

CESR Research Day: Gendered Employment A Report

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The Centre for Employment Studies Research held a second one-day research seminar on 15 October 2008. This time the focus was on the gendered workplace and the audience was drawn from academics and practitioners based in the South West of England. Six papers were presented, addressing part time women managers, pregnant women workers, women entrepreneurs, sex workers, women in construction and flexible working. This report summarises the findings of each paper and draws out emergent themes.

Jenny Tomlinson from Leeds University presented a paper on female part time managers, co-authored with Sue Durbin from UWE, and entitled 'Female part time managers: Work life balance, aspirations and career mobility'. She argued that very little research had been done on this group, which represents a very small proportion of all part time female labour. Drawing on data from the public and private sectors, career mobility, aspirations and work-life balance were analysed, as were the ways in which organisations and key individuals in organisations helped or hindered women's careers.

The findings revealed that part time status had a profound effect on women managers who opted to work this way. Their 'choice' was often thrust upon them by masculinised work cultures which were not sympathetic to the changing needs of women when forming families. Most respondents were positive towards their employers with regard to part time working arrangements but found that their career aspirations were impaired by their part time status. This was a devalued status. Their careers were on hold or were going backwards. Senior managers who held the key to future career development often stereotyped them as 'less committed' to the organisation and thus less productive. Nor was there any comfort to be drawn from the external labour market as part time jobs for managers simply did not exist. In that sense, the respondents felt tied to their organisations and no longer able to pursue a 'boundaryless career'.

With regard to working patterns, these women often worked significant amounts of unpaid overtime, reflecting the fact that part time hours did not mean a smaller workload. On top of that many had to commute long distances because they could not find an equivalent part time job which was more geographically suitable.

The evidence suggests that working as a part time manager, while trying to pursue a meaningful career path, remains a challenge for women in the UK. Organisations are still not prepared to shift away from the full time pattern of working of male managers. Until it becomes acceptable to employers that managers can be effective and work reduced hours, it will remain the case that part time women manager will have to make all the effort in ensuring that non-standard work hours deliver.

Caroline Gatrell from Lancaster University presented the second paper entitled 'Aliens at work?' in which she addressed the issues of managing pregnancy and employment. She found that the labour of pregnancy is excluded from definitions of work, leaving women to 'manage' their pregnancy in order not to disrupt the smooth flow of work. Employers assumed that pregnancy was a 'natural' activity and therefore to be regarded as a non-work activity. There was a dichotomy between the 'good mother' and the 'good worker'.

A complex and demanding array of standards and goals was set for pregnant women but they were expected to meet these from their own resources, regulating their behaviour to fit in and being judged by others against these standards and goals. Women were often having to hide, or at least minimise, the effect of their pregnancy in the workplace, where the pregnant body was a 'taboo'. They were expected to carry on as if nothing had changed and that their bodies were unaffected; more crucially, their pregnancy must not disrupt the workplace.

As with part time workers, there was often the assumption that pregnant women were unreliable and thus they were under great pressure to conceal such things as pregnancy-related illness. Women felt that they were being judged as less than capable of fulfilling all their tasks, even when they attended work regularly and reliably and completed all their allotted work. Pregnancy threatened the conventional social order of work and is regarded as a condition to be feared by employers. On the basis of such fears, pregnant women are treated as 'alien'. Ultimately women were expected to disassociate themselves from pregnancy in order to continue with effective employment.

Caroline also found that discussions of pregnancy and the maternal body are notable by their absence from management scholarship. More research was needed in this vital aspect of women's working lives.

In the third paper of the morning, Susan Marlow from De Montfort University, presented her research on women entrepreneurs. She found that they have been routinely excluded from the literature, despite the fact that they represent 26 per cent of all self-employed people in the UK and that narratives and models are constructed as masculine. In common with the two previous papers, women were presented as problematic, while the literature had, typically, been gender 'blind' – written by men, about men and for men. Although there was growing interest in this kind of work done by women, gender had only recently emerged as an analytical framework.

