

Homelessness and conditionality within the boundaries of the Swedish welfare state

- The case of lone mothers and their children

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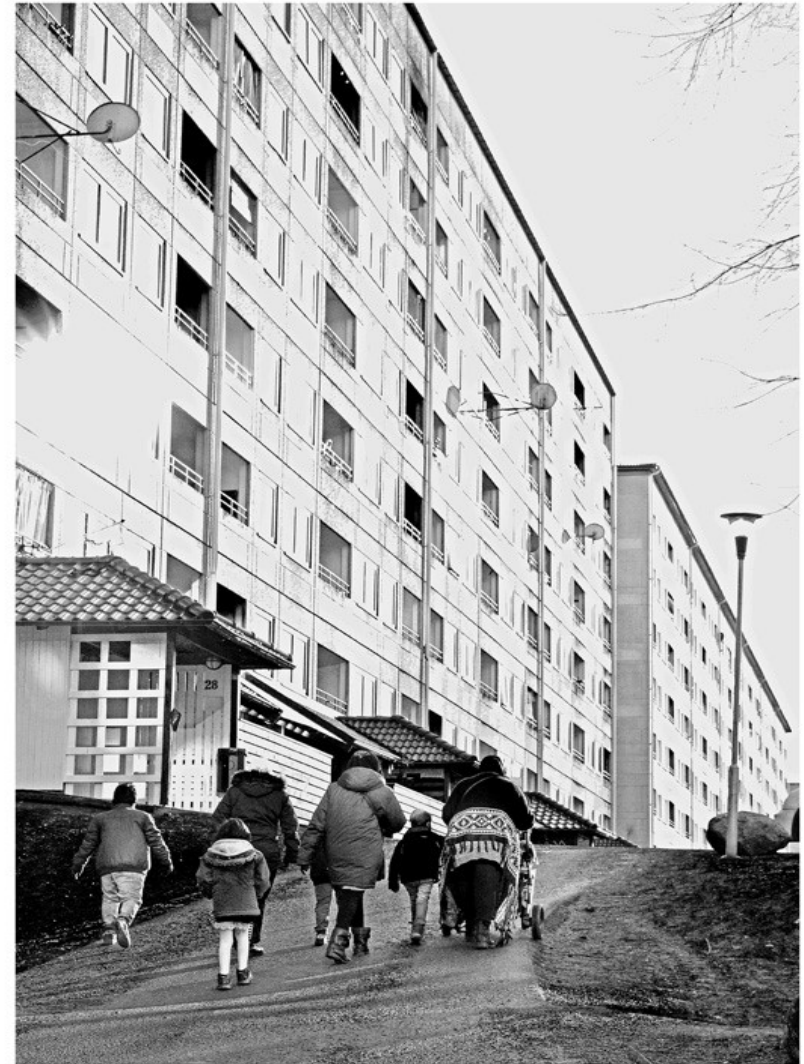
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I want to work. But right now, I feel no hope for the future... the circumstances don't allow it. I have too many problems. I just think about today. How should I deal with today? Tomorrow I think about tomorrow. I just think one day at a time.

