

The Influence of Family Policy on Freedom of Choice: Sweden from a comparative perspective

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During the last two decades welfare states have come under increasing fire. With the rise of Thatcher and Reagan a period of “retrenchment” set in, in which governments began making cutbacks in the public sector. The retrenchment literature has shown that the cutbacks were greatest in the Anglo-Saxon countries.¹ Nevertheless, the public sector has also come under fire in social democratic countries, such as Sweden. The market-liberal criticism has been two-fold:

- 1) Generous welfare policies decrease economic efficiency and cannot be maintained in face of “globalization;”
- 2) Such policies limit freedom of choice.

The focus of this article will be on the second issue: do social democratic welfare states really limit freedom of choice, or do they actually expand it?

This is an important philosophical issue, especially for the post-communist countries. Since the former authoritarian regimes considered themselves to be “socialist” and social democrats also originally considered themselves to be “socialists,” it would be easy and tempting to equate the two and believe that social democratic welfare states have authoritarian tendencies, whereby the state forces its will on the population. Laissez-fair liberalism or Christian democratic conservatism can portray themselves as liberalizing tendencies that give citizens more rights *vis-à-vis* the state. This article argues on the contrary that the Swedish type of social democratic welfare state basically *increases* the freedom of choice for families in comparison to liberal countries (such as the USA) or conservative countries (such as Germany). Although this article will not discuss the post-communist countries in much detail, its conclusions will also be interesting for Poland, since Polish family policy combines certain elements of liberalism and conservatism in a manner which limits freedom of choice more than in America or Germany.

It should also be emphasized that moral reasons can exist for being against freedom of choice. For example, one could believe that for moral reasons women *should* be housewives rather than work. Or one might believe that homosexuality is morally wrong and should be forbidden even though it decreases freedom of choice. This article will not take up moral arguments for and against freedom of choice, as it would lead to deep philosophical debates that are beyond the scope of the present task. Rather, the issue here is whether the market liberal criticism of social democracy is correct: do generous welfare policies limit freedom of choice? Or do they actually expand freedom of choice in comparison to liberal welfare regimes? This article discusses the issue of free choice by concentrating on one of the core areas of the welfare state: family policies.

Family policies influence freedom of choice in several manners. First, they can make it easier for women to enter the labor market if they are interested in having a career. They can also make it easier for the mother to stay at home with the children if she does not want to have a career. Second, they can make it easier for men to spend time at home with their children, if they desire to spend more time with their family. Third, family policies can make it easier for couples to separate if they (or one of them) are not satisfied with the relationship. Fourth, they can make it easier for adults

to chose alternative living arrangements, such as cohabitation rather than marriage, living in homosexual relationships or raising children alone. Finally, they can increase the freedom of mothers to control their own bodies when it comes to the issue of abortion.

Making it easier for women to enter the labor market

As feminist scholars have pointed out, traditional family policy was based on the “male breadwinner model,” in which the man was be the sole paid worker, while the woman did the unpaid work at home.² Since this was considered to be both the “normal” and the desired situation, state policy aimed to encourage women to remain in their role as housewives and careers. Remnants of this heritage still exist in Christian democratic Germany today, as for example, the tax system discourages women from working by increasing the tax rate if two members of the family work. In Sweden, by contrast, men and women have to file separate tax returns, so that neither partner risks landing in a higher tax bracket if the wife works. In America married couples must file joint tax returns, but the tax system is arranged in a manner that does not punish working women by placing the family in a higher tax bracket. In this sense the American model might be seen to offer more freedom of choice than the Swedish, but joint filing is only available to married couples, which means that those living in other types of relationships (cohabitation or homosexual pairs) are punished.

