

Redressing Gender Inequality in Employment: the National and Sub-regional Policy ‘Fit’

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ABSTRACT This article examines the ‘fit’ between policy development regarding gender inequality in employment at sub-regional and national (UK) level, in particular focusing on the experience of women. Drawing on research undertaken in Coventry and Warwickshire, the article explores the question of how policy development at sub-regional level fits with national policy, and whether the sub-region is an appropriate, or effective, level at which to develop policy on gender inequality in employment. It is argued that while there needs to be recognition of the limited ability of sub-regional policy to confront structural issues, policy development at this level does offer potential strengths in redressing both gender inequality in employment and the relative lack of a gender dimension in local economic development.

KEY WORDS: Local economic development, policy formation, gender inequality, sub-regional policy, labour market

Introduction

Gender inequality in employment is an area of increasing policy development at European level (see Feldmann, 2002). Following European Union directives, there is an increasing emphasis across Europe on policies and programmes relating to positive action (e.g. skills training), equal

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treatment (e.g. overcoming stereotypes and transforming the conception of 'atypical work') and documenting examples of good practice (Rees, 1998). At national level, gender inequality in employment has been the subject of considerable recent policy interest in the UK (see Kingsmill, 2001; Dench *et al.*, 2002; Walby & Olsen, 2002). In turn, these concerns have impacted on policy formation at national (and sub-national) level, as the gender mainstreaming of employment, education and training policy has been taken forward as a result of the European Union directives. However, arguably the gender dimension of policy is less entrenched at sub-national than at the national level, since many regional and *local* economic development strategies can be seen as lacking a clear gender dimension. This is problematic as women tend to be more dependent on the *local* labour market than men (Green *et al.*, 1986; Bruegel, 2000).

The interaction of policy formation at national, regional and sub-regional levels is the primary concern of this article. It draws on research into gender inequality in one specific sub-region, Coventry and Warwickshire, and the development of a potentially innovative sub-regional action plan to tackle that inequality (Bimrose *et al.*, 2003).¹

The article begins by discussing gender inequality in employment at a national level and within the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region, highlighting distinctive features of the sub-regional labour market as well as features shared in common with national trends. Following a consideration of policy development at a national level, evidence regarding policy development at the sub-regional level, based on the Coventry and Warwickshire study, is examined. This is achieved through a consideration of initiatives relating to women and employment in the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region. An examination of how they fit with national policy development raises issues of possible weaknesses in activity at a sub-regional level; hence posing a more fundamental question as to the appropriateness and effectiveness of policy development on gender inequality in employment at a sub-regional level. These questions are considered further by examining the development of a sub-regional action plan to combat gender inequality in employment. The article concludes by considering how best a fit can be achieved between sub-regional and national policy development, and the particular strengths that sub-regional policy development potentially offers in redressing gender inequality in employment.

¹The research was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Coventry and Warwickshire, with funding from the European Social Fund. It formed part of the LSC's commitment to issues of equality which also includes implementing a system of Equality and Diversity Impact Measures to provide targets for improvement relating to participation, retention and achievement at each level of qualification and learning activity (see LSC, 2002).

Gender Inequality in Employment: Coventry and Warwickshire in a National Context

Introduction

Evidence suggests that gender remains a determinant of individual economic prosperity, over and above individual skill and ability. It is a matter of concern that there is inflexibility in the labour market inhibiting women from realising their full potential. For instance, the 2002 Coventry and Warwickshire Employers Survey (Hasluck *et al.*, 2002) shows that skills shortages exist. The persistence of discriminatory employment practices means that employers who face skill shortages or recruitment problems could go some way to resolving these difficulties if they adopted fully-fledged equal opportunities practices, and offered flexible working and more on-the-job training programmes to female part-time employees.

Furthermore, recent research challenges the idea of a polarisation of 'work'- and 'home'-centred commitments for women. Various studies point to the structural constraints influencing women's employment preferences. For mothers, key issues include: childcare availability and costs; the demand of household labour on women's time; their weak bargaining position with employers; the fluctuating rather than static nature of mothers' involvement in the labour market; plus the fact that women tend to be unwaged in households where their partner is unwaged (see Crompton & Le Feuvre, 1996; Ginn *et al.*, 1996; Bottero, 2000; Gregg & Wadsworth, 2003). These issues highlight ideas that are useful for understanding factors that affect the quantity and quality of women's labour market participation, and policy formation at a sub-regional, regional and national level.

