SOCIAL VULNERABILITY AND SOCIAL WORK

Research Platform for the Department of Social Work at Malmö University

At the Department of Social Work at Malmö University, the majority of our research deals with social vulnerability. We focus on injustices and other circumstances that expose individuals and groups to vulnerable life situations, affecting their future prospects, denying them a peaceful life, and threatening their health and sense of dignity.

We see social vulnerability as a process that arises from an individual’s or group’s local, national, state welfare, and global context; it is important to treat vulnerable individuals as persons who interact with contextual factors, rather than considering their actions in isolation. This is because social vulnerability and inequalities result from a complex interaction of economic, social, and cultural factors, as well as state or institutional welfare and individual circumstances.

We consider social work to be an academic discipline, an area for education and a profession. In the final analysis, social work is about creating opportunities for social change amongst vulnerable individuals and groups, as well as working for structural change. Social work has a responsibility beyond pure academia, and therein lies its potential for social change.

Our research platform addresses two main questions:

- How can we understand and explain the processes that create social vulnerability and those that reduce it?
- How can social work be designed, organized and implemented most effectively in order to reduce and ultimately eliminate social vulnerability?

We address the first question by relating social vulnerability to processes that operate on multiple levels and involve power relations such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and other factors, as well as an individual’s physical, mentally and intellectual capacity. To answer the second question, it is essential to build lasting national and international partnerships and networks with various stakeholders, including established welfare systems, NGOs, universities and leading research institutions, as well as other people who have experience with social vulnerability.

In this research platform statement, we cover the following:

- Our understanding of social vulnerability and how it relates to processes such as economisation, individualisation and globalisation.
- The current situation in Malmö, which is a clear example of the consequences of increased social inequality and social vulnerability.
- Different points of view on social change.
- Our central research areas.
- How we conduct our research.
Putting social vulnerability into perspective

Social vulnerability is a relational process that must be understood in its local, national and global context. On-going economisation, individualisation and globalisation processes are at the heart of complex and evolving societal changes that create underlying processes for the emergence of social vulnerability. Social problems must be defined and understood in the light of these processes.

During the post-war period, state welfare safety nets provided a vigorous defence against social vulnerability in Western societies, although their initial design and subsequent evolution differed from country to country; for example, the Swedish welfare state has often been cited as an ideal example of a typical well-developed social welfare model. Since the 1980s, these welfare state structures have been further supported by a number of interconnected and mutually reinforcing processes.

However, unlike the welfare state expansion period, social and political arenas today are permeated by economic logic and control; the role of the market has become an organising, overarching and accepted principle. This growing economic influence is interwoven with increasing individualisation and globalisation, and has several implications for social work.

In this relation, we are not concerned about differing social circumstances per se, but about the limitations these create for socially vulnerable people. Similarly, we are not concerned with political policies, but about how these policies limit the scope for social and political action. It is not our goal to provide a comprehensive view of these implications, but instead to discuss key aspects central to our research.

Economisation affects the way we organize welfare systems. Responding to market forces has had repercussions, especially in the privatisation and outsourcing of various social functions – for example, residential homes for the elderly, refugees and substance abusers, and schools for refugees. It has also created a fertile ground for various forms of social entrepreneurship, and opened up the way for New Public Management (NPM) – a market adjustment of social organisations and programs with far-reaching consequences for social work.

In a subtle but profound way, NPM has implications for the relation between social workers and clients, and for the social work knowledge base. Increasingly, social work is equated with social service and the client with a customer; there is a greater focus on promoting social services and on using brand and image to attract “customers”, with both private and public organisations taking part in the competition. This conceptual shift from client to service users is linked with an increased demand for evidence-based social work – delivery of a high-quality, certified product. As a result, the social work knowledge base puts a greater emphasis on social work methods that can be measured and “proven”, with less importance being given to the relationship between client and social worker, and to professional competence. Social vulnerability has also been marginalised due to this, and therefore this research platform focuses on the impact of economisation on both social exclusion and on social work for change.

Individualisation is a prerequisite for and consequence of this far-reaching economisation; the individual is left to make his own choices and to judge himself and his identity in light of the consumer products, aspirations and needs which are constantly created in the economic
accumulation process. In addition, individualisation affects both the experience and perception of social vulnerability; to be poor in a culture that values individualism and consumption creates frustration at not being able to keep up with societal standards.

