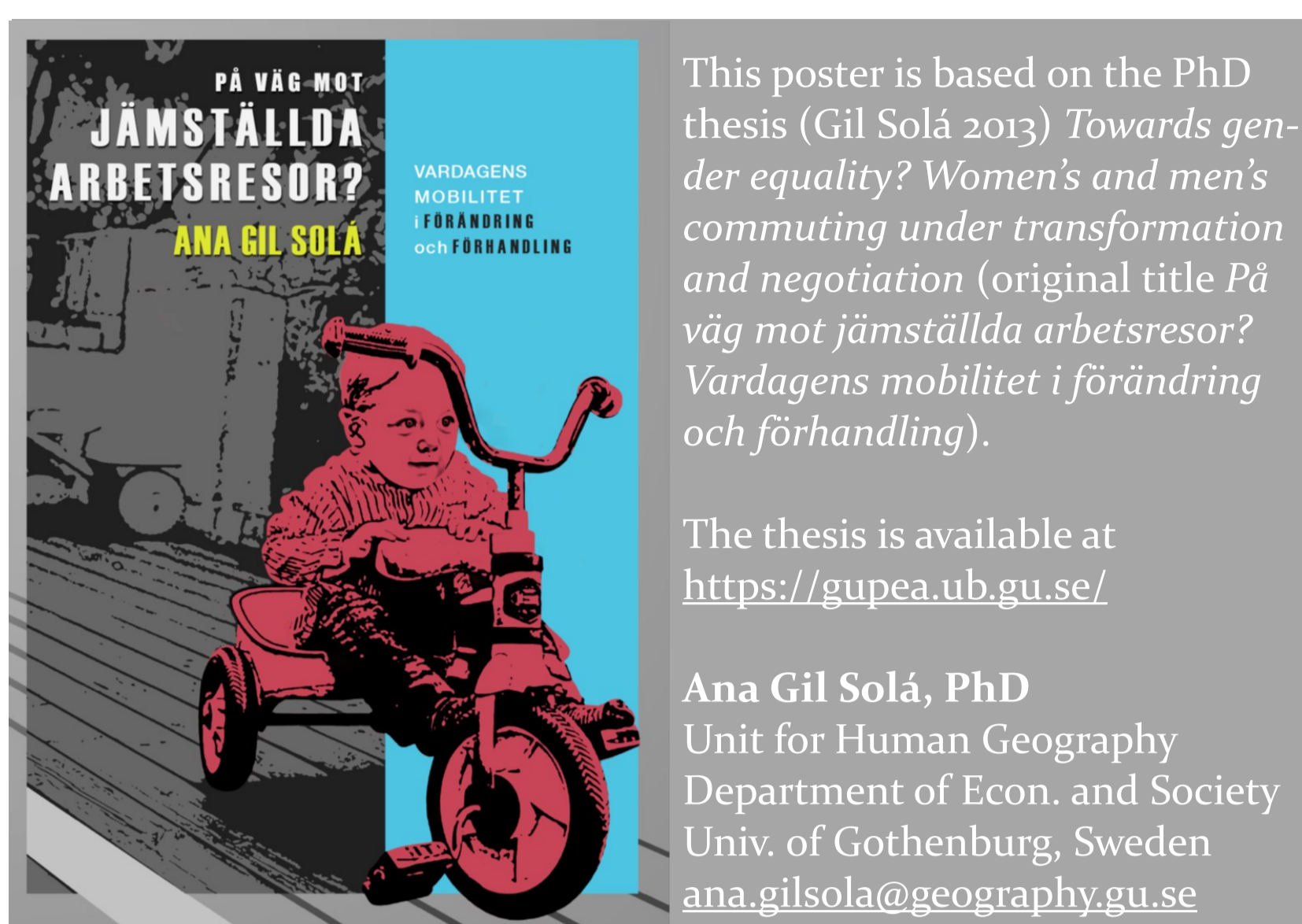


Creating work trip differences between women and men

The role of gender contracts within the household



Background and aim

In Sweden the policy of regional enlargement – i.e. promoting the geographical extension of labor markets and associated longer commuting distances – is embraced as a means of stimulating economic growth. However, since women generally and historically commute considerably shorter distances than men do, in Sweden as in other countries, a critical issue is whether women and men can participate in this process of enlargement at the same extent. Furthermore, the role and consequences of still longer work trips in people's daily living are seldom highlighted in this political discussion.

