

Sustainable living standard, health and welfare of women

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The meaning of sustainability ?

I find it fruitful to think about sustainability with a life course perspective – from being born, to grow up as child and youngster, to give birth to children, to raise children, to grow old and retired, to be frail elderly and die. Living conditions both shape and determine life chances and well-being differently during the stages of life. One stage in life hooks on to the next stage and have consequences for when death occur.

To my view sustainability in individual women is comprising living standard, health and welfare. It is a matter of having access to economic and social resources and also being able to master one's life, health and working conditions. It is composed of objective and subjective resources since both go together. Social inequality is not an individual resource but an aspect sustainable qualities of society. However to live in a social context of inequality, ecological imbalance erode resources of individuals to master one's life, to avoid deprivation and unhealthy life. I will focus on sustainability from an individual perspective but of course I am aware of other aspects like clean water and air, healthy food without stuff that can be poisonous and so on.

In my presentation I will draw on recent research – cross European and Swedish – about dimensions of sustainability.

Economic deprivation and social consequences

Longitudinal analysis have confirmed that persons who most often have to forgo consumption of goods and services that are deemed as necessary in a given society, often are associated with other types of welfare problems. Hence, people living under poor conditions do suffer from other welfare problems as well. The types of welfare problems that tend to cluster are economic precariousness, unemployment, psychological strain, loneliness and health problems. According to research the most common combination is economic problems and low health in large parts of Europe. In times of economic crisis, unemployment increases, cuts in welfare benefits are made and also cuts in public services. These cuts have effects on welfare problems, not only on economic resources but also health problems, overcrowded dwelling, anxiety, especially if the problems accumulate over years. Long lasting deprivation will have consequences also for the next generation. Young people, foreign born, lone mothers are particularly exposed to poverty and have increased risk for having multiple welfare problems and they tend to remain over years.

Psycho-social well-being

Basically well-being has to do with subjective feelings of a capacity to being able to cope with problems in a positive way on the one hand and on the other having access to resources in the social environment, especially to have social contacts – to feel embedded in a social network. Well-being can be defined in many ways but basically it comes close to mental health.

Psyko-social problems are linked to stress, which are connected to high demands combined with low control of working conditions, long work hours, atypical – or irregular work hours, insecure employment. Symptoms are enduring tiredness, sleeping problems, pain in neck and shoulders, depression.

Research on stressors in jobs shows that the most important factors behind work stress are:

1. Long work days and lack of control over work hours
2. The extent to which the work demands emotional and cognitive energy – positively or negatively
3. Insufficient control of work tasks

According to evidence from research there seems to be vicious circles where negative (and positive) factors are mutually reinforcing over time. Having a poor health from starting a job career is associated to remain disadvantageous for further development of income and job positions. Working conditions might be an important mechanism behind empirical findings of psycho-social health.

Psychosocial health and work

Figures comparing years 1991, 2000 and 2010 show an increase in ratings of psychological health problems. During these decades there has been several organisational changes, and downsizing of the work force. Especially the public sector and service work (health workers, teachers) have faced effectiveness reforms in organisations to the extent that organisational downsizing have meant increased demands and stress in employees. This pattern has been identified in EU countries, for instance in the last Working conditions survey 2010.

Psychological disorders are more common among women compared to men – a well known fact. In Sweden, stress among both young and adult women is nowadays regarded as a public health problem. It is a common reason for long sick leave and it has increased steadily since the late 1980s in Sweden. Here, studies of change in working conditions show that increasingly employees (both women and men) regard their work as stressful and psychologically strainful. About 40% of women regard their work as stressing and psychologically demanding. A cross-european study found a clear connection between having a poor work-life balance and poor self-rated mental health. As can be expected, full-time workers reported more often poor work-life balance. Workers with unskilled jobs and/or with temporary contracts have a negative impact on poor worklife balance. Women working long hours and with low control of work tasks are more hit by psychological stress than men. Another crosseuropean study found that in southern Europe the domestic burden has, not surprisingly, an effect on women's health. Lack of child care support and poorer working conditions, especially temporary and uncertain job contracts played a significant role. It was assumed, based on another study, that austerity policies have led to higher financial stress on the household, and concern about keeping on to jobs. In Eastern European countries the association between health and workload was weaker for women since child care facilities and regulations regarding long work hours put certain limits that might reduce psychological strain. In the Nordic countries a similar pattern was displayed, but living with an unemployed partner also had an effect on health. This can be related to limitations in unemployment benefits and benefits in connection with sick leave have been considerably reduced during the last eight years, especially in Sweden and Denmark.

The studies also found variations between the welfare regime countries. Both men and women in Southern Europe and Central European countries had the highest frequency of men and women reporting poor work-life balance, whereas the Scandinavian and Anglo-saxon countries reported less.

But recent cross European research found that even where employees have formal right to ask for flexible jobs, reduce or increase work hours, attitudes with the organisational culture govern the possibilities of employees to control their work in a direction that would be of benefit for the private life of the employee. Increased work intensity, competitions and understaffing may imply pressure from the management and colleagues to reduce sense of entitlements of employees. There are also empirical examples from case studies that if asking for leave to take care of a family member they sense they will be punished in one way or the other from the managing staff and colleagues.

The case studies show that having a low educational level and/or to be self employed gave the weakest agency capabilities for work life balance. Flexibility in work hours existed alongside precarious and unpredictable jobs. High demands in jobs, lack of boundary setting are the back side of autonomy and flexibility.

