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Gender, Equality and Industrial Relations in the ‘New Europe’:
An Introduction

ABSTRACT • This introduction draws together the broad themes discussed in the articles presented in this special issue, placing cross-national similarities and differences in gender, equality, and industrial relations within a broader conceptual and policy context. As a field of study, industrial relations traditionally downplays the salience of gender and other identity characteristics; however, the European policy context now firmly supports the positioning of gender and equality as key issues within the industrial relations system.

Introduction

This is a critical juncture in European industrial relations: the boundaries of the EU are shifting and gender and other equality issues are firmly on the European agenda. Women and minority ethnic workers comprise an increasing proportion of labour in the ‘New Europe’, but experience continuing inequalities and disadvantage. However, gender and equality are still neglected issues in industrial relations (Hansen, 2002; Wacjman, 2000).

This special issue of the European Journal of Industrial Relations addresses gender and equality as central concerns. The following articles explore gender and equality in a range of ‘old’ and ‘new’ EU states and in one applicant for membership, Turkey. These countries display different economic situations, trade union structures and identities, social and cultural norms, and state policy backgrounds, all of which shape the gender, equality, and industrial relations contexts. The authors focus on gender and ‘race’ as key issues of equality policy in the EU. However, we recognize that other dimensions of workforce diversity, such as disability, sexuality and age, are (or should be) part of the equality agenda.
Placing Gender and Equality Within Industrial Relations

In this section, we consider first some conceptual issues concerning the place of gender and equality within industrial relations, then discuss the role of individual actors in the employment relationship and lastly explore the meaning of equality.

The label ‘industrial relations’ carries connotations associated with male-dominated heavy industry, trade unions, and strikes. This has had consequences for what is considered legitimate territory for research. Just as important, since this is a policy-oriented field of study, the dominant masculine construction of industrial relations has contributed to the invisibility of gender and equality. While this traditional understanding of industrial relations is less widespread today, as a field of study it still commonly neglects gender, women’s and equality issues (Forrest, 1993; Greene, 2002; Hansen, 2002; Wacjman, 2000).

Part of the problem is a tendency to use class as the principal concept to theorize social inequality. As feminist authors argue, such theories cannot explain gendered or racialized social divisions and power relations, which become subsumed within class (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1993; Gottfried, 1998; Pollert, 1996). However, it is of course necessary to engage with class, as there are without doubt class variations in the way that gender and race are experienced in the labour market. Hence, there have been calls for greater sensitivity to gender within class analysis (Walby, 1997) and to class within gender analysis (Bradley, 1999): in other words, neither class nor gender analysis is complete without the other. In addition, there is now greater sensitivity to the intersecting nature of gender and race inequalities in the feminist sociological literature. Industrial relations research must now incorporate different forms of identity and social inequality into the analysis of employment and the employment relationship, rather than treating class as the central concern.

This brings us to the role of individuals within industrial relations, which traditionally studies the employment relationship from a collective perspective, with employers, trade unions and the state as the main actors within the industrial relations system (Dunlop, 1958). Yet, though the historical and contemporary policies and actions of the main collective actors largely explain the patterns of inequality and disadvantage across Europe, it is important to acknowledge the agency of individuals in navigating the institutional context. This ties in with calls for gender analysis to be grounded in women’s and men’s everyday lives (Gottfried, 1998; Pollert, 1996) and for industrial relations research to focus on social processes as well as institutions (Kelly, 1998). In this way, we can come to understand how individuals experience and respond to the contexts they face, and therefore what kind of policy initiatives might progress the equality agenda.
To what extent are women’s patterns and experiences of employment a function of choice or constraint? There are still polarized positions emanating from different schools of rational-choice analysis (Hakim, 1991) and patriarchy (Beechey and Perkins, 1987), but most feminist authors now reflect the theories of the ‘duality of structure’ and ‘knowl-edgeability’ proposed by Giddens (1982, 1984). For example, Walby (1997: 24) states that ‘women make choices, but not under conditions of their own making. They choose the best option that they can see, ration-ally, though usually with imperfect knowledge, but only within the range of options open to them’. The question of ‘choice’ and constraint is one that is useful to pursue from a gender perspective, as again an understand-ing of the conditions under which particular choices are made by gendered (and racialized) individuals can assist in equality policy formul-ation.

But what does equality mean? As Rubery (2002: 502) points out, progress towards equality cannot be assessed unless it is clear what a more equal society would look like. In addition, understandings of its meaning inevitably influence the equality strategies and policies the industrial relations actors pursue. Jewson and Mason (1986) distinguish between liberal and radical approaches to equality. The former holds that equality exists ‘when all individuals are enabled freely and equally to compete for social rewards’. The role of the policy-maker is to devise measures to facilitate fair competition; for example, governments might increase childcare provision and public bodies might produce literature in minority languages. At the heart of this approach is the belief that fair procedures will result in fair outcomes.