Perhaps more important than the tax system is the availability of daycare. If affordable daycare is not readily available, then one of the parents will be forced to stay at home and take care of the children. In practice, of course, this means that in almost all cases women are the ones who are the most influenced, since they are expected more than men to stay at home with the children. In the American system daycare is mostly private and extremely expensive. This means that poor families, who are in the most need of two incomes, are also the least likely to be able to arrange daycare, so that the mother can work and provide a second income. When transportation costs are added, both for taking the children to the daycare centers and for going to work, then the costs of daycare can easily surpass the income earned by a low-paid mother doing manual labor. Even the middle-class in America generally finds daycare prohibitively expensive. Consequently, rather than send their children to nursery schools with trained personnel, they tend to favor hiring illegal aliens, who do not have any pedagogical training.³ In Germany daycare is more readily available than in the USA, but normally it is only available part-time, since mothers are not expected to work full-time.⁴

In Sweden, daycare is not only readily available it is also rather cheap. Recently Sweden has also introduce a maximum rate of 1,260 crowns (or around 140€ per child). Furthermore, for low-income families the maximum fee is even lower, as the fee cannot be higher than 3% of the family income. For the second child the maximum fee is about 400 crowns lower and cannot be more than 2% of the family income.⁵ Although the local governments do not have to introduce this maximum rate, almost all governments have agreed to do so, in order to obtain subsidies from the national government

Parental leaves are also a policy that can influence the freedom of choice for women. If it is long and generous, it can make it easier for women to stay at home if they prefer being housewives. This is a more complicated issue that the supply of daycare. For example, in Sweden the parental leave is shorter than in Germany, as the period of paid leave is 12 months, compared to 3 years and 14 weeks. However, in Sweden the benefit level is much higher than in Germany. One receives 80% of ones

salary (up to an income of 24,125 crowns per month or ca. 2700€). In addition, one can receive parental leave benefits another three months at a low daily rate of 60 crowns (around 7€) per day. In Germany, the first 14 weeks are very generously compensated at a rate of 100%, but the period afterwards is means-tested and the benefits are given at a rather low, flat rate.⁶

Since parental leave benefits in Sweden are generous during the first year, mothers have the possibility of staying at home for one year, but then it discourages women from continuing to stay at home after this period. For this reason, conservatives in Sweden have criticized the policies for discouraging parents from staying at home for longer periods. According to their argument, these policies encourage parents to send their children at a rather early age to daycare centers even if one of the parents (i.e. the mother) would prefer to stay at home for a longer period. In reality, though, many parents stay at home for longer periods. For example, since one receives 80% of one's income for 12 months, many families decide to stay at home for a total of 2 years and thereby receive an average of 40% of their income for a two-year period. Nevertheless, conservatives maintain that parents should have the economic possibility of staying at home for much longer periods with their children.

Despite this criticism, it is not clear that the liberal or conservative models provide more freedom of choice on this issue. In the liberal American system, until Clinton became president mothers had no right at all to parental leave. It meant that if women committed the "crime" of having a child, they could be punished by losing their job. Now they have the right to stay at home for three months without losing their job, but they do not receive any benefits. As a result, there are women who would like to stay at home for longer periods, but do not do so, because they are afraid of losing their job. (Here it should be noted that in Sweden the parents together receive a total of 12 months at 80% of pay plus 3 months at the low daily allowance, but they have the right to stay at home for 1 ½ years each for a child, meaning that totally they can stay at home for 3 years without losing their job, even though they do not receive economic compensation for loss of income for the last 1 ¾ years.) At the same time as some women in America feel forced to work although they would like to stay at home for longer periods, other women feel forced to stay at home even though they would like to work, since they cannot afford the expensive daycare fees.

In a conservative system such as Germany women have greater freedom to be housewives than in Sweden, since they receive benefits for a longer period. However, since the level of benefits are much lower than in Sweden, some German women could feel forced to work even though they would rather stay at home. In addition, since daycare is less available than in Sweden, many women are forced to stay at home even though they would prefer to work. The low level of parental leave benefits also hurts the freedom of choice for German women in another sense: since the level is low and since men usually earn more money than women, it means that families often cannot afford to have the father stay at home even if the mother would prefer to work and the father would be willing to stay at home.

When it comes to the issue of parental leaves and daycare, Poland presents a mixture of the liberal and conservative model. As in the liberal model, little public money is spent on daycare facilities. The parental leave schemes, though, resemble the German model. As in Germany, the maternity leave for the first period is very generous. During the first 16 weeks, the mother receives 100% of her income. According to a recent change of the law, the father can utilize 2 of the 16 weeks. The number of weeks for this benefit increases to 18 for the second child.⁷ However, for the further period, the model is much less generous. As in Germany the benefits for

the further leave are means tested (which limits benefits to those earning less than 25% of the average monthly salary) and those receiving benefits get them at a relatively low flat rate.⁸ Because of the means testing, only a small portion of the families qualified for this benefit.⁹ In addition the benefit is only available for two of the three years for those who receive it.

