

# **Gender, Place and the Labour Market**

**SARAH JENKINS**



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# Gender, Place and the Labour Market

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004 by Ashgate Publishing

Reissued 2018 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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ISBN 13: 978-0-815-38917-0 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-351-15764-3 (ebk)

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# Preface

Sarah Jenkins' research builds on a now long tradition of enquiry into the geography of women's participation in paid employment. And although, since the 1980s, the growing body of innovative feminist research in geography has become increasingly wide-ranging and diverse in theoretical and empirical perspectives and preoccupations (WGSC 1997, McDowell 1998), there has been a continuing concern with the geography of women's employment and the constraints on their labour market participation. Indeed, some of the earliest feminist geography in Britain focused on these themes (Tivers 1982, Lewis 1984). Other research has since addressed key issues including: the gendering of workplace relations; the significance of local, gendered social networks in job search and hiring; the development of local cultures of mothering; and the importance of the diversity of women's social identities to explanations of their labour market behaviour.

However, we still seek richer answers to those early questions concerning the spatial variation in women's participation in paid work. How do rates of participation vary at different spatial scales? How can we account for these variations? Are they simply a product of the geography of economic activity or – more probably – do they arise from complex interconnections between local ways of life, local patterns of gender relations and shifting structures of local employment? Are there spatial variations in practices and beliefs concerning childcare and women's participation in paid work? For example, are there spatial variations in the involvement of men in childcare, in women's views of how children should be cared for and of whether and for what hours mothers should take on paid work? Do such spatial variations only reflect differences of class or economy or, once again, are locally based social relations influential?

These questions are necessarily central to an understanding of the continuing economic inequality between women and men (Women and Equality Unit 2002). And although we have partial answers there still remains a need for more extensive analysis of the spatial variation in women's participation in paid employment and deeper research into local variation in gender relations. Sarah Jenkins' research addresses and contributes to both these key areas.

She begins by exploring the growing sophistication of research on women's labour market participation. She identifies the recent emphasis on the importance of developing theoretically informed local labour market research. Her discussion of recent national trends in women's labour market participation is followed by an analysis of Labour Force Survey statistics that identifies spatial variations in women's participation in paid work at the local authority district level. There is then a fascinating in-depth exploration of the labour market activity of a sample of women interviewed in two areas with strongly contrasting participation levels – Neath Port Talbot and West Dorset. The interviews provide the basis for a subtle and thoughtful analysis of women's labour market decision making in the two



areas. The book concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of the research, including a plea for greater practical recognition of the importance of local geographies. The research provides a clear demonstration of the continuing value of research and policy making that recognises the interdependencies of local and national socio-economic processes.

Sophie Bowlby

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# Acknowledgements

Although the name on the cover is mine, *Gender, Place and the Labour Market* has evolved due to the input, support and belief of many people.

Firstly, there are Martin Jones and Mark Goodwin who placed their belief in me at a very early stage and who have provided nothing but encouragement along the whole way. Thank you for allowing me to develop and for looking over endless earlier versions of my work. A special thanks to Martin for never failing to answer my continuous questioning and for allowing me to 'sound off' during times of panic. Thanks also go to Luke Desforges for encouraging an early interest in this subject area, and for his input during the later stages of this project. Thank you also to Sophie Bowlby for your kind words, support and encouragement with this project. My gratitude goes to the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, who provided financial support in order to help me undertake the research for this project.

Although the names of all the women who spent time chatting to me must remain anonymous, I must thank each and every one of them for opening their lives to me, inviting me into their homes and for the endless cups of tea. From listening to these women I learnt a lot, laughed a lot, ate a lot of biscuits and in some cases wanted to shed a tear. However, without their honesty, this book would not have been possible.

On a personal note, massive thanks go to mum, dad and Mark who have allowed me to follow my own path, continually supporting me the whole way. I apologise to mum and dad for taking over their office and hogging the computer during the final stages of this project – but I hope it was worth it! Mark, I have thus far avoided that job in McDonald's, but it is only a matter of time....

I am indebted to Blondie, Carys, Catho, Chrissie, Emma, Gwawr, Karen, Kelly, Linda, Mari, Philippa, Rachael, Rhi, Rhian, Rosie, Sara and Tina who have supported me through my endless years of being a student, backed my mad ideas and maintained my sanity – thanks girls, a wholehearted hug to you all!

