

The stairway class and sex in the work environment

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Data from Statistics Sweden for the period 1991 - 2003 was used to categorise a large set of questions. Three stairways were found where class, class & sex or sex was the prime factors. The result can be used when addressing problems in the work environment. Examples of questions belonging to each category are:

- *Class; working hours, possibility to influence your own work.*
- *Class & sex; straining work, own development in work.*
- *Sex; take minutes for a chat, own influence of the work rate.*

Class and sex, Work environment, Sweden, Trade union

1. Introduction

Several studies have found that the different socio-economic groups on the labour market are on a stairway regarding the level of the work environment (Nelander 2004, 2001, 1992, Marmot 2004, Gellerstedt 2003). Female hourly workers are found on the lowest stair and male salaried professional on the highest, as in figure 1.

2. Aim and method

This paper takes a starting point in how the work environment and its effects on health were perceived by women and men in the socio-economic groups “hourly worker”, “salaried employee” and “salaried professional” (Anon. 2004) in the years 1991, 1995, 1999 and 2003. The objective is to categorise the pattern of the different socio-economic groups’ answers to a set of questions.

Statistics Sweden’s (SCB) work environment inquiries were used and the total number of responses for these years were 38 870 persons. The drop out in these inquiries were; 12 percent 1991, 16 percent 1995, 19 percent 1999 and 22 percent 2003 (Anon. 2003).

The 20 questions analysed in the study are listed in Table 2. They were categorised by plotting data as in figure 1, 2 and 3, and then visually assessed. The definition of a good working environment follows the view in the Swedish Work Environment Act’s (Anon. 1978). The ranking of the working environment into good or bad in figure 4 and 5 is inspired by the work done by Wikman (1991).

Since 1970, after the legendary “low income investigation” (Johansson 1970), SCB has quantified the standard of living of the different socio-economic groups. To describe these groups, SCB interviewed the respondents in their home (will be done by telephone from 2008), which gave a high validity especially regarding questions about health. Since 1989 SCB also measures working conditions and health at work by a mailed questionnaire.

To be able to choose the questions to be analysed among all in SCB’s inquiries, the Swedish Work Environment Act’s view of the work environment was used (Anon.

1978). The Act implicitly implies that work produces a strain in the worker, which gives rise to a natural fatigue. However, if rate and duration of work and its physical, mental and social work load exceeds the worker's capacity, work may lead to ill health. The employer's demands (work here in this environment!), the employee's recovery, background and her/his possibility to influence the work situation determine whether the worker will become ill or not. The employer's supremacy (monitor and control the work and pay for it) restricts the workers ability to regulate her/his strain, e g to take a break or to avoid particularly strenuous work moments.

3. Result

Figure 1, 2 and 3 shows the different socio-economics groups answers to three of the 20 questions in the study. Each question has a clear pattern and figure 4 gives a schematic illustration of the three stairways found. Each staircase relate to a set of different questions presented in Table 1. Table 2 lists the differences in answers between the groups, and also sum the changes, between the years 1991 and 2003 for the analysed questions, divided up in class and sex. Figure 5 illustrates the changes between the years 1991 and 2003.

Figure 1. The percentage in each group answering "The work (each week) gives me possibilities to learn new things. ...", illustrating the stairway Class & Sex.

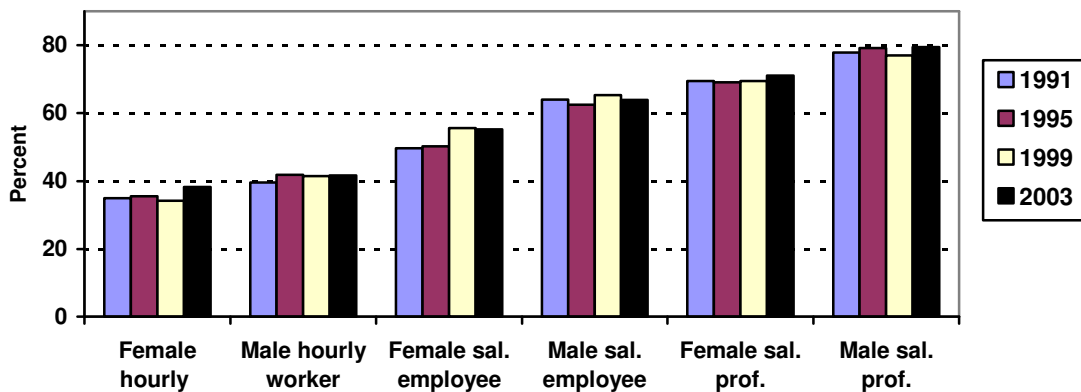


Figure 2. The percentage in each group answering "Have a monotonous work (agree totally or partly)", illustrating the stairway Class

