
ECONOMICS

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**DISCRIMINATION AGAINST
WOMEN IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE IN
CHOSEN PRO-FEMINIST THEORIES**

ABSTRACT. Taken professional career into consideration, situation of women and situation of men differ a lot, which has been proven by numerous research presenting a worse position that women occupy in the labour market as well as factors determining such a state of affairs. Women earn lower salaries and hold lower position in the hierarchy of positions, are less often referred to professional training and have greater difficulties in gaining employment. The present chapter is aimed at presenting feminist theories that account for discrimination against women in professional life as well as formulating the main determinants of this state of affairs. Apart from pro-feminist theories regarding discrimination against women in professional life, universal theories by Chodorow, Ortner, Rosaldo, Engels, Sacks, Sanday, patriarchy–capitalism theory, reserve army of labour theory by Beechey as well as Turner's and Musick's conflict theory have been referred to as well

JEL Classification J16, B54*Keywords:* gender discrimination, pro-feminist theories**Introduction**

Freedom of thought, speech, moving, working – nowadays, women consider all the above completely natural. However, in order to achieve this freedom they had to struggle for a long time. In Europe and North America women have attained a lot and still there are domains of life in which they are discriminated against.

As far as professional career is concerned, the following types of discrimination against women can be distinguished (Zwiach 2006, 78 – 87):

1. **Employment discrimination** refers to limited employment opportunities that discriminated groups are offered with and occurs when all qualification-professional as well as demographic characteristics are comparable and the discriminated have a larger share in unemployment. This type of discrimination is connected with greater difficulties in finding employment as well as being put at risk of losing a job to a larger extent.

2. **Professional discrimination** occurs when there are arbitrary limitations in the access to certain professions, due to which certain groups are jammed in other professions, and when conditions of employment are different in the case of men and different in the case of women.
3. **Position discrimination** is observed when there are arbitrary limitations in the access to managerial or decision-making positions. Position discrimination against women is connected with professional segregation on a vertical plane, which is reflected in the fact that the ratio of women to men holding managerial or decision-making positions is considerably low.
4. **Discrimination in the access to training** increases discrimination of the human capital type. It is reflected in the fact that certain social groups have limited access to education, knowledge, professional training and experience all of which improve their efficiency as employees.
5. **Pay discrimination** is reflected in major differences in salaries received by women and men and occurs mainly due to professional segregation, ill judgment and not objective job appraisal. It also takes place when wage differentiation stems from reasons other than employee efficiency.

The development of feminist movement would not be plausible without theoretical background. It was as soon as in 1869 that Mill referred to equality between the sexes¹. On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir initiated gender studies². Nevertheless, it was only in the 1960's that, because of social pressure from women who wanted to change the existing status quo, issues relating to discrimination against women had been raised, it was analyzed in which domains women were discriminated against, what this discrimination consisted in as well as what reasons there were behind such a state of affairs (in the labour market as well).

In the 1960's many concepts referring to discrimination against women were developed. These theories account only for one dimension of discrimination (e.g. pay discrimination or employment discrimination) or refer to many dimensions of discrimination.

As far as theories accounting for discrimination against women are concerned, feminist theories stand out against other ones. These theories explain either the universality of discrimination against women or differences in social standing of women in various societies or historical eras.

The following theories can be numbered among pro-feminist theories referring to discrimination against women in the scope of professional life: universal theories by Chodorow, Ortner, Rosaldo, Engels, Sacks, Sanday, patriarchy-capitalism theory, reserve army of labour theory by Beechey as well as Turner's and Musick's conflict theory.

Universal theories referring to discrimination against women

A number of universal theories attempt to account for male domination in differing societies (e.g. theories by Chodorow, Ortner³ and Rosaldo).

Chodorow (Chodorow 1974) explains the subordination of women to men by stating that personality of a girl is shaped in a different way than personality of a boy. Girls develop

¹ The subordination of one sex to the other is false itself and one of the main barriers to improvement in one's living standards. It should be replaced with perfect equality principle – (J.S. Mill: *The Subjection of Women*, 1869, quoted after: H.Landreth, D. Colander, 1998, 261).

² S.de Beauvoir: *Druga pleć*. Paris 1949. Polish edition: PWN, Warszawa 1972. In her publication, the author differentiated between sex and gender.

³ This theory has been criticized for perceiving women as being closer to nature, which in fact is not universal – C. Mc Nelson: *Sex In Society. Perspectives on Stratification*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont California 1978, 128.

their female identity via positive identification with their mothers. A mother looks after small children and, unlike father, spends all her time with them. On the contrary, a boy does not have a chance to create his identity through positive identification with his father as the latter is often away and does not look after small children. Hence, boys develop their male identity via negating, rejecting and humiliating all things they consider female.

