

## CAN THE WELFARE STATE BE INSTRUMENTAL OF GENDER EQUALITY?\*

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I consider gender inequality to exist in all modern societies, i.e. women's social status to be inferior to that of men, but I also consider the achievement of gender equality to be feasible within the foreseeable future. This certainly is not an inevitable process: if we want it we have to work to make it come true.

By equal social status for women to that of men I mean:

- a) equal access to resources--meaning income, pensions, credit and property, as well as education and training
- b) equal autonomy--meaning an equal measure of freedom to make life choices and of freedom of movement--and
- c) equal power--meaning equal appointment, and equal ability to be elected, to positions of political and economic power.

I do not intend to discuss here either the causal connections between these three components of equal gender status, or their relative importance, as this would lead me too far afield.

There is considerable agreement concerning many preconditions of equal social status for women in modern societies--in addition to the basic equal rights, equal pay, and equal opportunity legislation passed during the last 30 years in nearly all modern societies. The equal rights, pay and opportunities legislation which grants women formal equality as citizens and in the labour market, has been codified in several widely ratified international conventions. Yet serious obstacles to their enforcement continue to exist. In some of the areas of life where de facto gender inequality is largest, some societies have attempted change by legislation and regulation, others not. Whereas the majority of women in Western democracies is in favour of more effective legislation and regulation in favour of women in all or in most of these areas, some consider the achievement of these "preconditions of gender equality" to be desirable, yet declare them to be not amenable to regulation; against the realization of some of these changes there exists open or concealed opposition from parts of the population, mainly from men and male-dominated organizations. This is not surprising, as the

achievement of most of these preconditions of gender equality involves far-reaching changes not only in the traditional female role, but also in the male role.

The areas of life where existing conditions in most modern societies are those of considerable de facto gender inequality, are those of reproductive choice, maternity, childcare outside the home, the gender division of family work, parenting, divorce and its economic effects, single parenthood, the gender income gap, gender occupational segregation; underrepresentation of women in positions of political and economic power; persistence--and perhaps even increase--of harrassment and of violence against women.

Which, and how much, of the changes needed for gender equality can be brought about by any means of state institutions? I wish to limit the discussion in this paper to democratic multi-party regimes which keep the rule of free association; there exists sufficient evidence that without the existence of an autonomous women's movement, and without the possibility to use the means of legitimate political competition, men will not be ready to give up their privileges and their monopoly to the top positions of economic and political power. In all one-party states, notwithstanding their radical ideological differences, policy concerning the status of women will depend on the short-term interests of the--usually all-male--party leadership.

Are "welfare states" superior in this to other states? How much of these goals have already been achieved by existing welfare states, and how do they compare in this to other modern democratic states? Is their record the same, worse or better?

I shall concentrate on the especially interesting case of Sweden, which is recognized as the most far-reaching welfare state, and compare its policies, achievements and failures with other democratic states.

Let me spell out in some detail the changes that have been suggested--and that have already been implemented to some degree in part of modern societies--that are needed to create the preconditions of gender equality in these areas in more detail:

I Reproductive choice:

- 1) Early sex education in schools
- 2) Free access to medically safe means of contraception
- 3) Free access to legal and medically safe abortion.

Although all three "preconditions" are essential to give women--and girls--

the choice of having children or not, when and how many, all being central life choices, measures for their legalization and provision are incomplete in many modern societies; in several countries they have been repeatedly challenged, limited and/or repealed. As the official views of Roman Catholic, fundamentalist Protestant, Orthodox Jewish and conservative and fundamentalist Moslem religious authorities, are all opposed to 3) and most also to 1) and 2), this is not surprising. Neither is it surprising that legalization and provision are relatively more advanced and less challenged in the 5 Nordic welfare states of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden than in the welfare states Britain, Canada, Israel or Germany: none the above-mentioned religious groups is very influential in any of the Nordic countries (although the opposition from protestants seems to have been influential enough in Norway to postpone the liberalization of abortion legislation there until 1978).

