

Dissertation. The kaleidoscope of family policy

Zhanna Kravchenko
**Family (versus) Policy:
Combining Work and
Care in Russia and
Sweden**

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MANY OF THOSE LIVING in the Nordic region probably would associate Russian families with a demonstrably intimate emotional climate. Cramped rooms, but always room for a friend; guests can step into slippers, stay a long time, feel part of great events and tragic fates. At the same time, certain taboos are detectable. Confusion arises immediately if you comment on how much the hostess of the house is doing in the kitchen while the men sit and talk. Other characteristics also feel amazingly old-fashioned: a minimum of three courses for dinner on a normal day, toasts held in honor of the beautiful ladies at the table.

The emotional climate makes it tempting to exaggerate the differences between Russian and Nordic family life. After all there are a lot of similarities between Russian and Nordic families; small families with few children and working parents, public health care, affordable daycare and free schooling, suburban life in ugly high-rises, a high divorce rate, and a large number of single mothers. Much of what seems to be “typically Russian” can also be found in Southern Europe: maternal dominance, the patriarchal traditions, the closeness between generations.

When Göran Therborn examined families of the previous century around the globe, he underlined the peculiarities of the European family model, relative to all the others. But even if one limits oneself to Europe, differences are seen from the very start. From a socio-political standpoint, it is exciting to figure out which ingredients are relevant: is it about legislation, ideology, or everyday culture?

ZHANNA KRAVCHENKO'S dissertation, *Family (versus) Policy*, compares family policy in Sweden and Russia from 1991, when the new post-socialist Russia arose, until 2007.¹ She is interested in the goals of family policy, the implementation of the policy, and its outcomes, especially with regard to the question of reconciling children and career. In contrast to most previous comparative family policy studies, she does not base the research on different welfare regimes à la Esping-Andersen. Instead, she examines the so-called

gender contract at various levels: the official, the normative, and the everyday level. In this way she can compare Sweden and Russia on three different levels (government policy, attitudes, practices), but can also observe the discrepancy between different levels within the same country, as well as the direction in which these levels are developing.

Kravchenko makes use of different kinds of material and methods of analysis: for the policies, documents; for attitudes, survey data; and for the micro-level, personal interviews with employed parents.

I AM A STRONG supporter of this kind of methodological pluralism and pragmatism. The materials and methodology used by research should, of course, be determined by what one is trying to figure out, namely the research question, not the theoretical guru that previously had been granted the status of household god. In recent years, purely “qualitative” sociological research seems to have reached an impasse. There are far too many dissertations in which no statistical background is given and the outcomes depend solely on a few, intuitively interpreted interviews.

As sociologist Pertti Töttö has pointed out, a hunt for “meaning” and “depth” that has gone too far can result in all figures aside from page numbers being banned. Just a month or so ago I heard someone with a Ph.D. in sociology discourage surveys as a method, on the grounds that “a survey can never say anything about *meanings*”. Coupled with this attitude is often a blind faith in the power of ideologies and expressed opinions, a kind of reverse Marxism.

Kravchenko's methodical choices thus serve her theoretical ambition: to examine *how* ideologies, attitudes, and practices affect each other. Nonetheless, it may be difficult for one and the same researcher to master both textual interpretations and statistical analyses. Researches also have different talent for these rather disparate kinds of handicrafts. In addition, there is the matter of how much time a graduate student can find for various methodology courses – both advanced semiotic analysis and advanced statistics require months of training.

Kravchenko manages all of her material with the same skill and confidence. The analyses are methodologically simple, but the results fascinating. As if through a kaleidoscope, the research approaches a question, answers it, and, keeping that mosaic in mind, performs the next turn of the kaleidoscope with it, creates a mosaic in memory at the next turn.

First mosaic: the official contract. What do parental leave, public childcare and families' economic benefits look like in the two countries? The biggest difference concerns the constant emphasis on gender equality in Sweden, as opposed to the Russian orientation, which either is gender-neutral or holds the woman responsible for both the children and the household. In practice, the countries guarantee fairly similar rights, except that the level of benefits, support, and services is higher in Sweden. Kravchenko stresses that the development of childcare in both

countries came only after women and mothers had entered the labor market, not vice versa.

The Swedish tradition of part-time working women leads to the significant difference that resonates throughout the research: more than 30 percent of Swedish women worked part time in 2002, compared to just five percent in Russia. On the other hand, 14 percent are housewives in Sweden, but 20 percent in Russia. This means that 45 percent of Swedish women and 25 percent of Russian women (usually mothers) do not work fulltime – the latter in a country that has not consciously focused on equality during the past two decades! Among other things, the Russian maternity leave is, in practice, consistent with what feminist researchers have called the gender equality oriented model – but without being so in an ideological way.

In contrast to Russia, Sweden has made efforts to involve fathers in childcare, with results that are obvious, albeit modest in relation to how much mothers still do. Another striking difference is that the proportion of children in daycare steadily increased in Sweden (53 per cent of 0- to 7-year-olds in 1992, 63 per cent in 2003) while it held at around 57 percent in Russia. So daycare practice from the Soviet period has for the most part continued, despite new private nursery schools, and increased difficulties facing parents in the search for a good daycare center.

The Swedish drive for equality in parenting thus results in more and more young children being in daycare. If one wants to stir up a hornet's nest in the eternal debate on homecare versus daycare one could ask whether this trend of increasing daycare is the price of increased paternal mobilization in the family. And if the Swedish trend soon reverses because of the childcare allowance: more children at home but reduced equality? Kravchenko does not approach this hornet's nest. Also, she consciously takes the adults', not the children's, perspective on family policy.