There can also be significant spatial variations in women's experience of employment (Townsend, 1997; Smith & Duncan, 2002) affecting their contribution to the economy. At a regional level, these variations include: women's participation in the labour market; women's participation in the engineering and manufacturing sectors in the West Midlands, namely their under-representation (Phillpotts & Cohen, 2004); and the gender pay gap (Anderson *et al.*, 2001).

Although sharing some key features of gender inequality evident at both national and regional levels, the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region makes an interesting case study as it is an area where large male-dominated industries were historically important, and it has one of the most dynamic economies in the West Midlands. Traditionally Coventry and Warwickshire is associated with the male-dominated manufacturing sector and being the 'heartland' of engineering. Although the sub-region has seen an expansion in the service sector, this has historically been more important in Warwickshire towns such as Stratford, rather than Coventry.

The sub-region is an important focus for policy development as it represents an attempt by *local* policy makers to develop sub-regional policy which addresses *local* issues. This example of sub-regional policy formation could offer a generalisable model.

Women's Participation in the Labour Market

Women's employment has changed dramatically over the last 20 years (Dench *et al.*, 2002; Hakim, 2000; Summerfield & Babb, 2003), but gender inequality remains a well-documented feature of the UK labour market. The economic activity rates of men and women are moving in opposite directions with the activity rate of men falling while that of women is increasing. Women's participation rates in the UK labour market have continued to grow since the 1980s. National research indicates that the employment of mothers with young children grew fastest, from 27% of all mothers of children under 5 in 1980 to 41% in the 2000 Labour Force Survey – with an increasing percentage being full-time.

In Coventry and Warwickshire, demographic trends and changing patterns of labour force participation mean that the composition of the labour force available to employers has been changing. On average, it has become older, while more women and fewer men are working. Women now account for 51% of the sub-regional labour force. Around 38% of these women are working in part-time jobs, in contrast to the small number of men (though this has increased sharply in recent years). Women with higher-level qualifications are more likely to be economically active than those with no qualifications.

The data in Table 1 show trends in economic activity at sub-regional, regional and national levels. In general, the economic activity rates for women in the sub-region are higher than the national rate, whereas the regional economic activity rate for women (72% in 2003) is slightly lower than the national rate for women (73% in 2003). However, women's participation rates in certain sectors show a very different picture.

Table 1. Economic activity rates of the working age population by sex percentages

	Coventry and Warwickshire			West Midlands			Great Britain		
	Males	Females	All persons	Males	Females	All persons	Males	Females	All persons
1994	85.7	74.5	80.4	85.2	70.8	79.1	85.3	71.0	78.5
1995	87.5	68.7	78.7	86.4	70.1	78.0	84.9	70.9	73.2
1996	85.8	70.1	78.6	85.7	70.3	78.4	84.8	71.3	78.3
1997	84.0	73.4	79.2	85.5	69.9	78.1	84.5	71.6	78.4
1998	87.7	73.8	81.4	85.7	71.3	78.9	84.0	71.8	78.2
1999	86.5	73.6	80.4	84.7	72.7	79.1	84.3	72.3	78.6
2000	81.9	74.2	78.3	83.3	72.1	78.0	84.5	72.8	79.0
2001	86.1	75.1	80.9	84.1	71.5	78.1	83.9	72.7	78.6
2002	83.7	75.7	79.8	84.4	72.0	78.6	83.8	73.0	78.7
2003	87.6	75.3	81.7	84.1	72.0	78.4	84.0	72.9	78.7

At Spring each year.

Source: Labour Force Survey Quarterly, from NOMIS.

Women's Sectoral (Under-)Representation

Women's participation in employment remains different and unequal to that of men. Horizontal segregation, meaning women are over-represented in some sectors (e.g. social care), but grossly under-represented in others (e.g. construction), is well-documented (see Brown *et al.*, 2000; Fielden & Davidson, 2001; Construction Industry Training Board, 2002).