This strong individualisation has implications for how we understand and work with social vulnerability. It affects how we understand social problems, and which preventions, interventions and treatments we see as appropriate – or even possible. Social structures played a very important role in understanding of social exclusion during the welfare state expansion – especially during the social and political radicalisation that took place in the late 1960s – but now the individual is central to understanding, explaining and solving the different forms of social problems we experience today. Of recent decades, diagnosis has become a dominant trend, with human biology and psychological or neuropsychiatric status becoming the primary focus, and emphasis being placed on medical solutions to social problems. This can be seen in the growth of psychiatric and addiction treatment services, as well as in schools, and allows social and structural explanations to be set aside.

Our research platform challenges this trend towards single-faceted models by contributing knowledge that puts social problems in their societal and social contexts. Our studies and analyses address the complex interactions between social relationships and networks, hierarchical social structures, physical environments that stigmatise or create hindrances, and the influence of individual dispositions – and the implications these interactions have for our understanding of social problems.

Globalisation is yet another perspective on social vulnerability, and is related to economisation and individualisation. We treat globalisation as an extensive process that involves various dimensions, including economy, politics, culture and migration. While economics has long been the sole focus of globalisation, there are now those who believe that increasing international migration is globalisation’s most radical expression. This has increased in scope and also changed in nature; technological developments – from steamboats to low-cost airlines, from letters to internet, and from expensive to cheap phone cards – allow migrants to maintain lasting and close relationships over long distances in a way that was not possible previously. These relationships are both a consequence of and a driver for further migration.

When international migration is seen as part of globalisation, this calls into question discourses where migration is viewed as a one-way movement from one country to another, where the migrant is uprooted and societies are treated as national “containers”. In contrast, we view international migration in the context of global integration of economies and labour markets that were previously separate. Furthermore, the expression of globalisation in everyday life is important: how it affects social relationships, how “here” and “there” are linked, and how one can talk of transnational social communities that cut across state borders. This transnational aspect affects people’s daily lives; individuals and groups are anchored in two or more countries, sometimes linked by individualisation, and sometimes by the way that parallel legal systems, economies and group affiliations have a dual effect on deliberation and control.

Our research platform studies how globalisation manifests itself in local contexts, as well as the resultant consequences for social vulnerability. In addition, we examine the broader implications of this for social work.
Economisation, individualisation and globalisation are also making individuals and groups increasingly question the type of collective solutions that the welfare state offers. Amongst other things, this is related to both the dissolution and reinforcement of traditional family, sexual and gender values, as well as the development of volatile and hybrid identities that the welfare state was not designed to handle. Our ambition is to study how this challenge and resistance to old structures can be analysed and understood.

Social vulnerability in Sweden and in Malmö

Increasing social vulnerability shows that a society has social and economic inequalities which jeopardise the ability of individuals and groups to experience dignity and self-respect. In fact, social inequalities have increased in recent decades, both globally and at the national and local levels; there are inequalities between countries, within countries and within cities.

From a Swedish perspective, there has been an increasing gap in net income between the rich and poor since the early 1980s, one of a multitude of signs of social inequality. In Malmö, as in many other cities, social and economic disparities are concentrated in specific areas of the city, and have reached such proportions that the city is growing apart – one can start to speak of two Malmös. Although global, nationally and local dynamics are intertwined, we feel that developments in Sweden in recent decades, and in Malmö in particular, are enlightening and worthy of further discussion.

In recent decades, economic, political and regulatory changes in the welfare system have widened the social divide in Sweden. These changes must be considered in a broad sense, as they encompass, amongst other things, social security, unemployment insurance, health care, long-term care (child, elder and LSS) and the primary, secondary and tertiary education system. The regulation of the housing and labour markets (both employment and working conditions) must also be taken into account. Although the situation is not completely clear, there is no doubt that social disparities are increasing; access to economic resources, opportunities to enter the labour market and social security systems are all affected. The conditions for children in school and at home are also impacted due to residential segregation and large income and status differences. Some of the most vulnerable groups are teenagers, young adults and people of foreign descent. In addition, the number of irregular migrants is growing, although there is no definite information about this group.

This development is pervasive and has wide-ranging consequences. The welfare system offers considerably less protection for individuals and groups than it did a decade ago. Employment insurance and sickness insurance have been particularly affected, with a decrease in insurance benefits being accompanied by stricter qualification requirements and increased fees. In fact, sick leave and associated early retirement requirements have been tightened so much that Swedish rules now are among the toughest in the OECD. This change in social insurance has dramatically increased the gap between those who work and those who live on employment insurance or sick pay. Furthermore, many of those who lack sickness or employment insurance coverage are now forced to turn to Swedish municipalities for economic support – resulting in increased workload and expenditure pressures on these municipalities.

