

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Module: Family Life

Unit 5d: Theories of Workplace Inequality

Introduction

The main Aims of these Notes are to help you understand:

Sociological explanations of workplace inequality based upon gender differences.

The main Objectives of this Study Pack are to help you understand:

1. Sociological theories of workplace inequality:
 - a. Dual labour market.
 - b. Reserve army of labour.
2. The concept of primary and secondary employment sectors.
3. The concept of a "dual role" or "double shift".
4. The relationship between family life and work roles.

Theories of Workplace Inequality

As I have just argued in the Notes on “Women and Work”, (at great length I'm afraid), **sociological explanations of gendered inequality are not "individualistic"** (that is, **focused** on the supposed **qualities** - or lack of same - of **individual social actors**).

There is, for example, **nothing inherent to women** that makes them less likely, as **individuals**, to be successful in the workplace than men.

I also suggested that the **theory of overt forms of sexual discrimination** in the workplace, while clearly important and significant for the people involved, is **not a sufficient sociological explanation** to fully explain how and why gender inequality continues to exist within the workplace. This follows for two main reasons:

Firstly, overt forms of “sexual discrimination” are an **effect of structural forms of gender inequality**. That is, they are but **one manifestation of inequality**, rather than the **cause** of that inequality. In simple terms, overt sexual discrimination (considered in terms of the various ways women are treated in a discriminating manner in the workplace) is something that exists as the **result** of other, **deeper, structures of social inequality** in our society.

Secondly, as a number of **post-feminist** writers (such as Christine **Hakim**) have argued, to see gender inequality within the workplace as a **simple manifestation of patriarchal relationships** is to **ignore** the fact that men and women clearly make **“lifestyle choices”** (for want of a better phrase) relating to their social roles. To put this bluntly – and rather crudely – both men and women are capable of making **rational choices** about their life. While the prospect of being sexually discriminated against in the workplace is clearly **one aspect** of this overall system of choice, it is clearly **not the whole story**.

Taking the above into account, therefore, it is possible to explore the nature of gendered workplace inequality in a more-subtle way, one that seeks to produce an explanation based on a combination of factors that encompass all of the points noted above.

One way to do this is to focus on the **structural constraints** that surround people in their daily life. That is, to examine the **social context** within which they **make choices** about things such as education, work, career, home life and so forth.

To simplify matters, in the context of this set of Notes, one way to do think about structural constraints is to use the concept of **“market situation”** as a hook on which to hang various explanations of workplace inequality. This involves the following ideas:

Firstly, when thinking about the nature of the workplace in Capitalist societies, it is evident that work involves competition (for jobs, income, status and the like).

Secondly, an individual's **market situation** (which, in basic terms, means thinking about their general employment prospects) involves a **combination of factors**, some of which are **subjective** (for example: What type of work do I want to do? Do I want to combine a family with work? Is caring for my children my primary responsibility) and some of which are **objective** (for example: Do I have the qualifications and skills required for a particular type of work?).

An individual's **market situation**, therefore, involves **general questions** about the **resources** they **have** or can **control** (things like qualifications, for example), the **economic market** they are **competing in** (professional employment, for example, has historically involved the need for a long, unbroken, period of education – GCSE, A-level, Degree, Professional Qualification...) and their "**lifestyle situation**" (for example: if you live with a partner and you produce children, who will care for them?).

Sociological explanations of **gendered inequality** tend, therefore, to focus upon two main questions:

1. Firstly, what is required by an **economic system** in terms of the general composition of its labour force?
2. Secondly, what is it about the **general structure of women's lives** that places them at a **competitive disadvantage** to men in relation to paid employment?

As **Haralambos** ("Themes and Perspectives"), notes on this point:

"Women face a number of disadvantages in paid work. Firstly, they tend to be lower paid than men. Secondly, they are more-likely to be in part-time work. Thirdly, they tend to concentrated in the lower reaches of the occupations in which they work. Fourthly, women tend to do particular types of jobs, usually those with low status".

We can begin our examination of gendered inequality, therefore, by looking initially at the ideas of Theodore **Caplow** ("The Sociology of Work", 1954). Caplow identified a number of factors relating to the **general structure of women's lives** that, he argued, weakened the ability of women to **compete** against men in the general labour market.:

1. Women's **primary role** and social status as **housewife and mother**.
2. The **secondary economic role** of women as "family breadwinners / providers".
3. The large number of women in society for whom **paid employment** was as **option, rather** than a **necessity**.
4. The **historical (cultural) domination** of the **workplace** by **men**.

