Chapter 19 - Gender and employment

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. How active are women in the economy, and how has this changed over the years?

The expansion of female employment in particular in the post-war period has been one of the most significant of all social and economic trends. In Britain, between 1960 and 1980, the workforce increased by about 2 million due almost entirely to the entry of the group that traditionally did not work, namely married women. By 2002, 44 per cent of the labour force were women compared with 41 per cent a decade earlier, while the total size of the female labour force stood at 12.9 million, its highest ever. In the same year 70 per cent of women of working age were economically active compared with an equivalent activity rate for men of 80 per cent. The employment scenario seems to have been stabilizing, and economic activity rates and female employment have been increasing gradually, with an additional 1.4 million women employed between 1992 and 2002 (Duffield, 2002). This long period of growth has left women firmly entrenched in the economy.

2. What do you understand by the terms vertical and horizontal job segregation? How have these practices distorted the distribution of work between men and women?

Women are ‘crowded’ into a narrow band of occupations, whereas men tend to be more equally present in different kinds of work. Nor are there signs that occupational segregation is declining. Female employment is concentrated in unskilled factory work and low-grade service work—in the minor professions (nursing, teaching), in the caring and manual services (shop work, cleaning, canteen work, laundry work), and in the clerical and secretarial sector. In 2002 in Britain 90 per cent of women worked in the service industries compared with 67 per cent of men (though for both groups this figure has been increasing in line with the expanding service sector). A high proportion of these are concentrated in a few main groups of the standard occupational classification. Thus 35 per cent of employed women worked in public administration, health and education, 26 per cent in distribution, hotels and restaurants, and 10 per cent in financial and business services (Duffield, 2002).

Conversely, women are poorly represented in occupational sectors such as skilled manual work and the senior professions. The pattern of female employment is also vertically distorted. Only small proportions of women occupy top jobs in management and administration. Even in occupations where women are well represented, and which offer a career structure, they tend to be confined to junior levels. Thus, women teachers are concentrated in primary schools, while there are fewer in secondary schools and even smaller proportions in promoted posts. In industry, too, it is common to find entire departments of women workers, perhaps with a woman as immediate supervisor, but with higher levels occupied by men.
3. Can legislation put right discrimination over pay and other work opportunities?

Legal provision has gone some way towards closing these pay gaps. Britain has had over 30 years of legislation against pay and workplace discrimination. The Equal Pay Act 1970—aimed at the ideal of ‘equal pay for equal work’—confers the right to the same treatment as an employee of the opposite sex who is doing identical or similar work, or work rated as equivalent under a job evaluation study. The other relevant piece of legislation is the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. This attempts to prevent discrimination on grounds of sex particularly at the stage of recruitment and over the distribution of promotion opportunities.

Before the legislation was introduced women received just under half the male wage, then the gap closed gradually. The earnings ratio stabilized during the 1980s, with women receiving about two-thirds of male earnings. This seemed to suggest that the legislation had an initial impact—probably by eliminating grossly unfair situations where men and women in the same jobs were paid at different rates—but the broader effect was more marginal. The improvement in women’s pay took another step forward with the ratio edging up to around 80 per cent by the late 1990s. The rate of improvement in the past five years or so has flattened out, more or less, suggesting that perhaps some structural ‘glass ceiling’ has been reached.

4. Technology is a mechanism of male power. Discuss.

Perhaps the most important aspect of social gendering concerns technology and skills. Here Cockburn has emphasized the powerful affinity between men and machines: ‘the identification of men with technology and of technology itself with masculinity’ (1988, p. 38). Again this is partly a cultural process operating outside work. ‘Technology enters our social identity: femininity is incompatible with technical competence; to feel technically competent is to feel manly’ (1985, p. 12). Thus, technology is a ‘medium of power’, and by colonizing technology men are claiming power for themselves and also power over women.

5. What part do sexual stereotypes play in gender discrimination?

Pollert’s (1981) study of women’s manual work in a cigarette factory—the experience of working-class women selling ‘generalised unskilled labour power’—discovered powerful stereotyped attitudes held by managers and supervisors. She defined these as male-generated images of female experience, yet they were real for the women workers who had to ‘live out’ these stereotypes on a daily basis. Thus, the supervisors firmly believed that women had an ‘aptitude’ for the repetitive, monotonous jobs that were typical in the factory. The women themselves rejected the crudest version of this stereotype, but they did accept their work as ‘women’s work’ in the sense of knowing that no man could be persuaded to do it (‘I’d like to see one of them do my job for a week!’, p. 87).
6. What are the similarities and the differences in men’s and women’s work orientations?

They vary from person to person and are unrelated to gender.

7. What are the major career barriers that women face?

The central aspect of the gendering process in employment is reflected in the career paths open to men and women. At its broadest, the issue of obtaining decent employment with an element of progression, and a return for an employee’s own investment, has several distinct dimensions. A major issue is that of combining the long-term pursuit of a career with care of a family, given that the responsibility for childcare falls more or less exclusively on women. The difficulties of coming back to work after a break are a major cause of having to return to a worse job, and employment and family responsibilities become difficult for women to combine.

8. The same social mechanisms that constrain women’s progress often enhance male careers. Discuss.

In the case of working men, not only are they compatible but family life is often taken as evidence of maturity and stability and is actually career-enhancing.

9. Discuss the factors—practical and theoretical—that have a potential for improving gender discrimination.

One of the current trends favouring women is the changing composition of the labour force. The supply of school-leavers entering work is declining, which means employers have to target groups such as women with children (as well as the long-term unemployed, returners, and older workers). There is also the role that women are playing in the restructuring of work. To be sure, many of the new industries offer low-skill and low-pay jobs, and even some high-profile growth industries, such as electronics and financial services, are poorly paid. Yet employers require skilled, responsible workers as much as they need to cheapen labour, and not all female work is in marginal occupations. To the extent that change means moving towards ‘high tech’—clean, quiet, physically less demanding—jobs, women’s claim on work may be strengthened. If ‘flexibility’ is the future of the workplace, with people constructing their working and personal lives in complex ways, going back and forth between employment, education, and periods out of the labour market, women are already adapted to this.