

5. Overview and Conclusions

It is difficult to distinguish the separate effects of law and national culture in producing the very different family trends observed in Sweden and Italy. Law and fiscal policy in Sweden are strongly supported by energetic moral exhortation for women to be self-supporting while producing the next generation of Swedes. The result is a homogeneous culture, in which all institutions and public messages work towards the same goals. Italy achieves the same effect, but with family affairs left far more to families, with little or no public intervention.

Sometimes new trends are the unexpected and unforeseen consequence of intended developments. For example, increasing income inequality between households is the inevitable consequence of rising female employment and the polarisation of women's jobs and careers. Sharp inequalities between no-earner, one-earner, and two-earner households are exacerbated by the decision of some two-earner couples not to have any children, while one-earner and no-earner households often have larger families. Given this long-term increase in income-inequality, poverty must also rise in the long term, given the current focus on relative definitions.

More state support for children has its own inevitable consequences, when a husband's financial support is automatically replaced by state support (which is more regular, predictable and reliable than many men are). One-parent families become more viable, divorce becomes less unattractive and financially ruinous. The long-term consequences are shown in Sweden. The consequences of a long-term refusal to improve state support for parents and children are seen in Italy, with its plummeting birth rate.

Sweden has wrapped its pronatalist policies in a 'gender equity' gift wrapping. Based on a combination of feminist claims that all women wanted to combine paid jobs with childrearing and socialist demands that they should do so, the focus of social policy has been on supporting working mothers-to the extent of decrying full-time mothers. There is good evidence that many women do not want this dual role; instead, they prefer to focus their energies full-time on family work (and large families) or on high-achieving careers (often staying childless to avoid conflicting priorities).¹ It is thus not surprising that recent research has finally shown the pay gap in Sweden to be just as large as elsewhere in Europe,² while occupational segregation and the glass ceiling are even greater than in the USA and western Europe.³ The irony here, as elsewhere, is that lower birth rates can be reversed, but only among the minority of women who are family-centred in their goals and aspirations. Unfortunately, these women are now completely lost from sight in the conventional focus on high-achieving women.

It is finally being recognised that family-friendly policies, even in Sweden, do not eliminate conflicting priorities between work and family, they simply make it more feasible for mothers to do some paid work rather than none.⁴ This does not put mothers with (part-time) jobs on the same footing as careerist men in full-time jobs. However, it does curtail their parenting activities. In Italy, mothers face a sharper choice between a fulltime homemaker role and full-time employment. But this is not the sole cause of the low fertility rate, which seems to be due rather to a host of problems in combination, including the tendency for children to live at home until their late 20s and 30s.

This, in turn, owes much to a failure to provide fiscal recognition for families that might enable young people to set up home and have children while maintaining some parity in living standards with their childless peers. This failure may be attributable, ironically, to a protective 'hands-off' approach that extends to economic support itself, where the reverence for the family kills the very thing it loves. In the UK, spitefulness towards two-parent families and male breadwinners ensures that birth rates in the middle range of incomes are driven down, while those in more approved mother-only or mothercentric (with men loosely attached) families receive much greater subsidies to form and multiply.

The introduction of reliable modern contraception in the 1960s had several unplanned consequences. Sexual activity became disconnected from marriage and childbearing. Recreational sexual activity increased hugely, and new types of relationship developed around this new popular (but private) pastime. Cohabitation in its current form is a direct result of the contraceptive revolution, and is further extended by large numbers of young people entering higher education. Sexual relationships acquire a contingent character; divorce and separation become acceptable; serial monogamy (or cohabitation) appears. However, policy can restrain or exacerbate these trends. Limiting conditions can be applied to serial partnerships just as much as to marriage, and Sweden's de-familialising policies are not obligatory or inevitable.

The polarisation of women's employment patterns, and of household incomes, point up the need for policies that are more flexible, that cease to rely on the assumption of homogeneity. Cohabitation is also polarised - between the better-educated couples who progress to marriage, and the lower-income, less educated couples whose behaviour can be heavily influenced by welfare benefits, fiscal policy and employment histories. So far, few social scientists, and even fewer policy makers, have recognised the need for analyses that differentiate between polarising groups. Policy will be far more successful if it is based on a correct map of current developments.

It has to be recognised that the relatively low impact of family policies in some countries is due to the lack of consistency and continuity in policy-making. Sweden is an exception here, due to the social and political homogeneity that kept the same political party in power for decades. If Sweden is a model, it is primarily for the consistency and continuity of its social and family policies, which do, eventually, cumulatively, have large impacts. Countries like Italy and France experience changes in government that produce sharp swings in public policy. With no single type of policy dominating, it is not surprising that small bits of tinkering at the edges have little effect. For example, new policies to support full-time mothers and large families alternate with policies to support working women and individualised welfare benefits. One result of the conflicting ideologies and competing policies in western Europe is that many schemes and benefits are in practice non-operational for one reason or another. This is certainly the case in southern Europe, for example.

Labour laws in Italy (as in Spain and Greece) give working women extensive rights to parental leave and other benefits. In practice, these are regarded as so onerous for employers, especially in the context of high unemployment rates, that women do not feel able to take advantage of them.⁵ The alternative view is that legislators intentionally gave working women extensive rights so as to ensure that employers would refuse to employ women, forcing them back into the home.⁶ In effect, women have to choose between full-time continuous employment (in the same way as men) or full-time homemaking in Italy. This produces a much lower level of employment among women, as noted in Table 1 (p. 7), than in countries (such as Sweden and Britain) where women move flexibly in and out of paid work, and in and out of part-time jobs, over the lifecycle. In turn, another consequence is that working women tend to have no children, or only one child, producing the lowest fertility rate in the EU in the 1990s (see Table 2, pp. 8-10).

While some commentators see policies on the family as a response to family changes, rather than the cause, historically, the fear of falling fertility, if not family decline, have been the most potent catalysts for action. It seems likely that family policy will take centre stage in the foreseeable future.

Footnotes in 5: Overview and Conclusions

1. Hakim, C., *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2000; Hakim, C., *Models of the Family in Modern Societies: Ideals and Realities*, Ash gate, 2003; Hakim, C., , *A New Approach to Explaining Fertility Patterns: Preference Theory*, *Population and Development Review*, 29,2003, pp.349-74.
2. Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*, 2000, p.m.
3. Hakim, c., *Key Issues in Women's Work*, Cavendish/Glasshouse, 2004, pp. 170-82.
4. Charles, M. and Grusky, D.B., *Occupational Ghettos*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004; Hakim, *Key Issues in Women's Work*, 2004; Jacobs, J.A. and Gerson, K., *The Time Divide: Work, Family and Gender Inequality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.
5. Hantrais, L., *Gendered Policies in Europe: Reconciling Employment and Family Life*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, pp. 108-23.
6. Hantrais, *Gender Policies in Europe*, 2000, pp. 112-13.