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# List of Abbreviations

DfEE	Department for Employment and Education Now DfES (Department for Education and Skills)
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IoD	Institute of Directors
LAD	Local Authority District
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MEE	Motherhood Employment Effect (see Duncan and Savage 2002)
NPT CBC	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
ONS	Office for National Statistics
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government
WDDC	West Dorset District Council
WEU	Women and Equality Unit
WGSG	Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers
WPT	The Work and Parents Taskforce
WU	Women's Unit



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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: Women, Work and Home in the Twenty-first Century

### Introduction

*'When Lisa Gordon announced last week that she was giving up her six-figure salary to spend more time with her children, her story was widely reported in the tabloid press, but given an all-too-familiar spin. High-flying career woman, tried to have it all, discovered she couldn't, came to her senses and returned to the domestic fold.'*

*The 36-year-old corporate affairs director of Chrysalis Records, who earns £133,000 a year (she was on £336,000 until she went part-time last year), "faced the classic career woman's dilemma", it was reported. "From now on, however, school runs will take over from share prices and homework will supersede boardroom battles," says the Daily Mail.'*

(The Guardian, Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2002)

Can women really have it all? In fact, do women really want it all? Daily life in early twentieth-century society largely revolved around very clearly defined patterns amongst men and women: men overwhelmingly travelled to work in order to provide the household with an income, whilst women stayed in the home performing the domestic duties (Mackenzie 1986). Woman's role was seen firstly as that of wife and mother, and secondly as a provider of unskilled, low paid labour between leaving school and starting a family (Massey 1994). In the past fifty years there have been dramatic changes in the attitudes and perceptions towards woman's role within society. Changing structures in society such as the introduction of reliable contraception, new patterns of consumption and a restructuring of the labour market through the introduction and implementation of new technologies, have meant that more women than ever before are taking formal paid employment outside of the family home.

Entry by women into the labour market, however, has not been accompanied by any re-negotiation of their domestic role and women are still responsible for the majority of domestic tasks, regardless of their involvement in paid employment.

Little et al. (1988) and Tivers (1977) believe that this dual role places severe constraints on women's labour market activity due to the restriction that domestic duties place on the amount of time a woman has available to undertake paid employment. The UK Government is keen to promote initiatives which encourage women into the workforce, and much time is spent advocating the economic and social benefits gained from being a working mother. However, despite the Government efforts, some women maintain the opinion that it is their role to be the primary carer for their children and therefore insist that any paid formal employment must not interfere with that responsibility. A woman's own perception or interpretation of her role is as important a constraint on activities as any externally imposed restriction. Practical and tangible support can be given such as childcare (Tivers 1986, Arber and Gilbert 1982, Brannen and Moss 1991). However, childcare is not the only barrier to women, for as McDowell (1997) argues, women's working lives still differ from men's even amongst the highly educated, well-paid and childless women. Evidence of this is found within gendered cultures which form both within and outside of the workplace (see also Deal 1988, McDowell 1997, Orenstein 2000, Turner 2000).

The current UK Labour government is keen to promote *choices* for women, providing them with the opportunity to have quality time with their child(ren) at the same time as fulfilling their domestic role, whilst also allowing them to maintain a valued career position within the new economy. As the current Minister for Women puts it:

'I think ... what Government has to do, and increasingly what employers have to do, is to enable different people to make different choices about how they balance work and family, work and the rest of their lives, at different stages in their increasingly long lives. For families with children that means Government mustn't in any way dictate to families about how they balance earning and caring, paid and unpaid work. Government instead has to create the supportive environment, the provision of public services, the right employment regulatory framework to ensure that parents can make choices about how they balance earning a living and caring for their children in the ways that will suit them and their families best. And of course that commitment to greater choice, real choice for more and more parents, is entirely in line with the most fundamental values of our Government.'

(Hewitt 2002)

Given this context, and through an analysis of national, regional and local scale data, this book explores the *geography* of women's participation in the UK labour market, and investigates the factors, which both influence women's decision-making process and contribute to the formation of their perceived societal role. Exploring labour market geographies through various scales of analysis, this book starts with an investigation of women's

formal labour market participation at the national scale including an examination of government claims regarding women's labour market position within the UK and their explanations for that. I shall then move to the meso scale with an exploration of women's labour market activity at local authority district level, identifying that in fact there is a large spatial variation of women's economic activity across the UK, which is not evident at the national scale. In order to investigate an explanation for the spatial variation, I shall present the findings of discussions with individual women about the influential factors in their decision-making process regarding their participation or non-participation in the formal labour market. This book will demonstrate the importance of local social processes in addition to the role of economic factors in making labour market geographies. Furthermore, this book will explore exactly what *choices* the Government claims it provides, and what *choices* individual women feel they have when it comes to negotiating their everyday lives.

### **The Structure of This Book**

Chapter 2 situates my research within a wider context of academic debates on labour markets and their geography. I follow the development of, and draw together two very distinct sets of literature; labour market segmentation theory (see Peck 1996a) and the development of feminist debates within geography. Initially there was very little overlap between the two debates, and they developed in parallel to each other, but chapter 2 argues that within contemporary academic debate they do need to come together if we are to gain a fuller understanding of women's labour market participation (see Hakim 2000).

