GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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The world today is characterized by rapid transformations in all spheres of life that are customary analyzed in light of the term 'globalization'. In addition to the globalization of the economy, two broad global social processes, connected to what we could call the globalization of culture, the struggle for gender equality and the trend toward individualization, are of special importance in relation to the questions of gender equality and social security systems.

In this age of globalization both the labour market and the family relations are infused with new and old-age risks and uncertainties. Most treatments of the economic change and these consequences in terms of risks and uncertainties harbour however a 'conceptual silence'; the refusal to acknowledge explicitly or implicitly that global restructuring today is occurring on a gendered terrain. When applying feminist scholarship to macroeconomics, the importance of the modern welfare state as a source of modern women's empowerment becomes visible. To the extent the proponents of economic globalization seek to shrink the public sphere- the realm of political negotiation- and at the same time expand and reassert the autonomy of the
private sector and the private sphere, this clearly conflicts with the equity agenda of the women's movement.

The mass entry of women into the labour market has been one of the major social developments in most modern societies since World War II. What changed was not just the nature of female activities as such, but also women’s expectations of themselves and their general view of their own proper place in society. Transformations in one sphere, however, do not necessarily produce significant consequences in others. The reasons why women plunge into paid work today have therefore no necessary connection with their view of their own general positions or legal rights. It can be due to poverty or economic necessity, to employers' preferences for the female over the male worker as being cheaper or more biddable, or simply to a growing number of female-headed families. What looks like similar trends in various countries around the world of women's increasing engagement in paid work may therefore have different causes and carry different meanings, in relation to the struggle for equality between men and women.

As shown in UN Human Development Reports, there is no clear statistical correlation between the so-called human development index and women's proportion of the labour force; countries with high ranks on this index may have high as well as low female economic activity rate, and the same is true for countries with lower ranks on this index. Today women's right to employment seems however to have been widely accepted as a necessary condition for bettering women's welfare in relation to men, and even as a matter of survival. According to the 1998 UN Human Development Report, there is no country in the world in which women's quality of life is equal to that of men, according to a complex measure that includes longevity, health status, educational opportunities and political rights.
The differences between countries are however great, and the Nordic countries come out as the best ones on this measure of gender equality. The Nordic social welfare system is an important condition behind this result. The concept of "women-friendly" welfare states becomes relevant when attempting to understand what the increase in women's employment can signify in terms of bettering the societal position of women.

In addition to the social revolution of women’s role on the labour market, a parallel, but still different process has been under way for some time. This cultural revolution can be linked to changes in the family and the household, and thus to the structure of relations between the genders and the generations. In the second half of this century, basic and long-lasting arrangements, such as the existence of formal marriage with a privileged sex relation for the spouses and the superiority of senior over junior generations, began to change at great speed throughout the modern world. Standards governing sexual behavior, partnership and procreation have changed dramatically over the past three decades. In many countries, behavior that was prohibited not only by law and religion, but also by customary morality, convention and neighbourhood opinion has now become permissible. These tendencies can be interpreted as part of a broader, worldwide trend. Although the feminist movement may have played an important role in this development, the rise of a specific and extraordinary powerful culture among the younger generation seems to have had even more significance. The ideology of everyone claiming the freedom to "do their own thing" with minimal outside constraint has been a distinctive characteristic of this wave. (The fact that, in practice, peer pressure and fashion probably impose as much uniformity as before is another matter). More social theorists argue that we in the Western societies are eyewitnesses to a social transformation within modernity, in the course of which people will be set free from the social forms of industrial society - class, stratification, family, gender status of men and women -
just as during the course of the reformation people were released from the secular rule of the Church into society. It is argued that the spiral of individualization is taking hold also inside the family and that it is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean. Even if such a transformation hitherto has been more ideologial than real, some of its consequences seems real enough.

