

Freedom of Choice through the Promotion of Gender Equality

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Abstract

This article argues that policies that promote gender equality actually also increase freedom of choice. Thus, despite the neo-liberal criticism that welfare policies limit choices and privatization and market solutions increase freedom of choice, this article concludes that market-liberal welfare regimes offer less choice than the Nordic type of social-democratic welfare regimes, which have openly striven to promote gender equality. They do so by making it easier for mothers to choose to work (by making day care available and making it easier for fathers to stay at home with children) and by giving fathers the ability to choose to spend more time with children. However, within the realm of such policies, it is still possible to offer more or less freedom of choice, for example, by making parental leaves either extremely flexible or rigid in how they are utilized. Interestingly, it turns out that, in the real world, policies that promote gender equality even offer greater freedom of choice for the group of women considered to be 'family oriented' as well as for lesbian and homosexual couples.

Keywords

Gender; Family policy; Freedom of choice

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of 'freedom of choice' has become increasingly prevalent in the debates on public policy in general and welfare policy in particular. Although it originally grew out of the neo-liberal discourse on the need for privatization and retrenchment, even more social liberal and social democratically oriented theorists began claiming that a process of individualization has been taking place, in which preferences for career, lifestyle and caring choices have become more pluralized (Beck 1992, 2001; Giddens 1991). Both our wants and needs have become more diversified as we have moved away from the assembly line towards jobs that allow for greater work-time

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flexibility, working partially or fully at home, the possibility to work part-time, etc. Thus, they claim traditional standardized welfare policies cannot meet the needs of citizens as well as in the past.

This article focuses on family policy because, as feminist theorists have noted, no policies have greater influence over gender roles than family policies (i.e. Lewis 1993; Sainsbury 1994), which in turn means that family policies influence almost every aspect of our daily lives, from the manner in which we relate to our romantic partners, to our ability to have careers and compete on the job market and the way we raise our children.

Family policy also presents an interesting case because some basic aspects of it, such as parental-leave insurance, cannot emerge from a free market, but rather by their nature require state intervention. Private insurance providers would not be able to make a profit without any state support or regulation, as they would expect their clients to have children and thus demand payment rather early in their adult lives after only paying insurance premiums for a few years. Then the clients would discontinue their membership in the insurance scheme almost immediately after having the number of children that they want. Thus no long buffer period exists for most adults in which they might be expected to pay insurance fees without demanding any benefits in return.

Family policies also bring up the long-standing debate on positive and negative freedom in a rather special light. Free-market supporters using the notion of negative freedom would claim that the way to maximize choice in society is to let markets take care of everything, while social democrats and social liberals can argue perhaps more clearly than in many other cases that considerable conflict exists between what choices the market provides and what choices *could* be available if the state were to pursue policies that increase our freedom of choice. For example, in the United States it is common to ask mothers whether they breastfeed their infants, while in Europe it is *obvious* that the mother breastfeeds the child unless health reasons prevent it. This difference does not arise because American mothers have different preferences than European mothers – American mothers are just as aware that it is healthier for the infant to get milk from the mother than from baby formulas – rather, the difference is that in almost all European countries paid maternity and parental leaves exist that allow mothers to stay at home for usually at least half a year, while American mothers did not even get the right to a short three-month unpaid leave until the courts ruled in the 1990s that mothers were entitled to a ‘sick leave’, because they were not physically capable of working after having a child. Many mothers cannot afford this unpaid leave and others are afraid that taking even this short leave would gravely affect their careers. Another striking example is the case of a female doctoral student in the United States, who told me that she had recently become pregnant and when her adviser found out he tried to persuade her to get an abortion, otherwise she would lose her scholarship! In European countries, by contrast, mothers have the right to return to their jobs after going on maternity leave, even if they are doctoral students at a university. So here differences in family policy can literally become a question of life itself!