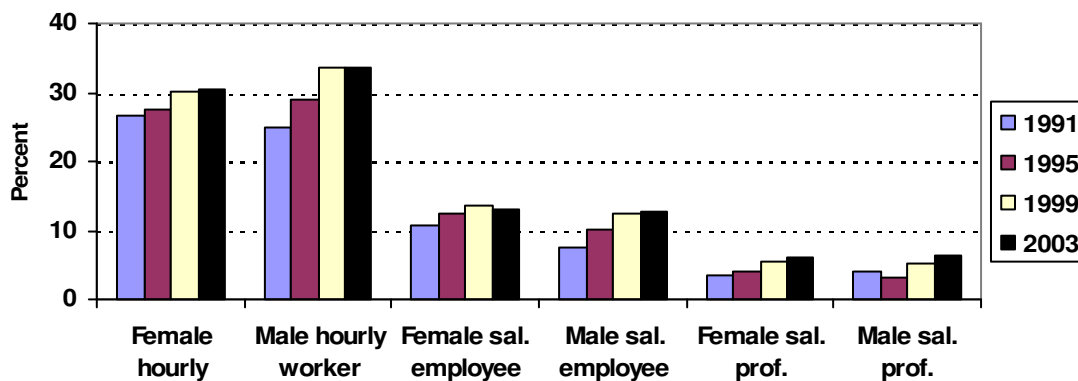


Figure 3. The percentage in each group answering “Can take a short break for a chat (valid for at least 1/2 of the working hours)”, illustrating the stairway Sex.

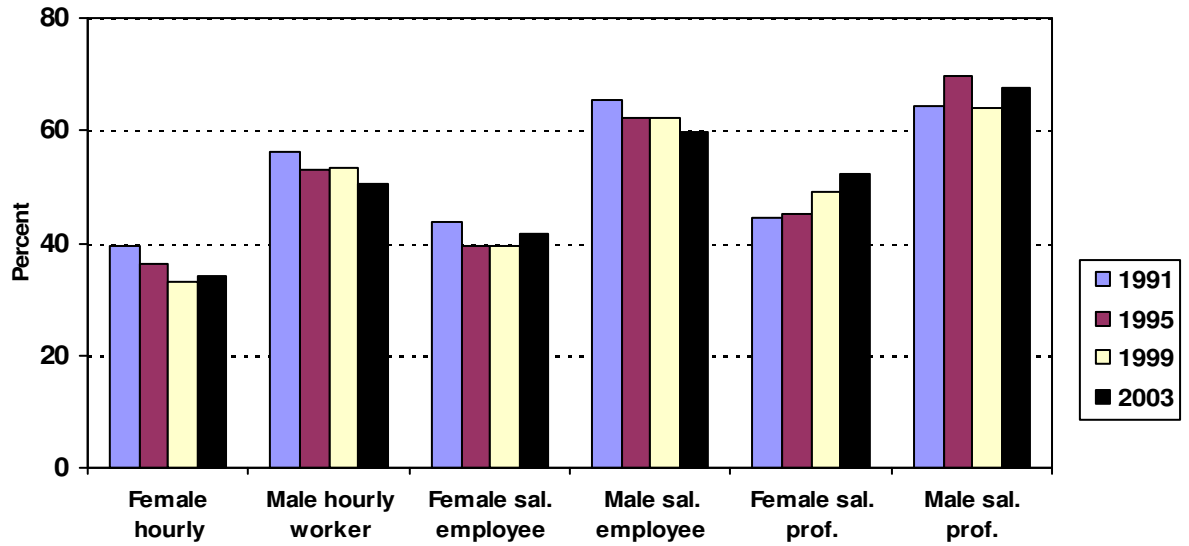


Figure 4. The stairways Class, Class & Sex and Sex identified in the study.

