

Lone mothers with low income face obstacles to practice their mothering

Abstract

Lone mothers are an increasingly vulnerable group in Sweden. Mothers with less education are particularly at risk. This short paper discusses some findings from a study exploring low-income lone mothers' possibility to reconcile paid work with family commitments. Results show that a lack of financial resources significantly limited the mothers' possibility to combine various responsibilities and practice the kind of mothering they preferred. This conflict between aspirations and access to means for their realization engendered dilemmas and feelings of inadequacy.

Keywords: low-income lone mothers, work-family conflict, sociological ambivalence

SWEDEN IS OFTEN considered advantageous to lone mothers on account of high employment rates and low poverty rates. After the economic crises in the 1990s Swedish lone mothers' situation has, however, deteriorated. Poverty rates have increased, and nearly three out of 10 lone mothers have an income level that is below 60 percent of the median in the country (the EU's at-risk-of-poverty measure) (SOU, 2011:51, p. 117). Higher unemployment levels and reductions in welfare benefits are important explanation. Lone mothers with a lower education are particularly at risk.

The discussion in this short paper is based on a research project exploring work-family reconciliation among Swedish lone mothers with different socioeconomic background. It focuses on one of the main findings, namely, that low-income mothers' limited access to economic resources seriously constrained their ability to act in accordance with their notions of "appropriate care" (Alsarve, Lundqvist & Roman 2016).¹ The results considered in this paper are mainly based on 15 in-depth interviews with low-income and working class lone mothers. Two of the mothers had migrated to Sweden from a non-European country. Two were born in Sweden by migrant parents. In the following paragraphs I elucidate ways in which financial difficulties restricted the low-income lone mothers' possibilities to act in accordance with ideas of "good" mothering.

1 The Swedish Research Council funded the research project. It has been carried out in collaboration with Åsa Lundqvist, Jenny Alsarve and Terese Anving.

Struggling to be a "good" mother

Regardless of socioeconomic background, the mothers who participated in the study associated good mothering with meeting the children's needs, spending much time with them, and not letting them spend too long days in preschool. Reconciling paid work and caring responsibilities was not easy, however. The culturally shaped ethical ideas of good mothering particularly constrained the low-income mothers' possibilities to reconcile paid work with caring commitments. While all mothers wanted to give appropriate care to their children, the opportunities to do so varied greatly (cf. Rowlingson & McKay 2005).

Facing the money-care dilemma

The low-income mothers had to devote a lot of time and energy to paid work in order to manage the household funds. This, in turn, restricted their ability to act in accordance to their ideas of good mothering. The challenges confronting the low-income mothers can be called the money-care dilemma. To earn enough money to provide for the family, they had to work long hours, leaving them less time and energy to spend on their children. After a working day, often at inconvenient hours, the mothers frequently felt drained of energy. It is thus illuminating when a mother with school children said that she felt so worn out after a day's work that she would often go to bed before the children. The money-care dilemma that faced the low-income lone mothers is well captured by one of the mothers in the quote below.

... on the one hand I want to work more because it means money, but on the other hand I must think of the child, who means even more than that.

Because of difficulties to combine full-time work with family responsibilities the mothers typically wished to work fewer hours. They wanted to spend more time with their children. In Sweden, parents whose children are under eight years old have the legal right to reduce their working hours. Earnings are reduced accordingly. While the middle-class mothers could typically afford to do so, the household finances did not allow the low-income, working class lone mothers to shorten their working hours. Some mothers were hourly employed. They found it difficult to benefit from their social right to stay at home with a sick child on the days they had promised to work. The reason was that the economic compensation they would receive from the state was much lower than the expected earnings that day (as the yearly income is the basis of calculation). The low-income mothers badly needed all the money they could earn. They therefore recurrently had to take the sick child to preschool. Limited access to economic resources was also problematic because the mothers had difficulties to sustain the same lifestyle as other families. They could not afford to enrol their children in organized activities associated with a cost, take them to amusement parks, go on holidays, or give them much coveted things and clothes like "everyone else". Not

having the resources to do so was a source of distress giving rise to feelings of relative deprivation (cf. Townsend 1979).

Feelings of inadequacy and guilt

Lacking the means to act in ways the mothers considered to be in the best interest of the child engendered feelings of guilt and inadequacy. When asked how she managed to combine the job with the care of her children, it is significant that one of the mothers said that she never thinks that she has "done the right thing" and managed "to be a good enough mum". The reason she felt this way was that she had to work full-time on inconvenient hours to cover household expenses. The mothers who had to take their sick child to preschool expressed similar feelings. One mother put words on this when stating that she "didn't want to become the kind of mother who drops off her child with a runny nose", but that was exactly what she had to do in order to support the family.

Conclusion

The findings of the study referred to in this paper dispute the rather rosy international picture of the situation for lone mothers in Sweden. They highlight the difficulties that employed low-income lone mothers come up against when trying to realise ideals connected to the care of children. A possible explanation of this finding is in terms of the concept of "sociological ambivalence". It says that conflicts and dilemmas arise when there is a "disjunction between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing these aspirations" (Merton & Barber 1963: 98). The low-income and working-class mothers' opportunity structure made it difficult for them to act in accordance with culturally shaped ideas of good mothering. They wanted to spend much time with their children, stay at home with them when they were sick, pick them up early from preschool, do fun things with them, and so on, but lacked the economic resources to do so. This situation fostered feelings of guilt and shame. The discrepancy between the culturally shaped ideal of a good mother and the mothers' opportunities to act as such was clearly connected to economic inequality. The lack of economic resources also meant that they could not fully benefit from some of the social rights to which they are entitled, such as reducing their working hours or staying at home with a sick child. To conclude, the mothers' prospects of reconciling paid work and caring commitments were influenced by social class, as well as by their position as lone mothers.

References

- Alsarve, J., Lundqvist, Å. & Roman, C. (2016) *Ensamma mammor. Dilemman, resurser, strategier*. Malmö: Gleerups.
- Merton, R. & Barber, E. (1963) "Sociological ambivalence" i E A Teryakian (red.) *Sociological theory, values, and socio-cultural change: Essays in honor of Pitirim A. Sorokin* (pp. 91–120). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013.
- Rowlingson, K. & McKay, S. (2005) Lone motherhood and socio-economic disadvantage: insights from quantitative and qualitative evidence, *Sociological Review* 53(1): 30–49.
- SOU 2011:51 (2011) *Fortsatt föräldrar – Om ansvar, ekonomi och samarbete för barnets skull*. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Townsend, P. (1979) *Poverty in the United Kingdom. A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.

Corresponding author

Christine Roman

Mail: christine.roman@oru.se

Author

Christine Roman is Professor of Sociology at Örebro University. She conducts research on intimate relations, gender, and work-family integration.