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Seeking public assistance to escape violence: a study on relocation co-created with women with lived experience of homelessness

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ABSTRACT

Why are so few women given public assistance to relocate away from violence? This article will try to answer this question using findings from a study co-created by women with lived experiences and academic researchers. Public assistance for this group is, in Sweden, a right granted by the national Social Services Act, but a significant proportion of women in need of it do not receive it. A survey of local social services reveals a pattern of chance, low priorities, and lack of awareness of this group within the public administration. The pattern is the same for women with children, in spite of their additional legal protection.

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Discretion; public administration; relocation; social services; violence

Introduction

Living under the threat of violence is a day-to-day reality for a large group of people in Sweden and most other countries. We do not know exactly how large this group is, but we do know that most of them are women exposed to violence perpetrated by men. Much of what we know about this group comes from their contact with public authorities and services. In this article we will use new data on contact made with local authorities by individuals who are living under the threat of violence. This data is collected from the 290 municipalities of Sweden, and it documents requests to receive social assistance in another municipality than the one the applicant resides in. People who are experiencing violence or abuse in Sweden may receive aid and services in another municipality, if that is what is needed to enable them to move there, away from their offender. This data also only provides a glimpse into the lives of people, mostly women, who are struggling to keep themselves and often also their children safe. It does, however, provide some insight into the specific process of interacting with public administration while in that situation.

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Making sure that housing, social support, and necessary welfare services are available in the municipality one is planning to move to is only a part of the difficult process of relocating (Casas et al., 2016). What we in this article discuss is specifically the group of people who do seek help to move away, and their experiences in contact with local authorities in Sweden.

In this article, we address the question of whether the individuals in this situation receive the assistance they apply for. Furthermore, we will offer some explanation for acceptance and declines of such applications, and from those explanations try to further an understanding of the role and responsibilities of local authorities for this problem, as well as what their potential and limitations are. The study upon which this article is based was co-created by university researchers and a board of women with lived experiences of homelessness and violence. The co-creation was an integral part of all stages of the research process, including the completion of this article.

Violence against women and relocation in Sweden

Having to leave your home because of fear of violence is a difficult and often painful process that no one should have to go through. Unfortunately, many people around the world, almost all women, find themselves in this situation. In many cases, the threat of being exposed to violence, or further violence, pushes them to leave, but ties that bind them to their homes pull them back to stay. These ties could be anything that one needs to make day-to-day life work; a place to live, a workplace, a school for the children and, not least, family and friends.

Our study of relocation has tried to better understand the nature of these challenges, some of which are influenced by the context of the Swedish welfare state. It is plausible that those seeking safety are, at least economically, a little less hindered by family ties, but a little more dependent on local authorities in Sweden, relative to other countries outside the Nordic region. The reason for this could be that family ties have somewhat less economic significance in Sweden compared to countries with more family-centred welfare states, which is almost all the rest of Europe. The welfare state and its tax base are organised to enable dual-income families, and social policies are designed to approach men, women, and also children as equal and mostly independent members of a family, rather than as a family unit (Vamstad, 2007). This Nordic, or social democratic, welfare state forms a bond between the individual citizen and a distant state that to some degree replaces dependency on the much more intimate bond to other family members (Trägårdh, 2013). Social democratic family policy has therefore, by some, been called a 'freedom project' fuelled by a uniquely Nordic state-individualism that, in theory, also should make it easier for individuals to leave a violent domestic situation (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015). The state-individualist welfare state may empower individuals to leave but this partial replacement of family ties with public welfare also increases the reliance on social services to work as intended.

The social democratic welfare state in Sweden has in part been transformed by neo-liberal welfare reforms in the last decades, but this has not affected its high level of defamiliarisation. It has, however, shifted towards a greater focus on individual responsibility of citizens, including struggling individuals like women exposed to violence and women experiencing homelessness (Samzelius, 2020). For marginalised groups like these, there

has been a ‘desocialisation’ of social problems, which are instead increasingly viewed as individual problems (Sahlin, 2020; Samzelius, 2020). The state-individualist welfare state has, in other words, become more individualist and less state-oriented.