In contrast, the radical approach sees a need to intervene directly in order to achieve a fair distribution of rewards: the role of the policy-maker is to devise interventions and make decisions that will redress inequalities of outcome. This could include positive discrimination in employment. Both approaches have been criticized. The liberal approach is considered unable to deliver equality, while the more interventionist radical approach is often perceived negatively as reverse discrimination, special treatment, or tokenism. In response to these criticisms, Cockburn (1991) suggests an alternative concept of ‘transformational’ equality strategy, one with both ‘short’ and ‘long’ agendas. The former treats the symptoms of discrimination and disadvantage, resonant with the liberal approach. The latter is a project of transformation, which acknowledges the need of disadvantaged groups for access to power, and has echoes of the radical approach. The concept of ‘gender mainstreaming’ adopted by the EU fits with the idea of transformational equality because it involves subjecting all policies to examination to ensure that a gender-equality perspective is incorporated (Rees, 1998). There is, however, a detectable shift in discourse, particularly among employers, from the traditional
concepts of equality outlined here towards a discourse of diversity. The latter approach is much broader than traditional concepts of equality in terms of the dimensions of discrimination, disadvantage, and identity it includes. However, there is concern that diversity management with its emphasis on the individual, top-down managerial activity, and the business case for equality, represents a significant dilution of the equality agenda (Kirton and Greene, forthcoming).

The European Policy Context

How do these debates connect with the broader European policy context? Below, we review the EU strategy of gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities and the equality strategies and policies of the European trade union movement.

The European Employment Strategy (EES), agreed at the Luxembourg Jobs Summit in 1997, contained a commitment to equal opportunities as one of its four pillars. Revisions in 2003 replaced the four pillars with three ‘overarching and interrelated objectives’ (full employment, quality and productivity at work, and social cohesion and inclusion). Controversially, equality is no longer an ‘overarching objective’, but promoting gender equality in employment and pay, combating discrimination against disadvantaged groups and mainstreaming gender and equality are still defined as priorities for action (Rubery et al., 2003). There is of course a risk that the loss of the equal opportunities pillar will allow member states to downplay equality issues (Rubery et al., 2003), but it is also possible that the mainstreaming approach will stimulate a broader conception of equality issues moving beyond a policy emphasis on gender.

In 2004, the EU made country-specific recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the EES, recommending that 18 countries prioritize gender-related issues, including the gender pay gap, broadening and increasing employment access and opportunities for women and improving access to childcare and flexible work arrangements (EC, 2004). The two latter recommendations reflect the need to make it possible to combine work and family life. Increasing the availability of childcare was recommended particularly for western European countries; while for Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), family-friendly work arrangements and more part-time work were to be the key mechanisms for promoting gender equality. However, the Commission recognized that some member states have promoted flexibility with little regard for the impact on gender equality. Critics have also argued that strengthening rights to family-friendly working conditions might not promote gender equality, but instead, simply
Kirton & Greene: An Introduction

reinforce (or create) the ‘male breadwinner model’ with negative consequences for women’s pay and work prospects (Hardy and Adnett, 2002). This is particularly apposite in the case of the CEECs, where part-time work is uncommon (see Pollert in this issue).

Some 17 countries were urged to develop policies to improve the labour market prospects of minority ethnic groups (EC, 2004), a recommendation directed particularly to countries with ‘guest workers’ (Austria and Germany) and to ‘new immigration’ countries (Spain and Portugal). Non-western (or third-country) nationals tend to be the most disadvantaged in the European labour market, concentrated in so-called ‘three D jobs’ (dirty, dangerous and demanding) (Wrench et al., 2003). In the CEECs, the labour market integration of Roma people, often employed in low-skill jobs in construction and agriculture, was seen as a key issue for policy intervention.

These recommendations reflect the Commission’s evaluation of the most urgent country-specific equality issues. However, the national industrial relations actors (governments, employers and trade unions) can exercise choice in responding to the push for reform of the European labour market, on the basis of the very different regulatory regimes that currently exist. For example, EES targets on gender equality present no major problems from a Swedish perspective because the objectives are already in line with national policies (Gonäs, 2004); but in Mediterranean Europe, where the extended family remains an important part of social life (Hardy and Adnett, 2002), care for children and other dependants is still a significant barrier to women’s employment participation (see Hantrais and Ackers in this issue).

In a changed and changing labour market, trade unions cannot any longer position themselves solely or even primarily as class-based organizations. They must respond to the specific employment issues facing women, and also address new policy issues concerning equal treatment for the increasing proportion of immigrants, refugees, and minority ethnic workers in the European labour market.

How far, and how, does trade union activity address the main features of women’s employment: the gender pay gap, gender segregation and lower rates of female participation? A survey by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC, 2002) provides some information. With regard to the gender pay gap, although the principle of equal pay for equal work is incorporated into the collective agreements of a number of countries, the issue of pay equity does not seem a central issue in collective bargaining. Many European trade unions believe that gendered wage differences are more likely to be resolved through legislation than collective bargaining. However, the majority of European trade union confederations gather data on the position of women in employment, train negotiators on equality issues, and monitor the implementation of
equality measures included in collective bargaining. In addition, an overwhelming majority of confederations claim to mainstream gender in all trade union policies, particularly employment, health and social security, training and working-time policies.

