

Gender inequality in contemporary society



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Describe And Discuss Gender Inequality In Contemporary Society With Reference To The Labour Market.

Sex is what distinguishes men and women biologically, namely it describes the physical qualities which derive from variations in chromosomes, hormones and genitalia. Gender refers to a set of culturally defined characteristics which determine society's view of people as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Sociologists have long debated over the causes of unfair sexual divisions of labour. Some have forwarded biological explanations, whereas others hold responsible the socialisation of gender roles. In this essay I will look at how the nineteenth century socialisation of gender roles is believed to have affected women's position in the labour market. I will then consider the increasing feminisation of the labour market and seek to explain the persistent inequalities between men and women.

Up until the twentieth century, women were largely excluded from the labour market, partly because of the social construction of separate 'male' and 'female' spheres. Feminist Ann Oakley believes that the modern role of 'housewife' emerged in the early stages of industrialisation (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 108). Due to the norms and values of the time, supported by the functionalist Parsons, it was expected of the man to provide for the family, whilst the woman would tend to the home. Oakley claims that this concept of different 'duties' has persevered and has since had a negative influence on the development of women's position within the labour market (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 108).

However, since the mid-twentieth century there has been an increasing feminisation of the workforce. According to Ulrich Beck, women are 'setting

the pace for change' (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 647). In Beck's view, we are moving into ' the second modernity' (as against post modernity). He argues that in our society, characterised by risk and uncertainty, women have realised the importance of self-reliance and have sought to widen their participation in the labour market and as a result have changed the social discourse. This has been made possible by a number of factors. The increased possibilities of an education, the development of domestic appliances, the growing tendency for smaller families, the Feminist Movement of the 1970s, the steady expansion of the service industry, the increase in living costs and the consequent need for two incomes are all factors which have generated a shift in traditional family patterns and significantly changed the gender division of labour. A UK Labour Force survey conducted in 2005 suggests that the rates of employment for women of working age have risen to 70% in 2004 compared to 56% in 1971. In contrast, employment rates for men have declined from 92% to 79% (Giddens, 2006, 755).

Despite women's increased participation in the labour market, barriers to equality remain. Although 75% of women of working age are in employment in the UK, it has been shown that in high-earning, high-status professions they are severely under-represented (www.employment-studies.co.uk). 2005 demonstrated, in terms of vertical segregation, that 83% of chief executives, 71% of sales managers and 70% of management consultants were men, whilst 96% of dinner ladies, 95% of receptionists and 76% of cleaners were women (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 124). Different reasons are held responsible for such disproportion. One argument is that jobs are

highly gendered, with a tendency for high-status, high-paid jobs to be male-dominated because they have traditionally been perceived as ‘masculine’. Radical feminist Sylvia Walby claims women are subjugated by patriarchal values that discriminate and confine them to specific areas of work (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 113).

Not only are women under-represented at the highest levels of the occupational structure, they have likewise not achieved equality of pay, despite liberal feminist’s success in campaigning for equal pay legislation. The wage gap was once thought to be narrowing, however, new figures suggest that the pay divide is still a matter of concern today. According to the Office for National Statistics, the pay gap between men and women in full-time work has increased to 17. 1% since 2007 (The Guardian, 15/11/08). The median full-time gross weekly earnings per week for men in 2007 were £498, whilst for women they stood at £395. In 2008 they stand at £521 for men and £412 for women. It has been calculated that over a lifetime, women working full-time will earn an average of £369. 000 less than their male colleagues. This result, according to the annual survey conducted by the World Economic Forum, places Britain 81st in the world ranking in terms of equal pay for men and women in similar jobs (The Guardian, 15/11/08).