Social work in the Swedish context

Aid for those exposed to violence is regulated in the Swedish Social Services Act (SSA), which is a broad legal framework that regulates all public social work in Sweden, not least the responsibilities of local authorities to provide it. The 290 local authorities in Sweden govern municipalities, which are the principal providers of welfare services. Healthcare is provided by the larger regions, but all other welfare services are local responsibilities, as stated in the SSA. It is, in an international comparison, unusual that such great responsibility is put at the local level, but Swedish municipalities are relatively independent and self-sufficient – most of the income taxes in Sweden are, for example, collected by the municipalities (Bolin et al., 2022). This means that it is mainly the services and benefits provided by the municipalities that need to be replaced when someone is forced to leave their threatening situation and move elsewhere. It also means that there are differences between municipalities in service quality and the range of services they can provide, although the SSA is supposed to guarantee some basic levels of social welfare (Wollter & Vamstad, 2022). The municipal social services in Sweden have a broad responsibility for aid and services for older people, people with disabilities, and people with drug and alcohol problems, as well as for child welfare and, more broadly, the welfare of families and individuals (Wollter & Vamstad, 2022). The social services also provide economic assistance as a last resort for those not able to support themselves in any other way. The means-tested economic assistance is, however, just a small part of what the social services do; they manage and provide a broad range of publicly funded services and benefits (Wollter & Vamstad, 2022). They are not involved in benefits for people on sick leave, parental leave, or for the unemployed, as these are administered by the national Social Insurance Agency.

The legal basis for public assistance to relocate

The primary need for people in this situation is housing, which municipalities can assist in providing, although they have no general obligation to provide them. The needs also include publicly funded welfare services like, for example, economic assistance, school and childcare, and more specialised services like addiction treatment or mental health services. Normally one would only be able to apply for such services in the municipality in which one resides, but the SSA offers an exception. It states:

A person who wishes to move to another municipality may apply for assistance in that municipality if he or she, [...] because of violence or other abuse, needs to move to another municipality, but is unable to do so without the assistance that he or she would need in order to leave. (Social Services Act 2011:328, 2nd chapter §8) (Author’s translation)

The law clarifies that this only applies in cases where continued assistance is a requirement for being able to move. People who are in no need of assistance are of course free to move wherever and however they want. We do not know exactly how many have the

need to move, and we therefore also do know how many require continued assistance to do so. It is, however, reasonable to assume that a substantial share of those in this situation do need continued assistance. Individuals experiencing violence, typically women subjected to domestic violence perpetrated by men, are often dependent on the lifeline that public services may offer (Ekström, 2016).

The situation is further complicated for individuals living with protected identity. Protected identity can be provided for people living under threat of violence. In Sweden protected identity can mean anything from just having one's name and address removed from public records to assuming a new name and getting a new social security number. Protected identity involves other authorities as well as municipalities, which means that the local responsibility for it, in addition to any resources currently being provided by social services, cannot be handed over from one municipality to another. Transferring local responsibility for protected identity is, in other words, a separate process with its own bureaucratic hurdles.

Another relevant subcategory of individuals in violent environments are parents, typically mothers, with children in their care. Their legal rights are also supported by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is fully incorporated into Swedish law. Article three of the convention states that the best interest of the child should always be considered in decisions that concern them. The decision to approve or decline assistance to someone residing in another municipality is a decision for local authorities that falls within what concerns an accompanying child. Recent Swedish research has shown, however, that the discretion practiced by social work professionals sometimes limits and hinders the full use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is a topic further explored in this article (Sonander & Palmstierna, 2023).

Enabling relocation to a safer place is, of course, not the only responsibility that municipalities have for those subjected to violence. The SSA also states that Swedish municipalities have a responsibility for victims of crime and that local social authorities should:

Especially consider that women who are, or have been, victims of violence or other abuse by persons close to them, could be in need of support and assistance to change their situation. (Social Services Act 2011:328, 5th chapter §11) (Author's translation)

This paragraph primarily regulates the responsibility of the local authority to provide support and services for people already residing in the municipality. This could, for example, refer to access to women's shelters. The wording also indicates, however, that the local authorities have a specific and especially far-reaching responsibility for the well-being of women in this situation.

Discretion and street-level bureaucracy in social work

Those living under violent conditions or with the fear of violence are by the Social Services Act of Sweden offered the possibility to apply in municipalities in which they do not reside. It does not, however, guarantee the right to actually receive assistance from the local authority to which the application is sent. Such applications are processed through social casework at the local social services, and decisions are made based on the discretion of the local social workers (Wollter, 2020a). Discretion was famously described by Dworkin (1977) as 'the hole in the doughnut', a space in public administration left open by

surrounding restrictions. The considerable discretionary powers of Swedish social workers are, however, not just an arbitrary result of a lack of legal regulation – the SSA is designed to provide a wide legal framework, giving each social worker freedom and authority to make decisions based on an individual process of deliberation.

