

Gender equality in paid and unpaid work: Priorities for UK policy intervention

Anke C. Plagnol, Jacqueline Scott and Pia Schober
University of Cambridge¹

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this report is to summarise policy interventions and realistic strategies for achieving greater gender equality in paid and unpaid work, which were identified during a conference on “Gender equality in paid and unpaid work” held on 8th December 2009 at the Church House Conference Centre, London, UK.

Design/methodology/approach – The conference included four plenary talks and group discussions. The report is based on the presentations and group discussions.

Findings – Government policies need to be holistic in the sense that labour market inequalities are often interlinked with inequalities in the home. The current economic recession can be seen as an opportunity to renegotiate work and life arrangements.

Originality/value – The papers presented at the conference included original qualitative and quantitative research by researchers from several social science disciplines. The participants in the group discussions were academics, policy makers, pressure groups, practitioners and third-sector workers, and thus provided a variety of different viewpoints.

Keywords Gender, equality, women, unpaid work, paid work, conference

Paper type Viewpoint

¹ Department of Sociology, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ

This paper reports on a one-day conference held at the Church House Conference Centre, London on 8th December 2009. It was organised by Dr Anke Plagnol and Professor Jacqueline Scott from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Gender Equality Network (GeNet; www.genet.ac.uk), and targeted at academics, policy makers, pressure groups, practitioners and third-sector workers who are concerned about the current gender imbalance in paid and unpaid work.

Gender equality issues in paid and unpaid work are long established and well known. Yet huge changes in the social and economic context in which men and women live out their work and family lives have been taking place. The current generation of working parents make choices and face constraints that their parents never encountered. Getting the balance of paid and unpaid work right is an important challenge for policy makers. The changing nature of work, the development of more flexible working patterns, the narrowing educational attainment between men and women, the rising economic costs of juggling careers and motherhood, pose new challenges to men's and women's work and family lives in the 21st century. These challenges are global in scope. Changing patterns of migration and new human rights discourse underline how gender aspects of paid and unpaid work vary markedly by race and ethnicity, as well as by class and age. The current economic crisis means that gender equality issues are at risk of being neglected while immediate concerns focus on stemming the rising tide of unemployment and minimising the dangers posed by looming public service cuts. However, losing sight of gender equality is short-sighted and costly because the balance of paid and unpaid work matters hugely not just for the well-being of UK families, but also for the life-chances of their children.

Of course, labour market inequalities are not only restricted to gender, but are also often based on social class, age and ethnicity. However, following the theme of the conference, we will focus on gender inequalities in this paper, but we are aware that gender inequalities often intersect with other forms of inequalities. The key priorities for policy intervention suggested in this report are based on those developed during group discussions and a plenary discussion session. These group discussions focused on inequalities in the labour market and followed presentations by Professors Linda McDowell and Shirley Dex. Linda McDowell discussed how diversity and differences are shaping divisions of labour among immigrants in London (McDowell et al., 2009). She presented qualitative research on workers at a London upmarket hotel and at a teaching hospital, and pointed out how these workers are often chosen for these mostly precarious jobs based on their gender and ethnicity. Shirley Dex' analysis of a sample of mostly British women revealed how women continue to enter occupations that have lower wages than men (Dex et al., 2009, Dex et al., 2008). Interestingly, women have better chances than men of upward moves on the social status scale, especially from its lower ranks, but not on occupations ranked by pay. Women often change from full-time work to part-time employment after child birth, which can lead to a loss in human capital due to less time in the labour market and thus lower hourly compensation if women remain in part-time positions for several years after the birth. This suggests that government policies that aim to address labour market inequalities need to be holistic in the sense that such inequalities are interlinked with patterns of unpaid work, for instance child care.

