

**ECONOMICS***Sociology***Patrycja Zwiach***Department of Microeconomics**University of Szczecin**patrycja.zwiach@o2.pl**http://mikro.univ.szczecin.pl/zwiach**Received:* October, 2010*1st Revision:* October, 2010*Accepted:* November, 2010**DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN  
IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE IN  
SELECTED THEORIES OF CLASS  
STRUCTURE AND STRATIFICATION**

**ABSTRACT.** Taken professional life into account, the situation of women and men differ considerably, which is proven by research on the situation of female workers in labour markets functioning in the Member States. Women earn less and hold lower positions in organizational hierarchy. They are less often chosen to undergo professional training and face greater difficulties in gaining employment. These symptoms of inequality prove that women are discriminated against in professional life. In the 20th century, a number of concepts were developed to account for the phenomenon under consideration<sup>1</sup>. These theories referred either to one dimension of discrimination (e.g. pay discrimination) or to several dimensions. The concepts were introduced both in economics and sociology.

The article is aimed at presenting selected theories of class structure and stratification that account for the discrimination against women in professional life, all within the framework of sociological concepts. Furthermore, the author of this paper will attempt to identify the main factors determining the phenomenon in question and discussed within the framework of the aforementioned theories. As for the theories of class structure and stratification related to discrimination against women in professional life, the author will discuss those developed by G. Lenski, F. Parkin, T. Parson and J. Acker.

**JEL Classification:** J16, P2**Keywords:** gender discrimination, theories of class structure and stratification.**Introduction**

Taken professional life into account, the situation of women and men differ considerably, which is proven by research on the situation of female workers in labour

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Mill referred to gender equality in 1869. He stated that the subordination of one sex to the other one is false itself and one of major barriers to improvement in the standard of living. He believed it should be replaced with perfect equality (Mill 1869, after: Landreth, Colander 1998, p. 261). On the other hand, gender studies were initiated by Simone de Beauvoir. In her works, she differentiated between biological (sex) and socio-cultural (*gender*) (Beauvoir, 1949 and 1972).

markets functioning in the Member States. Women earn less and hold lower positions in organizational hierarchy. They are less often chosen to undergo professional training and face greater difficulties in gaining employment (Zwiech 2010, pp. 269-285). This fact is proven by reports published by Open Society Institute, World Economic Forum or World Bank (OSI 2005; World Bank 2004; World Economic Forum 2005).

Wages and salaries are true reflection of differences between the situation of women and men in the labour market. For instance, analyzing *gender pay gap* (GPG)<sup>2</sup> presented by Eurostat for average hourly rates, it can be noticed that in the Member States women's hourly rates are about 18% lower than men's rates. Furthermore, in some countries this difference is as many as 25%, which is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. GPG (gender pay gap) index determining average hourly rates for women and men in the EU Member States in 2002 and 2006-2008.

<i>EU Member States</i>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>
Italy	:	4.4	5.1	4.9
Slovenia	6.1	8	8.3	8.5
Belgium	:	9.5	9.1	9
Romania	16	7.8	12.7	9
Malta	:	5.2	7.6	9.2
Portugal	:	8.4	8.3	9.2
Poland	7.5	7.5	7.5	9.8
Luxembourg	:	10.7	12.5	12.4
Latvia	:	15.1	15.4	13.4
Bulgaria	18.9	12.4	12.4	13.6
Denmark	:	17.6	17.7	17.1
Spain	20.2	17.9	17.1	17.1
Sweden	:	16.5	17.9	17.1
Hungary	19.1	14.4	16.3	17.5
<b>EU-27</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>17.6</b>	<b>17.8</b>
France	:	15.4	16.9	19.2
Holland	18.7	23.6	23.6	19.6
Finland	:	21.3	20	20
Slovakia	27.7	25.8	23.6	20.9
Great Britain	27.3	24.3	21.1	21.4
Cyprus	22.5	21.8	23.1	21.6
Lithuania	13.2	17.1	20	21.6
Greece	25.5	20.7	21.5	22
Germany	:	22.7	23	23.2
Austria	:	25.5	25.5	25.5
Czech Republic	22.1	23.4	23.6	26.2
<b>EU-25</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>17.8</b>	<b>:</b>
<b>EU-15</b>	<b>:</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>:</b>
Estonia	:	29.8	30.9	:
Ireland	15.1	17.2	17.1	:

