



Inequality Regimes in Grocery Stores: Intersections of Gender, Hierarchies, and Working Conditions¹

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the extent to which spatial and hierarchical divisions of work in grocery stores intersect with gender, and resulting inequalities in employees' working conditions. Our empirical basis is individual and group interviews conducted with managers and employees at two grocery stores in Sweden. The theoretical concept of inequality regimes serves as an analytical tool for understanding if and how multiple intersecting processes produce and maintain inequalities in working conditions. The findings show that hierarchical and gendered inequalities are (re)created in the stores, for both permanently and temporarily employed workers. The organizing processes include a functional and gendered division of the workforce together with a division based on terms of employment mainly based on the profit generated by the goods handled in each department. The study shows how spatial divisions related to hierarchy, status, and gender intersect in creating inequalities in employees' working conditions, career opportunities, and the physical and psychosocial working environment.

KEYWORDS

Gender / grocery stores / inequality regimes / non-standard employment / staffing strategies / working conditions / work environment

Introduction

Work organizations form the primary context for work and are central arenas for creating, maintaining, or changing inequalities in working conditions and work environment, as well as decisions about how business is organized and staffed. Gender inequalities in working conditions and work environment are present in the retail sector, just as in the labor market in general. Even the Swedish labor market is gender segregated, and despite numerous initiatives to reach gender equality, the gendered inequalities remain (e.g., Johansson et al. 2015a; Vänje 2015). Gender segregation and

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gendered inequalities are also found in other European countries and in North America. While the specific characteristics may differ between countries in terms of gender equality policies, welfare systems, labor market regulation, and women's participation in the labor market, they also share basic gender inequalities in the labor market. Studies in Swedish retail have pointed to a gender distribution of work tasks, even between workers with the same job description (Johansson et al. 2015a, 2015b). Eventually, this gendered distribution of work tasks may lead to differences in physical workloads, with women performing more repetitive and monotonous tasks than men, while men not only have more varied but also more physically demanding work (Balogh et al. 2016; Johansson et al. 2015a; Zeytinoglu et al. 2004). Work-related musculoskeletal disorders are more prevalent in the retail sector than in the general worker population, and women are more often affected than men (Forciera et al. 2008; Lundberg et al. 1999; Mathiassen et al. 2020; Sansone et al. 2014). In a study of Swedish supermarkets, Christensen (2000, pp. 116–117) found that employees described men and women as having different competences, that is, that men were more suited for physical work, whereas studies in supermarkets from other countries indicate that operating cash registers is described as a job for women (Tolich et al. 1999; Zeytinoglu et al. 2004). In an American supermarket study, Tolich and Briar (1999) reported that women had different experiences and a different quality of working life than men. Gendered segregation is also found in management positions. In a study of male and female retail managers in the United Kingdom, Broadbridge (2007) showed that women were underrepresented in managerial positions. Broadbridge emphasized that the retail culture was perceived to be 'dominated by male norms and values' (Broadbridge 2007, p. 956), which had consequences for how male and female managers experience their job and career opportunities. One explanation for the difference in men's and women's experiences can be traced to expectations in the society that place women within traditional roles in the family and men within the workplace. Work arrangements, such as long working hours and taking work home in the evening, are examples of how the culture in retail upholds male-based practices and norms. In higher management positions, the working hours increase further (Broadbridge 2007).

The gendered division of labor in retail highlights generic divisions among workers in western countries that may even be present in Sweden, in terms of employment, working conditions, work environment, and career opportunities. We argue that it is important to further investigate these inequalities to unfold the organizational processes and the underlying norms that create and maintain unequal working conditions. Despite the basic similarities in attitudes to men and women among different western countries, differences in the countries' welfare systems may affect working conditions. For example, the Nordic countries are characterized by a well-developed economic safety net with parental leave, unemployment insurance, and collective agreements that include regulations of working conditions. Also, Sweden offers affordable childcare, which has contributed to women's high labor force participation (e.g., Sandberg 2013). Thus, genders may be more equal in Sweden than in many other countries, and if inequality still exists in Sweden, it may well be more prevalent in other countries.

The overall aim of this study was to explore the extent to which spatial and hierarchical divisions of work at grocery stores intersect with gender, as well as the implications for inequalities in employees' working conditions. We examined which store positions are staffed by men or women and whether the specific organization of work

tasks creates hierarchical and gendered inequalities in working conditions and career opportunities. If divisions are present, where are they located, and in what way are these divisions visible? The empirical basis of our research is the interviews we conducted with workers and managers, both individually and in groups, in two grocery stores in Sweden. The theoretical concepts of inequality regimes developed by Joan Acker (2006a, 2009) will serve as a basis for explaining and understanding the multiple and intersecting processes. Acker's concept of inequality regimes merges an analysis of gendered processes with an analysis of how activities are organized and staffed (Bolin et al. 2019). The study contributes to knowledge of how work is organized in grocery stores such that it can contribute to unequal working conditions.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part provides a short overview of the research background and theoretical perspective. In the second part, the study's design is described. The third part presents the results. A concluding discussion follows in the fourth part.

