

An Analysis of the Gender Inequality Issues in the United Kingdom's Employment Relationship—Based on the Current Situation and Theoretical Approach

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Abstract

The impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on the British labor market has sparked concern for disadvantaged groups in employment relations. This paper examines the current state of gender inequality in the British labor market and the three theories that attempt to explain it: human capital theory, social and cultural norms theory, and institutional discrimination theory, to answer the question of how to improve gender inequality in the British labor market. Through a critical analysis of three approaches to equality and diversity and the principal actors in industrial relations, this paper concludes that a combination of liberal, radical, and diverse approaches is advantageous and that the state and main actors in industrial relations must collaborate more.

Keywords: managing human resource, employment relations, gender equality

1. Introduction

With the impact of COVID-19 on the UK labor market gradually emerging, the attention to equality and diversity in managing human resources is also increasing. Whether because of business cases, in which fair treatment and promotion of diversity make business sense, or in social justice cases, in which managers have a moral obligation to treat employees with dignity and respect, equality and diversity are critical components of human resource management. The scope of the paper will be limited to gender inequality in the UK's labor market, which is the most primitive and oldest form of inequality. This paper will examine gender inequality in employment in the United Kingdom and the theories that have attempted to explain it. Then will attempt to interpret how to improve gender inequality from the perspective of a theoretical approach and the collaboration between key actors in industrial relations.

2. Background: Gender Inequality in Employment in the UK

In 1874, when Emma Paterson founded the Women's Trade Union League in the United Kingdom, the fight against employment barriers for women in the United Kingdom began. Reviewing gender inequality in selection and recruitment, performance management system, and pay, it was concluded that, after approximately 150 years, widespread gender inequality in employment persisted on the UK labour market.

Gender inequality is reflected in employment selection and recruitment in the UK's labor market, which can be divided into the recruitment stage and selection stage. Recruitment refers to the development of a pool of capable candidates to apply for jobs in a company, while selection refers to the process by which managers and others utilize specialised tools to select a person most likely to succeed in the job from a pool of candidates, given management objectives and legal regulations (Bratton & Gold, 2007). Direct discrimination, in which female candidates are treated less favourably than male candidates, and indirect discrimination, in which practises, rules,

or policies apply equally to everyone but have a worse effect on women, continue to exist in the recruitment and selection processes of UK employees.

During the recruitment phase, there is a need to attract the interest of potential candidates to apply for jobs. However, the gender-code language in advertising and other recruitment channels can easily prevent males or females from applying for certain positions. Because of broader cultural stereotypes, women are perceived as more public and relationship-oriented than men, while men are more easily associated with attributes related to leadership and agency (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). This leads to some words such as leadership and analysis being more easily associated with men, while others such as support being more easily associated with women. The application of these gender code languages in job descriptions can influence the sense of belonging of different genders to the occupations, thus affecting their decision to submit resumes (Gaucher, 2011). A recent research conducted by Totaljobs reports that the use of “lead”, “analytical”, “competitive”, and other relatively masculine gender terms in job advertisements will lead to a significantly higher proportion of men than women sending out CVs (Whincup, 2018).

In the selection stage, it can be seen from the statistics of the response rate that there is discrimination against women in the selection process, and it is still questionable whether the application of artificial intelligence can alleviate such discrimination. A UK study that focuses primarily on the impact of social class indicators found that an applicant's gender had a measurable effect on application response rates (Jackson, 2009), suggesting that male applicants were more likely to receive response than female ones. Another earlier study conducted in the UK Labour market showed that when all other productivity determinants were held constant, female job seekers applying for engineering positions were 20% less likely to be returned than male job seekers (Riach, 2006). Meanwhile, the process of applying artificial intelligence to reduce discrimination faces algorithmic difficulties. As a new screening method advocated by major companies recently, artificial intelligence based on machine learning sometimes will amplify the inequality in the selection process because of historical gender ratios in recruitment data (Caccavle, 2021). Amazon's recruitment algorithm before 2015, for example, demoted resumes with “women” or references to women's colleges/universities after a decade of machine learning of resumes submitted to the company (Guardian, 2018).

Additionally, gender inequality is also reflected in employee performance management. Performance management is a collection of interconnected techniques that are used to track an individual's overall capabilities and potential. In addition to guiding goal setting, performance appraisal can also affect employees' promotion and development opportunities (Gaucher, 2011). Correll et al. (2010) believe that the existing management mechanism easily produces biases favouring men, leading to the glass ceiling of female employees. Although the proportion of women on the boards of FTSE 100 companies increased from 12.5% in 2010 to 40% in 2021 (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2022), women account for only about one third of all middle and senior management positions in the UK (UNECE, 2020), reflecting that the glass ceiling for women still exists. And at least part of this can be attributed to unfair performance management mechanisms. According to a survey conducted in the technology industry (Snyder, 2014), women are more likely to receive performance appraisals including critical feedback, when they exhibit similar characteristics to men. The biased selection and recruitment system and the glass ceiling caused by performance management contribute to gender pay inequality.