Yet all welfare-states have an advantage here: the governments of all those countries that have a comprehensive universal national health services stand a better chance to provide adequate services for reproductive choice than those that, like the United States, provide public health services only to selected groups of the population (the old, the poor and the veterans). If we use having a universal public national health service as a sine qua non for classification as a welfare state, than it is obvious that--once legalization of reproductive choice has been achieved, governments of welfare states are better equipped to provide family planning and abortion services than non-welfare states.

## II Maternity:

- 4) full and universal health insurance to cover medical expenses for prenatal care, childbirth and post-natal care
- 5) full pay, social benefits and job security during absences from employment due to (complications of) pregnancy, childbirth and need for recuperation.

The medical disabilities of pregnancy and childbirth are peculiar to women; in order to prevent them from being a serious handicap for women, medical expenses for "maternity" have to be covered by the public health service just like any other medical services; in order of preventing their being used as an excuse for discrimination against women by employers, two provisions are essential: employers must be forbidden to fire or demote an employee due to pregnancy or during absence due to pregnancy and maternity, and the woman's salary and social security contributions have to be paid by national

insurance funds during the period of her absence from employment for health reasons. In the great majority of modern societies the first of these provisions is the law; in the U.S. it took until quite recently to make it the law of the land; in many countries about 3 months of maternity leave are considered obligatory on employer and employee.

Welfare states with full national health services usually also provide for full coverage of medical expenses of maternity. This may not be the case, where most medical services are provided by group health insurance companies (U.S.) or by a union health fund (Israel); those tend to deny the coverage of maternity services to members who were not insured with them before the beginning of the pregnancy.

Welfare states also tend to fulfil the precondition of "paid maternity leave" by law, whereas the absence of pay causes many U.S. mothers to return to employment too soon for their own health. In Sweden there exists in addition also a paid paternity leave of 10 days; this is used by the great majority of fathers immediately after the birth of their new babies.

### III Parenting:

- 6) equal access to both parents to paid parental leave for infant care and for the care of their children when sick
- 7) shorter and more flexible working hours for parents of younger children.

In the mainstream of the new women's movement--that started in the U.S. in the mid-sixties--there emerged a consensus about "equal parenting" as extremely important for gender equality. Feminist social scientists pointed to the need to equalize all the social "sex-roles" or "gender-roles". It is interesting that in Sweden the idea and the terminology of "sex-role equality" took hold in official reports as early as 1960.

The traditional female gender-role of child care, and above all of baby care, is one of the most stereotyped and most entrenched of all gender-roles. It was indeed so entrenched that no neutral word for nurturing children, encompassing both parents, existed in most languages: there was just "mothering"--"fathering" had nothing to do with nurture--and the word "parenting" had to be invented. The notion that only mothers (and other women acting as substitute mothers) could and should do the work of primary baby and child care, and be assigned full responsibility for it as their primary life-role, has been buttressed not only by religious and mythological teachings but by a welter of relatively modern theories claiming scientific status: women were programmed by the "biogrammar" for maternal (and

domestic) activities, women could only fulfill themselves by being mothers, children would suffer irreparable harm by being separated from their mothers, men lacked the hormones necessary for understanding infants in the pre-verbal stage and thus were incapable of baby care.

In addition to all this, many feminists had, and still have, difficulties with the goal of equal parenting. Engels criticized "monogamic" or "bourgeois" marriage as identical with the family and with the private family-household, inevitably causing women's enslavement to unpaid "reproductive" work, i.e. to housework and childraising. With the overthrow of the capitalists, whose interest was to keep women reproducing the workers, as well as to keep them as a cheap reserve labor army for industry, housework and childraising would be "socialized", and women would be free to participate in "social production" just like men; apparently the private family-household would disappear, and with it the "woman problem". Neo-Marxist feminists struggled with the problem of the continuing unequal and unjust division of unpaid housework (which did not disappear also under "Socialism"), but as to child-care, they concentrated their efforts on public daycare, and many had difficulty with policies aiming at, and facilitating the shared and equal parenting of infants and children by two employed parents in the setting of a private family-household. Some scholars who are critical of the effect of long hours of public child care and of long school days on children, as well as of the hopes for egalitarian dual-career marriages and families, which they considered to be "middle-class", pinned their hopes instead on multi-person households.