It is clear that the policies aim to encourage women to stay at home. Until 1996 men did not even have the right to take the parental leave unless a) the mother did not use it, b) the mother is dead or disabled, or c) the mother's right to raise the child is limited by the courts. Even when the rule was changed in 1996 to open it up for men, as previously was the case in Germany, only one parent could take the leave.¹⁰ It could not be shared as in Sweden and the benefits are so low that few families can afford to have the man stay at home. The relatively long period of 3 years for this "further leave" combined with the lack of access for daycare follows the conservative male-breadwinner ideology, which assumes that the father will work and the mother will stay at home.

Table 1 shows the daycare enrollment rates for Germany, Sweden the USA and Poland. As would be expected, rates are highest for Sweden, while liberal America is well below Germany, since in Germany kindergartens are publicly funded, even though they are not opened all day. Finally, as the table shows, Poland has followed the liberal course in its policies toward daycare and as a result the enrollment levels are very low. There are two reasons why Poland has lower enrollment rates than liberal America and both are related to level of economic development. First, Americans on the average are wealthier and can better afford private daycare. Secondly, since Poland still has a relatively large agricultural sector, a greater portion of families lives in the countryside. Consequently, the traditional families are stronger, which mean that the well-known phenomenon of the "Polish" grandmother influences the situation, as grandmothers offer a cheaper alternative toward daycare. Of course, it is not only about money, as parents might trust grandparents more than daycare employees to take care of their children.

Table 1: Access to Daycare (2000)

<i>Country</i>	<i>% of children 0-2 years old in publicly funded childcare in middle 1990s</i>	<i>Enrollment rates for 3-year olds in 2000</i>
Germany	2%	54.8%
Sweden	12%	68.0%
USA	1%	36.0%
Poland	5%	23.3%

sources: www.oecd.org for 3-year olds, Marcia K. Meyers et. al, "Public Childcare, Parental Leave, and Employment," in Diane Sainsbury, *Gender and Welfare State Regimes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 126; for rates of Polish children in daycare, see Steven Saxonberg, *The Czech Republic in a New Millenium: Parties, Politics and Gender* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 2003), chapter 5.

Fathers' Possibility of Staying at Home

A system that optimizes freedom of choice should optimize it for fathers as much as mothers. Concretely that means that it should make it possible for men to stay at home with the children if they so desire. Not only does this increase the freedom of choice for men, it does so for women as well. As long as men do not have the possibility of

staying at home with the children, then even women who want to work will often be forced to stay at home. However, it does not work in the other direction: if it is difficult for women to stay at home with the children it does not mean that men would be forced to stay at home against their will. Consequently, father leave turns out to be a key issue for improving the freedom of choice for families.

The liberal system gives the least amount of freedom of choice in this regard. Just as mothers in the USA had no right to stay at home and keep their jobs until Clinton became president, men do not have any right to stay at home even today. This means that any man who wants to stay at home even for a short time with his children risks losing his job.

In conservative-Christian democratic countries, such as Germany, parental leave has traditionally been reserved for mothers. However, by the 1990s most countries allowed for the theoretical possibility of fathers taking parental leave. In practice barriers often existed. For example, in Germany until recently only one parent could take parental leave. Since it could not be shared it meant that in practice the mother was virtually always the one who took the leave. This is obvious, since normally the mother will want to stay at home during the first few months in order to breastfeed the baby. The current red-green coalition government has now changed the rules, so that mothers and fathers can share the parental leave. This means, for example, that the mother can stay at home for the first year and then the father can stay at home for the next two years. However, since the benefit level is rather low and a lump sum, very few fathers make use of their right to parental leave. As long as fathers generally earn more money than mothers, families often conclude that they cannot “afford” to have the father stay at home.

