

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Gender, Education and Employment: An international comparison of school-to-work transitions, edited by Hans-Peter Blossfeld, Jan Skopek, Moris Triventi, and Sandra Buchholz**

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015, 416pp., £85.50 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-78471-502-1

When the gender pay gap comes up in academia, the media, or everyday life, it sometimes seems a simple issue with a straightforward solution. *Gender, Education and Employment: An international comparison of school-to-work transitions* provides a welcome reminder that gender inequality in the workplace is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The book also challenges some key premises in recent scholarship; for example, some researchers have suggested that pay inequality is attributable to motherhood – women who have children are penalized by a lack of flexible working provision. This appears plausible for the US and UK; however, is it really the case everywhere that inequalities only emerge after family formation? And, more broadly, is pay the only relevant outcome to consider when it comes to gender equality in the workplace?

Blossfeld and colleagues boldly address these questions by drawing attention to the first job after leaving education, a crucial yet frequently overlooked stage in the life course for establishing gender differences. In the first coordinated research effort of its kind, the authors quantify various differences between males and females in first job experiences, using longitudinal data from recent cohorts in a range of countries. A key aim is to examine whether women's recent success in education 'translates' into labour market outcomes. The editors summarize the topic's theoretical and empirical complexity in an expertly crafted introduction, which is followed by two overview comparative chapters. The remainder of the book comprises case studies using data from countries in Europe and North America, as well as Australia and Russia. Case study authors adopt a uniform approach: first, they establish whether a raw gap exists between males and females in their first significant job in terms of pay, prestige, occupational sector, skill level, and authority. Next, they consider whether this is explained by education levels, occupational sector, or other characteristics. Finally, they discuss which country features might explain their results.

Variations in the nature and size of gender differences make for a complex cross-national picture. The most striking and consistent trend across countries is female over-representation in the service sector, while men dominate productive occupations. In other areas, countries vary widely. The authors draw upon the 'welfare regimes' approach, popular in comparative sociology. This suggests why gender differences might be more pronounced in some contexts, notwithstanding cross-national similarities such as rising female educational attainment, increasing egalitarianism, and large service sectors. The authors' new welfare regime model recognizes multiple influences on males' and females' transitions into the labour market, including culture, welfare and family policies, and education systems. Yet results are sometimes counter-intuitive. The social democratic regime type, for instance – represented here by Sweden and Denmark – typically exhibits gender equality in culture and in labour force participation, as well as generous parental leave and childcare allowances. The case studies show that while this is so, these countries also exhibit high levels of inequality on measures such as job prestige and pay. This demonstrates the multidimensional nature of gender inequality, whereby parity in one domain

can amplify disparity in another. It also shows that theoretical models may not always capture and predict reality.

In order to ensure robust comparison between countries, this book is consistent and logical in its structure. However, the chapters also draw out interesting features of local context, which varies the tone agreeably; for example, the chapters on Spain and Italy show the many difficulties faced by all young adults in securing employment following the 2008 crisis. In this context, the authors also consider job stability, showing that females are more vulnerable to temporary contracts in their first jobs, owing in part to the fact that they more often work in the service sector. This perfectly illustrates that qualitative job differences are no trivial issue, but have meaningful consequences for women's early career development and financial stability.

A distinct lack of rhetoric could alienate those who favour a more political stance on gender inequality. Although their results are genuinely original the authors offer few policy prescriptions. The book instead focuses on the careful selection, presentation, and comparison of data. This empirical approach may appeal most to fellow sociologists working on gender, education, and employment, and to students. By offering much quantitative methodological guidance and highlighting many potential avenues for future research, the book can stand alongside classic handbooks of comparative methodology and theory, such as Shavit, Aram, and Gamoran's *Stratification in Higher Education: A comparative study* (2007) and Shavit and Blossfeld's *Persistent Inequality: Changing educational attainment in thirteen countries* (1993). The book would also be suitable for those interested in particular countries, as the chapters are convincing as standalone research studies.

Readers should not expect the authors to endorse a particular theory. Instead, they pepper the text with loose insights on the inequalities observed, which may relate to family policies, labour market structure, or culture. However, ultimately, the book's purpose is description rather than explanation and this is its key strength. By focusing analysis on the qualitative dimensions of labour, it convinces us that factors beyond pay are important for gender equality. By zoning in on the first jobs we clearly see that gender inequalities in the labour market start early, and are far more complex than the now well-documented penalties to motherhood.

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