

Gender Relations and Employment: A Cross-National Study

Introduction: the research project

Cross-national comparative research has been conventionally categorised as representing either a broadly positivist approach, which seeks to establish continuities which may then be used to support universal or law-like assertions, or alternatively, as being largely concerned to understand the particular nature of events and circumstances which have generated a particular (i.e., unique) outcome [Kohn 1987]. However, the Gender Relations Project was designed to explore both similarity *and* difference. Thus the research has established the significance of *different* national institutions in structuring patterns of women's employment and gender role attitudes [Crompton and Harris 1997], but these differences are cross-cut by cross-national *continuities* at the occupational, interpersonal, and individual levels [Crompton and Harris 1998a, b].

Gender relations are produced and reproduced via already-existing institutions, norms and practices, as well as through the ongoing relationships between individual women and men. The above project, therefore, was designed to investigate gender relations at three societal levels: macro, meso, and micro. The institutional structures reproducing the gender order include educational systems, welfare states, systems of occupational regulation, labour markets, and so on, as well as legislation etc. pertaining directly to women. Systems of regulation and legislation are often linked to an 'equality agenda' which has been widely adopted, at a national and trans-national level, since the Second World War. The countries chosen for comparative analysis in the Gender Relations Project reflected the variations in welfare state 'regimes' identified in Esping-Andersen's [1990] typology: Britain ('Liberal'); France ('Corporatist'); Norway ('Social Democratic') and Russia and the Czech Republic ('State Socialist self-welfare'). This last category is not taken from Esping-Andersen's framework. The ex- 'state socialist' countries are an interesting comparative case in that their regimes had formally espoused women's equality in the public sphere – which included full employment for women – whilst gender relations, and the gender division of labour in the private sphere remained highly conventional. In the Czech Republic, the project was carried out in collaboration with Prof. Marie Čermáková, Dr. Irena Hradecká, and Dr. Jaroslava Šťastná.

In relation to the equality agenda, 'human capital' theories have explained women's relatively disadvantaged labour market position with reference to their lack of qualifications and employment experience. The research design did not, therefore, focus on such 'disadvantaged workers', but on women in professional and managerial occupations. This strategy also facilitated a systematic contrast between these two occupational types, which enabled us to focus on the impact of meso-level structures – in this case, occupations – on the structuring of gender relations at the occupational and individual levels. Biographical work-life interviews were carried out with women doctors, and retail bank managers, in all five countries. Standardisation was achieved via a number of simple rules to be followed by all interviewers. All doctors had to have completed their post-registration qualification, and all bankers had to hold managerial positions. All had to be currently employed. The women had to be aged between 30 and 55.

To summarise: the research framework and associated research methods were as follows:

- *Macro level*: Focused on the nation state. It included (i) Nationally available descriptive statistics including census data, government and other reports, for all five countries. These national ‘case studies’ included, (amongst other topics) information relating to education systems, family policies, ‘welfare states’, occupational and labour market structures as well as the ‘equality agenda’. (ii) Data collected by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (Family and Gender Roles Module) for Britain, Norway and the Czech Republic.¹
- *Meso level*: Focused on the occupational structure. It included case studies, for each country, on the development of medicine and retail banking.
- *Micro level*: Focused on individuals and their relationships. It included biographical work-life interviews with fifteen women, in each occupation, in each country (154 interviews in all).²

Major findings

We have shown that a three-country (Britain, Norway and the Czech Republic) comparison of national level survey (ISSP) data indicates that gender role attitudes are the most liberal in Norway, most conservative in the Czech Republic, with Britain somewhere in between [Crompton and Harris 1997]. These differences are, we argue, systematically related to differences in national cultures and institutions.

Norway is a Scandinavian social democratic country at the forefront of both ‘gender equality’ and ‘family friendly’ policies which are reflected in liberal gender role attitudes. In contrast, the British government has not attempted to develop ‘active’ gender equalisation or transformation policies. Thus legislation has given women formal equality of opportunity, but (until recently) the government has not actively promoted women’s employment through (for example) the provision of childcare – and indeed, Britain has had the second lowest levels of childcare provision in Europe until very recently. As an ex-state socialist country, the Czech Republic has actively promoted women’s employment. Pro-natalist policies in support of motherhood have also been accompanied by extensive maternity leave and allowances [Heitlinger 1979, Scott 1974]. It might have been thought, therefore, that national attitudes to a mother’s employment would be relatively positive. However, we found that Czech attitudes to women’s employment and gender roles were in fact rather conservative, reflecting the lack of emphasis given to domestic labour as a source of gender inequality in the ex-state socialist countries [Buckley 1989].

¹) The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) is an ongoing programme of cross-national attitudinal research, which fields (in addition to a set of core questions) module(s) relating to different topics each year, using a suite of mutually agreed questions [Davis and Jowell 1989]. Advance copies of the ISSP Family and Gender Roles Module, gathered in 1994-5, were obtained for Britain, Norway and the Czech Republic. Many thanks to SCPR (Social and Community Planning Research), London; The Gender Studies Centre, Institute of Sociology, Academy of Sciences, Prague; and Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Bergen, for their assistance in obtaining advance copies of the Family and Gender Roles data sets.