Question:

For each of the above ideas in turn, how can they be applied to explain the "lesser market situation" enjoyed by women as outlined by Haralambos?

Caplow added two further cultural factors to the above as a way of explaining women's economic position in (**American**) post-2nd World War society:

1. The concept of **patriarchy** which led to the idea that, except perhaps in the home, men should not be directly subordinate to women.
2. The idea that "**intimate groups**" (such as those found in the workplace) could be composed of a **single sex** (male or female) but **not a mixture** of the two (the "**When Harry Met Sally**" **syndrome** of a later epoch...).

Although **Caplow** was writing about a time and society that is now nearly **fifty years in the past**, his work has echoes of contemporary (especially **feminist**) writers and theories. **Sylvia Walby** ("Theorising Patriarchy", 1990), for example, has talked about "**structures of patriarchy**" that surround the lives of women.

In particular, **Walby** argues (in a similar way to **Caplow** but with greater emphasis on the **primary importance** of **patriarchal relations** within the **workplace**) that **male domination** of the workplace has created a **cultural** setting in which **women** play a largely **peripheral role** (in terms of successful integration into the general labour market on equal terms with men).

In addition, we can usefully develop a couple of **Caplow's** key **themes** as they relate to two more theoretically developed explanations of gendered inequality, namely:

- a. **Dual labour market theory** and
- b. **Reserve army of labour theory**.

1. Dual Labour Market theory:

This theory has been most fully developed by **Barron and Norris** ("Sexual Divisions and the Dual Labour Market", 1976) and their basic argument can be **summarised** as follows:

In the first place, they argue that the **general labour market** can be divided into **two related** - but effectively **separate** - **sectors**:

a. The Primary employment sector:

This sector is **characterized** as one in which **pay and job security** is **relatively high** and where there tends to be a **recognized promotional ladder** based upon the possession of various **skills and qualifications**.

b. The Secondary employment sector:

This sector is **characterized** by **unskilled / semi-skilled work involving low levels of pay and job security**. There is **rarely**, if ever, a **recognizable promotion structure** and the sector is generally characterized by **high levels of labour turnover**.

Barron and Norris argue that whilst **men are employed in both sectors**, they are **mainly employed** in the **primary sector**. **Women**, on the other hand, are **mainly employed** in the **secondary sector** (with a number of important and significant **exceptions** - mainly involving single or childless married women). There are a number of **explanations** for this "gendering of the workplace" advanced by Barron and Norris.

1. Women are generally willing to **work for less money than men** and are more-willing to take forms of employment (especially **part-time employment**) that allow them a degree of **flexibility**. This observation relates to the idea that women tend to have a "**dual role**" (a **primary** one of **home maintenance, child-bearing and rearing** and a **secondary** one of **supplementing family income**).

As might be expected, the **primary role** makes certain demands upon women (in particular, **when** and **where** they are able to **work** - "when" has to be considered in relation to child care responsibilities and "where" has to be considered in relation to their husband or partner's work). This, in turn, affects their **market situation** in relation, primarily, to men

For this reason, **women** are **more-likely** than **men** to **work** in the **secondary sector**, where the **low wages** and **lack of promotion prospects** are **off-set** by a degree of **flexibility** in relation to both **part-time work** and the **re-entry** into the labour market at various stages in the **family life cycle** (such as when children start school, for example).

2. Related to the above is the idea that, because of their **primary role** women in general are **less inclined** - or **less socially able** - to "**commit** themselves" to a **long-term career**. Marriage and child care are still seen, by both men and women, to be of primary importance.

In addition, the **general structure of women's lives** is **less well adapted** to the demands of **professional employment**, for example, which, as noted earlier, **requires a continuous** period of **post-16 educational commitment** and **success**.

We can note this, in an **idealised** way, as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">16 -18: A-Levels.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">19 - 21: Degree.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">21 - 24 / 26: Professional studies and examinations.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">24 / 26+: Continuing career development along a coherent career structure where the emphasis is placed on an unbroken employment record as a career is established.</p>

3. **Historically**, for a variety of reasons, **women** have been **less organized than men** in the **workplace** (especially in relation to **Trade Union organization and membership**). They are, therefore, **more-easily dismissed** or made **redundant** than men and employers **exploit** this **organizational weakness** to **marginalize women** in the workplace and to drive down wage levels. Employers paying low wages, for example, are attracted to female labour because of women's overall lack of workplace organisation.

