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## **“Summary of article by Siv Gustaffson: Single Mothers in Sweden: Why is Poverty Less Severe”**

In the United States poverty is increasingly concentrated among single mother-families. In 1986, 53 percent of families with only one parent present were poor. Yet in Sweden less than six percent of single parent families were in poverty. This striking difference results from state policies which promote equality between men and women and support their endeavors in the workplace and in the home. The Swedish model emphasizes labor force participation, but rather than generating American-style forced workfare, Swedish policy promotes full employment, reduces inequality, and supplements earnings with services and benefits. Policies directed specifically at single mothers are less important than policies that extend to all families and support women’s labor force participation under diverse family circumstances.

Swedish family policy has evolved over decades and continues to evolve in response to changes in social values, the political balance of power, and the macroeconomic environment. Much of the framework was established during the Depression when low birthrates were a concern. It reflects pro-natalist policies proposed by the great Swedish economists and sociologists Alva and Gunnar Myrdal.

### **Trends in Family Composition**

Sweden has long been relatively tolerant of women who became pregnant before marriage. But even for Sweden the recent rise in births to unwed mothers from 12.6 % of all births in 1963 to 48% in 1986 is startling. This phenomenon does not indicate similarly high levels of single parenting, but rather reflects the fact that Swedish couples frequently cohabit without or before marrying. It is not unusual to get married after having had a child, a fact which is reflected in statistically higher median age at first marriage than at first birth. Tax law changes in the last few decades have removed economic incentives for marriage. Illegitimacy is not stigmatized and has no legal bearing on inheritance. Joint custody of children is now the default outcome of divorce and separation. The incidence of teenage pregnancy is low due to extensive use of contraceptives.

Most Swedish children live with both parents, but the percentage dropped from 88.6% in 1975 to 85.9% in 1985. Of these, 14.4% lived with unmarried cohabiting parents in 1985, up from 7.6% in 1975. The proportion of children living with single parents grew slightly over the same decade: from 1.3% to 1.9% with single fathers; 10.1% to 12.2% with single mothers. (In the U.S. the percentage of children living with single mothers rose from 11% in 1970 to 21% in 1988.)

## **Labor Market and Workplace Policies**

Earnings are important for most women in Sweden, including single mothers. Although many women work part time, single mothers are more likely to work longer hours than married mothers; 48% of single mothers work full time. Occupational segregation remains high with women concentrated in lower paying jobs, but the gender wage gap in Sweden is not as great as in other industrialized countries. Nearly 60% of women work in the public sector where wage inequality is less than in the private sector. In the 1960s and 1970s, wage differences across occupations narrowed. They have widened since then, but wages for men and women still remain more equal in Sweden than elsewhere.

At present, conflicting trends mean that women's prospects in the labor market are uncertain. Global economic pressures are eroding the solidaristic political values that tended to reduce wage differences throughout Swedish society. Since women are concentrated at the low end of the wage structure, they will be disadvantaged if wages are set solely in response to market pressure without intervention from government or other institutions. On the other hand, women are increasing their education levels and moving into the ranks of higher paying jobs.

Generous paid and unpaid family leave policies for both men and women enable parents in Sweden to enjoy job security, income stability, and time with young children. The amount of time allowed for family leave stood at 15 months in 1992, 12 months at approximately 90% of full pay plus 3 months at a daily rate. (Non-workers receive a lower rate.) Family leave can be used by either parent until a child is eight years old and can be configured so that a parent saves blocks of time for children's medical emergencies or works shorter hours while young children are in school.

## **Tax and Transfer Policies**

Government support for single mothers and their children is based on benefits available to all families, or to all low-income families. All parents receive an allowance for each child aged 16 or younger. Many also receive means tested benefits, the most common being housing subsidies. Single mothers, and in recent years single fathers, also receive assistance from the government in collecting child support from non-custodial parents. The system is very complex and subject to frequent revision. It involves formulas for determining each parent's fair share of the child's expenses based on parents' incomes, how much time the child spends with each parent, stepfamily arrangements, etc. If necessary, the government will advance child support money due from a non-paying parent and attempt to collect the money later.

The tax structure contains no deduction for dependents. The tax structure once taxed husbands and wives jointly and penalized working wives. Today's system taxes men and women separately at a rate nearly proportional to their income. Recently progressivity of taxation has been increasing.

## **Child Care**

The Swedish government subsidizes child care heavily. Nearly half of all children under six were either enrolled in state funded child care centers or in the care of host mothers who are paid by the local governments. Fees from parents cover only 10% of total daycare costs. Private child care is expensive and not tax deductible, so most families, including 84% of single mothers, who use child care place their children in publicly supported situations. Forty-two percent of children under six have one parent at home on family leave (some attend part-day kindergarten).

Rated on a continuum of public to private responsibility, “Great Britain and the United States come closest to ‘maximum private responsibility for children,’ and Sweden comes closest to maximum public responsibility.” [312] To some extent this commitment to children on the part of the state traces its origins to discussions of family policy in the 1930s. The Myrdals promoted the idea that children would be better off in the care of professionally trained caregivers than with untrained mothers. Childcare under this regime was seen as a kind of poverty relief. The expansion of the publicly subsidized child care system came about only in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the demands of working mothers.

School hours in Sweden are also compatible with working mothers’ hours, particularly if one parent takes advantage of the opportunity to use family leave to shorten the work day. Children remain in school until late in the afternoon, eating lunch there and performing most of their work at school. In comparison, German children get out of school around one o’clock in the afternoon, eat lunch at home, and require help with a heavy load of homework.

## **Conclusion**

During the 1980s and 1990s there has been increasing economic insecurity in the global economy. Although Sweden has not been immune to these pressures, welfare policies and institutions buffered the Swedish people from the worst global trends and protected single mothers and their children from the poverty that too often faces single mothers in the U.S. It is not clear if and to what extent these publicly furnished supports will persist, however the fact that most benefits extend to all families improves the chances for widespread political support. In the 1990s Sweden has experienced the worst economic recession since the 1930s with, in some years, double digit unemployment figures. The family support system, under heavy attack because of its heavy load on public finances, has survived with modification. The 12 months paid parental leaves are now compensated at 75 percent of foregone income rather than the previous 90 percent.