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Key Issues in Women's Work

Female heterogeneity and the polarisation of women's employment

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Conclusions: female heterogeneity and workforce polarisation

What has been demonstrated by this review of the theory and empirical evidence on women's employment? First, that a great many true lies are told about women's employment in Britain and in industrial society generally. Second, that the most effective mechanism for subordinating women is neither exclusion from the workforce nor segregation within it but the ideology of the sexual division of labour in the home and the ideology of sexual differences. Prisons of the mind are always more effective than prisons of the body. Third, because women are so eager to raise their own children personally, it is women who are the main propagators and the main beneficiaries of the ideology of the sexual division of labour, both by precept and example. How many mothers tell their daughters that they should never marry, never have children, because they will live to regret it bitterly? And how many daughters, faced with a daily demonstration of what marriage and motherhood does to women, recoil in horror to say No! Never! Not I! and rush to enrol at the nearest college to enable themselves to be self-supporting? Fourth, the heterogeneity of women's preferences for homemaking or employment careers is pronounced and is unlikely to disappear. Fifth, this heterogeneity is the source of the polarisation in women's labour market behaviour. Sixth, sex differentials will ultimately disappear at the top of the occupational structure, where women conform increasingly to the male employment profile of continuous full-time employment, but there will be continuing sex differentials in attitudes and behaviour within the secondary labour market and within couples with a (modern) homemaker wife. Seventh, paradoxically, it is in the group at the top of the occupational hierarchy that the potential for sex discrimination remains the greatest, remaining hidden due to the

lack of detailed information on professional and managerial women in national datasets, and due to the focus on the manufacturing sector in industrial relations research (Rubery and Fagan, 1995b). Eighth, there is evidence to support all three main theories explaining women's subordinate social and economic position, so that they must be seen as complementary rather than competing.

True lies

A great many true lies are told about women. It is said that women's work is invisible in industrial society because women are family helpers, do home-based work, work in the informal economy, do voluntary work. All of this is true. The lie is the unstated implication that women are distinctive in engaging in these activities; that their important contribution is hidden from sight by not being recorded in national statistical surveys; that the activities are devalued by being excluded from the definition of economic activity. All of these conclusions are untrue. Men also do a great variety of informal and unrecorded work, sometimes displaying the same level and pattern of activity as women (as in voluntary work), sometimes doing more than women (in the case of home-based work), sometimes less than women (as illustrated by family helpers). Men and women are equally likely to have caring responsibilities for elderly or infirm people, although women devote more time to childcare. Domestic work is done by men as well as women, although women do more of it. However men do many more hours of market work than women, *in addition to* all their other informal work activities. The most recent time use surveys indicate that men do more work than women, using the term in its wide sense of activities producing goods and services. Employment statistics do not give the complete picture, but they do not give an entirely misleading picture of the balance of work between men and women. This may be part of the explanation for women living longer than men, despite the fact that women wear themselves out in childbirth. In practice, men still work more and longer hours and wear out faster. The most telling inequality in society today is the sex difference in average life expectancy, which is increasing over time. Life expectancy at birth has almost doubled in Britain, from 40 years for men and 42 years for women in 1838-54, to 74 years for men and 79 years for women in 1990-95. The sex difference in average life expectancy

has more than doubled, from just under 2 years to 5.4 years in favour of women in Britain, with even higher sex differences in France (8 years), the USA (7 years), Germany, Sweden and Japan (6 years). The EU average is 7 years and the sex difference showed no signs of falling in the post-War decades (European Commission, 1995b: 36). The sex differential in life expectancy is almost as large as the social class differential, yet only the latter is treated as inegalitarian. Women in developing countries have heavy workloads; most women in industrial society do not. Case studies that focus on the minority of women with young children at home have given a misleading picture of the average housewife's workload. They also show that many full-time housewives make their own misery: their long hours include a substantial volume of unnecessary make-work. As an occupation, the job of housewife is hard to beat: short hours, reasonable security of tenure and average rewards in terms of status and income. It may be boring, but so are most jobs. The price is dependence on another person, but most housewives value their autonomy in comparison with the subservience of waged labour in the market economy. The choice is finely balanced.