The professional discretion offered social workers in the SSA has been limited in certain ways since the law was passed in 1982. Managerial reforms, quality management, standardisation of methods and decisions and, more recently, automatisations of certain decisions, have all influenced how professional discretion is practiced in social work in Sweden. Ponnert and Svensson (2016) study standardisation in social casework and conclude that decision making has become more ‘mechanical’ and that the standardised tools both provide the professional social worker with confidence in some situations, but also new uncertainties about how and when to use the tools. Ellis (2014) shows that various management reforms have led to routinisation of social work in the United Kingdom, but that this routinisation has not stopped the use of informal strategies by social workers. Such individual or local strategies for handling social casework seem to be an integral part of such work.

The use of discretion in social work is often analysed within the framework of Lipsky’s (2010) well-known theories on street-level bureaucracy. In explaining discretion, Lipsky focuses on different practical difficulties for management to control the actions of front-line staff. Evans (2011) suggests that, in the case of social work, there is no significant division between staff and management; they are joined by a professionalism in which discretion is an integral part.

Relocation of women subjected to violence – a literature review

For a woman to leave everything and relocate to escape violence perpetrated by a man may seem like an extreme measure to take. Sadly, it is in many cases the only available option for those exposed to violence, and relocation is generally one of very few standard procedures to use in cases of domestic violence. In fact, relocation in response to domestic violence is so common that it influences even the broad patterns of domestic relocation for all young women. Dillon et al. (2016) studied various variables that could be thought to cause women aged 26–34 to relocate domestically in Australia. Having had experience of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the last 12 months was shown to be a significant explanatory factor, even when controlling for other variables like age, social support, area of residence, income, number of children, education, and housing situation (Dillon et al., 2016). Relocating to get away from an abusive partner is, in other words, a significant motivating factor for women deciding to move from one place to another in Australia. We do not have any comparable data from Sweden but we do know that 35% of women in Sweden report having experienced IPV in their lifetime, and 17% of women in Australia have experienced IPV since the age of 15 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2024). There is, in other words, a clear possibility that IPV is a significant reason for moving in Sweden as well. The reason for moving might not only be the need to get far away from the violent partner. Another reason could be that local authorities are not self-sufficient when it comes to specialised services for women in this situation, like women’s shelters, as has proven to be the case in, for example, the United Kingdom (Bowstead, 2022).

This naturally raises the issue of fairness; why is it that the victim should have to move while the perpetrator gets to stay? A growing literature on domestic violence suggests a shift in focus from relocating women to removing men, in typical cases of domestic violence. The arguments for this go beyond fairness, not least the wellbeing of accompanying children, as relocation due to domestic violence has been seen in, for example, British and Norwegian research to further traumatise children brought up in a violent environment (Selvik, 2020; Stanton, 2017). Policies for removing male perpetrators and allowing women to remain at home have, however, proven to be difficult to implement. Diemer et al. (2017) present findings from an Australian study in which the justice in removing the perpetrator comes at the cost of the safety of the women and accompanying children. They can show that women staying at their home are much more vulnerable, or ‘sitting targets’, to violent men breaching their restraining orders, compared to women who relocate (Diemer et al., 2017). What is missing for the policy to work is a rigorous effort by police, courts, and other government agencies to uphold it, something that was proven lacking in the study by Diemer et al. (2017). The institutional context in Australia is different from the one in Sweden, but this research illustrates the importance of government agencies working actively to protect women.

Research on relocation and domestic violence is quite unambiguous about the importance of resolute aid from government that enables women to seek safety elsewhere. It is relatively well-known what type of aid is needed – what is usually lacking is the commitment to act and provide it (e.g. Menard, 2001). Driskell (2009) presents the idea that there should be a ‘Family Relocation Programme’ that is as comprehensive and effective as the Federal Witness Protection Program in the United States. Such a programme could provide a package solution for the many different problems and risks associated with relocating to escape a violent partner, if government was willing to prioritise victims of violence as highly as witnesses and provide the necessary resources.

