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US and Sweden (“The Ultimate Welfare State”) Compared

- I. Sweden is an interesting case study because it illustrates a radical departure from traditional nuclear family
 - A. High degree of state involvement
 - B. 8 million people
- II. Historical background
 - A. Movement for gender equality came much earlier than anywhere else
 - B. Why? Historical antecedents¹
 1. Sweden was always a poor country: no great hierarchies
 - a. Less concern about arranged marriages in order to maintain and consolidate property than elsewhere in Europe
 - b. Few economic or political advantages to marriage, so for the most part young people chose their partners
 - c. Also a tradition of late marriage: couples wouldn’t marry until they could afford to
 2. Also, men were seafarers, lumberers
 - a. Women had to be resourceful, self-reliant, economically productive because men were gone for long periods of time
 - C. More recent history
 1. Very poor country, lots of immigration out
 2. Late industrialization
 - a. A labor shortage
 - b. Single women were drawn into the labor force

¹ Some of this material taken from Charlotte G. O’Kelly and Larry S. Carney, *Women & Men in Society: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Gender Stratification*, 2nd ed., 1986. Belmont: Wadsworth: 182-198.

3. And although it had been one of the poorest countries, it used “rational social planning” to avoid poverty, slums, unemployment
 - a. Probably helped foster the notion that women were an underprivileged social group
4. In 1842 free elementary school education for both boys and girls
5. In 1845 women were given equal inheritance rights and other reforms
 - a. It’s interesting that parliament instituted these reforms without pressure from women’s groups

III. A form of democratic socialism evolved, following industrialization

- A. Socialist in the sense that legislation was passed to redistribute the surplus to the weaker members of society
 1. Sweden continues to have of the highest standards of living in the world; no poor people in Sweden
 2. Literacy rate 99%²
 3. Infant mortality rate 6 per 1,000
- B. Almost all the production is in the hands of the private capitalists
- C. Employment was a key goal of government
 1. The Social Democrats had power to implement job creation schemes, and Sweden pulled out of the Depression before the rest of the West

IV. Underpopulation crisis influenced family policy-making

- A. There had been a decline in the birthrate during Sweden’s bout with widespread poverty and unemployment in the 1920s
 1. Arguments were made that the state had to take responsibility for making it easier to have and support children
 - a. That children are a valuable contribution to society

V. The government instituted these policies on its own initiative

² Some of this material from J. Ross Eshleman, 2000, *The Family*, 9th edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon: 9.

- A. As in the 19th century
 - B. Policies considered to be necessary for the good of the nation:
 - 1. Provide employment
 - 2. Increase population
 - 3. These social policies supported gender equality and women's issues
 - a. Not because women were in major offices
 - b. Not because candidates who supported these issues were supported by mass support organizing campaigns
 - c. Not by changing the political/cultural climate so politicians see it to their interest to support reforms
 - C. Government promoted affirmative action
 - 1. Social Democrats blocked attempts at legislation banning discrimination on the basis of gender
 - 2. Because, they said, it undermines attempts to right past inequalities
- VI. Sweden's current policies related to families
- A. Based on achieving a high quality of life for all citizens
 - B. Marriage
 - 1. The Marriage code of 1921
 - a. Equality and legal independence of the husband and wife
 - b. Equated housework and earned income as contributions to the unit
 - c. Joint owners of any property
 - 2. In the 1970s the government introduced the notion of shared roles
 - 3. The distinction between marriage and cohabitation was made minimal

- a. Receive the same government benefits
 - b. The difference: no implied contract of marriage for couples cohabiting
4. The stipulation of legitimacy was removed in 1917
- a. Parents are responsible for 50-50 support
 - b. The state will pay if the father is recalcitrant
 - c. 90% do pay child support
5. Changes in tax laws
- a. No longer do couples file a joint return
 - b. If a woman works, she as an individual is taxed, which probably results in lower rates than if they filed a joint return, if he earns more they're taxed more
 - c. This is an incentive to get her to work: if together they earn the same amount of money that they would if only he worked,
 - 1) They will have more money