Women do not make completely free choices, it is argued, hence are forced into low-paid part-time jobs or forced into marriage instead of the financial independence of wage labour. This is true in part. Again the implication is that men have real choices and more choices to make. This is the lie. Most men have little choice in how to spend their lives, being forced into the full-time continuous life-long employment career whether they like it or not, whether they take on the breadwinner role for a wife and children or not. Public disapproval for the househusband role is reflected in a status score so low that it scrapes the very bottom of the prestige scale, whereas the housewife's score is right in the middle of the scale. Women can choose to drop out of the labour market and become homemakers, full-time or in combination with a part-time job, and retain a social status not very different from the status of typically-female occupations in the market economy – such as secretary. No such choice is open to men. It is indicative that even career women refuse to marry and maintain househusbands: women who earn enough to be breadwinners themselves, who can afford to keep a non-earning or low-paid husband, and who constantly bemoan the fact that most men have the support services of a wife at home whereas they do not, even these women refuse to contemplate role

reversal and become economic supporters rather than joint earners in a dual-career household. The closest approximation to this is the young woman who works as the main breadwinner while her husband goes through law, medical or business school. However she is investing in her husband's career with a view to being financially dependent for the rest of her life after he qualifies, so her role is the same as that of all wives contributing to two-person careers, whatever the nature of the career (Papanek, 1973; Finch, 1983). Goldberg is right to underline this *joint* refusal of men and women to contemplate complete role reversal at home as telling us something important about relations between the sexes (1993: 152, 192).

Sample selection bias provides one of the most fruitful sources of true lies. Find an unrepresentative minority group that demonstrates your point, study it in detail and broadcast the results as if they were relevant to women generally, rather than the particular minority group in question. Interestingly, economists are far more likely to be aware of, and seek to correct for sample selection bias than are sociologists.

Sex and gender

Some doubt that the Western distinction between sex and gender is universally meaningful, theoretically and empirically; however all human societies recognise biological differences between men and women and the differentiation of masculine and feminine social roles seems to be universal, with or without the possibility of an intermediate position, temporary or permanent (Moore, 1994). The most powerful evidence of what it means to be male and female in everyday life comes not from social science research but from real life natural experiments (Hakim, 1987a: 109-110): the accounts of people who undergo sex changes. These are not 'ordinary' people; they already believe, strongly enough to persuade doctors to help, that their true personality lies on the other side, and requires a physiological sex change to match. Yet even they are shocked when they cross over to the other side. Men who change over to being women discover they have become second-class citizens, are ignored, kept waiting, are treated dismissively and belittled in a never-ending stream of small daily humiliations; they also find themselves not protesting as they would when they were men. Women who change over to being men are amazed to discover

they go out into the world charged with aggressive energy when they start taking the testosterone tablets, wanting to fuck everyone and fight everything. People who cross over to the other side *in real life* confirm the fluidity of the boundaries between male and female, in terms of sex and gender; they also reveal how dramatic the differences are, in terms of felt experience. These real-life cases also underline the fact that sex and gender almost invariably go together in real life, even if it requires physiological change to get the match right, so that there is little point in the artful distinction, for most people most of the time. These and other natural experiments (Stoller, 1975; Imperato-McGinley et al, 1979; Goldberg, 1993: 167-8) contrast interestingly with the mind-games that Western intellectuals like to play (Moore, 1994: 135-150).

Female heterogeneity

Ideas generally have a material base. But once created,, ideas have a life and vigour of their own, as illustrated by feminist ideology itself.