A large programme for relocating women would be a significant undertaking for national governments, but sometimes the success of relocation is decided by something as simple as the response the woman gets from street-level civil servants. Baker et al. (2003) studied the relationship between domestic violence and housing problems in the United States, using a sample of female respondents in which 38% had ended up homeless because of relocation. It is probable that fewer women become homeless due to relocation in Sweden and other European welfare states with more interventionist housing policies. Baker et al. (2003) also show that, in the United States, having contact with fewer formal welfare institutions, or receiving negative responses from, them predicted housing problems, while a positive interaction with police officers responding to their violent situation reduced the likelihood of homelessness by 30% (Baker et al., 2003). The need to contact fewer welfare institutions is a goal of the type of co-ordinated community response that research suggests should be in place (Bowstead, 2021). Evidence from the United Kingdom also shows, however, that the response often is anything but co-ordinated, that women have to navigate between many different institutions, and that they are often met by gate-keeping measures from public administrators (Bowstead, 2021). Bowstead (2022) describes how ‘women and children often make complex multi-stage journeys, initially forced by the abuser, but subsequently forced or blocked by the availability or not of the services and support they need’ (Bowstead, 2022, p. 228). This conclusion is based on

research from the United Kingdom, but the initial stages of this complex journey, compelled by the abuser, is probably similar in Sweden and other countries. The findings presented in this article will indicate whether the availability of services in the later stages of the journey is also similar in Sweden.

Local government is likely the most salient level of government when it comes to providing the conditions and resources necessary to relocation in response to violence. One of the many challenges for successful policies to counter domestic violence is therefore the often significant variation in capability of local authorities. Bostock et al. (2009) show how cases of domestic violence in rural communities in northern England can be prolonged both due to a material lack of public resources, but also an insufficiently active acknowledgement that there is no acceptable level of domestic abuse. Assistance for women to relocate is in such cases simply not on the local agenda, is not perceived as something the local authority could, or perhaps even should, do. This is particularly true for aid and services catering to the specific needs of women belonging to ethnic or other minorities. Coy et al. (2011) map the availability of refuges for victims of sexual violence and genital mutilation in the United Kingdom, and the journeys that women make to reach them. Ninety-four percent of the 93 women in their sample travelled to another local authority or county, many of them over considerable distances and some as far as hundreds of miles (Coy et al., 2011). In their study, they make the point that although policy makers and practitioners work locally to stop domestic violence, it is for these women a sheer necessity to relocate because of a lack of safe options where they live (Coy et al., 2011).

Similarly, Crisafi and Jasinski (2016) present results from a study of relocation and help seeking of immigrant and native women who are exposed to IPV in the United States. They too show that the likelihood of seeking formal help, like that at a refuge, increased with relocation (Crisafi & Jasinski, 2016). This is, of course, not to suggest that relocation and other measures to seek safety are easy solutions. Thomas et al. (2015) shows the painful and difficult trade-offs that those subjected to IPV must make, just to maintain their basic safety. In their survey of 301 women in the United States, as many as 62% stated that they have had to give up too much to keep safe, and 55% said that the actions they took to be safe led to new, and often unexpected, problems for them and those close to them (Thomas et al., 2015). Relocation is, in other words, not only something that is difficult to do and for authorities to assist with, but it can also be a gamble in which the stakes are high.

Methods and materials

The primary empirical material for this study is a mapping of the use of paragraph 8 in the second chapter of the Social Services Act (henceforth SSA 2.8) in 235 of the 290 municipalities in Sweden. This particular section of the legislation pertains to applications for assistance. The applications were made by individuals living in other municipalities at the time, but who wanted to move to the municipality that received the application. The mapping was conducted through the distribution of postal inquiries to all 290 municipalities in Sweden, and 235 of them, constituting 81%, provided responses. The questionnaire used in the survey of Swedish municipalities contained only a few questions, a limitation considered essential for a reasonable response rate. The administration of

the local authority in the municipalities were asked to deliver statistics for the number of applicants, how many were accepted, how many included children under the age of 18, and how many of these were accepted. We asked for the numbers per year, for two years, 2020 and 2021. The total number of applications in the data set was 416, which illustrates that many of the 235 responding municipalities had only very few cases or did not have any available information about SSA 2.8 applications.

The information collected for this study provides the first available source of descriptive statistics about the use of chapter 2.8 in the SSA. The information was mostly delivered via letters and e-mails sent by the municipalities, and these also contained elements describing the local situation and the handling of SSA 2.8 cases. This additional information from the civil servants is mostly anecdotal but it did provide some clues into how and under what conditions people apply, as well as how the applications are received and processed.

The Women Advisory Board

The inception of this study was driven by women with experiences of violence. In Spring 2020, we established the Women Advisory Board (WAB), a collaborative reference group composed of women with lived experiences of violence, abuse, and homelessness. The members of the board were recruited with the assistance of two civil society organisations: one that supports people experiencing homelessness, and another that operates shelters. These shelters include a high-security facility for women facing violence who also struggle with substance abuse, and a second shelter for women, with or without children, who are experiencing domestic violence. The board serves a threefold purpose: to ensure and promote public involvement in our research programme, to prioritise research agenda items collectively, and to actively engage with researchers on equal footing in interpreting and presenting research findings. Board members convene weekly for two-hour workshops with the third and last authors. The members receive compensation on an hourly basis through temporary employment at the university, in accordance with guidelines for public involvement.

