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**Article:**

Holth, L, Bergman, A and Mackenzie, R (2017) Gender, availability, and dual emancipation in the Swedish ICT sector. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31 (2). pp. 230-247. ISSN 0950-0170

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017016651378>

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## **Gender, availability and dual emancipation in the Swedish ICT sector**

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Set in the context of the Swedish state's agenda of dual emancipation for women and men, the article shows how a global ICT consultancy company's formal gender equality goal is undermined by competing demands. Employing the concept of availability, in preference to work-life balance, the research found women opted out of roles requiring high degrees of spatial and temporal availability for work, in favour of roles more easily combined with family responsibilities. Such choices led to poor career development, plus the loss of technological expertise and confidence. These outcomes were at odds with the company's gender equality aims, as well as government objectives to make it easier for women and men to combine work and family, and increase the number of women within ICT.

**Keywords:** availability, gendered division of labour, ICT, IT consultants, work and family, dual emancipation, work-life balance

Although Sweden, and other Nordic countries, are often seen as paragons of gender equality, many women and men are finding it increasingly difficult to strike a balance between their

dual loyalties vis-à-vis work and family (Cousins and Tang, 2004; Kitterød and Petterson, 2006; Knudsen 2009). Since the 1970s the Swedish welfare state has promoted an agenda of double emancipation, encouraging a combination of female labour market participation and active fatherhood (Klinth, 2002) as a means of challenging gendered assumptions over role allocation. Despite this supportive regulatory environment, research shows parenthood generally affects women's careers to a higher degree than men's (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014; Holth et al., 2013). A job characterized by good wages, high status and opportunities for career-development is often shaped to suit the traditional male working model of someone who is always available for work.

The article examines the continued challenges facing women and men working in the Swedish ICT sector over balancing the dual commitments of work and family, in the context of the dual emancipation agenda and its organisational expression. Data is presented from a case study of DashCom, a major Swedish IT consultancy employing around 500 people. The analysis utilises the concept of 'availability' (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007; Bergman and Gustafson, 2008), which connects gender to work and family in ways that entail crucial consequences for both the employees and the company. The unintended consequences created by the ambivalent organisational response to the dual emancipation agenda produced new stresses for both men and women dealing with the competing availability demands of work and family. Although impacting both men and women, there were gendered differences in the strategies for dealing with the challenges of availability. Men struggled to breach the stereotypical role expectations of temporal and spatial availability for work, but it was women who were forced to divert their occupational career paths. The consequences were gender segregation in terms of tasks and occupational hierarchy and a divergence of experience that reflected traditional gendered assumptions about role allocation at work and in the home. The

choices women made had longer term implications for individual career prospects and for the supply of skilled female engineers – a goal of both organisational and government policy. Gendered assumptions regarding women’s suitability for technical roles became self-fulfilling prophecies.

The article is structured as follows: a review of relevant debates from the literature is followed by a discussion of background and methodology. The subsequent sections present and analyse the findings from the DashCom case study. The final section discusses the key research findings and offers concluding comments.

### **The battle for time and space**

Whilst research has shown the importance of organizational structural conditions for understanding gender segregation (Kanter, 1977), it is also strongly connected to the broader gendered division of labour in terms of production and reproduction (Hochschild, 1997). The gender order of work is closely related to the gender order of the home, where women still have the main responsibility for reproductive and unpaid work, tying them to the home during specific phases of their lives (Duncan et al., 2003). Awareness of these interrelated domains raises the question whether commitment and gains in one precludes commitment in the other (Buonocore and Russo, 2013). There are studies indicating that the two domains can have positive synergic effects for the individual, as well as for both the work and family domains (Greenhouse and Powell, 2006). Research has also revealed a growing permeability and blurring of work-life boundaries (Ford and Collinson, 2011), which is seen by some as beneficial to work-life integration (Kylin, 2007), and by others as just putting more pressure on individuals (Elvin-Novak, 1998).

The relationship between work and family is crucial for our understanding of women's and men's work patterns and commitments (Pas et al., 2011). In the literature, the concept of work-life balance is widely used (Scholarios and Marks, 2004; Ford and Collinson, 2011). However, the work-life balance concept has been criticized for being too subjective, for neglecting objective conditions and for being naïve in presuming work and family can be balanced by holding the individual responsible for their time management (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). Hobson et al. (2011), by contrast, stress the emancipatory possibilities of empowering people to achieve a work-life balance that allows individuals more time to engage in activities of value to them. However, their use of a 'capability approach' focuses on how the institutional context facilitates or hinders individual agency for achieving work-life balance (Hobson et al. 2011). Nonetheless, concerns have led to the adoption of alternative concepts such as work-life conflict: alternatively, work-life boundary or work-life integration avoid loaded terms like balance and conflict (Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Scholarios and Marks, 2004).

