

How does the work of feminist theorists and researchers challenge orthodox sociological understandings of work, employment and the professions?

There is a wealth of sociological literature concerned with understanding work, employment and the professions but until recently there has been little concern with women and work. For many years, sociologists concentrated on the work of white males and on paid employment. But since the Second World War there has been a gradual increase of women entering the labour market thus creating an interest in the work carried out by women. There has also been a great feminist interest in the sociology of work, employment and the professions and this has both challenged and increased traditional understandings of work.

Classical approaches to work almost ignore gender in their explanations or at least view it as being irrelevant. Marx saw women's exploitation as a product of capitalism although this was true of all workers under capitalist society. Durkheim held the belief that women were not capable of fully participating in the labour market as they were physically and emotionally too different to men; men were rational and women were not. Weber was a supporter of women's civil and social rights but despite this, his work still maintained gendered assumptions relating to the division of labour. So it is clear that classical approaches to the sociology of work looked only at men and their experience of work.

Traditional sociological class analysis assessed a woman's class position in accordance with that of her male partner. As men were seen as the head of the household, their income and status would be higher than that of their female partner

and so it is their social class that will be higher. Following from this, orthodox sociological studies of work only focused on white men and women's employment was ignored. However, a woman's class position is not always equal to that of her male partner as has been pointed out by feminists. Many women do not have a male partner so cannot be placed in a class position in this way. Also, some women earn more than their partners and therefore could be seen to be in a higher class position. Feminist researchers and theorists have sought to include women in studies of work, employment and the professions as they are an important social category in themselves.

Many feminists argue that the model of work is a patriarchal model in which women are exploited and subordinated by men. Marxist feminist, Heidi Hartmann put forward a dual systems theory of work in which a system of capitalism works alongside a system of patriarchy in order to secure the male domination of women. She claims that there is a material basis for the power of male domination and this takes the form of all social structures which enable men to control women's labour both 'public' and 'private'. She also believes that occupational segregation ensures that women are concentrated in low paying jobs and excluded from better paying jobs and the professions. This provides women's cheap labour for capitalists while in turn benefiting men as they remain in power. Domestic labour including housework, childcare and so on had previously been ignored in orthodox sociological understandings of work but feminists have tried to include it in their analyses of work. As Hartmann claims, it is another form of work carried out by women which maintains their subordination.

The segregation of employment has been of great interest to many feminist theorists especially as more women are now active in the labour market. It has been argued by some that women are now equal if not achieving more than men in the labour market. As Edwina Currie says,

‘ Socially, women’s battles have been won. We have equal opportunities in the workplace and we have sexual freedom.’ (As cited in Bradley, *Myths at Work*, 2000)

But many feminists argue that this opinion is a little hasty. Although more women take part in paid employment they are often concentrated in the lower paying jobs and in part time work which gives them little security or chance for promotion. In terms of the professions, women who have broken into the traditionally male dominated professions are still based at the lower end of the scale. For example, in education there are very few female headteachers and in medicine the majority of consultants are male. Despite some women now making steps into higher level jobs, many more women are entering low paid, insecure employment as Rubery et al show,

‘ Women have made breakthroughs into traditional male higher level jobs at the same time expanding their share of already feminized lower skilled or lower paid occupations.’ (As cited in Bradley, *Myths at Work*, 2000)

Studies by Crompton and Walby have proved that gender segregation of jobs is a predominant feature of most societies and is a major source of male social domination. There has been a feminization of certain jobs particularly of those in the service sector. Women are seen as having skills required for working in such jobs and employers know and exploit this. A study by Lisa Adkins (1995) showed how jobs in

the leisure and entertainment business make use of female employees sexuality and bodily appearance in order to attract and please customers. Part time work is mostly undertaken by women who want flexibility due to home and family responsibilities. Employers can exploit women and pay them lower wages and offer little benefits as they know that women want part time work.

