

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A STORY OF GENDERED INEQUALITY IN WORK

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Introduction

This chapter blends fiction and social science. It sketches the *working-life-cycle* of a fictional woman (Anna) from her early years, through school and university, via her various jobs, work aspirations and experiences as a working mother, to her eventual retirement. The aim is to illustrate the kinds of gendered inequality faced by millions of working women every day. Although the narrative is fictional, it rests firmly upon ideas from contemporary social science. The aim of blending fiction and social science is to offer non-specialists the chance to see the type of thing specialists have to say about gendered inequality – without having to plough their way through pages of statistics and references. Before getting underway, four points are worthy of mention.

First, throughout a typical work-life-cycle, women are (or are not): selected, recruited, allocated (vertically) to hierarchical levels in an employing organisation, allocated (horizontally) to jobs; allocated to (flexible and inflexible) working arrangements; trained, re-trained, appraised, promoted, fired, made redundant, subjected to different payment systems and rewarded financially and/or non-financially, with or without (various kinds of) pension provision.

Second, and relatedly, at each point in this cycle important decisions are made often, but not exclusively, by male managers of varying degree of seniority that have a significant influence on women's working experience. It is important to differentiate between two different ways of arriving at a decision. Some decisions are the result of *conscious*

deliberation over gendered structures via what Archer (2003) calls the “internal conversation” - i.e. a process where we, literally, talk to ourselves in trying to decide upon a course of action. Other decisions are made on the basis of largely *unconscious* habits of thought. These habits are obtained via a process of habituation - i.e. a process of internalisation of, in this context, gendered stereotypes (Fleetwood 2008).

Third, I have resisted the temptation to present male decision makers as explicit sexists, motivated by backward ideas about women’s presumed inferiority and misogyny. This is not because I doubt the existence of such men, unfortunately they do exist. It is, rather, because explaining gendered inequality in this way does not so much explain it as explain it away. An explanation that starts with men’s preferences for discrimination (commonly found in economic theory) begs the question: Where do these preferences come from? Moreover, such an explanation is relatively easy compared to explaining how men who are *not* explicitly sexist nevertheless end up making decisions that discriminate against women.

Fourth, to keep gender and gender inequality in work firmly in focus, and avoid discussing phenomena like class, race, sexual identity, physical and mental disability, *all of which are extremely important influences upon work*, I make the following assumptions. Anna is a fairly typical white, heterosexual woman, born in the 1960s, with no physical or mental disabilities, brought up in a typical working class family, in a typical working class town in the UK, attending typical schools and a typical university. A more thorough treatment would have to consider the intersection of gender with class, race, sexual identity, physical and mental disability and other characteristics. A good example of this is Acker’s (2006) book *Class Questions: Feminist Answers*.

Anna’s story

Anna’s early years

During her early years Anna learns how to be a “girl” and, of course, learns how “boys” learn to be boys. She watches TV, plays with dolls, has several nurses outfits, wears dresses, has a feminine hairstyle and when old enough to realize that adults “go to work”, “have jobs” and “are something”, announces that she wants to be a “cat and dog nurse”. When she gets a little older, and learns to pronounce it, Anna wants to be a veterinary nurse. Sometimes Anna wants to be a “nail lady”, sometimes a hairdresser and once (after a visit to the local fire station) she wanted to be a “lady fireman”. Until Anna is midway through secondary school,

however, she keeps coming back to the idea of being a veterinary nurse. What matters here is not so much what Anna wants to be, but what she doesn't want to be. Anna shows no significant desire to be a train or bus driver, soldier, construction worker, or any other job marked as a "man's job". Basically, and to the extent young children think seriously about it, Anna's upbringing never breaks any gendered ideas vis-à-vis her future working life. Via the largely unconscious process of habituation, she acquires a set of gendered habits of thought that shape her fundamental ideas about working life.

It is not until she goes to the secondary school that she starts to think seriously about her future working life. Indeed, she is constantly reminded by teachers and parents that if she doesn't do her homework, and pass her exams, she won't be able to get a "good job". Meanwhile her earlier ideas about being a veterinary nurse are fading. Whilst watching TV and reading books and magazines extend Anna's set of ideas about jobs she might consider suitable, they simultaneously reinforce some of her gendered habits of thought and stereotypes. Furthermore, whilst her careers teacher often suggests a wider range of jobs, and teachers often use examples that break the dominant gendered ideas about suitable work for women, the gendered habits exercise a strong, unconscious, causal influence on Anna's thinking.