Most contributions to the work-life balance debate have focused on the temporal dimension, such as the challenges associated with non-standard work schedules or long-hours working (Craig and Powell, 2011; Cousins and Tang, 2004). There has been less focus on the spatial dimension and little engagement with adjacent debates on spatial mobility (Cohen, 2010). Indeed, it could be argued that concepts of work-life balance and/or conflict conflate temporal and spatial dimensions, subsuming the spatial within the temporal: this is problematic, as mobility is a highly gendered phenomenon (Cohen, 2010). Alternatively, the concept of availability is sensitive to both temporal and spatial dimensions. Bergman and Gardiner (2007: 401) define the concept thus: "To be available is to be accessible in time and space and responsive to the needs and wants of others, for example one's employer or family.

Availability is both a disposition and a capacity, emphasizing both structural conditioning and action.”

Availability is concerned with human capacity and potential, while work-life balance can be understood as a preferred outcome in which multiple demands of life are met. Work-life balance is therefore a normative concept, whereas the relational and distributive aspects of availability provide more analytical purchase. Availability refers to making your time and energy available to “another”, be it in the form of an organisation (with regards to work), an individual or a group (with regards to family). Employment can be conceived as the purchase of a certain share of an individual’s availability, which is then used in different ways and under different conditions. The concept itself is not predicated on notions of balance, conflict or integration, although the outcome of women’s and men’s availability patterns can result in any of these states or experiences. Availability is a relational concept that highlights the distinction between being available to meet the needs of others and claiming others’ availability. Since availability focuses on how, when and where women and men use their capacity to work – paid or unpaid – it is useful for understanding why the gender neutral potential to be available for work and family become manifest in gendered forms. Within the family, one partner’s availability may release the other partner from household and care work, thus increasing their availability for employment (Jonasdottir, 1994). Manifestations of potential capacities to be available are therefore formed by the context, and by the individual who is, or is expected to be, available (Bergman and Gustafson, 2008): availability is therefore conditioned by structures reflecting exploitative socio-economic relations – which in most cases are gendered. At a more concrete level, these social relations are manifest in manifold patterns of temporal and spatial availability for work.

Spatial availability for work can vary by occupation and organization. Employment as a nurse in a hospital or a mechanic in a repair shop means being at a specified workplace when working. For ICT employees, work is often performed at customers' premises (Scholarios and Marks, 2004), placing high demands on mobility in order to be spatially available. Regarding temporal availability, working hours can be static or flexible to varying degrees; working irregular hours is increasingly common, presenting new availability challenges (Marchington et al., 2005). Long working hours and the expectation people are always available via technology – even at home – have further stretched temporal availability for work (Towers et al., 2006). There are also demands of both spatial and temporal availability for the family, especially if there are small children. Care work, among other unpaid work tasks, is often spatially bound to the home. Being spatially available to work in the home means not being spatially available elsewhere. Again mobile technology may facilitate some plasticity of spatial availability but only where this is consistent with the competing demands on availability, for instance the extent to which work is not spatially bound. Availability patterns ultimately reveal the existing gender order: as long as women are more available for the family, both spatially and temporally, looking after the home and providing care, they are freeing up time for their partner to be available for work (Jonasdóttir 1994).

Availability patterns may be understood in terms of compulsion, or even coercion, but they must also be viewed in terms of agential choice. Being available for work is a way of showing loyalty and commitment, with studies showing beneficial effects on career opportunities and personal development (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007; Hochschild, 1997). Agency includes different intentions and orientations: for some the orientation is towards work, for others it is towards family - or towards both of these domains (Moen and Sweet, 2003). Such agency has to be set in context. To follow Tilly (1999), organizations constitute a crucial arena for

durable inequality patterns; however, organizations are also potential arenas for changing these patterns. Part-time work, flexible working hours, opportunities to work from home and parental leave are common organisational responses to work-life balance problems. Ultimately, however, such support for boundary management is only effective where it reflects individual preferences regarding the integration or segmentation of work and non-work roles (Rothbard et al., 2005). Moreover, as Fleetwood (2007) points out, ‘family-friendly’ working practices can be little more than ‘rehabilitated’ discourses of flexibility that disguise employee-unfriendly working practices and even trap employees into a quasi-moral quid-pro-quo that ultimately favours the employer in terms of what they can extract in return. Research also shows that the actions taken may not have the intended results (Ford and Collinson, 2011): this article seeks to advance our understanding of why that is.