Background and theoretical perspectives

Work environment in retail

Workers in supermarkets have been described as being at risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders, cashiers being an especially exposed group (Forciera et al. 2008, p. 1). In a study of grocery workers in the United States, Anton and Weeks (2016) showed that about 80% of participants reported work-related pain. Back pain was the most common, followed by pain in the feet. While musculoskeletal disorders have long been known to be prevalent among grocery workers, little has changed in the sector, despite the introduction of new technology such as hand scanners (Anton et al. 2016). Balogh et al. (2016) studied the consequences of work organization on musculoskeletal health in the retail sector in Sweden. They showed that cashiers had a lower physical workload than employees working in picking, delicatessen, and mixed tasks, but they also had the largest prevalence of musculoskeletal complaints in the neck and shoulders. The authors suggested that this could be explained by their work offering too little physical variation compared to the tasks performed by other workers in the store (Balogh et al. 2016). However, these other tasks may also lead to disorders, as illustrated in a literature review by Forciera et al. (2008), reporting a considerable prevalence of disorders, even among workers in the bakery department.

Zeytinoglu et al. (2004) showed that cashiers in Canadian retail reported difficulties with sleeping, exhaustion, headaches, lack of energy, anxiety, and irritability. These symptoms were partly due to casual and part-time work and partly associated with working conditions. An increased risk of disorders at work among young workers was also emphasized in a study of Danish supermarkets, which could be explained by their situation as newcomers to the job and that they tended to do the more physically demanding tasks (Lykke Nielsen et al. 2013).

Job rotation is one way to increase variation at work (Mathiassen 2006; Padula et al. 2017). In their study of a Swedish supermarket, Johansson and Lundgren (2015b, p. 200) showed that the strategy for how workers rotated stressed a hierarchical relationship between the pre-store space and other departments. The former was construed



as a ‘dead-end, peripheral and subordinate’ (Johansson et al. 2015b, p. 200) space by workers in other departments who did not wish to work in the pre-store space. Only limited or partial job rotation may exist in which cashiers rotated between work in the check-out and stocking shelves on the shop floor (Johansson et al. 2015a). Still, a job rotation including all available tasks may be necessary to obtain sufficient physical variation to reduce musculoskeletal disorders throughout the workforce (Balogh et al. 2016; Mathiassen 2006).

Employment structure and staffing strategies

In a case study of staffing strategies in Swedish retail, Tullberg et al. (2014) found that different strategies were used for different groups of employees. These strategies followed, in principle, Atkinson’s (1984) model of numerical and functional flexibility (e.g., Kalleberg 2000, 2009). Numerical flexibility means adapting staffing on a short notice to the customer flow, to minimize total staffing needs (Tullberg et al. 2014). These workers are relatively easy to replace, and their work is characterized by low job security and poor career opportunities (Kvist 2006). For example, Lykke Nielsen et al. (2017) showed that young retail workers in Denmark were aware of their replaceable positions at work and were used as a cheap and flexible workforce to buffer different needs. On the other hand, functional flexibility is characterized by employees having competences that allow them to change tasks depending on demands. They are mainly permanent full-time employees, have access to skills development and career opportunities, and are sometimes found in supervisory positions (Kvist 2006; Tullberg et al. 2014). As a consequence of these staffing strategies, an organization is divided into a core of permanent employees and a periphery of workers with non-standard employment. Within the last 20 years, non-standard employment has increased in Swedish retail. In addition, there has also been a shift in the type of employment, from probationary employment and employment as substitutes to hourly based employment and on-call employment (Carlén & de los Reyes 2021) (see Table 1).

Table 1 Number and proportion of employees by gender and proportion of temporary and part-time employees in Swedish retail

	Age	Women	Men	Total
Number of employees		147,400	80,400	227,800
Proportion of employees (%)		65	35	100
Temporary employees (%)	16–29	46	36	43
	30–64	10	13	11
Full-time permanent employees (%)	16–29	12	22	15
	30–64	37	67	48
Part-time employees (%)	16–29	80	70	77
	30–64	61	27	47

Source: Handeln (2018).



Table 1 shows that Swedish retail is gender segregated: 65% of employees are women, and they have, to a considerable extent, temporary employment and part-time work. There are a variety of reasons why employees work under non-standard employment conditions. The most common reasons include difficulties in achieving full-time employment, or a desire to combine work with studies. Less common reasons include sickness, taking care of children, or not being able to work full-time (Handels 2018). Non-standard employment can be positive, especially among students, as it offers great opportunities for working in the evenings and on weekends when they are not studying. Still, non-standard employment can also have negative consequences for individuals, since it leads to job insecurity and financial anxiety (Berggren & Carlén 2016; Strandlund et al. 2018). In addition, the psychosocial work environment seems to be worse in workplaces with a high proportion of non-standard employment, including more sick leave due to stress-related ill-health, a greater degree of perceived staff shortage, and worse relations between workers and managers (Carlén & de los Reyes 2021).