Anna is not, however, a prisoner of these unconscious habits and she does sometimes consciously reflect on "what she wants to be". But when the careers teacher tells her that "there is nothing stopping her if she wants to be an electrician or a brick-layer" this just doesn't ring true. There actually *is* something stopping her, even if she cannot clearly articulate it. She tacitly knows (or at least she thinks she knows, remember women too have stereotypical ideas about men) that some, maybe most, men are obnoxious. Men fart, don't get washed regularly, swear a lot, like to ogle at pictures of topless women in the newspaper, sometimes they fight, sometimes they pick on weaker people to bully and sometimes they bully and harass her. Moreover, Anna tacitly knows (or at least she thinks she knows) that "typical men's jobs" are dirty, involve lifting heavy stuff and are often dangerous. Somehow the fact that many "typical women's jobs" are also dirty and dangerous does not register with her – but gendered ideas often work in this negative way, keeping things *off* the agenda and out of her thoughts. The key point to note, however, is this. Anna does not want to be an electrician or a brick-layer because anyone is actually constraining her wants, or because no-one is suggesting that she can – as might have occurred in the past. She rejects the careers teacher's idea about becoming an electrician or a brick-layer on account of multiple,

largely unconscious, gendered habits and stereotypes about men and women in the workplace. Whether they are true or false is beside the point: she believes them to be true and acts on them.

Anna goes to university

Anna manages to scrape three “A” levels and gains a place at university. She decides to do *Business Studies* for several reasons, some of which have nothing to do with gender and some of which are rooted in gendered ideas. One such idea is that she is not very good at mathematics, and *Business Studies* allows her to avoid mathematics. The truth is Anna would never have gained an “A” level in Mathematics and she just scraped a GCSE. But it is highly likely that her lack of mathematical ability is an outcome of gendered habits rather than girls and boys aptitude for mathematics. It didn’t help that her mum could never help with her mathematics homework and her dad belittled her early attempts at algebra – until she gave up trying.

Anna enters the labour market

The first thing Anna notices is that many of the vacancies she comes across are differentiated by gender – the degree of differentiation varies with occupation, job and establishment. Nevertheless, occupations and jobs like building labourers, drivers, brick-layers, welders, electricians and engineers are primarily done by men, whereas those like nursery nurses, secretaries and hairdressers are primarily done by women – although there are some that are more difficult to place, such as local government officers and teachers. What Anna has spotted is *horizontal segmentation* which can occur at the occupational, job and establishment level.

- Occupational level segmentation occurs when men and women occupy different occupations – e.g. men cluster in occupations like driving and vehicle repair; and women cluster in occupations like secretaries and cashiers.
- Job level segmentation occurs within occupations and within establishments but across different jobs so that men and women in the same occupation and establishment perform different jobs. Within the occupation of accountancy, and the same accountancy firm, men cluster in mergers and acquisitions, and women cluster in non-profit, healthcare and retail sectors.

- Establishment level segmentation occurs within occupations and jobs but across establishments. Within the occupation and job of waiter, male waiters cluster in expensive restaurants (with large tips) and female waiters cluster in cheaper restaurants (with lower tips).

The second thing Anna comes to notice is that the occupations and jobs done primarily by men tend to have better pay and conditions than those done primarily by women.

As well as applying for jobs, and meeting large employers at specifically designated recruitment days at university, Anna also turns to her *network* of friends and relatives. She puts the word out, as does her mum that she is looking for a job. Her aunt Celia phones her one day with some potentially good news. The company Celia works for, a large, local builders' merchant, is seeking to recruit an administrator. Anna goes for the interview. There are five male interviewees and her. She does not get the job.

Why does Anna not get the job?

The manager dealing with recruitment, Terry, is not an explicit sexist and has no reason *not* to give her an interview simply because she is female. Nevertheless, as he starts the recruitment process, he is pulled in several directions by causal factors not (all) of his making. The following is an attempt to understand the kind of influences on Terry, both in terms of his gendered habits and his internal conversations.