Chapter 3 examines women's position within the labour market from a national context. After positioning women's current UK labour market activity rates with respect to the rest of Europe, the chapter maps how women's participation within the formal labour market has changed over the last fifty years, notably increasing, as men's economic activity slowly decreases. This chapter explores the current demands and expectations on women as the UK enters a new 'knowledge based economy' (see Hakim 2000) where women's transferable skills are vital in taking the economy forward. Therefore, in order to utilise women's skills, the Government is trying to encourage mothers back into the workforce by establishing a better work:life balance through the promotion of initiatives such as flexible working, the National Childcare Strategy and increasing maternity and paternity rights. This chapter looks at UK national policy and considers what this means for individual women.

Chapter 4 moves beyond the national level to the meso scale and establishes that national level data is in fact not representative of what women are actually experiencing. This chapter demonstrates that there is a wide variation in women's economic activity rates across the UK not recognised in national level analysis.



Looking at local authority level data and through an examination of previous academic literatures, this chapter critiques the ways in which typologies have been used to explain why women's economic activity in the UK ranges from 93 per cent in West Dorset to 40 per cent in Newham.

Having established that a spatial variation of women's economic activity exists across the UK, chapter 5 highlights the methodological considerations required to move beyond a national level analysis and investigate why the variation in women's labour market activity exists. After a discussion on the benefits of using both extensive and intensive research techniques, this chapter describes how I used a combination of the two in order to gain a fuller understanding of women's labour market activity. This chapter goes on to introduce the two case study areas for this book, providing an economic geography of each area as well as an analysis of an extensive survey carried out on mothers in each of the areas, exploring their current situation regarding labour market participation.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the results of intensive research in the two case study areas, which explores in-depth the reasons why women have taken their respective decisions regarding whether to work or not work, once they have had children. Chapter 6 presents the results of in-depth interviews carried out with women at a local level in Neath Port Talbot and West Dorset, who are currently trying to combine motherhood with paid work in the formal labour market, whilst chapter 7 focuses on those women who have withdrawn from the labour market and have 'chosen' to stay at home to be a full-time mother. The interviews asked the women about their chosen 'career path' and enquired why they had *chosen* to take that particular route. Both chapters establish that rather than a single barrier existing to prevent women entering or not entering the labour market, it is in fact a complex combination of interdependencies which overlap to influence a woman's decision on whether or not she wants, and is able, to enter the formal labour market.

Having explored the issues that are important to individual women at the local level, chapter 8 draws together all the findings and explores the issue of conceptualising spatial variation in women's formal labour market participation. Drawing out the similarities and differences between the responses from the women in the two localities, this chapter highlights the impact of local social relations on the implementation and conduct of national level policies. This chapter gives prominence to the fact that some of the major influencing factors in a woman's decision-making process are dominated by locally determined social factors, rather than the broader economic factors which form the basis of nationally driven Government policy. As a result, this chapter offers suggestions on policy reform which must be considered if the Government is to offer genuine *choices* to women.

## Chapter 2

# Gendering the Labour Market

### **Introduction**

It has long been argued by labour market theorists that men and women operate in different labour market contexts (see Barron and Norris 1976, Rubery 1988, Picchio 1992, Peck 1996a). In this chapter I will attempt to trace the development of two sets of literature, which have explored women's position either within or outside of the labour market: firstly, labour market segmentation theory, which has explored women's labour market activity from its understanding of the ways in which labour markets operate; secondly, the development of literature on gender within geography which acknowledged that women operate primarily from the home, and consequently it was in fact the home which determined labour market activity not vice versa. Although these two areas of academic literature have been explored and developed separately, there are times when themes within the two literatures come together in their discussion of women's position either in the labour market or within the home. I will attempt to draw attention not only to where the links are in the two literatures, but also identify lacunae in terms of trying to explain women's position within the labour market. Both the progression of labour market theory and the development of gender literature within geography have diversified to provide a multifaceted literature base. In order to unpack the different literatures and to analyse their different contributions, I will deploy a chronological and thematic approach. By doing this, I will demonstrate their complementarities. Additionally, for the purpose of this review I will concentrate specifically on those arguments that I feel have contributed towards explaining women's decision making, regarding their subsequent role within or outside the labour market.

### **Separation of Men and Women**

Initial literature from both labour market theorists and feminist geographers treated men and women almost as two separate categories. The main goal of both first and second generation segmentation theory and the initial impetus of feminist thought within geography, was to highlight the fact that differences existed in the type of work women undertook in comparison to men. Labour market theorists argued these were due to the level of control which the labour market had and the recognition by employers that women had an alternative role outside of the

workplace which would impinge on their commitment. In contrast, feminist geographers argued that it was the alternative role of homemaker and childrearer which dictated a woman's position in or out of the labour market, which was reinforced through systems of patriarchy which existed in order to maintain women's position as subordinate to men's.

