 1993/94: 148, RD 1993/94: 108.
- 18) Fleischer 2003. See also Snitow 1992 for a discussion on neo-liberalism and motherhood.
- 19) RD 1994/95:43.
- 20) See for example Palméus & Lindahl 1991.
- 21) The issue of the right to choose between publicly and privately run day care came to a crucial point as the municipality of Nacka, a suburb to Stockholm, wanted to let a private profit-driven company run tax funded day care. This attempt was ruled illegal, and a law was passed that stated that only non-profit organisations were permitted to receive state subsidies (SFS 1983:943. See also Bäck 2000, Montin 1992).
- 22) Even though these changes were objected to by the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party (ex. Communist Party), the initial reforms were actually put forth by social democratic governments (Montin 1992). One of the prime arguments against the reforms was that it would lead to increased inequality and social and ethnic segregation (Hwang 2003). In 2002 the government run by Social Democrats introduced a maximum charge for day care which applies to all day care institutions that are recognised/licensed by the authorities and receive public funding.
- 23) Bjurulf 1997, Bäck 2000, Håkansson 1997 pp.65. For empirical examples of the neoliberal turn in childcare debate see for ex. RD 1981/82: 140, p. 28-29, SOU 1993:47.
- 24) Day care is administered by the local authorities and there are some differences in the administration between the 289 Swedish municipalities.
- 25) RSKR 1996/97 no. 15, RSKR 1997/98 no. 107, SFS 1985:1100, Skolverket 1999.
- 26) SCB 2005. In 2004 the total number of children aged 1-5 years were 476 000.
- 27) Swedish association of Local Authorities, 1997, SCB 2005.
- 28) The right-wing parties have formed coalition governments during 1976-1982 and 1991-1994, otherwise

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the Social Democratic Party has formed minority governments with the support of the left party, and the greens (after 1988).

- 29) RD, AK 1968 no.12, Blenda Ljungberg (cons.), my translation.
- 30) Jansson 2001, Karlsson 2002.
- 31) Jansson 2001.
- 32) Phillips 1991 p. 28-31.
- 33) Dalla Costa & James 1997/1974.
- 34) Pateman 1989.
- 35) Arendt 1958/1998.
- 36) Scott 1998, Pateman 1989.
- 37) Grace 1998.
- 38) Smith 1987, se also Jansson 2001 p. 18 for further discussion.
- 39) Arendt 1958/1998 pp. 82-92.
- 40) MacKinnon 1989.
- 41) SOU 1975:37, p. 37, my translation.
- 42) RD AK 1968, no 12, p. 28, my translation.
- 43) Jansson 2001, p. 116-120.
- 44) SOU 1979:89, p. 7.
- 45) SOU 1979:89. p. 167.
- 46) RD FK 1968, no. 12 p. 22-23, Per Jacobsson (lib), my translation.
- 47) In the later material, women and mothers are often replaced by the term “parents”. Lisbeth Bekkengen (1999) shows the term parents (“föräldrar”) most often refers to mothers, while the term “fathers” remains as the prime way of referring to male parents.
- 48) SOU 1979:89, p. 7, my translation.
- 49) SOU 1997:157, my translation.
- 50) SOU 1991:80 p. 22, my translation, italics added.
- 51) See for example SOU 1979:89.
- 52) SOU 1975:37, p. 35, my translation.
- 53) SOU 1972:27, p. 262, my translation.
- 54) See for example SOU 1972:27.
- 55) Elvin-Nowak 1999.
- 56) SOU 1972:26-27, RSKR 1996/97:15.
- 57) Skolverket 1999, SOU 1997:157.
- 58) SOU 1997:157 p. 60, my translation.
- 59) SOU 1975:31, p. 44, my translation.
- 60) *Cf.* Pateman 1988.
- 61) See f. ex. SOU 1972:27 p. 17-19, SOU 1991:80 p. 21, SOU 1997:157 p. 35-37.
- 62) Jansson 2001: 86, 131-139, 223-231, 288-289, Waerness 1980.
- 63) *cf.* Roberts 1999.
- 64) Correspondence, interest organisation 1969-1970, protocols of interest organisation 1969-1970.
- 65) In Sweden the frequency of union membership is traditionally high, especially amongst blue-collar workers, where around 80 per cent of workers are unionised. Swedish unions are organised so that for example all blue-collar workers with the same employer belong to the same union. The municipal workers'

union is the largest union in Sweden today with approximately 570 000 members.

- 66) Kommunalarbetaren no. 4/1970.
- 67) The union and the employers' organisation entered an agreement on general regulations applicable for all municipal employers. To these regulations other agreements could be connected. The general regulations contained time limitations etc. Two groups of municipal employees were excluded from the general regulations; home helpers and childminders. These two groups of municipal employees follow each other in the development of agreements. The general regulations did not apply to them until 1981 and even then with exceptions. During the 1990s general agreements for municipal workers lose ground in favour of local agreements. And from 1995 the union policy is that childminders agreements should be local. (Agreements for childminders 1981, 1995).
- 68) Aftonbladet 1970-05-27, my translation.
- 69) Agreements 1969-1979.
- 70) Local agreements 1995-1999.
- 71) Jansson 2001.
- 72) RÅ 1991.
- 73) Agreements 1990-1994, Local Agreements 1995-1999.
- 74) See further discussion of the interviews in Jansson 2001.
- 75) Jansson 2001.
- 76) Rich 1980/1976.

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