The vast majority of employees in the firm are men. A small number of them are outright sexists who are hostile to women and will make this known. The majority, whilst hardly being at the forefront of women's liberation, are not particularly hostile to female employees, although many do tease female employees with what might be described as mild sexism. Does Terry risk upsetting the outright sexists – who, after all, are extremely good workers? Does he risk the (very likely possibility) that one of them might sexually harass Anna who might then bring a charge of sexual harassment? Whilst the other men are not hostile to female employees, he thinks (but he doesn't really know) that they would prefer it if he hired another man; they would all be more comfortable. And so, therefore, would he as a manager – it makes his life easier.

In addition, there are customers to think about. The customers are almost all male builders. Terry is concerned about how customers are likely to respond when enquiring about building materials, building procedures and tools when Anna, as a woman, probably does not know much about these things. This presumes, of course, that the other male

applicants have knowledge of these things. Whilst Terry does not know this (yet), gendered habits kick in: Terry implicitly, tacitly, and unconsciously draws on the belief that the male applicants will possess this knowledge and the female applicants will not.

Terry's decision not to recruit Anna, but recruit one of the male candidates is influenced by gendered habits and *homosocial reproduction* - i.e. a kind of in-group favouritism where the significant groups are male workers and customers.

There is also a flip-side to this. Terry has to consider how Anna will cope with these male co-workers? How will she deal with the hostility of the outright sexists? How will she take the mildly sexist jokes? How will she cope with pictures of naked women in the locker-room? Terry's decision not to recruit Anna is rooted in paternalism, that is, a (misplaced) desire to protect, itself fuelled by gendered stereotypes about the need to shield women from some of life's nastiness.

Terry is also influenced by commercial or financial pressures. He knows that, when recruiting a female in her early twenties, he is recruiting an employee that is likely to start a family in the near future. Pregnancy brings with it a range of problems that will cause a headache for Terry (or at least he imagines this to be the case) relating to pregnancy, maternity leave and then the responsibility for bringing up children. If Terry hires a male of similar age, these headaches simply will not arise. Terry's decision not to recruit Anna is based on a mixture of gendered stereotypes and deliberate calculation about likely costs.

Anna gets a job

A few weeks later, Anna gets invited for an interview in a fairly large care home, seeking to recruit an administrator. She goes for interview, all six interviewees are women. She gets the job. Whilst Anna is happy to get a job, she is aware that this is in an occupation, job, and establishment marked "female". She earns relatively low pay and has relatively poor conditions compared with an occupation, job, and establishment marked "male". She did not "choose" this state of affairs, it is not the result of her having preference for a job marked "female". Her "choice" (if we can call it that) is constrained, in part, by the segmentation noted above.

Anna tries to get on a training course

After a couple of years working in the care home, Anna decides to do something about her relatively low pay and enquires about training and

promotion. She approaches her line manager (Rick) about enrolling on training courses (one afternoon per week) relating to pay and pension administration. As it happens, her boss has recently been approached by Anna's colleague Matthew who has expressed an interest in enrolling on similar training courses. He is a similar age to Anna, with similar work experience and a degree in *Economics*. The line manager, Rick, knows that any request to send *two* staff on similar training courses will be rejected on three grounds: the company does not need *two* people doing the same role; the company cannot have *two* staff members taking half days off work; and it would create one unnecessary cost. Rick is now in a difficult situation. He has to decide whether Anna or Matthew should go on the training courses. Eventually, he decides to send Matthew on the courses.

Why was Anna not sent on the training courses?

Rick is not an explicit sexist. He believes Anna to be just as capable of completing the training courses as Matthew. Indeed, his own daughter has just been sent on a training course by her employer. But Rick is pulled in several directions by factors not (all) of his making. The following is an attempt to understand the kind of influences on Rick, both in terms of his gendered habits and his internal conversations.

Whilst he does not, and could not, articulate it, he is nevertheless influenced by the gendered habits of thought learned over a lifetime that cause him to think differently, and stereotypically, about Anna and Matthew. These stereotypes suggest women are relatively docile, are less inclined to complain about work conditions; are more likely to accept lower wages, and have less need for income. Let us see how this might manifest itself in this case.

Rick knows that Anna is now in her mid-twenties, is in a fairly committed relationship with her partner and is likely to start a family in the near future. He does not know this for sure (and cannot officially ask Anna about her plans to start a family) so he falls back on gendered stereotypes. His dilemma is exacerbated by the fact that Matthew is in his late twenties, is also in a fairly committed relationship with his partner and is also likely to start a family in the near future. Unconsciously, Rick thinks that Matthew's needs to be a breadwinner are greater than Anna's. Going on the training courses will help future promotion prospects and improve pay, and Anna needs this less than Matthew because her partner is likely to be the main breadwinner. At a more conscious level, Rick thinks that if Anna goes on the training courses, then soon after leaves the company to start a family, he will have made a mistake choosing Anna.