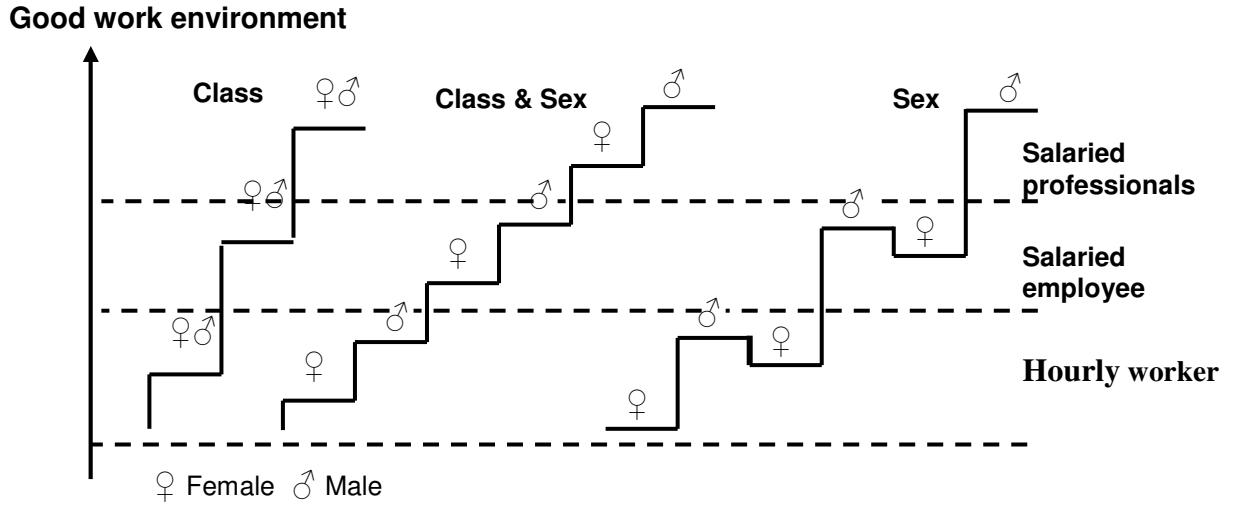


Table 1. The questions belonging to the stairways Class, Class & Sex and Sex.

Stairway	Questions
Class Questions where class explain more then sex. Hourly workers state the lowest level and employee professionals the highest level. Women and men in the same class at about the same level.	Usually working daytime, Influence own work set up, Have a tedious work, Education and training at work.
Class & Sex Questions where female hourly workers state the lowest level followed by men in the same class and male employee professionals at the highest level.	At work despite being ill, Influence when the different work moment shall be done, Bounded work task/lack of freedom, Turning, bending several hours per day, Have a straining and heavy work, Able to learn new things, There is a systematic monitor and control of the work environment, Access to occupational safety and health service, Body tiredness each week, Pain in shoulders and arms at least once a week.
Sex Questions where sex explain more the class. Female hourly workers state the lowest level and female in a higher class state a lower level then male in a lower class. Male employee professionals at the highest level.	Can take a short break for a chat, Influence own work rate, Exposed to threat and violence, Exposed to sexual harassment, Tired and listless the latest 3 months.

Figur 5. The figure sum up the changes in the work environment during the period 1991 to 2003. The stairway 1991 (to the left) is the base-line and the stairway 2003 illustrates the changes in the answers given by the different socioeconomic groups.

Good working environment

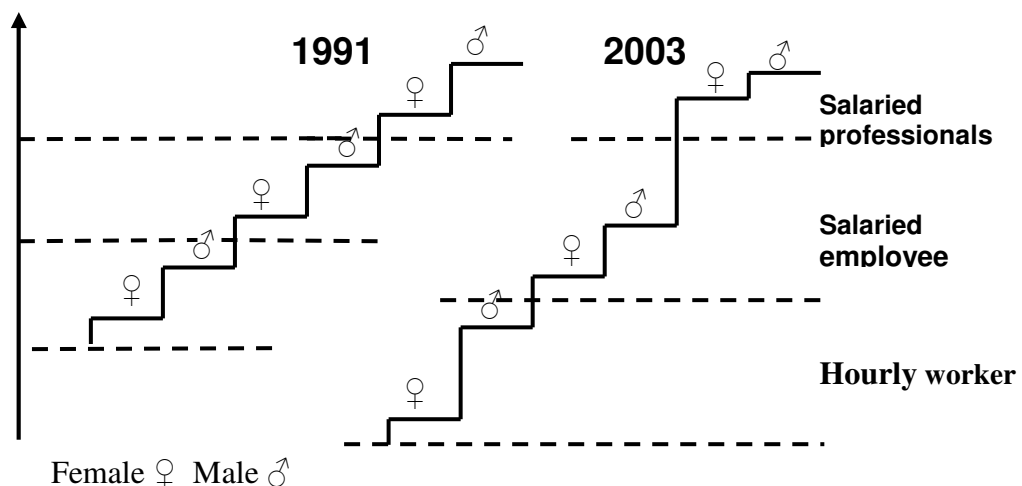


Table 2. The differences in answers to the questions about the work environment and health between the years 1991 and 2003 (in percent). Changes larger than five percent are in bold.

