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The Swedish Welfare State and Women:
Is Sweden the Feminist Society the United States Imagines?

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This paper discusses several aspects of the Swedish welfare state and whether or not they represent a successfully feminist form of government. It compares these aspects of the Swedish government to the United State's government. Therefore, this paper satisfies the parameters of this award as a culture studies piece.

This paper discusses both modernity in Swedish society as well as the migration of ideas, particularly feminist ideas between Sweden and the rest of the Western world. It also helped to make Scandinavian Studies relevant to my life by looking at feminism in the government through a Swedish model. It encouraged me to explore a culture other than my own and examine how alternative forms of government have embraced an ideology that is important to me but that is somewhat lacking in my own government.

I chose the topic of this paper because women's rights are important to me and because Sweden has been presented to me as an example of a society that makes women's rights a priority. I wanted to try and explore if the image I had of Sweden in my mind was an accurate representation of current Swedish society. Through writing this paper I learned that while Sweden may be considered a more feminist society than the United States there are areas in which they struggle and ways in which they can improve, just as there are ways that the United States struggles and can improve. I've come to the conclusion that Sweden is a society that values women's rights, but that American women are not alone in their fight for equality. Even in Sweden women are still fighting for true equality.

**The Swedish Welfare State and Women:
Is Sweden the Feminist Society the United States Imagines?**

The first exposure I received to Sweden's welfare state was in an introductory Swedish language class when my professor proclaimed that Sweden was a utopian society where everyone took care of each other, women were equal to men, and the government valued the personal lives of its citizens. From that point forward, to me Sweden was a magical place where feminism was not a dirty word and families were made up of two parents who shared childcare and household responsibilities equally. This was in stark contrast to my home country of the United States, where the debate over whether females working outside of the home is destroying the youth of today is still very real and relevant. As a feminist and future mother, the idea of work-life balance and shared familial responsibility is of great importance to me. I wondered if Sweden really was a utopian society where mothers were not ridiculed for aspiring to have careers and where fathers were expected to spend time with their children.

This paper is the result of that interest. Here I will explore the development of the welfare state in regard to women's rights, as well as analyze a few of Sweden's social policies in an effort to discover if Sweden truly is a feminist government. I will ground my understanding of the Swedish welfare state in the knowledge I have gained from my History of Scandinavia course and I will use my personal experience as a citizen of the United States as a comparison. In the course of my research, I have concluded that while Sweden is in some ways a more feminist friendly society than the United States, both countries still have room to grow when it comes to truly elevating women to equality with men. Sweden's social policies have created the appearance of a gender equal society, but the underlying attitudes and behaviors of the society are keeping the country from reaching its full potential.

Background on the Swedish Welfare State

A welfare state is a specific form of government that uses taxation in order to provide its citizens with comprehensive social services, including things like education, health care, and parental leave. There are two types of welfare states: general and selective. A general welfare state provides its services to all of its citizens, while a selective welfare state chooses to focus its services on the citizens it deems to have the greatest need. Sweden is an example of a general welfare state, whereas the United States is an example of a selective welfare state.¹

The welfare state, while today seen as a liberal invention, can actually be traced back to the conservatives of the German Bismarck era in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In order to try and avoid the threats of emigration and revolution, the conservatives needed a government that could provide for the basic needs of the poor in order to keep them at the bare minimum level of living. Providing for basic needs like unemployment benefits and pensions was seen as the best option to maintain the state. Today in Sweden, however, the success of the welfare state can be traced back to the 1920s and 30s with Per Albin Hansson and the Social Democrats. The Social Democratic party embraced the idea of the welfare state as a way to expand their voter base, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was mainly blue-collar workers. With their base shrinking as a result of increased industrialization, the Social Democrats began to promote a general welfare program in order to gain the support of a wider section of Swedish society. What followed was decades of reform that, with the help of outside events, gradually began to grow the Swedish government into the welfare state that it is today.²

Over the course of the twentieth century, Sweden developed a wide array of social policies to benefit its citizens. From things like the child grant, to government sponsored health

¹ Tobias Berglund, "The Swedish Welfare State" (Uppsala University, March 16, 2018).

