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Flexible working time arrangements: A Swedish gender perspective

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The gender composition in the labour markets, in the Netherlands, in Sweden and elsewhere, has changed dramatically the last 50 years. From being a very male-dominated arena the number of women in many countries is today almost equal to the number of men. There are however major differences between men's and women's connection to the labour market and their working conditions. The reason to this is primarily the very sex-segregated labour market and that women, on average, are working fewer hours than men on the market. The latter is offset in women's lower wages and incomes as well as poorer career prospects.

The question still widely debated is whether these differences are **a cause or a consequence** of the gender-division of the paid and unpaid work in the market and in the household.

In this short paper I will only focus on the role of part-time work for the supply of female labour. Part-time work does also exist among male labour but their reason for choosing part-time differ from women. Their part-time job may rather be seen as a complement to other activities such as studies or different leisure activities. They are therefore also often very young compared to women working part-time.

Although the concept of flexible working-time may seem new, it is not, since "traditional" **part-time work** is still the dominating flexibility measure. Other forms of flexibility are not as frequent as they seem to be.

The development in the Netherlands as well as in Sweden has however emphasised how important part-time work has been for women. As long as employers just offered full-time contracts the options for many women to perform **work outside home** were very limited. Part-time work did solve this conflict. For Dutch women this meant a dramatic rise in employment rate from about 30 percent in the 1970s to above 70 percent today. A figure that has moved the Netherlands from a bottom to a top position on those lists ranking female labour force participation (FLFP) in different countries. This position has hardly been possible without the introduction of part-time work on a larger scale. Of all women on the Dutch labour market today as many as 75 percent is working part-time.

The development has been similar in Sweden with the exception that part-time employment started to increase already in the 1960s. The reason to this substantial increase was partly lack of labour and partly a general desire among women to be part of the paid labour. The growing acceptance for female labour in general and for women in part-time work in particular encouraged even more women to enter the labour market at that time.

The answer to the question: *What brought women in Sweden and later in the Netherlands to the top position when looking at their respectively LFPR?* seems therefore very simple: **Part-time work!**

The increasing supply of part-time work in Sweden did however soon raise questions concerning its long-lasting effects. Was part-time work a “*woman’s chance*” or would it be a “*female trap*”? These concerns made women in general and women’s movement in particular prepared to formulate very distinct demands. In particular how a social infrastructure would look like to fit female labour, irrespective they were working full-time or part-time.

Most but not all women are during their life-time more or less surrounded by a lot of family obligations, as mothers and wives. In a time when gender-division of household work was almost non-existing and the expectations on “mothers and motherhood” were very traditional the demand for quality and affordable child care and elderly care became very soon an important political issue. Parallel with the growing supply of female labour the resistance among the politicians against a general expansion of the public child care (and elderly care) was therefore gradually undermined.

The result of this was a more comprehensive expansion of the social infrastructure from the 1970s and onwards. The number of places in public childcare e.g. increased very fast. This was also a confirmation of a new time where *women had become a permanent part of the paid labour force and were going to remain so*. Very short part-time (<20 h/w) was therefore just a temporary phenomenon in Sweden and it disappeared very soon. More and more women wanted to work longer hours and today 30-34 h/w is most frequent among female part-timers.

So how will you interpret the increase of female labour supply in the Netherlands during the last decades? The first and perhaps most straightforward interpretation is that it is a firm expression that women, irrespective of they are married, mothers or not, also want to be a part of the paid labour. The second is that part-time work is a perfect complement to women’s household responsibilities. Nothing has to be changed since women seem to be happy with part-time as they can fulfil their motherhood role at the same time.

A third interpretation is a mix of the two. The supply of part-time employment did encourage women to look for a paid job and did at the same time release many of them from full-time unpaid household work. If this is an intention for the society and women’s desire, to become a permanent part of the paid labour, this must be met by the political authorities, the employers and by men in general.

Women must be (i) offered reasonable conditions to work longer hours and men must be (ii) offered reasonable conditions to become more active fathers and husbands. The expansion of the social infrastructure facilitating for **both women and men** to be active in the labour market as well as parents and care-givers are therefore inevitable.