C. Divorce

divorce

- 1. If the situation is really bad, Swedes argue that there's no reason to stay together
- 2. So if long-term companionship and intimacy have ended, then yes,
- 3. Very high rates
 - a. Divorce rate is about 1/2 of U.S.
 - b. But if you include nonmarital cohabitation dissolution
 - c. Highest breakup rate in the industrialized world³
 - 1) Note that Swedes have institutionalized nonmarital

³ Eshleman, 2000: 492

cohabitation much more than most other countries, so the counts of these relationships are closer to 100%

4. Risk of divorce lower for women with one child, and even lower for women with 2 children

D. Reproduction policies

1. There has been free prenatal and postnatal care since 1937
2. Maternity leave up to 6 months (without pay) was instituted in 1945
 - a. In 1954 3 months' paid leave was instituted
 - b. As of 1995: parents entitled to 10 months' leave at 80% regular pay and an additional 3 months at a flat-rate⁴
 - 1) Can be used any time before the child is 8 years old
 - c. And 60 days off with pay per child sick leave
 - d. The government is trying to encourage fathers to take paternity leave more often, participate in prenatal care, parental education, and delivery
3. Loans are available for newlyweds to purchase household goods
 - a. In 1953 such loans were extended to unmarried parents
4. And other state-initiated social welfare services: neighborhood laundries, aid to the elderly, ill
5. In 1948 a family allowance per child rather than tax deduction was instituted
 - a. This favors the poor
6. Sweden is very resistant to pushing parents of small children, especially single parents, out to work
 - a. There is state-sponsored day care
7. And education is free, including university, including a stipend for living

⁴ Eshleman, 2000: 544

expenses regardless of parental income

E. Sexuality policies

1. Earlier in Sweden it had been illegal (1910) to disseminate birth control information
 - a. But in 1938 the country committed itself to the principle that every child should be wanted
2. Currently in Sweden: contraception is available to all sexually active individuals
3. Compulsory sex education in schools since 1956 (begun in 1940s)
 - a. Policy: provide detailed information, and avoid taking a moral stand against premarital sexuality
5. Abortion: frowned upon
 - a. Holdover from anti-contraception campaign, pro-natal movement
 - b. But abortions were allowed from 1938 on for rape, incest, and threat to the mother's health
 - c. In 1973 the law about abortions was liberalized because of evidence of illegal abortions
 - d. Why teenagers get pregnant is a mystery
 - 1) Only 1.4% of teens ages 15-19 became pregnant in 1990
 - 2) In U.S. it was 11%
 - e. Abortion rate in 1993 was 19.8 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44
 - 1) U.S.: 25.9⁵
6. Premarital sexuality is expected
 - a. No emphasis on virginity
 - b. Males are far less likely to try to “score” than here

⁵ Eshleman, 2000: 179

- c. 1990s: Uppsala University students: about 70% believed it is acceptable for a 15-year-old girl or boy to have sexual intercourse with a steady boyfriend or girlfriend
 - d. 90% did *not* approve of a 15-year-old girl having sexual intercourse with a casual partner
 - 1) Far greater approval for a 15-year-old boy; double standard
7. Extramarital sexuality
- a. Not approved of
8. Attitudes toward sexual freedom
- a. Yes, if doesn't impinge on rights of others
 - b. Prostitution, yes, solicitation, no
 - 1) Poverty is low, so not as many women go into prostitution
 - c. Sex with children, no
 - d. Incest is a crime only if involves under 18 years old
 - e. Homosexuality is seen as a private matter
- F. Cohabitation
- 1. Not seen as a problem
 - 2. About 25% of relationships
 - 3. A study published in 1988 of 5,000 women found that those who cohabited premaritally had almost 80% higher marital dissolution rates than those who did not
 - a. But the longer the marriage, the smaller the difference⁶
 - b. No differences for intact marriages of 8 years' duration or longer
 - c. Virtually all Swedes cohabit prior to marriage now⁷

