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## Abstract

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This thesis is concerned with lone-mother families in a local Swedish urban community. Against the background of the changes that the Swedish welfare system and labour market underwent during the 1990's, the study focuses on the mothers' *subsistence strategies*, that is, how they combine different sources of income and organise their consumption in order to make ends meet. Considering the structure of the labour market and the characteristics of social policies, as well as the specific features of the local community, the study investigates how lone mothers work out their subsistence within given frameworks.

The investigation is based mainly on interviews with lone mothers in three suburban areas: Hammarkullen, Hjällbo and Eriksbo, in the district city council of Lärjedalen in Göteborg. Seventy-five women were interviewed in the summer of 1998, using structured questionnaires. In the winter of 1999/2000, thematic, qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen of the mothers in a second phase of data collection. The study focuses on the results from these interviews – i.e. on the women's own understanding and interpretation of their situation, as well as their explanation of their subsistence-related choices and actions. This approach is viewed as fruitful in that it regards lone mothers as active agents and renders it possible to generate accounts of every-day practices based on experience, which would not be generated in policy studies on a macro level.

The mothers in the study work out their subsistence strategies in the cut-off point between labour market, welfare system and personal or informal networks. The women's relations to these societal spheres are thus studied. It is shown that the interviewed women discuss their subsistence-related choices and actions in terms of *autonomy* and *dependence*. The goal orientation of the interviewees was to maintain an autonomous household and manage by themselves without 'asking for favours' or 'being a burden'. The women's subsistence-related choices and actions are also guided by a kind of *moral rationality*, in the sense that economic utilitarianism is weighed against collective and individual norms and values of e.g. 'good motherhood' and the needs of the children. Overall, the mothers assume a very *active* position in relation to their daily subsistence, in terms of both incomes and consumption. It is also shown that the women, towards the end of the 1990's, regard it as necessary to be very active in relation to authorities, and to monitor their own social rights – such as economic benefits – to a higher extent than previously. The study contributes knowledge about the effects of economic and welfare policies on the individual level, as well as about how people who organise their lives within tight economic margins and in precarious situations cope.

Keywords: subsistence strategies, lone mothers, local, welfare state, labour market, private networks, autonomy, dependence, moral rationalities.

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