The Transformation of F a m i l y Life

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Family life in the Nordic countries has undergone fundamental change during the past thirty years. In order to understand the processes and political choices that have transformed Sweden into a society that is now characterized by a relatively high degree of gender equality, it may be useful to take a look at the past.

There can be no doubt that a transformation has taken place. Just over thirty years ago, for example, the majority of Swedish women did not earn incomes they could live on; they were economically dependent on their men. For most women, having children meant being forced to quit their jobs. Access to child-care services was very limited. Today's parental benefit was still called the "motherhood" benefit. The notion that fathers should stay at home with their small children was unthinkable. There was some slight discussion about the possibility of parents sharing responsibility for children and the home, but it was still an unrealistic idea for most Swedes-- just as unrealistic as it seems today for many countries outside the Nordic region.

Developments since that time are clearly reflected in labour-market statistics. In the mid-1970s, for example, one-fifth of working-age women identified themselves as housewives; last year, less than two percent did so. Child-care services have been expanded to include nearly all children. Even those who have most forcefully resisted the new family policy have re-evaluated their positions: At a meeting of the Christian Democratic Party, which has most energetically opposed the egalitarian family model, it would be difficult to find many traditional housewives.

Altered concept

In short, the reality of family life has undergone fundamental change, and political parties have been forced to adapt to this development.

The proportion of household work performed by men has increased significantly. Actually, this is mainly because women are spending much less time on such chores than previously. But men have increased their efforts somewhat.

Fathers more often take parental leave, and now share responsibility for their children-- even before they learn to play football. This can perhaps be seen most clearly when parents separate: Nowadays, fathers do not disappear. Fewer and fewer children lose contact with their fathers after divorce, and increasing numbers of children share their time between the mother and the father.

Of course, these developments have not taken place without conflict. Gender and family policies have been hotly contested during the entire 30-year period. It is important to keep this in mind when contemplating other societies. For, if we shut our eyes to the conflicts surrounding gender-equality issues in the Nordic countries, we will never be able to understand why others do not follow our example. The solutions that have worked well in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland may seem quite alien to other European countries.

In the Nordic region, gender equality has been a conscious political project. During the 1960s, the labour movement began to move away from the conventional view of the family. The model based on a male breadwinner and a female homemaker ceased to be the ideal. It is open to discussion as to whether it was a shortage of labour that changed the ideal, or the abandoned ideal that changed the labour market. What is certain is that the basic concept of the family was altered, and this has led to fundamental changes in Swedish society.

Support for working mothers

At the start of the 1960s, the Social Democratic Party proposed the introduction of a child-care allowance for housewives. Ingemar Lindberg has described how a completely different family policy developed, instead. Between the early 1960s and the early 1970s, the Social Democrats reshaped their policy so that the emphasis was shifted to child care and parental benefits.

During a long period of transition, this solution was less than satisfactory. The parental benefit lasted only six months, and there was a great shortage of child-care facilities. Despite fairly rapid expansion, the demand for child care increased faster than the supply. Parents thus perceived shortcomings in the Social Democrats' family policy.

In addition, strong pressure was exerted by the bourgeois (liberal-conservative) parties from the 1970s onward. They argued, instead, for a child-care allowance that would provide an income for women who chose to stay at home with their children. However, there was no change in the Social Democratic policy during the six years of bourgeois government during 1976-82. On the contrary, that policy was further expanded.

This was partly due to divisions within the bourgeois coalition. Nevertheless, it provides clear evidence of the Social Democrats' political hegemony in Sweden. Despite their six years in power, the bourgeois parties were not able to alter the family policy set out by the Social Democrats.

In retrospect, it can be seen that the Social Democrats understood the needs and preferences of families in the future, and of women in particular. But thirty years ago, if Social Democratic voters had been asked whether they would prefer a child-care allowance or child care facilities, most would have probably chosen the allowance.

It should also be noted that, during the 1960s, those countries with the lowest rates of female employment had the highest birth rates. Improving opportunities for women to enter the labour force might thus be regarded as a risky strategy from the standpoint of fertility. But a remarkable change has taken place since then: Now, countries with the highest rates of female employment also have the highest birth rates. The previous relationship between female employment and fertility has been reversed.

Greater equality

All of this suggests that countries which invested in making it possible for women with children to also pursue careers anticipated what women actually wanted. But in those countries which have maintained traditional family patterns, women have been forced to choose-- and growing numbers of them have chosen careers instead of children. These countries had the lowest birth rates in Europe during the 1990s. The highest rates were in the Nordic countries, and in those with "liberal regimes" (according to Esping-Andersen's classification).