In a study of organizational practices at a Swedish supermarket, Johansson (2016) found that the use of temporary workers was economically motivated, based on an assumption about the work being unskilled and requiring limited formal training. This idea stood in contrast to the fact that much of the work does require both experience and independence. In addition, peripheral workers are heterogenous and can include both well-paid, highly skilled workers and low-paid, low-skilled workers. Thus, work in non-standard employment relationships differ in terms of workers' ability to control the terms of their employment, highlighting that employment relations are not the only explanation behind inequalities in organizations (Kalleberg 2009). It is also important not to view core and peripheral workers as working in separate parts of organizations, as they might have the same job within the same department (Kalleberg 2001).

Understanding working conditions from the perspective of inequality regimes

In addition to the framework discussed above, we also want to highlight that differences in working conditions and working environments in grocery stores may be gendered. Gender segregation and inequalities in workplaces reflect inequalities in the surrounding society. It is clear that various forms of inequalities exist within both organizations and society in general based on gender, class, and ethnicity (e.g., Acker 2006b, 2012). This means that inequality between groups of workers in retail reflect the institutional conditions that prevail in the retail sector trade in general, such as a polarization between secure and insecure employment and part-time and full-time work (Carlén & de los Reyes 2021). In addition, physical and psychosocial working conditions and their consequences for health can be linked to gender segregation in the workplace. Although women employees form the majority of front-line service workers, they are disproportionately under-represented in managerial positions. Johansson and Lundgren (2015b) suggested that an essentialist understanding of men and women as different could explain why work and workers are organized based on gender. While this gendered segregation can be more or less formalized in job descriptions, it is, as



stated by Tolich and Briar (1999), a result of managers' distribution of everyday work tasks. Johansson and Lundgren (2015, p. 85) highlighted another aspect of gendered divisions in supermarkets in which job rotation may challenge gender divisions when workers rotate extensively between tasks throughout the store. However, studies of job rotation in supermarkets in Sweden have suggested that cashiers are formally or informally excluded from the more attractive tasks included in the rotation (Johansson et al. 2015b, p. 201; Kvist 2006; Sundin 2001). Abrahamsson (2000) stated that in order to develop in the direction of increased equality in working life, we must be able to counteract development trends that act as restorers of the unequal gender order. To identify the barriers to equality in organizations, Acker (2006a) developed the concept of inequality regimes as a way of investigating how inequalities are created and maintained in the local practices of work in various types of organizational structures, jobs, and positions. Thus, the concept facilitates a mapping and exploration of inequality patterns in working conditions and work environment of employees, their association with how work is organized, governed, and valued, and how these processes intersect with gender (Acker 2006a, 2012; Bolin et al. 2019). Acker (2006a) defined inequality regimes as

[...] systematic disparities between groups of organizational participants in control over organizational goals and outcomes, work processes and decisions, in opportunities to enter and advance in particular job areas, in security of positions and levels of pay, in intrinsic pleasure of the work, and in respect and freedom from harassment. (Acker 2006, p. 110)

Acker (2006b, 2009) distinguished between the following six characteristics of inequality regimes: 1) *The bases of inequality*, which vary between organizations, but typically with gender, class, and race processes being present. 2) *The shape and degree of inequality* highlights the steepness of the hierarchy and segregation of jobs and occupations in the organization. 3) *Organizing processes that produce inequalities*, which include, for example, opportunities for flexibility, jobs, and wage classifications systems, recruitment, hiring and promotion, wage setting, and supervisory practices. 4) *The visibility of inequalities*, that is, the degree of awareness of inequalities in organizations. Visibility is variable and can be difficult to observe, and awareness can differ between members based on the position of the beholder (Acker 2009). 5) *The legitimacy of inequalities*, where some inequalities are accepted as normal—for example, between managers and non-managers. Productivity, efficiency, and adjustment to the market can also legitimate inequalities (Acker 2000, 2006a). 6) *Control and compliance*, which refers primarily to maintaining the power of managers and ensuring that workers act in accordance with organizations' goals through controls, including unobtrusive or indirect controls and internalized controls.

The concept of inequality regimes can both deepen and nuance knowledge about what contributes to creating inequality in working life in different ways. For example, in the analysis of staffing strategies, the characteristics mentioned above—such as the visibility and legitimacy of inequalities—can contribute to the unfolding of the underlying processes and practices that create inequality in the grocery stores. As noted by Tilly (1998), it is important to focus on how work is organized and how occupations and workplaces are staffed when examining how inequalities and gendered segregation are

created. Still, it is particularly important to adopt the concept of inequality regimes in the study of work environments since critical perspectives related to gender or intersectionality have not often been investigated in these studies. Instead, a focus on medical and ergonomic explanations has received a great deal of attention, and studies of the psychological work environments have often focused on the individual rather than on the organizational context (Bolin et al. 2019; Marklund & Härenstam 2010). Adopting a perspective highlighting that the psychosocial work environment is not limited to the individual's experiences makes it possible to address, for instance, an organizational work context (Abrahamsson et al. 2013).

Study design and the investigated grocery stores

This article is based on a case study approach (e.g., Merriam 2016; Yin 1994) and draws on interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020 with employees and managers at two grocery stores in Sweden. A case study is an empirical inquiry of a single bounded entity that can provide certain insights on a specific context (Merriam 2016). This implies the search for understanding and meaning in a specific context instead of aiming at generalizations regarding the retail sector at large. The study was part of a larger research project that aimed to examine the working conditions, work environment, and workload in grocery retailing from a gender perspective using both qualitative and quantitative methods (Mathiassen et al. 2020). In this article, we explore inequalities in working conditions and if—and in that case, how—gender, hierarchical, and spatial divisions intersect to create inequalities in stores.