In contrast to the liberal and conservative welfare regimes, the Swedish social democratic regime has the openly expressed goal of encouraging fathers to stay at home with their children. It basically allows mothers and fathers to share their parental leave as they desire. In addition, the benefit level is comparatively generous in order to make it affordable for families if the father stays at home. Parents receive 80% of their salary up to a certain income level (today 24,125 crowns or around 2,700€ per month). In addition public employees usually gain an extra 10%, making their benefit 90% of their former salary. Under these conditions families do not lose much income if the father stays at home. One problem however, is that the maximum salary has not increased to keep up with inflation. As a result, around 1/3 of all fathers receive less than 80% of their incomes, which means that in many cases families still conclude that they would lose too much income if the father stays at home. Despite this problem, Sweden clearly provides greater possibilities for fathers to stay at home than either conservative Germany or liberal America.

Even though Sweden offered the greatest amount of free choice for fathers, legislators were disappointed by the results (and it should be remembered that until 1992 parents received 90% rather than 80% of their salaries, which meant that the benefits were originally even more generous than today). It turned out that by 1991 only 7.7% of the parental leave time was taken by men.¹¹ Often two reasons were given for this lack of interest among men. One was that the patriarchal culture is still so strong that it will take decades in order to change the attitudes of men. A second reason is that even if men want to stay at home, they are afraid that they will have problems with their jobs.

The first reason is problematical from the viewpoint of freedom of choice: if there is a patriarchal culture and men do not want to stay at home, then forcing them to stay at home would decrease their freedom of choice. Here other moral arguments come

into play for still wanting to encourage men to stay at home, such as that it increases gender equality, which itself is an important goal; it increases the freedom of choice for mothers to work, etc. One could even argue that men will have more fulfilling lives if they grow in their roles as fathers, but because of cultural reasons they are blinded to their own interests. However, as already noted, this article will not discuss moral issues as to whether freedom of choice is good or bad; it is enough here to point out that arguments in favor of encouraging men to stay at home even if they do not want to might be morally forceful, but they do not encourage greater freedom of choice.

The second reason, however, does deal directly with the issue of freedom of choice. The problem is that since women have traditionally been the ones who stay at home with children, if a man suddenly wants to do the same, the employers will often become angry and accuse the father of not being ambitious. So even though fathers have the legal right to stay at home with their children, they can often expect to be punished by their employers. Since unions are extremely strong in Sweden it is not easy for employers to fire fathers for staying at home, but sometimes they can get around the rules, for example, by using other excuses for laying off a person. A more common problem is that if the employer is angry at the employee then the employee will have more difficulties getting promoted and advancing in his or her career.

Consequently, in 1994 the center-right government introduced a “pappa month,” which meant that one month of parental leave is reserved for the father.¹² If the father does not take out this month, then the family loses its benefits for one month. In other words, the family only receives full benefits for 11 rather than 12 months. In practice this reform has had the effect that almost all fathers in Sweden spend at least one month at home with their children. In addition, fathers receive an additional two weeks leave when their children are born; so most fathers spend at least 6 weeks at home with their children. As a result, during the 1990s the rate of father leave has increased, but in 2000 still only around 12.4% of the entire parental leave time on the average, is utilized by the fathers.¹³

Poland again has followed a strategy here that is a combination of liberalism and conservatism. As already noted, the further parental leaves in Poland are means-tested (which is typical for liberal regimes) but pay out a lump sum at a rather low level (which is typical for conservative regimes). Since these benefits are means tested and the level of pay is rather low, few fathers in Poland can afford to go on father leave. In addition, after the fall of the communist regime fathers in Poland gained the official right to father leave. However, as in conservative Germany, until recently restrictions existed that strongly limited the practical possibilities for fathers to utilize this right. For example, as in Germany the further parental leave could not be shared, which in practice excluded men from using it. But as in Germany a social democratic coalition government removed these restrictions.

Once again we see that the Swedish model provides greater freedom of choice than either the liberal American or conservative German model. However, the issue of a father’s month is ambivalent from the perspective of freedom of choice. One could criticize it for limiting the freedom of choice of men by forcing them to stay at home for one month. On the other hand, one could praise it for increasing the freedom of choice for fathers, who really do want to stay at home more with their children, but who did not dare anger their employers. Now these fathers have a good excuse for staying at home. In addition, by changing cultural patterns in the long run one could argue that Sweden will create a freer society, where gender will play a much smaller role in choices about working and taking care of children. Instead, individual

preferences rather than biology will determine choices; and thus, a freer society will emerge than a society, which assigns rigid roles based on birth.

