

## Precarious employment conditions among Scandinavian home care workers

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Authors:

Rebecka Strandell & Anneli Stranz

Department of social work, Stockholm University

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### Abstract

In recent decades, there has been increasing demands for home care in all the Scandinavian countries. However, precarious employment conditions and turnover intentions are challenging home-care work. The purpose of this comparative paper is to study and analyse precarious employment conditions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. A further focus is to relate similarities and differences to the country-specific institutional and organizational context of eldercare. The data used comes from the international Nordcare-survey. This paper draws on a subsample of participant working in home care in Denmark (n=392), Norway (166) and Sweden (226) in 2015, in total 784 individuals. Results show that care workers in the three Scandinavian countries experience different challenges related to employment conditions.

## Introduction

In Scandinavia, care of older people is a central part of the welfare system and the workforce, a majority of which is women, constitute one of the largest occupations in the labour market. Further, in all the three countries, an ageing population, a focus on cost-containments and an emphasis on ‘ageing-in-place’ (Björk & Härenstam 2016, Eurostat 2015) have contributed to increased demands for home-care services, and thus, the need for home-care workers (Rostgaard et al. 2012, European Commission 2015, Stranz & Szebehely 2018). Parallel to these changes, policy aims for improved quality of eldercare services in all the three countries has brought a call for more qualified and trained staff (Nordic Council of Ministers 2014, NBHW 2018).

At the same time, home-care work is internationally characterized by low institutional recognition as well as precarious employment conditions and a poor working situation. Hence, working in home care is generally low paid and a relatively high proportion of the employees work part-time, are employed by the hour and/ or work irregular hours. Moreover, it is common to experience difficulties reconcile work with family life and other social commitments (ref.). Further, the Scandinavian eldercare sectors are challenged by high staff turnover rates and the workforce is ageing (Rostgaard 2011, Meagher et al. 2016, Genet et al. 2012, EUROFOUND 2013, NBHW 2014). A vast body of international literature have shown that employment insecurity and precarious employment conditions in home care have consequences for job satisfaction, physical and mental well-being as well as turnover intentions (Zeytinoglu et al. 2009).

Although home-care work in Scandinavia are facing challenges, including increasing demands for care services, a call for qualified staff and high turnover rates, the home-care workers employment conditions have generally been neglected. Hence, little is known about precarious employment conditions in the Scandinavian countries and how institutional and organisational contexts shape home-care workers’ employment conditions.

Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the aim of this paper is to investigate and compare precarious employment conditions among home-care workers in the Scandinavian countries and how similarities and differences between the countries could be related to the country-specific institutional and organizational eldercare context.

Home care work in Scandinavia

*Precarious employment*

Precarious employment is a complex phenomenon. The concept of “precarious work” is often defined as employment under conditions that create uncertainty and/ or insecurity for individuals in the labour market (Zeytuniglu et al. 2009). Within the scope of this paper, precarious employment refers to employment conditions of involuntary part-time, precarious work-time arrangements such as irregular hours and split shifts, work-family conflict and worries about pay. Although some of these precarious employment conditions, such as irregular hours and split shifts, might equate flexibility for some workers, previous research have shown that it equate precarity for many others (Zeytuniglu et al. 2009).

In the Scandinavian countries, home care workers are challenged by precarious employment conditions. This is a trend that is present also in other countries, and related to questions about low salaries, work hours, a typical work shifts and the possibility to balance work with family life and other social commitments (Meagher et al. 2016, more references).

Working time and working conditions have a strong influence on the level of work-family conflict. There are differences between employees in different countries and welfare-regimes.

[Insert more research on precarious employment conditions in eldercare/home care, research on work-life balance, and implications of precarious employment conditions]

Comparing employment conditions in the Scandinavian countries

*Institutional structures and organization of home care in the Scandinavian countries*

In the welfare literature, Denmark, Norway and Sweden is often clustered together to make up a distinct Scandinavian-welfare state model. Care of older people is, in the Scandinavian welfare-state model, characterised as being comprehensive as well as mainly publicly organised, financed and provided. Further, care services are of and high quality and directed to all citizens based on individual needs rather than financial resources (Szebehely 2005, Anttonen et al. 2012). However, some studies suggest that the Scandinavian countries do not conform a coherent welfare-state model (Rauch 2007, Meagher & Szebehely 2018).

