CONTINUITY IN CHANGE:
The private service sector and gender relations

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1.0 Introduction

I think it's because they want the heads. Because they want more employees so they can play games with us, throw us around like balls, move us up and down, and of course they save a little money, too (...) Maybe it's best for the company to have part-timers, at least for those at the top, 'cause then they can play around a little. Oh yeah, throw her in 'cause she hasn't worked for three days. That's the game system. Or else they have a full-timer who works eight to four today and noon to nine-fifteen tomorrow. And then maybe I come in and they can throw us around a little more.

This young woman’s explanation of why she is an hourly employee and not offered permanent employment is that it is so she can be thrown around like a ball in a game because it is more profitable for her employer. The number of young women used as ”heads,” as this informant put it, steadily increased in Sweden throughout the 1980s and 90s (LO 2001). A large percentage of these women work in the private service sector. Sweden is usually described in international contexts as the country with the big public sector. Comparatively speaking, a large share of service production in Sweden is still within the tax-financed public sector, within which a large percentage of ”Swedish” women have worked. The percentage employed in the public sector has declined as a consequence of budget cutbacks in the 1980s and 1990s. The private service sector has grown in tandem with job cutbacks in the public sector and private industry. Many of those employed in this sector are young women, who are often paid low wages and have little job security.

1 I used quotation marks because the word ”Swedish” has occasionally been used to conceal differences among women in the labor market based, e.g., on processes of racialization.

2 Of all women members of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) who work full-time, 60 percent earn a maximum monthly wage of SEK 16,700; 35 percent SEK 15,000; and 15 percent SEK 13,000. However, a large percentage do not work full-time, which makes their wages even lower. A high percentage of young women are currently working in non-permanent positions and for fewer hours than they would like to work. In the 16-24 age group of women members of LO, 27 percent work involuntarily part-time (14 percent in 1990); the corresponding figure for the 25-29 age group is 20 percent (9 percent in 1990). This should be compared to women members of the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO), of whom 4 percent work part-time against their wills, which is the same figure as for male members of LO. People working under these forms of employment are also covered by the disability and pension insurance systems.
Swedish gender studies have attempted to analyze how the structural transformation of industry (Gonäs, L 1989, 1991) and the public sector (Johansson, S 2000) is affecting contemporary gender relations. Until now, the private service sector has been accorded marginal importance in Swedish gender studies. In its most traditional forms, according to me, gender research with a focus on labor markets is characterized by excessive focus on the patriarchy hence it lacks the theoretical tools for capturing the heterogeneousness of women’s working conditions with consideration given to class, race/ethnicity, and generation.

Based on the first phase of my empirical studies, I intend in this paper to shed light on the importance of theoretical and empirical study of this sector from the perspective of intersectionality (Collins, P 1998, Brah, A 1993, McCall, L 2001, Dickerson, T Niki 2002) in order to identify the continuity and changes in inequalities in today’s labor market. One central question is how the expansion of the private service sector is impacting changes in the balance of power in terms of class, gender, and ethnicity. The objective of the case study is to illuminate and bring to the fore the experiences and reflections, as well as the forms of consciousness and organization, that are evolving within the framework of the private service sector. My basic premise is that Swedish gender studies must understand (and theorize) social changes by analyzing the connection between the construction and reproduction of gender regimes and (in)equalities between women and men, but also between different groups of women.

2.0 Methodological and theoretical points of departure

Swedish studies of the private service sector are thin on the ground (Sundin, E 1996, Aurell, M 2001). The few studies of the private service sector that have been done in Sweden are almost exclusively based on quantitative data collection. My study emphasizes women’s personal reflections and knowledge about their employment conditions. In this text, I will focus on five in-depth interviews with women working under flexible conditions in occupations organized by the Swedish Commercial Employees’ Union. The women share a common generational experience

