

Response to Commentaries

Gösta Esping-Andersen

Both Lena Sommestad and Stein Reegård made many observations, and it would be inappropriate to monopolize the rest of the day trying to respond to all of them. But I did note one issue in Lena's presentation which I believe went to the core of her concern, and that is the division of labour within the family and household. I gather that Lena would like to raise the priority of that issue and place it on the political agenda.

One interesting point she made is that Swedish women insist that their fertility behaviour is conditional on the willingness of men to divide up domestic chores in a more egalitarian manner. I am sure that this is probably the case-- although I am not so sure that it is a universal fact, given that many women and mothers do not live with male partners, and that their numbers are increasing. It may well be that the reason more and more women live without partners is that the departed male did not meet his quota of household chores. But of course, once he leaves, her share by definition becomes 100 percent.

In any case, I have been thinking about how to deal with this problem. In spirit and in principle, of course I agree. It is hardly controversial that domestic chores should be distributed more equally. However, as I mentioned earlier, I do not feel that women-friendly policies should be pursued merely on behalf of women, but also on behalf of society as a whole. Everyone benefits.

Politicizing the private

It should be noted, however, that in making this issue a matter of public concern we are penetrating the private world of the family and its internal bargaining, its internal conflicts. To what extent should we politicize this issue?

I would respond to that question in two ways. One is that, apart from promoting equality, the real goal of housework is to *minimize* at least the more undesirable aspects of it. If we were to follow, to the letter, the feminist call for equalizing the burden-- that men should increase their efforts in order to relieve women of their double burden, and so on-- the net result would be a less dynamic post-industrial growth in jobs than if women simply reduced their domestic burden while the contributions of men remained at their present low level. The first objective should be to minimize the burden of self-servicing on families.

The question then becomes how to distribute the remaining, minimum burden of household work among the partners. One set of figures that occurs to me has to do with average weekly hours of unpaid work performed by men and women in Sweden, as compared with the corresponding figure in Denmark or the United States. The average Danish women spends about 25 hours a week on such chores,

and her male partner about 10-11 hours. In Sweden, the average male partner spends about 21 hours on unpaid household work, and the average Swedish woman about 30 hours. This is the only case where men devote more than ten or eleven hours a week to such work.

Opportunity cost

Thus, Sweden is the only country in the developed world where men make a significant, nearly egalitarian, contribution to domestic work. Why? I'm not sure that we have the complete answer to that question. But I am certain that it is related to the extreme wage compression in Sweden where, in comparison with other countries, there is very little difference between the wages earned by men and women for comparable work. This in turn means that the "opportunity cost" for men to reduce their hours in the labour market is less than elsewhere. It costs less for men to spend fewer hours at work and more time at home.

But there is another interesting question that can be raised in this context. Why is it that, in the Nordic countries, the large-scale entry of women into the labour market was relatively early and very strong? It began to accelerate in the late 1960s and increased very rapidly, like an avalanche. Of course, that created pressure on the traditional male-oriented welfare state to very rapidly become women-friendly and service-intensive-- features that are now regarded as basic components of "the Nordic model".

Why did that development occur in this region, and not others. I am convinced that it does not have so much to do with incentives for higher-educated women to work. They always work, everywhere. It is the lower-educated women in the Nordic countries who now have much stronger incentives to enter the labour market than anywhere else, because the wage gap between lower-educated men and women is much less than the corresponding gap between higher-educated men and women. To begin with, this was, especially the case in Sweden. That is why Sweden, and now also Denmark, Norway, etc. have been pioneers in "universalizing" female participation in the labour market.

Now, this has another consequence-- and here I am probably going way beyond what Lena had intended with her remarks. A deregulatory strategy of reducing relative wages among the less educated would probably be extremely problematic for women's inclusion in the labour market, especially those with limited educations.

Carl Tham, moderator: Before you continue, Gösta, may I ask a question about this. Of course, it is difficult to be certain, but it may be that the "ideological pressure", the *idea* of sharing the burden and equality may have been stronger in the Nordic countries than elsewhere. The general political climate for such ideas may have been stronger here. The perspective on women and the family has changed more profoundly, perhaps, in the Nordic countries. This ideological pressure may also have been a very important factor in all of this-- not only the economic incentives. Is that a possibility, in your view?