Thus, there appear to be two strategies for combining high employment frequency with high birth rates-- the social democratic and the liberal. Common to both of them is widespread moral acceptance of working mothers. This is a matter of no little importance. Another key factor is an extensive labour market for women which, in the Nordic countries, has been developed by investing heavily in family policy and subsidizing much of the work that was previously done in the home, especially child care. Essentially, a market was created for this kind of work, although much of it is carried out within the public sector. In the liberal countries, similar solutions have developed at their own pace, without much political intervention or heavy subsidies.

One result is that the Nordic countries have become much more equal in several respects: There are no great differences between various subgroups of women with regard to income and labour-market participation; child-bearing is evenly distributed among women with different education levels and rates of employment; and income distribution among children is comparatively equal. In the liberal countries, there are large differences on all of these dimensions.

When we Swedes describe our success in reforming family policy, it is easy to forget that it was a process which involved great political conflict. It is interesting to note that in Norway, where a large Christian party has had a stronger influence, the development of a new family policy has proceeded at a consistently slower pace than in neighbouring Nordic countries.

Dispute over "max tax"

Most recently in Sweden, there has been a major dispute over a proposed ceiling on the fees paid by parents for child care. This reform, the so-called "max tax", gave rise to an ideological dispute that rekindled previous conflicts over family policy. It seems that the Social Democratic government

had forgotten how sensitive all matters relating to child care tend to be. Public discussion of the child-care allowance had pretty much subsided when the issue of the max tax woke the entire debate to life again.

Following heavy cuts in public spending during the 1990s, the Social Democrats had nearly forgotten about all the issues of basic values that are woven into general-welfare policy. The welfare system constructed during the 1950s and '60s was based on the assumption that there was a housewife who would perform unpaid work on behalf of the family. That conception of the family formed the basis of welfare policy. In order for Sweden to develop as it has during the past thirty years, it was necessary to increase the gender equality of the social insurance system, to expand municipal services, and to reform the tax system so that it became possible for women to combine work and children.

Many European countries have still not managed to do this. Their welfare systems are still based on, and continue to reproduce, families served by housewives. As a result, many of these countries now face a situation of low female employment and low birth rates. This dilemma is unlikely to be resolved until their family policies are reformed, something that will require a strong will and great political courage. For, such reforms pose a challenge to the traditional view of the family, and such deep-rooted values seldom change overnight.

This "value inertia" can be clearly seen in the experience of Sweden, where it is still the case that women utilize nearly all of the parental leave which, in theory, may be divided in any proportion between both parents. For the most part, it is still women who work part-time while the children are small, and who perform most of the unpaid housework.

Positive outlook

If we forget the long political struggle that preceded the transformation of Swedish family policy, the slow pace of change in other European countries becomes difficult to understand. The experience of Sweden teaches us that, if we want to develop a general-welfare policy for tomorrow's society, we should not dwell on today's injustices. If such a negative perspective had dominated thinking in the 1960s, the result probably would have been the adoption of a child-care allowance to compensate women for their unpaid work in the home. In all likelihood, that would have been a popular reform.

The new family policy, with subsidized child care and the parental benefit, was at first utilized mainly by the middle class. Working-class families regarded the traditional family with housewife as the ideal to uphold, if one could afford to.

Welfare policy should not be something that merely corrects mistakes. It must also show the way to a new society. The family policy that took shape during the 1970s took a stance for the right of women to establish themselves in the labour market before they have children. The results

seem to speak for themselves: Either Swedish women are extremely easy to influence, or the new policy coincided with what they actually wanted.

Today, nearly all Swedish children are born to mothers who have already established themselves in the labour market. This is reflected in the proportion of women who receive the guaranteed minimum parental insurance-- i.e. those who have never been employed prior to motherhood-- a figure which has steadily decreased since the 1970s. There has been a drastic reduction in the number of teenage mothers, and it has become much easier to return to work when the children become older.

Emerging problems

This strategy functioned effectively until the start of the 1990s. Until then, Sweden combined relatively high birth rates with high rates of female employment. In addition, the average number of hours worked per week rose significantly during the 1980s. Women who entered the labour market in the 1970s often began with half-time jobs. But during the 1980s, average weekly work-hours increased.