Entrepreneurship for women was often a solution to work-life balance, to fragmented careers and a response to economic deprivation. However, they are still not taken seriously as entrepreneurs, being expected to adopt an honorary male status while being excluded from the male 'club'. Women's activities were often home-based, concentrated in already-feminised occupations. There were fewer of them, their enterprises were smaller and women were often represented as 'underperforming' and in need of 'corrective assistance' in order to fulfil their potential. It is harder for women to separate domestic workload from entrepreneurial skill development. They suffer from less accessible capital, being regarded as financially naïve.

Nevertheless, women often saw entrepreneurship as a solution to economic deprivation, the need to achieve work life balance and to address the fragmentation of career caused by motherhood. They needed to be taken seriously and not treated as proto-men. This would

only serve to continue stigmatizing women's business activities, rather than assisting them in achieving success in their entrepreneurial ventures.

In the afternoon, Gregor Gall, from the University of Hertfordshire, gave a wide-ranging discourse of the sex worker and the problems of collective organisation. His paper explored a variety of methodological issues: access, because most sex workers are not visible for the purpose of being contacted; most researchers are male which may distort the investigation; the lack of formal organisations to conduct research in. Evidence shows that the workers themselves struggled to have 'sex work' recognised as legitimate work. Sex work now includes exotic dancers, strippers, porn models and sex chatline workers.

In the 1970s and 1980s many of the early sex worker organisations took the form of self-help groups looking at prostitutes' rights and pressing for change. The focus has now moved to issues within the workplace. Therefore, sex worker unionisation now took the form of membership based organisations, because current sex worker organisations needed to constitute themselves as labour unions. Sex worker unionisation has moved from one of focusing on civil rights and human rights in law to one of economic, labour and workers' rights.

The paper explored contemporary development in a country by country survey, including evidence from Australia, Britain, Canada, USA, Germany and the Netherlands. Australia shows a picture that two groups emerged, one of which was for prostitutes. The other emerged in 2002 representing Striptease Artists and was formed to represent lap dancers and strippers. The Scarlet Alliance, which is composed of the Australian Sex worker's association and is frequently although wrongly identified as a Trade Union and shows no sign of developing into a labour union.

In Great Britain evidence shows that there have been many different attempts to set up embryonic labour unions; seven lap dancing clubs are unionised and have been organised by the GMB union. These are often small clubs with a vested interest in letting the unions in because lap dancing clubs desire a code of conduct agreed with their dancers through a union. This helps the organisation gain the necessary local authority entertainment licenses. In Canada there is some evidence of sex worker rights groups but these are often organised province by province or city by city. In Germany there is an improved legal position in major cities with the offer of registration. The sex worker continues to be self-employed and most prefer to remain anonymous and resist registration. The workers generally reject the longer-term benefits of state pensions, unemployment benefits offered by registration. The Netherlands have the Red Thread prostitutes' rights group representing 20,000 prostitutes. Red Thread operates as a pressure group and provides help on union issues. Recently the authorities in Amsterdam closed brothels and windows in order to strike at organised crime which has had the impact of driving prostitutes into illegal establishments in order to gain work.

In the United States there have been many and different attempts at unionisation for Dancers. Porn actors and actresses have also unsuccessfully attempted to unionise. Much of the activity was surrounded by bitter disputes between male workers such as front desk and cleaning staff in clubs. Unionisation and pressure groups continue to work for recognition but not much headway has been made.

The paper concluded that despite different national employment laws, economic, political and social conditions for creating sex worker labour unions, remains uniformly difficult and activists comprise a small amount of the total. Sex worker unionism remains in fragile forms. In addition, sex worker union organisations were unable to construct wider effective alliances with feminists and trade unionists to overturn the weaknesses to create widespread and active membership.

Linda Clarke, from the University of Westminster, explored a different theme. She investigated the inadequacy of the apprenticeship systems in the construction industry using an historical overview. The paper looked at the narrowness of the notion of 'skill' and the effect for today's labour processes in the building trades. A view of the gender divisions in 'male trades' and that the work was male because in the large part the historical control over apprenticeships in traditional trades.

The paper examines the extent to which apprenticeship has continued to act as a means of exclusion and 'skilled work' to remain a male preserve.