How do cohabiting women and men negotiate and respond to needs and claims for longer work trips? This poster highlights the role of *gender contracts* (an analytical concept developed by Hirdman 1990, 1993, 2003) within the household in the understanding of work trip differences, as well as their consequences in daily life of women and men. In current research, aspects related to the home and household, such as being married/cohabiting and the presence of children, have

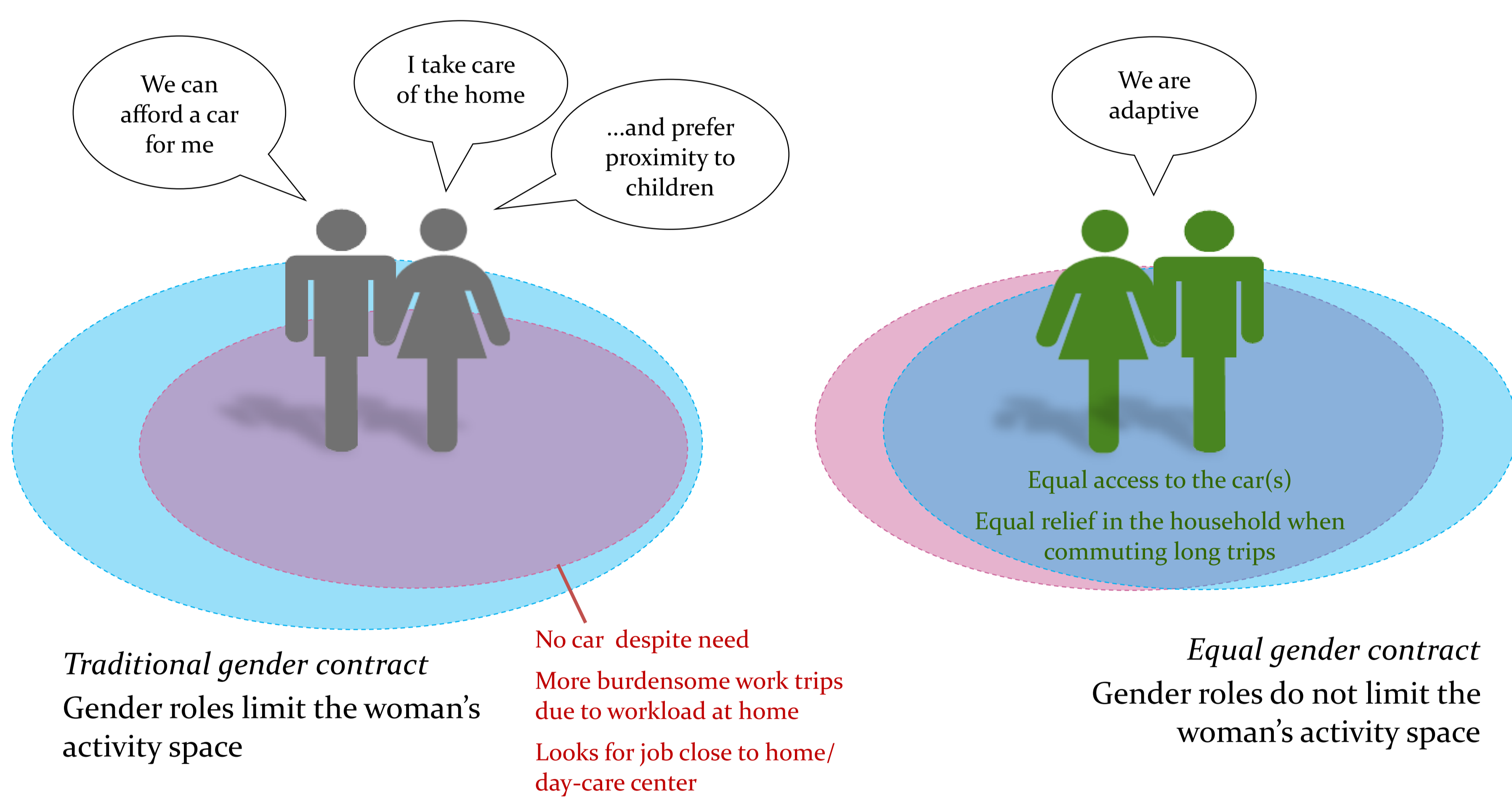
shown to affect the commuting of women and men differently, as well as how the consequences of work trips are evaluated. However, most studies are statistical explorations, and do not investigate how existing differences are created, negotiated and practiced among the household members in the context of everyday life.