Gender inequality still exists in the pay and reward in the UK, and differences between males' and females' working patterns are predicted to be one reason for the amplification of gender pay inequality in the post-epidemic era. As one of the most important aspects of employee relationship, salary is not only related to the quality of life of the family and the income of the company but also affects incentives and productivity (Purcell & Wright, 2007). In the UK, although the gender pay gap has narrowed considerably over the past two decades, there is still a gap of about 15.4% until 2021 (White, 2021), which means that the median gross hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of women are 15.4% lower than those of men. Considering that the proportion of women working part-time is about three times of men (Irvine et al., 2022) and part-time workers are more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic (Cockett et al., 2021), there is a risk of this figure being magnified in the post-pandemic era.

3. Explanations Behind the Gender Inequality

Gender inequality in the workplace will negatively impact organizational engagement and operational effectiveness. Moreover, gender inequality in the workplace is linked to the distribution of social resources, which impacts the social inclusion of a region or nation. Initially, the cause of gender inequality in the labor market was attributed to differences in ability between the sexes, but institutional discrimination theory and social and cultural norms theory appear to provide a more compelling explanation.

Originated from Becker's book *Human Capital* and published in 1964, the Human Capital theory put forth the argument that the disparity in income, much of which was thought to be a compensatory consequence of

differences in training duration (Becker, 1964). Under this perspective, gender inequality in employment is due to the fact that men invest more time and resources in education and career, which leads to men's productivity advantage over women (Brynin, 2017). In the beginning, the criticism of this theory mainly focuses on how it simplifies people into machines and inanimate objects (Teixeira, 2014). As women become more educated, human capital theory explains the shrinking of gender inequality. Since the 2010-2011 academic year, women have made up the majority of new undergraduate students in the UK (Office for Students, 2021). Meanwhile, the proportion of full-time female employees receiving employer-paid training and obtaining new qualifications is higher than that of male full-time employees (Olsen et al., 2010). Although the female part-time employees who take up around one third of total female employment receive less training opportunities (Olsen et al., 2010), it is difficult for human capital theory to explain gender inequality in isolation from social, cultural and institutional factors when there is growing evidence that women invest no less in education and vocational training than men. Manning and Swaffield (2008) show that the discontinuous difference in the labor market affects gender inequality. Goldin (2008) report that childcare affects women's employment prospects over the life course. These studies show that employment gender inequality is affected by the family-work balance and the expectation from social and cultural norms.

Social and cultural factors cannot be ignored when considering employment inequality. From this perspective, gender inequality in employment originated from normative discrimination against women, which disadvantages women due to expectations of social and cultural norms. Normative discrimination against women in employment is reflected in the maternal penalty and the division of housework. First of all, maternal punishment is used to describe women who have mothers as more likely to be discriminated against in the workplace (Correll & Wynn, 2018). Although some studies have shown that women during pregnancy and parenting may develop planning and organizational skills, flexibility, and multitasking skills that contribute to their success in their future careers (Gardiner, 2007), the beliefs about mothers being less committed to work than non-mothers continue to exist (Correll & Wynn, 2018). Benard & Correll (2010) show that this belief comes from the inconsistency between the qualities of success in the paid labor market from a male perspective, such as dominance and assertiveness, and expectations of cultural norms for mothers, including warmth and nurturing. Such normative discrimination reduces employment opportunities for women. According to a survey faced by mothers in the UK, 9% of mothers reported that they were not fully informed about promotion opportunities while on maternity leave (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016).

Walker & Woods (1976) show that the more children a family has, the more time women spend on unpaid housework. This reflects another normative discrimination against women – the unfair division of housework. Although the female labour force participation rate in the UK has risen dramatically over the past two decades (Irvine et al., 2021), housework and childcare are still seen as women's tasks in the UK (Zamberlan et al., 2021). Some classify this as a result of men working longer hours and having less time left after work (Hiller, 1984). However, studies have shown that in couples where women work longer hours than their husbands, women continue to bear a greater share of housework than their husbands (Lachance & Bouchard, 2010), reflecting the impact of social norms on the division of housework. Unpaid housework had an important impact on women's careers. Olsen et al (2010) show that the time spent on family care positively correlates with the gender pay gap.

