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Introduction *Gender and Working Life*

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Analysis of occupational segregation by sex and gendered practices in the workplace are complex, multidimensional and contested fields of research and academic discourse. Since the 1960s, we have seen a rapid growth in both quantity and quality of academic work in this field. Earlier simplistic main (male) stream as well as straightforward feminist explanations has been roundly criticised and deconstructed. It is now clear that the study of gender relations in working life is far more complicated than it was believed decades ago.

The central question in gender research is how gendered structures – in which men in general have more power, more prestigious positions and higher pay – are reproduced in a world in which demography, economy, production, education and therefore society and family have changed over time. Nordic countries represents an interesting geographical arena to examine gender relations in working life, because many factors, which have been seen in other countries as causes for female subordination, appear in other forms.

At present, the labour force participation rate of women in Nordic countries is nearly equal to that of men, but there are still substantial differences. Women are better educated than men, and also, to a large extent unionised. Although these factors make Nordic women stand out globally, gender equality at work or at home has not yet been achieved. The male breadwinner is still a societal norm and a construct, which conditions the behaviour of organisations and individuals in many circumstances in working life. This influence can be obvious or obscure. From the 1990s, research has turned to focus also on the fate of the male workforce during deindustrialisation and global restructuring. Participation rate of men in gainful employment have diminished in all industrialised countries (Crouch; 1999, Walby; 1997). Nordic countries are not an exception to this trend. Men's difficulties to adapt to a new service- and care society offers new perspectives on the rigid gendered segregation of industries and occupations in Nordic countries (Bergholm; 2011.)

The rapid rise of the welfare states not only created new privileges for working women, but also increased the existing ones, such as parental leave, care for children and elderly, health care and education. The Nordic welfare states were partly built by women, and they were (and are) to some extent for the benefit of women and the welfare services are primarily provided by women. Yet, despite all these structural, economic, social, legal, and even organisational changes, equality at work or at home has not yet been achieved.

Not only have the circumstances concerning the gendered labour market changed as a result of the transmission from an industrial to a service society. The focus in gender research has also changed radically.



In the 1960s and 1970s, the gendered labour market was viewed as a result of the different values and aspirations of the two sexes. Gender differences were considered an effect of the different kind of upbringing the two genders were exposed to, and women's marginal position on the labor market was understood as an effect of the different gender roles. This perspective was radically changed as a consequence of the cultural turn in the social sciences in the 1990s.

Rather than focusing primarily on the unequal legal and economic status of men and women, meaning and language became the central issue. This implied that identity construction and discourses became important subjects for gender studies (Scott 1988). The two genders were not only seen as objects but also as agents and gender identity was now perceived as constantly produced and reproduced in interaction with the ways a given society at different times and in different contexts defined femininity and masculinity. On the one hand, it is up to the individual to decide how to 'do' gender. On the other, the choices are structurally restricted: some choices concerning occupation and family responsibilities are more recognizable and therefore more desirable than others. This explains why gender inequality continues to exist in the Nordic countries even though women have education equal to that of men and social movements and public authorities have made efforts to reduce gender discrimination.

But what are the origins of these gendered values? The American Sociologist Joan Acker (2011) suggest that processes of gender segregation are a product of the division between the paid economy and the unpaid economy of family and daily reproduction of life. She argues that the goals and organization of unpaid family labor are different from paid work because responses to personal needs can not be handed off to the next shift when the work-day is over. These differences create practical problems for those who divide their efforts between these incompatible work regimes. Women are most frequently the ones who must deal with balancing the two together for both practical and ideological reasons. This produces different images of workers. The employee who can give all to the organization is stereotyped as a man, whereas the employee who is less dedicated to paid work is stereotyped as a woman. Her actual family status is not considered relevant and she pays a high price for this. According to Acker this implicitly justifies low pay for women and support for the ongoing creation of gender segregated jobs. Men avoid female typed work, including unpaid domestic work, because it is devalued, low waged or unpaid, and therefore threatening to male status and male income advantages. Thus, both vertical and horizontal sex segregation and sex segregation across the unpaid family labor – paid labor divide is maintained.

In this issue, we present six examples of contemporary research on gender relations in work life, examples that all contest the notion that job categories are gender neutral. The articles show that what is expected from the 'ideal employee' concerning career choice, appearance, working hours and the like differ profoundly depending on the gender of the employee. Certain forms of appearance, such as obesity will have a stronger excluding effect for female employees than for male employees, and some career trajectories are more acceptable for women than for men and vice versa. Employers' expectations concerning career paths and work hours also differ depending on the gender of the employees.

