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New forms of work

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Comments paper – Sweden

Flexible working time in Sweden

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A comment from a Swedish gender perspective

The gender composition in the labour markets in the Netherlands, in Sweden and elsewhere has changed dramatically the last 50 years. From being very male-dominated the number of women and men is much more equal today. There is however still a major gender-imbalance since men and women are not working on the same conditions. Number of working hours by women and men differ, women's relative wages are lower than men's and future career prospects differ are examples on major differences which matters and makes the gender-difference still substantial in the labour market today.

In this comment I will only focus the first aspect: Working hours and working time arrangements.

The development in the Netherland as well as in Sweden underlines actual and flexible working-hours as a necessary, although not sufficiently, condition for women with care responsibilities to be a part of the paid labour. As long as the employers only offered full-time contracts the options were limited for many women at least for those socially responsible for family members. A more dramatic change came however when the supply of part-time work rose. Among Dutch women the employment rate rose from about 30 percent in the 1970s to more than 70 percent today. This development has moved the Netherlands from a bottom to a top position on the lists ranking female labour force participation (FLFP) in different countries.

In Sweden the development was similar disregarded that FLFP started to increase earlier. The substantial increase in part-time employment became more obvious by the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s. This change was a direct consequence of employers suffering lack of labour but also of their growing acceptance for female labour in general and women in part-time work in particular. The demand of female labour and the supply of part time work in different parts of the labour market encouraged women en masse to enter the labour market. The participation, both on full- and part-time contracts increased until the beginning of the 1990 when the peak was reached. Due to the severe economic crises that hit Sweden during the first half of 1990s, with a huge loss of employment and high unemployment as a consequence, FLFP was reduced and, although still in the top of the lists ranking countries, Sweden is not yet back to the high level from 1990s.¹

So what brought women in Sweden and later in the Netherlands to the top position when looking at their respectively LFPR? The simple answer is: Part-time work!

In Sweden this did however evolve to a most debated issue among women. Some arguing that part-time work was "women's chance" while others talked of part-time work as a "women's trap". Women are, during their life-time, more or less surrounded by a lot of obligations and considerations. Given the almost non-existing division of household work between women and men and the expectations of the motherhood in

¹ These figures refer to the age group 16-64 years.

the 1960s in Sweden and in the 1980s in the Netherlands the only way for women to become part of the paid labour force was the introduction of part-time work. Lack of childcare made women accept part-time work and lack of labour made employers less reluctant and even keen on offering part-time employment. But the question remains: Did part-time harm or improve gender equality?

In Sweden there is still an ongoing discussion about this. Few deny that part-time work meant a massive inflow of women into the labour market during the 1960s and 1970s but did it change anything? The opinions may diverge but the female presence in the labour market made it easier to argue for necessary reforms. One demand of great concern for women was the need of a modern social infrastructure. The concept of a two-breadwinner model, as opposed to the previous one-breadwinner model, was established and this must be taken into consideration. Public child care was a particular target here. Another demand, inspired by the vast increase of part-time work, was a general reduction in working hours from 40 to 30 hours per week. But while the previous one soon became realised through an extensive program for public child care all over Sweden the latter remained a “female dream”.

The demand for a general reduction in working hours was a direct consequence of women’s entry into the paid labour force. The pressure to reduce the normal working hours, from 40 to 30 hours a week, was justified by findings showing that many women had become “double-workers”. They were paid for a part-time work in the labour market but at the same time performed an unpaid full-time job within the household. In other words the positive effect on gender equality was not forthcoming as expected because female part-time job did not call for any major changes among men.

The advantages with part-time were therefore soon counter-balanced by several disadvantages, from a female perspective. One disadvantage, frequently discussed in Sweden during the last decade, can be summarised in the following way: “Once in part-time work always in part-time work”. This reveals the difficulties many women have in getting hold of a full time contract once in part-time employment. The reason was/is that many part-time jobs are created as a part-time job. Other negative things connected to part-time employment concern women’s prospects for a reasonable wage- and career development in the future. These and other disadvantages made women advocate a general reduction in working time. But since there was almost no interest among men for such a reform this demand did not get any general support whatsoever. A common opinion among many Swedish women is therefore that women themselves have introduced 30 hours week - but on their own expense.

A closer look at the statistics reveals that female part-time employment has been almost constant during the last five years (figure 1). And the difference in average working week between fathers and mothers are closely related to the age of the child (figure 2).

