

Occupational gender segregation in british labour market sociology essay



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The essay will concentrate on the phenomenon of an occupational gender segregation that women continue to suffer in the labour market in Britain. Firstly this essay will look at some statistics surrounding women in the employment. Secondly, the paper will consider theories that try to explain the occupational segregation by sex. The essay will examined the neo-classical economic theories of human capital and rational choice. Moreover, the paper will evaluate if these theories stands up as an argument to reason the occupational gender segregation. Then the concept of patriarchy which is at the centre of feminist theory will be presented and appraised in connection with understanding the cause of occupational sex segregation. The last theory to be assessed in relation to disadvantage experienced by women in the labour market will be the idea of preference theory based on Catherine Hakim's study.

Despite over forty years since first Equal Opportunities legislation has been introduced, labour market in the United Kingdom is marked by the sexual segregation in occupations that women so often experience. Labour Market Statistics(2010) highlights that 42. 8% of female employees work in part-time jobs to compare with 11. 9% of their male counterparts and 74. 4% of all employees in part-time jobs are women; thus part-time jobs tend to be seen as ' women's work'. This generates financial consequences for women. Recent survey by Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (2009, p. 5) illustrates that the full time gender pay gap is at 16. 4% and the part time gender pay gap is at 13. 2%. The Equal Opportunities Commission (2006) estimated that the gender pay gap would lose a woman working on full-time basis a cumulative amount of £330, 000, or £210, 000 after taxes over her

life. Labour Force Survey (2006, p. 5) also points out that women predominantly work in service occupations whereby men mostly work in management occupations and in professions that require high level of knowledge and skills.

The neo-classical economic theories of human capital and rational choice represent a prominent proposition that attempts to clarify the reasons behind occupational sex segmentation. (Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 515) The rational theory suggests that employees and employers behave sensibly in the labour market. Thus, people decide to invest in their qualifications and gain work experience in order to obtain the highest level of income possible after assessing the level and quality of their human capital and existing constraints to enter particular occupation (Anker, 1997, p. 317). Furthermore, employers look for the highest return possible by increasing productivity and reducing costs. However, the rationality of employers' actions may cause unequal treatment of women in employment sphere (Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 55). According to human capital theory, women entering labour market offer lower level of knowledge and skills, and less suitable qualifications that employers are looking for compare to men partly due to inequality women experience within education system (Haggerty and Johnson, 1995 p. 212 and 216) and partly because women are predominant child carers and are solely responsible for home activities (Anker, 1997, p. 317). Moreover, women obtain lower level of work experience than their male counterparts due to temporary or permanent exit from the labour market to look after their youngsters and households (Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 55). Neo-classical theories indicate that house duties make women

often to opt for a part-time work, a full-time job that does not require much effort and energy (Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 517). Therefore, female workers are often regarded by employers as less committed and less professional (Epstein et al., 1999 in Hardill and Watson, 2000, pp. 21-22). In accordance with Polachek's theory, women usually select occupations that do not carry severe penalties for short-term breaks that women take to care for their children and homes (England, 1982, p. 363). Furthermore, the employers often link female employees with higher indirect costs, which the most known is maternity leave. It is said that women are more likely to be late or absent at work than men, possibly due to home responsibilities (Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 57). The women are often associated with high level of turnover as they often quit their jobs after childbirth or in some cases after getting married (Anker, 1997, p. 317). Thus, according to Becker (1971 in Anker, 1997, p. 320), employers are rational when they abstain to employ women in order to avoid higher indirect costs.

Despite of neo-classical theories' contribution to explaining occupational sex segregation, there are some issues when these theories are the only one considered. Evidences have indicated that women's participation in employment has risen in Britain since 70s (Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 60). Labour market statistics (November 2010, p. 3) indicates that recent women employment rate stands at 65. 7% compare with just 56 % in 1971(Office for National Statistics 2009). An introduction of house appliances such as washing machines, cookers and microwaves has decreased significantly the time required to perform certain house activities in recent decades (Bowden and Offer, 1994, p. 728). Moreover, recently more women are force to work

to sustain themselves and their children due to a higher proportion of single parent households (Buvini, 1995 in Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 60). Census (2001) statistics have indicated that 90.5 % of households in England and Wales are headed by single women. These changes indicate that women have increased their work experience and in this way they have enhanced their human capital (Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 60). Considering the human capital theory these changes should enable women to enter occupations. However, women still face barriers to enter those occupations (Anker, 1997, p. 320), and the reason for that is not explained by the economic theories.

In accordance with economic theories, lower level of income achieved by women is fair as their level of human capital is much lower than that of the male workers. However, pay inequality between men and women is much higher than would be anticipated based on human capital reasoning (Treiman and Hartmann, 1981; World Bank, 1994 in Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 517). Furthermore, women's pay inequality is not only bounded to women with children. There are many professions which also badly reward single women. Although rational choice theory explains that there is a belief that all women will have children, recent researches have highlighted that more and more women are fully dedicated to their careers and decide to have no children on their own (Browne 2000; Franks 1999 in Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 519). When looking at indirect costs, they are perceived to be higher for female employees than their male counterparts; however, the evidence has shown that the rate of absenteeism and turnover is very similar for both genders (Anker, 1997, p. 319). The argument of human capital theory that women traditionally choose professions that are not costly when suspended

for a short-time (Watts and Rich, 1993, p. 60) is disapproved by England (1982). The evidence England has put forward indicates that professions with a high rate of women do not necessary carry lower penalties for short-term breaks from work than professions with lower rate of women (England, 1982, p. 365).