The main argument of this article is that *family policies which promote gender equality also increase freedom of choice more than either laissez-faire liberal or conservative*

policies. They do so by increasing the amount of available choices to both the mothers and fathers by making it easier for women to choose to have careers while still having children and by making it easier for men to choose to spend time with their children. Even women who are not interested in having a career have a greater number of options available under social democratic regime-types that promote gender equality than under the liberal or conservative alternatives, as such policies still make it easier for them to choose to have children given the economic constraints that make it difficult for most families to live on one income. In fact, given the budget constraints that exist, then social democratic policies that aim to promote gender equality have in practice been more generous even towards women who would prefer to stay at home with their children full-time and not work at all. However, I will also argue that the question is more complicated than simply whether policies promote gender equality or not, because even among policies that promote gender equality, one can develop policies that are more flexible and give more freedom of choice, or policies that are less flexible and give less freedom of choice, in the sense of giving more or less option of how parents can divide their time between work and family.

Despite these rather straightforward arguments, two factors complicate the analysis of freedom of choice, although, if one includes these elements in the analysis, they strengthen the argument that measures which promote gender equality increase freedom of choice. First, a possible conflict can arise between long-term and short-term freedom of choice. In some cases, policies that place some limits on freedom of choice in the short run (such as reserving parental leave months only for the father even if he would 'prefer' to work) can actually increase freedom of choice in the long run. Second, if one takes into account structural factors, such as cultural norms that might, for example, prevent men from making the choices that they would have made without these constraints, then policies that reserve parental leave months only for fathers could actually increase freedom of choice also by fighting against structural factors and making men realize more clearly what they would 'really' want to choose if they had not felt constrained by these cultural norms.

I break this article down into five sections: (1) maternity leave policies; (2) paternity leave policies; (3) the flexibility of parental leaves; (4) day-care policies; and (5) policies towards non-nuclear families. It should also be noted that most of the Scandinavian examples will concentrate on Sweden, because as Sainsbury (1999) shows, its policies go farther in promoting gender equality than Denmark, Norway or Finland, while most of the examples of conservative policies will be based on Germany, both because that country has often been considered the ideal-typical conservative welfare state and because its recent moves towards the Swedish model help indicate the problems that the conservative model faces today.

Maternity Leaves

Hakim (2000) built upon the individualization hypothesis to develop her preference theory, in which she basically argues that family policies can have only very limited influence on behaviour, because women in post-industrial

societies have developed different preferences. One group of women is 'career-oriented', and will always want to work regardless of policies; a second group is 'family-oriented', and will always want to give priority to having a family over working regardless of policies. Consequently, only the third group of 'adaptable' women will adapt their choices to changes in family policies.

A problem with this line of reasoning is that Hakim herself considers the group of adaptable women to be the largest (representing about 60 per cent of all women), which implies that policies in fact will have impact on choices. Another problem with Hakim's argument is that she claims that gender equality is not possible because while women have different preferences, virtually all men have the same preference for placing their careers over their families. As a result, policies cannot influence men to share in raising children. Rather than investigate this hypothesis empirically by using survey data as she does for women, she merely assumes this to be the case. She also refers to Sweden as proof that policies promoting gender equality cannot induce men to change their behaviour to stay at home with their children. This is also a rather strange conclusion, given the fact that the percentage of parental leave time in that country has been progressively increasing over the last two decades and has now surpassed the 20 per cent level (SCB 2008).

Despite the drawbacks of Hakim's arguments, what is interesting for present purposes is that if it is true that women have preferences in line with what Hakim writes, then policies promoting gender equality would still actually provide more freedom of choice than traditional liberal or conservative policies. For the career-oriented group, generous social democratic policies that encourage fathers to stay at home and give easy access to quality day care allow career-oriented women the *choice* of having children without having to give up their careers. If the father of the children stays at home most of the time during the first year or years and then the children attend day care, then women who do not want to give up successful careers for their families would no longer be required to do so.

Meanwhile, for the largest group, comprising adaptable women who are interested in both working and having families, policies that encourage fathers to stay at home for a while, provide easy access to day care and also provide generous leave provisions for mothers for their period at home also make it much easier for these adaptable women to balance work and family life. While conservative policies that support the male-breadwinner model might force these women against their will to become housewives and completely give up their careers, and liberal, laissez-faire policies might make it difficult for these women to spend any time at all at home with their children, the Scandinavian types of policies that promote gender equality allow the adaptable women to stay at home for a while and receive generous leave payments (80 per cent of previous salary in Sweden, for example), but also make it easier for them to return to their jobs since they are guaranteed the right to come back to the same job and position if they return within one and a half years.

