

Women and the labour market sociology essay



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Since the emergence of the Sexual Discrimination Act in 1975, gender issues in relation to the workplace have been a much talked about subject surrounded by debate and opinion. Today, there are various theories that link the segregation of men and women in paid employment to the partition of domestic duties between husband and wife, some of which date back to the 1970s. Watson (2003: 144) defines occupational segregation as:

'... a pattern of occupations in which some are predominantly male and others female'.

Intertwined with each theory, you will find concepts that relate to sociological, physiological, psychological and economical views.

In 2008, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed that just under 19% of men in the UK occupied managerial and positions of seniority compared to 12% of women (ONS, 2008). Further, as of 2009, the overall pay gap (which compares the median hourly rates of full-time and part-time employment) between men and women in the industry was 22% in favour of men (Government Equalities Office, 2009). There are many conflicting views present that suggest the current pay gap and number of senior posts occupied by men. Amble (2005) suggests that it is gender stereotyping that prevents women from obtaining advancements in her career. In a study, he found that women were stereotyped in exceeding in 'care-taking' tasks. It is possible that this reason accounts for the 80% of administrative and secretarial jobs occupied by women (Browne, 2006). Fagenson (1990) however, suggests that it is due to the lack of encouragement that women

receive to commence such positions, due to them being seen as a less valued member of society.

The Inevitability of Patriarchy by Steven Goldberg (1977) focuses on the genetic make-up of a male, in particular the effect of male hormones and testosterone, and of the consequence that they have on motivation, ambition and behaviour in the work industry. He argues that the " male physiological development make men generally more self-assertive, aggressive, dominant and competitive" (Hakim, 1996: 5). In his theory, Goldberg underlines that he does not believe that women are incapable of performing the tasks associated with senior roles; he however contends that their biological make-up prevents them from obtaining such positions of seniority.

Juxtaposed with Goldberg's theory of male dominance is Baron-Cohen and his theory relating to the scientific make-up of a persons brain. He too agrees that males present more of a competitive streak than women, of which enables them to succeed (Browne, 2006). Baron-Cohen's 'empathising system' theory states that the construction of the male brain is for systemising, whereas a females brain is for empathising. This essentially means " the male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems" and that " the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy" (Baron-Cohen 2003, in Browne, 2006: 23). To a certain extent Priola (2007) supports this by implying that in order for women to occupy managerial roles they need to contain their emotions. Parsons (1942) however, contends that the behavioural dissimilarity between men and women are purely social.

Current statistics demonstrate that in the UK labour market women approximately occupy fourteen million employment posts. However, half are in part-time employment, compared to that of men, whereby one in six commences part-time employment (ONS, 2008). Becker's 'rational choice' theory somewhat provides an explanation as to why the majority of the part-time labour force is taken by women, thus resulting in them receiving a lower salary compared to men across the board. The analysis of the nuclear family plays a starring role in his theory. A Treatise on the Family, by Becker (1981) indicates that occupational segregation is due to the rational choices made by men and women according to their human capital levels. In the existing context, human capital can be defined as:

'education, accumulated employment experience and skills' (Browne, 2006: 35)

Becker (1981) suggests that because most women commence part-time work, they have more energy to exert into household duties, compared to that available of their husbands. He adds that most men specialise in paid employment, where the majority of women take on domestic responsibilities. He further argues that a woman who attempts to integrate both into her life will experience elements of inferiority in relation to human capital (Becker, 1985).

In response, Hakim's 'preference' theory disagrees with Becker in respect to the emphasis that he has put on childcare being a prevailing reason for unpaid labour (Browne, 2006). In 2008, the Office for National Statistics found that on average a woman would have 1.96 children in her lifetime,

compared to that of the 1960s 'baby boom' where the average was 2.46 (ONS, 2008). Further to this, for the second quarter of 2008 found that 68% of women with dependant children were in employment (ONS, 2008). Such increasing statistics is partly due to the welfare facilities available to women with dependant children are becoming more obtainable. Currently, children aged between three and four are entitled to fifteen hours of free childcare a week, which is facilitated by a government scheme aimed to help mothers back in the workplace (Siddique, 2008). In light of this, Hakim argues that childcare is less demanding than Becker implies, as the number of offspring women are having is in decline (Browne, 2006). Engelhardt et al (2004) supports this by indicating that the connection between fertility and female employment weakens due to the greater accessibility of child care services, family policies and changing attitudes towards working mothers. At present, new mothers are entitled to fifty two weeks maternity leave, thirty nine weeks of statutory maternity pay and the right to a flexible working pattern (Directgov, 2010).

Women in Higher Education

For the academic year 2008/09, 57% of first degree grades were awarded to women (HESA, 2009). With this in mind, it is somewhat hard to comprehend the disproportion of men to women in higher education, or the lack of senior posts that are occupied by women. As of 2008, only 16% of the Vice Chancellors in the UK were women (Nielsen, 2009). From this, we can question why women are under represented at senior levels? Is it purely out of choice, or are they discriminated against in a profession dominated by

men, whereby by they are simply 'travellers in a male world?' (Marshall, 1984).

