

SOCIAL POLICIES AND MARRIAGE STABILITY IN SWEDEN

by

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INTRODUCTION

The approach of the present paper, dealing with family policies in Sweden, is somewhat different from that of Professor Marty, describing corresponding legal rules in France.¹ He describes elegantly and in great detail the workings of the legal machinery. Our approach, however, is to give comparatively brief summaries of the legal rules while trying in addition to indicate how the policies can be assumed to affect the stability of marriages and families. It seems legitimate to give at least some thought to these problems, since the effect on stability presumably is the reason that this kind of legislation is discussed in the present context at all.

Two things should be emphasized from the beginning. One is that the legal devices discussed have been introduced for other reasons than to promote family stability. At least, this has not been the primary reason. Whatever effects there have been in this direction must be regarded as secondary effects, not directly intended by the deciding persons.

The other point is that nothing is known with certainty regarding these effects. The causal relations involved have not been investigated. The indicated causal connections must therefore be regarded as more or less plausible speculations. Much research is needed before we can state anything about the effects of different legal devices with any greater degree of confidence.

1) G. Marty, "La politique juridique française en faveur de la famille," supra in this volume.

If there are any effects as suggested below, they are probably very small. This is made even more likely by the fact that the effects are almost wholly unintended.

A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Behavior is conceived as motivated. It leads to goals of one sort or another. Those things which are perceived as goals and as desirable behavior are culturally defined. In marriage, the roles of the spouses are to a large extent culturally defined for them, but some aspects of the roles are defined individually by each spouse for himself.

The group — marriage — is formed and maintained because the spouses prefer this state of nature to any other state of nature. They are more motivated to live in this particular marriage group than in any other marriage group or to live single. This motivation may come from either inside or outside the group.

Motivations from the inside are all those characteristics of the group activities (role activities of the spouses) and personal qualities of the spouses that make this particular marriage either more or less satisfactory to the spouses than other possible marriages. The motivation to stay in a marriage is reduced chiefly by role conflicts and emotional conflicts.

Motivations from the outside to stay in a marriage are those changes in the environment that would result from the dissolution of this particular marriage (or are believed to so result by the spouses) and that are undesirable. E.g., others would take and express an hostile attitude, they themselves would develop feelings of guilt and doubt, the legal procedure of divorce would be decidedly unpleasant, the economic conditions of both would deteriorate.

Many different definitions of marriage stability are possible. Within our frame of reference the most adequate definition is perhaps that marriage stability is proportional to how much more the particular marriage is liked than any other conceivable realistic state of nature by the spouse who is least interested in it. We obviously are avoiding any consideration of operational definitions

in this connection. We can also say that marriage stability equals the probability that the marriage will last. The two definitions should be approximately equivalent. The most important and readily available index of marriage stability as so defined is the divorce rate. It is not a perfect index, but it is the best available index of marriage stability in practically all countries.

If changes in marriage stability are noticed in a society, they can be attributed to certain classes of causes. a) One class consists of changes in the role expectations of the spouses with the marriage. Changes in the society which may change the roles of the spouses so as to decrease their satisfaction are : decrease in the number of culturally defined role characteristics, cultural conflict, conditions favoring unrealistic and neurotic expectations, conditions favoring alcoholism, etc. b) Another class of causes are changes in the prevalent moral codes regarding marriage stability. These changes will affect what people say about the dissolution of a marriage and how the spouses themselves will feel about such a thing. c) The third class of causes are changes in the social structure of the society. We may have changes in the legal rules, e.g. divorce laws alimony provisions. Changes in the economic structure are also taking place, e.g. the greater proportion nowadays of wives engaged in gainful occupations and thus economically self-supporting. Changes of this kind determine more general social effects of the dissolution of a marriage.

These changes are not independent of each other. In particular, there is a close relationship between moral and legal codes. And the legal devices — outside of the divorce laws — affecting marriage stability will have to do so indirectly, in particular by making certain role behaviors possible which would otherwise have been impossible. In discussing the different legal devices in Sweden which may have effects of this kind we will in each case outline some possible way or ways in which these effects may take place.

SOME LEGAL DEVICES

1) Keeping the Family Members in Good Shape.

a) *Social Medicine.*

Through the general health insurance and social medicine

system good medical care at low cost is provided for everybody. This is a means of keeping the family members in good condition, thus eliminating reasons for dissatisfactions.

b) Vacations.

All employees are entitled to a three weeks (18 days) vacation with full pay each year. This is a minimum, guaranteed by the law. Some categories have more. This law is beneficial to all gainfully employed family members, contributing to their physical and psychological wellbeing.

c) Care of Mothers in Connection with Childbirth.

Expectant mothers receive free medical examinations, and at the birth of the child they get practically free confinement in maternity hospitals. They pay in the hospitals 1 Kr. a day, which is less than the cost of their food at home for most of them. These policies serve to keep the mothers in good shape, by encouraging them to get the best possible care during pregnancy and at the birth of the child. This should increase the average satisfaction of both husbands and wives by keeping the wives longer in good physical condition.

d) Other Measures to Keep Mothers (Wives) in Good Shape.

Cheap home help is provided during illness, childbirth, etc. The state employs full time home workers who are partially paid by state funds. The family using the services of the home worker pay her according to the family income. The highest income brackets pay the full cost, the lowest pay nothing at all.

From 1946 vacations for housewives have been facilitated. They receive a practically free railroad trip within Sweden once a year. The only cost is a flat sum of 10 Kr. per trip. Also, vacation centers are built for them with state subsidies where they can spend some time practically without cost. These benefits are open only to those wives who have a low family income and at least two children. During the absence of these mothers, domestic assistance is available in their home through state subsidies.