Some radical feminists do not consider egalitarian marriage, or other forms of relatively stable heterosexual unions, feasible at all, and would therefore not consider equal parenting at all.

It appears that in Sweden all these ideological concerns had much less impact on the thinking and the policy proposals of the women's movement than in most other western countries. Sweden is the country which has clearly distinguished between policies for "maternity" and for the facilitation of infant and child care at home. Parental baby-leave, to be shared by both parents and covered by parental insurance, was instituted in 1974, and the voluntary 6-hour working day for all parents of children under age 8 was instituted in 1979.

This does not mean that thereby the Swedish welfare state has instituted equal parenting. By 1987 a growing number of fathers (41% of compensated days) were ready to look after their children when sick, but

only 24 % of all fathers of new babies made use of their right to baby leave, and the amount of days they look after their babies is only 8% of all compensated days. Sweden has however taken two most important steps on the road to equal parenting. Several other governments have formally given fathers the right to child-care leave, but for much shorter periods or much less pay. This appears to be so even in the other Scandinavian countries with the exception of Finland, whose period of paid parental leave is only a little shorter than that of Sweden, and whose fathers appear to participate at a higher rate.

Although the voluntary 6-hour day for parents of young children has to-date attracted only a tiny minority of Swedish fathers, it may have contributed to women's status by legitimizing "part-time work" in many occupations and positions of responsibility that were claimed to be unsuitable for less-than-full-time work. Much needed research on the causes of the limited success of the two Swedish laws in establishing equal parenting, is in progress.

#### IV Day-care outside the home:

- 8) a sufficient year-round supply of affordable quality daycare for pre-school children and for young school-age children

This is essential for mothers entry into the labor market, and for their continuous attachment to it. It is a precondition for the ability of a large group of women to earn an income of their own at all. Nowadays only a small fraction of mothers of young children can rely on relatives, most often their own mothers, for child care during the hours of their absence from home. In order to be affordable to lower-income parents daycare has to be subsidized and/or fees have to be progressive. Welfare states tend to be more ready to include this service within their network of social services than non-welfare states. Germany (FRG) lags seriously behind; France has a satisfactory system that is claimed to be suitable for adoption even by non-welfare-states. Swedish policy is to facilitate the care of infants under 18 months at home, and to provide a place for all pre-school children in municipal child care, as well for 7-12 year olds in pre-school and after-school centers. (School lunches are free.) In 1989 56% of preschool children were cared for in municipal day care, but due to the recent baby boomlet there still remained a problem of unanswered demand.

#### V The gender division of unpaid family work:

- 9) the abolition of the unequal division of household, child care and elder-care work, between women and men, mothers and fathers.

Here the discussion is very similar to that concerning equal parenting; women will be disadvantaged in the labor market and in political life, as long as they have to put in much more time, effort and attention to all kinds of family work, not only child care but also routine daily housework and unpaid care work for adult relatives, than their male partners. The domestic role of women is as old and as persistent as the child care role. The rebellion against the exclusive housewife-role has been one of the center-pieces of the new women's movement. Within three decades the portion of women of working age who conformed to the exclusive housewife role, has dwindled from an overwhelming majority to a minority in nearly all modern societies.

Sweden leads the way in the rate of labor force participation of its women. By 1989 85% of women in the ages 20-64 were gain-fully employed-- compared to 90% of men. Sweden, as an advanced welfare state, possessed in its labor-market-authorities a powerful (yet non-coercive) instrument to facilitate women's entry into the labor market.