Moreover, he would not enjoy his colleagues, and especially his immediate managers, seeing this mistake. Furthermore, although he would never admit to such cynicism, he does not want to risk his own promotion chances. Unconsciously, Rick also thinks that, as a woman, Anna will be more docile, and less likely to complain if the decision goes against her. This makes his life easier. A complex combination of causal factors, some conscious and deliberate, some unconscious and habitual, all weigh on Rick and he decides to send Matthew on the training courses.

Rick knows he has to offer a reason for the decision or leave himself open to a charge of discrimination, and finds it in Matthew's degree in *Economics* which has given him mathematical skills. Rick unconsciously believes that, as a woman, Anna's mathematical ability will not be as good as Matthew's. Rick also recalls a conversation between Anna and Matthew, where Anna actually said "Oh I'm hopeless at mathematics". The combination of these factors gives Rick an excuse – it is an excuse because Rick knows the level of mathematics required to complete the course is little more than basic numerical proficiency. But, his tracks are covered because this will be an "easy sell" to his immediate (male) managers, who are likely to accept the stereotypical idea that women are not good at mathematics.

Anna contemplates legal action

Anna feels that the decision to send Matthew, not her, on the training courses is unfair but has nowhere to turn for advice about whether she should pursue matters via an Employment Tribunal for discrimination. Her internal conversation on this matter covers the following issues. If she pursues a sex discrimination case and loses, then her action could come back to haunt her. Will she be seen as a "troublemaker"? Will she be seen as a woman gaining advantage by (mis)using equality legislation? What if she wins? Even if she wins, and stays with her employer, she will still be seen as a "troublemaker". Apart from not wishing to cause trouble, this could also make any future requests for training, promotion or anything else extremely difficult. Not only would she have made an enemy out of Rick, her co-worker Matthew might take it personally. Moreover, if she leaves, what kind of a reference will she get? What will a potential future employer think about her making a sex-discrimination charge? In the end, she quietly gives up on this route. Having no "voice", she chooses to "exit". She makes a decision to look for another job. It is worth pointing out that her decision has nothing to do with women's (stereotypical) greater docility, or lesser inclination to complain about work conditions.

She faces significant structural constraints which she cannot alter. Six months later she lands a new job.

Anna changes jobs

The new job, an administrator with a large supermarket chain is a sideways move, with a virtually identical wage. She likes three things about this new company. First, it advertises itself as an “equal opportunities employer” so she should be able to avoid the kind of gender discrimination she is escaping. Second, the workforce is largely female. Third, there appears to be good possibilities for advancing up a career ladder. There is an internal labour market and a promotion ladder. Indeed the Human Resource (HR) manager at the interview pointed this out to her. Whilst she is on the second rung of the promotion ladder, there are opportunities to become a department head, then an assistant department manager and eventually a store manager. The company is split into four departments based upon the products sold: produce, grocery, bakery/deli and general merchandise – see figure 1.