² Berglund.

care, to mandatory vacation time, the Swedish government built for its citizens a cradle-to-grave welfare state with a generous safety net. During the 1960s legislation was introduced that incentivized women to go to work, including publicly funded daycare and individual taxation. This was the beginning of Sweden as a “feminist” state, but it was not the end. Though globalization and the financial crises of the 1990s threatened the welfare state, Sweden has adapted and continues to include the welfare state as an important aspect of the national identity.³

Swedish Women in the Workforce

During the 1960s it became the expectation that both women and men enter the workforce and contribute to the labor market that upheld the Swedish welfare state. This was seen as a step toward gender equality, and in many aspects, it was. This section will focus on three specific components of women in the workforce: how the Swedish state conceptualizes women within the labor market and the effect it has on labor rights, the gendered segregation of the Swedish workforce and its effect on women’s economic position, and how Swedish society values women’s work compared to men’s, as analyzed through the *pigdebatt*. These three areas are ones that set Sweden apart, an analysis of them will uncover how feminist the Swedish welfare state truly is.

Women as Workers, Women as Mothers

Women entering the workforce is only the beginning of creating equality in the labor market. Once there are women entering jobs, it becomes necessary to find a way to ensure they are receiving the same opportunities as their male counterparts. There are many ways to do this and Sweden and the United States have adopted two different methods. There are many reasons

³ Berglund.

for the differences in how the United States and Sweden work toward gender equality, for example the nations have different histories and therefore have different cultural and political norms. One difference, however, that may play a significant role is the way in which the nations conceptualize women's rights within the labor market. According to Engelke and Astrom, the majority of countries operate on a model that deals with women as wives/mothers and therefore their participation in the labor market "becomes a matter of individual 'choice'."⁴ Sweden, however, operates on a model of women as workers.⁵ Interestingly, rather than ignoring the fact that women are both workers and wives/mothers, Sweden's model "seems to have made possible the greater recognition of women's caring work in the family."⁶ By treating all women as workers, rather than the United States' method of viewing them as potential workers, Sweden has guaranteed women rights that their counterparts in the United States do not have.

These rights include benefits like public childcare, which makes dual-income households more obtainable for Swedish families, and parental leave for both the mother and the father.⁷ While there is public childcare available in the United States, at the moment its scale and affordability cannot compare to Sweden's. And parental leave, an important resource for those interested in having children, is not a right in the United States but a privilege that employers can choose to offer. By law, Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days of parental leave after the birth

⁴ Jane Lewis Engelke and Gertrude Astrom, "Equality, Difference, and State Welfare: Labor Market and Family Policies in Sweden," *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178214>.

⁵ Engelke and Astrom.

⁶ Engelke and Astrom.

⁷ Urban Lundberg and Klas Åmark, "Social Rights and Social Security: The Swedish Welfare State, 1900–2000," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 26, no. 3 (September 2001): 170, <https://doi.org/10.1080/034687501750303837>.

or adoption of a child and are guaranteed a certain number of child sick leave days per year.⁸ For the majority of these parental leave days, parents are eligible for eighty percent of their normal wages and for the rest they receive a flat rate.⁹ And, in stark contrast to the United States, even those who are not employed are entitled to this paid leave.¹⁰ In addition to this generous parental leave, “parents with children under 8 years [have] the right to reduce their working day (at their own expense) from eight to six hours.”¹¹ All of these benefits combined make it, theoretically, easier for women in Sweden to both maintain a career and build a family than for their international counterparts.

Engelke and Astrom argue that these large differences in governmental involvement in the lives of women are a result of Sweden and the United States having different goals when it comes to the structure of their welfare. Because Sweden views women as workers, Sweden is focusing on developing policies of “equality,” whereas the United States, in viewing women as wives/mothers, focuses on developing policies of “difference.”¹² However, by not focusing on the differences between women/wives/mothers and men/husbands/fathers, Sweden has drafted legislation that gives women and men the same access to the benefits mentioned previously. So, by not trying to treat women as special because of motherhood, Sweden has begun to even the playing field between women and men in a way that the United States will not be able to so long as it treats motherhood as something that stands in the way of equality for women. As long as having children is viewed as a unique aspect of womanhood rather than a normal part of life for

⁸ “10 Things That Make Sweden Family-Friendly,” sweden.se, October 24, 2013, <https://sweden.se/society/10-things-that-make-sweden-family-friendly/>; Engelke and Astrom, “Equality, Difference, and State Welfare: Labor Market and Family Policies in Sweden.”