These policies should also help to keep the wives in better shape, both physically and mentally.

2. Easing the Economic Burden of Having a Child.

a) Allowances at Childbirth.

The allowances at childbirth are of two kinds. One, called maternity aid, is given in cash to all mothers, who receive 270 Kr. at the birth of a child, irrespective of economic need. The other kind of allowance is called maternity grants which are given according to need up to 600 kr. per birth. The maternity grants are usually provided in kind the form of domestic help, better food, clothing, dental care, etc.

These allowances prevent direct economic difficulties in connection with the arrival of a child. They take care of most of the extra initial expenses. Thus they remove directly a cause of dissatisfaction for the spouses. Indirectly the birth of more children may be encouraged by this economic help, at least in the lower income brackets, and there are some signs that indicate a relationship between a higher number of children and more stable families, but this relationship is not proved decisively.

b) General Child Allowances.

A cash allowance of 400 Kr. a year is paid for every child up to 16 years of age (to 18 years if the child continues his school education after 16 years of age). The money is paid out 4 times a year, except in special cases to the mother. On the other hand, no tax exemption is, of course, to give more help to people in low income brackets.

The effect on marriage stability is to remove some of the economic burdens of having and bringing up children. Thus the chances of satisfaction with the marriage are increased. The amount paid per year for a child is comparatively small and covers only a small part of the actual costs for a child. But it is a definite step in the direction of distributing the burdens of child rearing more evenly. In a few cases, in the very lowest income brackets, an increased motivation to have more children may also be created, thus indirectly contributing to family stability, if we can rely on the relationship discussed above..

3. General Standard Supporting Devices.

a) *Child Care.*

Various services are provided by the state to keep the children in good condition. Health standards are maintained for the children while at the same time the economic burden of the parents is lessened. Both effects should contribute to the satisfaction of the parents.

i) Periodical health examinations are given to children from birth up through school. They are free for all.

ii) Various vaccinations are given free.

iii) Free dental care is given in most elementary schools.

iv) School meals, one meal a day, is given free to all school children.

v) Low cost day nurseries are provided but not with sufficient capacity, to fill the demand.

vi) All children in families below a certain income level are given one free railroad trip a year within Sweden for a nominal fee (5-10 Kr.). For children under 10 the mother is entitled to accompany it.

b) *Housing.*

The system of public support to housing is very complex. Practically all new houses receive state loans and general state subsidies. Rents are controlled, and the rent costs are kept low in general. In some cities public housing projects have been started with support from local funds.

In addition special subsidies are given to low income families (about 70 per cent of all families): i) tax-exempt rent-rebates 150 Kr. per child and year, ii) supplementary fuel allowance 270-330 Kr. annually, iii) an additional allowance of 270 Kr per year to families with very low income (4,000 Kr. a year or less).

The policies have led to a uniformly fairly high housing standard at low cost. They have also resulted in a serious housing

shortage. The effects are different on those who have got an apartment or house and those who have not. In the former case the good housing should increase satisfaction and stability, in the latter case the lack of adequate housing should have the opposite effect. Another possible result of the housing should increase satisfaction and stability, in the latter case the lack of adequate housing should have the opposite effect. Another possible result of the housing situation is that some marriages may be postponed because of lack of housing facilities, and in this way some hasty marriages may be prevented.

c) Marriage Loans.

Loans are advanced through the Bank of Sweden to young couples within half a year after marriage. No security is necessary, the state guarantees the payment. The interest rate is low, and repayment takes place within 8 years. To be eligible, the couple must have an income below a certain level. At present, loans are given to about 20 per cent of all newlywed couples. The program has been in effect since 1938. From 1953 unmarried mothers may be granted loans on similar conditions. Plans for purchases of furniture and other household articles have to be submitted before the loan is granted. In some cities counselling is arranged for the couples concerning the use of the money.

The loans make it easier to get married. Marriage stability may be decreased through the encouragement of more hasty marriages. On the other hand, the loans facilitate the procurement of a good home equipment, a very important characteristic of the family group. This may make the spouses more satisfied with the marriage. In particular, frustration in the home is less likely to develop, and consequently there is less probability of quarrels developing.

4. Tax legislation.

The tax laws regard the total income of the married couple as the unit of taxation. For state taxes the rates are progressive, for local taxes proportional. Exemptions are allowed for the husband and the wife but not for the children as mentioned above.

Married women with income of their own may make special deductions. First they deduct 300 Kr. if their income during the year is 300 Kr. or more. In addition, if they have children living at home they deduct 10 per cent of the income up to a maximum deduction of 700 Kr. The total maximum is thus 1,000 Kr. These deductions are aimed at counteracting the effect of the progressive rates on the pooling of the income of the couple.

The net effect of these deduction rules is that married women with low income pay less in taxes than they would have done if the individual income had been the tax unit, but if their own income is high and/or their husband's income is high they pay much more in taxes than they would with a higher education, qualified for well paid and interesting jobs, usually married to men with comparatively high salaries. Either they get very little left of their pay, or they stay home dissatisfied with being housewives.

DISCUSSION

All devices considered probably have only small effects on marital stability if any. The effects that exist are almost entirely confined to the spouses' satisfaction with the marriage as such, affecting their wellbeing, economy, and home environment. These effects are limited, however, by a factor which has not been mentioned before. The value scales may change so that as the standard of living gets higher, the demanded standard also increased. If this is the case, most of the increases in satisfaction treated above will be eliminated. If the demands increase faster than the progress of the actual conditions, a decrease in satisfaction may result even from an increased level of the standard of living.