Source: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/labour\\_market/earnings/database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/labour_market/earnings/database)

<sup>2</sup> GPG index is defined as a percentage difference between average hourly gross rates for women and men in the economy. GPG index show how much (in percentage terms) women's hourly rates are lower than men's ones. It can be calculated with the use of the following formula:

$$GPG = \frac{wg_m - wg_k}{wg_m} \times 100$$

where: GPG – gender pay gap;  $wg_m$  – men's hourly rate;  $wg_k$  – women's hourly rate.

GPG index for the year 2008 suggests that the Member States deal with considerable differences in hourly rates between women and men. The slightest ones are observed in Italy, Slovenia, Belgium, Romania, Malta, Portugal and Poland (less than 10%), whereas the greatest – in the Czech Republic, Austria and Estonia (over 25%). Furthermore, having analyzed the index it might be stated that in the period 2002 – 2008, the differences under consideration became slighter in 12 countries (Belgium, Romania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Denmark, Spain, Hungary, Finland, Slovakia, Great Britain, Cyprus, Greece) and greater in the remaining 14 states (Italy, Slovenia, Malta, Portugal, Poland, Luxembourg, Sweden, France, Holland, Lithuania, Germany, Czech Republic, Estonia and Ireland), and in the case of Austria they were not subject to any change.

The other aspect in the case of which differences between women's and men's situation in the labour market can be noticed are job opportunities. Having analyzed the unemployment rates in particular Member States, it can be noticed that women's situation is less favourable. The aforementioned rates for women were higher than those for men during the period under examination in the majority of the EU states, which is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Unemployment rates for women and men in the EU Member States in 1997, 2002 and 2007

Specification	1997	2002	2007	Specification	1997	2002	2007
WOMEN				MEN			
Greece	15.2	15.6	13.6	Slovakia	16.3	18.6	10.0
Slovakia	16.4	18.7	12.8	<b>Poland</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>9.0</b>
Spain	22.6	15.7	10.9	Germany	9.0	8.8	8.4
<b>Poland</b>	<b>13.0</b>	<b>20.9</b>	<b>10.4</b>	Romania	7.5	9.1	8.2
Portugal	7.5	6.0	9.6	France	10.0	7.7	7.9
Italy	15.3	11.5	8.8	Hungary	9.7	6.2	7.0
France	13.2	9.7	8.8	Belgium	7.3	6.7	6.7
Belgium	11.9	8.6	8.5	Portugal	6.0	4.1	6.6
Germany	9.8	7.9	8.3	Finland	12.3	9.1	6.5
Malta	7.4	9.3	7.6	Bulgaria	16.7	18.9	6.5
Hungary	8.1	5.4	7.6	Latvia	15.1	13.3	6.4
Bulgaria		17.3	7.3	Spain	13.1	8.1	6.4
Finland	13.0	9.1	7.2	Estonia	10.3	10.8	5.8
Czech Republic	8.1	9.0	6.7	Sweden	10.2	5.3	5.8
Sweden	9.5	4.6	6.4	Malta	6.4	6.6	5.7
Romania	6.2	7.7	6.1	Great Britain	7.6	5.6	5.7
Slovenia	7.1	6.8	5.8	Greece	6.4	6.8	5.6
Luxembourg	3.9	3.7	5.7	Italy	8.7	6.7	5.4
Latvia	13.6	11.0	5.4	Ireland	9.9	4.7	4.7
Austria	5.4	4.4	5.0	Czech Republic	5.0	5.9	4.3
Great Britain	5.8	4.5	4.9	Lithuania	14.6	14.2	4.1
Cyprus	7.2	4.5	4.6	Luxembourg	2.0	2.0	4.0
Lithuania	11.7	12.8	4.4	Austria	3.6	4.0	3.9
Denmark	6.2	5.0	4.1	Slovenia	6.8	5.9	3.8
Ireland	9.9	4.1	4.1	Denmark	4.4	4.3	3.4
Estonia	8.9	9.7	4.0	Cyprus	3.2	2.9	3.3
Holland	6.6	3.1	3.6	Holland	3.7	2.5	2.8