Therefore, lower social standing of women stems on the one hand, from the fact that father does not take care of small children and on the other hand, from reducing women's role to housekeeping and upbringing.

According to the author of the present chapter, the fact that girls and boys have different personalities brings about a situation when women and men choose different professions, which may contribute to professional segregation by gender.

Ortner states that asymmetric relations between women and men result from a degrading way in which femininity has been defined (Ortner 1974). Women are commonly perceived as being closer to nature due to their physiology and maternal functions. By contrast, men are connected with culture to a larger extent. And since culture is more valued than nature, women have lower status than men. Understanding the situation in such a way justifies the necessity to make women subordinate to men. Being closer to nature, women should be controlled and manipulated to serve the aims of culture dominated by men and that is why they should occupy lower positions in the hierarchy (Reszke 1991, 186).

Rosaldo (Rosaldo 1974, 246) states that reproductive function of women explains why women are commonly subordinate to men. Necessity to be a mother leads to a conflict between being a housewife and performing a public role. As a housewife, woman does not have the access to power, prestige and cultural values that are enjoyed in public sphere. Thus, women are oppressed, have lower status to such an extent to which their activity is reduced only to household activity, are isolated from other women and from social world of men.

According to Rosaldo, the greatest equality between women and men is observed when men participate in housework and household life, and women can take part in important public affairs. Men may treat women as their equal only if household and public spheres are accessible to both sexes and men take on some housework.

As far as theories formulated by Chodorow, Ortner and Rosaldo are concerned, discrimination against women is determined by the roles that women perform as mothers bringing up their children.

The theory developed by Engels is also among universal theories which suggest that the situation of women is getting worse and worse in the course of social evolution. According to him, women's "handicap" stems from the evolution of society and discrimination is connected with the development of private property, patriarchal family (and then individual one) as well as social classes. Women's "handicap" has been caused mainly by isolation from public sphere (production sphere in particular), economic dependence on men, housework and childcare. With reference to original communism, work done by women in a collective household was public and socially necessary production, and it had become private service to a family in the course of evolution. Women had been driven away from social production as they were not able to reconcile housework with professional career. According to Engels, women's emancipation was conditioned by their mass entering the sphere of social production and reduction of household duties they did to the minimum. The reduction of household duties was to be plausible due to the development of social industry thanks to which women would be liberated, equal and participate in social and political life to a full extent (Engels 1946).

Engels did not expect that discrimination against women would still be present after reducing the participation of women in household duties and childcare⁴. Therefore, he believed that discrimination against women in professional life was determined by burdening women with housework and childcare.

The theory formulated by Engels was developed by feminists-socialists. Sacks had proven that women's "handicap" did not stem from private property as not all men possessed such. On the contrary, this phenomenon resulted from the fact that men were given employment and worked for privileged classes (employment in the form of serfdom or military service) more often than women. They did the work collectively which allowed them to take mass actions to improve their situation. A great dichotomy between public life and household life excluded women from the former and limited their duties to household. Housework done by women was not highly valued as they did not produce exchange values but only use values.

According to Sacks, social subjectivity is a key aspect of social position and can be achieved by participating in social production. As women had been excluded from social production, their social standing automatically declined in comparison with men (Sacks 1974).

The theory developed by Sanday is another universal theory accounting for discrimination against women in public sphere. According to her, contribution that women make to earning a living is a major factor determining their status.

Each human community must perform three functions to survive, namely earn a living, protect itself and reproduce. Men expended their energy into defending and earning a living, due to which they had greater control over strategic resources. By contrast, women expended energy into reproduction and only then into earning a living⁵. They were dependent on men to a greater extent, which resulted in male domination.

Hence, as stated by Sacks and Sanday, discrimination against women is determined by division into female and male activity, which leads to lower position occupied by women both in social life as well as in the labour market.

Patriarchy – capitalism theory

Patriarchy-capitalism theory was formulated by feminists-socialists⁶. They tried to combine the analysis of capitalist system presented by Marks and Engels with feminist analysis of patriarchy⁷. Their theory aimed at presenting class divisions and gender divisions

⁴ The theory by Engels was verified by J. Buber Agassi (1989). She examined equality between women and men in Israeli Kibbutz. Her research invalidated theses formulated by Engels – cf. J. Buber Agassi, 1989, 45-65.