If nothing happens the risk is otherwise obvious. Part-time work will continue to be a female issue and as such become a “female trap”. But since this is not only about economics it is also about the **relation between men and women** one relevant question is: *Does part-time harm or support gender equality?*

In Sweden very few should deny that part-time work meant a massive inflow of women into the labour market but did it change anything when it came to female emancipation and gender equality? According to me the simple answer is: **Yes!** The main effect was that part-time made women a **way out** into the labour market. The unintended effects may also have been several e.g. very few could imagine what a **female presence** in the labour market would mean in the long run.

Their arguments for reforms necessary for women (and men) who wanted to combine paid work and family were taken seriously. The propositions presented by women's pressure groups and supported by a great majority of all women made it also a lot easier to find acceptance among the political parties. As soon as the concept of a two-breadwinner model, as opposed to the previous one-breadwinner model, was established and accepted it had to be taken seriously.

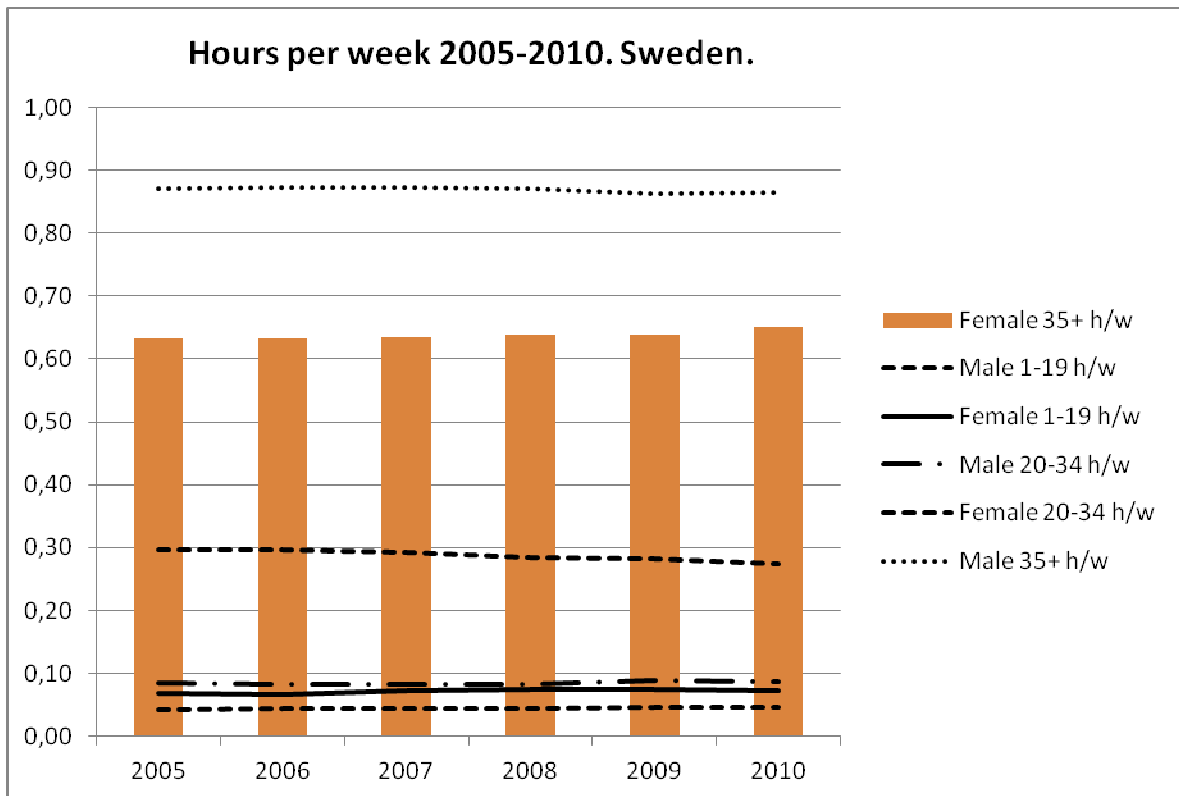
One demand from the 1970s, but foredoomed to failure, was however a general reduction in working hours (from 40 to 30 h/w). The arguments for such a reduction were justified by findings showing that many women had become "double-workers". They were paid for a part-time work but they also performed a full-time job, un-paid, within the household. The reason for this failure was that the interest among men, employers and almost all politicians for such a reform was almost zero. A common opinion today is that women themselves have introduced 30 hours week – but on their own expense.