Comment: no data is available for 1997 – hence data for the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania refers to 1998, for Slovakia and Romania – to 1999, and for Cyprus, Bulgaria and Malta – to 2000; no data is available for 2007 – hence data for Greece, Italy and Great Britain refers to 2006.

Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat, <http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/portal/>

Remuneration and employment opportunities are not the only aspects of professional life in which the situation of both groups differ considerably. Women face discrimination in other spheres as well. And so, one may distinguish the following types of discrimination against women in the labour market (Zwiech, 2009, pp. 796-104):

- a) **Pay discrimination** reflected in considerable differences in remuneration received by women and men;
- b) **Employment discrimination** implies that the discriminated groups are provided with limited employment opportunities;
- c) **Professional discrimination** occurs when there are arbitrary restrictions on access to some professions;
- d) **Position discrimination** occurring when there are arbitrary restrictions on access to managerial or decision-making positions;
- e) **Discrimination in access to training.**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of concepts were developed to account for the discrimination against women in professional life. These theories explain either one dimension of discrimination (e.g. pay discrimination) or several dimensions. These concepts were introduced both in economics and sociology.

Taken sociological theories related to the phenomenon under consideration, one may mention profeminist theories<sup>3</sup> as well as theories of class structure and stratification.

### **Discrimination against women in selected theories of class structure and stratification**

As for the theories of class structure and stratification that refer to discrimination against women in the labour market, one may mention Lenski's theory, theory of class formation developed by Parkin, Parson's theory and Acker's theory.

#### **The theory developed by G. Lenski**

G. Lenski treats women as a separate social class. He believes that people tend to perceive family as a group of individuals and not as units to be analyzed within stratification systems. That is why the class system based on gender is not taken into account. Women should not be treated only as individuals dependent on men, i.e. as wives and daughters. Hence, the analysis of the developed industrial societies cannot ignore the role of gender in the distribution process any more (Lenski 1966, p. 402).

In industrial societies, women and men are equal in political life and e.g. as far as access to higher education is concerned. However, gender equality does not exist in the labour market. There are a number of obstacles which lessen job opportunities that women may take, and to be more precise their access to more rewarding domains of professional life.

In his theory, G. Lenski states that privileges depend on power<sup>4</sup>, and power depends on resources. He claims that male sex is one of labour market resources. Furthermore, he believes that *women's resources, namely organizations owned, unbroken employment record,*

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<sup>3</sup> According to profeminist theories, the main factors that determine discrimination against women in professional life are as follows: implications resulting from the roles that women perform, namely as mothers and educators, household duties with which women are charged as well as care of children, division of activities into female and male ones (due to which women's situation both in social life and in the labour market is worse), structure of capitalist production, division of labour by gender, division of family duties, division of power within a family, i.e. subordination of women, division of roles into typically male and female enhanced by cultural believes and socialization, the fact that men may perceive women as a danger, and finally differences in resources that women and men have at their disposal (Zwiech 2009, pp. 96-104).

<sup>4</sup> Power is understood as the ability of an individual or a group to exercise their will, against others' will if necessary.

