

## Work and Equalities Institute Research Briefing

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# Applying a gender lens to employment relations: Revitalisation, resistance and risks

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### Summary

Employment is no longer a primarily male preserve. With women accounting for 44% of total employment in the developed world, the consideration of gender issues within employment relations (ER) is essential. Indeed the costs of not embracing a gender perspective leave employment relations at risk of further decline.

ER texts today commonly include chapters or sections on gender or diversity, contrasting with the almost complete absence of even references to gender just 20 or 30 years ago. However, simply 'adding in' women's issues is insufficient and we argue the need to apply what we label a gender lens to ER.

In this briefing we outline four key ways through which a gender lens could revitalise ER as a subject area, and identify the forms that resistance to this approach may take and the types of risks that may be encountered. This framework is then applied in turn to each of the four areas through a review of both research evidence and policy debates and actions.

Our argument is that a gender lens can provide new insights into core issues at the centre of the ER discipline and establish a revitalised, dynamic and extended research agenda.

## Introduction

ER research on gender remains primarily the preserve of female scholars taking a feminist perspective, although a small number of male scholars have taken up the issues. The contention is that a more mainstreamed gender lens, informed by gender scholarship in ER and associated disciplines, could provide a basis for revitalisation of ER research by addressing four key gaps in ER's traditional frameworks:

- ER has neglected social reproduction, an issue at the heart of the feminist critique of ER for ignoring how unpaid work, 'frees up' male labour for wage work and how the marginalisation of care work may in part explain the growth of precarious work.
- ER has focused on class identities or interests to the neglect of more complex notions of identity and interests that have developed just as class identities have waned. A gender lens provides the stimulus to start to consider the intersections of a multiplicity of social divisions and differences, and provides a framework for extending trade union organisation to excluded groups.
- ER lacks a fully effective narrative to counter the increasing 'marketisation' of ER. A gender lens could provide a new means of challenging the apparent neutrality of markets and thereby help defend collective and political efforts to protect against exploitation and unequal pay.
- ER has been concerned with the material and political aspects of people's work experience to the neglect of the physical, emotional and sexual aspects that make us fully human, and not solely economic or political subjects.

In considering these gaps we also have to consider the apparent resistance displayed by scholars and practitioners to this change of focus, and the risks for ER that filling these gaps might also entail.

## Embedding ER in social reproduction

### Revitalisation

The proposition that social reproduction should require equal attention alongside production extends the scope of the ER discipline in three main ways:

- It widens the lens beyond the currently employed or unemployed as the organisation of social reproduction influences who is included in the labour supply. So-called full employment may be achieved through processes of exclusion, operating through both social norms and an absence of care provision.
- It provides a direct focus on the integration or separation of work and care.
- It fills a hole in the comparative international research on ER that so far has emphasised interactions between ER and political, education and training and production systems regimes with a much more limited focus on gender, family and welfare systems.

### Resistance

Despite a wealth of comparative welfare and family system research, the neglect of social reproduction in ER continues. Gender marginalisation is also common among both ER practitioners and scholars.

For instance, equality bargaining has been found to be often confined by union negotiators to adjusting working time for women only. Flexibility is considered either to be related to neoliberalism (Jepsen and Serrano Pascual, 2006) or to be a work/life balance issue (Rubery et al., 2016), and the complex interconnections between them are rarely addressed.

Moreover, the need for general reform of working time has not emerged on the agenda in response to gender equality.

Even the French 35-hour week focused on reducing unemployment without much concern for the gender consequences of the more flexible working schedules employers demanded in return for the shorter hours (Fagnani and Letablier, 2004).

By and large the gendered impact of austerity measures have also been left unanalysed and research on the impact of austerity on the feminised public sector still maintains a gender-neutral perspective.

### Risks

ER scholars and practitioners can be criticised for doing too little to accommodate gender equality demands within more inclusive labour markets.

In practice, trade unions have vacillated between complete opposition to flexible working or acquiescing in its concentration in marginal jobs located outside of collective regulation. Only a few countries, for example Sweden, have integrated flexible working within regular work, by providing rights to reduce working hours up until a child is eight and a right to return to full-time hours.