Another aspect of the Scandinavian welfare model concerns the labor market which is highly gender segregated, especially in the public sector. Studying paid care workers position in the labor market is often connected to gender issues. Feminist care researchers have for a long time

questioned the rosy picture of the Nordic welfare state (Anttonen, Dahl) and refers to the low status of paid care work, bodywork and how working in elder care which endanger the care workers possibility to influence their work life (Widding Isaksen, Twigg).

For all the Scandinavian countries, eldercare is mainly organized based on the principle of ‘ageing-in-place’, that is, the opportunity for older people to receive care in their own home as long as possible. The recent international trend of de-institutionalization has put further emphasis on aging-in-place and home care in all the countries (Rostgaard et al. 2012). Further, ageing-in-place policies have contributed to an international trend of an increasing proportion of more sick and frail older people living at home. These transformations implies that the organization of home care has changes, needing care several times a day, 24 o’clock, every day of the week, contributing to unsocial hours for home-care workers.

[Insert statistics on salary in the three counties]

[Maybe insert more research on central trends and transformations in the eldercare sectors for the three countries]

#### *Trends in spending and service coverage*

Comparisons of spending and coverage of eldercare over time reveals both similarities and differences between the Scandinavian countries.

**Table 1. Demography, expenditure, service coverage in Denmark, Norway and Sweden**

	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Sweden</b>
A. Older people in the population, % 2015 <sup>A</sup>			
65+ years	<b>17</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>
80+ years	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
B. Public expenditure on eldercare, % GDP 2016 <sup>B</sup>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>2.2</b>
C. Home-care services for older people, coverage (% of population 80+)	<b>34</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>23</b>

A. OECD 2015 B. Nososco 2017 C. Meagher & Szebehely 2018

Internationally, the Scandinavian countries are amongst the most generous spenders of eldercare, measured as public spending on eldercare as proportion of GDP (Rodrigues et al. 2012). However, since the 1990s, the public spending on eldercare services has declined in Norway and Sweden, while it has increased in Denmark (Meagher & Szebehely 2018). In, 2015, public spending on eldercare is at the same level for all the countries at 2.2 of GDP (Nososco 2017).

National trends in spending somewhat reflects service coverage of home care in the three countries, which in an international comparison is relatively high (Rodrigues et al. 2012). Home-care service coverage are higher in Denmark and Norway, where about one third of 80+ receives home care compared to almost every fourth in Sweden (see Table 1). However, coverage has been falling in all three countries (Meagher & Szebehely 2018).

For all the Scandinavian countries, needs assessments have become more strict, the threshold for receiving eldercare has been raised and home care has become more targeted towards those with the largest needs (Daatland 2014, Meagher & Szebehely 2018). As a part of this, there has been a redistribution of tasks with a focus on medical and personal care rather than household tasks (Strandell, forthcoming). However, tightening of eligibility and the distribution of tasks differ somewhat between the three countries. Denmark and Norway spread their resources more evenly compared to Sweden where small amounts of services are provided to a relatively large proportion of older people. Hence, older clients (80+) in Denmark and Norway home-care services receives low-intensity help, about on average 3.7 hours per week in Denmark and 4.5 hours per week in Norway (Meagher & Szebehely 2018). In comparison, services in Sweden are more strictly targeted towards those with largest needs and Swedish home-care users (80+) receives on average 8 hours per week (ibid.).

## Methods

This article uses quantitative and qualitative data from the international Nordcare study from 2015. The Nordcare study is a postal survey to care workers in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway.

In 2015, the questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of unionized care workers (home-helpers, care aides, assistant nurses and similar occupations) in various forms of care services, including residential and home care for older people. Studying unionized care workers implies that this study is limited to study a better-established segment of care workers. Hence, unionized care workers are more likely compared to non-unionized care workers to have permanent employment, more formal training and longer experience in the sector. The sample size was 2000 in 2015 and the response rate was for Denmark, Norway and Sweden together XX %. This paper draws on a subsample of participant working in home care in Denmark (n=392), Norway (166) and Sweden (226) in 2015, in total 784 individuals.

