

WHY DO WOMEN END UP IN ‘FEMALE’ JOBS?

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Josie O’Reilly seeks to address the fundamental differences that arise between male and female unemployment. She scrutinises the institutional influence of different types of welfare states, coming to some surprising conclusions. She also examines how socio-cultural norms – often ignored by economists – affect our view of women and the role that they play in the economy.

Introduction

If you slipped on the icy pavement today and had to go to hospital you would expect a female nurse to tend to you while you waited to see a doctor. Similarly, if your kitchen appliances stopped working or you suddenly found yourself in the dark, you would call an electrician and expect a man to come and fix it. In our industrially advanced societies these expectations usually prove to be accurate, yet in the last century women’s place in society has been revolutionized. As they have earned the right to vote, to study, to work, women’s outlook on life has evolved; no longer the bland wallflowers defined by their husbands and families, they are now active agents with wider horizons, who make decisions independently (Goldin, 2006) and are an important part of the labour force (Muhlau, 2010a). So why are women still confined to ‘female’ jobs? This essay will begin by defining what we mean by ‘female’ jobs, it will then review the economic theories and non-economic theories as to why women end up in them, and finally it will conclude by briefly examining the societal effects of occupational segregation.

What Makes a Job ‘Female’?

The different theories to explain occupational segregation by sex all concur that it is a defining feature of our post-industrial societies (Charles, 2005; Estevez-Abe, 2005; Anker, 2001), but from then on they diverge drastically. Before we begin our review of these theories, it is important to clarify certain aspects of our subject. Firstly, although occupational segregation by sex is a phenomenon which exists all over the world (Anker, 2001), we will limit ourselves to western post-industrial societies. Secondly occupational segregation by sex can be vertical, which implies that

women are less likely to be in hierarchically powerful positions (i.e. managers), or it can be horizontal, which means women are clustered in certain sectors of the labour market (i.e. teaching jobs). If we consider both of these aspects we can draw up a rough sketch of what a 'female' job is likely to be in a developed nation. A woman's job is typically within the public sector and usually in the service industry (Turner and McMahon, 2010; Datta Gupta, Smith and Verner, 2008), her job is likely to hold less power and responsibility than her male counterparts (Mandel and Semyonov, 2006) and she will receive lower wages (OECD, 2008; Muhlau, 2010b; Belgian Presidency Report, 2010). Female jobs are also more likely to be part-time or reduced-time and they are more likely to be salaried jobs rather than self-employed positions (Elder and Johnson, 2001). The skills needed for them are those that mirror stereotypical female attributes, such as interpersonal skills, manual dexterity and a caring disposition, as well as jobs which correspond to women's traditional tasks in the household, such as cleaning, cooking and looking after children. (Anker, 2001; Hakim, 2002; Belgian Presidency Report, 2010). These are generalisations and it is important to realise that there are large disparities between countries. For example, women in liberal market economies such as Ireland, the UK or the US are more likely to be in a managerial position than women from social-democratic regimes (Turner and McMahon, 2010; Mandel and Semyonov, 2006) and are more likely to be employed in the private sector (Estevez-Abe, 2005; Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). These discrepancies have fuelled occupational segregation investigation and from them have emerged the various theories we will now review.

Polacheck's Human Capital theory is built on the corner stones of Neoclassical economic theory. Put simply, these foundations state that the individual is a rational being who evaluates costs and benefits in order to defend his self-interest and the sum of all these egotistical calculations equates to the common good. Taken in context of the labour market, this means that workers choose jobs which will maximise their abilities and preferences while minimising their 'handicaps' (Anker, 2001). The argument is the same for employers; they will choose employees who are likely to make them profits from the wages they are paying them and the 'on-the-job' training they may provide. Applied to the gender question the argument runs as follows: from an employer's point of view women have less human capital than men in certain areas, they may not have the qualifications needed or they may not have enough on-the-job training and experience, all of which make them less productive than their male counterparts. Employers being rational individuals they will consequently employ men over women (Estevez-Abe, 2005). Other theories similarly based on neo-classical economics claim that additional costs of hiring women include: their lack of flexibility, their high turnover rate and their high level of lateness and absenteeism (Anker, 2001). Equally, legislation requirements such as separate toilets or regulation concerning night work or physically taxing occupations (Anker, 2001), act as disincentives for employers as they increase the cost of hiring women. These theories highlight the importance of human capital in the gender occupational divide; they do not however delve into the

reasons women are disadvantaged in this area and by failing to do so they offer little hope to alleviate occupational segregation.