The two selected grocery stores were part of a nationwide grocery chain entailing independent retailers who own and run grocery stores with access to a shared brand. Both stores were located in downtown areas of a large Swedish city. They were medium sized, had between 40 and 50 employees, and were similarly organized in departments based on the type of goods handled—that is, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, charcuterie and meat, colonial goods, bread, postal services, and checkout.

Interviews were conducted at Store A in 2018; in 2019, follow-up interviews were done at that store, followed by interviews at Store B. Follow-up interviews were planned at Store B in 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic made this impossible (see Table 2).

Table 2 Interviews in Stores A and B

Year	Store	Interviewee position	Interviews	Women	Men
2018	A	Store manager/HR manager	1 group interview	1	1
2018	A	Employees	3 group interviews	5	5
2019	A	Employees	2 group interviews	7	3
2019	A	Store manager	1 individual		1
2019	B	Manager/owner	1 group interview	1	1
2019	B	Employees	3 group interviews	5	3



Group interviews and *individual interviews* were conducted with store owners and managers to map how their company was formally organized and staffed. Both stores were similarly organized with few formal management positions. Unfortunately, the interview with the store manager in Store B was cancelled due to illness. The interviews followed an interview guide with themed issues, such as staff composition, competence structure, management and delegation of staff liability, gender segregation, flexibility strategies, and systems for control. We did not ask questions about wage setting or wage differences between groups of employees, but such data would of course have strengthened the analysis of inequalities in the stores.

Group interviews were also conducted with employees with different work tasks in the two stores. The selection of the interviewees was done in cooperation with the management, and we strived to maximize variations in terms of gender, age, and experience working in grocery stores. The selection of participants may be distorted when managers are involved in the selection—for example, only employees with a positive attitude toward working conditions are selected. In our case, we did not find this to be a problem; rather, the participants had varied experiences of and attitudes toward conditions within the stores. The objective of the group interviews was to gather knowledge about the participants' thoughts and experiences of their working conditions. The interviews were semi-structured; we followed an interview guide with themed topics, such as physical and mental strain, workload, stress, career and development opportunities, discrimination, and management. The use of different interview guides between management or employee interviews was due to the differences in focus, with the management interviews focused on organizational structure and the interviews with employees focused on their experiences of their working conditions.

Methodologically, the group interviews with managers and employees took the form of a conversation during which the interviewees had opportunities to further develop and deepen their opinions over the course of the discussion (Creswell 2007; Fielding et al. 2001). The group interviews provided information about the participants' shared norms, ideas, thoughts, and experiences of working in the grocery stores. These discussions also allowed us to observe the interplay between the participants, which opened up a different kind of interview than those with single individuals (e.g., Morgan 1993). It is important to be aware of any risks of latent conflicts or signs of informal hierarchies of power in the groups. To minimize such risks, we strived to create a safe and permissive atmosphere in small groups and be alert to any signs of dominant behavior and questioning in the groups. The group interview approach gave a voice to participants and made it possible for them both to support and question each other's assertions. During individual interviews, such differing views may not appear to the same extent. An additional advantage was that the balance of power between us, as researchers, and the participants was more in equilibrium than in individual interviews.

With the participants' permission, individual and group interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews lasted 1–1.5 hours and were conducted in a separate room at the stores. In analyses of a case study, you strive for an understanding of the investigated case. Both individual and group interviews were analyzed on the basis of a case study approach (See Marriam & Tisdell 2015) in order to unfold how complex inequalities were (re)produced in the grocery stores. The analytical process involved a repeated reading of the transcribed interviews, thematic categorization, and coding to identify patterns in the data, as well as inconsistencies.

Findings

Organizational hierarchy: A functional division of departments

In order to explore the extent to which spatial and hierarchical divisions of work intersect with gender, we investigated the organizational hierarchy and staffing. The two grocery stores were similar, with a flat organization comprising few formal positions. Both stores were family-owned, with family members having management responsibilities. In Store A, management consisted of the store owner, who did not take an active part in operations, and two store managers, who were the owner's sons. One was mainly active in formal decisions and daily operations, and the other was responsible for administration. At the time of the interviews, the management was working to formalize an organization in which the wife of the first son would become the human resources (HR) manager and take charge of the check-out and post-office, while the general manager would be responsible for operations in other store departments. Store B was owned by a married couple who had run the store for many years. The female owner was in charge of administration and HR. The male owner was close to retirement and had begun handing over the business to their daughter, who was the store manager.

Directly below the store managers was, in both stores, an organizational mid-level management consisting of two leaders each responsible for about half of the departments. The main functional division in both stores was between fresh goods and colonial (dry) goods. Fresh goods had four subdivisions: fruits and vegetables, bread, charcuterie/meat/fish, and dairy. Colonial goods had two subdivisions: dry and frozen goods. In addition to these main divisions, the stores contained a check-out and a post-office, but they lacked the mid-level management.

