



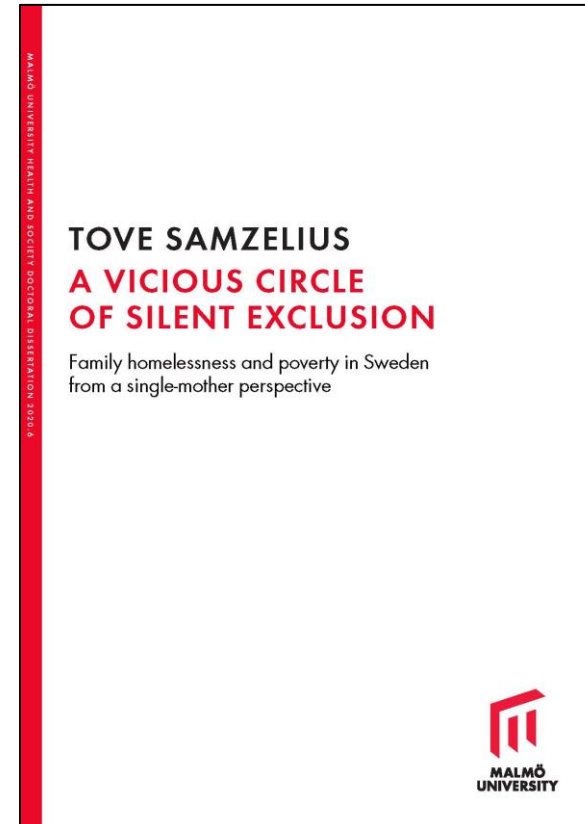
Precarity and vulnerability among homeless single parents in Sweden:

A critical perspective on policy and practice

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Two key perspectives

- 1) The centrality of lived experience and the need to listen to those with that experience. Inspired by the tradition of critical poverty scholars and feminist epistemology.
- 2) The need to situate the research and analyse the lived experiences within a broader social, political and historical context.



Focus in today's presentation

- The 'precarity-trap'
- Welfare conditionality
- How our understanding and use of the concept of 'vulnerability' impact on the response to family homelessness.

Precariousness and precarity

- **Precariousness** - all humans are interdependent on each other and therefore we are all **vulnerable**.
- **Precarity** is an acute expression of precariousness – result of fragmented systems of care and support – uneven impact of capitalism and state interventions (Butler 2008).
- **Precarity-trap** (employment, housing, income) – politically induced condition (Standing 2011).

Social Service Act (§1, Ch. 4)

Individuals unable to provide for their needs or to obtain provision for them in any other way are entitled to assistance from the social welfare committee for their livelihood and for their living in general. The individual shall, through social assistance, be assured a reasonable standard of living. The assistance shall be designed in such a way as to strengthen his or her resources for independent living.

Welfare conditionality

- A form of coercive power, which uses the threat of deprivation (of welfare goods) to achieve behavioural change on the part of those in need of them (Watts et al., 2017).
- Social assistance in Sweden is means-tested and administered through municipal social services – goal is self-sufficiency & personal responsibility.
- Individuals have the right to apply for social assistance, but there is no guarantee that they will receive support. Based on individual needs assessments and conditioned through activation requirements and claimant contracts.
- Emergency accommodation in Sweden is paid through the social-assistance scheme.

Activation and sanctions

- Requirement to 'actively look for housing' – locally or across Sweden.
- Compulsory attendance 'house-searching school' at social service office.
- Threats of sanctions (withdrawal of finances for emergency accommodation) and care proceedings.

Well, you know, I didn't know that it was a normal thing that they could put your children against you. I thought that was really scary. It was what surprised me in any case. Even with my own caseworker. It was always like, 'Oh, the children can be put in care'. It was always brought up in one way or another. I thought it was horrible. It was getting so bad that I went to see a psychologist. You know, I went to see a psychologist...or a therapist...because I was suffering from anxiety and that...I had sleeping problems because of this situation.

(Leila, mother of three children aged 0-6)

The mother says that she has been referred to solve her housing situation by herself, which she says she is unable to do. She says that she has no network that can support her and that she has no means. She is sorry that the police have been called twice this week to remove her in a situation where she feels completely powerless.

...in the acute situation, judged from the behaviour of the mother, she obviously lacks a network that can help her with housing, alternatively she lacks the ability to ask them for help. Furthermore, in principle she has no means if she pays for this night's lodgement.

(From social service emergency team notes regarding Hanna, mother of two children aged 0-3)

Who belongs to an 'especially vulnerable group'?

- Long term substance misuse/addiction, mental health issues or another condition which results in a long-lasting disability.
- Families with children, immigrants and those with low incomes do not belong to the group 'especially vulnerable'.
- Landlord's requirements about, for example, secure employment, income, and references does not mean that the condition 'especially vulnerable' is fulfilled.

A shift in norms?

- Although not necessarily made explicit, one consequence of these shifts is that ‘homeless women (born abroad) and their children by now are judged to be less “deserving” than, e.g., homeless single men (born in Sweden) with substance abuse or mental health problems’.
- This development is ‘at odds with the historically strong social norm’ in the Swedish welfare state ‘that women – especially mothers – and children should be protected by society’ (Sahlin, 2020, p. 43).

Challenging current norms - rethinking vulnerability

- Dissociate concept from negative connotations of victimhood, helplessness, neediness and pathology – sometimes used to justify coercive and objectionable paternalistic social relations, policies, and institutions.
- Focus on the moral obligations arising from vulnerability – emphasis on relational approaches to autonomy.
 - To counter the sense of powerlessness and loss of agency that is often associated with vulnerability.
 - To counter the risks of objectionable paternalism (Mckenzie 2013).

Different sources and states of vulnerability

- *Inherent vulnerability* – focuses attention on the minimal capabilities needed to sustain a decent human life.
- *Situational vulnerability* - a person's interpersonal, social, political, economic, or environmental situation that may compound her inherent vulnerability and compromise her capabilities to participate.
- *Pathogenic vulnerability* – Draws attention to 1) the way that situational vulnerabilities caused by social relationships of domination and subordination can give rise to compounded capability deficit or corrosive disadvantage. 2) the way that badly designed social policy responses to vulnerability cause or compound major capability failure, thereby entrenching social inequality and injustice.

- All three kinds of vulnerability draw attention to the need for responses that remediate or lessen the intensity of the particular harms and suffering to which the vulnerable person is subject.
- Just interventions to remediate vulnerability must not only **minimize harm** and **meet fundamental needs** but must do so in a way that **fosters autonomy** and promotes the **development of the relevant capabilities**.

Can this way of thinking about vulnerability help us to challenge current ways of working with families stuck in the 'precarity-trap'?