The Right for Parents to Separate

If freedom of choice is to mean anything, we must also be able to choose with whom we want to live. If we can choose whom we want to live with, it is logical to also have the right to be able to choose with whom we do *not* want to live. Almost all countries in the Western world today allow for divorces. Today most countries even allow for divorces without the courts ruling on the reasons why couples want to get divorced. It is enough for the couples to agree that they want a divorce. Despite the common introduction of “no-fault” divorces, the different welfare regimes treat divorces in different manners.

In conservative Germany the courts still assume that the father is the breadwinner and the mother is a housewife. For these reasons the courts almost always give custody to the mother and demand that the father pay both child support and alimony to the mother. Fathers usually only have the right to see their children every other weekend. Furthermore, although divorce is legal, the government punishes divorcees by placing them in a higher tax bracket. In fact, Germany has three levels of taxes depending on one’s marriage status. Married couples pay the lowest tax, while separated couples must pay a higher tax and divorced couples even higher taxes. In practice this means that if a wife walks out on her husband, the husband is supposed to immediately report this to the tax authorities, so that he can have the “honor” of paying higher taxes. If she comes back one week later, he must immediately report this again to the tax authorities in order to lower his taxes back to the “married” rate. Needless to say, this system involves great state control over personal living arrangements. It also shows how the state tries to limit freedom of choice. Those, who live together pay higher taxes than those who get married; and those who get married get punished if they decide to separate or divorce.

In the USA the state is less intrusive than in Germany. To some extent it even recognizes cohabitation arrangements, as couples living together for more than three years are considered to be living under marriage-like conditions, known as “common-law marriages.” In addition, the US courts are more open than German courts for the possibilities that women can earn more money than men or that parents will often want joint custody etc. Nevertheless, a tendency still exists to see the father as the main breadwinner and assume that he will pay alimony to the mother and that the mother will have a greater responsibility for raising the children.

In Sweden, the state remains neutral concerning the choice of a couple to live together, to get married, separate or get divorced. Since joint tax filing does not exist and everyone files their own taxes, tax levels remain indifferent to living arrangements. Furthermore, the standard norm today is that both parents have an *equal* responsibility for their children. Consequently, if a couple gets divorced the courts assume that unless special conditions arise, both parents will have equal custody of the children. Of course, the parents can agree to divide their time differently. Under certain situations also one parent can try to claim full rights to the children, for example, if this parent claims that the other parent is unfit for raising the children. Examples of this could be if one of the parents has been a drug addict or has been convicted for child abuse etc. Still, the starting assumption is that both parents normally have an equal right to see their children. This right strengthens the freedom of choice. This right is further strengthened by the fact that the parents can agree to other arrangements concerning custody, so that the division of labor best fits their

needs. Since both parents are also expected to work, then alimony payments are very rare; however, if one parent has custody over the child, then the other parent is expected to pay child support. It is interesting to note that if the other parent cannot pay any support (for example, because the mother does not know who the father is or because the father lives in another country), then the state pays child support.

It is interesting to observe that the easier access to divorce in Sweden and the more generous conditions for divorcing families has not led to huge differences in divorce rates in comparison to other countries, with the exception of Poland. Instead, the combination of generous family policies in Sweden has sharply reduced child poverty rates, which one could argue increases the freedom of choice for children as well. For children living in poverty can hardly expect to have the same chances to develop, continue to universities, choose the most suitable career and choose their own life style as children who are well off. Table 2 shows that child poverty rates in Sweden are much lower than in Germany and radically lower than in the USA. Meanwhile, it is true that divorce rates are higher in Sweden than in the USA or Germany, but not by such high margins. One conclusion is that easier access to divorce, by increasing freedom of choice, does lead to slightly higher divorce rates, but these differences are still relatively moderate. An interest phenomena is that divorce rates are much lower in Poland than in the Western countries, but this cannot be explained by Poland having “conservative” policies, since Germany also has conservative policies; nor can it be explained by Poland being a post-communist country, since the Czech Republic has nearly the exact same divorce rate as Germany. Rather, cultural factors probably explain this difference.