Requirements for profitability, productivity, and sales figures were described by the managers as reasons for organizing work in the shops. This was explained by the female manager of Store B:

We run a company with financial responsibility and personnel responsibility. It is our job; it is to ensure that the company is run in a wise, sensible and profitable way.

The managers also used the word 'operations' in their discourse about the stores and said that their first priority was to ensure that operations were working. To achieve this, the managers emphasized the importance of being in constant, detailed control of sales figures for each department. One of them described how statistics were part of his morning routine: 'It's the first thing you do together with the day's coffee' (Man, manager, Store B). Thus, value was seen as being created on the shop floor. The manager in store A described it like as follows: 'To do something, it is to sell goods. It's so imprinted'. Colonials were the center of profitability, and were a prioritized operation in both shops. Such prioritization of operations on the basis of sales figures legitimizes the underlying hierarchical divisions between departments. The cashiers and the post desk positions were considered to be on the periphery, at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, as they were not part of operations, that is, they did not add value in terms of sales figures. One of the workers put it like this: 'They have no responsibility for sales, so they are the ones who just scan the goods' (Man, Store A). As a consequence, work as a cashier or at the post desk was devalued and seen as a peripheral activity, even though management



emphasized the importance of the cashier staff as ambassadors of the stores. This means that the functional divisions also imply a hierarchical division between departments based on sales figures, especially between the colonial goods department and the check-out and post-office. The other departments on the shop floor, such as fruit, dairy, and bread, can be described as being in the middle of the hierarchy, as they contribute to sales but not to the same extent as the colonial department.

The hierarchy also became visible in the way management prioritized staff resources in the various departments. In general, the stores were slim organizations with a minimum of regular employees. The only department staffed with a sufficient number of workers for unpacking goods was colonial:

If a person in the dairy is missing, then it would look like chaos. Or should one be missing in fruit, there would be no fruit. But if you miss one at colonial, there are still probably three, four or five people working there. (Man, Store A)

The male-dominated colonial goods department had the most employees and the largest area; it accounted for a large part of sales, had the best career opportunities, and was where you could find managers when they worked on the shop floor. Consequently, this department was the center of operations in both stores. The other departments were not prioritized in the same way. This means that the divisions have consequences in terms of hierarchical and gendered inequalities. In both stores, the colonial department, and the dairy were dominated by male employees. The departments of bread, check-out, and post were to a large extent staffed with women. Fruits and vegetables were gender-integrated, like charcuterie/meat/fish in one of the stores. While some men worked at the checkout in both stores, hardly any women worked in the colonial goods department. The lower staffing in the non-colonial departments likely led to a higher work intensity and a work environment with less opportunities for recovery. A male worker in store A described that 'fruit and dairy seem to be the most stressful departments'. Despite this, there were no directives for staff in the colonial department to assist in other departments when needed. This further marks the colonial department at the top of the hierarchy, while the female-dominated cashier and post-office end up at the lower end of the hierarchy. The other departments, such as fruit and vegetables, dairy, bread, charcuteries/meat/fish, are found in the middle of the hierarchy regarding their gender composition. This means that the sales figures take the upper hand, while the gender composition plays a minor role in the hierarchical positioning between the departments in the middle. However, in the interviews with the managers, it became clear that they were unaware of some of the gender-segregating practices in the stores. In the interviews, we asked the managers to draw an organizational chart and describe how departments were staffed. At first, the managers at both stores described the staffing as gender-integrated throughout their respective stores: 'Yes, it's probably pretty 50–50 all the way' (Man, owner, Store B). However, next they were asked to mark each department using different colors for male-dominated, female-dominated, and gender-mixed departments. It then became clear to the managers that the departments were not gender-integrated. The managers expressed their surprise about the clear gendered patterns. The male manager at Store A exclaimed: 'Is it so damned bad?' Thus, the gendered structure of the organization had been invisible to the managers. Such gender-segregation between departments, leading to gendered task segregation, can have consequences for working conditions (e.g., Johansson et al.

2015a; Tolich et al. 1999). For example, jobs in the female-dominated cashier role offer little physical variation, leading to a higher risk of musculoskeletal disorders, compared to the more varied and mobile work on the shop floor (Balogh et al. 2016). Thus, as a consequence of the functional division, a hierarchical division between departments was created, a division that was also gendered, as men and women largely worked in different departments. Such differences in working conditions between groups of workers are a part of the organizational processes that produce inequalities (see Acker 2006a).

Staffing strategies: Division into core and peripheral groups of workers

In addition to the functional division of departments based on the goods handled, a division was also apparent based on different terms of employment. This meant a division into a core of staff with secure permanent employment and a periphery of more insecure non-standard employment (e.g., Kalleberg 2001, 2009). This is also the case in the Swedish retail trade where non-standard employment has increased significantly in recent years (Carlén & de los Reyes 2021). Such staffing strategies are ways in which organizational processes produce inequalities between groups of employees in organizations (Acker 2006a). In the investigated grocery stores, workers usually started as temporary hires during the summer or worked evenings and weekends in combination with their studies, followed by a longer-term position after they had finished their studies. To have such non-standard employment in which they have the opportunity to work part-time, often on evenings and weekends, can be positive for the individual student who can thus earn money while studying (e.g., Berggren & Carlén 2016; Strandlund et al. 2019). In that case, the temporary employment could be seen as a way to enter the labor market for young people. A woman in store B described her experiences of working during her studies as follows:

