

Maternity leave: a debate at the cross road of social and labour legislation in Sweden and Norway in the beginning of the XXth century

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The issue of the protection of women before and after childbirth is a compound subject because it concerns both the problem of insurance, the organization of the services of the public assistance and labor legislation. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, this issue was a question of general interest in most of the European countries. Of course it affected women's interests but it also affected the interests of men and of the Nation as a whole because it ensured the welfare of children.

There was a considerable variation in the measures in force in different countries for the protection of women before and after childbirth. This regards both the extent and the length of time during which protection was secured. The period for maternal leave could vary from four to twelve weeks. Some legislation covered all manual work; other measures applied only to industrial establishments of a certain size.

In addition to the questions of the extent and the length of time of the maternity leave, two other points were underlined in the international debates: 1) the right to cease work at any period without being liable to discharge on this account and 2) the system of benefits or grants payable in respect of enforced absence from work at the time of the childbirth.

This paper aims first at presenting the situation in Europe from the Berlin conference in 1889 to the creation of ILO in 1919. Then I would like to focus on the Norwegian and Swedish cases. In these countries, debates on this issue were a most important topic, but if Norwegian legislators passed a law, no law where enacted in Sweden. An analyze of the debates (in the feminist journals, in the press and at the national assemblies) in the two countries shows important differences in the views on maternity leave and its relation to labor and society at large.

The different focus in the debates, one focused more on female work issues the other one more on the social role of maternity, explains why one country passed the law and not the other.

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