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3 See, e.g., Aurell, M 2001 for an interview study.
4 Of all employees in the Swedish labor market, 80.5 percent belong to a union; in other words, *slightly more than 16 out of 20 wage earners are union members*. Of all female wage earners (blue and white collar combined), 83.6 percent belong to a union. The corresponding figure for men is 77.3 percent. Within the private service sector, the percentage of employees organized in a union is lower than the average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Union Membership Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wholesale and retail trade</td>
<td>68.2 + 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other private service</td>
<td>74.1 + 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal services</td>
<td>90.6 + 3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All industries</td>
<td>83.0 + 0.5</td>
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The increase is taking place within the private service sector, which is the sector that is currently employing the most people. The percentage of all workers who work in wholesale and retail trade or other private service has increased since 1990 from 22 to 33 percent. Within the latter areas, union membership is relatively low.
(all are between 20 and 30 years old). They have all grown up in an era in which the welfare system has been cut back and unemployment, unlike during the preceding half-century, is a constant threat to many in the working class (Korpi, W 1999). One question is whether this generation of young working-class women can be conceptualized as a new, genderized working class. New, because the public sector that has been providing jobs to ”Swedish” women since the 1970s is, in the face of reduced public resources, offering this new generation a more limited alternative. New because as I will show, these women are experiencing forms of exploitation that did not exist in the past (or perhaps were never brought to light) within the framework of the public sector, which even if it has reproduced hierarchical gender relations has nevertheless offered jobs that were relatively secure. The in-depth interviews are part of my first phase of data collection. In forthcoming case studies, I will emphasize in-depth interviews with racialized(Miles, R 1989) groups in the same industry.

I have taken my theoretical inspiration for the paper from a postcolonial perspective within feminist economics (see for instance Feminist Economics 2002 nr 2) with focus on intersectionality. The objective of my dissertation project, of which this paper is a part, is to expand the Swedish anti-racist feminist critique of traditional Swedish gender studies and to unveil the specific status of racialized groups in the labor market and the emergence of a new genderized and racialized working class. I believe this analysis requires an understanding of the Swedish labor market within the framework of globalization processes, migration, and international distribution of jobs. By means of this paper, I hope to bring several questions to the fore, upon which I will be able to carry out further research.

3.0 Disposition

The paper is organized in three sections. The first provides an overview of the private service sector. The second is based on my empirical material and addresses the issues brought up by the informants. The third and final section is devoted to concluding reflections on this text.

4.0 Dynamic and/or unequal? – The private service sector

5 The term Racialization was first used by the Algerian psychoanalyst Frans Fanon. The term has than been developed by the sociologist Robert Davis (1989). Davis writes ”... in certain historical conjectures and under specific material conditions human beings attribute certain biological characteristics with meaning in order to differentiate, to exclude and to dominate: reproducing the idea of the ”race”, they create a racialised Other and simultaneously the racialise themselves (Miles, R 1993:44). According to Miles the process of racialization is an ideological project with material effects. For a wither discussion on the concept see Anthias, Floya & Yuval – Davis, Nira (1992).
"The picture that emerges in the descriptive section is that the private service sector constitutes the front line of the labor market in several ways. This is where we find the dynamic that is attracting new firms in new, knowledge-intensive industries like IT, corporate services, and the music industry, but also in labor-intensive industries like retail, transport, janitorial and housekeeping service, tourism, and the experience industry. Most of the new jobs created in the 1990s were in the private service sector" (LO 2000: 9-10).

The private service sector is the fastest growing sector in the Swedish economy (Hermele, K 2001, LO 2000, SCB 1999). The 1990s saw a sharp decline in employment in the public sector, primarily due to budget cutbacks. The trend was the opposite for the private service sector, which grew throughout the 1980s and 90s. The expansion of the private service sector is not a particularly Swedish phenomenon. The private service sector is the most rapidly expanding sector in many western economies (Rubery 1993). The service sector in Sweden is roughly proportional to those in other OECD countries (LO 2000).6 The difference is that the percentage of service production within the public sector has been larger in Sweden. Employment in the private service sector remained relatively constant at about 35 percent from 1963 until the 1980s. In 1998, the private service sector provided 38 percent of all jobs, a larger percentage than the public service sector. In the 1990s, job growth in the private service sector was the highest of all sectors. Employment in Sweden rose by 0.5 percent between 1993 and 1998, while the percentage of jobs in the private service sector increased by 5.8 percent. The private service sector is heterogeneous, encompassing ”knowledge and information services” such as legal advice, research, consultancy, financial services, and marketing, but also ”labor-intensive” industries like shipping and transportation, the hotel and restaurant business, and wholesale and retail trade.7

Cultural geographer Saskia Sassen described the dynamic within this sector in Globalization and its Discontents (1998), wherein she describes what she believes are new economies in what she calls global cities.8 These cities are home to relatively little industrial production, but burgeoning service sectors. According to Sassen, the expanding service sector is connected by two poles.9 At one end are the expanding financial and real estate markets. The white-collar employees in those sectors are often well-paid and have secure, permanent jobs. At the other end, we can see an expansion of the service sector in terms of more restaurants, janitors, domestic servants, and

6 LO analyzes the expansion of the private service sector in its report "Vid arbetsmarknadens frontlinje: privat tjänstesektor, svart arbete och pensioner" ("On the front line of the labor market: The private service sector, black market labor and pensions," Swedish only). The LO authors believe there may be various reasons behind the growth of different parts of the private service sector. It is possible that economic and political mechanisms are behind the expansion of the educational and real estate sectors. I cannot in this paper recount the discussion of why the private service sector is expanding.