Data on employment by industry in the West Midlands (Phillpotts & Cohen, 2004) show that the region has a relatively high percentage of workplaces involved in distribution, hotels, catering and repairs accounting for 30% of all (209,400) business sites in the region (UK economy 28%). Financial intermediation, real estate, renting and business activities account for 24% – lower than the figure for the UK economy (27%). Women's participation rates in certain industrial sectors is low in Coventry and Warwickshire, and the West Midlands, but are comparable to those identified for Great Britain. The sectors identified include: engineering; utilities; construction; and transport, storage and communication. The Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region has a higher percentage of people, of working age, employed in manufacturing (17%) compared with the national percentage of 14% (CSWP Ltd., 2003) and lower than the regional percentage (21%) (Phillpotts & Cohen, 2004).

In the region there is a greater than national average reliance on the engineering industry, a sector in which women (nationally) make up just 20% of the workforce (EMTA, 2002). In Coventry and Warwickshire this figure is even lower, at 18% (Bimrose *et al.*, 2003). This under-representation is compounded by the fact that, just as at national level, women are far more likely than men to work part-time, but the percentage of the sub-regional workforce that works part-time tends to be lower in the largest workplaces. While women actually make up a slight majority of employees in the Coventry and Warwickshire labour market (Hasluck *et al.*, 2002), they are greatly under-represented in the key engineering sector.

Thus, gender inequality in employment is evident at all levels. This gender inequality has implications for policies designed to enhance economic competitiveness and inclusion at national, regional and sub-regional levels. One key thrust of policy has been concerned with addressing women's under-representation in specific sectors.

The Gender Pay Gap

Within sectors where women are over-represented, vertical segregation is also evident, meaning women are concentrated in lower paid positions. Indeed, the gender pay gap remains a prominent feature of the labour market. In 2003, the gender pay gap was 18% for those working full-time in Great Britain, compared with 40% between women working part-time and men working full-time (EOC, 2004).

A regional analysis of the gender pay gap for the West Midlands Government Office Region (Anderson *et al.*, 2001) shows that women's

mean hourly earnings as a percentage of men's is 81%. Women working part-time earn 95% of the earnings of male part-time workers, which compares with a range from 81% in the South West to 97% in London and Scotland. The gender pay gap in the West Midlands is significant, particularly for women working part-time. The analysis also showed that in manufacturing and construction the gender pay gap is still very evident in the West Midlands. Data from the New Earnings Survey show very striking gaps in the percentage of women earning less than men working full-time at a national, regional and sub-regional level. Working women were less well paid at a regional and sub-regional level compared with the national average, highlighting the persistent gender pay gap at all levels.

The following sections discuss policy responses to gender inequality at a national level and in the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region.

Policy Responses at National Level

Gender inequality in employment has been the subject of considerable policy development under New Labour with a number of priority issues now being identified (see Women & Equality Unit, 2003). These priorities are located in a broader equality agenda, which includes issues such as domestic violence and women's political representation. There are some areas of overlap between policy areas, but with regard to employment a number of key priorities are evident at both the national and sub-national level. These are childcare, work-life balance, the gender pay gap and what is described as 'women into under-represented sectors', which seeks to address issues of horizontal segregation in the labour market.

To take the gender pay gap as an example, the government considers the key drivers behind this as being: differences in men's and women's work experience and qualifications; the predominance of women in part-time work; travel patterns due to childcare; occupational segregation; and discrimination (Women & Equality Unit, 2002). The government has committed itself to action in four key areas which it describes as:

- leading by example – government departments and agencies were required to undertake pay reviews by April 2003 and more detailed action was subsequently set out in *Delivering on Gender Equality* (Women & Equality Unit, 2003);
- making it easier for women to get equal pay – the Employment Act 2002 simplified the process of taking up equal pay cases where women have been discriminated against through the introduction of a questionnaire procedure;
- making it easier for employers to pay fairly – the promotion of good practice, for example the Equal Opportunities Commission produced a model for voluntary pay reviews for businesses, and trade union representatives are being trained on equal pay issues; and

- tackling the wider causes of the pay gap – policies in this field aim: to help women with children stay attached to the labour market (including the extension of entitlement to parental leave, a right to request flexible working and the provision of more childcare places under the SureStart initiative as part of the National Childcare Strategy); to provide access to training for low skilled employees; to promote two good practice guides, both funded by the European Commission, for advancing women in the workplace and dealing with gender wage differences; and finally to address the under-representation of women in non-traditional occupations (Women & Equality Unit, 2003).

