

Report on an International Conference on Gender, Class, Employment and Family

Clare Lyonette and Rosemary Crompton

Published in: Equal Opportunities International 27 (8), 2008.

Abstract

Purpose – The current report is intended to provide a brief summary of a series of papers presented at the Gender, Class, Employment and Family conference, held at City University, London, in March 2008.

Design/methodology/approach – The conference involved 25 papers presented by invited speakers, and the report is based on summary notes, observations and conference abstracts.

Findings - This report summarises a range of contributions, theoretical and empirical, to the continuing debates on gender and class inequality in Britain, Europe and the US. The evidence presented not only demonstrated the persistence of gender and class inequalities, but also provided a critique of the ‘individualisation’ thesis. The contribution of both normative and material factors to gender inequality was extensively explored. The discussions focused upon a series of tensions and contradictions – between ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ feminism; choice and constraint; capitalist markets and the human requirement for caring work.

Originality/value – many of the papers drew on original empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, using sophisticated methodologies. Longitudinal findings (cohort studies) were well represented, as were cutting-edge theoretical contributions.

Keywords Women, gender, equality, class, occupations

Paper type Viewpoint

This paper reports upon a two-day conference held at City University, London. It was organised by Dr. Clare Lyonette and Professor Rosemary Crompton, and marked the conclusion of Project 7 (‘Class, gender employment and family’) within the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Gender Equality Network (www.genet.ac.uk). The conference was, amongst other things, a showcase for the research carried out within GeNet, currently the major arena for research on gender equality in the UK. A total of 25 papers were presented by an invited group of researchers from Britain, North America and Europe. The sessions covered many topics, ranging from theoretical and empirical papers analysing continuing gender and class inequalities overall, to those dealing with specific experiences of class and gender inequality amongst particular groups. Professor Nancy Folbre, from the University of Amherst, Massachusetts, opened the proceedings with a lively analysis of the distinctive characteristics of care provision. She argued that major societal problems were emerging out of the tensions between market and non-market economies. In respect of this conference, these tensions lay at the interface between the (extrinsically driven) market economy and the (more intrinsically motivated)

care economy. She also emphasised the need for better measurement tools and accounting systems to understand the evolution of the care economy and the role of the welfare state.

The following day, papers were divided into three streams: 1) families and households, 2) gender, careers and labour markets, and 3) changing definitions and categories, class, and gender. Stream 1 began with an interesting session on particular aspects of inequality faced by Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in the UK. Harriet Bradley began by challenging many of the 'big ideas' of contemporary sociology as reflecting a masculine framing of the world, one which does not apply to Muslim women living in this country. Angela Dale continued the challenge to generalised ideas of 'individualisation' and women's ability to determine their own life trajectories, focusing on the extent to which partnership and childbearing significantly affect employment opportunities for women from different ethnic backgrounds, especially for those with few or no qualifications.

The family/household perspective continued with two papers related to decisions regarding money management within the household, against a background of recent social changes which include the increase in cohabitation and the rise in women's employment. Fran Bennett and colleagues focused on the importance of power and control, in the light of recent trends towards more individualistic practices and ideas of equality, concluding that 'control' is in fact a multi-faceted process, and that all systems of money management comprise a spectrum of practices. Carolyn Vogler and colleagues examined money management amongst married or cohabiting couples, and found that keeping money separate is not necessarily associated with greater independence for women – and indeed, that couples who made joint spending decisions tended to be happier than 'independent' spenders. The afternoon began with a paper from Maria das Dorres Guerreiro examining the relationships between quality of work, work-family balance and subjective well-being in Portugal, and Jackie Scott and Jane Nolan explored how gender affects 'quality of life' over the lifecourse. Finally, within this stream the focus turned to dual-earner households which, by the early twenty-first century, have increasingly become the norm across Europe and the US. Man Yee Kan and Jay Gershuny used the BHPS (British Household Panel Survey) to demonstrate that women reduce their hours of paid work, and increase their domestic work, after having a child. Although men increase both their paid work and childcare hours on fatherhood, they do not substantially increase the time they spend on routine domestic work. Turning to Norway (a Scandinavian welfare state with generous work-family policies), Gunn Birkelund explored the question of whether the increase in dual earner households has contributed to increased inequality overall, even in this more egalitarian country.

The second stream examined the inter-relationships of gender, the labour market, and employment. It began with an exploration by Ingrid Schoon and Andy Ross, using British longitudinal cohort studies, of differentiated gender transitions into adult roles. Even at similar levels of academic ability, the transitions of young men and women are very different. However, social origins (class) also emerge as crucial in shaping both aspirations and eventual outcomes by the age of 30. In the same session, Tiziana Nazio drew upon the ECHPS (European Community Household Panel Study) in an in-depth

examination of the wide variety of factors – national, familial, labour markets, as well as current employment – in shaping women’s employment decisions around childbirth. The next session within this stream examined the initial stages of women’s career development. Kate Purcell presented the first results of a major survey, examining students’ decision-making prior to their entry into Higher Education. As is well-known, there are significant differences, by sex, in subject choices, and the HECU survey suggests that even at this early stage, young men are more self-confident than young women. Fiona Devine then presented the findings of qualitative research on the families of doctors and teachers, demonstrating how these gendered choices for children are shaped within the family.