Another disadvantage with part-time, 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. Pressure groups, primarily political parties to the left and unions, are today arguing for legislation where women (and men) have the *"right to full-time work and possibility to part-time work"*.

Long time ago the employers were violent opponents to part-time work but now the situation is almost the reverse. Many employers do appreciate part-time employment and may find it even more profitable than full-time employment.

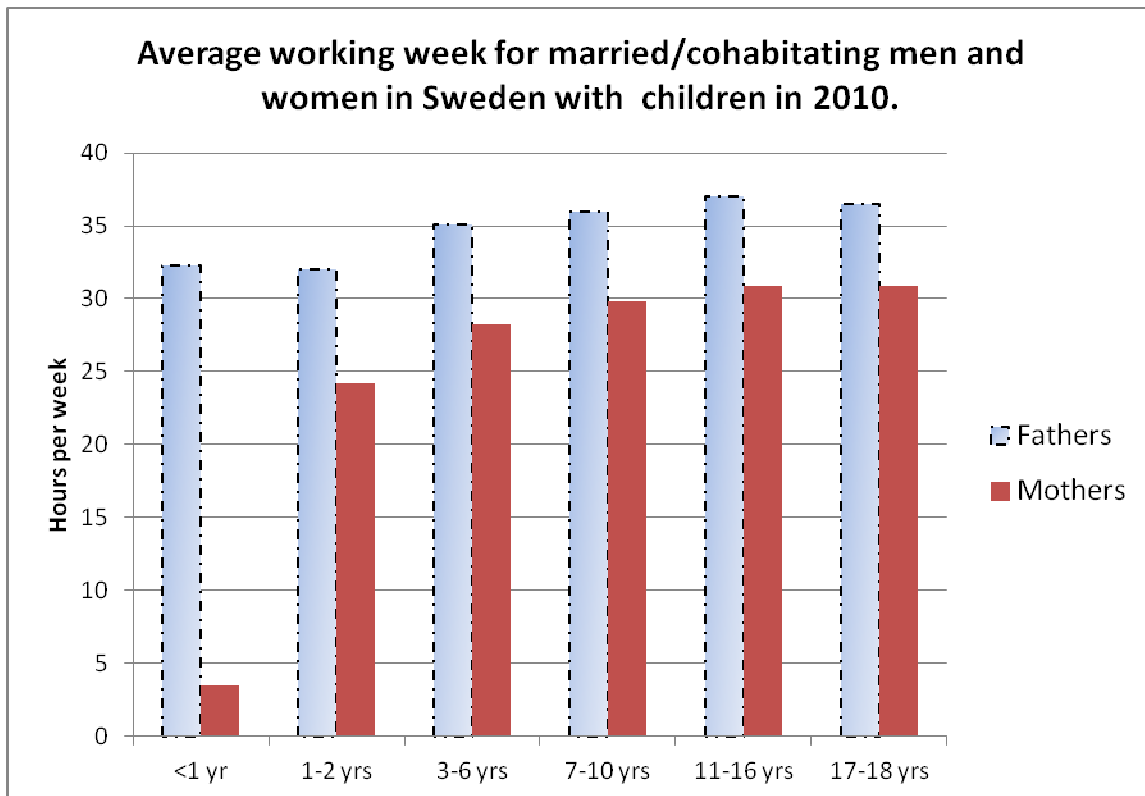
So what does the situation look like in Sweden, 50 years after flexibility was introduced in the labour market with part-time as the most prominent measure? A closer look at the statistics does reveal that in year 2010 were 65 percent of all women working full time (35+ h/w), 28 percent 20-34 hours per week and seven percent less than 20 hours (figure 1). Similar figures for men were 87, 8 and 5 percent respectively. The development during the last five years has been almost constant.