⁵ When women earn a living while men are absent (e.g. because of war) and they still do so even when they are back, their status may be a subject to change. The research conducted by Sanday, that covered twenty pre-industrial societies in Asia and Africa, showed that women's status is low where their contribution to earning money is very small or where they are the only ones in employment. The highest status is enjoyed by women in societies where their input of work is similar to men's input and where there is a balance in the division of labour by gender. According to Sanday, when women are the only ones in employment, their status may be low just because men have control over excess production and hence make profits. The other explanation provided is that women are dependent on men in satisfying their survival needs (e.g. defence) to a larger extent than men are dependent on women in the scope of earning a living. Mutual dependency of women and men in the scope of earning money may provide them with equal power and make men accept power that women exert in other domains (cf. Sanday 1974).

⁶ Patriarchy-capitalism theory has been formulated as a response to concepts developed by radical feminists who believe that the division into men and women is a primal and main class division. They also believe that men's striving after domination over women is the motor of the history. On the other hand, patriarchy-capitalism theory was supposed to overcome neo-Marxist and feminist concepts showing the functionality of housework and professional work done by women to capitalism.

⁷ Patriarchy is the relationship between men and women in which the latter are the "handicapped" and the former

at once due to charges of destroying the unity of working-class movement and distracting the attention from the main class conflict (Acker, footnote 101 Young 1981, 62).

Patriarchy-capitalism theory account for women's "handicap" in capitalist system through burdening women with housework as well as professional segregation by gender. Housework reduces the share that women have in production. Lower salaries received by women result from professional segregation by gender. Low earnings make women dependent on their husbands for whom they have to do housework. Subordination of women in a family, economic dependence on men as well as unfavourable situation in professional life create a vicious circle as the division of housework (done mainly by women) makes it impossible for women to earn high salary, and low earnings justify such a division of household duties.

Patriarchy was prior to capitalism yet patriarchal relations between men and women were modified and used by capitalists, which had led to women's oppression.

Patriarchy-capitalism theory refers to male domination in two ways. Rowbotham presented the former version of the theory, whereas the latter version was formulated by Hartmann.

Rowbotham stresses the importance that the division of labour has in a family and states that women have been oppressed even before the capitalism era which, however, has changed the character of this oppression. Discrimination against women is determined by the structure of capitalist production, division of labour in firms by gender as well as the division of household duties (Rowbotham 1973, 187).

Such a division of labour makes women occupy a different position in the structure of social relations compared to men. Women are entering the professional sphere. At the same time, they bring up children and do the housework, which determines the labour force they can expend into professional sphere.

The belief that men should maintain women is a remnant from the times when woman was her husband's property. Wage system in which women's work is less valued than men's work is based on the aforementioned belief. Besides, women are a reserve army of labour. They earn lower salaries compared to men and in the period of unemployment they are sent back to households. Furthermore, the division of labour into male and female is unfavourable to women. "Natural", i.e. resulting from the socialization, female skills are not cherished and rewarded.

Thus, Rowbotham provides three explanations for women earning less than men, namely

1. belief that a man should maintain his wife;
2. reducing women's professional activity because of housework and maternal function they perform;
3. division of labour into male and female.

Hartmann presents a more extended version of the theory. She tries to explain male domination over women by means of Marxist concept of class domination. Ruling classes have provided men from subordinate classes with power over women from their families as a replacement for losing economic independence. This power is exerted via denying women the access to economically necessary production resources, thanks to which men can use service provided by women in their families as well as they do not have to do any housework or get involved in childcare.

Patriarchy is a set of social relations that has its material basis. It is characterized by hierarchical relations and solidarity among men that allow them to control women (Hartmann 1979, 22). One can mention the following key elements of contemporary patriarchy (Hartmann 1981, 18-19):

are the privileged because of structural conflict of interests (cf. Domański 1992, 16).

- heterosexual married couple;
- housework and childcare perceived as female duties;
- economic dependence of women on men (enhanced by the functioning of the labour market);
- the functioning of the state and a number of institutions based on social relations among men (e.g. clubs, unions, universities, corporations and armies).

Hierarchies, relations among men as well as women's subordination are integral elements in the functioning of modern capitalist society. These relations are systemic in nature.

Male workers have played and still play a crucial role in transforming the patriarchal division of labour by gender into capitalist system of hired labour. In the past, it was actions taken by trade unions that had led to professional segregation by gender. As heads of their families, men gained abilities useful in organizing into groups and used it for setting up trade unions. This ability occupied a major role in the first stage of capitalist development of industry as men used their trade unions for reducing the share that women had in industry and extorting professional segregation by gender. Attempts to exclude women from professional sphere were workers' reaction to women's competition in industry. Workers did not struggle for equal pay for men and women but strived after receiving a salary/wage sufficient to maintain a family as they wanted to keep their wives at home so that they could provide them with household services (Hartmann 1981, 21-22).