²) Interviews have been carried out by Dr. Elena Mezentseva, Irina Aristakheva, Prof. Marie Čermáková, Dr. Irena Hradecká, Dr. Jaroslava Šťastná, Dr. Gunn Birkelund, Merete Helle, Dr. N. Le Feuvre, Florence Benoit, Rosemary Crompton and Dr. Fiona Harris.

Indeed, attitudes to Western feminism throughout the ex-Soviet Union are somewhat negative. The employment of women has been linked with their 'forced' employment during the era of state socialism [Crompton 1997], and gender role attitudes tend to be stereotyped – that is, rather traditional – in consequence. Our interviews in both the Czech Republic and Russia confirmed this at the micro (individual) level, as these examples demonstrate:

I always wanted a family and from home I knew what was involved (her parents are doctors). I took my husband's job into account when I was deciding on my specialism, when I decided to marry him I knew that his job would come first (...) I knew I would support him (...) in this sense, I am the 'second sex' (1/05 radiologist, two children).

He (...) never did anything at home (...) I was too busy at the bank but he did not do anything, everything waited for me. When I expressed my dissatisfaction he replied with ironical comments like 'Oh, our Director has arrived' – we separated, and I feel much better (1/21 banker, two children).

The ISSP data has also been used to demonstrate that more liberal gender role attitudes are linked with less conventional patterns of the domestic division of labour [Crompton and Harris 1999]. This paper also uses evidence from the work-life interviews in Britain, Norway and the Czech Republic to demonstrate that the domestic division of labour between doctors and their partners has a marked tendency to be rather more conventional than that between the bankers and their partners. This finding was one of the first indications of a systematic pattern of difference in the work-family biographies of the doctors and bankers in all countries, which cut across the cross-national differences we have identified.

We link these occupational differences in work-family biographies to the characteristic differences in the manner in which 'professional' (doctors) and 'managerial' (bank managers) occupations are organised, and the possibilities they offer to those in these occupations [Crompton and Harris 1998b]. Medical careers require long-term forward planning, and we found that many doctors had developed similar strategies in respect of their family lives as well. This had often resulted in a somewhat gender stereotypical domestic division of labour. In contrast, bankers had made their careers by responding to organisational demands, in which domestic life had often had to take second place, and if it was to be managed at all, more often than not required more than average assistance from a partner. The meso or occupational level, therefore, provides further evidence of the importance of occupational *structures* in shaping personal lives.

Nevertheless, we do not see women, or their employment decisions, as being in any sense entirely 'determined' by particular national or specific occupation-related structures and institutions. Thus the diversity of the work-family decisions (and their origins) that had been made by women in similar jobs has also been a focus of our research [Crompton and Harris 1999, see also Crompton and Harris 1998a]. In so doing, we found that there could be identified amongst the women we interviewed (and it should be remembered that *all* of them had been successful in employment terms) a minority who were 'super-women', and that this minority were equally distributed amongst the doctors and bankers. Thus macro and meso level structural patterning are criss-crossed by personal characteristics not necessarily linked to occupation or nation.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, we will make some East-West comparisons, drawing on the research described above. In the West, the development of capitalist industrialism was accompanied by the emergence of the 'male breadwinner' model of the gender division of labour, in which women took the major responsibility for domestic labour and men specialised in market work. During the inter-war period, many married women gave up paid work entirely, and, up until the 1960s, women still tended to withdraw from the labour market when children were born, often only returning to part-time work when children were of secondary school age. The ex-state socialist countries instituted a dual earner/state carer model which supposedly constituted the conditions for women's 'liberation'. However, this economicistic model of 'liberation' paid little attention to the prevailing gender culture, which remained, and still is, rather traditional. Thus in Eastern Europe, women remained the carers, and the major organisers of 'self-welfare'. Following the collapse of 'state socialism', gender roles and gender role attitudes remain highly traditional in these countries: some have argued that employment for women is associated with state socialist ideological prescriptions in relation to gender 'equality'.

As Western women have increased the level of their labour force participation, so they have also improved the level and extent of their academic and professional qualifications. Over the last ten years, women in all countries have been steadily increasing their representation in professional and managerial occupations. In the case of England, in 1998 women were 44% of all persons in employment, 32% of managers and administrators, and 40% of those in professional occupations. It would seem, therefore, that the improvement in the economic and social status of women, as reflected in their employment, is a non-reversible trend. In contrast to Eastern Europe, however, married women in the West took up market work during an era much influenced by 'second-wave' feminism. Thus although the situation falls far short of absolute equality, there are nevertheless indications that gender role attitudes are changing as a consequence, and men are carrying out an increasing amount of caring and domestic work [Gershuny et al. 1994].

Recent trends in Eastern Europe suggest that women are not simply 'returning to the home', despite economic difficulties. Interviews with managerial and professional women in the Czech Republic suggest that, although the majority would reject the label of 'feminist', they are nevertheless aware of, and hostile to, men's general lack of participation in domestic work. Thus, despite our emphasis on the importance of national cultures, it would nevertheless seem reasonable to suggest that over the next decade, attitudes and behaviour in respect of gender relations will also change in ex-state socialist countries, particularly those, such as the Czech Republic, that are close to the West.

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