### **The national and sectoral context**

The decisions made by both employers and workers in Sweden are shaped by the political programmes of what has been described as a feminist friendly state (Holth and Mellström, 2011), underpinned by a strong gender equality narrative promoted by most governments of recent decades. Scandinavian countries have pioneered the provision of paternity leave since the 1970s as part of an agenda for rebalancing the division of paid and unpaid labour in pursuit of a dual earner/dual sharer model (Kitterød and Rønsen, 2012; Knudsen 2009). In Sweden, parental leave totals a comparatively generous 480 days. In addition to 8 weeks maternity leave covering the period of birth there are nine months of parental leave to be shared between the parents, including a non-transferable 8 week “Daddy quota”, which can be taken flexibly up to the child’s eighth birthday. The compensation rate is 80% of pay up to the final 3 months, for which a flat rate is paid. The extensive provision by the state has led to a tendency in Sweden for employers not to supplement mandatory leave entitlement, steering



workplace agendas more towards flexible working arrangements as a means of facilitating shared family responsibilities (Lyness and Kropf, 2005).

Successive reforms of the parental benefits system, in 1974, 1995 and 2002, provided the statutory underpinning to a major “experiment in social engineering” (Lamb and Levine, 1983: 39) pursuing gender equality through shaping the career choices and life preference decisions of both men and women (Holth and Mellström, 2011). At the heart of this vision has been the ideal of ‘double emancipation’, which promotes active fatherhood as well as female labour market participation. Encouraging men to take more responsibility for the family ties the logic of double emancipation to a dual-earner family model, underpinned by parental leave and extensive state subsidised childcare provision (Kitterød and Rønsen, 2012). Klinth (2002) argues that the agenda of ‘dual emancipation’ has become central to the development of the Swedish welfare state; both as a tangible legislative programme, and in a more abstract sense of the political vision of a gender egalitarian society and the social values the welfare state embodies. Intermittent regulatory reform reflected a political will for broader social change, fostering a debate within Swedish society that challenged traditional gendered assumptions over role allocation, and the distinction between the domestic and public spheres (Klinth, 2002). There is evidence to suggest that male workers in Sweden have been influenced by these long-term political programmes, with more egalitarian gender ideologies amongst men translating into improvements in the distribution of childcare and housework (Evertsson 2014). Longitudinal observations have pointed to a change in attitude towards career choices and life decisions amongst male workers; a new generation of men are increasingly torn between family and work, putting a greater focus on fatherhood and parental responsibility rather than their careers (Holth and Mellström, 2011). Furthermore, Sweden is placed 4th out of 136 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report (2013).

Such evidence contributes to the widely held perception of Sweden as a paragon of gender equality (Knudsen, 2009); other evidence suggests an imbalance in the dual emancipation equation. Statistics (SCB 2012) show that men have not increased their involvement in the family sphere to the same extent that women have established themselves on the labour market: 82.5 per cent of women and 87 per cent of men were employed in 2011, whereas only 24 per cent of parental benefit claims that year were made by men (SCB, 2012). In 1991 women did 62 per cent of the unpaid work and men 38, while in 2011 women did 56 per cent and men 44 per cent (SCB, 2012). Despite the welfare system and equality legislation, there is still evidence that women's availability for their families makes it possible for men to continue to be available for work (Cousins and Tang, 2004; Lindsay and Maher, 2014). However, even if there is still some way to go in realising double emancipation, changes have occurred in the gendered division of labour in Sweden (Klinth, 2002). In turn, such changes have not been without unintended consequences: today, both women and men are expected to be responsible parents and committed full-time employees, with the stress of having a dual burden now also being reported by men (Holth and Mellström, 2011; Cousins and Tang, 2004).