Not only do individuals experience a considerable reduction in income during long periods of unemployment or sick leave, but also feel ashamed and disadvantaged. In addition, they are
subjected to increased administrative controls and to the additional humiliation this may involve. However, it must be pointed out that there are also some positive developments; for example, the law governing support and services for certain disabled people (LSS 1993: 387) ensures that people with extensive, long-term disabilities have access to good living conditions.

The social divide in Malmö is extensive. For Sweden as a whole, the disposable income of the richest 10% is seven times that of the poorest 10%. In Malmö, the situation is even more acute; both the richest and poorest 10% have less disposable income than the national average, but the rich have about twelve times the disposable income, not seven. Furthermore, the differences are increasing; in the past two decades¹ the disposable income of the poorest 10% in Sweden has increased by 7%, while in Malmö it has decreased by 30%. In the same time period, the disposable income of the richest 10% has increased by 76% in Sweden overall, and by 56% in Malmö. These discrepancies in disposable income are reflected in other indicators such as life expectancy, employment rate, school examination results, rates of illness, use of health care, and, not least, housing; for example, the average life expectancy varies by as much as eight years between different parts of Malmö. Other indicators that are unevenly distributed in the city are economic assistance, educational levels and employment rates. This is why we can speak of Malmö as a two-tier city.

The solution to human vulnerability cannot, however, be reduced to mere national welfare system changes. There is a need to examine social structures and human relationships, and to understand how deprivation results from various economic, social and cultural processes such as racism and territorial stigmatisation. The nature of the interaction between these processes is a complex question that is not easy to answer. These processes need to be understood at a local level, intertwined with other phenomena, both within the city and internationally. From a societal perspective, economic globalisation and commercialisation of the political and social arenas are important factors. Networks that connect local neighbourhoods to other parts of the city and to the world can differ in type, strength and duration; examples include family networks, hometown associations, business and economic networks, criminal networks, political networks of all persuasions, religious communities, and other associations and unofficial social networks. These processes all conspire to create a complex web that links differences within the city and in the wider outside world.

These divisions within Malmö constitute a precarious situation, and have created a breeding ground for social conflict that has led to violence. However, while these divisions are evident, they are not unique. Increased divisions resulting in violent social conflicts have been seen in many cities in Europe and the United States; for example, in Los Angeles in 1991, in Paris in 2005, and in London in the summer of 2011. In Sweden, we have seen conflicts of this kind in Malmö, as well as in Gothenburg, Stockholm, Uppsala, and Landskrona, including arson and stone throwing.

**Social change: interventions and agencies**

It is important to understand how social vulnerability emerges, so that we can design social work that drives both structural and local change, reduces the incidence of social vulnerability, and prevents it from becoming more severe or permanent. To do this, our research platform must have multiple focuses. Hence, we address social change in terms of interventions, agencies and  

various other hybrid forms. Our definition of interventions includes welfare-state interventions, interventions by non-governmental organisations, and those made by commercial and non-profit companies. Our definition of agency is similarly broad, and includes all actions and processes through which people try to change their living conditions.

Interventions are carried out to address destructive family and individual situations. One aim for this research platform is to further our knowledge of welfare system interventions and institutions, and to understand the ways in which these can improve or adversely affect people's lives. We intend to carry out a critical examination of different interventions and institutional practices, and to determine how these can reduce or increase the social vulnerability of individuals. We also want to analyse how interventions are influenced by institutional factors such as legislation, national guidelines and recommendations, and by ideologies, theories and ontologies that deal with “clients”, “patients”, “users” and the characteristics of “good” interventions.

Interventions meetings and their associated conditions raise another aspect of social vulnerability. We intend to study where such meetings between professional social workers and clients lie along a continuum, with respect and dignity at one extreme and disrespect and violation at the other. This research will study various aspects of these meetings, such as the exercise of micro-power, the extent to which they are characterised by hierarchical structures, and the institutional and ideological context that surrounds them – as established by conventional logic and modes of thought.

Social vulnerability in interventions also raises legal and judicial issues. These centre on the legal system's ability or inability to deal with various social rights claims; it seems to include some and exclude others. Therefore, we want to explore the ability – or inability – of individuals to prevail in a legal context.