*free time and physical strength, are limited compared to men's resources<sup>5</sup> and thus their power is limited and so are their privileges. Hence, they experience greater disadvantage.*

G. Lenski mentions the following four factors determining the discrimination against women in professional life (Lenski 1966, p. 405):

1. **maternal functions** – pregnancy and care of children are chiefly female “roles” due to which they have limited opportunities to compete for more rewarding job positions;
2. **traditional division of duties among family members** – it is woman who is responsible for housework ;
3. **historical events** – successes achieved by women in professional life were as a rule less spectacular than men's; this might be an argument for promoting men and not women, even if the former had lower qualifications;
4. **women's attitudes** – knowing that it is less risky to them, women gave up success in economic and political spheres and began to compete in the matrimonial market. Woman may benefit from being married, or at least be financially supported.

The criticism about the theory comes down to the fact that the author does not mention that women earn less than men even when they hold the same position. Lenski also omits horizontal occupational segregation by gender in enterprises and particular trades as well as the fact that segregation often eliminates women from practicing certain professions. The only indication of inequality he notices is that women are seldom given the opportunity to practise more rewarding professions and hold responsible positions.

### **Theory of class formation developed by F. Parkin**

F. Parkin is against including gender inequality in the theory of class structure. He believes that gender could be treated as a factor determining the stratification only if women's disadvantage was greater than class distinction (Parkin 1971, p. 145). However, if one assumes that gender inequality are differences within a given class, the theory of class formation developed by Parkin (Parkin 1974) may be used for explaining the inequality in the labour market (Reszke 1991, pp. 178-179).

The theory formulated by F. Parkin is based on the assumption that *social communities strive after maximizing their benefits via providing a narrow group of people with access to rewards and opportunities. This requires one to distinguish social or physical characteristics (e.g. gender, age, race, nationality, disability) that justify why some people are denied access to rewards and resources.*

In order to refuse a given community access to resources, individual or a group of individuals needs to have advantage. In other words, power possessed by the latter must be greater than power possessed by the former. This process is facilitated when the interested have certain resources, due to which they can limit other groups access to these resources and hence maintain privileged position (Reszke 1991, pp. 179-180).

F. Parkin differentiates between two general strategies adopted for resource acquisition, namely strategies based on exclusion and strategies based on solidarity. Male employees may be more effective than female one in implementing the strategy based on solidarity with employers. At the same time, they may dominate women and follow the

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<sup>5</sup> One of such resources is e.g. opportunity to organize oneself in order to protect one's interests. Some authors pay attention to the fact that women more often than men work in small firms and hence are more “scattered”. That is why they find it more difficult to organize themselves. Women are less likely to begin a strike than men as they must look after children or do housework. Hence, they do not have as much free time as men, which makes it difficult both to improve professional qualifications and be active members of political and professional associations. One should also bear in mind the fact that women who bring up children may not have unbroken employment record. Finally, women are weaker than men taken physical strength into account, which is of major importance in the case of less modern production technologies.

strategy based on exclusion. In other words, they exclude females from more profitable trades and managerial positions (both of which grant privileges). This is favoured by low level of solidarity among women determined partly by the distribution of female employees (the fact they work mainly in small firms) and their commitment to family matters, due to which they join labour unions more seldom than men.

Therefore, discrimination against women in the labour market results on the one hand from male employees' interests and on the other hand – from the distribution of female employees, family roles they perform and household duties they are charged with.

The theory is criticized mainly for not determining why the labour market community is divided into men and women and not into families that belong to particular social classes.

### **The theory developed by T. Parsons**

The theory of social stratification formulated by T. Parsons refers to discrimination against women and examines it from functional perspective. T. Parsons claims that family is a solidarity unit. Hence, it has a common status (Parsons 1972). *Women's status is her husband's status as all the family members need to have equal status. It is a functional requirement at the level of a family, local community and global society.*

However, the thesis according to which wife's professional status and income do not affect the family status is not reasonable as they do have effect on the situation of family and children's future. Empirical research examines the effect that professional employment of a married woman has on her status and social standing of the entire family<sup>6</sup>. The results suggest that work carried out by women also determine the family and her own status. Furthermore, the research shows that professional career pursued by mother has a positive effect on the professional life of her sons (Reszke 1991, p. 166).