When I worked in the evening cashier we were all about the same age and in the same life situation because we worked evenings, we went to school during the day, so that way we had kinship. (Woman, Store B)

The starting position was mainly cashier, often on a part-time basis. Despite the presence of many young, temporary employees at the cash register, it is important to note that it is also not uncommon for permanent employed women, in particular, to continue working as cashiers for long periods. However, for many of the young workers, it was their first job; this became obvious during young workers' discussions about their terms of employment in Store A:

Man: I do not really know; I think I am permanently employed, but we are at least employed by the hour. I think so for the time being. No, I am not really sure.

Interviewer: But are you working full-time then?

Man: No, no. My contract says 15 hours a week. But now I've got a little more time, but it is so different.

Woman: I also have something like permanent or whatever you call it, but I work 25 hours a week, but it gets more.



In this discussion, it became clear that these young workers did not know, or were unsure of, the terms of their employment and the difference between permanent and temporary employment. An overall impression from the interviews was that the staff lacked good knowledge of the employer's responsibility for, among other things, work environment issues.

In the interviews, the workers expressed insecurity and uncertainty regarding the terms of their employment. As a temporary employee, fear of not being seen as someone worthy of being invested in or the risk of not securing extended employment could be part of complying with organizational norms and values. One example was how the management handled sick leave and whether the workers felt they could stay at home when they were sick:

When I started here, when I worked evening shifts, I never dared to be sick. Even if I was sick, it was like this: "You still work!" ... You do not dare, you do not want to cause problems. (Woman, Store A)

The workers described how they were rarely met with pity or empathy when they called to report being sick; instead, they were asked directly if they could work the next day. However, although these workers tried to manage their work in a responsible way, they were affected by the fact that other people did not always act responsibly in the case of absence, which in turn affected how they would act when they were sick.

In comparison to these young, casual workers, the permanent employees mainly worked daytime shifts:

Permanent staff can, for example, work until 18.00—those who have a weekly schedule. Then there are mainly students between 16.00 and 21.30; they work one to two evenings a week and every other weekend. (Woman, manager, Store B)

Thus, flexible staffing strategies created a division between permanent and temporary workers. This was pointed out by a woman at Store B: 'Yes, it is two groups'. In addition, the female manager at Store B put forward the need for having a core of permanent workers with long-term ideas for the business:

In general, in stores, there is such a turnover of people because it is a perfect extra job if you study or go to school ... But, at the same time, we need regular workers as well. (Woman, manager, Store B)

There were also some differences in the terms of employment between those who worked in the evenings and those who worked during the day. The manager at Store A said that almost everyone who worked during the day was a permanent employee, and that employees with some kind of operational responsibilities were permanently employed full-time. The situation was similar in Store B. In line with previous research (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Tullberg et al. 2014), we argue that flexible staffing strategies may (re)produce inequalities in that they create a division into a core of permanent, full-time staff working day shifts and a periphery of workers with non-standard employment, working evenings and weekends. The division of groups with different terms of employments, together with the gendered division between departments, is a part of

the inequality regimes. However, we believe that even if certain groups, such as young people, see their employment in the stores as a short and temporary part of life while at the same time providing an education, it still means that the flexible staffing strategies create unequal working conditions and segregation between groups of workers.

Working conditions and work environment

There are extensive studies on the risks of musculoskeletal disorders in supermarkets, especially among the staff working at the checkout (e.g., Balogh et al. 2016; Forcier et al. 2008), but research also reports stress-related illnesses, difficulties with sleeping, headache, exhaustion, and anxiety (e.g., Zeytinoglu et al. 2014). The findings from our study show that workers in the woman-dominated cashier position were confronted with psychosocial and physical work environment risks, such as stress, extensive sitting, and continuous noise:

There are lots of sounds, a lot of different faces and there are customers all the time. If you have been there for many hours, you can feel very tired in your head. (Woman, Store A)

In general, work in the two stores was characterized by an intense physical workload:

I have 35 years left to work. Yes, it's many years, but I do not think my body will be able to cope with working at this pace for so many more years. (Woman, Store B)

The workers described their work as stressful; they also said that they had to work at a fast pace and that it was difficult to slow down. It was especially difficult when the store manager prioritized being present on the shop floor to unpack goods. When the managers set the pace using their own bodies and show the importance of quickly picking up goods after delivery, a normative control of the 'right' behavior is created. This can influence workers' behavior (e.g., Degiuli et al. 2007).

Still, there were differences in how stressful or heavy the work was perceived to be. The dairy and fruits departments were examples of areas requiring heavy lifting. One man described the consequences of his work environment:

Lately, I have had a back pain, an inflamed lumbar spine from work ... I did almost everything myself in the department, and it was a lot of lifting, a lot on my knees ... Yes, I lifted tons a day. (Man, Store A)

In addition to the heavy lifting of goods, the spatial design of the store premises also affected the physical work environment. In the two stores, restricted spaces in all departments were described as physically demanding, especially due to work involving repeated lifting and twisting, as described in an example from the bread department:

In the bread department, you think it's light [not heavy], but I have very tight spaces, and then it's all heavy ... Bending legs and the back, you have to lift from here to there, and you cannot do it very ergonomically. (Woman, Store A)



Even the small storage space could also lead to physical injuries, since the staff had to quickly unpack goods for each department before receiving the next delivery. Thus, workers had to be constantly aware of new deliveries, which created stress and increased demands to step in and help each other. The heavy lifting and stressful work may put the workers at risk for both physical and psychosocial disorders.