7 The term ”knowledge-intensive jobs” is problematic in that it implies that other types of work do not require knowledge.

8 Examples of such global cities are Los Angeles, Tokyo, Madrid, London, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and New York.

9 The cities are also part of the global economy in that the high-tech devices used by the elites are often built in third-world countries by low-paid workers, often women.
other types of service occupations. These occupations are created to serve an increasingly affluent
class and to ensure that all the central institutions like banks and shopping centers are kept neat
and tidy, the streets clean, and the children of wealthy families well-scrubbed. Conditions in those
occupations are characterized by low wages, insecure employment and limited or non-existent
social benefits. They are, according to Sassen, populated to a great extent by women and
immigrants. The author concludes that what we are seeing in these global cities is a polarization
that is increasing segregation between women and men and between native-born populations and
immigrants, who are often people of color.

None of the large cities in Sweden can be defined as one of Sassen’s global cities. However,
certain elements of her illustrations fit nicely into the description of the inequalities emerging in
the private service sector. Differences in wages, in levels of education, and in terms of forms of
employment are greatest in the private sector, which encompasses everyone from janitors to
highly paid executives. In the public debate on this sector, the industries usually described are the
information-intensive ones. Meanwhile, no one is talking about the circumstance that the bulk of
employees in the private service sector work in labor-intensive industries, often at low wages and
with little job security. A clear example of the dynamic in this sector can be seen in the
relationship to forms of employment. The group with the highest percentage of permanent
positions is made up of men who belong to the Swedish Confederation of Professional
Associations (SACO), many of whom work in the private sector as consultants, advisers, IT
managers, etc. The largest percentage of temporary employees (“services-as-needed”) are found
within the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, the Commercial Employees Union, and the
Municipal Employees Union, of which the first two are within the private service sector. Another
similarity in relation to Sassen’s picture of the private service sector is that it has the highest
proportion of employees who are immigrants or the children of immigrants. The Hotel and
Restaurant Workers Union is the Swedish labor market sector with the highest proportion of
employees with foreign backgrounds, about 37 percent. A small fraction of those are Nordic
citizens, while the overwhelming majority are non-European immigrants who have lived in
Sweden for more than ten years.10 Seven of ten employees are women and the sector has the
lowest average age of all sectors, at just over 30.

Developments in the 1990s linked to the expansion of the private sector have made it possible to
discern a higher percentage of jobs within polarized service production in which the knowledge

10 The average within LO is 13 percent.
and information society is the province of one group of producers, while marginalization and insecure employment is rising for other groups of service producers. The trend is an interesting subject of study precisely because it captures the continuity but also the changes of (in)equalities in terms of class, gender, generation, and racialized relationships.

As part of my dissertation project, I produced a report for the Commercial Employees Union on the issue of involuntary part-time employment. Based on those interviews, I will reflect in the next section on how an analysis at the actor level can illustrate structural changes in the Swedish labor market.

5.0 Flexibility, feminization, and conflicts among women

Seven to four, off every weekend and holiday. I’ve never had that in my entire life, but I wouldn’t be happy starting at seven, that’s too early. I would be happy with eight to five.

A new generation of young women members of LO in Sweden have never had a permanent position or regular working hours, which is particularly true for those employed in the labor-intensive segment of the private service and municipal sectors (LO 2001). When I asked one of the informants what hours she would like to work, she answered almost ironically as if the option did not exist, that she would like to work from eight to five.

I believe the discussion of flexible working hours makes obvious the need for a gender perspective that does not regard women as a homogeneous group, but rather captures the intersectionality between the balances of power that are shaping today’s labor market. In Sweden, differences between women’s and men’s working hours are often linked to women’s responsibility for reproductive work. Part-time jobs, which are much more common among women, have been analyzed as a way for employers (and men) to make sure that women retain responsibility for the home, despite their paid work, even though working part-time constricts their opportunities to make a career, have influence, and especially to increase their pay. The

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11 LO (Landsorganisationen) is the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, the umbrella organization for all working class trade unions.