The labour market in late modernity is the motor behind this individualization process. Success in the labor market depends on education, willingness to be mobile and to participate in individual competition. Education, mobility, and competition reinforce each other in a way that reinforce the individualization process. To what extent this process in late modern societies leads to new and great differences between men and and women (and between women) is heavily dependent on the structure of the social security system. Welfare states differ much with respect to how much women can be said to "be a husband away from poverty" and with respect to the supply of social services making it possible to combine employment and motherhood. Indicators on the women-friendliness of the welfare state are:1) Welfare benefits that allow women to support families when marriages break up or fathers neglect responsibility for children, 2) policies to protect job rights during pregnancy and motherhood, 3) policies to promote greater wage equality and women's access to good jobs, 3) policies to promote good social care services for children, disabled and elderly. Gender differences in vulnerability to the need for social provision and care services are important premises for social policy also in the late modern societies. Women's greater vulnerability is connected to their role in biological reproduction as well as to their longer life expectancy. The "inevitable dependency" connected to the necessity of being cared for because of old age and disability, and the "derived dependency " that so often accompanies informal caregiving, are both conditions of life which women come into more often than men.
When analyzing what kind of welfare policy are adequate to further gender equality in this era of economic globalization, I find a new political concept of an ethic of care to be much relevant. This new ethic of care has been developed in a discourse between feminist philosophers, political scientists and sociologists from many countries, and new books on the topic are coming all the time. The main ideas behind this ethic that makes it so relevant in relation to the future politics of gender and social security are the following:

1. Assuming care to be a fundamental aspect of human life means that humans in the first instance are not to be understood as fully autonomous, but as being in a condition of interdependence.

2. Thinking of people as interdependent allows us to understand both autonomous and involved aspects of human life. From this perspective it becomes misleading to discuss the principles that should guide welfare policy in terms of dependence versus autonomy. The question should rather be: What kind of dependencies will be created by different kinds of welfare policies and then also of social security systems, and which consequences will the different alternatives have for different groups of people?

3. Caring is a central, but devalued aspect of human life also in late modernity. Because the modern world does not fully notice the importance of care and the moral quality of its practice, we devalue much of the work and contributions of women and other disempowered groups who still do most of the caring of children, disabled and elderly. Only to the extent we understand care as a political idea are we able to understand its status and the status of those who do the caring work. (Such an understanding also make visible the chains of care and the care drain that today seem to be a result of immigrant women from the third world taking over some of the care for the dependent groups in the first world. This kind of "taking over" might be a necessary condition for
gender equality on the labour market for many middle class couples in the first world. On the other hand, the consequences for the care of the immigrant care workers' own children left behind also have to be considered when evaluating this globalization of carework.

Of all modern welfare states the Nordic ones have realized some more of the political idea of care than others. Today there seems however to be some tendencies going in direction of weakening this idea as a basis for welfare policies. One such tendency is a decreasing attractiveness of the traditional female jobs in the public care sector. A focus on care implies that we have to recognise that the organisation of paid care services have to be based on a logic different from the instrumental rationality dominating in the market. A focus on care as a political issue also implies that we have to question how different indicators on gender equality should be interpreted in terms of welfare. Not all indicators on gender equality can be interpreted as welfare indicators, as it probably is possible to realise some kind of gender equality in a society that otherwise could be characterized as a "technological hell", like Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. If we in the modern world do not manage to balance the dominating norm of competitive individualism with a greater emphasis on an ethic of care in welfare policy and planning, there is a danger the development might go in such a direction.

The great challenge for most modern societies today is to develop welfare systems that can further a more care rich society which is neither based on greater gender inequality nor on being dependent of large groups of very low-paid immigrant care-and service-workers with no or minimal social rights. The further development of social security systems in modern societies should not be based on any of the two family models that dominate in welfare policy today.: 1) The model of a patriarchal family. 2) The model of a family which have realized gender equality both in relation to the labour market and in the family. None of these models fits the realities of today's family practices very well. Instead we therefore have to find a new
model which acknowledge both the problems of gender inequality and the problems families have in order to fulfill the demands of the labour market and at the same time provide adequate care for children and other dependent family members. Maybe it could be possible to model such a new system of social responsibility in a way that also could contribute to a considerable decrease in the social stratification based on sex.
References


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