⁹ “10 Things That Make Sweden Family-Friendly.”

¹⁰ “10 Things That Make Sweden Family-Friendly.”

¹¹ Engelke and Astrom, “Equality, Difference, and State Welfare: Labor Market and Family Policies in Sweden.”

¹² Engelke and Astrom.

both men and women, women and their careers will be penalized for motherhood. While some may say that automatically viewing women as workers limits their ability to choose homemaking over a career, I see that assuming women will be working outside the home has forced Sweden to create employment policies catered to working mothers. Something the United States' view of women as mothers has not succeeded in doing.

The Gender Segregated Workforce

There is one particular area in which Sweden is having a hard time reaching gender equality: although “Sweden [has] one of the highest proportions of women in the workforce in the industrialized world,” their workforce is exceedingly segregated by gender.¹³ In fact, “welfare policies intensified divisions in the labor market as women increasingly [work] in a strictly regulated public sector, whereas men stayed in the private market.”¹⁴ So, while it is wonderful that Sweden is leading the world in the percentage of women entering the workforce, the fact that they are being filtered into specific jobs in the public sector has real and serious consequences for women’s financial outcomes.

Approximately seventy-five percent of those working in the public sector are women.¹⁵ Some of the public sector occupations dominated by women include teaching at the preschool and elementary school level, nursing and other health related fields, and social work.¹⁶ And while it can be considered progress that the welfare state is opening these opportunities for women to work outside the home, the problem lies in the fact that they are now getting paid for work they had previously been expected to do for free. They are still being pigeon-holed into the

¹³ Lena Andersson-Skog, “In the Shadow of the Swedish Welfare State: Women and the Service Sector,” *The Business History Review* 81, no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 451.

¹⁴ Andersson-Skog, 452.

¹⁵ Andersson-Skog, 462.

¹⁶ Andersson-Skog, 462.

same caring roles that they were expected to fulfill as homemakers. And there is the fact that it has been found that “female managers in the public sector [remain] in organizations that [keep] them close to the clients they [serve...v]ery few [hold] higher-rung positions in the central state bureaucracy.”¹⁷ So, while more women are finding employment outside the home, not only are they finding jobs in highly gender segregated fields, they are still not advancing in the same way that their male counterparts are.

There is also a second, and perhaps more serious, consequence of the large percentage of women entering the workforce in the public sector: an increase in women’s dependence on the state. As Anderson-Skog writes, when women began to enter the workforce in the public sector,

Personal services in particular were associated with women, but they were now supervised by the state, rather than performed under the auspices of the market or the household. The result was a rapidly growing female employment rate, but one that occurred in the strictly regulated and practically monopolized public sector... A major outcome of the gender-segregated public-sector labor market was that many women became doubly dependent on the state. First, women relied on the state for employment, often as part-time workers. Second, women turned to the state for the provision of child support, housing, and other allowances. Social rights were based on two pillars: the rights of universal citizens and the rights derived from an individual’s participation in the workforce.¹⁸

Women entering the workforce were trying to become more independent, but in some cases the opposite was occurring. In fact, though Scandinavia’s poverty rate is low in comparison with other countries, “so far as economic poverty exists in Scandinavia today, it is concentrated among women, especially as heads of households.”¹⁹ This is partially due to the fact that still more women than men work part-time, but it also has to do with the fact that the public sector jobs that women are often taking are not as high paying as other occupations.²⁰

¹⁷ Andersson-Skog, 463.

¹⁸ Andersson-Skog, 467–68.

¹⁹ Helga Maria Hernes, ed., *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*, First Edition (Oslo: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 32.

²⁰ Hernes, 32.

So where does that leave the Swedish welfare state? Are they leading the globe in gender equality because of the high percentage of their female population entering the workforce? Or does the fact that the majority of the female workforce is concentrated in the public sector negate the numbers? The answer is not so clear cut and simple. The Swedish welfare state has allowed women to become more financially independent than their international counterparts, but at the same time has created a highly gender segregated labor market.²¹ A safe conclusion to draw may be that Sweden is ahead of the United States and has begun taking steps that will eventually lead to true gender equality in the workforce, but that there is still much work to be done. Sweden needs to value “women’s” work at the same rate that it does “men’s” and close the gender pay gap.