In the present study, seven women from the WAB actively contributed to the research process by initiating and introducing the study at inception. They were instrumental in designing the data collection, collecting the data, conducting data analysis, and providing valuable pointers during report writing.

The study was initially discussed by the WAB in workshops. The purpose of the workshops was to identify specific factors that could determine the conditions for women who are the victims of violence, factors that could perceivably be altered to improve their situations. The lived experience of the women on the board emphatically pointed to the inadequacies in SSA 2.8, or the use of it by local authorities. In addition to basic information like the number of applications and the acceptance rate, the questionnaire also considered applications that included children. The rationale for including this area was provided by the WAB, a rationale that was also used in the design of the analytical framework within which the results were understood. The WAB has also workshopped early drafts of this article, providing original input and correcting misconceptions among the academic researchers.

The method of analysis of the results was, in other words, also based on lived experience. Analysing social science data using lived experience is today a well-established technique, and there are many examples of it being used in studies of vulnerable groups, including women subjected to violence (e.g. French & Raman, 2021; Loke et al., 2012). In this study it was more specifically used for understanding the particular interaction between women exposed to violence and local authorities. The unique contribution of this technique is that it both provides insight about the conditions that the women are in and how local authorities behave towards women in this situation. Submitting an application for social assistance may appear to be a mundane task to most people, but for someone fleeing violence it can be quite daunting, both difficult and risky. Likewise, most people would expect professional treatment from local authorities, but to understand the response women in this particular situation receive one must look at it through their lived experience.

McIntosh and Wright (2019) performed a literature review of the use of lived experience in social policy analysis, and they identified several challenges associated with this technique. One of the key challenges is to shape the subtleness of individual experiences into an analysis of social policy based on a 'shared typical' version of lived experience (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). Lived experience should not replace structural social determinants like socio-economic relations but instead serve as a link between them and individual experiences. This is possible since lived experiences have elements of commonalities that can form 'clusters of commonality and shared intersubjective experiences' (McIntosh & Wright, 2019, p. 459). There are several ways to achieve this, and the one used in this study is the workshop format in which the lived experiences are integrated into the analysis. The women in the WAB are hired as research assistants and work with research during workshops, in which patterns of lived experiences are identified through guided, and shared, conversations.

The research collaboration between the WAB and the academic researchers is in the form of Participatory Action Research (PAR). This is research performed with people, not on people, with the purpose to inform practitioners and solve problems (Baldwin, 2012). Participatory Action Research often aspires to solve problems for participants in a co-created research process, but in our study the WAB is both aiming to improve practice and working to prevent other people from experiencing what they have experienced in the past (Baldwin, 2012). Participation is intended to be a 'transformative rather than merely informative' process for the women as they articulate knowledge from their lived experience and share it with others (Baldwin, 2012, p. 468). Participatory Action Research approaches may be criticised for lacking objectivity, but the inside perspectives that the WAB has on the topic of this article provide information that may have been withheld or discouraged by respondents in a traditional, top-down, expert-led study (van Acker et al., 2021). Other criticism concerns uneven power relations within PAR processes (e.g. Healy, 2001). The academic researchers in our study provided all the necessary material resources, as well as the know-how necessary for putting the results of the research in an academic format. We recognise that this creates uneven power structures, but we have worked on compensating for them by using the inclusive techniques described here, and by striving to explicitly value lived experience and academic knowledge equally.

Limitations to the study

The survey of 235 Swedish municipalities is a novel, first endeavour in mapping the use and functionality of SSA 2.8. It is a pioneering effort, as it has not been done before and the results provide a rare insight into the process of relocation that victims of crime often must undertake. That being said, the findings are mostly descriptive, and they only cover a limited aspect of said process. It would be possible to correlate the replies to the written questions with a categorisation of different types of municipalities. There are, however, no indications of systematic patterns in the material, apart from obvious ones like larger municipalities receiving more applications. There is also a bias towards smaller municipalities in the sample, which also reduces the significance of such a correlation. The bias was due to larger municipalities finding it more difficult to provide the statistics, as the SSA 2.8 cases were difficult to identify in the very large caseloads of cities like Stockholm and Gothenburg. This also means that the survey cannot provide a good estimate of the total number of SSA 2.8 cases, as some large cities, where perhaps the bulk of cases are to be found, are missing. These limits should, however, also be considered as part of the results from the study. The lack of statistics and general awareness of the SSA 2.8 applications is, as we shall see, part of a broader spectrum of institutional disinterest in them, which leads to a low rate of acceptance of these applications.

