

WOMEN AND SOCIAL CHANGE: THE FAMILY AND WORKING LIFE IN SWEDEN*

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L'état socialiste suédois semble idéal pour que s'opèrent des changements nécessaires en vue de parvenir à l'égalité de la femme. Diane Afzelius analyse comment le gouvernement suédois cherche à éliminer la discrimination fondée sur le sexe dans le monde du travail, et à favoriser une politique familiale active. Elle remplace la notion d'"égalité" dans son contexte historique, et évalue le fossé existant entre le "mythe" et la réalité contemporaine de la femme au travail. Pour réaliser l'égalité, il faudra donc lier les sphères de production et de reproduction, et renforcer le mouvement des femmes.

Introduction

Arriving in Sweden in the summer of 1970, I found myself on a sociological journey into what we believed in the United States to be a distant "mythical landscape" called the welfare state. Recognizing that women were to become a permanent and important addition to the labour force, Sweden had begun to make its formal commitment to eliminate sex discrimination in the labour market and to promote an active family policy. Based on my experience observing social change in the 1970s, this paper attempts to establish a balance between myth and reality. I will describe the relationship between the egalitarian principles underlying the welfare system, the functioning of industrial relations, and the influence of cultural tradition on the historical development of women's struggle for sex equality. While



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organizational life has contributed to the absorption of some important feminist demands, there are also inegalitarian forces operating within the system which may limit the possibilities for achieving real equality between men and women.

Cultural traditions and values are powerful components of any exchange of knowledge, which makes it a selective process, of course, be it personal or academic. How the "equality" concept has been perceived historically in different societies says something about the methods and aims that are employed to achieve social change. I will begin this discussion with a look at a popular early Swedish Utopian vision of equality between men and women.

A Utopian Vision?

In Sweden the first Utopian vision of a society in which women were to be freed

from the oppression and restrictions of a male-ordered society was written by a man. Carl Jonas Love Almqvist's *It Will Dol* (1839) was a standard reader in Swedish schools until the 1960s. Sara Videbeck, the daughter of a deceased glass-maker and main figure in the novel, advocates complete equality. She is idealistic but pragmatic, and even wise, yet her approach to life is uncomfortably dispassionate. There is something mechanical about her – or is it Alqvist himself who is willing to subject himself to a life that *will not do*?

What are the freedoms afforded to men to which she aspires? Is it simply a question of splitting the cheque 50/50 which she insists upon, thereby defining the limits of her commitment to Albert? And where do the children belong? Sara Videbeck resigns herself to a life without children as the price she must pay for her freedom; she resists the institution of marriage where she sees only "wickedness and unhappiness in all homes."

Sara's problem is that she is more concerned with attacking the institution of marriage and private life, than the demands and organization of working life itself.

According to historian Gunnar Qvist, Almqvist's novel was an attack on what he felt was a limited debate in Sweden at the time aimed only at reforming the outdated guild system regulations of 1720 as they applied to widows and daughters in crafts and trade. The broader implications of complete economic independence for all women suggested a real sharing of power.¹

"How can the labor market be organized to allow women their rightful status and equal opportunity in society?"

Only recently have problems associated with the separation of social reproductive functions (including the care of children and the elderly, the satisfaction of human needs for emotional integration, and the structure and organization of working life) begun to receive increasing attention in the literature. Along more feminist lines, Rita Liljestrom suggested in the middle 1970s that "the greatest dilemma posed in the debate on equality between men and women lies in the historical denial of female culture and the limited attention given to reproductive needs in the overall planning of society."²

A Socialist Solution?

Early socialist advocates of equality saw the future from a perspective in which the privatized family unit would be replaced by large collective households. In theory, at least, attempts were made to link the spheres of production and reproduction. Swedish Utopian working-class views on women were taken largely from the texts of German socialists, including Bebel, Engels and Zetkin. Organizing themselves in trade unions, Swedish women were soon to discover that their male counterparts saw the woman's question as subordinate to the overall problem of social organization. Rather rapidly the women's organizations were amalgamated into the male trade union movement, but a women's association was established within the Social Democratic Party. From the late 1890s debate continued among working-class women in search of a socialist solution to the question of women's equality.