Data and methods

This study is based on 20 in depth interviews with parents with small children living in the Gothenburg urban region, being highly skilled with specialized labor markets, and recently having moved to a new residential location. Special attention is paid to women's and men's everyday activities; their wishes and values concerning housing, work, mobility and family life; experienced restrictions in relation to the work trip; and decision processes within the household. The study also investigates consequences of the work trip for individuals and households.

Theoretical approach and concepts

Discrepancies in actual mobility between the sexes are seen as an expression of the relationship between women and men found in the homes, places of work and in the transport system. Focusing on the role of the household, the concept of *gender contract* is used in order to understand existing mobility choices and decisions made within households. The concept implies an agreement between women and men containing mutual commitments, liabilities and rights regarding how the individual is expected to be and act, in this case as regards travel-related issues. The agreement is understood as having advantages for both parties. In this particular study the agreements concern, for example, who has the "right" to use the car, or who should leave the children at the day-care center in the morning.



Main results and conclusions

Overall, the study shows that the role and implications of the work trip for individuals (and their households) on everyday life and welfare are shaped by surrounding structures such as conditions on the labor market, the housing market and the design of transport systems. This shaping appears in slightly different ways for women and men, to a great deal depending on the (explicit or silent) gender contract that defines their room to maneuver. The analysis highlights two distinctive and contrasting types of gender contracts: the *traditional gender contract* and the *equal gender contract*. The traditional gender contract describes women and men as different, expresses an unequal (male dominant) power relation between female and male attributes and roles, and leads to the man limiting the woman's activity space and range on the labor market. The equal gender contract, on the other hand, assigns women and men different roles within the household as well, but the roles are not taken for granted to the same extent. Furthermore, power relations between the roles are not distinct, and the man does not limit the woman's action space.

In the interviews these gender contracts are clearly expressed as regards: 1) The use of the car: In many families who own one car, car-driving is equally distributed. Still, in more traditional households, women's need of the car is not perceived important motivating the economic cost that a second car constitutes (though the same argument is seldom applied to men). In this case, both women and men argue in terms of a "taking for granted" of men dominating, or women *not* dominating, the use of the single car of the household; 2) Household responsibility and proximity to children: While households with equal gender contracts distribute household responsibilities largely according to direct needs and restrictions, tra-

ditional households have the woman taking most responsibilities, even when commuting long trips or difficult hours, resulting in a more burdensome commuting. Furthermore, in some cases the woman wishes to be close to the children and chooses to work comparatively near their day-care center, reducing her reach in the labor market. 3) Career: In some traditional households the woman's wish to pursuit a better work opportunity is not considered a valid reason for the household to support her – for instance with a car or to have reduced household responsibility, if this is needed – even when she is overqualified for her current job.

In sum, results show that gender contracts within the household influence the consequences of regional enlargement for the individual. The consequences depend on how the household succeeds in handling existing restrictions, as well as making use of possibilities, imposed by surrounding socio-spatial structures. Households with equal gender contracts show a greater variety of possible solutions in their negotiations, while households with traditional gender contracts more easily get stuck in traditional solutions. Continued progress towards gender equal work trips thus depends on how gender contracts within households are negotiated and further re-negotiated as well as how future societal structures support household's decision making in a more equal direction.

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