In addition, trade unions in western Europe have introduced a range of measures that include women’s committees and departments, equality training and awareness raising, women-only training, and reserved seats and quotas. The ETUC report finds less information for the CEECs: there is a tradition of declarative gender equality, but less receptiveness (indeed, often hostility) to more interventionist special measures such as reserved seats (Petrovic, 2001).

Despite this convergence in trade union approaches to gender equality (in western Europe at least), there has been a greater variety of responses to race and ethnicity issues. Wrench (2004: 7) identifies two contrasting trends: northern European unions are more concerned with informal racial discrimination and its implications for the opportunities of an established second or third generation of postwar migrant origin, while southern European unions are more concerned with the relatively recent influx of immigrants.

A report survey of 24 union confederations from the EU-15, Norway, Poland, and the Czech Republic (ETUC, 2003) revealed general agreement that migrants and minority ethnic workers faced particular problems in the labour market. An overwhelming majority of confederations had staff with particular responsibility for minority ethnic issues and had published material (leaflets and posters). However, actual strategies (rather than declarations) to address the issues facing minority ethnic workers were more varied. For example, only 13 had a strategy to increase minority ethnic membership; 16 had a special committee for issues of concern to minority ethnic workers; 15 provided training on issues related to migrants and minority ethnic workers; and 11 had collective bargaining guidelines. These differences clearly reflect each country’s political, social and economic context, in particular, the specific history of immigration. In summary, while we can say that issues of race and ethnicity now occupy a place on the policy agenda of European trade unions, orientation varies from country to country and the resources allocated to the agenda also vary.

Discussion and Conclusion

Wacjman (2000: 195) argues that a ‘gender analysis of IR is not simply about adding “women’s issues” to the list of research topics, or noting the impact of IR systems on women’. The articles which follow demonstrate why gender and equality should be central concerns for industrial
relations and why class analysis alone proves inadequate in explaining gendered and racialized social inequalities.

It is clear that different EU countries have different definitions of what equality means and looks like and hence different policy approaches. We can discern very different understandings of women’s role in the family and therefore of what gender equality means. Is the aim to accommodate women’s assumed need to balance work and family, or is it necessary to question why it is women who are primary carers?

Just as different understandings of equality clearly shape the policy measures of the state, it is also the case for trade unions. For example, Greene et al. (in this issue) find very different attitudes to diversity management among union officials and equality activists in the UK and Denmark. These are rooted in different understandings of what equality means and therefore what are the best ways of tackling inequalities. Clarke et al. (in this issue) reach similar conclusions in the construction industry. The evidence suggests that the orientation of the European social partners to equality resembles the liberal model, treating the symptoms of discrimination and disadvantage, rather than the deeper causes.

Is the EU a progressive force in the campaign for equality in the ‘New Europe’? There is certainly evidence that equality has moved up the agenda of the EU-15, and in some countries the EES has ‘kick-started’ equality initiatives where little commitment previously existed. However, although the pace of change has been, by historical standards, quite dramatic, the ‘innovations are not always followed through and effectively implemented due to inertia and also to misunderstanding’ at the member state level (Rubery, 2002: 516). Therefore, we are unlikely to witness a convergence in equality policy and practice, nor a complete dismantling of the structures of inequality. The study of work–life balance (see Hantrais and Ackers in this issue) in three countries reveals salient social, economic, and cultural differences between the contexts which influence both state policy and the ‘choices’ of individual actors (referred to above) within the different policy frameworks, giving rise to differential equality outcomes. The contrasting policy environments in two contiguous EU-15 countries (France and Spain) are particularly notable, highlighting the diversity of member states’ responses to EU strategy.

In the campaign for equality, we must ask who benefits. One conclusion that might be drawn from the study by Clarke et al. (in this issue) is that middle-class, highly qualified women benefit most from gender equality policies, as is often argued in the literature (Cockburn, 1991; Rees, 1998), and that there is little will to tackle embedded horizontal segregation, which might be of greater benefit to lower-skilled women.
Whether the EES has a positive impact on equality in the new member states of the CEE remains to be seen. Pollert (in this issue) highlights the negative impact of economic reform on gender equality in the CEEC-10. However, she concludes that ‘EU accession has undoubtedly been a progressive force counteracting the erosion of gender equality, women’s rights, and support for families during the transition to capitalism,’ although it is not clear to what extent strategies and policies will change practice. However, in her study of highly qualified women in the CEEC-10, Glover (in this issue) concludes on an optimistic note.

The final conclusion from this review of supranational equality strategy is that the outcomes of gender and equality policies are likely to be varied and patchy across countries and industries or sectors.

REFERENCES


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