The Institutional Context

Other theories thankfully do go further. One approach focuses on the institutional context in which women evolve. For instance, research has shown that countries with stronger welfare systems suffered higher occupational gender segregation, both vertical and horizontal (Estevez-Abe, 2005; Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund, 2009; Datta Gupta, Smith and Verner, 2008; Mandel and Semyonov, 2006; Mandel, 2009). The reason for this lies in the welfare state itself. On the one hand, social policy aims to encourage female employment by providing lengthily paid parental leave and institutional arrangements for part-time work or reduced working weeks (such as the 35 hour week in France) (Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). Although these measures have been found to increase female work participation, they also have certain adverse consequences. Encouraging career breaks and part-time work ultimately emphasises women's roles as mothers and carers over their role as employees (Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). It also reduces the time women spend on the job, which means that they gain less experience and miss out on vital training, reducing their human capital and leaving them unable to compete with their male colleagues. The consequence is that women are depicted as 'risky investments' for employers, especially for jobs which require specialisation (typically 'male' jobs) and for which the cost of training or finding a replacement in case of maternity leave would be crippling (Mandel and Semyonov, 2006). Whereas private sector employers, slaves to market competition, are unable to assume these costs, the public sector is; this brings us to the other half of the argument. As the welfare state grew, it removed women's traditional tasks from the family sphere and absorbed them into the state's service sector. Jobs such as childcare, education, nursing or caring for the elderly became paid occupations, but this move into the formal economy did not ease gender segregation in these areas. Like in the home they remained distinctively 'female' jobs. The main reason for this is that, as we mentioned above, they provide the employment protection for women that the private sector cannot offer. At the same time, not all women have the burden of family responsibilities, hence they do not all need the protection that state employment provides them, nor do they all represent a cost to their employers (Datta Gupta, Smith and Verner, 2008), so why are they still predominantly clustered in the public sector?

Statistical Discrimination Theory provides us with some measure of the answer. Although employers know that not all women are less experienced, less qualified and less committed to their career, it is easier and cheaper to rely on these group characteristics when recruiting rather than evaluating each individual applicant (Anker, 2001). As we have seen, welfare states' family friendly policies increase the likelihood of women taking career breaks and prioritising family over career, making these group characteristics seem closer to the truth. This increases the scope of statistical

discrimination in these countries and with it reduces women's career ambitions (Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund, 2009). Women don't only end up in female jobs because they are less qualified or because other occupations are less suited to their responsibilities, they also make a rational decision to apply for 'female' jobs because they know they are unlikely to be employed in 'male' jobs. It follows that their choice of education reflects this assessment; it would be pointless to invest years of study into engineering to then find oneself disadvantaged when looking for a job, which partially explains why women can be less endowed in human capital.

Another author to highlight the importance of institutional context is Estevez-Abe. In order to explain occupational gender segregation, her skill-based theory focuses on two types of welfare state. On one side countries with Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs), such as Sweden or Germany, in which the state partially controls the market, encouraging long term partnerships between social partners and providing protection for jobs, unemployment and wages. This leads to a more stable labour market, in which companies work together rather than against each other and in which workers are more likely to enjoy longer term work contracts (Estevez-Abe, 2005). The education system behind this type of society is one which centres on specific non-transferable skills, which correspond to a very limited number of occupations. But because the state provides unemployment benefits, retraining in case of job loss and a general stability which prevents jobs losses in the first place (Charles, 2005), the risk of selecting this type of education is attenuated. Equally, employers are willing to invest in their employees' skill development as they will reap the benefits. Liberal Market Economies (LMEs) on the other hand have a very low level of state intervention in the market, which creates a much more elastic labour market in which the employee's only real employment protection is his qualifications. For this reason education in these countries (e.g. UK, USA or Ireland) are more likely to be based on general skills, which will be portable from one job to another. Due to the greater insecurity of jobs, employers are less likely to invest in firm-specific skills for their workers, just as much as their workers are unlikely to want to learn them. Estevez-Abe finds that CMEs were more likely to suffer from high occupational segregation than LMEs (Estevez-Abe, 2005); these findings corroborate the previous thesis which equally attributes higher occupational segregation to stronger welfare states. However, rather than placing the blame directly on family-friendly policies, this theory shifts the blame to the skill-regime. As women are more likely to have to interrupt their careers in order to care for their families (Estevez-Abe, 2005; Stier, Lewin-Epstein and Braun, 2001) they are less likely to benefit from skill-specific education or firm specific training programs. As a consequence they are more exposed to dismissal, wage depreciation or loss of position within the work place (Charles, 2005). To guard against this, CMEs offer extensive social policy (obligatory paid parental leave), which as we have seen above induces higher occupational segregation. On the other hand, in general skill regimes moving in and out of jobs is acceptable; qualification and training is more likely to be transportable, so that if upon return from maternity leave a worker is forced to change jobs, her skills will allow her to do so without submitting to wage depreciation or loss of

human capital. This means that men and women are ultimately on a more level playing field in LMEs and so suffer less occupational segregation.