At a national level, there is some concern with women's human capital, but the greater emphasis would appear to be on structural issues such as childcare, with responses including legislation and national strategies. However, it raises the question as to whether the same can be said of the development of policy at the sub-regional level. So where does this very broad ranging policy development at national level leave sub-regional policy development on gender inequality in employment? What is the fit between national and sub-regional policy? Can the sub-region be an appropriate and effective level for policy development on gender inequality in employment? In an attempt to address these questions, the next section presents evidence from Coventry and Warwickshire.

Evidence from a Sub-regional Study: Coventry and Warwickshire

Introduction

The Coventry and Warwickshire study involved a number of different elements. The first element of the study was concerned with a review of the evidence on gender inequality in the sub-regional labour market and involved a comparative analysis of relevant research at sub-regional, regional and national levels (Bimrose *et al.*, 2003). The second element of the study explored initiatives in the sub-region relating to women and employment, which involved interviewing 15 organisations engaged in promoting and supporting relevant activity, including women's centres, training organisations and *local* colleges.

The third element was concerned with future policy formation through the development of a sub-regional action plan. This included two dissemination events, which were attended by over 100 people from training organisations, community groups, *local* authorities, the Connexions Service and Jobcentre Plus. The events were designed to enable key *local* actors to discuss policy development through a series of workshops. The findings of the main research report and the outcomes from the two participative events formed the key points of a sub-regional action plan to address gender inequality in employment, to be implemented by the Learning and Skills Council, Coventry and Warwickshire, working with *local* partners.

Initiatives Relating to Women and Employment at Sub-regional Level

There was a very diverse range of initiatives in the sub-region relating to women and employment, which fall into a number of categories beginning with activity directly influenced by national policy development.

Firstly, the promotion of work–life balance policies is one of many government responses to gender inequality in employment which is evident at the sub-regional, regional and national level. As well as a national campaign, however, *local* authorities are also involved in this initiative. The research found one example of a *local* authority undertaking a major campaign to promote the adoption of flexible working by companies, and offering advice and support to those companies wishing to pursue work–life balance policies. This initiative was based on an attempt at structural change by seeking to persuade employers of the benefits of such policies; there were no powers to enforce change. For example, one approach used by the *local* authority was to invite employers to nominate themselves for an awards scheme for innovative flexible working practices. While examples of good practice were identified, progress is slow, with emerging evidence for success concentrated in the public rather than the private sector.

Similarly, there were several *local* initiatives aimed at encouraging women into non-traditional sectors, addressing horizontal segregation in the sub-region and reflecting the government's view that this is a priority issue. For example, the Women's Engineering Society believes that *local* groups are important in providing practical support for women, and by women, in the sector. In 2002, a sub-regional group was established, with an immediate membership of 50 women. In addition, *local* schools, colleges and other organisations were involved in activities encouraging girls to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. Events aimed specifically at girls and young women included an annual Girls and Technology and Engineering day, and 'taster' sessions at further education colleges enabling young women to gain experience of construction and manual trades. Although addressing the under-representation of women in non-traditional sectors is a national concern for policy, it is even more pertinent to the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region and the West Midlands. However, no evidence in the sub-region was found of activities aimed at encouraging employers to change working practices so as to make engineering more attractive to potential women employees.