Problems with the new family policy emerged during the 1990s. In the first place, the rights to leave of absence and parental insurance were directly linked to having a job. Also, the labour-market legislation regulating leaves of absence applied only to those with permanent employment.

During the 1990s, employment opportunities declined drastically, especially for the young. It took increasingly longer to establish oneself in the labour market-- i.e. to get a full-time job that one enjoyed. The average length of schooling increased, partly due to the tight job market, but also to an expansion of higher education facilities.

These factors, together with the fact that many had been alarmed by the unhappy experience of those who had children during the baby boom of 1988-92, resulted in an increase in the average age at first childbirth. This trend had, in fact, been building up for some time; but now it accelerated. In the 1970s, the average age at first childbirth was just over 20; now it is just over 28. The proportion of young mothers increased during the 1980s when the labour market was hottest, but declined rapidly during the 1990s.

Declining birth rate

Through legislation and changing attitudes, the timing of the first child had been strongly linked to establishment in the labour market. When it suddenly began to take much longer to find permanent employment, there was a sharp decline in child-bearing among younger women. The proportion with temporary employment increased, most sharply among young women. Previously, seventy percent of women aged 25-29 had permanent employment which entitled them to parental leave; during the 1990s, that figure dropped to just under fifty percent.

Furthermore, many lost faith in their chances of getting a new job when they returned from parental leave. Since increasing numbers extended the length of their schooling, while many others had a weak connection to the labour market, there was a sharp drop in the proportion that qualified for parental insurance. The family policy that had been developed during a period of full employment turned out to have a negative side in a time of relatively high unemployment.

If there are no jobs available, potential parents postpone child-bearing until they have managed to establish themselves in the labour market. When the average age at first childbirth becomes too high, the total number of children decreases. Many parents never have a second or third child, and many have none at all.

Work-benefits connection

My personal assessment is that, if the success of Swedish policy is to continue in the future, it is necessary to loosen the connection between work and benefits. It is not very likely that today's Swedish women are going to throw themselves into some sort of housewife's role, even if it becomes slightly easier to qualify for parental insurance. That the labour-market situation of women is still worse than that of men is due primarily to the fact that women tend to have occupations with inferior terms of employment and inadequate opportunities for full-time employment. That women bear children is a relatively minor factor by comparison.

Obviously, it will take some time before women with young children work as many hours as men with young children. But, in fact, there has occurred a significant reduction in the gap between the average weekly work-hours of men and women during the 1990s.

The available data clearly show that the difference between the average length of time spent by men and women at work has decreased during the 1990s. Significantly, the relative increase has been greatest among women with young children, both because they worked longer hours and because fathers worked slightly less. It is also interesting that the difference between men and women without children did not decrease as much.

There is still a very clear difference between men and women, due partly to the fact that childless young women entering working life are often stuck, involuntarily, with part-time jobs. This is much more common in typical women's occupations than in those dominated by men. Another factor is that many older women still prefer to work part-time; this is very unusual among men, although their average hours of work also decline with increasing age.

Even though unemployment during the 1990s was very high by Swedish standards, there is no indication of any reduced ambition among women to combine work with children; in fact, the reverse appears to be true. At this point, it may be appropriate to loosen the connection between one's position in the labour market and the right to parental-insurance benefits.

Essential female employment

Developments during the 1990s reflect temporary problems in the labour market. It is fairly safe to assume that the proportion of young people pursuing higher education will be greater than in the 1980s. Problems of temporary employment and anxieties over unemployment will also continue for several years to come.

It may be concluded from the above that the new model of Nordic family policy has been successful, even if some problems have emerged during the recent period of rising unemployment. The Nordic countries have demonstrated not only that it is possible to combine high rates of female employment with high birth rates, but also that a high level of female labour-force participation is essential to reproduction in modern societies. Those countries which have tried to maintain a traditional, male-breadwinner model have experienced neither high birth rates nor high rates of female employment. They seem to carry the costs of a high reproduction of the population without receiving any positive result.

However, in noting the advantages of the Nordic model, it should be pointed out that countries with ”liberal regimes” have also succeeded in combining high birth rates with high rates of female employment. In some cases, for example that of Great Britain, this can be explained by women’s weaker connection to the labour market. But in other cases, for example the United States, the number of hours worked by women is comparable to or perhaps even higher than in the Nordic countries. Despite the absence of a supportive family policy, they somehow manage. There is a cost, however--greater income inequality, especially among children.

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