According to Hartmann, discrimination against women is determined by the division of power in a family (which entails women's subordination) as well as the division of activity into male and female.

Patriarchy-capitalism theory has been criticized for omitting the influence of the state on the situation of women in the labour market. Besides, it does not take labour market segmentation into account and rejects and criticizes this theory. Hence, patriarchy-capitalism theory cannot account for differences between salaries received by men and women whose qualifications are the same. It also omits cultural factors and psychological needs in material analysis called for and conducted by the authors of different versions of patriarchy-capitalism theory. In the theory under analysis, cultural values and norms are considered either as "ideology" or "false identity".

Reserve army of labour theory by Beechey

Beechey used Marxist concept of reserve army of labour for explaining the disproportions between men and women in the labour market (Beechey 1978, 250 – 276). She has made an assumption that hired female labour is a source of cheap and flexible labour force, which is favourable to capitalists – employers. If women's work is to bring profit to capitalists – employers, a certain model of a family, in which women's work is treated as secondary relative to the role of wife and mother, must exist. Then, woman's salary can be so low so that it does not even cover the cost of everyday reproduction of labour force. Due to such a family structure and such an ideology, women receive salaries lower than the value of their labour force. If it were not for such a family model, hired female labour would not bring such benefits to capitalists and married women would not be the reserve of cheap labour force.

Therefore, Beechey believes that discrimination against women is determined by the organization of labour in a family and cultural patterns.

This theory has also been criticized as it refers only to women who are at least partly maintained by their husbands or partners. It does not account for the situation of single women or women who maintain their families all by themselves. Besides, the theory under discussion does not take professional segregation by gender into account. The division of

activities, professions and branches of business into male and female reduces the extent to which men’s work is “replaced” by women’s work. What is more, low salaries earned by female workers may co-occur with high salaries received by male workers even in the same professions and firms.

Conflict theory by Turner and Musick

In their theory, Turner and Musick present reasons behind discrimination against women and inequality between the sexes in historical context. In all societies, social roles have divided into female and male ones. This division is enhanced by cultural beliefs. In the majority of societies, gender diversification is connected with a certain level of discrimination against women. In the age of hunting and gathering, inequality was slight but it was a historical tendency to enhance discrimination against women in such a way so that disproportionately greater power, wealth and prestige were enjoyed and are still enjoyed by men in comparison with women. Why are some people discriminated against then? Because they are competitors in the labour market and accept salaries lower than those received by the dominating population (Turner, Musick 1985, chapter 9).

Discrimination may not be practised if there are no substantial differences in power held by the discriminating and the discriminated. In turn, inequality in holding the power affect the level of financial, organizational and cultural resources that every population has. At the same time, discrimination consolidates the existing division of power or even strengthens it as denying the discriminated the access to resources reduces their power (Turner, Musick 1985, 224). Discrimination results in reducing economic, social and political roles that may be performed by the discriminated population and positions they may occupy.