Patriarchal ideology promoted the idea of bourgeois domestic femininity which contradicted the reality of most working class women's lives, but provided an ideal for everyone to aspire to. Patriarchal ideology also developed the idea of the sexual division of labour in the family which gave responsibility for the home to the wife and mother while the husband and father was responsible for income-earning market work. Cross-national comparisons show there is no necessary connection between these ideas. The sexual division of labour in the home seems to be a universally attractive idea, unconnected with other ideas on sex-roles, the personalities and abilities of men and women. This suggests that the idea is accepted because it is demonstrably efficient and fruitful for most couples, as Becker argues. But the exact specification of the family division of labour is changing. By the 1990s in the Western world the *complete* division of labour, which encouraged wives to refrain altogether from employment outside the home, had been replaced by what we have called the *modern* family division of labour which allows the modern housewife to engage in employment that is subordinate to her domestic responsibilities, either part-time and/or part-year work or a job that is less demanding than her husband's. Across Europe, about one-third of men and women support the modern division of

labour as the ideal to aim for, with some variation between countries. In Britain, the modern sexual division of labour was accepted by at least half of all women by the 1990s. About half of women rejected the complete division of labour, but only a minority of women, about one-quarter, rejected the modern marriage career and differentiated sex roles, choosing instead to pursue male-style employment careers.

No-one doubts that the work orientations of the full-time housewife who stops work as soon as possible differ from the work orientations of the career woman who always works. It is much easier to overlook the fact that the motivations of the career woman and the secondary earner are also quite different. The career woman challenges the sexual division of labour and the sex-stereotyping of jobs that constrains her choice of occupation. In contrast, the secondary earner, even when working full-time, does not challenge the sexual division of labour and prefers to work in female-dominated occupations. Wage work is an *extension* of her homemaking role, not an *alternative* to it; she seeks additional family income whereas the career woman seeks personal development and personal fulfilment, competing on equal terms with men (Matthaei, 1982: 278-9).

The USA is distinctive in being the only Western society to exhibit a genuine long-term increase in female work rates (OECD, 1988: 129-30; Goldin, 1990: 119), so it might be expected to prove that female heterogeneity is a new phenomenon. On the contrary, Goldin's historical analysis of female employment reveals that female heterogeneity is of such long duration that it must be a permanent feature of the female population. It was the key (hidden) factor explaining the absence of any change in the pay gap for 15 years after equal pay was introduced in the USA, until the 1980s (Goldin, 1990: 28-35; see also Smith and Ward, 1984; O'Neil and Polachek, 1993). Female heterogeneity can no longer be ignored as it is the source of increasing polarisation within the female workforce, and has social and economic consequences that are not affected by sex discrimination legislation.

Polarisation within the workforce

As a group, women are heterogeneous, diverse and divided. They have genuine choices to make between different styles of life, and the

choice has widened since the contraceptive revolution made voluntary childlessness more accessible. Having made one choice early in life, some change their minds and turn off onto another road. A great many women 'hang loose' and refuse to choose fixed objectives, drifting with events and opportunities as they arise, pretending they can keep all their options open by refusing to close the door on any of them. This itself is an important choice, one men do not have, even if it is a poor one, leading to chaotically unplanned careers.

There has always been a minority of women who worked continuously throughout life: 15 per cent of women of working age in Britain in 1965 falling to less than 10 per cent by 1980. In the past, career women were usually those who never married. The modern employment career is far less socially restrictive and far more attractive. One-quarter of women working full-time are in professional and managerial jobs. Most of them will marry and many will have children, some dropping out of the workforce into full-time domesticity at this stage.

The homemaker career narrowly defined, which involves a permanent cessation of work early in adult life, on marriage or when children are born, is on the decline, replaced by the modern homemaker career, chosen by over half of women of working age in Britain. This group is the most dominant, in terms of numbers, though it is not the most vociferous. The attitudes, behaviour and interests of this group are in sharp contrast to the attitudes, behaviour and interests of the small minority of employment career women. These two contrasting groups are producing a polarisation of female employment in the 1990s and for the foreseeable future, in Britain, the rest of Europe, the USA and other industrial societies (Jenson, Hagen and Reddy, 1988; Rubery, 1988: 44, 96, 127, 145, 159, 278; Humphries and Rubery, 1992; Coleman and Pencavel, 1993).

Women in senior grades have invested in qualifications, work continuously and full-time, are as ambitious and determined as men, are concentrated in integrated or male-dominated occupations and have high earnings. Women who pursue the modern homemaker career are secondary earners, fail to utilise any qualifications they may have, choose jobs for their convenience factors and social interest rather than with a view to a long-term career, are concentrated in female occupations and have lower earnings. When the earnings dispersion increases, as it did in most countries in the 1980s, especially in Britain and the USA, the two groups polarise further. The current

focus on low earnings as an indicator of discrimination has distracted attention from the fact that career women confront far more discrimination than secondary workers because they compete as equals with men but are often treated as uncommitted secondary earners.