Sue Yeandle’s comparative investigation of local labour markets emphasized their importance for women, whose domestic responsibilities make them more likely to work ‘close to home’ – and, as Yeandle demonstrated, local opportunities vary considerably. Sarah Dyer and colleagues then presented findings from GeNet Project 6 relating to the use of migrant labour in ‘traditionally’ feminine caring jobs in the National Health Service. In the next session, we returned to a focus on careers in Nicky Le Feuvre’s comparative analysis of ‘feminising’ professions (medicine, law, pharmacy and banking) in Britain and France. Her analysis demonstrated that in both countries, professional women (but not all women) were attracted to ‘family friendly’ career options, but that the institutional differences between the two countries meant that the nature of these ‘choices’ varied considerably between the different nation states, as well as between women selecting ‘family friendly’ as opposed to ‘male template’ career options. Finally, Erzsebet Bukodi, Shirley Dex and Heather Joshi’s in-depth analysis of British Cohort Studies demonstrated that men are more likely than women to ‘recover’, over the course of their careers, from a ‘bad start’ in their working lives – that is, entry into the labour market via a lower-level position.

The papers in streams one and two, therefore, served to illustrate the ongoing pervasiveness of ‘gender’, and gender socialization, despite the very real and recent changes that have taken place, as far as women (and men) are concerned, in legislation, state policies, employment, education, and family life. Officially, women may be the equals of men, but it is nevertheless expected that they will continue to take the major responsibility for domestic work and childcare. Gender inequalities, however, are interwoven with those of both class and ethnicity. In stream three, some of the papers focused on this inter-twining, as well as the conceptual problems associated with the persistence of ‘gender’ differences and ideologies in a rapidly shifting context.

The extent of part-time work varies cross-nationally. However, it is universally found more frequently amongst women, given its relative compatibility with domestic responsibilities. In the first session of stream three, Tracey Warren examined, via the ECHPS, comparatively lower-level, part-time employees in a number of different countries. Her findings showed that there were, as anticipated, huge variations in the part-time ‘penalty’, but that women’s earnings satisfaction was not necessarily related to their relative material advantage and disadvantage – although *class* disadvantages were found in all countries. In the same session, Rosemary Crompton and Clare Lyonette examined

decisions about childcare, and the extent of mothers' employment, using qualitative data from over 90 interviews carried out with partnered employees in accountancy, medicine, retail and finance. They found that material factors had tended to take precedence in decisions about mothers' employment and childcare – in some contrast to theories that have emphasized the significance of choice, and normative factors, in these areas. In the next session of stream three, Jan Webb was similarly critical of this current emphasis on choice, arguing that in organisations, even though ideologies of masculinity and femininity may be contradictory and partially incoherent, nevertheless identities cannot be freely 'chosen'. In some contrast, Lisa Adkins, focusing on jobs in the new media, argued that changing definitions of 'work' and 'skill' mean that conventional models of gendered labour must be transcended.

In the next session, Mary Campbell outlined the contrast between gender equality – or equivalence – and gender equity – or fairness. What is equal may not be fair – a parallel might be drawn here in the contrast between 'sameness' and 'difference' approaches to feminism. Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Diane Perrons also focused on the complexity of 'inequality', arguing that different 'inequalities' – of gender, race, class and age – cannot simply be added together, but create different experiences in different combinations. They used this 'inter-categorical' approach to provide simulations of the predicted probability of employment for certain groups of women in the UK. Finally, the last two papers in this stream examined the contemporary 're-shaping' of gender and gender inequality. Anne-Lise Ellingsaeter examined the impact of current breastfeeding policy in Norway which, through its insistence on a twelve-month period of breastfeeding, was in danger of undermining other state policies promoting fathers' involvement with small babies, as well as maternal employment, thus reviving the possibilities of conflict between 'sameness' and 'difference' feminist arguments. Mary Evans suggested that changes in women's employment, and extent of representation in the 'public' sphere, have resulted in the incorporation of 'the feminine' into capitalist markets where it is controlled and manipulated for profit, whereas the importance of 'class' is marginalized.