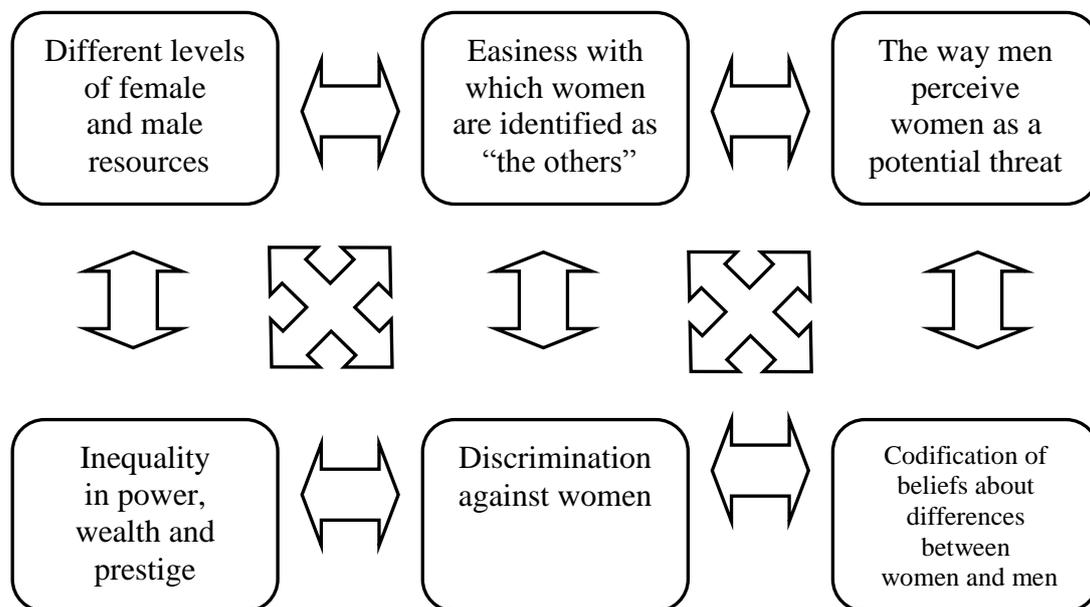


Figure 1. Relations among discrimination against women, inequality and perceiving certain issues in the theory by Turner and Musick.

Source: I. Reszke: *Nierówności płci w teoriach. Teoretyczne wyjaśnienia nierówności płci w sferze pracy zawodowej.* PAN IFIS, Warszawa 1991, 206.

Therefore, inequality between the sexes stems from many overlapping and mutually enhancing processes. Besides, men may feel threatened by women as the latter constitute at least a half of population and demanding equal rights would make men give up some of their privileges. Turner and Musick suggest the following model of diversification dynamics,

discrimination against women and inequality between the sexes that present mutual relations and the strengthening of various processes and factors:

Men do not find it easy to give up the access to well-paid jobs, power or prestige. They use power when their position is threatened. They create cultural beliefs about difference between women and men accepted both by men and properly socialized women. Thanks to these beliefs, discrimination seems to be right and the diversification of social roles and positions by gender seems to be a natural state of affairs (Reszke 1991, 207).

Processes that take place between women and men in society in economic, social and political spheres underlie the antagonism between the sexes. This antagonism may be hidden, i.e. when women and men accept their social roles, and overt when women and men (who support them) do not agree with cultural beliefs⁸ and political and economic organization of society. Then, there is an open conflict with the supporters of the existing status quo.

Thus, discrimination against women in professional life is caused by the division of roles into female and male enhanced by cultural beliefs and socialization, perceiving women as a threat as well as various levels of resources that women and men have.

This theory has been criticized for a number of reasons. First of all, it omits issues relating to maternity, childcare and educational functions of a family. Secondly, it fails to explain why women accept cultural beliefs that justify their social “handicap”, why in certain periods some women do not accept such beliefs and why men always discriminate against women. Besides, the theory in question omits institutional and structural factors (Reszke 1991, 207–209).

Conclusion

None of the concepts refers to discrimination against women in a thorough and comprehensive way.

The starting point are empirical universalities, namely referring to reproduction functions that women perform and the fact they are weaker physically. The knowledge of these universalities is the basis for the division of activities into household activity and public activity as well as for the concept of male domination. The theories indicate that it is mutually exclusive to deny someone the possibility of performing the roles that grant privileges and force him/her to perform the roles that withdraw these privileges. At the same time, if women do not have the access to public sphere and their role is reduced to housework, they are denied the possibility of taking power and the access to other valued goods, which makes them subordinate to men. Male domination leads to discrimination against women in the scope of the access to roles that give opportunity to receive greater rewards and opportunity to determine the division of social roles into male and female.

Therefore, the feminist theories referred to in the present chapter suggest the following reasons behind discrimination in professional life:

- According to Chodorow, Ortner and Rosaldo – implications resulting from maternity and educational roles performed by women.
- According to Engels – burdening women with housework and childcare.

⁸ Turner and Musick provide examples of cultural beliefs that give right to discriminate against women and divide labour by gender. According to one of such beliefs, women are more expressive and emotional and hence they should do the housework or get a female, protective job. According to another belief, women are more submissive and hence it is natural that they avoid competing with men, are economically dependent on their husbands and perform roles that have been assigned to them socially. Such beliefs also obscure the contradiction between discrimination against women and fundamental moral values cherished by society (like e.g. contradiction between liberty as well as striving after prosperity and discrimination against women). Thus, these beliefs are good to men’s interests (cf. Turner, Musick 1985, 242-269).

- According to Sacks and Sanday – division of activity into male and female, which results in lower position occupied by women both in social life and in the labour market.
- According to Rowbotham – the structure of capitalist production, division of labour by gender in firms as well as division of housework and family duties.
- According to Hartmann – the division of power in a family, which entails women's subordination as well as the division of activity into female and male.
- According to Beechey – the organization of labour in a family and cultural patterns.
- According to Turner and Musick – division of roles into female and male enhanced by cultural beliefs and socialization, perceiving women as a potential threat as well as various levels of resources that women and men have.

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