The workers also had to deal with additional work environment risks in terms of threats and violence as a part of their daily work (e.g., Geijer & Menckel 2003). Therefore, the staff were equipped with alarms, and security companies handled the locking and unlocking of the store. The evenings were pointed out as being riskier than the days, since youth gangs or addicts could behave aggressively:

It is a disadvantage of being open until 11 pm, when even more drunkards come in; even more idiots like this who just want to go in and vandalize. (Man, Store A)

Such situations were also described by a woman in store B: 'They come in and are high and have syringes or knives on them, so it's awful'. Some of the staff at Store A even had experiences of the store being robbed:

There was a pretty bad robbery, but they were never inside the store with automatic weapons; they stood guard with automatic weapons. (Man, Store A)

The management had identified threats and violence as a risk, especially in the evenings; therefore, the managers decided that only men should work as evening leaders because the ability to physically handle violence was defined as a male competence:

We've had a few girls too, but it's tough when there are 10 guys out there /.../ usually it's very tough for a girl. Even if she manages it, it will be very tough. (Male Manager, store B)

However, the numerically flexible, mostly young, female, and temporary checkout staff working in the evenings were more often subjected to threats and violence than the functional, flexible daytime workers. Thus, flexible staffing strategies created differences between groups of workers that had consequences in terms of risk of violence, but also, as described by Zeytinoglu et al. (2004), risks of developing symptoms such as anxiety, exhaustion headaches, and difficulties in sleeping (see Zeytinoglu et al. 2004).

Spatial mobility and changing positions

The organizational processes that create a hierarchical and gendered division of departments also imply different opportunities for advancement and spatial mobility. An important part to advancement in the stores is to occasionally assist in other departments to prove themselves as competent and worthy of being invested in. Still, there were differences in the workers' opportunities for workplace mobility; some could work temporarily in another department to expand their skills, while others were stuck in a particular role. A woman in Store B described how she had made a career move from being a cashier to working in the fruit and vegetables department and was given the opportunity to help in other departments from time to time:

Since I was there sometimes, it became quite natural to choose me again because I had started to get the gist of it. Then I jumped in as a ‘second man’ most days, and then [the incumbent] changed to another department, so then I took over the entire department.

The opportunity to help or be a substitute in another department was important to enhance the chances of advancement. The manager in Store A used ‘firefighters’ as an image of the ideal workers: ‘Now we need this firefighter even more over there because it’s burning even more’. This highlights how mobility and flexibility were seen as valuable competences by management.

However, mobility as a means for advancement made it difficult for employees assigned to the female-dominated checkout to prove themselves as competent, since their mobility was limited due to the specific nature of their tasks:

It does not matter whether you have three customers or if you have 13 customers, you should sit there until the next person comes. You have the opportunity to go out on the floor and pick up some goods. But your given place is at the checkout. (Woman, manager, Store B)

Working as a cashier was more spatially bound than working in other departments. The physical bonding to the checkout desk and the demands of being constantly present were also described by a woman in Store B:

I cannot decide if I feel that I cannot stand it anymore, because I have to sit there, since otherwise no one else would be sitting there. (Woman, Store B)

Moreover, the introduction of self-service check-outs had not substantially altered the work of the cashiers since they were still spatially bound to the check-out. However, this also meant that the cashiers were more or less excluded from any kind of job rotation that could have increased their chances of advancement (e.g., Johansson et al. 2015b; Kvist 2006; Tolich et al. 1999). In contrast to the bounded work at the check-out, workers on the shop floor described their jobs as offering good job control in terms of the freedom to decide what, how, and when to carry out work tasks:

The management has not put in anything, so I have always had to take care of myself, and I think it feels very good. And I have often said that the day I end up at the checkout, for example, then I would not last long. (Man, Store B)

This illustrates the status-related differences between departments, as described by a woman in Store B: ‘It is also a status thing; the evening checkout is not high up in the power hierarchy’. Overall, the working conditions in the female-dominated checkout stood out in comparison to the departments on the shop floor in terms of opportunities for autonomy and control over one’s own work situation. In addition to the division into a core and periphery based on the terms of employment, belonging to different departments created a status division where work on the shop floor was a more central part of operations compared to the check-out, having a more peripheral status. This was in line with other studies reporting that cashier jobs are perceived to be devalued and the check-out area is perceived to be a peripheral and subordinate space (Johansson et al. 2015b).