In summary, the papers at the conference revealed important elements of continuity within a context of rapid social change, both nationally and cross-nationally. Thus there are still persisting 'differences' between men and women, even though these 'differences' have themselves been transformed in their nature. Many of the papers demonstrated the persistence (and outcomes) of a 'mutated' version of the 'ideology of domesticity' (Williams 2000): although paid employment amongst women (mothers) is now accepted as the norm, women in large part still retain the major responsibility for domestic and caring work. These expectations continue to shape early and later employment and career choices amongst women (and men), as well as the division of labour between men and women in the household. One consequence is the persistence of inequality between men and women overall. The extent to which these normative expectations, and material constraints, shape gendered 'choices' was cited in the many criticisms of contemporary theories of 'individualisation' in the papers given at the conference. The biological differences between men and women mean that important aspects of the lives led by the two sexes will always be 'different', but it is important that these 'differences' are not

carried over into gendered normative expectations – and indeed moral judgments – that have a negative impact as far as gender equality is concerned.

Normative judgments and expectations continue to be important in shaping gendered life courses. Nevertheless, material differences (which may be broadly characterized as ‘class’ differences) obviously have a major impact on people’s lives. Indeed, given that women with a higher earning potential are likely to enter into partnerships with similar men, the fact that more women are taking up (and staying in) paid work may actually increase material inequalities between households. The actual power of normative expectations, however, should not necessarily be seen as determinant, as there is evidence that material factors (such as a woman’s very high earning capacity) will over-ride conventionally gendered normative patterns. Moreover, some have argued that, alongside the blurring and tension between market and non-market economies identified by Folbre, capitalist markets have the capacity to absorb, manipulate, and profit from the creation and definition of ‘femininity’ and feminine identities. Thus left to its own devices, ‘the market’ will continue to reproduce gender inequalities. Some kind of state intervention, particularly on behalf of dual-earner families, would seem to be essential.

The final point to be made in this report also echoes a point made by Folbre – that is, the need for better measurement tools and accounting systems. Many of the papers at the conference made exemplary use of the large scale datasets, and longitudinal surveys, increasingly available to social scientists. Early ‘second-wave’ feminism made an intellectual leap in identifying ‘the problem that had no name’ – that is, the universal subordination of women. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the tools with which this problem can be identified, described and discussed have been improved beyond recognition.

More details of this conference can be found on www.genet.ac.uk.

References

(All papers presented at the Gender, Class, Employment and Family international conference, City University, London, March 27th and 28th 2008).

Adkins, L. (2008) ‘Time, value and the end of the sexual contract’.

Bennett, F., de Henau, J., Himmelweit, S., Sung, S. and Sutherland, H. (2008) ‘Within household inequalities across classes? Money management and income’.

Birkelund, G. and Mastekaasa, A. (2008) ‘Women’s labour market participation and income inequality: a study of dual earner couples in Norway, 1975-2004.

- Bradley, H. (2008) 'Not so liquid living? Employment and care in Muslim women's lives'.
- Bukodi, E., Dex, S. and Joshi, H. (2008) 'Bad start: is there a way up? Women's and men's occupational mobility in their early careers'.
- Campbell, M. (2008) 'Where angels fear to tread: gender equality or gender equity?'
- Crompton, R. and Lyonette, C. (2008) 'Family, class and gender "strategies" in mothers' employment and childcare'.
- Dale, A. (2008) 'Ethnic differences in labour market participation over the lifecycle: "individualization" and the family'.
- Devine, F. (2008) 'Occupational inheritance and occupational choices: medicine, teaching and other careers'.
- Dyer, S., McDowell, L. and Batnitzky, A. (2008) 'Emotional work/ body work: the caring labours of migrants in the UK's National Health Service'.
- Ellingsaeter, A. (2008) 'Remoralising motherhood: a study of Norwegian breastfeeding policy'.
- Evans, M. (2008) 'Public gender/ private class: fashioning the feminine'.
- Folbre, N. (2008) 'Economies of Care'.
- Guerreiro, M. (2008) 'Quality of work, work-family balance and well-being. Reciprocal influences?'
- Kan, M-Y. and Gerhsuny, J. (2008) 'Division of domestic labour and women's human capital'.
- Le Feuvre, N. (2008) 'Comparing "professional" and "bureaucratic" careers from a gender perspective in France and Britain'.
- Nazio, T. (2008) 'Transitions in employment around childbirth'.
- Purcell, K. (2008) 'Courses, qualifications and career choices: does higher education amplify or reduce gender inequalities?'
- Schoon, I. and Ross, A. (2008) 'Gender differentiation in transitions to work and family-related roles'.
- Scott, J. and Nolan, J. (2008) 'The influence of gender on perceptions of quality of life'.

Sigle-Rushton, W. and Perrons, D. (2008) 'Analysing intersectionality of inequalities in employment'.

Vogler, C., Lyonette, C. and Wiggins, R. (2008) 'Money, power and spending decisions in intimate relationships'.

Warren, T. (2008) 'Understanding women's employment in Europe: the importance of class and gender'.

Webb, J. (2008) 'Organisations, work and social divisions: the remaking of gender'.

Yeandle, S. (2008) 'Women's employment in England: insights from local labour market analysis'.

Also referenced:

Williams, J. (2000), *Unbending Gender*, New York: Oxford University Press.