

Gender-based inequalities and discrimination in professional careers: An overview

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Abstract

The unbalanced gender-specific division of labour emerged as early as the end of the nineteenth century, when women work was exploited and underpaid in the wage market. The gendered professional inequalities between women and men continue to persist even today. The present paper aims to provide an outline of the main concepts used for analysing gendered inequalities in professional careers and to delineate the most significant explanations regarding this phenomenon. Besides gender stereotypes and gender roles, other terms which conceptualize the gender-based inequalities and discrimination in professional careers are addressed, such as gender pay gap, horizontal segregation, evaluative discrimination, vertical segregation, glass ceiling, sticky floor, and gender status beliefs. Furthermore, there are discussed both theoretical economic approaches, which emphasize the role of human capital and explain discrimination of women in the labour market by the expectations on their lower productivity, and theoretical sociological approaches, which highlight other aspects, such as differences in power, social and cultural norms and values, and take into consideration the importance of social capital, social interactions and networks, and social closure in professional career and ascension. In the last part of the paper the key aspects of the debate are emphasized and some remarks about the necessity of larger, more integrative and practice-oriented researches in this regard are made.

Keywords: *Gender inequality; gender pay gap; gender-based discrimination in professional careers; human capital; social capital; gendered organizations.*

1. The social division of labor and gender inequality. An analytical and conceptual framework

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, technological developments responsible for overproduction also led to new forms of rationalized work, which eventually materialized in the form of Fordism (Hennessy 2000: p. 103). Heteronormativity has become a historical component of labor, which has amplified both the social division of labor by gender in the family and at work, and the exploitation of women's labor in the wage labor market. Given that heteronormativity involves a hierarchy of genders, it has served to legitimize and naturalize the gender division of labor.

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Although women have always worked, the economic role played by women has focused mainly on “actual work from home, which could be combined with raising children” (Bergmann 1986: p. 7). This situation eventually led to a dominant feature of workforce behavior: working women were usually segregated, practicing a few professions often categorized as “women’s work”, and these professions are among the worst paid in the labor market (McCarthy Snyder 1994: p. 4).

Through various analogies and associations, socially shared “certainties” about the “gendering” of work have begun to become matters of self-evidence over time (Ernst 1999: p. 28). This may include the assumption of mental and physical skills and abilities “given by nature”, the preferences of men and women for certain professions and behaviors, as well as the idea of gender differences and its consequence: the naturalization of social inequality between genders (ibidem).

The allocation of men and women to certain activities and professions has been significantly supported by so-called common-sense knowledge, shared at the social level, with regard to the characteristic features of women and men. This “knowledge” takes often the form of *gender stereotypes*. These are cognitive structures, clichés, through which certain cultural representations are attributed to genders. Gender stereotypes include descriptive components – “traditional” assumptions about how men and women are, what traits they have and how they behave, as well as prescriptive components – assumptions about how men and women should be or how they should behave (Eckes 2004: p. 165).

Socially shared expectations of how individuals should behave according to the gender that has been socially assigned to them have often been conceptualized as *gender roles*. These are social roles encompassing a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for a person based on her biological or perceived gender. The internalization of gender roles in values and norms is reproduced in everyday interactions through “*doing gender*” (West and Zimmerman 1987, Busch and Holst 2012, Ruppert and Voigt 2012).

The application of the knowledge based on stereotypes and thought patterns to characterize concrete persons can be called *stereotyping* (Eckes 2004: p. 167). This means that people unconsciously make simplistic assumptions about others, classify and assign individuals they come in contact with in certain groups, only based on these clichés or “cognitive shortcuts” (Seca 2005: p. 628).

However, this stereotypical categorization is not neutral, but involves hierarchy: in the sense of “expectation states theory” (Berger, Conner and Fisek 1974, Berger et al. 1977), women and men are seen different according to environment and situation in terms of competence, and therefore a different status is assigned to them in each action situation (Busch and Holst 2012: p. 83). In this perspective, the masculine gender would be superior to the feminine one (Ruppert and Voigt 2012: p. 140), and from this idea derives the “devaluation hypothesis”, according to which the “feminine work” is underestimated and devaluated, while men (under identical conditions) are attributed higher performance, productiveness and professional skills (ibidem: p. 140-141). In this regard, occupations experiencing a significant inflow of female workers are devalued, both in status and in pay (Busch 2018: p. 1351).