The Value of Women’s Work

The discussion of whether or not Sweden is truly a feminist society takes an interesting twist when presented with *pigdebatt*, or Sweden’s maid debate. Essentially, the premise of the debate is whether or not working women who call themselves feminists should be able to hire other women for help with household chores. Bowman and Cole use the debate to examine whether or not the welfare state is involved in the development of gender equality and conclude that the debate reveals some underlying modes of thinking that are currently holding Swedish women back from true gender equality.²²

The key factor to consider in the maid debate is that it is work by women that is being discussed. The housework that is being turned into paid labor is work that is meant to be done by

²¹ Andersson-Skog, “In the Shadow of the Swedish Welfare State: Women and the Service Sector,” 469.

²² John R. Bowman and Alyson M. Cole, “Do Working Mothers Oppress Other Women? The Swedish ‘Maid Debate’ and the Welfare State Politics of Gender Equality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (September 2009): 159.

women and is still being done by women, but now by women who are being paid. Those who claim that women hiring maids is anti-feminist argue that hiring a maid is “a distinct form of exploitation and of betrayal [...that sustains] inequality.”²³ The underlying belief here is that housework is the responsibility of those who live in the household— namely the adult female of the household— and that outsourcing this task is a sign of laziness or of entitlement. There is also the underlying belief that a woman who performs housework for her income will never be able to be equal to a woman who can afford to hire a maid, hence the sustainment of a gendered inequality. Both of these beliefs are troublesome and hypocritical.

What makes housecleaning different from the wide variety of other household tasks that are outsourced and not criticized? In Sweden, for example, there is “tax relief to support the hiring of carpenters, plumbers, and housepainters,” but not maids.²⁴ These services all revolve around the home in the same way, but for some reason housecleaning is judged to be the responsibility of the homeowner in a way that the other three are not. The other significant difference, in the eyes of those who support hiring maids, is that the first three are not tasks that are conventionally performed by women.

The household services that are conventionally performed by men have been absorbed into the labor market and are now easily utilized. For some reason, however, housecleaning has yet to be fully absorbed into the labor market. Bowman and Cole argue that, fundamentally, this has to do with how society views women and the work that they perform. They point out that society does not have the same issues with cleaning when it is carried out in public places such as hotels, stores, or restaurants.²⁵ Those who view the home as isolated from the labor market

²³ Bowman and Cole, 160.

²⁴ Bowman and Cole, 163.

²⁵ Bowman and Cole, 164.

argue that instead of hiring maids, women should require their partners to step up and help.²⁶

That instead of outsourcing the cleaning, it should just be divided more equally between women and their husbands. There is a fundamental flaw in this view. This idea of simply requiring men to take a more active role in housecleaning does not address the underlying reason that some people do not consider housekeeping a valuable profession: it is work that is done by women.²⁷

The assumption is that housekeeping is a chore that can be managed by anyone, whereas chores such as painting, carpentry, and plumbing are more valuable and therefore require a specialized laborer who deserves to be paid for their work. The problem is not that housekeeping is difficult, it is that it is not treated as a valid and valuable service worthy of being purchased. Until tasks that are traditionally considered female, such as housekeeping and childcare, are considered as valuable as the tasks traditionally considered male, women and men will not be able to be equal in the labor market.

Bowman and Cole argue that those who say hiring a maid is anti-feminist are actually against the commodification of activities traditionally belonging to the family.²⁸ The maid debate “demonstrates that the boundaries between the family, the state, and the market are highly contested [...and] is a prime example of the form that conflict over these boundaries is likely to take.”²⁹ However, a main reason for not wanting to blur the lines between family, state, and market is because of the way housework is viewed. Housework, like many traditionally feminine tasks, is viewed as something that is “best done as a labor of love.”³⁰ This is one of the major

²⁶ Bowman and Cole, 166.

²⁷ Bowman and Cole, 166.

²⁸ Bowman and Cole, 170.

²⁹ Bowman and Cole, 170–71.