The Demands of Research

Davies and Holloway (1995, in Morley et al, 1995) states that the lack of senior roles occupied by women is partly due to the research process and the hurdles in which women have to jump in order to gain academic recognition, of which can stem back as early as the 1980s. Grummell et al (2009) contributes by indicating that it is somewhat due to the rise of neo-liberalism whereby higher education institutions have been increasingly redefined as market commodities. In 1981, the Universities Grant Commission (UGC), made a 15% reduction in government funding available to higher education (Williams, 1992). From this, it became apparent that in order to survive, a further source of income was required, which would be in the form of research.

Acclaimed research requires time, dedication, and vigour, all of which are not realistic for a woman who has parental responsibilities. HESA (2009) indicates that 67.3% of higher education part-time staff are female, thus leading us to believe that they have other commitments outside of their occupation. Morley et al (1996) shows that on average a woman professor spends two hours more a week than men on research, however they are still unable to achieve occupational recognition for their work. Neilsen (2009) and the Association of University Teachers (AUT, 2005) suggests that it is partly due to the lack of published work, reluctance to move and financial value acquired to your university, all of which are needed in order to gain promotion. Handley (1994) agrees by further stating that academic

patriarchy amongst female academics often results in them not being taken seriously due to the build up of part-time employment and limited published work. Nonetheless, one female senior lecturer argues that women are partly to blame as they are not "prepared to commit the energy and hours to get promotion" (Metcalf et al, 2005: 193).

In conjunction, Morley et al (1996) implies that elements of the above can also result in ageism. It is suggested that by the time women have out grown parental responsibilities, their promotional opportunities have declined. Universities recognise that women over the age of fifty are entitled to early retirement in a short period of time, therefore resulting in their reluctance to employ mature women. Nonetheless, the AUT (2006) imply that academic jobs were being given to younger candidates as they were less experienced, meaning they could receive a lower salary.

Male Dominant Working Environment

HESA states that 2008/09 saw 39% women occupy senior roles (which include managers and academic professionals). Much literature provides explanations of why figures are low, with the majority indicating that women are both unable and reluctant to reach managerial positions due to hostile and inhabitable working environments of which are dominated by men. Brookes (1997) identifies that gaining academic footing in a male dominated hierarchy often results in prevalent sexism. Handley (1994) adds to this by signifying that due to the competitive environment, male homosociability exists making it difficult for the professional inclusion of women. Morgan (1992) defines homosociability as:

'... a collective name for an important set of relationships, referring to the preference of men for each others' company'.

Brooks et al (2001) expands on this by indicating that academic women find it hard to gain recognition as the majority of the time they are being judged by men, against " male standards and criteria". Priola (2007) maintains this by stating that a dominant masculine culture can help to explain the low proportion of women at both managerial and professorial level. In Metcalf et al (2005: 191), one lecturer stated:

" There's general intolerance and discrimination. They don't treat female colleagues as evenly and as well as they should.... The culture here is very male dominated"

However, Neilsen (2009) contends that male dominance at the top is partly due to the management style adopted by some universities, whereby work-related bullying takes place. Further to this, an anonymous senior lecturer at South Bank University indicates that a male dominant environment can provide a antagonistic and intimidating atmosphere to work (Woodward, 2000). Conversely, West et al (1995) imply that because there are few women at the top, they are unable to mentor or advice those below to pursue senior academic posts.

Motherhood 'vs' Single Women

It would be ludicrous not to investigate the impact that parental responsibilities have on women in higher education, and of the barriers that they create in achieving occupational success at managerial or professorial level. Grummell et al (2009) suggests that the support a woman receives

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and her ability to juggle family life with her profession has a profound impact on the number of children she will have, or her decision not to have any at all. It was further stated that unlike men, women could not simply take parental support from her husband for granted. Metcalf et al (2005) assert that amongst issues relating to lack of published work, the unwillingness of women with children to attend international conferences also has a damaging effect on their careers. Due to the demanding hours that research roles require, Spurling (1997) suggests that women dominantly engage teaching positions as their schedules fit in better with family commitments.

However, in light of the above, Stiver Lie (1990, in West et al, 1995) proposes that publication rates for female academia are negatively correlated with the period during which they care for children less than ten years of age. In response to this, we can pose the question why is it that the majority of women without family commitments are also unable to achieve seniority? However, West et al (1995) contends that to a certain extent unmarried women are discriminated against based on their prevailing characteristics that pose a greater threat than married women.

Despite this, Priola (2007) and Coyle and Skinner (1988, in Morley, 2005) both concur in stating that a woman's domestic responsibilities and difficulties in merging family ties with a career, restricts their " participation and ascent in the professional domain".

Bagilhole (2009: 15) succinctly summarises the position of academia today and of the struggles that women face, " in universities, men rule and their ideas are the 'ruling ideas'".