The most ambivalent case concerns Hakim's family-oriented group. One could argue that conservative policies that promote motherhood and induce mothers to become housewives would be the preferred policy for this group. Regardless of whether that would be true, social democratic policies that

promote gender equality still provide the family-oriented group with more choice than the liberal, laissez-faire model. In a purely liberal model mothers do not receive any paid parental leave at all, so family-oriented women might find that even if they want to stay at home, they cannot afford to do so; in some cases, they might decide they cannot afford to have children at all. It is worth noting that the International Social Survey Programme survey on the family shows that, among European countries, the Netherlands was the only country in which fewer than 70 per cent of the female respondents believed that women need to work to support their families.¹ In the market-liberal USA the total was over 86 per cent. Thus, even women who have family-oriented values often find that they must work, so social democratic policies that make it easier for them to balance work and family life will make it easier for women to have children than under the liberal model, since they will at least get some paid leave time to stay at home and then will still be able to utilize cheap public childcare services when they feel that they must return to work for economic reasons.

Of course, even if family-oriented women have greater freedom of choice under the gender equality model than the liberal one, they still might prefer a purely conservative model that would enable them to be completely financially independent from the labour market, so that they could become housewives, while the Nordic model only makes it easy for women to stay at home for a couple of years. For example, in Sweden parents receive 13 months of insurance-based leave at 80 per cent of their salaries, with two months reserved solely for the mother and two solely for the father, but in practice parents often stay at home for a longer period by utilizing less than 100 per cent of the daily payment. For example, they can choose to stay at home twice as long for a total of 26 months and receive 50 per cent of the benefits per day (which amounts to 40 per cent of their salary). Some strains of feminism argue against the abolition of gender roles and instead claim that women *should* be the main carers, *but* they should be given a 'normal' salary for caring, so that they can become economically independent from their husbands. According to this view, the problem is not that women have different roles from men but rather it is that women's roles are undervalued.²

One obvious problem with the argument in favour of this type of 'maternal feminism' is that it would be extremely expensive. If the government were to provide mothers with a monthly salary equal to the country's average salary for their entire adult life or even 'only' for the 18-year period in which they take care of a child, the costs would be so high that they would become prohibitive, especially if one takes into account the government's loss of tax revenues from women who decide to stay at home rather than pursue careers. In practice, conservative governments have not 'succeeded' in inducing women to stay at home for longer periods with their children because their policies are not generous enough to give women the choice of staying at home; in fact they normally do not give more money for parental leaves than social democratic countries. Rather, they induce mothers to stay at home for longer periods with their children by *denying* the choice of returning earlier to work by limiting access to day care and discouraging fathers from sharing in the parental leaves. Thus, in Germany, before its recent reforms, mothers

received a generous maternity leave at 100 per cent of their previous salary, but that is only slightly more generous than the 90 per cent that Sweden used to give before its economic crisis in the early 1990s and still not much more than the 80 per cent that Sweden offers today. Although 80 per cent is somewhat less generous than 100 per cent, as already noted, in Sweden mothers can receive this high level of payment for 11 months. In contrast, in the old German model mothers only received this high amount for 14 weeks, which were followed by a means-tested child-raising leave (*Erziehungsurlaub*) that paid a low, flat-rate benefit (OECD 2007). Since very few nurseries existed for children under three and many kindergartens were not open full-time (Deutsches Jugendinstitut 2008: 46), mothers often felt forced to stay at home with their children until they began school. Under such conditions, one would expect the career-oriented and adaptive women either to give up their career ambitions or their motherhood ambitions, but the question is whether this large group of around 80 per cent of the population would really be giving up its freedom of choice for the small group of 20 per cent who are family-oriented. If that were the case, then at least one group could benefit from conservative policies. But as already noted, even many family-oriented women feel that they must work to survive economically, so the conservative model that is based on *taking away* the choice of balancing work and family also takes away the possibility for many family-oriented women to choose to have children.

Since the conservative model in practice eliminates the choice for many women to balance both work and family, the only realistic choice for many women is to give up their dreams of motherhood. The resulting drop in fertility has been so great that many continental countries have been abandoning the conservative family policy model and have moved closer to the Scandinavian direction. Thus, in Germany, the Christian Democratic Chancellor (together with her party comrade who was minister of family affairs) pushed through a reform that eliminated the child-raising leave and replaced it with a one-year parental leave insurance. In addition, it provides for a two-month bonus if the father goes on leave for at least two months. The government has also committed itself to radically building up access to day care for children under three.³ It seems that traditional, conservative, male-breadwinner policies have not been able to meet the needs of either family-oriented women or family-oriented policy-makers.