Within ICT, sectoral norms of flexibility, project-orientation and offsite client work are recognised as particular sources of conflict between work and non-work roles (Scholarios and Marks, 2004). Knowledge-intensive professional work in ICT is characterized by exacting demands for performance, high technological competence, a high level of work intensity and extensive working hours (Guerrier et al., 2009; Peterson, 2010). In Sweden, as elsewhere, IT engineering is an occupation numerically dominated by men: in the ICT sector as a whole, women constitute around 20 percent of the total (Computer Sweden, 2012). The sector is both

vertically and horizontally segregated along lines of occupation, position and task (SOU, 2004:43; Tillväxtanalys, 2012). Women are underrepresented in senior positions; the proportion of female presidents, for example, is only 7.6 per cent (Computer Sweden, 2012). Female IT consultants suffer from poor career development due to their separation from technological core activities (Peterson, 2010; Guerrier et al., 2009). This article examines the processes whereby men are connected to, and women separated from, technical roles.

### **Methodology**

The adoption of an organizational case study approach contributes a qualitative, workplace perspective to a debate often dominated in the Nordic context by a focus on the preeminent role of the state and extensive, survey based methodologies. In 2010, initial meetings were held with the Managing Director and Human Resources Director of DashCom, to negotiate access and explore the scope of the research. Broad discussions of company policy were followed by the analysis of company documentation relating to parental leave. DashCom had its own gender equality plan that aimed to “make it easier for all employees to combine parenthood and work”. For example, the plan called for “consideration to be paid to the situation of parents with small children when planning meetings, conferences and journeys”. Crucially, there was also a supplementary contribution to the statutory compensation rate, bringing it up to 100 per cent of wages; a strategy aimed at encouraging men to take parental leave.

The data presented here draw mainly on subsequent interviews conducted with IT engineers; 11 women and 11 men. All were engineering graduates who constituted what management regarded as a high-level team within DashCom, based on experience and technical skills.

Participants were selected on the following criteria: length of employment at DashCom, career similarities and being of an age where the likelihood of starting a family increases. Only two of the respondents, one woman, one man, did not have children.

Interviews were semi-structured, covering educational choices, career opportunities, working conditions and the challenges of combining work and family. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, with the norm being one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, verbatim. Analysis involved systematically processing the data, identifying themes, then generating categories and patterns (Miles and Huberman, 1994) around the availability for work and family, strategies for managing dual commitments and the consequences for both individuals and the organization.

Although all the participants started out as consultants; only one of the 11 women was still in that role. Consultancy assignments were performed offsite, on customers' premises, and often involved several hours of daily travel, or weekly commuting. The other 10 women were permanently stationed at DashCom premises as project leaders and team leaders, which did not involve the same demands of spatial mobility, or technical skill. Project/team leader roles involved some technical aspects but predominantly involved coordinating and administrating tasks, as well as responsibility for budgeting and staff. Of the 11 men: seven were consultants; three were managers (stationed at DashCom premises) responsible for internal projects, managing project members and the end-product-delivery to clients; finally, one was a project leader, also located at DashCom. None of the research participants were employed on part-time contracts, therefore, the remainder of this article focuses on the experiences of full-time employees.

### **The rules of the game**

DashCom's business model was based on revenue generated by hourly-chargeable, offsite consultancy services, which relied on both the expertise of its employees and the flexibility to provide services on customers premises at times that suited them; therefore, in addition to technical qualifications, employees had to be temporally and spatially available (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007). The spatial and temporal availability of its consultants were sources of competitive advantage for DashCom and reflected in the higher status perceived to be accorded by management to off-site consultants, compared to spatially-immobile colleagues who supported their activities. While for individuals, their availability was also a source of competitive advantage, in terms of career progression within the organization. Lena described how this reflected who were most valued within the organization:

“Those who travel, visit new clients, take the leap, and the mobile and flexible people, they're praised by management.”

Or as Peter observed:

“Revenue comes from consultants who charge by the hour, and costs are consultants who do not charge by the hour.”

The participants were all aware of the competitive situation, referring repeatedly to the imperative to be profitable. Many had witnessed redundancies when business was slow. Furthermore, several described how cost-cutting within DashCom, involving hiring temporary staff and outsourcing of basic consultancy services to countries with lower labour costs, had engendered a nagging sense of being dispensable. The perception of vulnerability was linked to a recognized need to be available for offsite work. Curt described this dilemma as follows:

You see, those who clearly said they couldn't travel, they're not with the company anymore, that's a fact. The company gave them notice... Saying 'no' might work once, or 2-3 times, but no more than that.