A particular risk is that policies presumed positive for gender equality may have very variable outcomes by class. For example, some studies (Mandel and Semyonov, 2006; Mandel and Shalev, 2009) have argued that strong welfare states and high shares of public sector employment enable lower-educated women to work, but also create stronger glass ceilings for higher-educated women in the private sector.

Another risk is the reinforcement of women's roles as wives or mothers (Acker, 2006). Women still constitute the majority of those providing care through taking parental leave or seeking reduced working hours.

## Intersectionality and representation

### Revitalisation

Intersectionality asserts that all aspects of social and political identity discrimination (e.g. gender/race/class) overlap. Feminist ER scholars have therefore emphasised the need for union agendas to recognise the multiple disadvantages faced by particular groups and how the issues women face are shaped, for example by ethnicity, age and sexual orientation as well as gender (McBride et al. 2015).

Recognition of the complex nature of identities has also created a space to engage with broader notions of activism that encompass wider community organising and the distinctive motivations that shape the activism of marginalised groups.

For instance one study of the organisation of low-wage workers in the US restaurant industry (Tapia et al., 2017) showed the success of alternative forms of community organising on the basis of their work and non-work identities as racial minorities, women and immigrant workers.

### Resistance

Resistance to the incorporation of gender interests into ER has waned as women's share of trade union membership has risen. Most unions in the UK and elsewhere have introduced mechanisms for combining gender and class interests in their organisational structures and decision-making practices.

However, gender is also still treated as a women's issue and not an issue for men (Wajcman 2000), and masculine exclusionary practices within union structures still prevail, although weaker than before (Ledwith, 2012). The superficiality of unions' commitment to women's representation is indicated, for example, by the absence of discussion of the consequences of union mergers for the representation of women's interests (McBride and Waddington, 2009).

### Risks

There is a risk that the concept of intersectionality and the reconciliation of diverse interests and identities may, inadvertently, lead to the marginalisation of gender in ER debates and practice.

The language of intersectionality (Briskin 2014) has led to the suggestion that 'gender inequality' does not capture the complexity of the inequalities that are experienced and lived by different groups of women. The risk is that this may detract from recognition of the continuing systemic inequalities that women face as a group.

The risk of gender marginalisation was seen in one study of union efforts to organise migrant workers working mainly as cleaners (Alberti et al., 2013). Initially, the union attempted to take an approach that recognised migrant workers to have specific needs and to be facing different forms of oppression from non-migrant workers. The researchers found, however, that the union quickly slipped back into a class-based approach, treating the migrant workers as generic workers.

## Using equal value to challenging market values

### Revitalisation

Rights to equal pay for work of equal value provide a major opportunity to challenge the value of wages set by the so-called market. This supports the core rationale for the study of ER, namely the proposition that the employment relationship is a social relationship, shaped by power relations. Consequently, institutionalised systems and regulations are needed to constrain the impact of power in the setting of employment conditions, including wages.

This view on employment has been overshadowed in recent years by more of a market orientation, associated with individualised pay setting as collective regulation of wages has declined. The opportunity to question the value of wages set by the market should in principle provide ER with renewed tools and arguments to question the efficiency and equity of so-called market-determined pay. Embracing the gender critique that the market reinforces gender disadvantage could thus strengthen the defence of collectively-determined pay compared to a supposedly neutral market.

### Resistance

Much of the blame (or credit, depending on viewpoint) for keeping the lid on the equal pay revolution applies to the legislators who in most countries, including in the EU, have mainly adopted a narrow concept of equal value, confined to a single employer and dependent on the presence of male/female comparators within that same employing organisation.

Concern with equal pay issues may in fact increase when unions are quite weak. Indeed some of the most sustained efforts to introduce equal pay for work of equal value, at least in the public sector, have been made by trade unions in countries such as the UK and the US, where collective bargaining is on the retreat. However, there are exceptions, and trade unions in the Nordic countries have taken action on gender pay issues, even in the context of high collective bargaining coverage.