Parental Leave Policies: The Fathers

So far the argument has been that the Scandinavian types of parental leave policies that aim to promote gender equality actually provide more freedom of choice for all three of Hakim's groups of women than liberal or conservative policies, but what about men? Hakim just assumes that all men have the same preferences for careers over families without empirically investigating this issue. Yet, if it is true that our attitudes are becoming more pluralized as we move from an industrial to a post-industrial society, from modern to post-modern views and we are becoming more individualized, then why would we expect all men to have the exact same preferences about parenthood? More-

over, in contrast to Hakim's claims, policies *do* seem to influence male behaviour, as in Sweden men now account for over 20 per cent of the parental-leave time.

The question is, from the view of freedom of choice: should we be satisfied with economic incentives such as a parental leave system that provides a high level of benefits, so that families would not lose much money if the fathers stay at home even though fathers usually earn more money than mothers? In both Norway and Sweden policy-makers concluded that providing economic incentives was not enough, so they introduced a 'daddy month' in the 1990s, which reserved one of the parental leave months solely for the father. Iceland went so far as to reserve one-third of the leave time for fathers, while the Swedish government eventually added a second daddy month.

From the freedom-of-choice perspective, reserving months for fathers might seem an infringement, because it limits the ability of men to choose to continue working and have the mother stay at home, but the issue is more complicated than that for several reasons. First, even assuming that daddy months might limit the freedom of choice for some men, they could also at the same time increase the freedom of choice for women, since women have the possibility of returning to their jobs more quickly if the fathers of their children share in the parental leave time. Second, the tricky issue arises of children. Technically, infants cannot reasonably 'choose' whether or not they want their fathers to spend time at home with them, as they are too young to even comprehend the word 'choice'. For this reason, in the Swedish discourse the term 'right' is often used instead. For example, one government report proclaims: 'The child has a right to early and close contact with both parents' (Batljan *et al.* 2004: 17, my translation). Despite the usage of the term 'rights', the logic of such arguments implies that *if* infants were capable of making choices, they would choose to exercise their rights to have a father home with them.

These examples show that when it comes to freedom of choice, when the father chooses whether or not to stay at home with his children, he is also directly influencing the freedom of choice of the mother and indirectly influencing the presumed freedom of choice of the children. Yet, even leaving out these matters, the father's choice is a rather complicated issue. Feminists and Marxists have traditionally criticized the liberal view of free choice, because liberalism assumes that society is nothing but a collection of free individuals and thus ignores the structural restraints imposed by underlying power structures. These structures can hinder our choice even if we are aware of our own best interests, but they can also influence our preferences by giving us some kind of 'false consciousness'. Thus, Lukes (1974) develops the notion of 'real interests' which he defines as *the interests that we would really have if our thoughts were not manipulated by ruling power structures that in turn influence the mass media, our culture and our cultural institutions such as schools*. This view implies that, deep down, we as individuals have interests that might differ from our conscious preferences, since our preferences have been manipulated so much by socialization processes and the mass media that we think we have a certain preference (such as men thinking that they should only work and never take care of children) although we might actually prefer an alternative if we were aware of our 'real

interests' (so these same men might find that they would actually prefer to spend time with their children if they had freed themselves from their manipulated socialization and actually spent time at home with their children). Of course, the notion of real interests in practice is very problematical, because the issue then arises of just who defines real interests. This leads to risks of authoritarianism as a small elite (such as the 'workers' vanguard' in communist dictatorships) decides it knows what is really in everyone's interests. This is such a complicated issue that it cannot be developed further here, but for present purposes it is enough to point out that 'preferences' as usually defined are also problematical, since many men might actually 'prefer' to spend time at home with their children if they actually had the experience of doing it (for example, by being pressured into it via daddy months), but given the cultural constraints and socialization processes that they went through, they are not aware ('conscious') that they would actually enjoy being at home with their children.

