

# Abstract

**Aim:** Women suffer from and seek health care for common physical and mental symptoms, such as musculoskeletal pain, stomach pain, anxiety and depression to a higher extent than men. The aim of this thesis was to study, by applying a psychosocial stress hypothesis, possible causal relationships between socio-economic factors, psychosocial factors, domestic responsibility and violence victimisation and a high level of common symptoms in women.

**Study population and methods:** A random sample of 50% of all women, 40 to 50 years of age, living in the municipality Lilla Edet, Sweden, were approached by mail and asked to participate by filling in the enclosed questionnaire (n=486). The response rate was 81.7% (n= 397).

**Results:** Non-employed women and women exposed to job strain had significantly increased odds ratios for a high level of common symptoms, (OR 2.82; 1.69–4.70 and 3.27; 1.92–5.57 respectively), and this was also shown for low levels of social support, social anchorage and social participation.

Of the women, 32.2% had experienced violence or abuse during childhood and 15.6% at adult age. Exposure to violence or abuse in adulthood was significantly associated with a high level of common symptoms (OR 2.26; 1.30–3.92) and when combined with exposure to low levels of social network/support and sense of coherence the odds ratio increased considerably, indicating a synergistic effect.

Women carrying great domestic responsibility were at risk for a high level of common symptoms (OR 1.76;1.04–2.97) and when at the same time in a job strain situation the risk increased about four times, and evidence for synergy was present. Furthermore, a high level of common symptoms was able to predict long spells of sickness absence (OR 2.95;1.60–5.44). Somewhat surprisingly, a job situation characterised by high demands and a high decision latitude was also associated with long spells of sickness absence (OR 2.16; 1.12–4.15).

**Conclusions:** Socio-economic and psychosocial factors reflecting women's living conditions are risk factors to observe and find appropriate intervention and prevention for, since they seem to affect women's health negatively through several causal mechanisms and also to increase the risk for subsequent long spells of sickness absence.