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Gender Discrimination Through Recruitment *

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* Review of David L. Collinson, David Knights and Margaret Collinson, Managing to Discriminate, London & New York: Routledge; 1990. Pp. ix + 251.

Half of this volume is a valuable research report; it documents and describes in detail recruitment and promotion practices in the UK, where a high level of gender occupational segregation is maintained by concentrating women in lower paying and lower status jobs and preventing them from entering many better paying and higher status jobs, either by limiting their recruitment or by preventing their promotion in the internal labor markets of organizations. The other half purports to be a critical analysis of extant theoretical studies of gender discrimination in the labor market and the authors' own theoretical contribution, plus their own prescriptions. I find the connection between the theoretical and the empirical parts tenuous and the prescriptions rather limited and disappointing.

1. Empirical

The research was commissioned by the British Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) occasioned by its awareness of the widespread disregard for its anti-discrimination laws, and carried out between 1983 and 1985. The researchers collected valuable information on the modes of gender discrimination in recruiting and in promotion across the North West of England at 64 worksites of 19 private sector companies in banking, mail order, insurance, high-tech and food manufacturing. As they succeeded to gain access not only to relevant documents but also to actual recruitment interviews they were able to report on the extent and the techniques of this discrimination; they used dozens of interviews with line and personnel managers to probe managers' rationalizations of their acts of discrimination; with the help of interviews with some of the affected women and reports on their subsequent actions, they attempted to examine the reactions of women to gender discrimination in the recruitment and promotion process.

The overall picture is that of the prevalence of blatant gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion by traditional sexist line managers using informal and paternalist methods; but even where more formal gender-neutral criteria had been introduced into the recruitment process by personnel management, these were regularly circumvented; female applicants' desirable characteristics, such as, for instance, a high level of formal education or "mobility" i.e. possessing a driver's license, were completely disregarded by male line managers, with the passive concurrence of both male and female personnel managers. In the case of internal

recruitment, a woman employee that had already been promoted, was barred because of her pregnancy.

Unfortunately all these reports do not enable us to compare the situation with an earlier one: we cannot conclude that the enactment of the British equal opportunities laws have or have not had any impact on the level of gender discrimination in hiring or the degree of the resulting gender occupational segregation;

A typical workforce profile for the researched firms, we are informed, is extreme segregation where women make up 84.5 percent of the clerical workforce of an insurance company, but only 8.2 percent of its supervisory/field staff, and only 0.7 percent of its management (p. 166).

In the whole volume only two instances are mentioned of women who attempted to fight back after having suffered unjustified rejection, only one of whom - the pregnant employee - was successful. In both cases the woman herself was a union activist; we hear of no case where, on their own initiative, shop stewards protested, not to say took action against gender discrimination in the external or in the internal recruitment process. Most surprising are the apparent total absence of any official or voluntary watchdog institutions whose task would be to report violations of the law and to formulate goals and timetables for gender integration, as well as the authors' apparent total lack of awareness of and interest in this vital aspect of "resistance". According to the authors' report, the managers had made no attempt to hide their blatantly discriminatory practices and did not expect any action to be taken against them on this account. In only one instance a manager is reported to have mentioned in passing the need to circumvent the law that, unreasonably in his view, demands gender neutrality in job advertising. As the authors do not provide a more general account of the extent of the resistance to discriminatory recruitment, they do not enable us to learn whether the North West is typical or atypical for the entire country.

2) Theoretical

From the beginning is it not clear what is the authors' interest in "theory". Answers to which questions are they looking for? For researchers observing illegal gender discrimination in recruitment obvious questions would be:

- 1) Why do employers/managers discriminate against women in recruitment?
- 2) Why do others collaborate with them, or keep quiet about it?
- 3) Why do most women victims of discrimination not fight for their rights?
- 4) Why do so many women voluntarily accept female stereotyped inferior and dead-end jobs, lower benefits part-time and seasonal temporary jobs?
- 4) Is it feasible to achieve equal hiring and promotion for women?
- 5) Is it feasible ever to overcome gender occupational segregation?