In recent decades, we have seen the expansion of NGO's and companies that work with socially vulnerable people. These include new and established voluntary organisations of various types, as well as different types of commercial companies, foundations and cooperatives. This research platform will examine the characteristics of interventions carried out by such NGOs, the conditions under which they are performed and the extent to which they reduce or reinforce social vulnerability.

Taking a different approach, one can study the individuals who are the subjects of interventions, rather the interventions themselves, since these are active people who may contribute to social change. It is the ambition of this platform to study how individuals come together to develop organic approaches to managing and changing vulnerable situations. These strategies may focus on improving financial and material conditions, or may involve coming together to share fundamental human values. These groups can be local or trans-local, and may either emancipate or control their members.

One of the agencies that our research focuses on is the role that resistance plays in these groups. For example, young people who feel alienated and isolated from society create communities and local lifestyles that are influenced by popular culture, where they help each other to attain self-understanding and find their way in society. However, insiders within these communities may also try to control members and further polarise relations with society. One relevant research question here is what social work can learn from this type of process; another is
the nature of the social navigation and identification processes that arise from this resistance, and how these relate to established welfare institutions, such as schools, leisure centres, social services and the police.

Finally, we will investigate the appearance of institutionalised meeting forums that bring together representatives of established welfare systems, various non-governmental organisations, companies and other commercial organisations, individuals and groups. Examples of these include service user bodies and citizen dialogue forums. The arenas may be physical places, but can also take the form of virtual meeting forums, where groups of people mobilise themselves socially to counteract what they perceive to be unfavourable trends. An important research issue here is whether these meetings give socially vulnerable people enhanced opportunities to influence their life situation, and another is concerned with how these meetings are related to social mobilisation and what this might mean for social change.

Central research areas

By taking multiple perspectives and using a range of methods, this research platform aims to better understand the processes that expose people and groups to vulnerable life situations that can threaten their prospects, their health and their ability to live a stable life. Vulnerable groups experience various types of risk; social vulnerability arises from a complex web of social influences that interact with each another. For example, substance abuse may be related to poverty and age, and an elderly person without documents or the same rights and economic support that others enjoy is more socially vulnerable than other elderly people. Therefore, socially vulnerable people do not share the same freedom of choice in our ever-evolving consumer society, with its constant and rapid development of consumer needs.

The following research areas are central to this platform:

Children, youth and family

The social vulnerability of children and young people is analysed in different studies that investigate the effects of factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, area of residence, sexuality and disability. These studies also examine how children and young people are influenced by strong individualisation trends, and how they create strategies to gain respect in different social positions. This can involve resistance to societal structures, beliefs and boundaries.

In studying families, we intend to go beyond understanding the “traditional nuclear family”. We will also study transnational families, families who live with other families, same-sex families and other family constructs, and investigate what different types of social interventions can be developed for each of these.

Functional disability

Disability arises from an individual’s interaction with their environment. This can lead to social exclusion when a functionally impaired person is unable to participate in society on equal terms. This may involve political life, the labour market, education, social relationships or other contexts. A person’s environment includes many things, such as their social, societal, and economic status, as well the interventions and agencies of public institutions. In other words, it includes all factors
that can hinder or promote inclusion. One important area of study is to analyse how these factors affect individuals and groups with different types of functional impairment in various life situations. This will allow social work to evolve to address these situations and may ultimately contribute to reducing social vulnerability amongst the disabled.

**Addiction**

The use of both legal and illegal drugs is not an isolated phenomenon; it is influenced by age, gender, class, ethnicity, area of residence, dominant ideologies – which are reflected in legislation and social policy – and common perceptions of abuse that are often stereotypical. Our research addresses the complexity and consequences of addiction from the perspective of the service user, as well as from the perspective of the welfare system and its associated ideologies, intentions and practices.

An interesting development that has taken place in recent decades is availability and legitimacy of hospital treatments based on the administration of drugs. We will analyse the effects of this form of treatment, where the global pharmaceutical industry is a significant player, and ask whether it is reasonable to speak of a paradigm shift in our understanding of abuse and its remedies.

This research relates both to welfare system transformations and to the problems and opportunities these may ensue for individuals and for the processes that create poverty and marginalise large groups of people.