This diversity makes women's employment patterns more interesting, but also much harder to study. Studies of male employment produced only a small labour economics literature until women were pulled into the picture (Blau and Ferber, 1992). Averages and measures of central tendency hide more than they reveal in relation to working women, often concealing divergent trends, as illustrated by trends in occupational segregation. This diversity also means that no single theory can hope to cover all aspects of women's work, paid and unpaid.

The absence of choice for men was highlighted in the 1980s by their obligation to work even when unemployment stood at over 2 million for over fifteen years in Britain, guaranteeing that there were no jobs for at least 12 per cent of men for over a decade. The pressure on men to seek and obtain employment does not diminish even in these circumstances. Women may take refuge, willingly or otherwise, in the alternative identity and social role of housewife or mother, but this is not possible for men. Research shows that men are *less* likely to share domestic work when they are unemployed than when they have a job (Pahl, 1984: 269, 273, 276, 327; Brines, 1994). Despite the fact that they have more time available, domestic work poses more of a threat to their male identity than when they have the security of the main income-earning role in the household. Unemployment creates more social and psychological stress for men than women (Hakim, 1982b: 449).

Sex differentials

Even if sex discrimination were completely eliminated, sex differentials in employment would continue, partly due to female secondary earners but also due to the large group of drifters with no clear plans, whose labour market behaviour is closer to that of homemakers than to that of employment career women.

Occupational segregation and sex differentials in labour mobility, work experience, hours worked, earnings and many other employment characteristics will be maintained, or even increase, in the lower part of the occupational structure. In contrast, sex

differentials will shrink at the top of the occupational structure, in the professional, technical and managerial grades that are already the most integrated and becoming more so. These opposite trends are concealed in studies that rely on averages to compare working women and men. This poses problems for the statistical evidence used in legal proceedings, as noted in Chapter 7.

Explaining women's subordination

Goldberg's theory of patriarchy and male dominance states that, by nature, men are without malice towards women. Faced with a race, men run harder than women, and win more often. Hartmann's patriarchy theory states that, in addition, there is a streak of malice in men which seeks to ensure that the male *team* wins the race, that women are kept from the prize, by fair means or foul. Becker's rational choice theory states that many women voluntarily drop out of the race to make babies and play with them, which obviously improves men's chances of winning. However even childless women working full-time accept the sexual division of labour at home as efficient and give priority to their husband's careers, so children and their care are not an essential feature of the sexual division of labour at home, with its consequences for differential attainment in the labour market. There is evidence to support all three main theories explaining why women are less likely to achieve positions offering wealth, power and status. So they have to be treated as complementary rather than competing alternatives. This review allows us to integrate the theories by identifying the missing link between them.

Theories should be able to answer the infinite regression question 'But *why*?'. Goldberg explains male behaviour as driven by psychophysiological factors within the boundaries set by socialisation processes. Becker explains the sexual division of labour in the family in terms of the mutual benefits of increased efficiency and outputs. But neither Hartmann nor Walby provide any explanation for the male malice that is implicit in the idea of patriarchy. Why should men seek to put women down? Hartmann and Walby describe mechanisms but not motives. Even Walby's (1990) most sophisticated account is essentially just description (Fine, 1992: 42). As Goldberg points out (1993: 148), patriarchy theory has so far failed to identify a cause for patriarchy, male dominance and male solidarity.

One possible answer is that Goldberg is right in saying men bear no malice towards women, that patriarchal processes are created accidentally and socially, and are thus malleable and reversible. Male solidarity rests on the natural instinct for people with similar interests, similar styles of behaviour and conversation to group together. Male managers select male applicants for jobs because they feel comfortable with them, know they can communicate effectively, will understand each other even if they disagree at times. Women are visibly different, talk differently, behave differently, so can be harder to understand or trust as colleagues. This explanation places the emphasis on social styles, communication styles and life interests providing the basis for the assumption of shared interests, and hence a distinct bias towards persons of the same sex as colleagues and friends in employment contexts as well as non-work contexts. This turns our attention to the source of such well defined differences in personal style.