Of course, the lower poverty rates in Sweden are not only directly connected to family policies. Other welfare policies, such as rent controls, rent subsidies, generous unemployment benefits etc., also contribute to the low poverty level. Nevertheless, the fact that women are not punished for getting divorced and the fact that even low-income families can afford daycare of course radically improve the economic conditions for the poorest families.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Divorce Rates in 1999</i>	<i>Child Poverty Rates in 1995</i>
Germany	44.3%	10.6% (1994)
Sweden	58.9%	2.7%
USA	50.6% (1998)	23.2%
Poland	19.2%	15.4%
Czech Republic	44.2%	6.6%

Source: www.oecd.org

Living Arrangements

When considering freedom of choice, other issues come up than the conditions for the nuclear family. If people can freely choose, not all will choose to marry somebody of the opposite sex and have children with them. As already mentioned, Sweden gives full rights to couples that live together, but do not get married. In fact, Sweden is rather unique in that foreigners, who have relations with Swedes, do not have to marry them in order to obtain residence visas. Regardless of whether couples want to get married or live together, in both cases they have to go to the authorities for interviews, so that the authorities can be sure that the relationship is a serious one. Then during

the first two years the immigrant receives 6-month visas and must go through an interview before the residence permit is renewed. After two years, the immigrant receives permanent residency, regardless of whether he or she marries the Swede. This is another example of how the current social democratic model increases freedom of choice. Above the case of divorce was also discussed and it was argued that the Swedish model gives greater freedom of choice by making it easier to get divorced and by granting better conditions to both the mother and the father.

However, other types of living arrangements are also possible. A parent might wish to have a child and live alone without a partner or homosexuals might wish to live together. In the Swedish model lone parents – which in most cases mean lone mothers – have comparatively better conditions than in most other countries. Not only do they have access to cheap daycare, as already noted, if the other parent does not pay child support, then the state pays it. In addition, as already noted, lone parents benefit from state controlled rents and rent subsidies. More specifically, those with low incomes can receive housing support from the government. As in Germany – but in contrast to the USA – all parents receive a child allowance every month as well. In the USA parents pay lower taxes if they have children, but this tax break helps the wealthy more than the poor, as the poorest pay little tax anyway and thus hardly benefit for the tax break. The USA does provide a means-tested program for supporting children (AFDC or “Aid for Dependent Children”), but the level of support is extremely low.¹⁴ The welfare programs also help explain why child poverty rates are so low in Sweden, since even lone parents are able to send their children to daycare, work and receive various governmental benefits.

Although these benefits make it easier for a woman to decide to have a child without living in a pair relationship, this does not mean that Swedish women are more likely than other women to choose such a situation. As table 3 shows, lone-parent families are lower in Sweden than in conservative Germany or liberal America. In addition, the number of one-person households, although higher than in Germany is lower than in America (statistics for Poland were not available). One study on the conditions of solo mothers also shows that in the middle-to-late 1980s, the poverty rate among such women was nearly 60% in the USA, compared to around 25% in Germany and under 5% in Sweden. This gives further evidence that the social democratic welfare state makes it much easier for women to choose their own lifestyles. One might think that the reason why Sweden solo women are better off is merely that they receive more money in transfers. However, the same study showed that over 70% of their income came from paid work and that the percentage of their income coming from social transfers was actually much lower than in Germany and the USA.¹⁵ Since they had greater access to daycare, they were more able than German or American women to work rather than relying on transfer payments.

Table 3: Compositions of Households

<i>Country</i>	<i>Lone-Parent Families</i>	<i>One-Person Households</i>
Germany	6.0%	15.0%
Sweden	3.0%	24.0%
USA	9.3%	25.7%

Source: www.oecd.org

The next issue is the right for people to live in homosexual relationships. Many religious groups have been morally against this possibility, but the fact remains that

all societies have large numbers of people who prefer homosexual relationships and it would radically reduce their freedom of choice if the state prevented them from following their preferences. Sweden is rather unique in guaranteeing full rights to homosexuals. Not only can they get married, they can also adopt children. Denmark to be sure introduced these measures before Sweden, but Denmark is also normally considered to have a social democratic welfare regime.

In Germany, homosexuals have the right to live together, but they cannot get married or adopt children. Since they cannot get married they cannot receive the tax reductions that married couples obtain.¹⁶ The situation in the USA is rather similar, but in the “liberal” country, legal battles still ensue over the question as to whether employers can fire people because of their sexual preferences. For example, when Clinton was president, public pressure forced him to withdraw a proposed law that would make it illegal for the military to discriminate against homosexual soldiers.