Within DashCom, long workdays and mobility were seen as norms, signalling dedication, interest and commitment (Hochschild, 1997). Although participants often referred to their work as stimulating and challenging, they were also aware that the DashCom business model generated certain conditions that were perceived as fixed and non-negotiable: either you were temporally and spatially available, which meant you were 'in'; or you were unavailable and 'out'. This maxim was hard to obey when competing demands were made by work and family.

Developing a career in management brought only partial relief. Even though they did not face the spatial availability demands put on consultants, managers experienced similar temporal availability problems vis-à-vis their families due to long-hours working. Additional working was estimated to average 25-30 percent over the standard 40-hour week. Such availability for work produced a sense of failing their families. As Johan observed:

I work more than full-time. Somewhere between 5 and 10 hours more every week.... I have too little time left to spend outside of work. I have a family and children etc. It's hard to get it together.

The interviews provided testimony that for both consultants and managers, work was unrelenting and people had to adapt or live with incompatible demands. If a woman, or man,

wanted to be a manager or a consultant, they had to adapt to demands formulated on the basis of a stereotypical traditional male role. However, balancing DashCom's demands for spatial and temporal availability with family demands for the same, created a sense of inadequacy, stress and a guilty conscience in both women and men.

### **Managing Competing Demands**

Perhaps endorsing the awareness raising of the Dual Emancipation agenda, it was clear the challenges of combining work and family were a concern for both women and men. Constantly negotiating time between the two domains led to many participants feeling 'burned out' during periods of high workload. Although the possibility of working from home in the evenings and at weekends provided a flexible way of meeting workload demands, many felt ambivalent about this since it clearly conflicted with family life. Johan described how trying to manage dual commitments through longer working hours could be problematic:

I try to avoid it [working late] because I don't think it goes down too well actually. But sometimes I've chosen to do it anyway if I know I have a lot to do. Then, I go home so I can be with my kids for a few hours and we can hang out and have a meal together maybe, and then I can work for a few hours in the evening. But, more often than not, I don't feel good about it. If it's been a stressful day, imagine going home for a while and then working a few hours more, working up steam and then going to bed, trying to wind down to gather strength for the next day – that's pretty hard. Then it's better to stay at work for a few hours and feel that you've done it and then you can really close the door and forget about it until tomorrow, even if there are only a few hours left.

Some scholars see being available for both work and family simultaneously as a strategy that generates a win-win situation for workers and employers (Greenhouse and Powell, 2006) while others point to the asymmetrical benefits of such arrangements (Fleetwood, 2007). Instead of solving the dilemma of conflicting demands, flexible working practices aimed at managing the boundaries between work and non-work can actually make it more emotionally and physically burdensome for the individual (Elvin-Novak, 1998; Rothbard et al., 2005).

Participants reported frequent tension between consultancy working conditions and parenthood. Although DashCom had specific gender equality policies, meaning men and women had the same parental leave rights, men in particular emphasized enduring problems. Men reported a sense of guilt for being absent. Notwithstanding the aims of policies providing equal access to parental leave, the burden of implementation was carried by co-workers due to management's failure to allocate resources to providing additional cover for absent colleagues. As Peter observed:

For those of us who have small children, there's an unfortunate lack of balance. That's one reason why I make sure I take parental leave. I mean, really, I don't have the time to do that, but even though I requested it, no one replaced me and my work was divided up between the others and I know they have a hell of a lot to do, so here I am with a guilty conscience.

It was not just obligation to the organization that could be understood in terms of demands for availability, solidarity toward co-workers was also an aspect, resulting in tension between colleagues and a guilty conscience for some. On the other hand, as Peter's comments above



indicate, the demands of excessive working-hours also helped generate the strategy for dealing with this pressure through a temporary exit from work.

Parental leave was one way to ensure availability to the family, something that for a time could reduce the dual burden reported by both women and men. However, the implications of exercising this right were not gender neutral. For women, it seemed to be more difficult to return to a consultancy position. The problem was not taking parental leave as such, which impacted for a limited period; rather, it was the subsequent daily imbalance in responsibility for childcare and availability to the family that proved the major obstacle in the long run. Consequently, many female participants reported changing their roles on returning to work, relinquishing their consultancy positions and associated demands for temporal and spatial availability. Karin reflected on her work as a project leader, thus:

It's easier for me to combine my job with my children's leisure activities and all that this entails as regards picking up and setting down, now that I'm a project leader here and don't need to travel. It's more stable, kind of thing. For a short time a couple of years ago, I was contracted out to a company 80 kilometres away and that took up too much time. I was stressed out the whole time and that affected everyone.