What was the role of women in society? For a time emphasis shifted towards the home arena. Ellen Key's arguments to protect women and children, and to preserve love and sexuality, received increasing attention; gradually they were incorporated into demands to upgrade the "occupation housewife." Key believed that "women's strongest instinct, reproduction, was also her greatest cultural task." The Social Democratic Women's Newspaper *Morgon Bris* proclaimed women "the true guardians of the home," thus providing a needed ideological point:

"the home and the family are indeed the primary foundation of society and the state." An attempt was made to claim that women were actually the *employers* of men because household needs steered economic production. The slogan was coined "*Fabrikernas basta for hemmens behov*" (in English, "The factory's best to feather the nest!").

It was Alva Myrdal who finally introduced a new radical direction. In 1937 she pointed out that industrialization had driven men from the home, just as it tried to force women out of the home sphere. She observed that only one out of ten adult women were active mothers with several children. "Not even two-thirds of the proclaimed million housewives had a single child under eighteen years of age to care for." A pragmatic approach, typical of the Swedish labor movement in the welfare state, was about to be born.

More Swedish women today have at least one child during their lives. They also marry or live with a partner more often. About the Swedish woman Paul Britten Austin observed:

Bringing up her child – or if married and divorced, perhaps three or four children, offspring of successive marriages, with only a tiny minimum of domestic help, she contrives at the same time to run a business, take a doctor's degree in Slavonic languages or hold down a job in an office. She is the standing refutation of Luther's thesis that a woman can no more do without a man than a man can bite off his own nose. She is the Sara Videbeck of the age.⁵

An exaggeration, perhaps, but how many women can lead such lives for very long without becoming fatigued and even passionless? What are the alternatives? How can the labor market be organized to allow women their rightful status and equal opportunity in society?

The Gender Roles Debate and Family Policy

Public debate in the 1960s, which also caught the eyes of many observers abroad, focused mainly on attitudes at home. Gender roles were discussed in re-

lation to the learned behaviour of men and women in order to refute the largely biological argument that women were more suited to remain in the home. If women were to participate in the labor force, their emancipation would remain incomplete as long as fathers did not share in child-rearing and household responsibilities.

This philosophy became firmly established and Sweden embarked on a new official policy of commitment to equality between men and women. The word *jamstalldhet* appeared in official documents to indicate "equality between men and women." Maternity leave and other social services related to family needs were formally changed to include the rights of both parents, so that the terminology used included "parental leave," etc. Demands for public daycare were included in social planning.

By the end of the 1960s women began to enter the labor force in large numbers. Today 76.8% of all women between sixteen and sixty-four years old are employed; 80.5% of all women with children under seven are in the labor force.⁶ Since the 1970s continued debate on sex equality has shifted from the home to include working life. What effects has this period of rapid transition had at the workplace?

Women and Economics

To a certain extent, the Swedish system of industrial relations has aided the economic situation of working women, particularly those in low income groups. This can be attributed to the policy of "wages solidarity" which the blue-collar trade unions have pursued for some years. Employment services have also contributed by providing job training programs. Still, the overall difference in male and female earnings of all workers is about 65%, due to the fact that 46.7% of all working women are employed part-time, and to the occupational segregation of the labor market.

Probably one of the most controversial issues debated in the 1970s focused on the effects of part-time work on women's employment patterns. From 1970 to 1982 the number of part-time workers increased

from 570,000 to 909,500. Half of the part-time jobs involve night or weekend employment, and 86% of all night workers and 66% of shift workers are women.⁷

The Swedish Labor Market

When women entered the labor force, market demands were greatest in the private retail and service sector as well as in the expanding public sector, which today employs approximately half of the Swedish labor force. As a result, women were not employed in traditional male occupations. In fact, according to OECD reports, Sweden has the most sex-divided or sex-segregated labor market in Europe. Of three hundred occupations in Sweden, two-hundred are male-dominated. Seventy occupations are female-dominated and the overwhelming majority of women work in only thirty occupations. When looking at the educational choices of students today, one observes a nearly symmetrical division between traditionally male and female lines of study.