12 In their book *I Vems händer? Om arbete, genus, ålderdom och omsorg i tre EU – länder* (Stark, A & Regner, Å 2001) authors Agneta Stark and Åsa Regner discuss the importance of seeing the relational aspects of the term ”part-time work.” They write that the hours involved in part-time jobs are and always have been varied. Accordingly, international statistics use two terms: short part-time at 1-19 hours a week and long part-time at 20 hours a week or more, up to the minimum number of hours considered full-time work. In Sweden, part-time work is defined as weekly hours of 1-34 and full-time work as weekly hours of 35 or more. In international comparisons, Sweden is regarded as a country with a high percentage of part-time workers. According to the authors, this is because such comparisons do not take into account that the percentage of ”long part-time” workers is high in Sweden. In OECD statistics, the current floor for full-time work has been set at 30 hours a week; by that measure, the statistics for Sweden show few part-time workers.
resulting dichotomy is between men working full-time in the private sector (read industry) and women working part-time in the public sector. The division is also based on a heteronormative assumption that the women working in the public sector should be married to the men working in industry. Women still make up the majority of part-time employees. And yet there exist historical and contemporary trends which show that the issue of working hours entails balances of power that are more numerous and more complex than this description implies. For instance, economics historian Paulina de Los Reyes and labor market researcher Wuokko Knocke have identified differences in working hours between Swedish women working in the public sector, the majority of whom worked part-time, and racialized groups of women who worked within industry, mainly during the postwar era. The latter group of women did not often work part-time; rather, they worked full-time but with irregular hours (Knocke, W 1981, 1986, de los Reyes 1998). By focusing on the connection between part-time work and reproductive work, traditional Swedish gender studies have obscured the circumstance that many women have had no opportunity to get part-time employment, as this was something for the Swedish women working in the public service sector. This shows that we need to refrain from defining women in the labor market as a homogeneous group, but rather to open our eyes to the impact of class and processes of racialization on the conditions encountered by women in the labor market.

Although there are many women within TCO and LO who work mainly part-time, the percentage of men working part-time (often involuntarily) within LO is increasing. While only 4 percent of all women members of TCO work on a services-as-needed basis, a full 50 percent of women from non-European countries who have lived in Sweden for fewer than ten years are employed on those terms. These figures illustrate a need to analyze the labor market beyond the dichotomies of public sector/private sector and women/men, as failure to do so entails a risk that many of the complex power and antagonism formations we can see in today's labor market will be missed.

The percentage of people working under flexible forms of employment is increasing in most western economies and a large proportion of them are women. The trend has been described as the "feminization of the labor market." The term is used to describe two intertwined processes, firstly to make it clear that women make up an increasing percentage of the gainfully employed population, and secondly to show that a feminization of forms of employment has taken place, by which authors who have used the term mean that we can see that both men and women are
working to a greater extent today under forms that used to be more common for women. These jobs are characterized by lower wages, lack of job security, lack of union organization, etc. The informants provide two illustrations of this labor market situation:

It is really frustrating to not have a permanent position and only work hourly. You can’t keep your home life straight. Can I go away for a day or two? You don’t plan anything because you don’t know what your schedule is going to be like, you don’t know whether you can go away for a couple of weeks at Christmas. You have no idea whether the job will be extended, which makes it impossible to plan anything for the future.

I lay in bed at night thinking about it. Everybody else might be making plans for New Year’s, but I don’t know if I can go to a party with my friends or not. It gets really annoying. I’m the kind of person who wants control, I don’t live from one day to the next, I at least want to know what I am going to be doing next week.

In The Future of Women and Work: Ending the Twentieth Century (1992), sociologist Joan Acker describes what she believes to be two central trends behind the increase in women who work for pay and the increase in insecure employment: the expansion of the private service sector and accelerating international competition. The two trends are often connected, as each is predicated on the other. Two things are required: technological progress that can free up labor for the new sectors and an international distribution of jobs wherein parts of industrial production are localized in other countries or put in the hands of women and men other than those working in the private service sector. She believes that increasing competition between companies and nations has caused a need to cut labor costs in both private and public enterprise. One of the means to accomplishing that end is to make jobs more flexible so that labor can be hired – just in time – as needed for production. According to the author, this is why we can currently see an increase in services-as-needed jobs and various forms of temporary employment. Permanent positions are regarded as a cost, in that they cannot be adapted to demand and production. Acker believes that these changes are one of the causes that allowed women to enter the labor market, firstly because women are used as cheaper labor and secondly because women are less likely than men to demand full-time jobs.13