Although both women and men identified spatial and temporal availability demands as problematic, it was women who altered their career paths. Women who had worked as consultants held the same understanding of the non-negotiable conditions as their male colleagues. Their strategy was to avoid consultancy jobs that forced them to work offsite. Instead, they reduced their spatial availability for work, taking static roles within DashCom headquarters. Some women used working part-time as strategy to reconcile competing

demands. Part-time work was also easier to combine with localized positions at DashCom than consultant positions. Women with small children, in particular, found limiting spatial availability a necessity, although some nurtured plans to make other choices as their children grew up. Anette reflected on her future thus: “The older the children get, the further away I can get (laughs), but of course teenagers need us too. We’ll see.”

The strategy of accepting positions that facilitated availability for their families reportedly reduced stress by making life more manageable, both for the women themselves and for their partners. This raised another heavily gendered aspect of the decision making process: the extent to which women’s career decisions were compensating for the ways in which their male partners managed their dual commitments. Ulrika, a former consultant who changed roles to become office based, provided a particularly stark example:

I’m often tired when I get home because my days are stressful, at least in periods, but at least I come home to my kids at a decent hour. My husband also works here as a consultant and I can honestly say that it wouldn’t have worked if we’d both been traveling consultants.

While the women explained their choices by referring to the need to combine work with family obligations, several of the men mentioned their spouses as a key factor in coping with their dual commitments. As Erik observed: “I’d never be able to work so much if I didn’t have a wife who was mainly responsible for our family”.

Although male participants stated their desire to spend more time with their families and that their careers were of less value to them than their families, particularly after having had

children, they accepted their working conditions. The support of female partners in compensating for a lack of availability for family was often important in facilitating this acceptance. Thus the traditional, gendered distribution of responsibility for family continued to circumvent the existence of formal company and state policies ostensibly aimed at rebalancing this distribution.

For some men the decision to choose work over family, which ran contrary to their personal values, created feelings of failure and guilt. Johan described how a disharmonious home situation affected him, his family and his work performance:

If things don't function at home, I don't function at work either... If I know that my wife thinks the situation stinks and everything to do with the children is hard to cope with, and they feel that we aren't happy, then you won't go to work feeling joyful, or do much. It does affect my work performance, definitely.

Men used coping strategies to ease their consciences over availability to their families, legitimatizing their choices: as a "necessary evil"; as having no other options; or concluding, in comparison to others, "it could have been worse". As Curt reflected:

Yes, I've been working in Karlskoga [70 kilometres away] for a year-and-a-half, which makes things harder at home, sure. But then some of my colleagues commute to Stockholm [300 kilometres] on a weekly basis. When jobs are scarce, that's what we have to do.

The availability demands of the consultancy role were regarded as unavoidable and non-negotiable. However, there seemed only two possibilities for dealing with these demands that had the support of management: continue as a consultant, with a guilty conscience regarding family life; or change career, to a role that was not first choice. Since the men tended to stay in position, while still being family oriented, they developed individual strategies for coping with stress and guilty consciences. Conversely, unlike the men, the women reported a degree of understanding on the part of their managers regarding competing commitments and their decision to get out of consultancy jobs. These options were heavily gender constrained: although both men and women regarded their workloads as excessive, the women were the ones to exit consultancy jobs in favour of less availability-demanding positions. Men, on the other hand, met demands for being available for work with the support of their spouses. Men also took more work home, working evenings and weekends in order to meet the dual availability demands; again, requiring the support of their partners. Neither the men nor the women, however, made any demands on management to reconsider what the gender equality policies actually meant.

### **Divergent paths**

The strategies women adopted to cope with the competing availability demands of their careers and their families had consequences that reverberated beyond individual decisions like taking parental leave. Such decisions can be seen as key turning points, resulting in gender segregation and the loss of technical competence on the part of both individual women and DashCom as an organisation (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). Agential choices reflecting values, preferences or career orientation were made in the structural context of ambivalent managerial support for non-traditional pathways, despite the existence of formal equality policies. The result was a clear gender division of labour. The path taken by most men to remain as

spatially-mobile consultants meant continued engagement with technologically advanced tasks. The other path, taken by most women, to be spatially-static within the DashCom site, meant the alternative to their consultancy careers were roles performing mainly administrative rather than technical tasks.