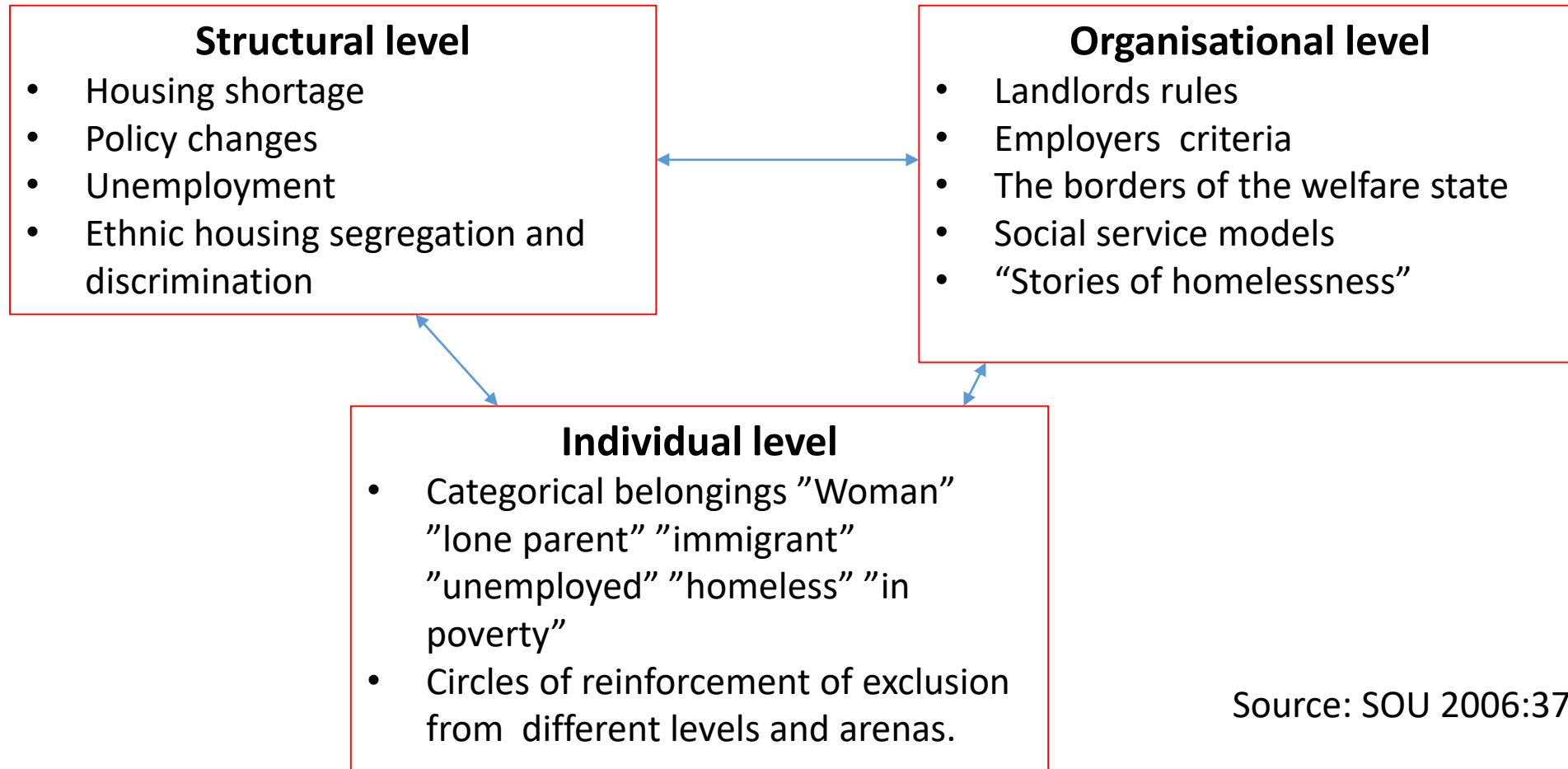
To have a job in Sweden is the way in...you know for everything. To be self-sufficient and that. If you have a job you can get a tenancy...everything falls in to place. But as soon as you are unable to work, you can't provide for yourself, the door is shut. That's when things look dark. That is when it gets tough. For me I think it was bad timing for everything...maybe...who knows...

Lone mothers and housing exclusion in a Swedish context

- Changes in housing policies since the 1990s – no longer a 'social right'.
- Ethnic minority lone mothers over-represented but not categorized as 'vulnerable'.
- The role of social services: social assistance and emergency accommodation



Factors contributing to family homelessness



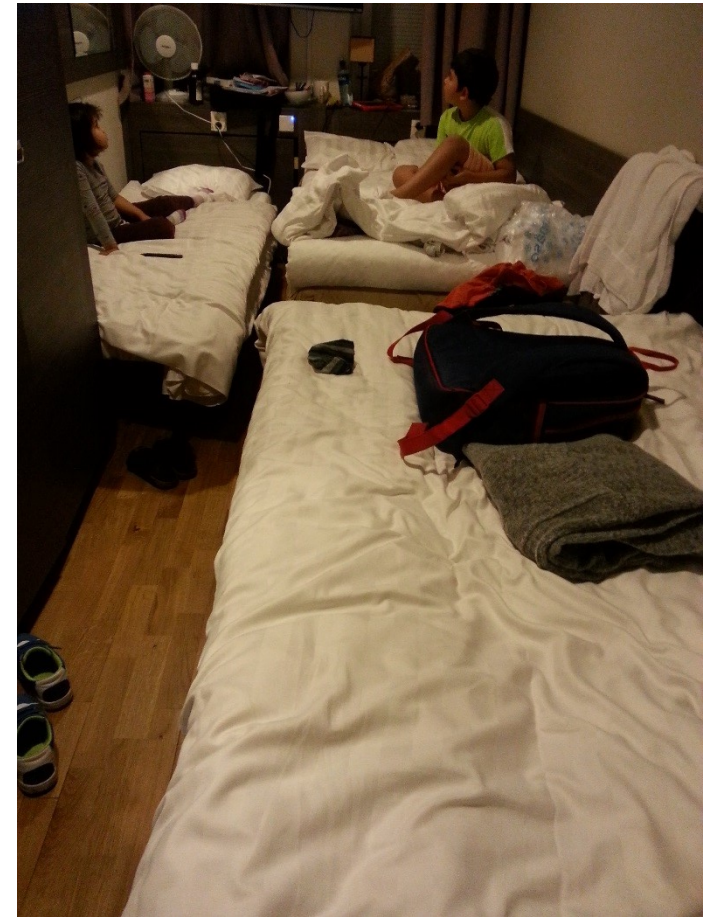
Discretionary powers and random conditionality