**Ageing**

As elderly people as a group have grown in numbers and improved their health, research on the elderly has gradually focused on the social and cultural complexity of ageing, creating new demands on old age care. For a long time, social gerontology has considered the question of ageing as “otherness”, leading to further issues such as ageism and age coding. This type of research has focused on the processes that lead to a specific social vulnerability, relating this to age, gender, ethnicity, and health. Another discussion has involved ageing and modernity, Here, ageing in today’s society is not merely chronological, since ageing involves consumption as a way of capturing and taking part in new lifestyles. From this perspective, ageing could be seen as a lifelong process that is full of opportunities. However, the ability to capitalise on these opportunities is constrained by how well an individual is positioned economically, socially and culturally, and how well their body is functioning. Research into ageing, the living conditions of elderly people and their care is based on multidisciplinary perspectives on work life and the design of the care for the elderly - including how to deal with the elderly, the organisational and recruitment base, and social mobility and social mobilisation. Other issues include national and international comparisons of old age care and conditions for the elderly, as well as ageing and migration.

**Forms of work and collaborations**

A key goal of this platform is that the research should lead to social change. This requires a diverse set of research approaches, forms of dissemination and collaboration initiatives, since it is essential to stimulate methodological creativity when conceptualising and analysing social vulnerability and change. Therefore, the platform incorporates a range of research approaches
with differing issues and methodological starting points; it includes ethnographic field studies, comparative studies, classical interview studies, group discussions, document analysis, discourse analysis and statistical analysis, along with combinations of these methods and their results. These methods will also be adapted to study glocal and transnational phenomena.

It is very important for our research to be close to the processes that create and reinforce social vulnerability on the one hand, and to the interventions that are undertaken to counter it on the other. To achieve this ‘split vision’, it may be necessary to involve more actors than are usually found in traditional research. This requires the building of networks in existing arenas of cooperation, as well as to creating new, less orthodox arenas for meetings, dialogue, knowledge development and social change. Interested parties who could work together include researchers, practitioners, politicians, NGOs, and people who have experienced social vulnerability, as well as PhD students and other people interested in the research. Hence, the research platform has a double ambition: to contribute to critical scientific discussion on the one hand, and to stimulate public debate and social change on the other. In this way, change and mobilisation become an integral part of our research and development.

As part of the platform, regular meetings are planned where new research results are continually presented at seminars and discussed. In these meetings, new strategies are presented for continued development, financing and publishing. In addition a number of guest speakers are invited for a series of seminars on Social Work in Change. In part, the aim of this seminar series is to take advantage of knowledge from other institutions that relates to our core areas. It is also intended to create and strengthen our networks and partnerships. This seminar series is open to anyone interested in the issues being addressed.

One of the major potentials for change lies in how our research findings can be integrated into undergraduate, masters and postgraduate education. At the doctoral level, our ambition is to accept doctoral students who can contribute well to the various platform areas, and we will also accept professionals working part time in a variety of human services. We also provide graduate courses on core platform issues. In the Social Work master’s degree program, the theme of vulnerability is central and is studied in depth; students are integrated into research projects, evaluations, and collaborations with other actors.

The development of the bachelor programme is dynamic, with knowledge from different platform projects being built into the programme as that content emerges. It is very importance that researchers and doctoral students, as well as senior researchers and professors are engaged in teaching at different levels. It is also important that junior lecturers and lecturers who are not directly involved in the research benefit from the knowledge generated by the platform, through reading reports, and attending seminars and other research meetings. Those who do not have a doctoral degree can also participate in various research projects and partnerships.

The research platform puts great emphasis on partnerships, both with various research groups within Malmö University, and with other universities within and outside Sweden. We are constantly building strong partnerships with researchers at other institutions, especially at the Faculties of Health and Society, Departments of Health and Welfare and Departments of Criminology. It is also important to develop strong partnerships with the Gender, Sexuality, and Social Work programme at our own Department of Social Work, since researchers in that programme are engaged in studies of social vulnerability. More broadly within Malmö University,
there are strong collaborations with other groups including Urban Studies, MIM (Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare) and the Faculty of Education and Society, since they are working on projects that are of high interest to our research platform. In general, it is essential to have an overview of social vulnerability research projects that take place in Malmö and other cities, so that other potential collaborations can be identified. At present, there are collaborations in Sweden with several other groups, including the Centre for Urban Studies at Hammarkullen, both the Faculty of Education and the Department of Education at the University of Gothenburg, the School of Social Welfare at Lund University, and REMESO at Linköping University. Internationally, there are a number of collaborations with universities in Norway, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Chile, Ghana and Cuba. The platform's researchers are also members of many different national and international research networks.