In addition, under the **Employment Law** introduced by the **Conservative Government** in **Britain** during the **1980's / 90's**, a worker only received full employment protection / rights (such as the ability to sue for wrongful dismissal) after **two years continuous service with the same employer** and any employer who wanted to evade their responsibilities under the law had a clear incentive to rid themselves of workers prior to this two-year qualification period (something that was easier to achieve when dealing with individuals who had no organizational support).

You should note, however, that the **Blair (New Labour)** government subsequently reduced the "qualifying period" for employment protection rights.

Question:

Although many feminists (rightly) have criticised Trade Unions as patriarchal organisations, what difficulties might Trade Unions face in terms of recruiting and organising women in the workplace?

Question:

Can you explain, in your own words, the difference between "primary" and "secondary" employment sectors?
What jobs do you think might be characteristic of each sector?

The various **strengths** of the **dual labour market theory** can be summarised in terms of the fact that it **locates economic exploitation and inequality** in a **structural framework** that encompasses such things as:

- a. Women's "**dual social role**" with special emphasis on the **primary female role** of "motherhood".
- b. The disruption produced by pregnancy and child care responsibilities in relation to continuity of employment (Britain, for example, has the lowest levels of maternity leave in the EC). This is clearly a handicap to any woman who decides to have children, especially in relation to continuity of professional employment.
- c. The consequent problems, considered in terms of female market situation, that result from the conflict between primary and secondary female roles in our society.

As **Dex** ("Women's Work Histories", 1984) argues the pattern of female lives in our society tends to be much more complex (in terms of work and family commitments) than the pattern of male lives. While this is not the place to construct a detailed analysis of these patterns, it is evident that the **basic cultural trend** in our society since the 2nd World War can be summarised as:

1. Leaving school and entering full-time work.
2. Marriage, which may involve continuing in full-time work until childbirth.
3. A period of no paid employment (either part-time or full-time) as females take-on primary responsibility for child-care.
4. Intermittent periods of full-time and part-time work (with the emphasis on the latter) at various points in the family life-cycle (for example, as children attend school).
5. A return to some form of paid employment (usually, but not exclusively, part-time) after the children leave home.

A further exercise (or possible project idea if you are really ambitious) might be to plot similar "life and work histories" for any men and women that you either know or can contact for research purposes.

d. The advantages to employers of a **pool of flexible labour** that can be "hired and fired" relatively easily. This "fluctuating pool of labour" can also be employed cheaply because:

1. It lacks political organization.
2. Government policies effectively deny many "part time" workers employment protection rights (although in the UK changes in the legal protection of part-time workers are being gradually introduced because of our membership of the European Community).
3. There is always a plentiful supply of part time (mainly female) workers available.

The above notwithstanding, the theory also has a number of possible **weaknesses**:

Firstly, not all women are employed in the **secondary sector**. An **increasing** number of women are employed in the **primary sector** (in skilled manual labour, professional employment and so forth), although it is important to note that they still tend to receive **less pay, less responsibility, lower promotion prospects** and **less overall remuneration** than their male counterparts.

As we have seen earlier in relation to the **Civil Service** example, gendered (**vertical**) **segregation** within a relatively secure, reasonably well-paid, service sector of the economy is still in evidence - even when women have shown a similar level of career commitment as men.

Additionally, we can note that a major **objection** to the use of the idea of women's primary "housewife and mother" role as an explanation for female employment patterns and experiences is that **not all women** are "married with children", just as not all men have a "family to support". As Peter **Worsley** ("The New Introducing Sociology") notes:

"Single women, women without children and women whose children have long since left home are as much disadvantaged in the labour-market as any others".

While it is true that (as **Worsley** further notes) the idea of a **primary female role alone** cannot adequately account for gendered inequality in the workplace (as I trust we have seen), it is evident that two points are significant here:

1. Firstly, within the gendered workplace it is invariably **men** who are overwhelmingly in positions of **power** and **authority**. It is men who, by-and-large, make **decisions**.
2. Secondly, in making decisions an **ideological dimension** is involved, since what is significant is **not** the specific social status of individual women, as such, but the fact that an individual is **female** in the first place.