This thing about the 'house-searching school' and those lists...we all know that it gives nothing... It is just to keep us in their control...that is all it is about. Everybody knows that there is no result from attending the 'house-searching school'. Nobody has got a flat from attending the 'house-searching school'. I have lived in Sweden for eight years. I have never seen this before. Only recently in [name of place]. I haven't seen or heard about it anywhere else. In other local authorities, even if you don't find a flat at least they offer you some sort of hostel. The 'house-searching school' is just used as an excuse by the local authority they say 'oh we have offered them help, they don't want to move anywhere else, now they need to leave...' that is the only reason why they have it. All they want is that we should just disappear as they see us as hopeless cases. They don't want us here... (Judith)

The 'politics of value' and social services

There are rules and laws, but they can make decisions arbitrarily...but nobody knows. The law can't say you have to treat them so and so...but they treat us like dirt...we can't demand our rights...because there can be language issues...we don't have people who can help us...our problem becomes isolated...the general public don't know what is going on. For me the politicians should represent what is right...but in this case when the staff abuse us, take bad decisions, treat us unfairly...there has to be someone who says stop. You are acting in a wrong way. But there isn't in this case. The staff are acting really badly, but nobody says stop. Instead they take their side.

Eva [the housing officer] says with a loud voice to mum that we have a democracy in Sweden and that the housing queue is seven years and people who work needs housing. How can mum think that she should get access to housing before them? Eva doesn't have any flats to give away to mum. Landlords are private corporations, businesses who don't want to pay for housing for people who can't pay and who don't work. Eva says to mum that she has to work if she wants somewhere to live.



The 'politics of rights' and the families caught in the middle

In some cases where financial assistance for emergency housing was refused, the grounds for rejection was that the parent's own responsibility for income and housing should be stimulated, which in the long-term would be good for the child. However, there was no explanation as to why the imminent risk of the child becoming destitute would be less serious. Parents have, to the best of their ability, a responsibility to ensure the well-being of their children and research shows that it is good for children if their parents are in employment.

However, at the same time, the Social Service Inspectors want to underline the ultimate responsibility of social services for people in need, which at the event of a rejection, includes ensuring that the child actually has a roof over its head

I had to go to the emergency service and they were...well now afterwards I can understand...they are also overloaded...so I can have some empathy...but they were like...no this is not a hotel...it doesn't work like that. There were a lot of threats too...'You know if you lose your home and you have children then you are considered...intentionally homeless you know...then the kids can be taken of you...That's what the woman was saying all the time. 'We can sort something out for the kids. Because the children have the right, but you put them in this situation so then you will be seen as being neglectful...you know what I mean...

Social suffering and motherhood

I was there for two months but I felt I couldn't cope any longer. I was really ill. I got...you know I felt I give up...I can't do this anymore... Then I called my children's father and I said 'you have to take your children. I have nowhere to live and I can't cope anymore'.



Every day when we have problems the children are sad and they cry and cry... Every day I try to force myself to forget what is happening. I cry inside but I am happy for the children. I don't want them to feel my problems or that I am sad. I read a book...my Somali book...a Swedish book...I talk to them, you know about dreams...that it will be all good one day... I try to have a normal life for the children because otherwise if they are damaged...I think about their future...

In conclusion:

- Strong discretionary powers of social services, in combination with weak rules and guidelines on how to best support homeless families with children, open up a space for abusive and oppressive working praxis.
- Children's rights in homeless families are conditioned on their parent's ability to prove that they are 'active' and 'worthy' citizens.
- Rather than supporting the parents to become self-sufficient, current policies seem counterproductive and risk pushing already vulnerable families to further marginalised positions.

Thank you for listening!

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