***Taken the level of family into account***, husband and wife need to have equal status for the sake of solidarity. Competition could disturb the family balance, which would disable it to perform its main role, i.e. socialization. That is why a typical division of duties followed by family enables only husband-father to entirely commit to professional career, and wife-mother is left with non-professional duties. Even if women works, her professional position does not have effect on the social standing of family. Being a wife and mother are the main social roles played by females (Parsons 1972, p. 550).

***Taken the level of local community into consideration***, family members need to have equal status so that relative social status of a given family could be determined in relation to other families.

***Finally, taken the level of global society into account***, modern economy requires employees to be mobile geographically. If husband and wife were committed to professional life to the same extent, potential relocation (new job and hence new place of residence) would be difficult.

Thus, Parsons claims that family's reputation and income depend mainly on the professional role performed by husband-father. Man plays an instrumental role in a family, i.e. he supports them, and wife-mother performs expressive role, she keeps house, socializes children, cultivates human values and is involved in voluntary work (Parsons 1972, pp. 113, 252, 257).

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<sup>6</sup> Acker questioned all the assumptions made by Parsons with reference to women's situation. She claims that the status of wife does not derive from the status of her husband since she has other sources of status as well. Not everyone has family. Some women are the heads of their families and often have a very low standard of living (Acker 1973, pp. 936 – 945). Furthermore, other researchers highlight that practising a given profession, wife and husband may belong to different social classes (Haug 1973, pp. 86 – 98).

The traditional division of roles among family members assumes that women's role is not to gain status thanks to professional achievements. Besides, regardless of their skills, women have limited access to some functions and hence cannot achieve the highest status. Parsons claims that the main positive reason behind this state of affairs is a profound importance that woman's role as a mother has to society (Parsons 1972, p. 550).

*Furthermore, he states that the main factors determining discrimination against women are family and household duties, both of which lessen employment opportunities and lead to occupational segregation by gender. He is inclined to believe that occupational segregation and limited access that women have to the most prestigious positions stems from the functional importance of family solidarity and woman's role as a wife and mother.*

The theory under analysis is criticized for referring only to the situation of married women with children. It does not take account of single mothers or women who are the heads of their family and support them all by themselves. Finally, it does not discuss pay discrimination against women, and to be more precise the fact that even though men and women have gained the same professional qualifications and education, the latter earn less.

Furthermore, T. Parsons does not notice that women's economic dependence on men and a relative labour market disadvantage they experience are dysfunctional not only to women themselves, but also to society as their professional qualifications and skills are being squandered (Reszke 1991, pp. 165-166).

### **Theory formulated by J. Acker**

In her theory related to discrimination against women in the labour market, J. Acker refers to the notion of socio-cultural sex (*gender*). *Gender* includes socially construed notions of femininity and masculinity based on beliefs, opinions and stereotypes about differences between men and women. *Gender has an effect on production management, labour process and remuneration. Beliefs and ideas about femininity and masculinity as well as asymmetric power relations and reward system determine social relations to some extent* (Acker 1988, pp. 25-37).

According to the author, the notion of social class includes not only relations of production, but also relations of distribution<sup>7</sup>. *In modern capitalist societies, remuneration, benefits provided by the state and interpersonal relations are forms of gendered distribution.*

*According to the author, wages and salaries depend on gender as they are largely determined by beliefs about differences between women and men.* The division of economy sectors, professions and workplaces into male and female ones goes hand in hand with pay inequality. Besides, gender-based segregation of positions strengthens the association between masculinity and mechanical or technical skills, and between femininity and patience for monotonous duties. The hierarchy placing women on the lowest positions and men – on the top ones, strengthens traditional power relations between men and women and proves the