The questionnaire encompass extensive and detailed self-reported information on eldercare workers' employment and working conditions, the job content and their assessment of different aspects of the jobs. Further, In addition to demographic information, background information about title, working hours per week, formal training in care, and whether they worked for a public or private provider was collected. The Nordcare-survey consist of both fixed and open-ended questions.

Measures

*Precarious employment conditions* were measured using five different variables: *Working involuntary part-time*, *Working irregular hours*, *working split shifts*, *experiencing Work-Life Conflict* and reporting *Worries about pay*.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Coding</b>
<i>Working involuntary part-time</i> “Are you satisfied with the number of hours you are working?”	‘No want to work more hours’=1; ‘yes’ and ‘Nor, want to work fewer hours (even if the salary is reduced)’=0
<i>Working irregular hours</i> “When do you usually work? Please mark one or more relevant alternative/s: Weekdays, daytime; Weekdays, evening; Weekends; Night”	Respondents marking 3-4 of the alternatives=1. Respondents marking 1-2 alternatives=0.
<i>Working split shifts</i> “Do you work split shifts, i.e. two shifts a day at least 2 hour unpaid time between sessions?”	‘Yes, more or less every day’, ‘Yes, every week’ or ‘Yes, every month’=1; ‘Yes, but more rarely’ or ‘No, never’=0.
<i>Experiencing work-life conflict</i> “In general, how do your working hours fit in with your family or social commitments outside work?”	‘Not very well’ or ‘Not at all well’=1; ‘Very well’ or ‘Fairly well’=0.
<i>Reporting worries about pay</i> “When you think about your work – are you worried that your salary does not cover your expenses?”	‘Yes, a lot’ or ‘Yes, somewhat’=1. ‘No, not very much’ or ‘No, not at all’=0.

In order to capture the proportion of workers in each country giving responses about precarious employment conditions in the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, a variable was made in SPSS in order to study whether or not the respondents mentioned precarious employment conditions. If the respondent mentioned some sort of precarious employment conditions in their written answers they were coded as ‘1’, of not, they were coded as ‘0’. Precarious employment conditions included dissatisfied with pay, precarious work-time arrangements (including irregular work hours, dissatisfied with schedule, split shifts), insecure employment-status and work-family conflict.

The open-ended questions gave the respondents an opportunity to comment on some aspects of their work situation on their own words. In this paper the following open-ended questions are analysed: *'If you have considered quitting your job, please tell us why?'*, *'If you have considered to stay in your job, please tell us why?'* and *'If you could change anything in the eldercare sector, what would you change?'*

#### Data analysis

Cross-tabulation with chi-squared tests were conducted to present descriptive comparisons between different staff characteristics and intentions to remain employed. Multivariate logistic regressions were conducted. Associations were defined as statistically significant if  $p < 0.05$ . Analyses were undertaken using SPSS version 24.

[Not finished with thematic analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions. Only very general and initial reflections are included in the results. We are going to use Nvivo 12 Pro for the qualitative analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions]

## Results

### Background characteristics

A comparison of the background characteristics of the Scandinavian home-care workers show that a majority of the employees in all three countries are women, although a significantly higher proportion of the Swedish workers are men compared to Denmark and Norway.

Further, higher proportion of the Swedish home-care workers are born outside the country. Sweden and Denmark stands out regarding the proportion of works employed in the private sector, reflecting the degree of implementation of marketisation in the Danish and Swedish eldercare sector. Similar between the countries are that a majority of the staff have long experience of working in eldercare. Nevertheless, the Norwegian employees have higher education in care compared to Denmark and Sweden.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Scandinavian home-care workers, %**