The question is whether this concept can be used to analyze and understand these young women’s situation in the labor market. One of the informants described her working situation:

The hours are bad. When you are at work, you are completely disconnected from everything around you. Sometimes you don’t have time to read the paper, watch the news. Plus you work every other weekend. The hours are really stressful; if they were from eight to five, I might very well have stayed in the job, because then I would at least have a life in the evenings. But if you don’t get home until eight in the evening, you don’t wind down before eleven and by that time everybody else is sleeping. That’s when I feel like calling a friend, but of course my friends have already gone to bed. You don’t have time for anything outside of your own family and the job when you work such irregular hours and are called in on such short notice.
This labor market situation differs from that of women who have permanent part-time positions and even more from those with permanent full-time positions. I believe that the concept of the feminization of labor that partially illuminates the development shared by these young women limits our understanding of that development, primarily because the term does not successfully capture and explore the current dynamic among women in the labor market. This dynamic may reflect precisely the private service sector, in which certain women provide services for other women who can afford to buy them (e.g., at hotels or restaurants). One of the reasons Swedish gender studies have not chosen to concentrate on this sector, despite its expansion, may be precisely because it reveals the wider class conflict that may exist among women in the labor market. One of the informants expressed the dynamic:

People who have permanent jobs and a lot of money can decide for themselves when they want to work. They think we should work during certain hours so that they can shop whenever they want. But if it was up to me, we would be closed on the weekends and close early during the week. Sure, there are people who work evenings at hospitals and so on, but then maybe we could have certain days or certain stores that are open later. But all of them don’t have to be open all the time.

The concept of ”feminization” cannot capture this dynamic when the jobs that are considered ”feminine” are those where employees have little influence, poor working conditions, and low wages. The question then becomes how should we understand and explain the processes that are creating opportunities for certain groups of women to strengthen their status in the labor market through more secure jobs and higher pay? Is this development also part of the ”feminization” of the labor market? If so, how should we understand these differences, which exist both between women and men of different social classes and between different groups of women? There is some risk that use of the term ”feminization” will conceptualize only ”bad” jobs as ”feminized,” while failing to show that other groups of women – at the same time and perhaps as a consequence of other women’s changed working conditions – have strengthened their status in the labor market.

Although I have focused on and problematized the concept of feminization, I nonetheless believe the term has relevance in a Swedish context. I believe it opens an arena for analysis of transnational processes that expand the often narrow focus on the Swedish nation-state. The concept of feminization offers a means of analytical approach to gender relations that

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13 Guy Standing’s (1999) analysis is similar to Acker’s. According to Standing, the increased internationalization of production with respect to international trade and the relocation of production to low-wage countries has resulted in attempts by companies to reduce labor costs by not hiring permanent employees.

14 We are currently seeing an increase in temporary employment in Sweden. Although the majority of people hired on a services-as-needed basis (a form of temporary employment) are women, the percentage of men who belong to LO working under those forms of employment also increased in the 1990s. Men and women who belong to TCO and SACO have experienced an increase of what is called ”object/project employment,” which differs considerably in terms of job security, influence, and pay from the ”services-as-needed” jobs that are most common within LO.
encompasses migration and globalization processes and which entails understanding of Swedish conditions as part of the capitalist social formation and not, as some traditional gender studies would have it, as an isolated entity. I believe that deeper understanding of how the international distribution of jobs, migration, and colonialism in the present era are affecting the Swedish labor market will enhance our ability to capture the change and continuity of inequalities in the Swedish labor market in general and more specifically in the private service sector.

As many researchers have shown, flexibility can mean anything from that the employee has a great deal of influence over his or her working hours to that he or she has very little to say about the matter. In their article “A critical review of flexible labour. Gender, race and class dimensions of economic restructuring,” authors Isak Zeytinoglu and Jacinta Muteshi describe the need to see the complexities in discussions of flexibility and to not presume that it is women as a homogeneous group who get the worst jobs. They argue that there is a need to explore how economic changes are affecting different groups of women in a variety of ways. They write:

“Thus, the supposition that it is mostly women who are in “bad jobs” in the secondary labour market eludes the problematic divisions among women. There is increasing evidence that it is mainly racialized minorities, immigrants and women in low economic classes who are found in the poorly paid, insecure jobs of the flexible workforce. Broadly speaking, however, there remains an under-representation of the complexity of the articulation of gender, class and race under “flexible accumulation” particularly in feminist scholarly work on restructuring in industrialized economies” (1999:111 Isak Zeytinoglu and Jacinta Muteshi).