Findings

The findings from this study were developed in a process involving participants with lived experience, as described above. The same process was decisive in grouping the findings into four broad themes. These themes are the rate of acceptance, the rate of withdrawal, the significance of children, and the lack of statistics, and the results will be presented in this order.

The rate of acceptance

One of the more significant findings from this survey was that more than half of the applications were flatly declined, despite the right to apply for assistance being stated in the law regulating municipal social services in Sweden. Just over 50% of applications were declined in both 2020 and 2021 (see [Table 1](#)). This is, of course, a reflection of the fact that although individual citizens have the right to make a SSA 2.8 application, local authorities are not bound by law to accept even correct and reasonable requests. In fact, they do not even have to give applications a serious consideration, and, according to local practices, SSA 2.8 applications can be denied routinely. A municipality's reasons for not considering any SSA 2.8 applications often have to do with the local housing situation, as the applications often ask for assistance to find housing. The written correspondence with the 235 municipalities considered in this study include many references to the

Table 1. Rejection rate for SSA 2.8 applications 2020 and 2021.

	Rejected	Granted	Withdrawn
Total ($n = 416$)	216 (52%)	112 (27%)	88 (21%)
With children ($n = 100$)	56 (56%)	44 (44%)	n/a

fact that many municipalities have a shortage of housing, and those social services do not have any housing opportunities at their disposal. Such conditions could lead municipalities to not even consider SSA 2.8 applications. An illustration of this could be that the rate of decline is close to 100% in municipalities in the greater Stockholm area, which most likely reflects the difficult housing situation in the region.

The survey showed that 28% of applications were approved in 2020, and 25% in 2021. That only one applicant in four is granted assistance in a municipality to which she wants to move to get away is not surprising. In fact, the work on designing this study in the WAB indicated that the rate of acceptance might be even lower. The general consensus from the lived experience of these women was that SSA 2.8 is never used successfully, despite an apparent and significant need for assistance among women trapped in a violent or abusive situation. Their research interest in this issue came from the realisation that the powerful SSA actually has a paragraph that seems designed to precisely address the problematic situation for those subjected to violence that they had identified, but that it was never, or almost never, used. Although the WAB is based in Stockholm, they collect past experiences from all over Sweden.

Although the survey of municipalities had a response rate of 81%, the findings clearly represent a much smaller share of the total number of SSA 2.8 applications in Sweden. Small municipalities, with few or no applications, are overrepresented in the material. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents could not provide precise statistics about these specific applications, including the four largest municipalities in Sweden (the cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, and Uppsala). Large cities clearly have a more difficult housing situation, although small, rural municipalities might also have limited resources and available services. It is, overall, a significant limitation that we are not able to say what the total annual number of SSA 2.8 applications is, as it makes it difficult to interpret the acceptance rate.

The rate of withdrawal

The acceptance/decline rates could be expected to vary according to local conditions and practices in the 235 municipalities in the study, making the numbers difficult to interpret conclusively due to sampling issues. The individuals whose applications were declined may simply have had the bad luck of having applied to a municipality that declines all applications, as some do. The decision to withdraw an application is, however, a decision that the applicant makes her- or himself, which may only be an indirect consequence of how the municipality choose to use, or not use, the SSA. As many as 21% (2020) and 22% (2021) of the applicants withdrew their applications before a decision was made (see [Table 1](#)). The way of handling the applications by the municipalities could be a factor in the large share of withdrawn applications. Local social services around Sweden have been reporting for years that their caseloads are overwhelming and that processing times are too long. This may be critical for a person in a desperate situation. Also, knowing, like our researchers in the WAB do, that the application is likely to be denied anyway could lead the applicant to stop trying. The high rate of withdrawals could also, more generally, offer an insight into the volatile situation of the applicants and the many factors that may enable or hinder them in leaving their current situation. The opportunity to leave could have been missed, or new opportunities that do not require assistance could have arisen.