Gösta Esping-Andersen: It is hard to say which is the chicken and which is the egg, here. If we look at the long-term behaviour of Swedish women. . . . Let's go back to the 1930s, when the acute issue was an apparent risk of declining population. In the

1930s, if I remember correctly, the employment rate of women was about 55 percent. By the 1950s, it had dropped to 35-40 percent-- a very sharp drop, in other words. I think that it had a lot to do with the general migration from rural to urban areas, and also with the fact that, following World War II, men were earning wages which permitted the luxury of a full-time housewife in a traditional working-class family. This took place at exactly the time that *middle-class* women were abandoning the housewife role and entering the labour market.

The second wave, the process that you refer to involving the pressure for egalitarian politics, came after the 1960s when-- due to higher educational standards, wage incentives and other factors-- women also began to enter the labour market. As regards the question of which came first, I think that this trend begins with economic incentives for women to enter the labour market as they had done in the 1930s, but had stopped doing in the 1950s.

They did that much more quickly in the Nordic countries than in the rest of Europe. I think that, here, the wage-setting mechanism and the solidaristic wage policy, in Sweden especially, was an enormous catalyst. Once in the labour market, women were again confronted with the conflicting demands of home and work that had been such an important issue in the 1930s, but which had been forgotten during the post-war period. That is my interpretation; but, of course, it is difficult to reconstruct.

Key factor: education

Although it may sound very odd, my response to Stein Reegård's presentation is essentially the same. He focused on labour market issues, while Lena was more concerned with the private sphere. But in a way, it all comes back to education. Stein stressed the long-term trend toward declining participation of men in the labour force, and the apparent desire to retire earlier. Actually, Norway probably has the most stable levels in the developed world, whereas the average retirement age elsewhere in Europe has declined very rapidly. In Belgium, Italy and France, for example, the employment rate of older men is now something like 30-35 percent. This trend is most pronounced in countries where the education gap between older and younger men is greatest.

If we take the proportion of young adults with a secondary education and use that as a comparative index with a value of 100, we find that today's 60-year-old Swedes have a ranking of 73 percent in comparison with Swedish 25-year-olds; in Denmark, the corresponding figure is 81 percent. But in Belgium, it is 49 percent; in Spain, 27 percent. In those countries, the education gap between generations is enormous. But in the Nordic countries, there is a much smaller gap between the educational level of the older people and the younger people of today. That is especially the case for women.

Now, if this sort of gap is going to disappear in the next 20 years-- and that is the apparent trend-- it will eliminate one of the main causes of early retirement, namely that older men with poor educations and limited cognitive skills have been pushed out of the labour market to become a "surplus". The supply of such men far exceeds the demand, which is constantly shrinking.

But due to the general increase in education levels, that surplus of poorly-educated older men can be expected to decline and gradually disappear over the next 20-25 years. So, the next generation of older men will not be as difficult to employ, even if that requires some retraining. They will possess the cognitive skills which the post-industrial labour market requires.

Healthy old age

Another reason that older men will be able to work longer in the future is that, in general, they will tend to be healthier than their parents and grandparents who spent their working lives in demanding industrial jobs that literally wore them out.

There is a considerable body of recent research which indicates that we are fast approaching a situation in which an average 60-year-old male will be able to count on 10-12 additional years free of disability. This means disability-free in the sense that he will be able to continue working to age 70-72 without any significant impairment. Gerontologists have been finding that improvements in this regard appear to be exponential. For each new cohort that reaches retirement age, the total years of freedom from disability are increasing.

As a result, we may see a reversal of the past few decades' downward trend in average retirement age-- depending, of course, on what kinds of pension incentives are built into actuarial calculations. But if we move in the direction of more contribution-defined benefits, it is likely that everything will conspire to raise the average retirement age. From the standpoint of general welfare, there are really no strong reasons to hinder or prevent such a development. With better educated, healthier older men-- and even more so in the case of women-- there is no reason to keep lowering the retirement age.

Finally, as I noted in my presentation, we seem always to have had the wrong retirement policy and pension system throughout history. We had the wrong pension system for the age-cohorts that reached retirement age in the 1950s; they received very meagre benefits that did not secure them against poverty. In response, we created pension systems that are probably *too* generous for those whose working lives coincided with the post-war era. They had fantastic lives in comparison with preceding generations. And we may end up with the wrong retirement programmes in the future if we are now eroding pension guarantees, especially if many of our children will have lives that are not as favourable as ours have been. So, it may well be that we are condemned always to devise the wrong pension system for each successive period in history.

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