In order to capture the complexity these authors are looking for and the balances of power that are emerging in today’s labor market, I believe work in gender studies must make use of the theoretical tools that can detect the intersectionality found in different balances of power based on class, gender, and racialization processes. In their article ”Dividend women: Labour market segmentation and gender segregation,” Brenda Burchell and Jill Rubery write:

"Much of the work on gender in the labour market has emphasized the difference between male and female labour markets and has not investigated the division within the gender groups. (...) The female labour market has thus been treated either directly or by omission as relatively homogeneous and at times as synonymous with the secondary sector of the labour market."

They cast light on the differences between women with respect to hours of employment, occupations, industry, and education. They conclude:

"With the partial exception of women’s domestic interference to their labour market participation, there is little evidence that gender can be treated as a meaningful, unifying category of experience. Advantaged women have more in common with advantaged men than with less advantaged women: some less advantaged women have more in common with men (i.e. the ‘stickers’ cluster) but other disadvantaged women (i.e. the ‘female’ descenders) do have a position in the labour market unique to women.”
The authors do not mean that we cannot write about women, but show that we cannot presume that women as a group encounter a single labor market. As I see it, the private service sector cannot be analyzed only from a gender perspective because in that case, much of the dynamic we are currently witnessing, particularly that resulting from wider, often racialized class differences, is lost. I believe Burchell and Rubery’s premises would be fruitful in an analysis of the private service sector in this era of greater class polarization, in which racism is changing the face of the labor market.

6.0 Insecurity, work, and solidarity

In many contexts, flexibility is a positive word. But that which emerges from these interviews is that when we talk about social flexibility, only certain areas of the social organization are flexible. As a result, those who have flexible working hours (which they cannot arrange for themselves) are at risk of being excluded from many functions of society. For instance, one of the informants spoke about the difficulties involved in something as simple as taking an evening class when working a rolling schedule:

One problem with weekends is that they are not always the same — you are not off every Sunday, for example. It would be great to have the same day off every week. There is no time for recreation when you work these kinds of hours. Right now, we have a rolling schedule. I wanted to take an evening class at the college, but I would have had to have every Wednesday off. But the schedule would have had to be changed, because it is different every week. You might be off one Wednesday, work until five the next one, and until eight the one after that. You can’t do anything that comes back every week. You have to try and squeeze in workouts wherever you can. The working hours are one of the biggest drawbacks. You just can’t take a class on the side, for instance.

The informant reveals an interesting circumstance here, i.e., that it is difficult to participate in recurring activities outside the job because her working hours are constantly changing. The rest of society does not adapt to the kind of flexibility that employees in this situation are dealing with. One of the informants related:

Now I’ve told them that they have to let me know soon, because I am starting to get annoyed. Christmas and New Year’s are coming up and you really want to know what is going on, especially when you have kids — is my son going to have to be in daycare between Christmas and New Year’s or not? This time, I’ve told them that I don’t want to get my schedule for the holidays so late. In the past, I have been informed that the temp position was going to be extended something like a week in advance and then got my schedule three days after starting the new temporary position. So now I’ve told them that I don’t want to get my schedule for Christmas and New Year’s so late.

P – What did they say?

Well, it was the first time I made any demands; I’ve never done that before. I have just sort of gone along with whatever happened, because I really do want to keep my job. But now I am starting to feel like there has to be a limit somewhere, because I also want a life outside work.

From this perspective, flexible working hours become a source of stress for those who have them. The quotation reveals yet another problem that can arise in the context of these forms of
employment – fear of speaking out. As one of the informants said, she had not objected before because she wants to keep her job. The same situation may arise for those who want to work more hours but are dependent on being given them – they have to keep in the employer’s good graces lest the hours be given to someone else. This could mean that employees whose jobs are insecure or who work few hours do not feel the same freedom to criticize management, the working environment, or the hours as employees with secure positions. It would be interesting to analyze whether criticism has been stifled in the workplace in the wake of the increase of temporary, services-as-needed employment and involuntary part-time positions.