Clearly, women as mothers play a large role in laying the foundations of sex role ideologies and behaviours. The separation of the workplace from the home in modern industrial society means that children do not have any immediate access to the labour market, to roles in the workplace and their father's activities. All children have access to the roles of men and women in the home, in particular the female role. Women are the first to give dolls to their daughters and guns to their sons. It is mothers who create housewives in their own image. Women treat their children as extensions of themselves, especially girl children. Whether they like them or not, men treat their children as independent social beings, who may well resist attempts to influence or persuade. Gilligan emphasises women's voice, insists it is benign rather than incapacitating, and claims it would be revolutionary to incorporate women's voice in the management of society. Another view is that it is precisely this woman's voice, so sensitive to other voices, that handicaps girls and women, allowing them to be easily swayed by others, initially their mothers, later men, in a world view in which everything is relative anyway, so why should women insist on their interests taking priority? Male solidarity wins because women dither in their judgements, because they are swayed by the dominant male voice and also because women are divided in their preferences and interests.

The key reason why male solidarity and male organisation are

so effective is that women are diverse and divided. If men are the enemy, women make a hopeless adversary. Men gain a huge tactical advantage from women's diversity. The heterogeneity of female preferences - for a lifestyle with or without a clear sexual division of labour - opens up a fatal weakness in women's representation of their interests. The trouble is that there are at least two sets of interests, as reflected in the two women's movements in the USA, for example, with paler parallels in Britain. With the opposition so fundamentally divided *within itself*, men race to the winning line without much imagination, effort or talent. This bothers employment career women, who see men of average ability succeeding in places where women barely get through the door. It is entirely acceptable to women following the homemaker career, who are spending their spouse's earnings and profits. Women's failure to organise, and lack of solidarity, *vis a vis* men is due to their having two avenues of upward mobility and achievement in life, through the marriage market or through the labour market. At present, men are limited to the labour market, though that might conceivably change, if employment career women learn to value toyboys and househusbands in the same way that men value bimbo babes and housewives. Looking at it from the male perspective, the bias is in favour of women who become homemakers. Men see housewives living a life of relative comfort and low stress, winning positions of financial dependency without necessarily displaying much competence, effort or talent for the job of housewife and mother. This bothers employment career men, who see women succeeding in a role where men fail even to get through the door. Some men would make far better parents than women do, especially for adolescents, but women currently have a monopoly on the homemaker role and, to a large extent, on parenting, while the male monopoly on employment careers has been declared unlawful.

On the evidence, Goldberg's theory of male dominance and patriarchy is unassailable. But it is *sui generis*, linked to nothing else. Female heterogeneity of preferences and interests provides the missing link between the concept of patriarchy (since it is not really a theory) and Goldberg's theory of male dominance. Male patriarchal solidarity and male organisation to promote male interests are disproportionately successful because women are sharply divided in their objectives and fields of activity. Becker's rational choice theory provides an adequate account of what the homemaker half of

the female population are doing; human capital theory accounts for the employment histories of the career women minority. The drifters' activities probably defy explanation.

Looking ahead

Everything may change. Social science research results can give a misleading sense of inevitability: the current pattern of behaviour is readily interpreted as inevitable, institutionally determined and unchangeable rather than volatile, chosen and changeable. Without hard proof of causal connections, contemporary coincidences are nothing more than that. And *most* research goes no further than contemporary coincidences, especially in the case of multivariate analyses where even the direction of causality is left completely open. However large scale real-life social experiments show that there are limits to what social engineering can achieve.