Even if we could agree on an exact definition of what men's real interests were and that they have real interests in spending time at home with their children, and even if some men became aware of these real interests, that in itself still might not necessarily increase the freedom of choice for all these men. Keeping in mind the starting point of a patriarchal power structure, then even men who are aware of their 'real interests' might still be afraid to ask their employer's permission for going on parental leave. They know that while employers expect women to eventually go on maternity leave, they do not expect men to take paternity leave. Consequently, requests to go on paternity leave can easily induce a negative reaction from an employer who disapproves of the employee's 'lack of ambition'. Although no scientific studies, to my knowledge, have directly addressed just this problem, studies on workplace culture in Sweden show a correlation between workplace culture and the willingness of men to take paternity leaves (i.e. Haas *et al.* 2002).

Given these structural hindrances, 'daddy months' can actually increase the freedom of choice for many men, as the designation of several months only for the father gives men a stronger bargaining position *vis-à-vis* their employers. Rather than having to defend their 'lack of ambition', fathers can now claim that their family cannot afford to lose several months of leave benefits. Consequently, at least some men find themselves in the ironical position of being forced to do what they really wanted to do anyway, but did not dare to do.

In Sweden some authors try to get around the choice issue altogether by pointing out that all other social insurances in the country are individually based and their benefits cannot be handed over to anyone else, so parental leaves should not be an exception (see the discussions in Lorentzi 2004 and Bergqvist 2008). Each parent should have a set amount of months and they cannot give away these months to anyone else, just as they cannot give away pensions or unemployment insurance to anyone else. Thus, leaves would be shared equally in every family. For example, in Sweden in every family each mother would have six and a half months' leave and each father would have the same leave, and neither parent would be able to decrease the leave time by giving away some time to the other parent.

If we are to take the notion of individuation and postmodern values seriously, however, then it is questionable whether we really want to force the same solution upon every family. No two people have the exact same preferences and needs, so why should everyone be forced to behave in the same way and divide their parental leaves exactly equally? From a feminist perspective, would it really be a problem if, for example, a career-oriented woman had a child with a family-oriented man and they decided that the man should stay at home for most of the leave period so that the mother could pursue her career? If we were to create a non-patriarchal society that no longer forced us into gender roles that prescribe for us how we must behave regardless of our own wants and needs, then why should we assume that everyone would suddenly have the exact same wants and needs? Perhaps, then, the goal of gender equality should not be to make all people exactly equal in their choices, but rather it should be to eliminate the correlation between gender and behaviour.

Even if one accepts this goal, the question is how to get there. Surely, the fastest way to get fathers to share equally in the parental leave time on average is to force them to divide the leave time equally in each case. In the short term parents would lose some freedom of choice, as family-oriented mothers (and perhaps a few family-oriented fathers) would spend less time at home than they would prefer, while some career-oriented fathers (and in some cases also mothers) would spend more time at home than they would prefer. In the long run, however, freedom of choice would increase, as attitudes would start changing and men learn to share in the childrearing and even like it. Once new cultural values become firmly entrenched and employers get used to the fact that on average fathers will go on parental leave for just as long as women, then eventually complete freedom of choice could be reintroduced in the model, as both men and women would be more likely to act in accordance with their 'true' preferences without fear of being punished by their employers, employees or looked down upon by friends, family and neighbours for not being 'good mothers' if they let the fathers stay at home with the children, etc.

For many families, however, the short-term sacrifice in terms of loss of freedom of choice will not be outweighed by the long-term gains to society. We can expect many cases to arise in which families would lose a lot by such a reform, which perhaps is one reason why no government has dared to go so far. Instead, the Icelandic model seems to represent the most politically feasible compromise, where one-third of the leave time is reserved for each parent while the remaining third can be divided according to each family's choice.

Parental Leave Policies and Flexibility

Even if policies that promote gender equality generally seem to increase freedom of choice, such policies can still be formulated in ways that provide more or less freedom of choice by being more or less flexible.

At one extreme, it would be possible to have a parental leave that is open to both parents, but only allows one parent to use it and no possibility exists of staying at home for a longer period and receiving less money per month. At

the other extreme, parents could be free to divide their time between themselves as they would like and they can decide to stretch out the leave as long as they like by receiving a lower benefit per month but for more months.