Second mosaic: the normative contract. How do Russians and Swedes view women's professional work and gender equality? Responses from the International Social Survey Programme from 1994 to 2002 show, not surprisingly, that Swedes are consistently more egalitarian and less traditional than



Continued. **Dissertation**



Russians. Despite this, the trend in *both* countries is towards greater support for equality. The distribution of household work paints the same picture: greater polarization between the sexes in Russia, yet with the same trend in both countries – men doing more “women’s jobs”, women doing more typically “male” jobs, and couples also sharing more tasks.

This result is as important as it is positive. Given Russia’s economic crises, massive social inequality, and sometimes openly misogynistic mass media, one might have predicted the opposite – and many did just that. During *perestroika*, leading feminist scholars claimed that the country was moving towards a patriarchal renaissance and that the status of women both in the labor market and in the family would deteriorate sharply. That this did not happen should be celebrated more vociferously. Kravchenko shows, in particular, that the acceptance of working women has increased, presumably as a result of its continued normalcy (see also Motiejunaite & Kravchenko). More general claims about gender roles changed somewhat more slowly. Interestingly, the variation among the responses is also greater in Sweden than in Russia.

Third mosaic: contract for everyday life. Sweden preaches equality at the official and individual level, but is far less egalitarian if we look at the labor market; Russia glorifies traditional gender roles but has a more egalitarian economic and social practice. What does this look like in the everyday life of families with small children?

Kravchenko rounds off the work with an analysis of twenty interviews conducted in families with children where both parents work. Here, too, Swedish couples emphasize the importance of sharing equally to a greater extent than what actually occurs, while Russian couples talk less of equitable sharing, emphasizing “rational” reasons (“My husband does everything I ask him to around the house, but I will do it better and faster, so what’s the point in asking him?”), but nonetheless share quite a bit.

The chapter elucidates the similar rhythms and challenges in both countries: everyday life rolls on until the delicate balance is interrupted by something unexpected, and urgent

assistance is needed. (And of course the Swedes love to plan much more than the Russians do.) The introductory theoretical discussions emphasized that the families’ “agency” shapes the actual outcomes of family policy. This no doubt holds true for individual values. As Kravchenko summarizes it, “sometimes [people] diverge from their normative ideas, guided by practical considerations, while on other occasions the most practical solutions are ignored in favor of the dominant (but not necessarily utilizable in their best interests) norms”.



BUT HOW MUCH LEEWAY do families have in official family policy? In my reading, the interviews with parents show just how strongly social policies govern behavior: benefits are taken advantage of, parental leave is taken precisely as it was intended. Examples of truly radical change are not given, though they are theoretically possible: families who do not put their children in daycare or school at all, families where no adult wants to work for a wage, or families who put their children in daycare before their parental leave has expired. (In Finland recently, a mother originally from France wanted to return to work when her baby was three months old. Officially, she had a right to daycare, but in practice, nothing was available to her since “no” Finnish parent does that.) The Swedish and Russian families live in a basic social structure that has already become deeply rooted and accepted, and that is rarely questioned. We are very, very far from the situations existing in countries that do not have statutory parental leave and do not provide early childcare, countries in which the very first thought of having a child is already overshadowed by the question of who should take care of it.

There are a couple of interesting differences between Swedish and Russian families. First, Russians compensate for the lack of legal benefits (for example the right to a week-long absence when a child is sick, part-time work arrangements) with personal agreements at work. Swedes, however, follow the regulations and don’t get involved in informal “deals”. Both practices of course have their good and not so good sides when it comes to changing workplaces, personal relationships at work, or the chance to be on flextime when it suddenly and unexpectedly is needed.

Secondly, there are differences in both attitudes towards, as well as the use of, relatives, primarily grandparents. Russians say it is important that their own parents participate in raising the children – that is, important for reasons other than the practical relief it offers them. Russians are also less likely to resort to friends or organizations if they need help with the children. Swedes see their parents more as practical help and also make much use of friends and organizations. This behavior is related to the phase of life when children are born: Russian women still give birth in their

20s and are often grandmothers in their 40s, while the later age of childbirth in Sweden means that the grandparents themselves might need care when the grandchildren are very young.

DORIS LESSING WRITES in the autobiographical novel *The Four-Gated City* about how different motives may underlie the same action. Lessing’s alter ego questions the reasons she gave at the time for why she left her family, but nonetheless knows that she would have left either way. It is the action taken that counts. Zhanna Kravchenko’s dissertation illustrates this in relation to gender equality and the situation of women in Russia. Although it’s been some time since any genuine policy providing for equality has been pursued, the economic and social status of Russian women is not as bad as one might think. Even though Russian men have no feminist superego, they iron and wash almost as much as Swedish men. Suddenly, the Russian president is able to express his concern for the economic dependence of housewives in much stronger terms than those a Nordic prime minister ever would have chosen (Rotkirch, Zdravomyslova & Temkina).

Ideologies and lip service are of course also important, but are not all that matters. Family policy outcomes do not necessarily coincide with their declared motives.

If the Nordic guest still remains with his Russian hosts, it may be worthwhile to avoid abstract discussions about gender roles and instead question them about what these women and men experienced during their lives. It is actions that count.

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1. Since I am thanked in the introduction, this commentary should not be read as an objective review.

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