There is nothing 'traditional' about women's restriction to the domestic sphere – quite the contrary. In Britain, women were as likely to be in the workforce in 1871 as in 1971. The domestication of women was a social experiment that did not last even a century, three generations. The Chinese social experiment at encouraging all women into social work outside the home achieved greater success within half a century, but there are signs that even in the context of a policy of one child per couple, one-quarter to one-third of women are inclined to return to the sexual division of labour in the home and drop out of work beyond the domestic sphere. It appears that the heterogeneity of women's preferences for employment careers or for homemaking careers is a permanent feature which resists attempts to squeeze everyone into a single lifestyle. Public policy has to allow both options, even if it is impossible to design policies that are completely neutral between the two, as argued in Chapter 7. The fact that socialisation processes exist in all societies does not guarantee their success. Like men, women can always say No. Some women are prepared to swim against the current; others prefer to go with the flow. So women's preferences are malleable, to some extent. But on current evidence there is a substantial minority of women (20% in Britain) who will never want to have and raise children, and there is a substantial minority of women (probably no more than 10%) who would prefer to have four or more children and devote their life to mothering activities mainly. Perhaps public policy should encourage

this more efficient division of labour and polarisation of fertility patterns.

Preferences determine choices, but they do not predict performance. Women who choose to compete with men in the public arena, not just the market economy but also politics and other public activities, will not necessarily have the ability to make it to the top, any more often than men do. *Most* men do not attain the top positions, even in the absence of discrimination. So it is not a sign of discrimination if *equally* few women are successful. Women's concentration in lower grade jobs does not differentiate them from men and cannot be discriminatory of itself. Similarly women who choose not to join the rat race may have to confront the possibility that they are no better as mothers and homemakers than they were (or would be) as workers. One of the great myths is that all women have a natural and benign talent for nurturance, that the mother's influence in never noxious. From a feminist point of view, it is arguable that mothers should not be allowed to raise either girls or boys beyond the age of about 12 years. Adolescents of both sexes need to break away from the mother to achieve autonomy and adult identities, not only boys as assumed by Chodorow (1978).

This review suggests that research should now focus on particular issues in women's employment. The invisible, and often unconscious, social processes that prevent women from obtaining and flourishing in senior grade posts merit far more attention than they have so far received. More generally, we should look more closely at the work and life histories of women committed to full-time continuous employment, including those in less prestigious occupations than the easily identified professional and managerial women, and including studies of sex differences in earnings. Research on occupational segregation must now move away from the long-standing concern with historical trends and fruitless obsession with measurement issues to address the causes and consequences of occupational segregation, its meaning for different groups of women, and whether its meaning for men is changing. Integrated or mixed occupations, employing both men and women, seem to be of particular interest both from a theoretical and a policy perspective. Lessons for the future must surely be found most often in this minority group of occupations in the workforce. Most challenging of all is the relationship between vertical job segregation, movement between segregated and integrated occupations across the lifecycle and the

three employment profiles identified in Chapter 5. We need to know if the highest achievements are accessible to, even if restricted to, women following the male employment profile, or whether it takes a lot more than that to succeed in male dominated careers. There are now enough women sweeping into senior positions in the labour market, if not in the political arena, to enable us to consider general patterns rather than uniquely individual cases.

The key conclusion is that we are in the middle of significant restructuring of women's social and economic position. The report on the 1980 Women and Employment Survey concluded that despite important changes in women's attitudes to employment since Hunt's 1965 survey, work was still less central to women's lives than to men's; that most women were still primary domestic workers and secondary wage earners while husbands were primary wage earners; that a majority of women regarded a home and children as women's prime aim and main job, so that children took priority over a career; and that there was little evidence that women saw themselves becoming equal or joint wage earners on the same terms as their husbands (Martin and Roberts, 1984: 191-2). All these conclusions remain valid today in the mid-1990s, but only for one section of the female adult population. The polarisation process that started in the 1980s has produced a sharp divide between these home-centred women and the minority of career-oriented women for whom employment is just as central to their lives as it is for men; who do not regard a home and children as their primary aims in life; and who see themselves as independent wage earners whether or not they marry. This means that there will always be evidence to support *both* the gloomy view and the optimistic view of women's position in the labour market. Modern industrial society creates the conditions for women to make genuine choices between two polarised lifestyles, so their preferences have become an important new social factor, potentially over-riding the demographic, social, economic and institutional factors that have historically been so important. Difference and diversity are now the key features of the female population, with the likelihood of increasing polarisation between work-centred and home-centred women in the 21st century. And in a civilised society difference and diversity are positively valued.