The Right to Control One's Body

Finally, the right for women to control their own body has been a central demand for women's movements throughout the world. In this regard, the right for women to a clean, safe and affordable abortion stands as the most important demand. As is well known, Poland used to have one of the world's most open abortion laws, but after the fall of the communist regime, successive governments took steps to make it increasingly difficult to obtain a divorce. Today it is forbidden in all cases in which the mother's health is not at stake with the exception of women who became pregnant through rape. Conservative Germany is more generous than Poland, but even there women have to go through humiliating experiences of presenting their cases to a board, which must approve their argument about special social, medical, genetic or criminal reasons for having an abortion.¹⁷ In the USA, the Supreme Court ruled that women have the right to abortions, but conservative groups have violently opposed this right. They have picketed abortion clinics and even at times bombed such clinics. Moreover, although the Supreme Court gave women the right to abortions, it said nothing about financing them. Consequently, the Reagan administration took away all public funding for abortions, which has made it difficult for the poorest women to afford abortions. Thus the sad irony arises that those who need the right to abortions the most are also those who are least likely to be able to afford them.

Conclusion: Social Democracy and Freedom of Choice

This article questions the liberal criticism of social democratic welfare regimes concerning the issue of freedom of choice. Liberals have claimed that generous welfare states try to limit the possibility of individuals to make free choices. It is true that no welfare policy is neutral and that all policies – including liberal ones – influence the choices which inhabitants make. Nevertheless, when it comes to family policy, evidence suggests that social democratic Sweden encourages much greater freedom of choice than liberal America, Christian democratic Germany or liberal-conservative Poland. In Sweden women have greater choice as to whether to continue a pregnancy or terminate it. Possibilities of choosing alternative life styles are also greater in Sweden. While America, Germany and Poland favor the nuclear family with married couples, Sweden also creates favorable conditions for cohabitating (i.e. non-married) couples, for homosexual couples, for single parents and for women who want to have children without having a long-term partner. Swedish policy also makes it easier for married couples to get divorced and provides greater possibilities for divorced fathers to share in the child-raising. Cheap and easy access to daycare also

make it easier for mothers in Sweden to choose to work, while general parental leave schemes make it easier for fathers in Sweden to choose to stay at home with the children.

On the other hand, some aspects of Swedish policy could be criticized from the viewpoint of freedom of choice. Critics could claim that the “pappa month” infringes upon freedom of choice, as a family cannot choose to let the mother utilize that month. However, this only represents a loss of freedom in choice in comparison to the previous Swedish policy. In comparison to Germany, Poland and the USA the pappa month does not imply a great loss of freedom of choice. All that this policy means is that if the father does not utilize this month, then the family will not receive any benefits for this month. In liberal America, however, *nobody* receives parental leave benefits, while in Germany and Poland the benefits are low and means tested, which means that most families do not receive this benefit anyway. Thus, practically speaking, the only loss of freedom of choice occurs in the extra tax money, which the family pays to finance the pappa month. (It is a loss in the freedom of choice in the sense that the slightly low tax rate would allow freedom of choice in consuming private alternatives). In addition, the pappa month can actually increase the freedom of choice for the men, who want to take parental leave, but previously would not have dared to do so, because they were afraid that their employers would punish them.

Finally, critics could argue that the Swedish model limits freedom of choice by encouraging mothers to work more than it encourages them to stay at home. Daycare is relatively cheap, while parental leave benefits are for relatively short periods. In comparison to the liberal and conservative models, however, this criticism does not hold up so well. In liberal America women have less possibility of staying at home than in Sweden, because if they stay at home for more than three months they can lose their jobs. Moreover, in contrast to Sweden mothers in America do not receive any parental leave benefits at all. In conservative Germany and liberal-conservative Poland, meanwhile, the parental leave period is longer, but the benefits are means tested, which exclude most mothers from these payments. In addition, since the benefit levels are so low, it is not clear that mothers staying at home for three years in Germany or Poland receive more money than mothers living in Sweden. For example, in Poland families can only receive parental-leave benefits for two years following the first 16-week period in which they receive 100% of their income. Since the parental leave benefits amount to under 22% of an average salary, then a Swedish woman who stays at home for two years would still receive an average of 40% of her income per year (80%/2 years) and this is not taking into account the fact that public employees normally receive an extra 10% (which would mean an extra 5% if they divide the amount over two years). This discussion shows that although Swedish policy consciously aims to encourage fathers to stay at home and mothers to work, it still provides greater freedom of choice even for mothers who want to stay at home. However, under such favorable conditions, few mothers *choose* to stay at home for more than 1-2 years.