⁶ Eshleman, 2000: 156

4. 35% of births not within a marriage in 1975
 - b. *Unwanted* pregnancies are seen as a problem
5. Although some disapprove of marriage—see it as old fashioned—most Swedes aren't against marriage
6. Another semi-institution: LAT (living apart together): 2 domiciles

G. Work

1. The government continued to see married unemployed women as “hidden unemployment”
2. The idea of shared roles occasioned a big debate in 1956
3. Two roles for women and one for men was inherently unequal
 - a. Led to the government developed policies for getting men into the domestic arena
 - b. Developed policies to encourage parental leave and other ways of getting men to accept half of the parental responsibilities
4. So by 1979 65% Swedish women worked (79% men)
 - a. Currently 82%⁸
5. Interest in getting women into the male domain
 - a. Government will bring women in to previously male jobs in areas with labor shortage (unskilled and semiskilled work)
 - b. And males are given preference in many female-dominated social service jobs
6. Not only government, but unions are behind ending gender-segregated labor
 - a. Unions supported instituting a “Solidarity Wage”

⁷ Eshleman, 2000: 153

⁸ Eshleman, 2000: 86

- b. A union negotiates for a larger percentage increase for those with the lowest wages
 - c. Aims to gradually raise the wages of those on the bottom without directly penalizing the higher-paid workers
7. In 1960: women earned 68.8% of men; by 1977 it was up to 87%

VII. Effects

- A. All of this legislation produced only a slight increase in birthrate
 - 1. Sweden's population would decline except for immigration
 - 2. Women's higher education levels and participation in labor force is associated with lower birthrates
 - 3. More education correlates with later marriages
 - 4. And children are expensive, even in Sweden
- B. It's a productive economy, there is little public resentment at the extremely high taxes
- C. Marriage rates low; late age at marriage
 - 1. By 1980 in Sweden 78 marriages per 1,000 women in the 25-29 year age group
 - a. 117 in France, 127 in the U.S., 168 in England
 - 2. Mid-1980s median age at first marriage: 27 for women and nearly 30 for men
- D. Role Sharing
 - 1. In the 1990s: 55% said equal partnerships preferred, with the youngest parent generation more in favor than older ones⁹
 - 2. The differences that remain are the result of attitudes about:
 - a. Having children (women still primarily responsible for home and child care)

⁹ Eshleman, 2000: 267

- b. And the man's role as breadwinner
- 3. There's still a ways to go
 - a. Women still feel more dependent
 - b. Many men say they do not want to take parental leave
 - c. Employers disapprove of men doing this (counter to what the government wants)
- 4. For parents, one solution is shift work
 - a. But then they will never see each other
- 5. Today: 85% of all women with at least one child younger than seven years old
 - a. Are in the labor force¹⁰
- 6. Government resists upgrading housework to status of a job: it is still considered "hidden unemployment"

VIII. Political Participation

- A. 90% Swedes vote
- B. All major parties supportive of gender equality
 - 1. High proportions of women holding office, but not 50-50
- C. Women are less represented in unions than men
 - 1. 90% of Swedes are unionized
 - 2. Women participate in popular movements, but are less well represented in leadership positions

IX. Discuss: how many values different from US?

- A. Characteristics:

¹⁰ Eshleman, 2000: 246

1. Low marriage rate, high cohabitation rate, high rate of family dissolution, small household size, extensive movement of mothers into the labor force, high focus on family and children

B. Values

1. Moral assumptions about what is a just society
 - a. Minimum standards for all citizens
 - b. Ensure equality of opportunity
 - c. Social mobility for young people: education through college paid for
2. About who is responsible for the welfare of its citizens
 - a. The state to a much greater extent in Sweden
3. About what is just treatment for citizens who do not, or cannot, manage their own welfare