Different from the human capital theory which explained the inequality from the supply side, Institutional discrimination theory tries to explain workplace inequality from the perspective of the organization. This theory believes that discrimination is deeply rooted in organizational processes and culture (Breadwell, 2017). Although the theory ignores the influence of managers in the implementation of procedures, the discrimination in institutional processes and culture revealed by the theory can help guide organizations to take action. For the process, although more and more organizations are adopting formalized bureaucratic procedures to eliminate the influence of attributional characteristics (Correll et al., 2020), there is still some space for informal processes. One example is word-of-mouth recruitment, where research shows that 63.5% of employees tend to recommend people of the same sex (Recruiter.com, 2021). Given that men still dominate management positions, this makes women and people with small social circles vulnerable to discrimination (Hudson & Runge, 2020). Institutional discrimination is also reflected in the organization's culture. Some long-established and deeply embedded cultures can influence specific social groups by making them feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. One example is the "long-hours" culture. Around two-thirds of British employees think that long hours are part of their working culture, and over three-quarters of respondents believe that working long hours is a condition for higher pay (Kodz et al., 1998). Given that women in the UK work an average of 31 hours a week, far fewer than men's 41 hours (Carbery & Cross, 2013), women in "long hours" cultures are more likely to face difficulties. Another example in the UK is the "pub culture". Because of the importance of high-context communication in an English workplace (Hall, 1976), the pub is like "an extended office"—a place to gain cultural and social capital by building professional relationships (Rimstad, 2021). For women, the need for family and child responsibilities as mothers prevents them from going to bars after work like male employees, which may reduce their chances of

promotion and new projects in the company (Rimstad, 2021). Overall, employment gender inequality in modern Britain is greatly affected by social and cultural norms and institutional discrimination. The human capital theory cannot explain the employment gender inequality in isolation from social, cultural and institutional factors.

4. How to Improve Gender Inequality in the United Kingdom's Employment Relationship?

4.1 Liberal, Radical or Diversity Approach?

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has dominated British politics (Hall et al., 2013), resulting in liberal approach becoming the primary paradigm for UK equality and diversity policy. Liberal approach is based on the principle of the "sameness approach", which believes that individuals should have the opportunity to be obtained and evaluated in the workplace regardless of their social group (Kirton & Greene, 2015). Under the guide of this principle, the liberal approach holds that equality should be realized by emphasizing the procedure of justice and the strategies of fair equal opportunities such as equal recruitment based on competency and positive actions that assist disadvantaged people should be applied (Kirton & Greene, 2015). Although historically, liberalism has provided a commitment to equality and promoted the development of women's rights (Levey, 2005), the limitations of the liberal approach can not be ignored. On the one hand, some working culture and unintentional institutional discrimination of employees are fundamentally informal and difficult to bureaucratize and formalize, which make the equality procedures difficult to develop. On the other hand, the disregard for inherent stereotypes cannot change the prejudices of cultural and social norms.

Given the limitations of the liberal approach, proponents of the radical approach believe that positive discrimination policies, the policies that benefit certain social groups as a compensation for the structural disadvantages suffered by these social groups, should be implemented, while proponents of the diversity approach believe that inequality issues should be addressed by applying the diversity management. According to the radical approach theory, which emphasises equal outcomes over equal procedures, direct intervention should be used in order to achieve employment equality and diversity within an acceptable time frame (Burton, 2014). However, despite supporters' belief that positive discrimination policies can create favourable conditions for revolutionary change to spread more quickly and widely throughout organisations (Noon, 2011), positive discrimination policies are unlikely to be widely accepted in the United Kingdom. This reflected on policies based on a radical approach, such as positive discrimination, are viewed as a violation of the fundamental principle of meritocracy in the United Kingdom (Department for Transport, 2021). Otherwise, the women and other disadvantage groups in Cockburn research (1989) opposed the concept of what they perceived as favouritism because of fear of retaliation by dominating groups. On the other side, the diversity approach suggests that diversity management should be applied to promote equality and diversity in the employment. The diversity management emphasizes increasing business value by recognizing, nurturing and celebrating individual differences (Carberry & Cross, 2013). From the perspective of diversity management, the contradiction between the dominant group and the disadvantaged group caused by interest demands has been eliminated by emphasizing individual differences. Meanwhile, the corporate cultural transformation advocated by diversity management can contribute to the elimination of institutional discrimination and stereotypes (Kirton & Greene, 2015). Nevertheless, critics of the diversification model believe that the diversity approach driven by business cases is dependent on the economic premise (Dickens, 2006). At the same time, eroding group differences may weaken the effectiveness of collective bargaining, thus limiting employees' ability to bargain with employers (Greene et al., 2005) and the view that deep-seated social discrimination will be ignored based on business cases (Kaler, 2001).