Further policy initiatives, specific to the sub-region, were developed as a result of sub-regional organisations accessing national and European funding opportunities to promote women's participation in the *local* labour market. For instance, the work of the *local* Women's Business Development Agency included: a Neighbourhood Renewal Fund project to raise the awareness of African-Caribbean women regarding self-development and business opportunities; a Phoenix Fund (Small Business Service) project to raise the awareness of women about

self-employment opportunities together with provision for a women's empowerment programme; and a project to help unemployed women to access training and employment opportunities. A *local* further education college had received funding from the European Social Fund to undertake a workplace-based Family Learning Works project targeting low-skilled employees who were parents. It was envisaged that most participants would be women. These initiatives reflect the overall aims of national policy by tackling the wider causes of gender inequalities, but are again extending those aims to address the requirements of the sub-regional labour market.

This complementarity between national policy and sub-regional initiatives can also be seen in a further category of activity aimed at tackling the wider causes of inequality: community-based initiatives aimed at women. Although these initiatives were influenced by national policy, they were specific to the *local* community and their needs. Examples at this micro level included a community centre which ran projects ranging from the establishment of a crèche (as part of the National Childcare Strategy) to support victims of domestic violence. The centre saw such projects as important in enabling women to take the first steps into learning and work. Another community-based venture acted as a training provider, offering courses aimed particularly at women from minority ethnic groups. The vocational courses provided ranged from IT to childcare qualifications, but also had a heavy emphasis on improving English language skills.

Discussion

The examples cited above are indicative of the considerable complementarity between sub-regional initiatives and national policy development, but elements of difference were also apparent. For example, while it was noted above that policy development at national level is focused on structural issues, the same does not appear to be the case, at least to the same extent, with initiatives in the sub-region. Some *local* initiatives such as promoting work-life balance policies reflect a concern with structural issues, but what is more evident is a concern with women's human capital and influencing women's choices. This is also illustrated by the initiatives aimed at enhancing the language skills of women from minority ethnic groups and encouraging low skilled women to acquire further qualifications or engage in empowerment training.

At a sub-regional level, even the encouragement of young women to enter non-traditional occupations appears not to be about changing sectors so as to be more attractive to women, but placing an emphasis on women's work preferences, which is often neglected by national policy. The focus on the human capital of individual women is perhaps simply a reflection of the roles of sub-regional organisations; a *local* training organisation, for instance, is inherently concerned with human capital. Moreover, it should be noted that a concern with human capital – as exemplified by learning targets – is evident in national policy. However, the far greater emphasis on women's human capital as opposed to structural issues does suggest

some possible lack of fit between sub-regional and national policy development.

Beyond the concern with the fit with national policy development, possible weaknesses in activity within the sub-region are identifiable, so raising the question of whether the sub-region is an appropriate and effective level at which to develop policy on gender inequality in employment. For example, the provision of training at community level was largely reactive, and often short-term, taking advantage of funding opportunities rather than systematically identifying *local* training needs and then formulating policies to address them. There was also an apparent lack of dissemination of information about initiatives within the sub-region. For example, a *local* higher education institution had provided empowerment training for women in the 1990s, but had ultimately failed to secure continuation funding and the training had ended. Lessons from this training could clearly have helped the new empowerment training initiative referred to above, but the new initiative was planned with no knowledge of the earlier project. These specific examples, therefore, do not merely question how sub-regional policy development fits with national policy, but also whether the sub-region is an appropriate level at which to develop policy on gender inequality in employment. These questions can be explored further by examining the development of the sub-regional action plan.

The Sub-regional Action Plan

The sub-regional action plan was developed by drawing on the authors' research report (Bimrose *et al.*, 2003) and the outcomes of two participative events attended by *local* employers, community groups and key *local* agencies. The first step in developing the sub-regional action plan was identifying priority themes and these fell under five main headings:

1. women's dominance in part-time work;
2. women's under-representation in certain sectors – such as engineering;
3. women's caring responsibilities;
4. the prevalence of sexual harassment at work; and
5. developing different policy responses to address the differing position of specific groups of women based on disability, ethnicity and age.