³⁰ Bowman and Cole, 177.

underlying beliefs that keeps people from being able to see housework for what it is: a service that is deserving of compensation.

Ultimately, it does not matter what someone's personal views on hiring a maid are. Housecleaning is a commodifiable task. It is a valid and valuable service and those who perform it should be entitled to a fair wage and benefits, the same way that every other individual who offers a service is. The debate over maids indicates that Sweden still has some underlying issues when it comes to valuing women and the work that they do, meaning that they are not yet a truly feminist society.

Where the Welfare State Fails Women

Outside of the workforce, a second area in which the Swedish welfare state fails to achieve gender equality is violence against women. This is not a struggle that is unique to Sweden, most countries are facing hurdles in eradicating violence against women, but in a society that claims to be one of the most equal in the world it is interesting that this is an area that continues to be overlooked. Sweden's failure in this area is two part: the continued belief that violence against women is rare and therefore not a pressing issue and the legislation that they have created that impacts women who have experienced domestic violence. The first failure is a failure of society's understanding of the issue and is difficult to fix. Continued advocacy for victims of violence and education about the prevalence of the issue are steps that can be taken, but since a fundamental shift in society's beliefs is necessary, it is a slow process. The second failure, however, is one that can be more easily addressed.

There are two key pieces of legislation that affect women who have been the victim of domestic violence. The first is orders of protection, which are a useful tool for women trying to separate themselves from a violent partner. This tool is being denied to a significant portion of

women who would like to utilize it, though, because “it excludes women who cohabit with abusive men.”³¹ These women, the women who live with their abusers, are the ones who are most in need of immediate help and yet Swedish law denies them the right to an order of protection.

The second piece of legislation that affects women who have been the victim of domestic violence is the child contact law. This law “guarantees abusive fathers access” to their children.³² This means that even if a woman is able to escape her abuser and make it to a domestic violence shelter or some other place where she and her children are safe from their abuser, she legally must inform her partner of where his children are. This is the exact opposite of the purpose of women seeking refuge at a shelter or some other location when escaping their abuser. It also indicates that the government cares more about an abusive father’s right to have contact with his children than an abused women’s right to not be abused.

In the eyes of Elman, these two pieces of legislation indicate that the Swedish welfare state’s “reforms may provide only the illusion of relief and serious state attention to the issue of violence against women” and that they illustrate the danger in “equating all reforms with progress.”³³ Discussing an issue does not equate to resolving an issue, and in the case of the Swedish welfare state their actions in regards to violence against women may be more for show than actually effective. If Sweden wants to be considered truly feminist, they need to put the welfare of the most vulnerable as a top priority.

CONCLUSION

³¹ R. Amy Elman, “Unprotected by the Swedish Welfare State Revisited: Assessing a Decade of Reforms for Battered Women,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24, no. 1 (February 1, 2001): 49.

³² Elman, 49.

³³ Elman, 49.

This essay has examined the Swedish welfare state as a feminist form of government through three aspects of women in the workforce as well as through one area in which the welfare state fails women. In comparison to their international counterparts, including those in the United States, women in Sweden are living in a more feminist society. Feminism requires removing the societal barriers that keep women from entering equally into all spheres of public life and progress is made when opportunities previously reserved for men are opened to everyone. Sweden is a more feminist society because the Swedish government has made women's issues a focus of their employment and social policies. Their government has taken steps to provide support such as parental leave, public daycare, and individual taxation that encourages women to enter the labor market at the same rate as men. However, underlying social norms regarding the type of work that women are suited to perform and the value of the work that women perform is stunting the creation of a fully egalitarian society.

So, while Sweden may not be a utopian and magical place, it is further ahead in the race toward equality than the United States and does have a form of government that feminists the world over can continue to look to for inspiration. The United States can look to Sweden for an example of how to draft legislation that reflects the value of motherhood and that can help make it possible for women to support themselves while they build their families. Perhaps it is time for the United States to begin to look at women as workers rather than as mothers and it is definitely time for the United States to critically analyze how we value the work done in traditionally "feminine" professions. Gender equality benefits both women and men by expanding the opportunities available and freeing individuals from the restrictions of gendered social roles, a feminist government is one way to help accomplish gender equality.

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