Questions about the work environment	Women			Men		
	Hourly worker	Salaried employee	Salaried professional	Hourly worker	Salaried employee	Salaried professional
Usually working daytime	-13.2	0	1	-7.6	-1.1	1
Can take a short break for a chat	-5.2	-2.3	8.1	-5.5	-5.6	3.3
Influence own work rate	-14.1	-7.7	2.5	-10.2	-10.2	-3.1
Influence own work set up	-0.3	-2.3	-2.9	0.4	-4.6	-3.8
Influence when the different work moment shall be done	-5.2	-0.9	5.1	-0.1	0.9	2.5
Bounded work task, lack of freedom	6.7	4.2	1.1	5.5	3.6	1.6
Turning, bending several hours per day	3.0	2.1	-0.6	3.1	1.3	2.1
Have a straining and heavy work	7.9	3.8	1.0	3.0	0.9	1.0
Exposed to threat and violence	5.3	1.3	-2.0	2.0	2.7	1.2
Exposed to sexual harassment	2.5	0.4	1.3	0.1	1.3	0.1
Have a tedious work	3.7	2.3	2.7	8.7	5.4	2.1
Education and training at work	2.7	-4.9	-4.7	3.9	-0.2	-2.2
Able to learn new things	4.3	5.5	1.6	2.1	-0.1	1.6
Changes in the work environment 1991–2003¹⁾	- - -	- -	+	- -	- -	-
Access to occupational safety and health service (1995–03)	-15.7	-7.0	-1.5	-6.4	-3.8	-4.3
Questions about health						
Body tiredness each week	9.2	9.3	4.3	11.2	5.7	4.2
Pain in shoulders and arms at least once a week	8.0	8.3	11.1	6.3	5.1	8.4
Tired and listless the latest 3 months	14.4	11.8	7.8	9.8	9.2	11.3
Changes 1991 – 2003¹⁾	- - -	- -	-	- -	-	-

¹⁾ + positive; - negative; - - - very negative change

4. Discussion

This paper describes how the work environment and its effects on health were perceived by the socio-economic groups in the Swedish labour force. It also categorises the answers from these groups to a set of questions.

4.1 Less freedom and heavier work

As shown in Table 2, the demands at work increased during the years 1991 to 2003, at the same time as the employee own influence on the work situation decreased. Female workers suffered the largest impairment in the working environment. In 1991 (the initial data point of this study) women were on the lowest step. Between 1991 and 2003 the gap between the other groups increased, especially the gap between female hourly workers and male salaried professionals. During the same time period the gap in

economic standard for the different socio-economic groups increased with 13 percent (Anon. 2006). Except for the manual handling aspects of a work, the position of female salaried employees in 2003 is closer to the situation for hourly workers than in 1991.

The percentage of female hourly workers who could influence their own work situation sank drastically during the period 1991 to 2003. More female hourly workers reported having a monotonous work task 2003 and fewer could take a short break for a chat, compared with 1991.

4.2 Three stairways

This study demonstrates that the socio-economic groups falls into three different stairways depending on which aspect of the work environment is studied, see Table 2. Female hourly workers report the lowest level in all stairways and male salaried professionals the highest. For many aspects of the work environment, e.g. own development at work, women report a lower level than men does in the same class. For other aspects, female in the class above report a lower level than the men in the class below, e.g. less control of the rate of work or ability to take a short break for a chat.

The stairways can be used to identify how to address different problems in the work environment. The stairway Sex illustrate that “lack of possibilities to influence the own work situation” is a general problem for women across the socio-economic groups. Here women have a common interest to join and get power to enable a change.

Problems shared by people on the lowest step of the stairway Class & Sex are more difficult to address (e.g. have a straining work), as the affected group is relatively smaller. Here measures need to be formulated also gaining other groups. Examples of such measures are; routines for early involvement by affected workers in planning; education and training programmes enabling less educated doing more qualified work tasks. These kinds of measures, however, require a mutual understanding by all parties involved, including the employer.

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