Questions, such as what is a skill and the role of apprenticeships, were explored. It was argued that skill is a masculine construct from which a number of categories emerge. These have been identified as 'Ideological', which has been imposed on certain types of work by virtue of the sex and power of the workers who performed it. Another category is 'creative craftsmen' a worker with manual skill and dexterity required of a finished product and assumes a creative gift. The final category is a combination of the knowledge and processes that need practical dexterity. The difficulties of the option of skill and the virtual invisibility of women contributes to the myth that the 'manual skill and dexterity' required for the work itself is inextricably bound up with notions of masculinity.

A key finding in the paper was that historically, women have been continuously excluded under capitalist wage relations. Without statutory regulations women became increasingly excluded from apprenticeships in the nineteenth century. Census material from 1841 and 1861 shows the reduction of women in a variety of building trades. Virtually all 'male' trades became more male dominated. This included carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, glaziers, painters, paviours and masons. At the same time female trades became more heavily female, including glovers, dressmakers and ribbon makers. The proportion of women recorded in carpentry and joiners was 0.3 per cent in 1841 but only 0.1 per cent in subsequent years to 1881. Furthermore, each craft system was based on preserving male privileges governing a particular trade.

Apprenticeships in the 19th Century were defined as male, moving from lad to man, and seen as a transitional period which meant more than just learning a skill. Apprenticeship was identified with defining the difference between masculinity and femininity and the ways in which this led to the exclusion of women from the system. Unions and Friendly Societies put limitations on the numbers and applications to the trades. By the 1840s the family wage was firmly entrenched and openly espoused.

The First World War threatened this exclusivity. Although a severe labour shortage was very evident there was still a reluctance to take women on and trade unions were highly resistant. The threat of dilution played a large part of trade union resistance to the idea of women working in the building industry. Therefore women remained in subordinate positions and could not earn a fully skilled wage.

The paper also explored the opposition encountered by women. This came in the form of lower pay, in some instances as low as a third of male wages. It was the skilled unions who presented the most opposition but there was a significant increase in the number of women joining general trade unions which went from 24,000 in 1914 to 216,000 in 1918. The building trade unions presented a different picture; here there was a relatively small increase from 1,000 women members in 1914 to 5,000 in 1918.

A similar story emerged during the Second World War. Again 'dilutees' were used even to the extent that the older women workers who may have gained experience during the First World War were rejected, preferring young inexperienced women. The discrepancy of earnings was still evident. In 1944, when a looming housing crisis increased the need for people in the construction industry, the Women in the Building Industry Conference overwhelmingly voted that women gain the necessary training. The call was ignored and the Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, demanded that all men up to the age of 60 with experience in the construction industry must register for construction work but refused to recruit any women into the skilled trades, despite their recent war experience.

Change was evident with the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Government intensive training courses provided a revolutionary route for women. This is the first time that women could gain craft skills through Training Opportunities Programme (TOPS) using the attainment of City and Guilds qualifications without an apprenticeship. The actual numbers were small. In some cases, local authorities and Direct Labour Organisations (DLOs) linked to run training schemes for building workers.

The challenge to entrenched segregation was short lived. In the 1980s legislation curbed local authorities' ability to act autonomously and the effect on DLOs was devastating. Women suffered most from the collapse of DLOs. The legacy survived in a reduced form and many DLOs are still active in addressing the low numbers of young women entering or applying for apprenticeships. Women are particularly found in painting and decorating.

Currently there is a concentration of FE college training for males and females and employers are reluctant to provide placement and therefore trainees are not gaining the necessary work based experience. In addition, work place processes are changing rapidly with greater use of technology and this has provided a break with the nineteenth and twentieth century where the understanding of a skill was provided by the symbolism of the ownership of a bag of tools. Increasingly therefore, the construction process is coming to rely on 'qualified' labour with qualifications acquired through formal schemes. As a result, the possibility is opened up for women to be included but this means that the industry needs good recruitment and selection practices and that good employment and working conditions are in place in order to provide a means of entry to the industry.

The transformation of gender relations was presented by Suzan Lewis, from Middlesex University, who addressed the issues of work-life balance through an organisation which has predominately female employees. Her paper explored some ostensibly gender-neutral working practices in a cosmetics company that has developed flexible working policies. She discussed the assumptions on which they are based and their gendered consequences. Central to her argument is the question of whether policies related to flexibility can change or challenge the male model of work and any associated working practices.

Gendered organisations such as the cosmetic industry are often based on an ideology of 'separate spheres' and these perspectives are often embedded in workplace structures. What emerges is that the concept of 'job' has become implicitly gendered.