In the second set of presentations, Professor Jonathan Gershuny underscored this argument by showing how trends towards gender equality in unpaid work time have

been faster in the Nordic countries than in other Continental European countries or liberal welfare states like the UK and the US (Gershuny, 2009). He connected this with cross-national differences in the policy packages including support for female labour force participation and childcare but also encouragement of men's parental leave take-up (Kan and Gershuny, 2010). Professor Sue Himmelweit and Fran Bennett further emphasised in their presentation that public policies can influence the distribution of resources within households through the effects of taxes and benefits and differential encouragement of men's and women's employment (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2007, Figari et al., 2007, Bennett et al., 2009, Bennett et al., 2010).

The bullet points listed below include the key priorities identified during group and plenary discussions. The groups each consisted of nine to eleven participants, seated at eleven tables. Each group was asked to first identify key priorities for the government to reduce labour market inequalities, and then focus on the role of employers and trade unions. Interestingly, each group proposed sets of quite distinct key priorities which is a reflection of the large number of labour market inequalities that still exist today.

What are the key priorities for government to reduce labour market inequalities?

- Government policy should be more holistic: work inequalities should be seen in the context of domestic inequalities.
- Government should provide clear definitions for its equality goals, so that appropriate evaluation measures can be developed to assess progress.
- Government should support obligations and right to care by protecting employees' entitlement to take time off work for caring responsibilities.
- Properly implement the recommendations of the Women and Work Commission (Women and Work Commission, 2006, Women and Work Commission, 2009).
- Provision of more affordable childcare that is good quality and covers sufficient hours and weeks of the year.
- More encouragement for men to take care leave and reduce work hours, e.g. paternity leave (possibly with a 'use it or lose it' aspect), transferable parental leave, better compensation of care leaves. Improved take up of leave by fathers might in the long-term lead to changes in gender role attitudes.
- More flexible work legislation, so families can reconcile work and home life; for instance better provision of breastfeeding at the work place; make men more aware of work-life balance choices.
- Consider intersectionality of gender, class and ethnicity in labour market policies by pursuing more transnational cooperation in this area as well as providing information specifically for migrant workers.
- Introduce effective legislation to protect vulnerable groups e.g. migrant/agency workers; review existing legislation that may exacerbate labour market inequalities.
- Women quotas in organisations to promote more equal representation. Look to Nordic countries to assess relevance of quotas.
- Minimum wage affects disproportionately women and thus needs to be raised or at the very least protected.
- Protect public sector jobs and wages since women are well-represented in this sector.

- Fiscal encouragement to allow more employees, including those working for small businesses, to have flexible work patterns (part-time, flexible hours). Small businesses should be provided with more help to manage and navigate the legislation and regulations, since at the moment many small businesses are more concerned with finding ways to get round it.
- Increase number, scope and quality of apprenticeships.

What can trade unions and employers do?

- Improve quality of jobs and thus enable part-time workers to progress within jobs.
- Reduce working hours and encourage part-time work among men to reduce the barriers to a greater involvement of men in caring and family life.
- Rethink working hours of certain industries and recognise that they are also socially constructed: does the education sector have to be largely part-time while the banking and finance sector is more than full-time?
- Protect or increase minimum wage.
- Temporary/vulnerable or new groups of workers are often not protected by unions, who mostly protect their current members rather than potential new ones.
- Trade Unions (TU) are not very clear on their purpose. Particularly young workers are often not sure what TUs are for.
- Good practice needs to be shared more actively between and within sectors. Good practice has to be implemented by smaller companies as well, not just large organisations.

During the discussion it was repeatedly noted that reducing inequality in the overall labour market is just as important as reducing inequalities between men and women, as the former will have an important impact on the latter. Inequalities based on gender, class, age and ethnicity thus need to be addressed by government policies simultaneously.