Figure 1

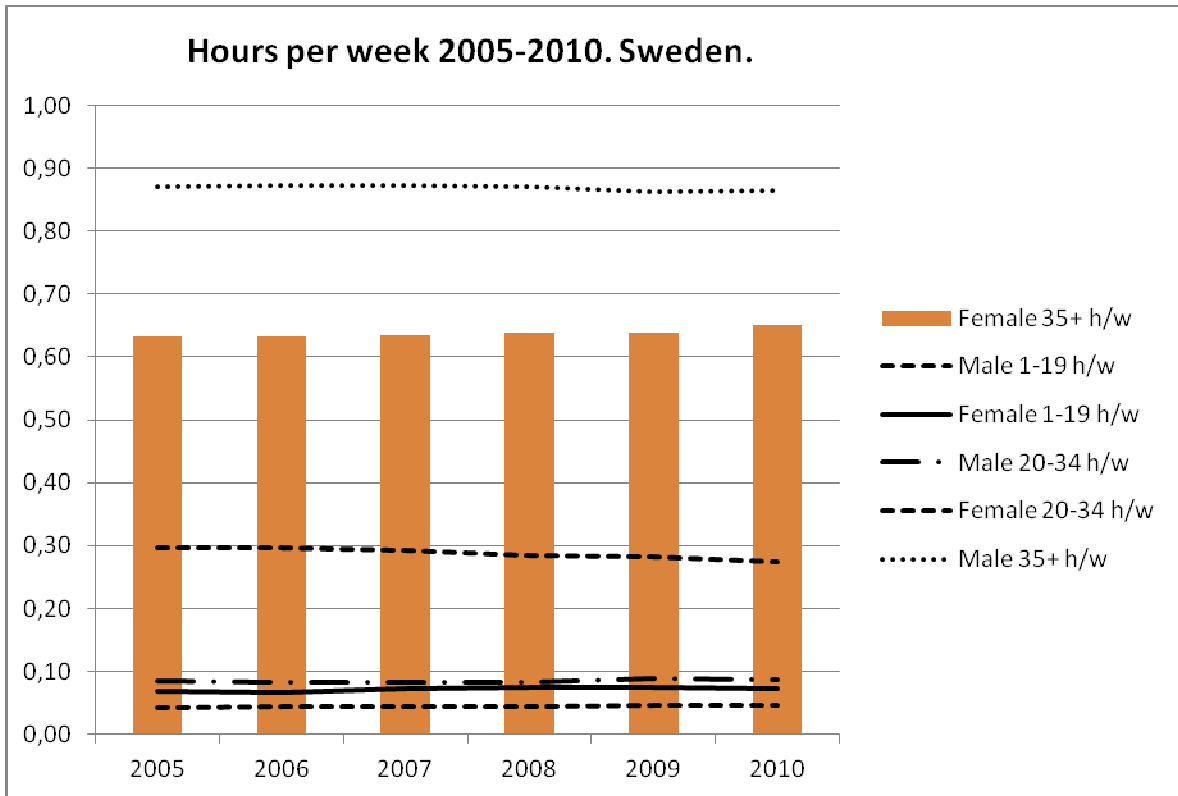
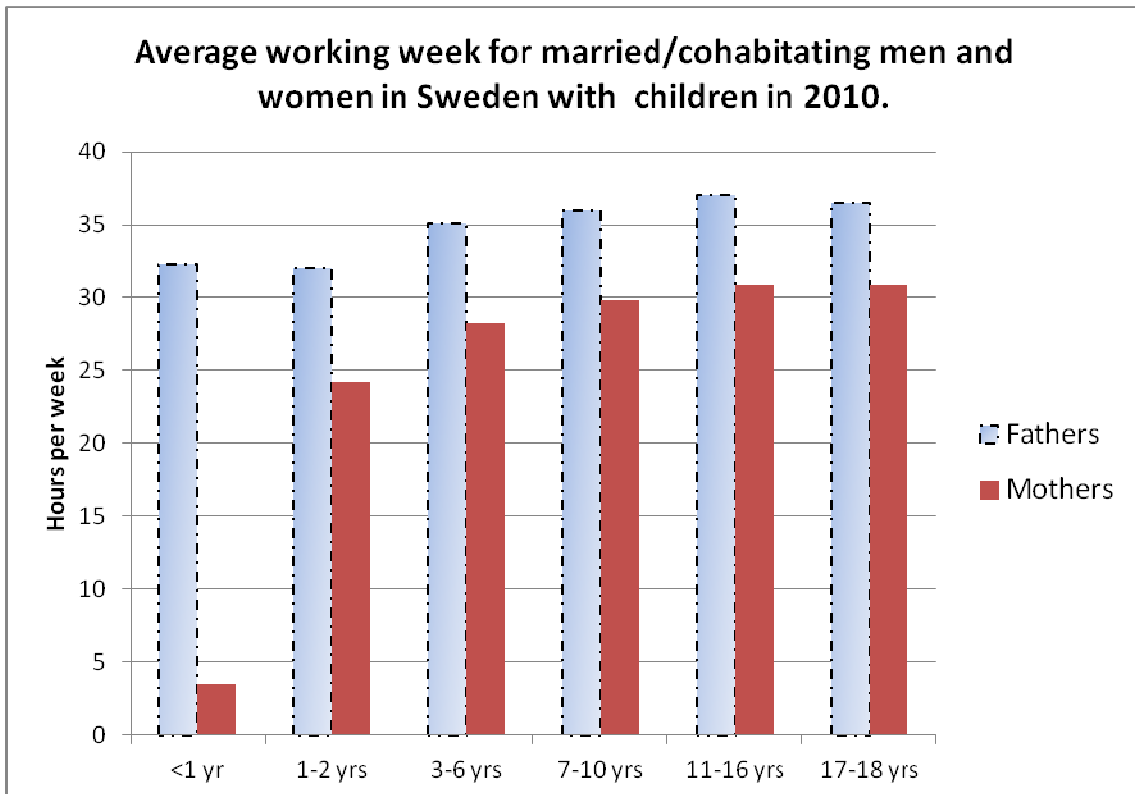