The objectives of the research were to explore workplace culture, working practices, assumptions or unwritten rules that may contribute to, or undermine, gender equality and opportunities to harmonise work and personal life for both men and women. The research was conducted in a large company in France where the workforce was predominately women, with male workers dominant in senior management positions. The company is regarded as family friendly, supporting flexibility and a great place for women scientists to work.

The research involved 18 interviews, 12 women and 6 men, split between research and development, marketing and human resources. The interviews focused on working practices, notions of success, working relationships and what it is like to work there. The analysis was provided by a dual agenda lens which addressed the dominant working practices and the assumptions underpinning them. What impact did these have on women and men's careers and their workplace effectiveness?

Her paper is part of an on-going study which asks questions related to the reality of work life balance and what difference these policies make in practice. Her findings show that the policies are often limited for a number of reasons. In general, these are policies that are not always well communicated and even when awareness is raised the take-up may rely on line managers. The company itself sees the ideal workers as those who can work continuously and for long hours. Therefore predominantly masculine ways of working still tend to be valued and rewarded more than feminine working styles. The images of the 'ideal' worker predominated and this can provide a disadvantage to women because they generally take up part-time and flexible working.

Flexibility was achieved by the introduction of a four day week. The opportunity to work a shorter week was received positively by the female workforce. They saw it as a luxury. Other factors which emerged from the research was that women were being paid often 20 per cent less but the line managers often stated that they would still be expected to do the same job. Many of the women were completing tasks started in the workplace at home. The general view was that the women felt they were much more organised and had planned their work carefully. One respondent said that she had time to spend with her family and that made her happier in the workplace. She was happy at home and happy at work. In addition, the research showed that for many women it was a case of 'golden handcuffs', staying because of the flexibility offered by the organisation. An interesting fact also emerged was that men do not take up the offer of flexibility.

The key findings from the research emerged through a series of themes. These were work and family, working hours and flexibility and career development. The theme of work and family stressed that in terms of working practices, the workload was not reduced and the higher up the organisation hierarchy women went, the longer the hours of work that were involved. A series of assumptions emerged which focused on the ideal worker and availability and visibility were important. The four-day week was only an accommodation and that five days *appeared* to be more efficient. The consequences for many women, then, are that they limit their aspirations, and assumptions about visibility can obscure greater efficiency.

The research also revealed that career development and promotional opportunities were limited for the women employees. When women were engaged in new product development and through their work new products had been launched, they felt that their efforts had not been fully rewarded. It also emerged that when women take up flexible working practices, it was assumed by management that they did not require or need development opportunities. Promotional opportunities were closely tied to the management's vision of the need for visibility and networking. It seems that this factor was more important than good communication and support skills. Another factor was that women generally did not put themselves forward for promotion and failed to market themselves very well.

Suzan's conclusions show that generally it was a good place to work but that in supporting mothers, flexibility reinforced gendered assumptions and experiences. Having some degree of personal choice in terms of flexible working continues to sustain gendered processes. Without interventions that challenge these assumptions they will continue to be present.

Conclusion

All of the contributors engaged with the gendered workplace, giving wide-ranging evidence, which was often complex and difficult to thematise and summarise. Nevertheless, four common themes emerged from the day.

First, the male model of work was a common presupposition and in each case where women were seen as not conforming to the model, their status in the workplace was problematised. In some cases, women were seen as unreliable; in others the feminisation of the work was seen as more important than women's abilities.

A second important point that emerged strongly from the research was that women could be excluded from normal organisational life if they did not conform to various, largely masculine, norms. Some examples of exclusion were the lack of promotion for part time women managers, lack of access to skills training and the literal exclusion of sex workers whose work was regarded as informal.

Third, women, but not usually men, had to deal with shifting boundaries between work and non-work in order to maintain any semblance of career. This meant that they often worked harder in shorter working time, took work home and had to plan their work, in order to achieve work-life balance.

Finally, the legislative framework is an important factor surrounding the gendered workplace. Legislation on its own, however, is not sufficient to tackle the problems facing women at work. Unless we are able to change attitudes to women in the workplace, the problems in today's organisations will not be solved and gender equality will not be achieved.