As we have seen, the **label "female"** doesn't simply signify a biological fact, it is a **social category** that carries with it various **ideological baggage** (not the least of which is "**potential housewife, mother** and **child rearer**").

In making **employment decisions**, therefore, it is **not necessarily** the **actual status** of the (female) applicant that is necessarily important, but **her potential status** (in male eyes). Thus:

A single woman, it may be assumed, will "normally" have children.

A married woman will "normally" be expected to look after her children.

A woman whose children have left home may simply be considered too old...

Secondly and continuing this kind of theme, **Oonagh Hartnett** ("The Sex Role System", 1978) has suggested **other ideological factors** that are at work (pun intended) within the labour market which have more to do with **entrenched patriarchal myths** and **male advantages** than with simple female disadvantages.

These "**managerial myths**", according to Hartnett, include:

1. "**Workers do not like working for women managers**".

The available survey evidence appears to suggest just the opposite...

2. "**Women are less dependable**".

In low status, low income, jobs, for example, there seems to be little difference in the turnover rates for men and women.

3. "**Women are financially dependent on men**".

While this is, to some extent, true, it does not tell the whole story. UK government Census figures, for example, point to the increasing number of families that rely on women as the sole wage-earner within the family. In addition, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the money female wage-earners bring into a family group is the single most important factor that keeps families above the official poverty line.

4. "**Women will only work until they marry**".

Not only do married women make up the majority of the female workforce, but the available survey evidence suggests that working women, at least, show a preference for paid employment over family responsibilities.

5. "**Children are damaged by having working mothers**".

Various studies (for example, **Rutter**, (1972) and the **National Child Development Study**, (1972)) have found little or no evidence to support the idea that a mother who works is unable to perform the necessary socialisation functions associated with child-rearing.

Finally, as **Pat Mayes** ("Gender") has noted in commenting upon the "**double shift**" reality of most working women's lives (a "**double shift**" involves responsibility for two jobs - one in the home and one at work), **discrimination** against women on the basis of this "double shift" role is apparent amongst employers.

2. Women as a "Reserve Army of Labour" theory:

Following Karl Marx, **Veronica Beechey** ("Women and Employment in Contemporary Britain", 1986), amongst others, has argued that **capitalism**, as an economic system of production, is subject to **periodic cycles of "boom"** (when extra workers need to be recruited) and **"slump"** (when workers need to be laid-off to reduce costs).

The **cyclic nature** of the production process means that employers have to strike a balance between the **need to retain trained workers** who are essential to their enterprise, whilst simultaneously ensuring a level of **flexibility** within the workforce so that **costs** can be reduced in periods of **recession**. In essence, employers need the flexibility to **expand** their workforce quickly in **boom** periods and to **reduce** their workforce efficiently during periods of **slump**.

For a variety of historical reasons (many of which we have already outlined in relation to both **Caplow** and **Barron and Norris**), **female labour** is considered by **Beechey** to be the **"most flexible"** form of labour.

Not only do women generally tend to **lack** the **political / economic organization** to protect themselves, but governments generally tend to formulate **policies** that make the hiring and firing of women **easier**, since women who are **"surplus to economic requirements"** tend to "disappear" into the **home** (where they rely upon their spouse's income) rather than appear in the unemployment statistics.

In this respect, **women** represent a form of **"reserve army of labour"** that can be **called into** - and **excluded from** - the general **workforce** in a way that is economically attractive to employers (because women lack the organizational power to resist redundancy) and politically attractive to governments (because of the ideology surrounding family life).

The main **theoretical justification** for this idea involves two main observations:

1. Firstly, women's employment tends to be mainly in those areas of the economy characterized by part-time, low skill, low wage, employment (the **"secondary sector"**).
2. Secondly, as far as it is economically possible, employers try to hang-onto their skilled, trained, workforce whilst they ride-out recessions. Since an employer needs to be prepared for periods of economic boom, it "makes economic sense" to get rid of those workers who can be most easily recruited once a slump ends.

In this respect, there is nothing particularly "special" about women (**males** who are employed in similar types of **low skill occupations** experience **similar** periods of **unemployment**) or "discriminatory" (in the **legal** sense) in employer's policies - it is simply a fact of economic life in our society that more women than men are employed in the types of occupations that disappear first in periods of economic recession...