The findings about withdrawn applications were analysed in a WAB workshop. The participants' initial reaction to them was a broadly shared objection to the word 'withdraw'. The consensus among the women was that the word incorrectly implied a free choice to withdraw the application. According to their lived experience, there is actually little choice, and the 'withdrawals' are caused, or at least influenced, by the actions of the social service administrators. The local social services sometimes fail to follow up SSA 2.8 applications, thus leaving them pending in the system without a decision for long periods of time. Applications in the withdrawal category may therefore be applications with long processing times or applications that are not considered at all. The WAB explained that social services sometimes avoid making a formal decision on SSA 2.8 applications. Several participants described how they would instead get a phone call from the municipal case worker, informing them that the municipality was unable to consider their application due to a lack of available housing or for some other reason. The application would then be 'withdrawn' by the applicant.

The correspondence with the municipalities participating in the study also offers another explanation. Several letters and e-mails from local social services indicate that it is an established practice to apply for assistance in several different municipalities at once, thereby increasing the chances of being accepted in at least one. This increases the caseload even further, but it is a result of the path towards an accepted application being very difficult to begin with, which makes the process a vicious circle. Individuals living with violence and abuse can hardly be faulted for trying to maximise their chances. The fact that these individuals apply to several different municipalities also indicates that they are not trying to cherry-pick a nicer municipality but are just trying to leave their current location and situation.

The significance of children

About a quarter of the applications documented in the study included an accompanying child. This is significantly lower than what existing studies would suggest (e.g. Bowstead, 2021). We do not know the reason why the proportion of applicants with children is so small. It could possibly have to do with SSA 2.8 applications being ill suited for the types of services that children require, such as school and childcare.

The SSA offers both broad and specific legal means through which social services could and should protect the wellbeing of children in many different situations. The SSA is also complemented by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is also incorporated into Swedish law. Combined they should provide a strong mandate for letting concern for children be a priority that supersedes other considerations that the social services may need to take into account. It is therefore surprising that the decline rate was actually slightly higher for applications that included an accompanying child. The difference is small and not statistically significant: 56% of applications with accompanying children were declined in both 2020 and 2021 (see Table 1). Still, just based on the additional layers of legal protection, one would assume a higher acceptance rate. An accompanying child requires additional assistance – an application could, for example, include a request for childcare, which Swedish local authorities are mandated to provide within three months to any parent who needs it. There is also a ceiling on the fee that the municipalities can charge parents, which covers only about 10% of the actual cost, and it is also mandated

by Swedish law (Vamstad, 2007). Accompanying children, in other words, cost more, but it is highly uncertain that this fact alone could explain the low acceptance rate.

The WAB suggests that the rights of children often do not enter the equation at all, since SSA 2.8 applications are not given serious consideration, whether children are involved or not. The women cannot offer any explanation as to why this is, other than these applications not being prioritised. Knowing the situation of these children they can, however, appreciate the cost of not considering the best interest of the child, in terms of the effect that domestic violence has on their wellbeing and development.

A similar, although anecdotal, explanation is offered by a few e-mails from one of the 235 municipalities. The local administrator responding on behalf of the local social authority reveals that it is her impression that hers and other municipalities are reluctant to aid applicants from other municipalities, simply because they do not have to. Doing so anyway could almost be considered an act of charity, only offered occasionally when the resources are readily available. An accompanying child would not make a difference, if this is the mindset of the local authorities, since they do not base their decision on SSA 2.8 or the legal protection of the child, but on the availability of resources necessary to consider the application at all.

The total rate of acceptance and withdrawal, as well as the numbers for applications with children, are summarised in [Table 1](#).

The lack of statistics

The data for this study was pieced together through individual contacts with all 290 municipalities in Sweden. These contacts showed that information about SSA 2.8 applications was kept and organised in different ways in different municipalities, and as many as 68 of the municipalities, out of the sample of 235, did not keep any records of these applications at all. In most cases they were instead filed with all other applications for social assistance. This is also true for some of the local authorities that did submit data for the survey. These were small municipalities that were able to collect the information about SSA 2.8 applications manually from the general files. The fact that these applications are not labelled as SSA 2.8 applications could just signify that in some municipalities there are not enough of them to justify a separate category. It also signals, however, that the specific needs of these applicants are not taken seriously enough. The SSA 2.8 applications represent an exception from the general principle of only applying for social assistance in the municipality of residence. If the SSA 2.8 applications are filed with regular applications, without being labelled as exceptions with special legal status, then this surely has the potential to influence the processing of them. The local implementation of the SSA is monitored by a government agency, the National Agency for Health and Welfare. The fact that the implementation varies and is often lacking at the municipal level suggests that SSA 2.8 is also not a priority for this agency, and thus not for the national level of government.