	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>P-value</b>
<b>Public or private provider</b>				0.000
<i>Public</i>	86.3	98.8	88.6	
<i>Private</i>	13.7	1.2	11.4	
<b>Length in occupation</b>				0.005
<i>&lt;5 years</i>	11.1	9.1	20.3	
<i>6-9 years</i>	15.2	13.9	11.0	
<i>10+</i>	73.8	77	68.6	
<b>Education in care</b>				0.000
<i>Max 1 year</i>	11.6	18.5	23.1	
<i>1-2 years</i>	54.5	35.2	38.9	
<i>More than 2 years</i>	33.9	46.3	38	
<b>Gender</b>				0.000
<i>Woman</i>	95.9	94.4	87	
<i>Man</i>	4.1	5.6	13	
<b>Country of origin</b>				0.000
<i>Born in the country</i>	93.8	88.9	77.6	
<i>Born outside the country</i>	6.2	11.1	22.4	
<b>Age (mean)</b>	50	48	46	

## Employment conditions

Table 3 presents the proportion of workers experiencing different precarious employment conditions in Denmark, Norway and Sweden respectively. Table 4 present multivariate logistic regression analysis on the same variables.

**Table 3. Precarious employment conditions among Scandinavian home-care workers, %**

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden	P-value
Worried about pay <sup>1</sup>	27	41	48.4	0.000
Involuntary part-time	13.3	44.4	17.3	0.000
Work split shifts <sup>3</sup>	1	2.5	37.2	0.000
Work 3-4 different shifts	4.8	52.8	45.1	0.000
Work hours do not fit family life and other social commitments <sup>4</sup>	7.5	14	31.7	0.000
Have at least 3 of the 5 precarious employment conditions	2.1	14.7	28.7	0.000

1 Yes, a lot/ Yes, quit a lot. Other response alternatives: No, quite little/ No, not at all. 2 Other response alternatives: Yes, happy with hours.

3 Yes, more or less every day/ Yes, some day a week/ Yes, some day every month. Other response alternatives: Yes, more seldom/ No, never. 4 does not fit particularly well/ Odes not fit well at all. Other response alternatives: Very well/ pretty well.

**Table 4. Precarious employment conditions among Scandinavian home-care workers, logistic regression (reference category Denmark). Model 1, bivariate logistic regression. Model 2, multivariate logistic regression with control for all background variables in Table 2**

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Norway	Sweden	Norway	Sweden
Worried about pay <sup>1</sup>	1.875*	2.539***	1.888*	2.239***
Involuntary part-time	3.708***	1.024 <sup>es</sup>	3.842***	0.957 <sup>es</sup>
Work split shifts <sup>3</sup>	2.452 <sup>es</sup>	56.485***	2.443 <sup>es</sup>	68.613***
Work 3-4 different shifts	21.926***	16.182***	20.662***	17.204***
Work hours do not fit family life and other social commitments <sup>4</sup>	2.025*	5.713***	1.858*	5.540***
Have at least 3 of the 5 precarious employment conditions	7.890***	18.206***	7.623***	17.462***

1 Yes, a lot/ Yes, quit a lot. Other response alternatives: No, quite little/ No, not at all. 2 Other response alternatives: Yes, happy with hours.

3 Yes, more or less every day/ Yes, some day a week/ Yes, some day every month. Other response alternatives: Yes, more seldom/ No, never. 4 does not fit particularly well/ Odes not fit well at all. Other response alternatives: Very well/ pretty well. P-value \* 0.05 \*\* 0.005 \*\*\* 0.001

### *Involuntary part-time*

Although this paper encompasses a well-established segment of the Scandinavian home-care workforce, part-time work is relatively common among the respondents in all the three Scandinavian countries. However, there are some differences between the Scandinavian countries regarding the proportion of employees working involuntary part-time (see Table 3). Involuntary part-time is significantly more evident in Norway, where more than two fifths of those who work part-time want to work more hours, compared to about 13 percent in Denmark and 17 percent in Sweden.

Looking at the open-ended questions, involuntary part-time is a central problem in Norway. In the Swedish and Danish open-ended questions, the issue of involuntary part-time is not mentioned to the same extent, especially not in the Danish answers.

### *Precarious work-time arrangements*

Sweden differs from the other two Scandinavian countries in a negative way regarding the proportion of workers stating that they work split shifts. About one third of the Swedish employees work split shifts at least once a month compared to only a couple of percent in both Denmark and Norway. This is also reflected in the open-ended questions where responses about split shifts is only mentioned by the Swedish workers.

