

Swedish working conditions survey highlights widening equality gap

The Moa project multi-disciplinary survey on modern working and living conditions run from 1995 to late 1997 studied organizational, psychological and ergonomic conditions, as well as physical and chemical factors, in 80 public and private workplaces. Investigators talked to employers and management, and sifted through written material on work organization. Equal numbers of two hundred men and women workers were selected for in-depth personal interviews and questionnaire surveys. The aim was to look closely into the tie-in between changes in work organization and working life at both organization and individual levels. The gender perspective was recognized as key from the outset, both for its impact on recruitment practices and work situations.

From the information collected, job clusters were identified which reflected similarities in changing work organization and working conditions of groups of workers. All the evidence pointed to growing differences between working conditions. In other words, social divides - as expressed by working conditions - were widening. No-one should be surprised at this, given the visible spread of inequalities in other areas (income, wealth, access to health care, life expectancy, operation of justice and prison systems, etc.). This Swedish research gives the lie to the upbeat official spin on the "information society" in showing that the new work patterns do not strike a balanced compromise between the different interests in the workplace. Anything but - it is abundantly clear that there are winners and losers.

The research is too detailed for a full treatment, so just the six main clusters identified by the researchers are described here.

1. "Decent jobs". Men and women workers who have a good balance between work and private life. They enjoy good management and sufficient resources to do their job properly. They tend to work fixed hours, often in the private sector, and are generally office workers.

2. "Boundaryless jobs". Work and leisure time merge. Work deadlines are tight. Jobs are gender-segregated. Individuals have a great deal of influence over their own work. This group includes project managers, consultants and media workers.

3. "Locked jobs". Work is bound by the clock, and very stressful. Usually in sectors exposed to fierce competition. Workers may have many superficial customer contacts and little influence over their work. It includes check-out staff, call centre staff and bus drivers.

4. "Exposed jobs". These are physically demanding jobs in a poor physical work environment (where the chemical and physical risks are greatest). Many people in these jobs suffer poor health despite being young.

5. "Heavy, monotonous jobs". These are usually physically demanding jobs, often insecure and with monotonous duties. Workers are often passive in their leisure time and completely exhausted at the end of the working day. Job insecurity is often linked to privatisation and tender-based outsourcing. Heavy goods drivers and cleaners are in this group.

6. "Restrained jobs". Workers who consider they are prevented from doing their actual job. These are usually found in the public sector. They have undergone restructuring and are increasingly paper-bound. Workers tend to be highly educated and in highly socially regarded professions. This group includes policemen, public prosecutors and care staff.

Researchers also looked at the increasing time pressure of work and individual control over work. Workload had increased in all the firms looked at, but especially so in women-dominated, sectors catering to the public (users, customers, etc.). The group where most changes related to "flexible working" included a hospital, schools, a supermarket, a large industrial firm and an IT firm.

The research took a hard look at the gender dimension of changing working conditions, and came to a series of conclusions :

- men who work in gender-mixed workplaces tend to share more of the unpaid housework with their partners than men in segregated jobs;
- the worst working conditions are often in women-dominated workplaces. The worsening quality of public service jobs is a key contributor here;
- men benefit more than women from a gender-mixed workplace;
- changes in work organization seem to have widened the gap between groups. Class differences have become more entrenched. Men's and women's situations are broadly alike where work and living conditions are the same. Which is about once in a blue moon ! ■

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