A consequence of these beliefs and practices established over time is that women and men tend to be segregated in certain professions and sectors of the economy. The over- or under-representation of a gender in a field has been conceptualized by the term “*horizontal segregation*”, a phenomenon that plays a key role in explaining income

differences between men and women. Since women's paid labor is devalued, so-called "female professions" (in other words, professions mostly practiced by women) or less socially recognized occupational fields (such as those involving nursing and care work) are also underestimated, and therefore less remunerated. The higher the percentage of women in a given profession, occupation or trade, the lower the gain in that profession, occupation or trade (Busch and Holst 2012: p. 84). This interdependence is referred to in specialized literature by the term "*evaluative discrimination*" (ibidem).

In addition to horizontal segregation, another form of discrimination against women in the labor market is the phenomenon of "*vertical segregation*" (often denominated also by the term "*hierarchical segregation*"). It refers to the fact that women reach the "top" of the professional pyramid much less often than men, in other words, women reach the management and leading positions of organizations, companies and business firms much rarer, both in public and private sectors. This phenomenon is also conceptualized by the expression "*glass ceiling*". This metaphor refers to the obstacles that arise in women's professional careers and to the invisible barriers that stop their path to leadership and decision-making positions in organizations. Research in companies and firms (Hamrick 1994, Wirth 2001, Böing 2009) has often revealed that in many of these women, regardless of education or skills, failed to exceed a certain level in the hierarchy. While women are predominantly present at the lower and middle levels of an organization, they are a minority at the leadership levels.

Another metaphor in the specialized literature used to describe this phenomenon is that of the "*sticky floor*" (Wirth 2001). This refers to the factors and forces that compel women to remain in the lower positions of the organizational pyramids (Bettio and Verashchagina 2008). Factors that hinder women's professional advancement include, on the one hand, "*gender status beliefs*", according to which female gender roles are too incompatible with the demands of a leadership position (Holst and Busch 2009: p. 8), and on the other hand, the so-called "*male power rituals*", in other words, the "verbal and habitual rules and games of an organization" (Ruppert and Voigt 2012: p. 141), which include and amplify scepticism about women in leadership positions. Thus, the term "sticky floor" describes the discriminatory employment pattern that keeps women at the bottom of the job scale.

In this context, the concept of "*gender pay gap*" (or "*gender wage gap*") is used to describe gender-based pay gaps. The disadvantage and discrimination of women in terms of salary has been illustrated and verified by numerous studies and research (Blau, Ferber and Winkler 2006) and amounted to 23% at European level according to Eurostat 2008 (Holst and Busch 2009: p. 18).

Gender pay gap can be found at all levels of the vertical division of labor. This distance has not become smaller in recent decades and is therefore a persistent element of gender inequality. It is also a basic indicator of the unequal social treatment of women in working life, because in this differentiation of remuneration based on gender are condensed all the facets of the problem that women have to struggle in their professional life (Ruppert and Voigt 2012: p. 139).

Subsequently, firms and companies – including modern organizations (Funder, Dörhöfer and Rauch 2006) – are still far from achieving gender equality. Inequality and lower status of women in the labor market can be recognized by numerous indicators, such as: horizontal segregation and concentration of women in underappreciated, devalued professions and occupations, often categorized as "typically female"; ranking in organizations according to gender; underestimation of women's work; differences in

income between women and men in the same positions and consequently the so-called “gender pay gap”, i.e. the average difference between the aggregate wages of a man and a woman, a difference determined only by the different gender; the social, structural, cultural and ideological barriers that women, unlike men, face in their professional ascent to leadership positions. It seems that many organizations still resort to traditional practices (Müller 2013: p. 489) that involve gender role models and stereotyping.

2. Theoretical approaches. Explanations of gender-based professional inequalities and discrimination

Gender inequalities and gender-based discrimination in people’s professional lives have been described and explained through various theoretical perspectives in the socio-human sciences. Especially theoretical approaches in economics and sociology assert interesting theses, arguing diverse viewpoints and discussing a variety of issues involved. The main theoretical approaches and explanations regarding gender inequalities in terms of professional career are outlined below.

2.1 Economic approaches

Economic theories place particular emphasis on human capital. This would be the decisive factor for justifying inequalities between men and women, inequalities that take the form of income disparities and professional gender segregation.

The central element of all the models that can be included in the “*theory of human capital*” is the idea that the productivity and, therefore, the value of the worker in the labor market are determined by his/her knowledge and skills (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 33). Education and professional qualifications must be acquired and require capital investment – not only money, but also time and intellectual effort. These models consider social actors to be completely rational. Thus, the different investments in human capital of women and men are interpreted as “the result of rational cost-benefit calculations guided by preferences” (Busch and Holst 2012: p. 82). This also means that people anticipate different chances of using human capital. Because women – more than men – place family-related activities at the center of their lives and take into account the “dead times” caused by “career breaks” (e.g. due to the birth and raising of children), they choose (based on rational calculations) especially professions that involve lower costs, but also lower opportunities, which are better suited to family activities and which do not oppose possible interruptions caused by maternity. Therefore, women invest in advance less in human capital. In this way is gender inequality in the labor market explained and analyzed by the theoretical economic perspectives.