One of the central arguments concerning the reasons behind flexible working hours for employees who are members of the Commercial Workers Union is that the hours exist in order to meet customer needs. But the informants I interviewed brought up another side of flexibility. A side that they say limits their capacity to give the customers the time they believe they need and to perform their work as they would like. All informants state that the cause of this situation is inadequate staffing and too much work to do in too few hours. One of the informants said:

*It's his loss (my note: the boss) because the customers don't get the help they need. If I owned a business, I would see my employees as an asset, not a burden. It is better to have more personnel so that the customers are satisfied and get the help they need. So instead of having two minutes with the customer like I do here, maybe you'd have twenty minutes. And you can get tied up with a customer for fifteen or twenty minutes and that is a long time for the ones who are waiting. (...) We have to have more people if we are going to make the customer happy – so that we can have any personnel at all, I mean, so the place doesn't end up going out of business. I don’t understand how they can see payroll expenses as a burden. I just don't get it. You have to have personnel to have customers.*

Here, the informant notes the problem of not being able to keep up with her work at the pace she believes it is reasonable for the customer to expect. Clearly, the employees also feel they are a burden to the company (since they must be paid wages), even as they find it difficult to see why they are a burden, since they are the ones who make sure the customers come back. Inadequate staffing is one of the central reasons that employees perceive their working situations as stressful. Another informant said:

*When someone on the floor is sick, they try not to put in a substitute if it isn't during closing or opening. As a result, the rest of us have to work much harder. Sometimes you run around and wonder where everybody is. Sometimes they just don’t bother to bring people in, but of course then maybe I get more hours myself. (...) I just don’t understand their (my note: management’s) thinking. Their thinking is so scummy. All of that with hours and money. // The more people we have to help the customers, the more we sell. Because the customers ask about everything and if they don’t find what they want, they go somewhere else. And the company loses. I think they would profit by bringing in more people. I don’t understand their reasoning.*

In this quotation, we can see both the gap between employees and employers as well as the downside of flexibility. The lean organizations that make use of rhetoric surrounding “focus on the customer” are perceived here as stressful workplaces because there are no personnel on hand to make sure customers are satisfied. The question is whether the organization is flexible or whether the company expects the employees to be the flexible ones, e.g., by being able to work even more when co-workers are out sick. In the eyes of employees, this kind of flexibility
basically means the employees have to be able to work overtime and work harder. In the employees’ view, this does not benefit them personally or the service they are expected to provide to customers.

The issue of inadequate staffing is also connected to temporary and part-time employment, as temps are often brought in during periods when managers perceive the pressure on the company to be at a peak. The problem seems to be that for the employees, the pressure may be intense all day long. As a result, the employees do not feel they can do the job as well as they would like, especially in relation to the customers. One of them said:

*We need more people – a lot of us think so. I think we would sell more if we had more personnel. Then you would have time to do everything, the employees would be happier, you would be more cheerful with the customers and more helpful // I think it's sad, because we would sell so much more. As it is, it seems like you mainly send people on to the next person.*

The respondent brings up a problem that rises when working hours are too short – the work is chopped up. The informants feel that the result is that in the first place they cannot do their jobs properly and in the second place that they have no control over their work. One of the informants said:

*You never get everything done that you're supposed to at work, something always comes up. You have to be flexible – and just do what you can. You can't get it all done because things come up all the time. You have to be flexible all the time at work.*

In this case, the employees feel that as a result of the short hours they do not have time to perform all their tasks in the little time they have. One can then ask whether there are problems with the organization and the division of labor. Is it possible for employees to perform the tasks delegated to them within the few working hours they have? And how do their perceptions that they cannot manage all their tasks in the time allotted affect employees? It would be interesting to study whether the degree of exploitation in the workplace has increased. Are companies now demanding the same amount of work from their employees, but in fewer hours? One thing that indicates this may be true is that the employees say that they constantly help each other out between departments and groups so that they can finish the tasks they have been delegated.

An interesting theme that recurred in the interviews was that of how employees tried in various ways to manage the stressful situation in which they work. The employees relate that they manage the stressful day and inadequate staffing quite simply by helping one another. A picture of solidarity among the employees emerges from the interviews. The respondents relate how they help one another if they are unable to finish their tasks. The employees are strongly aware that the compressed working hours and lack of personnel create a situation in which they cannot be
absent from work, because it only means that their co-workers will have to work even harder, as temporary employees or hourly workers are seldom brought in when people are absent, e.g., due to illness. One of the respondents related how it feels when she is called into work:

They called and woke me up on a Saturday recently and wanted me to come in. I said no, but I felt guilty about it – after all, you know there are not enough people to do the job. And then because you feel guilty, you feel like you have to offer to work the next day. You can’t say no because of the others and the bosses. It feels like you have some kind of responsibility. You are expected to say yes because you are supposed to be a positive and flexible person. A lot of us feel like you have to be able to come up with a good reason for turning down work. It doesn’t feel right to just say no, I don’t want to; it feels selfish somehow. When they call and you say no, you feel like you have to offer something else on another day.