Figure 1



The close relation between working-hours, children and parents is apparent in figure 2. (In Sweden the parents are permitted to shorten their working week to 30 hours as long as the child is below eight years.)

Figure 2



The average hours per week for men and women do gradually increase with the age of the child. The very short hours for those with children up to one year of age is due to the generous paid parental leaves system in Sweden. The family has the right to 14 months of full paid parental leave. This period can be split between the parents as they wish with the **exception of two months**. Two months are reserved for either parent. They are often called “daddy-months” since the usual thing is that the mothers are taking the greater part of the parental leave. At the moment there are pressure groups and political parties arguing for a more equal division of the parental leave between the parents.

Summary

Part-time work was an important “innovation” at a time when full-time work was the only accepted form for employment among employers. It opened up for women who so far had been **locked out from performing paid job**. “Part-time” is still common, and important, but the disadvantages have become more and more obvious. This may be the reason why more and more prefer talking of “flexible working” instead of part-time although “part-time” is still dominant within the flexible concept.

“Flexibility” and “flexible working” may also be seen as a modern concept while “part-time” is seen as an old-fashioned concept. Furthermore “flexibility” has so far no particular gender-label and since one of the purposes with flexible working is to **integrate men** this “new concept” may be well motivated. But there is also an intention to induce women working part-time to increase their supply of working hours.

The starting point for the “flexibility-concept” do differ from the “old part-time concept” since the target-group here is **men and women already in employment**. The flexibility here means primarily freedom, totally or partly, for the individual employee to choose where and when to perform the job. The disadvantages with the new flexible working are not fully known yet but the research, so far, does indicate that “flexible work” may turn into a “female trap”. This is something to take a mental note of. Another question is the *degree* of flexibility. Is flexibility only possible for a certain group of workers or is it universal? And who is the real beneficiaries?

If the purpose is to increase the female labour supply the question remains why better conditions are neglected. Higher wages, better future prospects, education and less of discrimination or for that matter a **qualitative and affordable childcare** may perhaps be as relevant as flexibility for increasing female supply.

Lastly, the most important thing may however be to recognise that **men and women are individuals** irrespective they are in a relationship or not, having children or not. As such women have to be aware of the **hazard with e.g. flexible working arrangements in general and part-time work in particular**. The reasons are many e.g. (i) the way modern pension system is constructed (ii) risks for separation and divorce are not negligible these days and (iii) death of own partner is a reality.

These examples point to the fact that women may continue to be the **economically vulnerable group** at least as long as they do not take notice of the negative economic consequences their choice will have in the long run. A life-long economic dependency of a partner may therefore be the most hazardous project for a woman today.

But men are also a **vulnerable group, emotional and socially**. Taking care of own children, and having shared responsibility for a household make a man prepared for a life on his own and together with children, in case of a separation e.g.

Necessary actions to be taken immediately to avoid the negative effects for men and women in the future must therefore be directed towards both politicians and employers but also towards men and women separately.

I will end this by giving a few examples on how to act.

(i) Employers

Encourage parenthood – do not punish employees because they will be active mothers and fathers. Write a manual of how to become a family-friendly company. Such a company will be competitive. Become creative in new ways of working in the long run – not just short run. Think positively about gender-equality!

(ii) Men

Encourage all men to be very clear towards their employer on their right to be active, not just passive, fathers. Men have to be aware of that economic and emotional wellbeing for a family is of equal importance today. Their demands for flexible working must therefore be legitimate and supported by their employers but also by their partners. But to make **fatherhood as “normal” as motherhood**, men must replace the old form of fatherhood with a new fatherhood based on economic **and** emotional responsibility. Just like a woman.

(iii) Women

Women must be taught the consequences of being economically dependent, fully or partly, today. The social norm that **she**, just because she is married or have children, must rely on a man for her “bread”, full-time or part-time, is not in line with modern thinking and the actual economic policy. A good motherhood today does therefore also include men, the fathers, and then we are talking of: **Parenthood!**