Similarly, the *theoretical model of discrimination* analyzes the wage discrimination of women and places the demand for education at the center of the explanations. According to this model, the existing processes of discrimination in the labor market, as well as the anticipation of some breaks and, therefore, of “dead times” in their careers, are significant factors that influence women to invest less in education, respectively in human capital, contributing, in this way, to perpetuating and intensifying inequality (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 35). The first author who spoke about the economic model of discrimination was G. S. Becker (1957/1971). According to Becker, the employers have a “taste for discrimination”, which means that hiring some workers, such as minority workers, has a disadvantageous value. Therefore, these workers “may have to ‘compensate’ employers by being more productive at a given wage or, equivalently, by accepting a lower wage for identical productivity” (Autor 2003: p. 3).

The *statistical discrimination model* deals with the relationship between belonging to a certain group (e.g. women, immigrants, students from certain lower ranked schools, etc.), expectations about their (lower) productivity, and discrimination arising from these expectations. In other words, according to this model, employers make hiring, salary and promotion decisions based on the ‘predicted performance’ of people, and these predictions are based on gender, race, age, disability. From this point of view, an individual is attributed the productivity of the group to which he/she belongs statistically, without taking into consideration his/her real abilities or competencies (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 35)

Although statistical discrimination is unlawful (Autor 2003: p. 11), the more so as women, minorities, people over the age of 40 and people with disabilities are “protected groups”, hence employers not being allowed to hire and dismiss them “at will”, in practice this is a phenomenon that occurs frequently (ibidem). Thus, in this case, a vicious circle works: the anticipation of a lower remuneration leads to a lower investment in human capital and hence a lower productivity. This process can be described by the expressions “*self-reinforcement effect*” (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 36) or “*self-fulfilling prophecy*” (Veith 1988: p 36).

In this context it can be mentioned that P. Bourdieu (2005) also considers that the androcentric perspective is always legitimized by practices that it itself determines. Due to the fact that the *dispositions* are the product of the incorporation of prejudices against women, and this incorporation is naturalized, women can only constantly confirm these prejudices. This is “the logic of a curse in the strict sense of a pessimistic self-fulfilling prophecy, which leads to what it itself predicts and results in its own truth” (Bourdieu 2005: p. 62).

2.2 Sociological approaches

Theories and approaches from the perspective of the social sciences, on the other hand, take into consideration the mutual relations and dependencies between the labor market and other spheres of society, and emphasize in their explanations these interrelationships and interdependencies. Also, in such approaches, explanatory factors of inequality such as norms, values, evaluations, and social differences in power are highlighted and analyzed. Theoretical conceptualizations target, for example, labor and personnel in the central and marginal areas of the economy, as well as the so-called “*dual economy*”, to which two sectors belong: the core and the periphery (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 42). While “core” companies belong to key industries and offer jobs accordingly, with stable employment opportunities and high wages, “periphery” companies have little power and offer lower paid and unstable jobs (ibidem). Minorities and – disproportionately – many women work mainly in this peripheral segment of the labor market.

Power differences in the labor market are explained not only by belonging to a certain social class or by monopoly positions, but also by social attributions and stereotypes, a common example from this point of view being the unfavorable treatment of women. In this regard, the “cultural system of the two genders” or “gendered organizations” are discussed. Gender, as well as belonging to a certain ethnic group, is among the significant factors used in social definition processes, these processes being an essential source for unequal power both in social relations in general and in the labor market (ibidem: p. 44).

At the social level, unpaid household and family work is allocated to women, while men are assigned paid work. This pattern, called *Male-Breadwinner-Modell*, reproduces the gendered division of labor and presents an “ideal of the family” in which men provide, earning a salary for the entire family, while women do domestic labor and care for family members. This results further on in assignments of skills and abilities that act to the detriment of women in the labor market (Busch and Holst 2012: p. 83). These socially established attributions and normative impositions are learned in the process of gender socialization, through which the “masculine” and “feminine” models or ideals are imprinted and internalized (Veith 1988: p 34). In this way, both gender-specific attitudes or gender-based preferences for certain professions (hence the idea of “gendered professions”), and the practices that discriminate women in organizations and in the labor market in general can be explained (Busch and Holst 2012: p. 83).