Technological expertise was central to the consultants' professional identity: they took pride in being technologically up-to-date, and in the range and depth of their technical knowledge. Sustaining this expertise was seen as the major advantage of being a consultant. As Alfred observed:

As a consultant, you keep abreast of technological developments, and I'm continuously enhancing my technical expertise and knowledge. Because consultancy jobs are so varied, my knowledge is broad too. Then, there's no denying the fact that I make lots of valuable contacts and that's good for my career.

Project/team leaders and managers were formally higher positions within the administrative hierarchy but, within the organization, the technological career was the most valued one. Margaretha explained career paths thus:

There's the manager and there's the project leader; those are the formal careers that we can see. But what we're talking about more and more here is the rungs on the consultancy ladder, kind of. Promotion means a higher salary for many. You're not guaranteed more pay as a project leader because the person who gets more pay is the one with a higher level of expertise, who has drive and is curious, and who understands the client and provides technical solutions. And you're supposed to be able to grasp new

technological areas without too much problem. Then you're a senior consultant kind of, being rewarded, and above all someone they can send out to clients. A project leader is technically narrow, which can mean a risky scenario because you never know what the client plans to buy.

After becoming a project or team leader, it was hard to get back into consultancy again; as Alfred observed: "If you want to move in the direction of IT systems, that is, be a technology expert, I think that this would be a bit harder if you got involved with project leadership." Even if team and project leader roles included some technical elements, most women still felt that they worked too little in technology per se to sustain the competitive advantage of their expertise. For Anna this was exasperating:

I trained to be a computer engineer because I thought it would suit me. The more I learned, the more fun it was, so I think it's a bit frustrating to be slightly detached from it now when I don't do it so much. As a project leader, you don't need to know so much about the technical side.

As reported above, some of the women envisaged a future as a consultant, when their children were older, but they are also aware that the longer they waited the further they would drift away from technology and lose their competence. There was concern that prolonged detachment from technical work would be detrimental to their future opportunities both within ICT in general and DashCom in particular. Many of the women felt that their technological confidence was fading with time. There was also a risk that a lack of confidence would automatically be seen as a lack of technical competence (Peterson, 2010). Growing insecurity regarding their technological competence became both the reason and excuse for

staying in the positions they currently held. These personal misgivings must, however, be located in a broader context that was underscored by the continuation of gendered assumptions, regardless of the existence of formal equality policies.

Participants from both genders observed that more women than men worked as project and team leaders at DashCom, and seemed aware of the implications of working away from the technological core tasks. However, common explanations amongst male participants relied more on perceived difficulties women faced in being accepted as technical specialists (Faulkner, 2007), or stereotypes of women's social skills, rather than strategies for reconciling unmanageable availability demands. As Lars explained:

I can see that there are fewer women in IT systems engineering and perhaps this is because they aren't accepted as easily, but I think they do just as good a job as men, and frequently better. I think that many people have become used to women taking on the team leader role and becoming project leaders and that they're promoted via this pipeline instead of the IT systems pipeline.

These were arguments embedded in gendered preconceptions of inherent qualities and role suitability. Similarly, Curt not only reflected on gender-labelled competencies, he also used them to explain why women were not technical: "It could be because they're technically inferior and better at organizing and doing lots of things at once." Carl described women's superior ability to be team leaders likewise:

I think it has something to do with social responsibility. A woman's a bit like the mother of the group and people turn to her and she takes on the overall responsibility.

Some of the men, even when given the responsibility, get immersed in the task, but don't see the whole task somehow and think "this is interesting" and get stuck into that bit in particular. But if you're a team leader, you have to see the whole group and take on the responsibility.

The divergence associated with women's individual career choices reproduced both gender segregation and gender-stereotyped notions of inherent capacities. Different positions were turned into gender stereotypical work suitable for either men or women. Performance was determined on the basis of the appropriate behaviour, competence and skills that reproduced stereotypical images of women, men and technology (Faulkner, 2007). Male engineers were associated with the technical and female engineers with the social aspects of work. Expectations were reproduced that men worked with "pure technology", in technically specialized work, while women performed generic engineering work (Faulkner, 2007). The consequences of the gender division of labour at DashCom were visible in terms of less career progression for women, who became neither technical experts nor managers. Instead, the project/team leader role turned out to be where women hit the glass ceiling. The role depleted technological core competences and, in turn, professional confidence, militating against a future return to a technical career: the gendered assumptions that underscored the exclusion of women from technical roles became a self-fulfilling prophesy.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