And even more basic:

6) Are these two changes essential for achieving gender equality?

Only those who answer questions 4), 5) and 6) in the affirmative would go all out to develop a systematic strategy for overcoming the discrimination of women in hiring and promotion. Unfortunately the authors do not relate the different theories they discuss to any of these questions; rather their discussion is conducted in vacuum.

They start out by criticizing what they call "conventional" or "liberal" theorists for their failure to recognize "power" as the central factor in gender discrimination, and for putting their trust in strengthening personnel management and in formal recruitment procedures. This sounds very much as if they accept the Marxist theory of all kinds of discrimination - whether of women or of racial minorities - to be part of capitalist managers' drive to maintain their position of power: their attempt to maintain maximal control over their workers as part of their relentless pursuit of high profits. Yet they then proceed to criticize the authors of Marxist theories of managerial behavior for being overly deterministic and neglecting human "agency"; it is never quite clear what they mean by "agency" besides the rather obvious facts, which they discovered in their observations, that various groups of human beings - not just "capitalists" and "workers" - tend to act in a variety of ways, having a variety of motives and rationalizations for their actions or inactions: different groups of management, line or personnel, main office or provincial, different groups of trade unionists, tend to discriminate differently, to collaborate, to do nothing or to disapprove feebly; different groups of women victims of discrimination either accept defeat and remain in lower female stereotyped jobs, retreat into domesticity, or put up a fight.

Although the authors deal very little with the role of trade unions in the gender discrimination practiced in the firms researched by them, they cite and list in their bibliography a considerable number of British studies of a variety of trade union gender discriminatory practices.

The motives of these different groups include different forms of - often rather short-sighted - self interest: as long as entire job categories are kept as a female ghetto it is easy for managers to undervalue the skills involved and to underpay; excluding women from "skilled" blue collar, technical, supervisory and managerial jobs will placate many male incumbents or applicants for these jobs and often also their unions. Provincial line managers will bolster their self-esteem and status vis -a vis main office managers and personnel managers by claiming to be the true money-makers, the "providers" of the firm; they will justify the exclusion of female applicants for the job of selling insurance, by their claim that only true "providers" i.e. young men, married, with children and a mortgage, will be desperate enough to succeed. Some managers discriminate against women applicants, simply in order to hold on to a power of patronage, as providers of jobs for sons or nephews of local solid citizens. Local women personnel managers often are so dependent on male line

managers, so afraid for their positions and careers that they completely knuckle under.

While all these "interests" in gender discrimination are without much weight, the opposing material advantages for managers of hiring the best qualified candidates for the job and of retaining and promoting experienced women employees are becoming obvious; it would not be difficult to make illegal discriminatory hiring and promotion unattractive enough for managers, to make them observe the law even before changing their sexist views. The authors recommend the strengthening of formal procedures and of personnel management, proposals that may be useful, and that they had criticized the "liberals" for. What they do not mention, and this omission is troubling, is that British equal opportunity laws obviously lack teeth, and that "status of women" or "equality" watchdog institutions for their enforcement appear to be missing. Yet these are prerequisites for the eradication of gender discrimination in hiring and promotion.

Obviously, even if discrimination in recruitment were completely eradicated, gender occupational segregation would not disappear. How do the authors deal with this larger problem? They express rather curious views on the permanence of gender roles. They attribute the fact that so many women tend to assume the entire responsibility for the care of their children and their households, that they interrupt their occupational work and resign themselves to inferior jobs, to "socialization" and even to "nature". Their only suggestion for change is the provision of daycare in the work place, so that mothers of young children would be able to continue in employment. The possibility of changing the rules of working life with the goal of facilitating and furthering the equal sharing of the responsibility and the work of parenting, of housework and of other carework, between employed men and women, apparently has not even entered the minds of the authors.