The previous German system approximated to the inflexible model. When the Christian Democratic-liberal coalition government introduced a means-tested, flat-rate childcaring leave after the maternity leave ended, it only allowed mothers to go on this leave. After a man complained to the European Court, the government decided to allow fathers to take this leave as well. However, until 1992 only one parent could take this leave. According to the new law parents could alternate the leave three times, but only one parent could go on leave for a particular period (Rosenkranz *et al.* 1998: 9). A later law further limited it, so that parents could only divide their stays at home to two periods (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2004).

Sweden represents the other extreme, where although some months are reserved for mothers and fathers, parents can choose to divide the remaining months in any way they please, including staying at home during the same period of time but during different days of the week. In addition, parents are free to stretch out the leave as long as they want, so they can, for example, receive half as much payment per month but for twice as many months. In contrast to the previous German system in which parents had to announce how they would divide the parental leave time from the beginning, in the Scandinavian countries parents can also decide at any point in time to change the length of their leave, so a father receiving 25 per cent of the leave money for two months could decide in the third month to receive 100 per cent of it, and then he could decide to return to work in the fifth month and let the mother take care of the child, etc.

Childcare Facilities

Easy and affordable access to high-quality childcare facilities also improves freedom of choice for parents. If they can afford to send their children to day-care centres and if they feel confident that these centres are of high quality, then their chance of returning to work at an earlier stage increases. If access to childcare is combined with generous parental leaves, so that the loss of income from staying at home does not matter much, and the cost of sending children to day care is not high enough to give parents a disincentive to return to work, then parents can make their decisions about how fast to return to work based solely on their own preferences for what is best for their careers, their children and their desire to spend time with their children. Such policies also promote gender equality given the unequal starting point in which the mother is the most likely one to be at home with the children if day care options are not available.

Market liberals might protest that state support for childcare distorts markets and takes away parents' freedom of choice, since the state is likely to favour public day-care centres over private alternatives. Even if this were true, a completely private system strongly restricts freedom of choice for many parents, who cannot afford to pay the high price of day care. For example, a recent survey of childcare in Great Britain complained about 'the shockingly

high costs of childcare in Britain' and noted that many parents have trouble paying for it.⁴ In America, even the middle class generally finds day care prohibitively expensive. Consequently, rather than send their children to nursery schools with trained personnel, many hire unqualified people, who often are immigrants (including illegal aliens), who do not have any pedagogical training.⁵ The question arises as to why one is more 'free' when one feels forced to hire an unqualified, illegal immigrant, but one is less 'free' when one sends one's child to a publicly funded day-care centre, run by university-educated preschool teachers! Even more importantly, why is a mother more free when she feels forced to stay at home although she would like to return to work, but cannot afford day care, but unfree when she is able to decide herself when to return to work, because the childcare facilities are easily affordable?

Nevertheless, market-liberals may have a point that freedom of choice could be improved in countries where public day-care facilities dominate the market. As long as all alternatives remain affordable, it is not clear that they must all be public alternatives. It would be possible to increase freedom of choice by allowing publicly funded private childcare facilities to compete freely with private ones. This would not represent a large deviation from the social democratic model if the private facilities were to be basically publicly financed and had to follow the same rules as public ones concerning fees. Then they would remain affordable and would be forced to compete based on alternative pedagogical philosophies rather than based on being able to provide higher-quality services by charging higher fees.

Alternative Living Styles

So far, I have argued that generous public policies that promote gender equality also promote freedom of choice. Generous parental leave schemes and easy, affordable access to day care obviously also benefit the freedom of choice for single parents (usually mothers) who can both afford to stay at home more easily and are able to return to work more quickly. Such arrangements should also help homosexual couples with children, although certain provisions should be made to allow the non-biological parent to stay at home with a child and receive parental leave benefits if the child is adopted or if the child was born via artificial insemination (in the case of lesbian mothers). When a heterosexual relationship leads to a child and the parents then break up and the mother then enters a lesbian relationship, it still might be good for the child and the father if the father shares in the parental leave time, so in that case it would not matter afterwards whether the mother enters into a homosexual or heterosexual relationship after they break up.

