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Session 15: Debating a Gender Encompassing Economic Citizenship

Leif Wegerman, BA

Department of Economic History

Stockholm University

Sweden

lydia1@spray.se

Women's duty to work.

Women's economic citizenship in the Swedish unemployment relief in the interwar period.

Abstract

Alice Kessler-Harris has coined the term “economic citizenship” to stress the importance of the right to work in women's path to citizenship. As women's right to work, even in today's modern welfare states, is not yet fully acquired or cannot be fully exercised, women are excluded from full citizenship. In this paper, I proceed from a distinction between the right to any kind of work, and the right to freely choose a career on equal terms with men. I argue that the first kind of right is essential to the development of women's economic citizenship. Contrary to what usually has been assumed, I wish to demonstrate that such a right was present in Swedish state policy as early as the Interwar period. My argument is demonstrated through an analysis of the public unemployment relief during the interwar period, a policy-making process that usually has been associated only with men.

However, I argue that within this policy-making system an explicit idea, not only of women's *right* to work but also of their *duty* to work and support children and unemployed men, was elaborated. Important steps towards women's acquisition of economic citizenship were taken in this process. The concept of women's right and duty to work was elaborated through an interplay between public policy and women's own practices in this sphere of work, family support and care. Whereas public policy explicitly stated women's duty to work, a number of factors, such as women's health condition, motherhood and as well as market conditions constrained their possibility to fulfil this duty. By such an analysis, I wish to contribute to the theoretical development of the concept of citizenship as dependent on both public policy-making and prevalent social norms and popular caring and working practices.