Some of the policies suggested above have already been successfully implemented in other European countries, including improved paternity or parental leave (Brandth and Kvande, 2001, Gornick and Meyers, 2008, Kamerman and Moss, 2009). Other policy suggestions might be considered by some as being part of a utopian ideal world – such as a reduction in work hours – which would likely not be accepted by employers, but possibly also by employees who want to preserve their current wages. However, changes for women often stem from changes for men (or the lack of change in their partners' hours) and a reduction in men's working hours might shift employers' and society's perceptions about normative family structures and responsibilities for caring. The current recession can be seen as an opportunity to better promote existing policies and let people work flexibly. This might make employers more aware of the potential benefits of flexible work arrangements. Several conference participants reported that some employers are encouraging their workers to reduce hours in order to lower costs. While the subsequent reduction in salaries is surely not desirable for many households, a more egalitarian work hour culture could have positive consequences for the domestic division of labour. Taking the recession as an opportunity to renegotiate work and life is an interesting aspect, which, however, might not be feasible for migrant workers and others in low pay

employment. Indeed, some companies already offer opportunities to work flexibly in order to attract top talent (Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, 2009), but these options are mostly available in knowledge-based industries.

However, as was pointed out by Angela Mason, the chair of the plenary discussion, “Things don’t change; people change things”. It is therefore important that those that would be affected by policy interventions voice their opinions and if possible point out potential advantages for employers and society as a whole. We believe that the policy suggestions developed at the conference provide a range of feasible options to improve labour market and domestic conditions for both men and women.

References

- Bennett, F., De Henau, J., Himmelweit, S., Sutherland, H. & Sung, S. (2009) Within household inequalities: policy implications. *Paper presented at Gender Equality in Paid and Unpaid Work, 8 December 2009, London, UK.*
- Bennett, F., De Henau, J. & Sung, S. (2010) Within-households inequalities across classes? Management and control of money. IN Scott, J., Crompton, R. & Lyonette, C. (Eds.) *Gender Inequalities in the 21st Century: New Barriers and Continuing Constraints*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.
- Brandth, B. & Kvande, E. (2001) Flexible work and flexible fathers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 15, 251-267.
- De Henau, J. & Himmelweit, S. (2007) Struggle over the pie? The gendered distribution of power and subjective financial well-being within U.K. households. *GeNet Working Paper No 27*.
- Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2009) Government's Business Link Guide: Flexible working - the law and best practice. London.
- Dex, S., Bukodi, E. & Joshi, H. (2009) The ups and downs of men's and women's careers. *Paper presented at Gender Equality in Paid and Unpaid Work, 8 December 2009, London, UK.*
- Dex, S., Ward, K. & Joshi, H. (2008) Changes in women's occupations and occupational mobility over 25 years. IN Scott, J., Dex, S. & Joshi, H. (Eds.) *Women and Employment: Changing lives and new challenges*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.
- Figari, F., Immervoll, H., Levy, H. & Sutherland, H. (2007) Inequalities within couples: Market incomes and the role of taxes and benefits in Europe. *GeNet Working Paper No. 29*.
- Gershuny, J. (2009) Gendered divisions of labour and the intergenerational transmission of inequality. *Paper presented at Gender Equality in Paid and Unpaid Work, 8 December 2009, London, UK.*
- Gornick, J. C. & Meyers, M. K. (2008) Creating gender egalitarian societies: An agenda for reform. *Politics & Society*, 36, 313-349.
- Kammerman, S. B. & Moss, P. (2009) *The Politics of Parental Leave Policies: Children, Parenting, Gender and the Labour Market*, Bristol, The Policy Press.
- Kan, M. Y. & Gershuny, J. (2010) Gender segregation and bargaining in domestic labour. IN Scott, J., Crompton, R. & Lyonette, C. (Eds.) *Gender Inequalities in the 21st Century: New Barriers and Continuing Constraints*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar.
- Mcdowell, L., Batnitzky, A., Dyer, S. & Dyson, J. (2009) Difference, diversity and discrimination: migrant workers in health and hospitality. *Paper presented at Gender Equality in Paid and Unpaid Work, 8 December 2009, London, UK.*
- Women and Work Commission (2006) *Shaping a Fairer Future*. Department of Trade and Industry.
- Women and Work Commission (2009) *Shaping a Fairer Future - a review of the recommendations of the Women and Work Commission three years on*. Government Equalities Office.