One of the unintended consequences of the dual emancipation agenda promoted by most Swedish governments in recent decades has been that women and men increasingly face similar problems over the competing demands of availability for work and family. However, as seen in this study, the implications, coping strategies and consequences continue to be quite



different for men and women. Despite progress, women in Sweden still retain the majority of responsibility for family duties, notably relating to childcare. The differing coping strategies engaged by DashCom employees reflected traditional gendered assumptions about roles: while women and men both faced competing responsibilities of family and work, it was women that withdrew from their careers in consultancy roles due to the associated temporal and spatial availability demands. Although interrelated, temporal availability for work is to some extent more manageable than spatial availability. It is the demands of spatial mobility for work that become critical and often subordinated to women's spatial availability for the family, which in turn paradoxically generates the same gender segregation problems targeted in the company equality policy. Moreover, men who stayed in their roles as consultants often did so on the basis of the support provided by female partners; the new challenges associated with the dual emancipation agenda were met via very traditional means of female majority-responsibility for household duties (Jónasdóttir 1994). The DashCom case highlights the processes underpinning women's continued disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic work, despite full-time employment (Knudsen 2009).

The findings are consistent with other studies that have noted a progressive shift in attitude amongst men towards family responsibilities (Evertsson 2014), but also intransigence from management, despite the existence of formal rights (Brandth and Kvande 2002). Men's heightened awareness of family responsibilities or commitment to active fatherhood exists in the context of unbending expectations of availability for work, based on continued gender stereotyping of roles. While the study concurs with a shift in individual awareness, evidenced in men availing themselves of parental leave, this right is exercised in the context of DashCom management not committing resources to cover absences. Regardless of *de jure*

legitimacy of their actions, men report de facto fetters on their choices associated with management's redistribution of their workload to colleagues.

Dashcom's equality policies may have reflected the aspirations of the dual emancipation agenda, but ambivalent implementation by management and enduring stereotypical gender expectations, among management and employees, facilitated the reproduction of gender segregating practices. Management seemed more willing to address women's availability issues, being more accepting of the expressed (if constrained) preference for roles based on DashCom premises. Men, by contrast, did not feel they were supported in relinquishing consultancy work, by management, in order to reduce the strain on their family. Men therefore still met the challenges of availability for work at the expense of their availability to their families (Holth and Mellström, 2011). The persistence of gendered assumptions therefore challenged both sides of the dual emancipation equation.

Gendered assumptions regarding women's responsibility for family, or compensating for the availability demands of their male partners career, were echoed in the roles occupied by women in the workplace: the less technical, generalist and coordinating roles. The loss of technical competence through exclusion from technical roles led to women losing confidence in their technical abilities and thus turning gender stereotyping into a self-fulfilling prophesy. Finding that women have fewer career prospects than men in IT engineering is consistent with other studies (Peterson, 2010; Tillväxtanalys, 2012). The underutilization of women's technical competencies is being translated into a structural discrimination, legitimized by individualistic explanations that emphasize agency and work orientations. The cumulative effects of women's (self) exclusion from technical roles become re-institutionalised within career paths ostensibly shaped by empowered choices, and so not only impact individuals but

also circumscribe the options open to those that follow. Such developments offer scant endorsement of the actual penetration of the dual emancipation agenda in the ICT sector. This reinforcement of gender roles is detrimental not only for the women concerned, but also for the organization and the entire sector. In recent years, stimulating women's interest in technology has been an important recruitment strategy for Sweden's ICT sector, amid concerns over future shortages of technological competence (Tillväxtanalys, 2012). These findings suggest that the long-term goals of this strategy are unlikely to be realised.

One side of the dual emancipation equation has always been more contingent than the other; active fatherhood is something that can be opted into, contingent on will or employment conditions (Klinth, 2002; Evertsson, 2014). The competing demands of family and career being experienced increasingly by Swedish men due to the dual emancipation agenda have long been familiar to women. For women, however, reconciling increased labour market participation with continued disproportionate responsibility for family remains an expectation, not an option.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Lena Gonäs, Kerstin Rosenberg and Birgitta McEwen for their contribution to the broader project from which this paper was developed. We would also like to thank Sophie Linghag for comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

## **Funding information**

This article draws on data from a broader research project, JämVäxt 2.0 [Equal Growth 2.0], funded by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (European Regional Development Funds), Region Värmland and Karlstad University.

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