Despite the flat hierarchy, the workers there described some opportunities for advancement, such as training and studying to be responsible for a department, becoming a leader of several departments, and, in the long term, becoming a store manager of a nationwide grocery chain. The latter advancement requires employees to have experience working across different departments and at several grocery stores. In any case, the management's assessment of and knowledge about personal suitability plays a vital role in matching candidates to different job positions and promotion opportunities, whereby management 'sifts and sorts' who is the most suitable for a job (Acker 2006a). A male worker in Store B described it as follows: 'The owners must see potential in that person ... so that they want to invest in him or her'. A few workers in our study had been given opportunities to enhance their competence:

I want to be a manager. I have taken a few courses, and now I am going to take the store manager training. (Man, Store B)

There are several who have been given areas of responsibility, who have started quite young ... but it is a lot like you have to show that you want to; then it is absolutely possible. (Man, Store A)

These men had been identified by the management as worthy of investing in and offering courses and training. They also stated that it was common knowledge that managers treated workers differently and had favorites as well as non-favorites; this governed selection when someone was singled out for training or to fill a vacancy. However, our interviews cannot provide answers to questions about why specific workers—in these cases, men—were considered for advancement and others not.

Discussion and conclusions

In this final section, we return to the article's aim of exploring how spatial and hierarchical divisions of work at grocery stores intersect with gender and the implications for the employees' working conditions. Drawing on an interview study with managers and employees at two grocery stores, the results illustrate how inequalities were created and maintained in the organization of everyday work. Our findings show how organizing processes produced and maintained inequalities between groups of employees (cf. Acker 2006a). The organizing processes (Acker 2006a) included a functional and gendered division of the workforce based on the goods handled by each department. The functional and gendered division was accompanied by differences in working conditions. The male-dominated colonial goods department had the highest status, produced a large proportion of sales, and was staffed with the most workers, who in turn had the best career opportunities.

In addition to the functional and gendered division of departments, a division was also apparent based on different terms of employment. The workforce was divided into a core of functional, flexible, and secure employees and a periphery of a variable number of employees with more insecure employment status (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Tullberg et al. 2014). This strategy was used as a means of adapting to different numbers of customers at different times of day. Evening and weekend shifts were mostly staffed with young,

temporary employees, often working part-time; employees with more stable employment had daytime positions. Such flexible staffing strategies produced and maintained inequalities between groups of employees (Acker 2006a). In addition, both non-standard work and gender are part of the inequality regimes. This means that inequalities based on gender and terms of employment interact in creating inequalities in the stores. One of the consequences of these functional and gendered divisions is that opportunities for workers to increase their competence and skills by being functionally flexible and mobile were decreased. For those who worked at the female-dominated checkout, mobility opportunities were even more limited. The spatial bonding to the checkout desk impeded the workers' opportunities to obtain new skills and in turn advance in the store. Organizational processes such as matching and promotion of workers to different job positions is a central element in the creation of inequalities in organizations (Acker 2006a, 2009). Lack of mobility opportunities, and thus limited opportunities to enhance competence and skills by practicing in other spaces, are grounds for gendered and hierarchical inequalities between groups of employees. Gendered inequalities seem to prevail in these stores, and as suggested by Abrahamsson (2014, p. 128); 'inertia and opposition to organizational changes can hinder improvement in organizational development, working environment, and increased gender equality'.

Furthermore, our findings highlight that work in the grocery stores is both physically and psychosocially demanding. Work at the shop floor extensively included tasks such as heavy lifting while unpacking goods after delivery, often under time pressure. Work at the checkout as a cashier was also associated with physical and psychosocial risk factors, such as repetitive physical load, extensive sitting, stress, and annoying, repeated sounds from doors opening and closing and from the scanning of goods. Our findings show that employees in the cashier areas and on the shop floor perceived work to be intense, hard, and stressful. These working conditions are consequences of how work is organized in such stores (e.g., Anton et al. 2016; Balogh et al. 2016; Zeytinoglu et al. 2004), and they contribute to producing and maintaining inequalities (Acker 2006a).

The management expressed being unaware of the gendered segregation between departments, despite the fact that they themselves were responsible for hiring and promoting workers to different jobs. In contrast, the workers were aware of discriminating practices in the management's selection of employees for promotion, but the reasons remain unclear. As suggested by Acker (2009), the visibility and awareness of inequalities can differ between persons based on their different positions.

A flexible and functional division was legitimized (cf. Acker 2006a) by profitability and productivity, such as sales figures. This reinforced the differences in status and hierarchy between departments, with the checkout cashier position being especially devalued since it was described as not contributing to sales. The colonial goods department was seen as the most valued and the center of operations. Control and compliance are strategies used to achieve organizational goals (Acker 2006a). The management had close and constant control over the sales figures in each department and participated in working on the shop floor, most often in the colonial department. Such direct and normative control implies that workers need to be compliant with norms, but this may be grounded more in self-interest than in the internalization of organizational goals.

In conclusion, the study shows how spatial, hierarchy, status, terms of employment, and gender divisions intersect in creating inequalities in employees' working conditions, work environments, and opportunities for career advancement. The gendered



substructure points to inequalities between groups of workers, partly explaining gendered outcomes in terms of the physical and psychosocial work environment. The male-dominated colonial goods department was at the top of the hierarchy with the best working conditions, career opportunities, and highest sales figures; the cashier was at the bottom end, viewed as less valuable in terms of profitability and being offered less career opportunities.

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