The Danish contribution by Lotte Bloksgaard analyzes the horizontal gender segregation in the Danish labour market. The article presents new knowledge about gender making processes that create horizontal gender segregation in the labour market. The author investigates how societal and cultural constructions of and relations between

gender and work influences the thoughts and actions of women and men in working life. The paper is based on two studies of women in male jobs and men in feminine jobs. The studies are based on interviews with male nurses and female police officers, and male healthcare workers and female electrical technicians. These groups were chosen to illustrate the importance of gender for the choice of profession and work. The analysis shows how professions and work tasks are created and marked as either 'masculine' or 'feminine' and how women and men generally try to live up to the societal and cultural ideas of 'gender appropriate behaviour'.

The Finnish contribution by Juho Härkönen, Pekka Räsänen and Matti Näsis concerns the relationship between obesity, unemployment and earnings among Finnish men and women. The aim is to illustrate how the conception of the ideal work-force excludes women from the more attractive jobs in the labour market. The empirical data form part of the Finnish European Community Household Panel (ECHP) data. According to the data, obese women have a significantly higher risk of unemployment (even after standardizing age, level of education and other related factors), than those of normal weight. Furthermore, the generally weaker professional position of obese women is evident in lower earnings and weaker labour market attachment. Obese women are also more inclined to drift away from the employment sector and into socio-economically weaker positions. Similar results were not found among men. The results indicate that gender discrimination is very much present in the Finnish labour markets. The article concludes that this issue represents a form of inequality that will have an increasing significance in the future.

In the Norwegian contribution Tove Håpnes and Bente Rasmussen discuss the culture and normalization of long hours which 'genders' organizations and has negative consequences for the opportunities for women (and men) who want to have a life and a family outside the workplace. It is a challenge to organize work around the needs of children and to limit the hours spent working without risking stigmatization as uncommitted workers. By comparing two family-friendly work places the authors show how the caring and responsible organization offers opportunities for career, but also individualize the responsibility for parenting by allowing parents to reduce their work hours, but without reducing their responsibilities. The result is that parents feel obliged to work full time for reduced pay. In contrast the market driven research organization with more transactional employment contracts and bureaucratic systems for accounting for paid and worked hours, allow parents to administer their working hours and work the hours they get paid for. As a result, the relational contract can be analyzed in the terms of a gift economy where the workers feel obliged to act in the interest of the company, i.e. not calculating hours.

The Swedish contribution by Liselotte Jakobsen, Cecilia Nahnfeldt, Christina Olin-Scheller, Erica Sandlund illustrates the dilemmas an employee can have in relation to work and family issues. The appraisal interview is one example of a contemporary form of employer-employee dialogue in organisations. However, as is demonstrated here, work-related stress and work-life balance clash with institutional goals of optimal performance and ideal stress management. This in turn makes it a risky business for the employee to bring up problems related to the management of stress and work-life balance. The aim of the paper is to identify and understand the conditions for an egalitarian and socially sustainable work life, with a particular focus on the possibilities for the single employee to obtain balance between work and other parts of life. Underlying norms regarding ideal employee approaches to stress emerge and are upheld in the talk and actions of participants. The unequal power relations between employee and employer



underscore this aspect and there are reasons to believe that these conversations are not the best place for discussing problems concerning stress and work/life balance.

The Finnish contribution by Satu Ojala comprises a discussion of why employees in a high-level labour market position feel obliged to work in their private sphere and in their free time. By combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, the author concludes that supplemental work is a two-edged phenomenon. Supplemental work comprises both fascinations and pressures that lie with employees themselves, in their organisations and society. Employees evaluate and respond to this often conflicting complexity in different ways, for example by engaging in informal work. Being able to apply one's own ideas at work and seeing one's own work as productive characterizes all work done at home. At the same time, the paper suggests that supplemental work may mostly be driven by time pressure, tight deadlines and heavy workload. Even if knowledge work allows and encourages freedom and autonomy, it usually necessitates personal responsibility and self-assessment of the result. The article suggests that a new concept of time has emerged in the high-level labour market. The need for quantitative measures of time does not fit with the qualitative nature of new work processes.

The last paper in this volume is written by Hans Lundkvist, and is based on an interactive research project where the aim was to describe and analyze a process of forming knowledge about gender relations in the work place that could be used by both employers and employees. The objective was to identify ways to establish egalitarian workplaces. The employer's ideal would be to find qualified labour by being branded as a gender equal workplace and thereby perceived as an attractive workplace. One branch of feminist research aspires to be applicable e.g. to contribute to increased equal opportunity, just as action research is aimed to improve workplaces. In a way, this project combines these two traditions in its ambition to establish a platform that creates knowledge, democracy and change.

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