Part of the reason would appear to be because of horizontal segregation. Much of the female workforce is clustered into a range of semi-skilled, low-status and poorly paid occupations. Across the occupational structure, men predominate in such lines of work as manufacturing, construction, IT and business industries. Conversely, women are overwhelmingly represented in health and social work, teaching, catering and cleaning

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(Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 123). Feminists, therefore, see this as a reflection of the 'two spheres' ideology. 2005 demonstrated, in terms of horizontal segregation, that 79% of social workers and 73% of teachers were women. In the same year, 90% of the construction industry and 76% of people working in transport were men (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 123). In addition, the fact that many women work in the part-time sector can be part of the reason for the poor levels of pay they are subject to.

Occupational segregation has been used to explain such high concentration of women in part-time work. Despite the disadvantages it involves, part-time work seems to remain a popular choice for women. In 2004, 5.2 million women in the UK were in part-time employment, compared to 1.2 million men (Giddens, 2006, 757). Social forces such as limited childcare assistance and gender discrimination have also been held responsible for such large numbers of women in part-time work. Many women seeking full-time employment often face unjust hurdles which men do not encounter: a Fawcett Society study (the leading liberal feminist organisation) reveals that 52% of employers consider the chances of a new member of staff becoming pregnant before employing them (www.fawcettsociety.org.uk). However, whilst it is possible that this may discourage many women who intend to have children from looking for full-time work, this is not on its own sufficient reason to explain such a heavy influx in the part-time sector.

Catherine Hakim's 'preference theory' suggests that women's position in the labour market depends entirely on the rational choices they make (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 125). Hakim identifies two types of women: those who commit themselves to full-time careers or those who prioritise

their domestic responsibilities. According to Hakim, many women have different work orientations than men, leading them to choose part-time occupations which enable them to balance their domestic and professional lives. Rosemary Crompton and Fiona Harris agree that women's position in the labour market is influenced by their decisions. They argue, however, that the choices women make are not always rational, but are the results of the practical challenges and cultural norms they may face. Crompton and Harris believe that women often start a career committed to the idea of full-time employment and the family sphere in equal measure, but in later life might have to compromise one or the other for a variety of reasons. There is, therefore, an important debate between feminists.

Additional theories have been advocated by sociologists to explain women's continued limitations in the job-market. Talcott Parsons' functionalist 'human capital theory' suggests that women's natural role is that of childcare. The theory implies that women are likely not to commit to a career or gaining qualifications, preferring to dedicate themselves to their children (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 125). According to Parsons, this lack of commitment or skills renders women less valuable to the employer, and is ultimately the reason for women's disadvantaged position in the labour market. However, critics of the theory point out that it does not account for the large number of women who dedicate themselves to a career and still end up in lower-paid, lower-status jobs (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 125).

Barron and Norris's 'dual labour market theory' promotes the idea of two labour markets: a primary sector in which professionals and skilled workers belong, characterised by highly paid and secure jobs, and a secondary

sector, consisting in lowly paid, less secure jobs mainly occupied by unskilled labourers. According to Barron and Norris, women are more likely than men to work in this sector because they are less interested in wages or status, a view which echoes that of Hakim. Transition from the secondary to the primary sector is rare, ending in confinement within a range of low-paid jobs for one's entire working life. The theory is criticised by feminists for not being able to explain why skilled women often earn less than men in similar work, or why they get promoted less often than men in the same job (Haralambos&Holborn, 2008, 126).

In the past century, women have made a revolutionary ascent in the labour market even if many work in the part-time sector. However, the rate of improvement seems to have stalled rather than grown. Despite legislation such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), vast inequalities remain in Britain, especially in terms of pay and status. It might well be that more radical reforms need to be made. In Norway, for example, hundreds of women have benefitted from a new act, passed in 2003, which stipulates that companies must increase the number of women on their boards to 44.%. This now means that Norway heads the league table for gender equality, 12 places above the UK (The Guardian, 17/11/08). This suggests that post-feminists are mistaken in believing there is no more for feminists to do. A third wave of feminism, as suggested by Katherine Rake, or 'new feminism', to use Natasha Walter's term, may be precisely what is needed.

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