



Gender Equality and Employment. Diversity Day, Sciences Po & Renault, Paris, 29 May 2008

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GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPLOYMENT

Hélène PÉRIVIER, Researcher, OFCE-Sciences Po

It is always somewhat frustrating to have to discuss such a vast topic in a limited amount of time, but I do thank you for having invited me to take part in this Round Table. My contribution will be structured around three questions:

Is gender inequality a reality on the labour market today?

Is gender inequality fair or effective?

How can we fight those inequalities?

GENDER INEQUALITY ON THE LABOUR MARKET

Gender inequality is obviously a reality today on the labour market, in all countries, though to varying degrees.

In all developed countries, women are less-represented in the active population and are more affected by unemployment when they do come on the market. In France, female unemployment is two to three points higher than that of men. As in other countries, they work most often part-time: 85% of part-time positions are held by women. When they do work full-time, they are less inclined to remain at the office late, as they have other constraints on their schedule, hence lower salary and slower career development. Thus, there is clearly inequality where the quantity and volume of jobs are concerned.

In terms of quality, too, the situation is imbalanced. In France and elsewhere, women tend to be in specific sectors (social work, education) and men in others. Indeed, the labour market appears to reproduce the traditional roles of men and women, with women often employed to perform tasks they already do in their homes. This means that women and men both are not able to enter different areas.

Similarly, in all countries and to a very noticeable extent, the glass ceiling phenomenon is very strong: as one moves up the ladder in terms of responsibility and salary, the percentage of women present declines, often to zero, despite their holding high-level degrees and being present on the labour market. The positions which they do hold are often in the service sector and are unstable. As such, they have less access to vocational training and, thus, fewer opportunities on the labour market than men.

Salary, the indicator of all inequalities on the labour market, tells a story that is no different. There is a difference of approximately 25% between male and female salaries in France, due to a combination of working hours, pure discrimination unexplained by any economic factor (one-fourth of the reason) and the sectors in which women work (one-third of the reason).

INEQUALITIES: FAIR AND EFFECTIVE?

The inequalities I described above are obviously unfair and, like Professor McCrudden, I see that injustice as reason enough, alone, to do everything in our power to fight them.

Some people assert that men and women are biologically programmed to play different roles in society, women in the home and men in the workplace. Yet, even assuming this is true, women



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should receive a salary as mothers, with the social rights and economic freedom that they need. Therein, the current situation can be described as unfair. I believe that there is no biological programming where work is concerned and that each individual should be able to develop, whether in the workplace or at home, as he or she desires. There too, there is injustice, in that women cannot give free rein to a career plan like men do.

FIGHTING INEQUALITIES

In France, no significant advances have been made with regard to gender equality for the last fifteen years. The first causes of this status quo are to be sought in the home: no matter what they have done during the day, women continue to be responsible for the bulk of the housework, taking care of the children, cleaning, doing groceries, etc., without any significant or increasing assistance from their spouse. An INSEE study shows that male participation in housework has increased by only five minutes in the last fifteen years, whereas women are working more and more. There comes a point when the male must become more involved in family life and the overall role-sharing must be adjusted to accommodate two working parents. This obviously requires, from the very early stages of parenthood, public policies that help the working population organise differently.

The laws exist already, as concerns gender equality in the workplace, yet French women fail to mobilise them and, in this respect, are far behind their American counterparts. Only 6% of the complaints lodged with the HALDE involve gender discrimination, and they come primarily from men. Indeed, surprisingly, men who are denied their pensions or family subsidies turn to the HALDE, while a woman who returns from maternity leave to find that her salary has not increased with the overall pay scale does not. This means that it is not enough to devise laws; one must also communicate about them, enforce them and ensure they are used.

Also central to equality in the workplace is the question of function. In France, affirmative action does exist, but is difficult to implement. The suggested quota for women on major corporations' Boards of Directors is only 20%, and is even being re-examined as potentially unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the Norwegians have successfully enforced a quota of 40%. Clearly, there and elsewhere, strong-handed action can and will bring progress in addressing the issue of inequalities between men and women on the labour market.