In theory, we would not necessarily expect social democratic countries to be any more tolerant of alternative lifestyles than liberal countries. If we take the free-market economist Milton Friedman's (1980) title to his famous book (co-authored with his wife Rose) at face value, 'free to choose' implies that under a market-liberal regime, the state should stay out of private matters and let people decide themselves how they want to live. Thus, the liberal state should be completely neutral concerning one's choice of lifestyle. In practice, however, countries with social democratic traditions are much more tolerant

of alternative lifestyles than countries with liberal traditions, even if liberal countries tend to be more tolerant than conservative ones. Whether the issue is the right to legal abortions (and state-funded ones), the ability to achieve easy, no-fault divorces, the right to same-sex marriage, the right for homosexual couples to adopt children, the ability for couples living together to enjoy the same rights as married couples, etc., the social democratic Scandinavian countries generally have come the farthest in granting freedom of choice. For example, Denmark allows same-sex marriages, while the Swedish government has recently proposed such a law and Sweden also allows homosexual couples to adopt children.

Conclusion

This article argues that family policies that promote gender equality as practised in Scandinavia (and especially in Sweden) have also tended to give greater freedom of choice than either liberal or conservative types of policies, by providing greater possibilities to decide how long people want to work or stay at home with their children.

Generous parental leaves make it easier for mothers to decide to stay at home for longer periods than under liberal regimes, while affordable access to day care makes it easier for women to return to work after a shorter period than under conservative regimes. Meanwhile, by providing insurance-based parental leaves that minimize the loss of income when one goes on leave, social democratic types of welfare regimes have also made it easier for fathers to choose to stay at home, since families do not lose much money even if the father earns more money than the mother (which in most families is the case).

Even within the confines of generous parental leave schemes and generous funding of childcare facilities, it is possible to increase the freedom of choice or decrease it. For example, the Swedish parental leave scheme allows for maximum flexibility in that parents can divide the leave time as they like by, for example, deciding to have one parent at home two days a week and the other at home three days a week or by taking a longer leave but receiving a smaller benefit payment per month.

The issue of months reserved for the father brings up an interesting dilemma concerning freedom of choice. In some cases daddy months can actually 'force' the father to do what he would really want to choose, but previously did not dare to choose out of fear of how his employer and work colleagues might react. Furthermore, when fathers are induced to stay at home for longer periods, this can influence the freedom of choice for mothers to return to work earlier and also give children the 'right' to have more time with their fathers, which they presumably would 'choose' to do if they were old enough to make choices.

When it comes to childcare facilities, generous public support increases the freedom of choice of parents by allowing them to decide themselves when they want to return to work. However, the generous public support does not necessarily have to go solely to public childcare facilities. Public support can just as well go to private or cooperative facilities as long as these alternative facilities are forced to have the same pricing model as the public facilities to

insure that good-quality care remains available to all regardless of income. Instead, policies should be geared to allowing competition among competing pedagogical concepts of what kinds of activities the children should engage in, which gives parents greater freedom of choice in deciding what kind of day care they would choose for their children.

Finally, if we take the concept of freedom of choice seriously, then we should also have maximum freedom to choose our lifestyles. This includes whether to live together or get married; whether to have homosexual or heterosexual relationships (and marriages); whether to live with a partner or alone; whether to raise our children with the other parent or alone; whether to stay married or get divorced; whether to have a child or choose to have an abortion, etc. Even though, in principle, countries with liberal traditions should support maximum choice in these areas, in practice social democratic Scandinavian countries have been much more tolerant than the liberal, Anglo-Saxon countries.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was financed by grants from the Baltic Sea Foundation in Sweden for the project 'Family Policies in Post-communist Europe: Influence from the Swedish or German Model?' and from the Czech Grant Agency for the project 'The Revenge of History? An Examination of the Historical Roots of Childcare, Healthcare and Elderly Care Policies in the Czech Republic', grant number GA403/09/1182; and Grant no. IAA700280901 from the Czech Academy of Science Grant Agency.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, this question was asked in the 1994 survey but not repeated in the 2002 survey. Nevertheless, no reason exists to assume that the results would change much if the question had been asked in the 2002 survey, since, for example, the percentage of women thinking that women should contribute to the family income increased for most European countries (i.e. Saxonberg and Sirovátka 2006).
2. Heidinger (1993) calls this 'maternal feminism'.
3. For the recent German reforms, see Bundesregierung (2007).
4. The quote comes from Daycare Trust (2008: 4), but the problem of affordability is discussed throughout the report.
5. See, for example, Esping-Andersen (1999: 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.

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