Feelings of guilt about not going into work when called are based on solidarity with the other employees, since employees know that if they do not come in, their co-workers will have to work harder if a temp or an hourly employee is not called in. Another informant told how she does not work a lot of overtime, but does so when needed:

We often are scheduled for more hours than stated on the contract. We have our leisure time too, and you don’t want to disturb that too much. You have your own schedule to keep too. So, you commit yourself both before and after. If it happens that another hour or two is needed to get things done, of course you help out and work overtime if somebody is out sick or something (….)

The informant relates that of course she helps out when necessary, but the problem is that it collides with her own plans. But employees do not work extra hours only when personnel are absent; they also pitch in when everyone is there but there is not enough time to finish the work.

As shown in the quotation, the employees help each other when needed. It also emerges that they feel a sense of duty because they are aware that their absence can make the situation more difficult for the others. Involuntary part-time positions have sometimes been seen as caused by financial problems within companies. A question that would be interesting for future analysis would be whether involuntary part-time positions are becoming an embedded component of organizational flexibility. If such is the case, the percentage of workers who have only part-time positions even though they want to work full-time may not decline in times of economic prosperity. Solidarity among the employees and the sense of duty that the informants relate in such cases can be used by the company as a reason for not needing to employ people in full-time or permanent positions, since the employees are willing to pitch in and help the company and each other. This solidarity may thus be one of the foundations of the company’s capacity to create a flexible organization and therewith becomes a paradox for the employees. On the one hand, they have to help each other in order to finish their tasks, but on the other hand, their willingness to help means the company does not have to call in more employees. Because the employees know there is a risk that no one will be called in, they may agree to work even if they had not planned to or even if they are ill. By this means, numerical flexibility can be accomplished.
by exploiting the employees’ sense of solidarity with one another, even when it may reduce their chances of getting a permanent position, as they are filling the function of numerical solidarity. Another important subject of discussion would be the question of whether the solidarity trap is as common in male-dominated workplaces. Are men less likely to feel this sense of solidarity and thus create greater pressure on employers to hire them full-time? Do women feel a stronger sense of care and concern for the organization and their co-workers that can be used to increase flexibility?

That which I have tried to shed light on through using the term ”solidarity trap” is the paradox that ensues as a consequence of employees’ willingness to help each other and sense of responsibility for one another. As the informants understand what the workload is like when there is a shortage of employees, they work even though they had not planned to and they help one another whenever it is needed. This could mean that the company can continue to function despite a chronic labor shortage because management knows the job will get done in the end. By this means, involuntary part-time positions become a component of the organization’s built-in flexibility, as management counts on this solidarity as well as the employees’ needs to work extra hours in order to survive financially. Therewith, solidarity among the employees becomes a trap for them, in that it means that the company does not, for instance, call in personnel when needed. From a more long-term perspective, it is conceivable that this solidarity becomes something that employers figure into their calculations when organizing the workplace. One possible example would be that management presumes that employees will help each other if they do not have enough time to finish their tasks. This would mean that they could hire people for fewer hours than required for the tasks, in that the company presumes that the work will get done ”collectively.” My intent in using the term is to reveal how women’s solidarity with one another may in the long run constitute a trap.

7.0 Concluding reflections

The private service sector is a relatively unexplored area in Swedish gender studies. I believe that deeper analysis of this sector could contribute to illustrating the new class, gender, and racialized relationships now emerging in the Swedish labor market. As I have chosen to elucidate, I believe that we need to abandon excessive focus on the patriarchy and instead develop theoretical tools that can capture how gender relations shape and are shaped by other balances of power such as class and racialization. I believe that the quotation above illustrates new forms of gender identity and class relations in the Swedish welfare state. Traditional gender studies have focused on areas
where differences between women and men were clearly apparent – in the public sector and on women working in male-dominated sectors.

I believe that my interviews produced a picture which implies that structural changes have taken place which I believe have entailed the creation of a new Swedish genderized working class, whose burgeoning presence casts doubt on traditional narratives on the Swedish welfare model and the status of women within it. One question that may be relevant in the context is whether these categories are outside or on the threshold of the Swedish model or whether the expansion of the service sector is an extreme illustration of the decline of the Swedish model. Although there is an established international feminist interest in these changes, with focus on flexibility, I believe there is a need in Sweden to theorize, based on these questions, on how various balances of power are reflected in the current labor market. I have argued that the private service sector is an area that may serve to illustrate this complexity.

8.0 Referens