Under each of these headings a series of action points were identified, covering a plethora of ideas. Key points were to:

- seek European funding to provide childcare for women attending training courses as part of the national aim to increase childcare provision supporting mothers who wish to return to work;
- continue the promotion of flexible working practices among employers, which is part of the national strategy to support people with caring responsibilities;

- use careers education and guidance to highlight opportunities for women in non-traditional occupations/sectors, which addresses the national concern about women's under-representation in some sectors;
- encourage current projects – for example a Saturday morning engineering club – to take a more proactive approach to attracting and including girls and young women, which is again tackling the national concern about women in engineering;
- ensure that training organisations in the sub-region provide women with information about their rights at work and ways of dealing with sexual harassment as part of the broader gender equality agenda; and
- provide a 'signposting' function to disseminate information about relevant initiatives within the sub-region.

The sub-regional action plan is at the start of its life and is subject to ad hoc revision on a continuing basis. In many instances, timescales for specific activities remain under discussion.

Assessing the 'Fit' with National Policy

In terms of the fit with national policy development, the sub-regional action plan presents strong complementarity in its key themes, but what of the differences in emphasis and the possible weaknesses? In answer to this question, three related key points are pertinent.

First, it is self-evident that some development, for example legislative, is the preserve of national government. If tackling gender inequality in employment is seen solely in terms of structural issues, which require legislative responses, then action at the sub-regional level might be deemed inappropriate. However, this is far from being the case. While the ability to tackle structural issues at sub-regional level is limited, and this needs to be recognised, there is still a role for sub-regional policy development to *disseminate* and help realise national strategies. For example, the promotion of work-life balance policies may be a national initiative, but including this within a sub-regional policy allows for the national strategy to be effectively reinforced at a different level. The fact that New Labour places great emphasis on persuading employers to change, for example through the promotion of good practice rather than resorting to legislation (see Dean, 2002), adds even more weight to this point. Similarly, the existence of a National Childcare Strategy does not preclude the kind of action described above, therefore addressing a specific *local* need for childcare is achieved more effectively through a sub-regional strategy.

Secondly, the sub-regional action plan brings greater specificity to national policy by taking themes from national policy development and successfully addressing them at a *local* and even individual level. The example of the promotion of work-life balance policies illustrates this, as a national policy is, through sub-regional action, targeted at the level

of individual firms with sub-regional action promoting greater awareness of national policy development. Similarly, a general national aim of tackling occupational segregation is addressed through sub-regional action by very specific initiatives such as the 'Saturday club' referred to above. Thus, a far greater *specificity* is given in taking national policy themes, but effectively addressing them at sub-regional level – taking account of the specific sub-regional context.

Thirdly, what gives real strength to the sub-regional action plan is the involvement of a broad range of key *local* actors, and the ability of those actors to identify issues of particular relevance to the sub-region and particular means for addressing those issues. The specific issue of women's under-representation in the engineering industry is of particular importance to the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region. The strength of sub-regional policy development is in devising locally appropriate initiatives to redress that inequality. Furthermore, the inclusion in the sub-regional action plan of a 'signposting' function means that momentum can be generated for the dissemination of good practice and the transfer of knowledge within the sub-region, thereby ensuring further development. As the action plan is in the initial stages of development, only preliminary conclusions about its effectiveness can be drawn, but these are positive so far. However, it will be interesting to see how the action plan is implemented and developed further.

Conclusion

In relation to addressing racial inequality in employment Lustgarten (1989) argues that there is a need for a variety of political, administrative and legislative responses, and in the light of the complex causes of gender inequality in employment it would seem that there is a need for a similarly diverse range of responses, including policy development at different levels. Some responses, for example legislative, clearly require action at national level and it is important not to exaggerate the ability of sub-regional policy development to impact on deeply embedded structural inequalities. But if redressing gender inequality in employment requires more than legislation, then policy development at the level of the sub-region offers a potential, and effective, way forward as it clearly addresses the needs of the *local* labour market and community.

The example of policy development in the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region demonstrates that there can be a positive fit between sub-regional and national policy development, with sub-regional policy 'pushing out' and giving greater specificity to national policy. More than this, the involvement of a broad range of key *local* actors, and the ability of those actors both to identify issues of particular relevance to the sub-region and particular means for addressing those issues, gives a very immediate strength to sub-regional policy development. Thus, not only can sub-regional policy development be an effective means of redressing gender

inequality in employment, it also offers the potential for redressing the lack of a gender dimension in *local* economic development.

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