### *First Generation Segmentation*

Theories of labour market segmentation have as their basis, the notion of the dual labour market initially developed by Doeringer and Piore in the 1960s (Peck 1989a, 120; also see Doeringer and Piore 1971). Doeringer and Piore's work represents the first generation of segmentation theory, with their development of the concepts of primary and secondary sectors within the labour market. The primary sector contains jobs, which offer relatively high wages, and provides stable and secure employment to workers who can expect to enjoy some form of career progression through an internal labour market. During their research, based in the United States, Doeringer and Piore found that jobs within the primary sector were primarily occupied by white men. The secondary sector contains the market's least desirable jobs, described by Kreckel as jobs for workers with 'everyman's qualifications' (1980, 542), and consists of poor wages, poor working conditions and few opportunities for promotion. The majority of employment in this sector is associated with small firms and is, therefore, prone to strong competitive pressures, staff turnover is high and the threat of unemployment is constant. In the industrial West, the low status jobs in the secondary sector tend to be filled by ethnic minority workers, women, the disabled and young people (Peck 1996a). According to Barron and Norris there seem to be five main attributes that make a particular social group or category a likely source of secondary workers; dispensability, clearly visible social difference, little interest in acquiring training, low economism and lack of solidarity (1976, 53). Barron and Norris fit women into each of these criteria due to their relationship towards their family, and the belief shared by many women that careerism does not accord with their place in the family after marriage. Similarly, Craig et al. (1985) also see women as secondary workers believing that they are prepared to take low-paid and unrewarding jobs, not because of a weak attachment to work and limited income needs, but because of the supplementary importance of their earnings to family living standards and the constraints on their choice of job.

The secondary sector provides a great deal of the flexibility favoured by the economic system, as increases in output required in the primary sector at the peak of the business cycle can be achieved by recruiting secondary workers on a temporary basis or by subcontracting from the primary to the secondary (Peck 1996, 51). This flexibility in the secondary sector is not nearly so readily available in the primary sector, and provides just one of the reasons why women are restricted from entering the latter. Many labour market theorists have agreed that women's access to the stable sector of the labour market has been restricted, explaining that it is because they are perceived to have an 'alternative' role outside

the waged labour market to which they may be drawn (see Peck 1989a, Gordon et al. 1982, Barron and Norris 1976). It is the recognition of women's alternative role: that of homemaker and childrearer rather than a primary worker, which sparked a debate amongst geographers about the extent to which the 'predetermined societal role' has an affect on women's lives. Even for those women who do not conform to the stereotypical work pattern, the very expectation amongst employers that they will, or may conform to it serves to restrict their access to primary jobs (Peck 1989a, 130).

First generation segmentation theory, therefore, acknowledged that women occupy a different sector of the labour market to men with initial explanations for this given as the recognition of women's alternative roles. Moreover, Rubery (1988) and Picchio (1992) both believe that women are likely to remain trapped in the most unstable segments of the labour market until there is a change in their (real and perceived) position within the household division of labour, or until these household 'responsibilities' become more compatible with primary sector employment (see Peck 1989a, 130).

Explanations for women's subordinate position within the labour market have not only come from labour market theorists, but have also come from feminist geographers working in this field. Massey and Meegan (1982) suggest two factors which differentiate male and female labour. Firstly there is the ideological factor, including a belief about woman's capability and the level of skill of the work undertaken by women (which may be underestimated). Secondly, Massey and Meegan move beyond the labour market and identify the sexual division of labour outside the workplace, particularly the greater responsibility of women in domestic work and the restrictions on women's time and daily mobility. Hanson and Pratt (1995) later argue that the positioning of women in the secondary sector can be explained by a combination of both women's tendency to arrange their paid employment around the schedules of their husbands and children, and the sexist practices of male employers and employees. They suggest that male employers may be reluctant to hire women for the most prized jobs because of gendered stereotypes and worries about complaints from male employees. I feel that at this point it is worth noting that feminist geographers primarily considered the 'home role' to be the main influence in a women's decision to enter the labour market, and the consideration of the 'rules' of the labour market are a secondary influencing factor for them.

### *The Geography of Women: The Initial Argument*

In the mid to late 1970s feminist geographers sought to demonstrate that due to gender inequalities, women's access to opportunities was not equal to that of men (Bowlby et al. 1989, 160). Patterns of accessibility to transport and other services, such as childcare, conspire to constrain women's access to paid employment and other urban resources. This first phase of feminist geography initiated a recognition that women as individuals or as a class, exist under different conditions and constraints than do men. In some senses this was a similar point made by those involved in the development of first generation segmentation theory. At first such work was broad in its focus, but as