Figure 2



Part-time work is still common in Sweden but the average hours per week have gradually increased while short hours are uncommon today. Since the size and the quality of the social infrastructure correspond to the demand today the remaining part of the labour force working part-time must either do it voluntarily or do it due to difficulties to transform part-time jobs into full-time jobs. This latter statement has been on the agenda the last decade due to problems for women to get hold of a full-time contract after being part-time employed for a certain period of time. Once upon a time most employers were violent opponents to part-time work now the situation is the reverse. The employers do appreciate part-time employment and find it sometimes even more profitable than full-time employment. This is the reason why some political parties and trade unions are working for a lawsuit where the workers will have the legal right to full-time employment and a possibility to work part-time if they want.

The interest for this issue stems from the fact that men and women in Sweden are individual persons irrespective they are living together with a partner or not, having children or not. As a simple way to explain the background why sustainable gender equality demands both men and women to share responsibility for the paid and unpaid work I have chosen the following very broad and rough outline of a human's life.

I identify (very broadly) three separate stages in a person's life where "social norms" play a crucial and significant role for the development of gender equality. I do refer these stages to the concept of "marriage" - but it is of course possible to use other benchmark as well.

My choice is done simply because I think this is easy to grasp for everyone.

Stage I: The pre-"marriage" stage

Education, job-choice, expectations etc.
Personal preferences, interest and talents.

Stage II: The "marriage" stage

The division of work between the partners in the market as well as in the household. Family size, economic conditions, region of residence, equality norm, actual policy intentions, subsidised care, transports etc are determinants here.
Personal preferences, interest and talents.

Stage III: The post-"marriage" stage

In case of *divorce* or in case of *partner's death* the emotional consequences as well as the economic ones may be large. How big they will be is primarily a reflection of what has happened during the previous periods (Stage I and II) and the "social norms" ruling these.

In some cases "they" have strongly pushed women and men in different directions with consequences *for women's economic well-being and men's emotional well-being*. While in other cases the establishment of new "social norms" do encourage men to take active part in family life and parenting and encourage women to be active in the labour market and maintain her economic independence irrespective she is a mother or not, wife or not.

Summary:

Your choice in life is important both in short and long term, as economic and social well-being is. The flexibility is also important but it is absolute necessary that it embraces both women and men. In all their roles: as breadwinner, partner and parent. So far part-time work has been a step forward when we consider gender equality in the Netherlands and in Sweden but it is far from sufficient when we consider sustainable gender equality. Women have to move on – and women have to be accompanied by men.