Another significant sociological approach is the *perspective of social networks*. Social networks are determinant factors that influence interchange relations in the labor market. These social relations of individual social actors and their general structure are also known as *social capital*. Various studies (see Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 52) have shown empirically that in the search for a job an essential role is played by the informal contacts of a person. There can be “strong ties” and “weak ties” in the social networks (Granovetter 1973). The more the ties of an individual are, especially the more, diverse and numerous “weak” and “distant” ties of a person are, the higher his or her chances of finding a job (Scheidegger and Osterloh 2005: p. 124). In terms of career path and career ascension of a person within an organization, positioning in a network of social relationships is still more important than the quality of the tie (“strong” vs. “weak”) (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 52). Networks build the channels through which information is transmitted, and certain positions within the network, such as “bridges” and “structural holes”, play a key role (ibidem). Therefore, relationships within the social network play a central role in the process of professional career development. They “channelize the flow of resources, regulate access to job opportunities, provide guidance and support, enhance influence and reputation and increase the likelihood – as well as the pace – of promotion” (Scheidegger and Osterloh 2005: p. 123-124).

Social networks can play a great role in job markets by providing assorted matching, i.e. employers can find employees with similar characteristics by searching them through networks, information asymmetries, in hiring models with adverse selection, as well as by simple insurance motives, since networks are helping to cope with the uncertainty determined by the turnovers of the labor market (Calvo-Armengol and Jackson 2004: p. 442-443). Because in flexible organizations the interactions and possibilities for choosing interactive relationships are more numerous, in such organizations the relationships in the social network are more important than in bureaucratic organizations, where the freedom to choose contacts at work is less (Scheidegger and Osterloh 2005).

Another aspect of particular relevance underlined by sociological approaches is the quality of information. *Social closure*, a phenomenon encountered in all areas of society, refers to the processes by which members of a group preserve their resources by drawing boundaries, building identities and excluding others or blocking access to others to their own group. The sociological phenomenon of social closure is also described in a structural perspective through social networks (Hinz and Abraham 2005: p. 56). The perspective of networks allows a reconstruction of the advantages and disadvantages of closed or open social systems and groups. With regard to gender differences in

organizations, it has long been recognized (Kanter 1977, apud Scheidegger and Osterloh 2005: p. 123) that women have more limited access to informal networks than men. The question remains, for which further investigations are needed, to what extent the relative lack of power of women in organizations and their lower share in management positions are correlated with their precarious participation and insufficient integration into informal professional networks.

Despite the relevance of all these aspects, the investigation of social networks in the empirical research of the labor market has still remained poorly developed (Hinz and Abraham 2005). Also, in explaining gender differences in organizations, little attention has been paid so far to the role of interaction networks (Scheidegger and Osterloh 2005).

3. Conclusions

The unbalanced gender division of the labor force has made its presence felt since the end of the 19th century, when women's labor in the paid labor market was exploited and inappropriately paid, below men's wage rates. Numerous research and statistics highlight the underestimation of women's work. The "devaluation hypothesis" describes the situation in the labor market in which women's work is underestimated and devalued, while men with the same training and skills as women are assigned superior performance and professional skills. Gender roles, gender stereotypes and stereotyping that are applied to specific people are proving to be the social factors that continue to contribute to the persistence of gender imbalances in the labor market.

Professional gender inequalities can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. Economic approaches, such as the theory of human capital, the discrimination model and the statistical discrimination model, are distinguished in their explanations by highlighting human capital and assigned expectations, based only on belonging to a certain gender. On the other hand, approaches in the social sciences emphasize the importance of issues such as social differences in power, but also of the social and cultural norms, values and evaluations at the social level. In this context, terms such as "dual economy", "cultural system of the two genders", "gendered organizations" and "gendered professions" are used in order to explain gender inequalities and differences of power in the labor market. Moreover, through the analyses from the theoretical perspective of social networks, the role of interactive social networks and of social capital is highlighted, both in finding a job and in career and professional advancement. As there is a process of mutual interdependence between the labor market and social networks, examining the process of formation and evolution of social networks can provide an overview of how the labor market works and how the social structures co-evolve, and how they mutually influence each other.

Although much progress has been made recently in harmonizing the opportunities of women and men in the labor market, many gender inequalities in professional careers still persist. Also, in terms of empirical studies, there are still research questions that need further investigation. These refer, on the one hand, to finding more detailed explanations regarding the factors that maintain gender differences in the workplace, given that at legal and 'objective' level gender equality is – or should be – already a fact. On the other hand, more studies are needed to bring practical and applicable results, useful in formulating measures and taking effective action to achieve professional equality between women and men.

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