The Socio-Cultural Context

The most important criticism voiced against these institutional theories is that they do not take into account the socio-cultural context of occupational gender segregation. Women do not simply choose certain occupations because they weigh up the positive and negative aspects of the question (be it in relation to family friendly policies or skill regimes). The cultural norms and values which surround them and form part of their identity dictate the roles and occupations which are acceptable and those which, because they are deemed 'male', must be avoided (Charles, 2005). Women, for example, are considered to be more interpersonal, better at communicating, more caring, more docile, more honest but also less proficient at maths and sciences (Anker, 2001), while those attributes which are inherently male, such as greater physical strength, natural ability to supervise and give orders, are of higher value and deserve higher status than those of women (Charles, 2005). Economic restructuring happened within this socio-cultural context. According to Charles (2005) this key mix of factors has led to greater occupational segregation. The expansion of the service sector has meant more jobs which reflect most of the characteristics attributed to women (sales jobs, receptionists, home helps). Economic rationalization, another feature of structural change, brought more jobs into the formal economy. Demand for workers, especially female service sector workers, rose, making it necessary to hire women that may not be career centred. One of the consequences of more women with family responsibilities entering the workforce is that the service sector has been forced to adapt to women's needs to a certain extent (Charles, 2005), with part-time work and flexi-time having become an integral part of the service sector and also of women's jobs. Although structural theory is effective in explaining horizontal and vertical segregation, some have argued that to ignore the institutional context is to overlook the fact that in many cases of structural change, growing service sectors are the fruit of social policy – this is particularly true for Scandinavian countries (Estevez-Abe, 2005).

A variation of cultural-structural theory focuses on work organization blaming the new post-Fordist work model for ongoing occupational segregation, specifically vertical segregation (Van Echtelt et al., 2009). The old 'time-greedy' (Van Echtelt et al., 2009, p.189) model of work was based on the premise that workers had no other obligations than their job; women, who carried the bigger burden of domestic work, were clearly at a disadvantage. It was hoped, that a new flexible and autonomous way of organising workers would change this (Appelbaum, E. and Bailyn, L., 2009 cited in Van Echtelt et al., 2009), but post-fordist models have shown themselves to be even more demanding than their predecessor, creating a highly competitive work environment in which flexibility and autonomy just push employees to work longer and harder in order to get to the top. As socio-cultural norms haven't evolved enough for men to shoulder their fair share of domestic

responsibilities, women are still not competing on a level playing field and so cannot hope to break through the glass ceiling of vertical segregation.

Gender or feminist theory has a completely different take on the question; for these theorists gender occupational segregation is product of patriarchal values and notions of female subordination (Anker, 2001) which we assimilate as children and keep on assimilating throughout our lives through our parents, our peers, the education system and the media. These socio-cultural norms give birth to a whole range of stereotypical ideas, which although they do not necessarily reflect reality, are too deeply embedded in our collective consciousness for us to refute them. Because of this there can be no such thing as completely individual choice. These powerful stereotypes not only dictate the type of jobs women will end up in, but also the hours they will work, and the length of their employment. One such stereotype is the idea that women have a more caring nature. This qualifies them for jobs as nurses, teachers, midwives and social workers, but interestingly we find fewer women in caring occupations of higher ranking, such as doctors or university professors because of another gender stereotype which dictates that women are naturally docile and disinclined to supervise or give orders (Anker, 2001). As their work force is predominantly female, these occupations then adapt to women's needs and become more flexible or prone to part-time organisation (Anker, 2001). Another similarly 'fuzzy' factor used to explain gender occupational segregation is discrimination. In its report on gender discrimination, the OECD (2008) defines it as 'the unequal treatment of equally productive individuals only because they belong to a specific group'. By this logic women are limited to certain occupations because employers feel a personal dislike towards their gender in general. Discrimination being a notoriously difficult factor to measure, it can be most easily defined as what is left over after we take into account all other reasons for segregation: education, experience, motivation and expectation (Muhlau, 2010b). Using this method, it was found that discrimination accounts for 8% of gender occupational segregation (OECD, 2008). Of course, the reasons for such discrimination can be traced back to gender stereotyping, making these two theories congruous.

Conclusion

To conclude this review, it seems fair to say that there is a wealth of different explanations for gender occupational segregation. The reasons offered as to why women end up in 'female jobs' range from their personal choice to the cultural values that surround them, from the type of economy they evolve in to the kind of welfare state they live in. Yet the consequences of the phenomenon are quite straightforward. On the one hand, systematically excluding half of the active population from certain occupations is clearly underutilizing the workforce (Anker, 2001). In the global competitive market that we live in today, submitting your economy to such inefficiency seems imprudent. On the other hand, such wasteful management of human resources, when most European countries are struggling with the costs of a rapidly aging population, seems like a glaring oversight (OECD, 2008). Boosting fertility rates is an obvious way to counter these costs, but if women continue to have to make a

choice between a career and starting a family they are unlikely to show any signs of equalising participation in the workforce (Van Echtelt et al., 2009; Datta Gupta, Smith and Verner, 2008). Equally, occupational gender segregation affects women's status and income and consequently how we, as societies, perceive women. This has a huge effect on income inequality, poverty, economic dependency and mortality, not only for the present generation but also for those to come (Anker, 2001). As our segregated vision of gender occupation is passed down through the education system, the media and our collective consciousness, we are perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality and submitting our children to the same fate.

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