Hakim has also attacked what she refers to as the myth of rising female employment. She claims that most growth in female employment has been in part time work but that very few women enter the professions. Hakim believes that women cannot be viewed as a homogenous group in terms of their experience and subordination at work. According to Hakim women deliberately chose one of three different work/family lifestyles. A very small proportion of women chose to be home centred meaning that they do not participate in paid employment but instead carry out housework and childcare. Between 10-30% of women chose to be purely work centred and the remaining 60-80% are what Hakim calls 'adaptive' as they structure their work around home and family. Hakim claims that women's choices in employment need to be addressed in order to fully understand their work. Some women do chose to stay at home and not work and this does not necessarily mean that they are being controlled by men. However, Hakim also notes that there is gender segregation in the workplace which marginalizes women.

Many feminists have highlighted the importance of the 'public' and 'private' spheres of work and Carole Pateman explores this in her influential work *The Sexual Contract* (1988). The main premise of the sexual contract is that women have been traditionally excluded from full participation in the public world of work and

employment because of the reproductive tasks they are expected to perform in the private realm. Pateman is concerned with freedom and by freedom she means an absence of subordination. Women cannot have freedom if they are not able to participate fully in the public realm of work and because of the sexual contract they are not able to do so. Pateman proposes the idea of a 'basic income' which would allow women freedom as they would not be dependant on anyone and so would be able to participate fully in both public and private spheres. It would also mean that women would only have to get married if they wanted to not just because they felt they had to in order to survive. This view may seem a little outdated as many women are able to support themselves but some women are still reliant on their male partners which means that they are not fully free.

Ann Oakley is another feminist theorist who has challenged traditional sociology for its lack of consideration of gender and its focus on paid work especially in the industrial sector which is predominantly male. Oakley was particularly interested to look at the so -called housewife and how throughout history domestic work has been viewed as women's work. In her book, *The Sociology of Housework* (1974) Oakley challenges what she calls the myth of woman's place in the home as a housewife. She says,

'The myth of the division of labour by sex describes the relegation of women to a domestic role in the family group as natural, universal and necessary.' (Oakley, 1974)

For years it has been seen as natural for a woman to work in the home hence the name housewife, but Oakley contests this saying that it is a myth which has been created by

men in order to subordinate them. If women are kept in the home carrying out domestic labour then men can control them and stop them from earning money which would free them. Until this myth is quashed, women will continue to be dominated and controlled by men and will never be equal in the labour market. However, the idea of housewife and what is traditionally women's work is so deeply embedded that even women believe their place is in the home.

Traditional sociological understandings of work have focused on work which is paid and this has excluded many women. Feminists have challenged this saying that domestic work, caring for family members and childcare should all be considered in the sociological study of work. It is also important to note that women who are in paid employment still do most if not all of the domestic work at home. This has been called the second shift as many go to work during the day then come home and start their second shift doing domestic work. Work for women is still viewed as being accommodated alongside domestic demands and responsibilities. However, many women show little overt dissatisfaction with their situation and this could be because they are trying to be a 'superwoman' as Llewelyn and Osbourne (1990) suggest. Attitudes to what is considered women's work and men's work are so deeply rooted in society that it seems impossible to ever imagine a change.

A major problem with much of the feminist analysis of work, employment and the professions is a disregard for the fact that not all women are equal and so their experiences of work will be very different. The meaning and understanding of work needs to be looked at including class, race and gender based influences. It is not just women who are marginalized in the labour market, some men are as well, notably

ethnic minorities. Amongst women there are many class and race differences and so women's experience of work is not universal. However, feminists argue that the one common experience all women have in the labour market is exploitation and domination by men.

Feminist theorists and researchers have challenged traditional understandings of work by including women in their analyses of work, employment and the professions.

Women and the work that they do cannot be ignored in sociological accounts of work as women are as much a part of society as men. They have offered useful accounts of the structure of work and of women's continual marginalisation in the labour market. They have also expanded the sociological study of work to include unpaid and domestic work.

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