A higher proportion of the Norwegian (52.8 per cent) and the Swedish (45.1) employees work a combination of 3-4 different shifts compared to the Danish workers (4.5 percent). In the open-ended questions the Swedish workers, and to some extent the Norwegian workers, are dissatisfied with the schedules and work time-arrangements. In the open-ended questions it is evident that work hours extend from early morning to late evening, including weekends and sometimes also night. This fragmented organization of work-time arrangements in Norway and Sweden is reflected in the open-ended answers.

### *Work-family conflict*

A significantly higher proportion of the Swedish workers experience work-family conflict compared to the Danish and Norwegian workers, every third employee compared to about 8 and 14 percent.

The fact that a significantly higher proportion of home-care workers in Norway and Sweden work 3-4 different shifts, and that it is much more common in Sweden to work split shifts might help

explain why a significantly higher proportion of the Swedish workers state that their work hours do not fit with family life and other social commitments. Bivariate analysis and the regression analysis shows that there is a significant negative association between work hours and work-life balance in Sweden and Norway. This is consistent with previous research showing that working time have strong influence on the degree of work-family conflict (Gallie & Russel 2009, Anttila et al. 2015).

Furthermore, for all the four different shifts, the proportion of workers experiencing work-life conflict is highest in Sweden (se Figure 1). Amongst those who only work one type of shift, 18 per cent in Sweden and between 3 and 9 per cent in the other Scandinavian countries asses that work does not fit with family life and other social commitments. Among those who work three types of shifts (day, evening and weekend), 53 per cent of the Swedish workers experience work-life conflict, compared to 18 percent in Denmark and 16 percent in Norway. Aspects that might us explain these differences: the differences between the countries regarding the prevalence of split shifts and the length of a full-time day.

#### *Dissatisfaction with pay*

The results show that it is relatively common among the Scandinavian home-care workers to worry that the pay is too low. Almost half of the home-care workers in Sweden are worried about the pay, compared to two fifths in Norway and a little more than one fourth in Denmark.

Also, complains about pay are more common in the Swedish open-ended questions compared to in the Danish and Norwegian.

Comparing the fixed and open-ended questions to national statistics on national wages, in all three countries wages are below the national average. However, there are wage differences between the countries. The average annual salary per full-time and full-year equivalent in the total economy is more than 20 percent higher in Denmark and Norway compared to Sweden<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In Denmark 51,126 USD PPP in 2015 compared to 51,663 in Norway, 42,886 on Finland and 41,467 in Sweden (OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics ([https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/data/oecd-employment-and-labour-market-statistics\\_lfs-data-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/data/oecd-employment-and-labour-market-statistics_lfs-data-en)))

### Discussion [or just some initial thoughts]

Home care is about providing care 24 hours a'clock every day of the week. Evidently, how home-care work and work-time arrangements are organized differs between the countries. The overall results shows that Sweden in a negatively way deviates from the other Scandinavian countries in terms of the presence of split shifts and experiencing work-family conflict. Norway and Sweden stands out regarding working 3-4 different types of shifts, but also worrying about the pay. However, in Denmark home care is to a high degree organized in way which do not involve irregular hours, involuntary part-time and work-life conflict.

How could we understand the results in relation to the country-specific institutional and organizational context?

Precarious work-time arrangements (split shifts and irregular work hours) in Sweden and Norway; is it the costs for working full-time? Precarious employment conditions; is it a reflection of 'gendered work', underfunding and undervaluing home-care work? But why does Denmark stand out in a positive way?

Shortage of home-care workers and the increasing demand for home care is a growing problem in all three Scandinavian countries and policy efforts are central in order to recruit and retain workers in the sector. Hence, have adequate employment conditions are essential in order to ensure an adequate and stable workforce in home care. In all the three Scandinavian countries, the policy goals of developing home care and ensuring high quality care for older people cannot be separated from the need to provide those who provide the care with sufficient employment conditions, including an organization of work hours that that make it possible to reconcile labour with other social commitments outside work.

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