Yet the overwhelming majority of adult Swedish women, whether married or cohabiting, still perform much more family work than their partners. In 1983 married women 25-44 years old performed on the average 38.2 hours of household work, their husbands only 19.4 hours; in the 45-64 age group, for most of whom the immediate pressure of infant care has passed, women still do 36.8 hours of housework, whereas their husbands do only 14.7 hours. Sweden started early its educational campaign for the equal sharing of housework. Women activists early-on realized that as long as most men's work days were very long, it would be near impossible to overcome their entrenched reluctance; women much more than men were in favour of radical reduction of the working day to six hours and the obligatory sharing of parental leave by fathers. It was the two bulwarks of organized male power--LO, the blue-collar union federation, and SAF, the employers' federation, that opposed both the goal of a general shortening of the working day--in favor of an additional week of paid summer vacation--and the obligatory sharing of parental leave by fathers.

VI The effects of divorce:

- 10) the equitable division of assets--including perhaps also of pension rights--between divorcing couples
- 11) alimony for divorced women who had worked as housewives for a large part of their married life
- 12) financial support for divorced women's completion of their education, training or retraining

- 13) guaranteed paternal child support to divorced/separated child-raising women

Some reform of the divorce law has taken place in all western countries within the last three decades, with varying results for women. In the U.S. the results were economically disastrous for large numbers of women; it has to be remembered that this is also largely due to the patchwork reform in a federal system. Sweden, similarly to the U.S., has a very high divorce rate. Certainly Sweden, and other advanced welfare states with universal insurance and allowance systems, are much more capable to enforce paternal child support, and to provide other supports to divorced mothers, than minimal welfare and non-welfare states. Yet in addition to that, Swedish courts also have a declared policy of encouraging divorcing parents to try joint-custody solutions; the well-known feminist sociologist Rita Liljestroem created the slogan of the 80s "Although love may end, parenthood is for ever".

#### VII Single motherhood:

- 14) special assistance to never-married single mothers.

These women are most disadvantaged, many having neither financial support, nor any help in child care and housework from a male partner. Sweden has started early-on to support this group, especially by housing allowances, the provision of public housing, and priority in day care.

Although as many as 25% of Swedish babies are born to unmarried mothers, this does not mean that 25% of mothers are completely without the support of a male partner. Many "unmarried mothers" live in relatively stable common-law unions. Half of cohabiting Swedish couples get married after the birth of a child. More than 80% of unmarried fathers accept paternity and the obligation to pay child support without the need for any court procedures.

Still, as recent criticism points out, the problem has not yet been fully resolved: the majority of genuinely single mothers tend to remain in the lower income groups.

#### VIII The labour market:

- 15) the elimination of de facto discrimination against women in pay, hiring, training and promotion (affirmative action)
- 16) the elimination of pay discrimination against women in female stereotyped occupations (comparable worth)



17) the reduction of occupational segregation with the help of mandatory training and hiring quotas

All three are essential to achieve de facto economic independence for women. Despite recognition of their importance, and commitment to the goal, there has been only relative slow advance in Sweden in eliminating de facto discrimination in training, promotion and pay. Currently the gender pay-gap varies between 26 and 10 per cent among different groups of full-time employees. (In comparison: Canada about 30%, US nearer 40%.) In 1980 total income of women amounted to 63% of men's, and rose to 66% by 1988. We have to remember the very high percentage of part-time employment (35%) among Swedish women.

The main reason for the relatively slow elimination of different forms of de facto discrimination, appears to be that famous central feature of the Swedish welfare state, the principle of non-interference into work-place affairs, once an agreement between the appropriate union and the federation of employers has been concluded. In the leadership of most unions and among the employers' federation, women's representation has--until quite recently--been much smaller than in parliament. LO even objects to grant any powers in the workplace to such watch-dog institutions as women's caucuses or networks.

Gender occupational segregation, which appears to be one of the major factors of the pay gap, appears to be as rampant and as persistent in the advanced welfare state as in minimal and non-welfare modern societies. Sweden initiated early-on educational programs to counteract girls' tendency to opt for female-stereo-typed education and choice of occupation, but with limited success; only in the recent "sex-equality action plan" a new policy of educational reform coordinated with work-place enforcement of equality legislation and with active support of parenting by fathers, appears to be forming. Recent research has shown that many Swedish fathers did not go to court when their legal rights to the six-hour day were infringed upon in the workplace.