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<sup>7</sup> Before the era of industrial capitalism, the distribution of means of support was based on rights granted on account of social role or status. Industrial capitalism changed these rules and remuneration became the main source of income to a newly created working class. However, not everyone was able to work, and women's income was not sufficient to support the family. This change revealed a contradiction fundamental to capitalism, namely between production and reproduction, which resulted from the fact that capitalist economic system was indifferent to the reproduction of working class. Only thanks to actions taken by trade unions, effort made by reformers, and political strife, this conflict could be resolved and new relations of distribution were established. One of such relations was the fact that salary or wage received by man was *family wage*, i.e. he shared it with his wife who was economically dependent and worked for free in a household. Trade unions, reformers, employers and mothers who wanted to take care of their children at home were "for" the ideal wage earned by man and sufficient for family maintenance. Success achieved by a man in the form of *family wage* strengthened a belief that women should not work and even if they do, they should consider their family duties the most important.

symbolic association between masculinity and leadership, and between femininity and support (Reszke 1991, p. 172). This inequality is justified with differences between sexes. In practice, this implies that remuneration received by man should be higher than remuneration received by woman.

Such an attitude highlights differences in remuneration received by women and men. *All in all, wages and salaries depend on gender and reflect relative disadvantage of women. The division of labour by gender and the ideology of family wage require men's wage to be distributed among family members.*

*Another form of gender-based distribution are social security benefits. Differences between men and women can also be noticed in this case. Benefits for men are as a rule related to previous employment or military service, and for women – necessity to maintain children. The state often plays the role of man-breadwinner.* Therefore, the distribution is determined by the socially construed notions of femininity and masculinity, hence it is *gendered* (Reszke 1991, p. 173).

*Another form of gendered distribution are interpersonal relations, mainly between married couple. Traditional approach according to which women perform non-professional, protective and family roles, the division of labour by gender as well as family wage ideology lead to the fact that it is men's income that is distributed among family members.*

Therefore, the theory formulated by Acker identifies the following determinants of discrimination against women: cultural norms, division into women's and men's activities, division of family duties, social policy pursued by the state and non-economic roles performed by women.

J. Acker pays attention to low income received by women, limited opportunities for promotion they have and their economic dependence on men. Still, she does not analyse the reverse relationship, namely the effect that household duties and care of children have on the situation of women in the labour market.

## Conclusion

Freedom of thought, speech, movement and work – nowadays these are completely natural to women. However, they had to fight for it for a long time. In Europe and North America women achieved a lot – yet there are still spheres of life in which they are discriminated against, e.g. in the labour market, and to be more precise with reference to jobs, professions, positions, remuneration and access to training (Zwiech 2008, pp. 317-328; Zwiech 2007, pp. 71-88). None of the aforementioned sociological concepts derived from the theory of social classes and stratification presents all the angles of discrimination against women in a thorough and comprehensive way. Still, they account for the phenomenon to some extent.

The class structure theories differ in the main assumptions and visions of society. They suggest that low income generated by women and limited access to more rewarding positions (that give considerable power) stem from reproductive function they perform, household duties, limited opportunities to develop their qualifications and be promoted, limited resources<sup>8</sup> and asymmetric power relationship between men and women. Together with patriarchy, power relations as well as socially construed notions of masculinity and femininity are factors determining the unfavourable situation of women in the labour market, which is reflected in unfair pay distribution, horizontal occupational segregation by gender and the fact that women occupy the lowest positions in organizational hierarchy.

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<sup>8</sup> Reward distribution systems within a family, country or at work are unfavourable to women. Hence, their resources are limited and so are their rights and privileges .

Therefore, the theories of class structure and stratification suggest that discrimination against women in professional life stems from:

- a) according to Lenski – implications resulting from woman's duties as a mother, traditional division of duties among family members, historical events and women's attitude;
- b) according to Parkin – male worker's interest and distribution of female employees, family functions they perform and household duties they are charged with;
- c) according to Parson – engagement in family life and household duties, due to which women have limited opportunities and deal with professional segregation by gender;
- d) according to Acker – cultural norms, division of activity into male and female, division of duties among family members, social policy pursued by the state and non-economic roles performed by women.

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