The neo-classical theories arguments applied alone offers just limited explanation for occupational sex segregation. Kirton and Greene (2005, p. 62) have put forward questions that the economic theories do not explain; ' why do certain social groups on average come to the labour market with lower levels of education and in what are seen as ' less relevant' subjects? Why is housework and childcare and elder care almost always the sole responsibility of women?'

The gender theory concept of patriarchy should fill the gaps that exist in economic theories discussed earlier. According to Hartmann (1976, p. 152-3), occupational gender segregation is a result of the phenomenon of patriarchy. This concept is concerned with a social situation where women are in subordinate position and are dominated, exploited, and undermined by powerful men (Bender L., 1988, pp. 5-6); thus it seems to be ' intended as an explanation of vertical segregation' (Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 521).

Women around the world are generally perceived to be housewives, and men to be main breadwinners in households. This might explain why women are solely accountable for most of the house activities and childcare (Anker, 1997, p. 324). Due to patriarchal system, women joining labour market are affected by their free house work; their incomes are perceived as extra

money added to a primary incomes of their husbands. This in turn stimulates <https://assignbuster.com/occupational-gender-segregation-in-british-labour-market-sociology-essay/>

the gender pay gap that exists in the United Kingdom (Kirton and Greene, 2005, p. 64). The fact that women occupy subordinate positions and perform house duties solely might explain why women enter the labour market with lower levels of education and are more likely to obtain qualifications that are less relevant to the labour market as it is believed that women have a lower desire for qualifications that are appropriate to labour market (Anker, 1997, p. 324).

Although the patriarchy theory is indented to comprehend the concept of occupational sex segregation, many scholars have highlighted some limitations when considered separately. Walby's claim that 'men have usually been successful in excluding women from the better work' (1986, p. 248) is disputed by evidences seen in the British society where many women work in better professions, and have better working and living conditions than many of their male counterparts (Blackburn et al. 2002, p. 521) The patriarchy theory reasoning is also looking bad when we take into consideration recent developments in the labour market, where shrinking of the male trades (such as mining, steel and docking) and the expansion of the service sector has favoured women more than men. The evidences have shown that in some parts of UK women account for most then 50% of the entire workforce (Browne, 2000 in Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 521).

The preference theory is a connection between gender theory of patriarchy and Goldberg's (1973, 1979, and 1993) biological theories. Hakim (1996 in Crompton and Harris, 998b, p. 144) argues that men are more ruthless and ambitious than women due to higher testosterone levels in their organism.

She presents the evidence which indicates that male labour market
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dominance is strongly supported by both genders. Furthermore, Hakim believes that women are not the same and they differ 'in relation to their family and work commitments' (Blackburn et al., 2002, p. 523). Their choices between job and home are not limited by any significant restrictions (Hakim in McRae, 2003, p. 318) but are based purely on their preferences. Hakim (2002, p. 434) assigns women to three groups. The first group involves the work-centred females who are highly committed to their jobs. The second group are the home-centred women. Women belonging to this group are devoted to their families and prefer to stay at home (Blackburn, 2001, p. 523). The third group includes the 'adaptive' women who juggle job and home or women who have no idea where their careers are going (McRae, 2003, p. 318). Hakim (1996, p. 211) suggests that 'male solidarity wins because women dither, because they are swayed by the dominant male voice and also because women are divided in their preferences and interests'. Thus, the interplay between women's differences, an argument of patriarchy theory of male domination and women's diverse priorities explains the women's employment position in Britain (Crompton and Harris, 1998b, p. 144). Hakim (2002, p. 435-7) suggests that only small proportion of women are fully concentrated on their careers or families. Large majority of females integrate family and work without fully committing to either (Hakim, 2002, p. 434). This view is supported by evidences that have shown that only 10% of first-time mothers remain in full-time work where 90% of mothers mix periods of full-time and part-time work or leave the labour market permanently (McRae, 2003, p. 322-3)

However, preference theory also has some deficiencies. Blackburn et al. (2002, p. 525) disagree with an argument that women's choices are not limited by any constraints. They point out that concerns such as possible income and childcare costs have a great impact on women choices that might be far from their preferred choice. McRae (2003, p. 333) suggests that the evidences introduced in her paper shows that women are not as diverse as suggested by Hakim in their choices in regards to their work and family lifestyle but they are different in their capacities to 'act on those preferences'. These evidences are clashing with an assumption of preference theory about female heterogeneity.

This concluding part of the essay offer some general conclusions about the applicability of the theories analysed in this paper for the reason behind the occupational gender segregation in Britain presented by statistical data. Discussed in the paper theories of neo-classical, patriarchy and preference have been very useful to understanding why women experience disadvantage in the labour market. They have offered different and sometimes contrasting arguments. Thus, the main argument of human capital theory is that women are disadvantaged due to their lower level of education and work experience which is a 'product' of inequality in a schooling system and sole responsibilities for home and children. Contrary to human capital theory, preference theory has argued that women choose to be committed or uncommitted to their work careers and there are no major constrains to prohibit women from joining the labour market. On the other hand the concept of patriarchy has highlighted that male domination over women in societies is the main reason behind occupational gender

segregation. Despite their great value to comprehend the cause of occupational segregation by sex, all of these theories are flawed to same degree and neither should be considered separately. To fully understand the reason for women disadvantage in the employment relationship, there is a need to bring neo-classical, patriarchy and preference theories together.