## IX Political and Economic Power

18. Here the obvious goal is the gaining of parity for women in both elective and in appointive positions of political and of economic power.

Recently considerable advance in this area has taken place in all the Nordic countries. Norway had the first ever government headed by a woman and composed by 50% women ministers.

Already in 1983 the four Nordic countries, Finland (31%), Sweden (28%), Norway (26%), Denmark (24%), were ahead of all other OECD countries in their percentage of women members of parliament or lower house. Among OECD countries only the Dutch Second Chamber with its 17% women surpassed the 15% women members of the small parliament of Iceland, the fifth Nordic country. For the sake of comparison, women's representation ranged from a "high" of 11% in the Swiss National Council to such lows as 3% women M.P.s in the British House of Commons and 2% in the Japanese House of Representatives.

Nevertheless by the mid-80s feminists in Sweden were dissatisfied with the relative stagnation in the growth of women's representation on elective central, regional and local bodies and with their much lower representation in Government; they also recognized the significance of women's continuing low representation and absence of chairpersonships of central parliamentary committees, on powerful governmental appointive commissions, and on the central bodies of those most powerful "social partners"--LO, the industrial trade union federation, and SAF, the federation of Swedish employers. A parliamentary commission formulated a new, more decisive "equality" policy, demanding outright 50% for women of all new candidatures in elections and of all new appointments.

In 1988 Parliament accepted a 5-year national action plan for equality between the sexes, and in 1989 it joined a Nordic action plan. In Sweden in some areas the results of the new policy were fast and impressive: by 1989 women's representation in Parliament had risen from 28 to 38 percent, in parliamentary committees from 26 to 35 percent, in municipal councils from 30 to 34 percent, in county councils from 33 to 42 percent.

Considerable progress was also made in all the white-collar unions, professional associations and union federations, in the representation of women on executive committees and as chairpersons of member organisations, although nowhere was women's representation as yet proportional to women's membership. An exception was LO, the most numerous and most powerful industrial union federation, 45 percent of whose members are women: here progress has been painfully slow: instead of the lone woman (7%) on its executive committee in 1983 there were 2 women (13%) by 1990; in 1983 none of its 22 member organisations had a woman as chairperson--by 1990 there was one. No figures have been published about the rate of women's representation on the central bodies of the employers' federation.

We now come to the last and perhaps most difficult area of gender inequality:

X Harassment and violence against women:

- 19) the elimination of sexual harassment of women in places of work and of education with the help of the establishment of special complaint boards, and/or by making the employer/management responsible for its prevention
- 20) the elimination of violence against women and girls in the household, in institutions and in the streets (wife-battering, sexual assault, rape, murder, involuntary prostitution, sexual abuse of children), with the help of
  - a) the rigorous prosecution of offenders
  - b) moral support and legal aid to victims during the process of complaint, medical examination, police interrogation and court proceedings
  - c) hot lines to crisis centres, better street lighting, escort services, self defence training
  - d) the provision of shelters for battered women and their children
  - e) legal help with separation or divorce and custody proceedings,
  - f) psychological services for battered women, abused children and rape victims
  - g) obligatory psychiatric treatment of convicted batterers, abusers and rapists.

In this very crucial area of the struggle for equal social status for women, it is hard to know if the welfare state as such has an advantage. In Sweden apparently the level of violence against women is considerably lower than in many other modern societies with or without welfare states. According to recent statistics violent crimes against women are not increasing in Sweden, as it is currently being claimed for Canada, which also has a relatively developed welfare-state system.

It has been demonstrated that even a relatively well intentioned government is incompetent in combating the more hidden forms of violence against women--such as date rape, wife-battering and sexual harassment in the work-place. For this, active grass-root feminist networks are essential; these developed relatively late in Sweden, and may therefore be weaker than

in some less advanced welfare states, and perhaps even in such a democratic minimal-welfare state as the U.S. disadvantaged groups of the population (the old, the poor and the veterans). If we use having a universal free access to medically safe means of contraception

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