Conclusions

This study set out to answer the question of whether women subjected to violence are receiving the assistance to relocate that the law allows them to get. The answer to this

question is that, for the most part, they do not. This result was expected but nonetheless interesting, since our research indicates that such assistance is just what is needed for the growing group of women who are exposed to violence (e.g. Driskell, 2009; Menard, 2001). The municipalities would just have to use a law that is already in place to provide relief and a better chance for change for women in this situation. The much more interesting question is, of course, why they do not. Although we cannot provide a definitive answer to this question, the findings from our study identified a few factors that could contribute to non-use of the SSA 2.8.

Availability of housing

Patterns of approved and declined applications, together with information gathered from the lived experience of the WAB, point to two important reasons, both having to do with housing. One is that many municipalities simply do not have any housing to provide for these, or any other, women subjected to violence. The other reason, which is closely related to the first, is that housing is not among the welfare services Swedish municipalities are obligated to provide for people in need. Since a place to live in the new town is a key requirement for many women wanting to relocate, this is clearly a significant limitation. Municipalities that do have some emergency housing available could also be expected to prioritise people already living within their district.

The role of discretion

The study has also shown that the discretion of the social workers and the practices of the local social services greatly influence the outcome of the application. Looking at the municipalities approving and declining applications, it becomes apparent that practices vary significantly and that chances for an application to be approved likewise vary seemingly randomly between municipalities. This follows a pattern in Swedish social work identified by existing research (Wollter, 2020a). This pattern is not just due to discretion itself, but to a series of central government reforms designed to standardise social work at the local level according to different and sometimes contradictory knowledge bases (Wollter, 2020b). The professional knowledge of the social worker is assisted by regulatory demands for the use of both evidence-based methods and active client involvement. Discretionary decisions are further made in a political environment, where some social work issues are decided by lay members of the assembly of the local authority. New standards for decision making are added and accumulated without replacing old ones, leading the social worker to have to choose between new and old bases for decisions (Wollter, 2020a). Adding other influences, like budgetary restraints and institutionalised local practices, it becomes very difficult to decipher what individual decisions by local social workers are actually based on.

From the perspective of the lived experience of the WAB, the decisions become a ‘lottery’, not only between approving and declining municipalities but between social workers within the same municipality. The discretion of the social workers gives them the authority to prioritise cases and, considering their often gruelling workload, it is reasonable to expect some to ‘become mechanical’ and prioritise applications from

local residents that are a lot less likely to involve housing (Ponnert & Svensson, 2015). The discretion also allows them to develop coping strategies like actively encouraging SSA 2.8 applicants to withdraw their applications (Ellis, 2014). From what we know from research about discretion in social work, it is likely that local practices are approved by management, and they would therefore not be altered by limitations in the discretion of individual social workers (Evans, 2011).

Priorities for public administration and local authorities

There are more reasons why the low acceptance rate is not just a matter of discretion of individual social workers. There are several different indications that the SSA 2.8 applications are not a priority for local authorities and that the applications are lost in the municipal welfare system or simply ignored. The survey of Swedish municipalities showed that many municipalities have no records of these applications; they are processed along with all the local casework, where they are subject to local priorities. The SSA 2.8 applications are not a category of their own in the casework and they are therefore not a separate issue for public administration and political leadership in the local authority. The pattern that emerges is that, because of this, they are approved when they reach the right municipality, the right social worker, at a moment when the resources applied for are available.

Violence against women is a growing concern and an increasingly important political priority at the national level. In Sweden, as in many countries, welfare and social policy are to a large extent local, and violence against women is clearly not as prioritised by all local authorities. Our recommendation based on evidence presented in this article is therefore to recognise the SSA 2.8 applications as a category of aid, and to take more responsibility for housing needs as a welfare issue. More specifically, we recommend that local authorities *firstly* publish information about eligibility for SSA 2.8 assistance and how applications are made, *secondly* separate SSA 2.8 applications from other types of applications, and *thirdly* keep files of the SSA 2.8 applications as a basis for public records about this section of the work of the local social services. Finally, in line with our dedication to collaborative engagement, our survey has ignited a crucial dialogue among a network of 60 municipalities currently grappling with the implementation of SSA 2.8 to ensure safety and wellbeing of women and children. This fruitful exchange has set the stage for an upcoming joint endeavour focused on advocating for necessary policy adjustment and legal practices. This collective initiative underscores the immense value of PAR and lived experience in identifying and addressing systematic challenges. It also serves as an example of how PAR can be used for framing salient political issues as well as progressing the policy process towards resolving them. This success of the work by the WAB has inspired us to initiate several further research projects based on PAR, and our recommendation for further research is for more fellow researchers to also explore the possibilities of this type of research.

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