Governance in Sweden after financial constraints

In 2006 Sweden got a center-right alliance in government. The political agenda of the alliance was that market mechanisms should be strived for in all activities, thus emphasising individual choice and responsibility. The policy change was primarily driven by ideology, emphasising that tax reduction should increase individual consumption.

The levels of income compensation relating to sickness and unemployment insurance have been drastically reduced and are now far below the formally agreed levels. The income compensation of the unemployment insurance is now below the OECD average. The implications are that the decommodifying effects of the socialwelfare benefits have been reduced due to low compensation rates and more restrictive criteria for entitlements.

Besides, an increasing amount of people do not qualify for access to unemployment benefits because their establishment in the labour market is too weak (temporary contracts, involuntary part-time work). There is an increased risk of poverty among people who do not qualify for entitlements to social insurances because they have not worked long enough or who are on long-term sick leave, or recently arrived refugees or students.

Today women are higher educated than men. In Sweden the pay gap has been reduced among men and women in low qualified jobs. However, recent cross sectional research over time in Sweden show that they have remained unchanged (17%) among women and men in qualified jobs. The gaps were explained by motherhood and domestic work. Women with high qualifications and who are mothers get lower pay than men in corresponding situations (both working full time). Figures show that motherhood and family circumstances have a negative effect on salaries for women but not for men.

In Sweden, effects of privatisation within the health and welfare sector have had negative effects for women. Working conditions for care workers within elder care have been deteriorated – salaries are lower, more temporary jobs are offered and more parttime jobs.

The development towards greater participation of families in the care of the elderly, has obvious consequences for gender equality, given that it is mostly women who take on the additional responsibilities, with repercussions for their working situation.

Effects of privatisation within the welfare sector have had negative effects for women. Working conditions for care workers within elder care have been deteriorated – salaries are lower, more temporary jobs are offered and more parttime jobs.

Establishment on the labour market takes longer time for women, they get more temporary jobs and involuntary part time work. The living standard among lone mother have not improved since the 1980s. It takes longer time for women to be established on the labour market compared to men.

Income inequality has increased since the 1980s in Sweden. In the wake of increased income inequalities, we have to pay attention to the fact that payments from social insurances have been lowered and that unemployment is relatively high. Thus, social inequality has widened in Sweden.

Of course there has been a resistance among feminists against the reforms that were introduced during the last eight years in Sweden. In the last election to the European Parliament a political party "Feminist initiative" got many voters and had one member elected into the parliament. The feminist party did not pass the threshold for entering the Swedish parliament at the last election one month ago, but they were successful in many local governments. And their criticism against the effects on women of the changes which I have mentioned in my talk have an effect on the other parties, especially among the left and green.

The gender effects of the reforms introduced by the centre right alliance in Sweden have not been evaluated for their effects on gender. Psycho-social stress at work has increased for women. More women left the unemployment insurance fund. Women are on long sick leave to a higher extent than men. Women have temporary jobs, and jobs on demand, to a higher extent than men, it takes longer time for young women to get a steady job, the effects of the pension reform have had detrimental effects on women, since the new system requires more contributions to the scheme from labour over the life cycle. Due to part time work and even housewifery of the retired women give many women a low pension that they can't live on. The female effects of the pension reform was not discussed at the time of its introduction.

There has been resistance from occupational groups like nurses, midwives, teachers, that is female dominated jobs, but the effects have been small. Many nurses move to Norway, where they have better conditions.

The last election two months ago resulted in a minority government with social democrats and the green party in coalition. They also negotiate with the left party and the Feminist party. Unemployment benefits will be raised; Sick leave will not have a time limit; Education and trainee jobs will be introduced; Limits will be set to understaffing in health care; Unfair taxation of pensioners is planned to be abolished.

Social inequality

Internet, social media has implied a huge transformation of living conditions in contemporary society for good and for bad. The global openness and accessibility of sources where individuals can compare themselves with others and evaluations of self pose a sense of "evaluation threat" to confront in everyday life. The book by Wilkinson & Pickett, "The spirit level", have provided insights into the role of evaluations and comparisons of status in everyday lives. Individuals are evaluating their selves in many ways and not the least advertisements are playing on our sensitivity for social comparisons. Shame is rooted in those processes by which we internalise an image about how others look upon us. Shame is a very powerful emotion and it is a basis for how we adapt to social circumstances through life. The most common sources of stress in modern societies is having low social status, having few or no friends, having difficult childhood experiences are factors recognised in psycho social research as creating anxiety and existential insecurity –. The authors name it as "threat of evaluation". The pressure from peers and colleagues is a powerful element in the lives of modern people, especially among the young. Social inequality aggravates the problems at the level of society.

Concluding remarks

The problems that I have stressed in this talk as posing threats to sustainability are not new to our knowledge, but they are more threatening for women than men. Important is to realise that welfare problems tend to multiply, start early in life and continue over the life cycle. They are not problematic for the majority of women or men, especially not for those living with adequate resources but they are problems that are increasing and have increased in contemporary societies. They have aggravated with austerity policies that somehow make the people to feel a sense of guilt and shame, anxiety and desperation. Meanwhile, social and economic inequality increases and brings unrest, anger and violence which is visible in social movements and political protests in the big cities. It brings low fertility. For others it means depression or passive withdrawal. I think it is important not to underestimate the power of these kinds of emotions. We know that individual problems are social problems. The personal is politics as we used to say in the 70s.

What to do about it?

Regulations regarding working hours- long work hours, irregular and temporary work, work on demand. It should be emphasised that rights of employees for flexible work hours for caring responsibilities should be allowed; limits to under staffing; regulations on minimum pay; reasonable social assistance; decrease demands on eligibility for unemployment benefits.