The goals of sex equality through equal opportunities at the workplace were debated in the decade of the 1970s at the same time as the trade unions were negotiating for greater control over the work environment and worker participation in decision-making. When they did not succeed in reaching any collective agreement with the central employers' organization on these questions, the Social Democratic government went against its previous non-intervention policy in labor market activities and legislated the 1974 Work Environment Law and the 1976 Codetermination Law. These laws are so-called "frame" laws that stipulate certain obligations. Their strength depends on the possibilities they leave open for collective bargaining at the centres of central and local decision-making bodies.

The Social Democrats and the trade unions, however, did not believe that similar legislation was needed to combat sex discrimination in the labor market. The Liberals, who came to power with the non-socialist coalition in 1976, proposed an Equality Act to prohibit sex discrimination in working life. It included a provision for mandating positive action for the

underrepresented sex at workplaces where one sex dominated. Their strongest argument was based on the fact that, because women had a weaker link to the labor market, an Equality Law was needed to protect the job-seeker. The Act went into effect on January 1, 1980.

In contrast to similar legislation in Norway, which includes in its text the legal intention to strengthen the position of women in the labor market, the Swedish law not only *neutralizes* the gender aspect of "equality between men and women," but it also lacks provisions stringent enough to elicit active compliance. As with other "frame" laws, more pervasive measures to strengthen the position of women can be adopted in principle via labor contracts. In practice, however, because trade union and management representatives are almost exclusively male, these contracts haven't been effective in raising the real women's issues.⁹

Women and Power

Professor Gunnar Qvist pointed out the problems of *real* as opposed to *formal* equality for women in the following:

Real or actualized equality implies that men of all social classes give up some of their realm of activities, in the labor market, in organizations and in political life to women. With existing rather class-bound educational systems and marriage traditions, this means that 'exchanges' *within* classes must occur, when it comes to *power* and higher income positions, *not between* classes, as for example, when workers gained the right to vote.¹⁴

Interest has only recently been taken up on questions of female influence at top levels of management in Sweden and the results are thus far as devastating as the occupational segregation problem. Gisele Asplund reports, for example, "Of 2,431 company executives listed in the Swedish Industrial Directory, only twenty-eight (or 1.2%) are women. Out of the 5,000 most important decision-makers in the 350 largest Swedish companies, only forty-six are women. And of these, fewer than half are in private enterprise."

In political life as well, the parliamen-

tary system of government channels influence through party affiliation. To become a politician means many active years in party political activities, sitting on committees and boards dominated by men before being chosen as a candidate for election on one of the party lists. Since one votes for a party rather than a candidate, there are no "women's candidates" elected for their positions on women's issues. Although there are more women in politics today (because politicians are increasingly recruited from the public sector) the heavy political posts, which involve full-time activities numbering 491, are occupied by only thirty-four women.¹²

At the workplace, social change through policies of co-determination or workers' participation could theoretically be expected to have an important impact on the goal of sex equality. Joan Acker found in her observations, however, that democracy and sex equality were not seen as logically connected by Swedish males and few women.¹³

A few studies have begun to look at the effects of organizational change and women's working life experience from the point of view of increased control over decision-making processes in typical female occupations. They conclude that self-management, job rotation schemes, and autonomous work groups contribute to improved job satisfaction, flexibility and feelings of power.¹⁴

Further feminist analyses of the distribution of power in different organizational structures from a multi-level perspective could complement these findings. How decisions are made, who gets what jobs and why, as well as what informal mechanisms of control are structured into and operating to keep women in the lower ranks, are areas that need to be considered. What effects technological changes at the workplace are having on women's jobs is a particularly important issue.

In sum, what may limit the possibilities for equality between men and women is a Catch 22. If women remain outside or at the bottom of the organizational structure of society, they are powerless; and if they get inside the structure they may be powerless as women because their new status may compromise their femininity.

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Future Possibilities

Full employment is one of the foremost goals of the Swedish labor movement. In addition, there is a highly valued "work ethic" in Sweden which influences every woman's choice to seek employment outside the home. Together these egalitarian values could be used to counteract the other inequalities which I have mentioned.