4.2 The Need for Collaboration Between State and Main Actor in the UK's Industrial Relationship

The application of various equality and diversity theories is reflected not only in the employment relationship between employees and employers, but also in the operations of other major actors in industrial relations, such as trade unions, the state, and legal regulation enforcers. In light of the limitations of all three approaches and the broader social context at play, the improvement of gender inequality in the British labor market requires collaboration between key actors and the state.

In terms of legal regulations, both past equality laws and the existing equality laws of Great British (including England, Scotland, and Wales) are mainly based on neoliberalism (Hall et al., 2013). The development of the law underwent the process from antidiscrimination to the pursuit of equality, from uneven and incomplete to complete (Dickens, 2007). Hepple (2010) divided Great Britain's employment equality legislation into five generations, from the Race Relations Act 1965 to the Equality Act 2010. The development of equality legislation is affected by internal factors such as protests from disadvantaged groups and external factors such as the influence of European Union courts (Dickens, 2007). By 2010, the equality act prohibited both indirect and direct discrimination against nine protected characteristics in service and public functions, employment, education, associations, and transport (Government Equalities Office, 2015). As the law unifies the previous laws and clarifies the definitions of discrimination, exerting a crucial impact on equality and diversity in

employment, the equality act 2010 has been referred to as a major accomplishment in the pursuit of equal rights (Hepple, 2010).

Although the equality laws are intended to reduce both direct and indirect discrimination, there are limitations that make them difficult to implement without state support. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, as the main statutory body, was stripped by the government of the duties to promote equality in society and has been left merely as an enforcer of the law, limiting its performance (Kirton & Greene, 2021). Besides, the EOA relied on the ability of individuals to exercise their rights under its protection (Dickens, 2008). However, the financial cost of the employment tribunal system and low legal awareness among disadvantaged groups may become hindrances to individual complaints (BIS, 2014; Dickens, 2008).

At the same time, some of the voices that criticize the reliance of Legal regulation on the individual complaints system come from the trade unions, who believe that the focus on the individual rather than the social group may weaken the collective bargaining effectiveness of trade unions. Although the unions have a mixed record historically on bargaining for workplace equality (Dickens et al., 1988), equality is now firmly on the agenda, and progress has been made through political and campaigning activities. The Trade Union Congress, as the main channel through which the trade union movement attempts to influence public opinion, political parties, and the government, has always sought to influence political and public opinion since around 2010 (Kirton & Greene, 2021). For instance, the TUC worked on a public petition organized by the campaigning group Race on the Agenda to protest the possible repeal of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) in the Equality Act 2010. Finally, more than 3,000 signatures helped to ensure that the government's 2013 review of the Equality Act did not contain a recommendation to remove the PSED (TUC, 2013).

In addition to the insufficient representation of women and other vulnerable groups in the equality representatives of trade unions, the main restriction on trade unions in promoting gender equality is the decline of trade union influence, which also requires communication and cooperation with the government. Since the number of UK trade union members reached its peak in the 1970s, the number sharply declined in the 1980s and 1990s (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2020). Though the UK's trade union membership levels among employees rose from 2017 to 2020, the trade union density in the private sector stayed at a low level (TUC, 2020). An essential factor in the decline of the influence of British trade unions is the social contract signed between the labor government and trade unions in the late 1970s. Before that, the British government encouraged "voluntarism", suggesting solving problems through bargaining power (Flanders, 1975). After that, the British government provided a minimum of personal legal power in exchange for trade unions' entering into the legal framework stipulated by the government (Blyton & Turnbull, 2004). Colling & Terry (2010) pointed out that the restriction on trade union policy is only one reason for the decline of trade unions. The deep reason is that the government-led privatization economic policy has significantly reinforced the competition faced by trade union-concentrated industries. In general, except from being an economic manager, the role of the state, as a collaborator and support provider for the main actors in industrial relations, has a vital impact on the improvement of gender equality in Britain's labor market.

5. Conclusion

Due to the importance of equality and diversity for employment relations, it is valuable to discuss the factors affecting equality and diversity in order to promote the business case in the workplace or to explore the social justice extension of employment contracts. Because of social and cultural norms and deeply rooted institutional discrimination, gender inequality is still widespread in employment in the UK, which reflects on the selection and recruitment, performance management and pay aspect of employment. Meanwhile, the existing equality opportunity policies has defects, but the other two mainstream methods, the radial approach and diversity approach, also have limitations. To promote diversity and equality in employment, the collaborations between the state and the main actors in industrial relations are necessary. Future research on cultural transformation and the balancing of the three approaches will be beneficial. The former can more effectively eliminate inequality by eradicating social and cultural norms, while the latter can provide solutions for the government to participate more effectively in addressing gender discrimination.

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