While this explanation has a number of **strengths** (in particular the fact that it involves a **clear structural explanation** for the position of women), it does have a number of **weaknesses**.

1. Firstly, it **doesn't** provide any **real explanation** for the continuing existence of both **horizontal** and **vertical segregation** in the labour force.
2. Secondly, it would appear logical to assume that, if women are more flexible in their employment needs and apparently "more willing" to work for lower wages then it would seem to make economic sense for employers to lay-off higher paid male workers whilst **continuing** to employ lower-paid female workers during periods of recession.

A **counter-argument** here, however, is the already noted fact that the **segregated nature** of the workforce means that employers need to hold onto trained workers for as long as is economically possible, since without this workforce a company will not be able to respond quickly to economic upturn (in fact, it would also mean that higher costs would be incurred, since recruited workers would either have to be trained or recruited from other companies).

A more-significant **problem** with this theory relates, once again, to the **horizontal segregation** of women in the general workforce.

- a. **Professional women** in our society are largely **employed** by the **State**, rather than by private sector manufacturing and finance. This means that they may be **relatively sheltered** from the effects of economic recessions (although, of course, they may similarly be **more-exposed** by **cutbacks** in government expenditure...).
- b. **Non-professional women** are mainly employed in the **service sector** of the economy (those occupations that do not produce profit directly, but which aid the production process in some way - **clerical** and **secretarial** work, for example). Again, such work tends not to be so dependent upon the cyclical nature of Capitalist forms of economic production.
- c. Finally, because of **horizontal segregation**, it's not entirely clear how women act as a "reserve army of labour" - who, for example, do they **replace** in the workforce during **boom** periods?

Question:

Harry Braverman has argued that service sector employees may also be subjected to "deskilling". Using a textbook, define this concept and briefly explain its possible relevance to female employment patterns and experiences.

Some Concluding Observations...

Gendered inequality within the **workplace** results from a combination of two spheres:

a. The family group structure:

The general position of women within the family group is one in which they are socialised into seeing their primary social roles as those of "wife, mother and child-rearer".

When such women enter the workplace, they are taking-on a secondary role (although a role that is no less important). This "dual role" or "double shift" structure to women's lives means that women tend to be concentrated in those areas of the economy that offer "flexibility" - since if the woman is to perform both roles some form of compromise has to be established.

However, the trade-off for "flexibility" is that much "female work" tends to be of the "low skill, low wage" variety.

b. The structure of employment:

In our society the basic structure of employment is such that there is a **bias** towards those workers who are able to be **trained and retained** on a **long-term** basis. The most **secure** forms of employment in our society are those that involve a **long-term investment** in **education** and **time**.

Ideologically and **economically**, women tend to be penalized by the general social expectation that they will perform a dual role (whether they have such a dual role or not) in which their primary commitment is to their husband and children, not their employer. This leads to a **vicious circle** that has to be squared by women:

Segregated secondary sector employment is "attractive" to women **not** because they want to perform this type of work or because it is work to which they are "best suited".

Women enter such occupations because **no other jobs are available**, since primary sector employment would involve not performing their primary family roles (men, of course, do not have this problem since their family role is considered secondary to their work role).

As I have suggested, the various explanations at which we have just looked have both strengths and weaknesses, the fundamental question that they all, in their various ways, manage to avoid or fail to confront is that of "**why women?**" - if women are both easy to hire and fire and willing to exchange low wages for "flexible" employment (making them potentially very attractive to an employer), why do employers not exploit these factors at the expense of the male workforce?

The answer, I would suggest, is to be found by exploring in more detail an idea that I noted earlier, namely why women come to take-on (or be made to take-on) a primary social role that revolves around the family group. This is something we will do in the final Notes in this series when we examine the concepts of class and, most importantly, patriarchy, in the context of **feminist perspectives**.

Examination Questions.

1. Critically evaluate the theory of a "dual labour market" as an explanation of gendered inequality in the workplace (25 marks).
2. What is meant by the idea of a "reserve army of labour"? (2 marks).
3. Briefly explain why women are more likely than men to be part of a "reserve army of labour" (5 marks).
4. How would you account for high rates of part-time work amongst women? (2 marks).
5. To what extent is it true that women are in a separate, segregated, labour market to men? (10 marks).