In the case of UK local authorities, the trade unions at national level negotiated a single-status pay spine using gender-sensitive evaluations. But when implemented at local level the trade unions proved to be more concerned about impacts on male employees than in securing the full back pay to which the undervalued women were entitled (Deakin et al., 2015).

### Risks

Challenging existing collectively-regulated differentials questions not only past trade union actions, but also the trade unions' traditional tendency to defend custom and practice when it comes to pay.

Furthermore, the intervention favoured for reassessing value, namely job evaluation, is problematic. Not only is it difficult to ensure women's skills and attributes are visible and valued, but it also risks passing power to managers as the custodians of an apparently gender-neutral system of job grading (Figart et al., 2002).

Another risk from equal pay demands is widening class inequalities at a household level (Milkman, 2016). Without changes to the overall pay range, inequalities at the household level could widen due to a trend towards what is called 'assortative mating', namely where both husband and wife may be either high or low earners. To address both gender and class interests, it is necessary not only for pay for workers in equivalent jobs to receive comparable pay, regardless of gender, but also for the range of pay to narrow.

## Doing gender and embodying work

### Revitalisation

ER has traditionally focused on the material aspects of work. Recent debates on sexuality and embodiment, that is how bodies and heterosexuality are commodified in the labour process, can provide a new expanded agenda for ER. One example is aesthetic labour, that is the notion that success in service work may depend on how one looks and speaks. This wider sexualisation of work can also be seen in professional and corporate contexts. For example, in Sommerlad's (2016) study of the legal profession, the sexualisation of women was common in the more lucrative deals where 'client care' meant they were expected to accept harassment. McDowell's (2010) study of corporate banking found excessive masculinity related to over-confidence and risk-taking that has been linked to the financial crisis.

A gender lens that focuses on embodiment has also put occupations that require body work at the centre of employment issues and inequalities. Body work has been defined as 'focusing directly on the bodies of others; assessing, diagnosing, handling, and manipulating bodies, which thus become the object of the worker's labour' (Twigg et al., 2011). Such work can encompass a wide range of health and social care jobs, sex work, aesthetic services such as beauty work, and protective and security services.

### Resistance

There has been a failure within ER to engage with the discriminatory ways employers combine their undervaluation of women's work with demands for specific aesthetic labour. Here there is a danger of reinforcing gender, class and racialised hierarchies in service work leading to feminists to argue for a strategy to 'debunk aesthetic labour, not to compensate it' (Williams and Connell, 2010).

Issues of dress codes and links to sexualisation and gender differentiation are beginning to be addressed (Nath et al., 2016), though UK legal judgments still allow sex differentiation in dress codes provided they are equally strict.

There are some examples of trade union action to protect sex workers. For example, in Canada there is cross-constituency organising across gender and lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) groups to press for the decriminalisation of sex work and to promote unionisation and healthy and safe working conditions for sex workers (Briskin, 2008).

### Risks

In making the doing of gender visible and embodied there is the major risk of emphasising differences between women and men. Feminist arguments can be subverted for very different ends, and attention to the use of erotic capital or men's excessive masculinity could even legitimise arguments around gender difference that have been used to justify inequalities and maintain gender segregation.

Despite such risks the new emphasis on embodiment, emotions and sexuality must be central to developing a fuller understanding of the employment relationship at the core of the ER discipline. It provides, for example, a new perspective on the boundary roles that women undertake in client-driven cultures, and on the service and body work that underpins much of the feminisation of the service sector.

## Conclusion

The response to these opportunities to expand research horizons and demonstrate ER's continuing relevance to a wider constituency has so far been very modest, except for a small coterie of mainly female ER-based researchers.

One explanation of resistance is that challenging accepted ways of thinking and doing involves risks. Nevertheless, mainstream ER scholars might still be expected to engage with these risks and suggest paths forward.

Many of the core challenges for ER, such as renewing the organisational base, addressing the growth of precarious work, and challenging the marketisation of the employment relationship, are all bound up with issues of gender and gender inequality. The costs of not engaging are thus not only to pass over opportunities for renewal, but also to fail to respond to critiques of ER's traditional narrow focus which may yet result in it withering on the vine.

## Further reading

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