What effects the current economic crisis will have on Sweden's future employment policies, however, is causing concern for many women. They are the hardest hit by unemployment, have less job security, and even run the risk of losing their foothold in the labor market as public expenditures for services are being cut back and advancing technology threatens to eliminate their positions in the office. Costs of daycare are rising and only 30% of all eligible children under seven have places in municipally-supported daycare programs. For the age-group seven to twelve, only 29% of children in Stockholm have recreation centres where they can go after school.¹⁵

Although the white-collar union estimates that there are 120,000 part-time women workers who need full-time employment, the tendency to work part-time will continue to dominate married women's choice of employment unless a shorter work day is implemented. They are realistic simply in assessing their own capacity to combine paid and unpaid labor, given the fact that Swedish men, despite all efforts to change their attitudes, do not appear to be significantly assuming their fair share of household responsibilities.

Increasingly, women in Sweden, especially in the urban centres, are expressing what seems to be a single-mother alternative. Combining full-time employment and caring for children leaves little room for maintaining the traditional marriage or living-together arrangement. Indeed the changing structure of the family can be said to consist of a variety of forms. The primary mother-child relationship forms the basis of the family unit, but the family cycle seems to be more likely to vary over time. This fact has yet to become accounted for in policy-making, and transition phases between family forms is often difficult due to housing problems and all the needed support systems.

I believe that women's organizations must align themselves in a stronger independent women's movement and use

their strength to transform the system. This transformation should be based on the integration of production needs and reproductive values. Perhaps then Sweden will realize its greater potential to achieve equality between men and women and a more human society for our children. If not, current efforts in the direction of equality will only apply to the "Sara Videbeck's of our age."

¹Gunnar Qvist, *Konsten att Blifva en God Flicka/The Art of Being a Good Girl* (Kvinnohistoriska Uppsatser, 1978).

²"Planning and Organizing Alternatives Stemming from the Sphere of Reproduction," *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 25 Supplement (1982); and *Kommunals Kvinnor pa Livets Trappa* (Kommunalarbetareförbundet, 1980).

³This section is based on Yvonne Hirdman's excellent chapter "The Socialist Housewife" in Brita Akerman's *Vi Kan, Vi Behövs* (Akademi litteratur, 1983).

⁴Siv Gustavsen, *Labor Market Policy Related to Women and Employment in Sweden* (Arbetslivscentrum: Conference Report, 1981).

⁵*On Being Swedish* (Florida: University of Miami Press).

⁶Statistics are taken from *Jamstalldhet pa arbetsmarknaden/Equality in the Labour Market*. Statistik from *Labor Force Sample Surveys* (1983).

⁷See Marianne Petersson, *Deltids Arbetet i Sverige/Part-time Work in Sweden* (Arbetslivscentrum report, 1981), and Monica Magnusson, *Shiftwork* (Arbetskyddsfonden, 1981).

⁸See Birgitta Wistrand, *Swedish Women on the Move* (The Swedish Institute, 1981), p. 60.

⁹See M. Sterner and Furst G. Mellstrom, *Improving Working Conditions and Advancement Opportunities of Women. The State Administration Taken as an Example; A Comparative Study in the USA, Sweden and the FRG* (Dept. of Sociology, University of Gothenburg, 1980). See also Anita Dahlberg, *Jamt eller Iland* (Arbetslivscentrum) for a discussion of the effects of neutralizing the equality concept in legislation.

¹⁰*Konsten att Blifva en Flicka*, p. 166.

¹¹See "Scandinavian sexual equality a myth," *Scandinavian Business World* (Nov.-Dec. 1981).

¹²Birgitta Wistrand, *Swedish Women on the Move*.

¹³"Editorial Introduction" to Special Issue on Women, Work and Democracy, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1982).

¹⁴Ulla Rensner and Evy Gunnarsson, *Sjalvstyrande grupper i fyra statliga forvaltningar*, 1982.

¹⁵Statistik, 1983. See note 6.

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NEATH MY STOMACH

O my dreams are heady and bruised
when I sweet think of you
out hungry and alone

For betrayal
those empty shelves
call pride
it's bellowed name
cry cry again
the final caw

And my wrath
moves dangerous and cold
neath my stomach
neath my starry starry breasts
I'll wait only once
for that slow burn of dawn
for the love of you

In betrayal
there is no honour
an eye for an eye plucked
my heart a wicked queen

Naked with a stranger
revenge
is an unforgiving power.

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