So whatever one thinks normatively about the Swedish model, the right to abort, homosexual rights, or gender equality, this article makes it clear that social democratic policies can actually increase freedom of choice. Thus, the market liberal criticism does not hold up at least when Sweden is compared to the real existing alternative models.

¹ G. Bonoli, V. George, and P. Taylor-Gooby, 2000. *European Welfare Futures: Towards a Theory of Retrenchment* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

² See, for example, Lewis, Jane, "Introduction: Women, Work, Family and Social Policies in Europe," pp. 1-25 in *Women and Social Policies in Europe: Work, Family and the State*, Jane Lewis ed. (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993) and Mary Dale, "Comparing Welfare States: Towards a Gender Friendly Approach," pp. 101-117 in Diane Sainsbury ed., *Gendering Welfare States*, (London: Sage, 1994).

³ See for example, Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 57, fn 7, who admits that Americans usually use "cheap informal care from unlicensed women," but he makes no mention of the usage of immigrants and illegal aliens.

⁴ Birgit Pfau-Effinger, "Transformation of Family Policies in the Socio-Cultural Context of European Societies," Paper presented at the International Conference on "Changing Work and Life Patterns in Western Industrial Societies" WZB-Social Science Research Center Berlin, September 20-21, 2001 and Vicky Randal, "Childcare Policy in the European States: Limits to Convergence," *Journal of European Public Policy*, special issue, vol. 7., no 3., p. 359.

⁵ *Dagens nyheter*, 12 April 2003

⁶ See, for example, Marcia K. Meyers et al., "Public Childcare, Parental Leave, and Employment," pp. 117-146 in Diane Sainsbury ed., *Gender and Welfare State Regimes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ Bożena Balcerzak-Paradowski, "Świadczenia rodzinne w Polsce. Zmiany okresu transformacji, stan obecny i perspektywy" *Polityka Społeczna*, vol 4: 2002 .

⁸ In 1996 the rate equaled 21.3% of the average wage. See Steven Saxonberg, *The Czech Republic in a New Millennium: Parties, Politics and Gender* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 2003), chapter 5.

⁹ Aleksandra Wiktorow, and Piotr Mierzewski, "Promise or Peril? Social Policy for Children During the Transition to the Market Economy in Poland." Pp. 207-233 in *Children and the Transition to the Market Economy*, ed. By Giovanni Andrea Cornia and Sándor Sipos. (Aldershot: Avebury, 1991), p. 209.

¹⁰ Bożena Balcerzak-Paradowski, "Publiczne instytucje usług społecznych a rodzina" pp. 55-69 in Halina Żeglicka ed., *Partnerstwo w rodzinie I na rzecz rodziny* (Warsaw: IpiSS, no. 13, 1997), pp. 57.

¹¹ <http://statistik.rfv.se/>

¹² Christina Bergqvist, "Modeller för barnomsorg och föräldraledighet," in Christina Bergqvist et al eds., *Likestilte demokratier?* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1999), p. 136.

¹³ <http://statistik.rfv.se>

¹⁴ Oláh Livia Sz, Eva M. Bernhardt and Frances K. Goldscheider, "Coresidential Parental Roles in Industrialized Countries: Sweden, Hungary, and the United States," in Barbara Hobson ed., *Making Men into Fathers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 35.

¹⁵ Barbara Hobson "Solo Mothers, Social Policy Regimes," in Diane Sainsbury ed., *Gendering Welfare States* (London: Sage, 1994), p. 178-9.

¹⁶ <http://www.lsvd.de/ratgeber/lebenspartnerschaft02.html#Angehörigenstatus>

¹⁷ For a discussion of the German case, see Prue Chamberlayne, "Women and the state: Changes in Roles and Rights in France, West Germany, Italy and Britain, 1970-1990," in Jane Lewis ed., *Women and Social Policies in Europe*, (Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1993), p. 184.