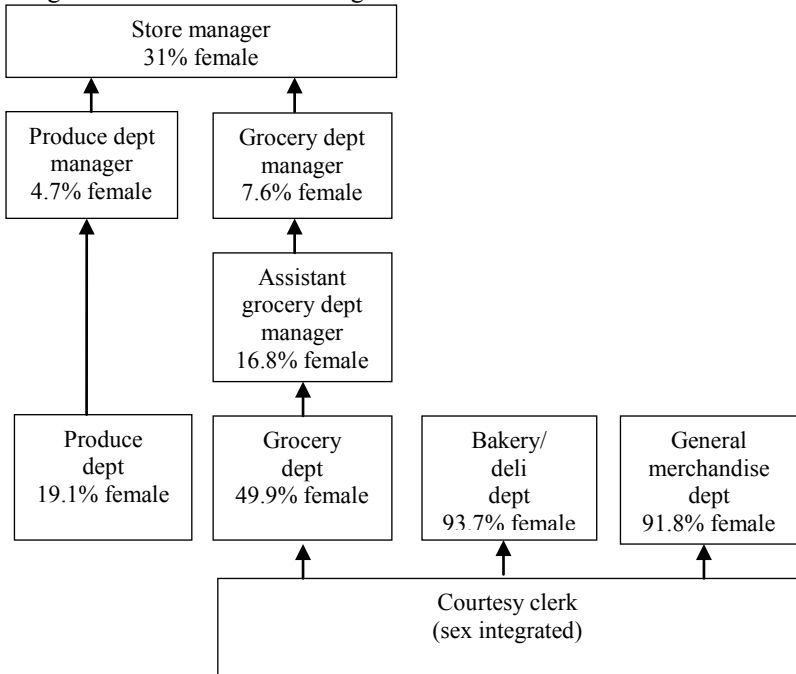


Figure 1. Internal labour market for grocery chain store. Adapted from Padavic and Reskin (2002: 110).

Anna struggles to get promoted

Anna is an administrator in the bakery/deli department. After a year, she starts thinking about possible promotion. At this point she begins to see problems with the internal labour market and its promotion ladders. And these problems manifest themselves in horizontal and vertical segmentation. Let us consider the horizontal and vertical segregation going on here.

- (i) The four departments have a high number of employees working on the lower rungs of the promotion ladder compared to the number of jobs available on higher rungs. The HR manager at the interview was not actually telling lies about the possibility of becoming an assistant department manager, or even a department manager, but the fact is that there are dozens of administrators on the lower rungs all competing for a very small number of assistant manager and manager jobs on higher rungs.
- (ii) The departments are horizontally segmented by gender – except for the grocery department which has an almost 50-50 male-female split. Unsurprisingly, Anna was recruited for one of the departments with an exceptionally high proportion of females. The problem, essentially, is that there are dozens of women competing for a very small number of jobs at slightly higher positions.
- (iii) The produce, bakery/deli and general merchandise departments do not have an assistant department manager position, only the grocery department does. This makes it highly likely that promotion to assistant manager will be dominated by employees from the lower promotion rungs in this department. And because this department has a 50-50 male-female split, there is less chance of a female making it to assistant manager than there is from the bakery/deli and general merchandise departments which are over 90% female.
- (iv) The positions of department manager in the produce and grocery departments have a vanishingly small number of women – 4.7% and 7.6% respectively. Indeed, only 3.1% of store managers are female. And this, let us not forget, is in a company employing an extremely high proportion of women. Vertical segmentation occurs also.

- (v) Along with gender segmentation goes pay segmentation. Pay rates in the produce department, where most males are employed are higher than the other three departments – this might actually benefit the females employed there. Furthermore, irrespective of which department we focus on, male employees will have higher wage rates than female co-workers who perform similar jobs.

On the one hand, some of the negative outcomes vis-à-vis gender have little or nothing to do with conscious and unconscious decisions to treat female employees differently to males, but arise from the structure of the organisation, its internal labour market and its promotion ladders. For example, the decision to create an assistant manager position in the grocery department and not the other three departments is very likely to be rooted in logistical factors, not a conscious decision to harm women's promotional opportunities. On the other hand, some of the negative gendered outcomes have everything to do with conscious and unconscious decisions to treat female employees differently to males. Indeed, many negative outcomes stem from horizontal and vertical gender segmentation.

Anna notices several factors playing a causal role in reproducing such segmentation. The following three stand out.

- (a) There is a distinct lack of representation of women in senior roles. The situation in the supermarket chain reflects the situation in most other industries. The higher up the hierarchy, the less women are found. Women face the “glass ceiling”.
- (b) One of the factors causing the lack of representation of women in senior roles is that decisions like selection, recruitment, training, promoting, rewarding and so on, often take place via exclusively male networks. While these networks can be benign, they can also be malevolent – as is the case with homophilous “old boys” networks that continue to act as a barrier, particularly to senior women. Women's exclusion from these types of networks mean that they are often denied access to a network that controls resources, including access to promotion.
- (c) Once relatively senior managers tend to be men, this state of affairs reproduces itself in many ways. One important way is the lack of mentors available to women.

A complex combination of causal factors constrains Anna's promotional prospects and she finds herself stuck as an administrative assistant on the second rung of the promotion ladder. Moreover, she has to

sit and watch the few opportunities that arise to become assistant manager or department manager in the grocery department, department manager in the produce department, or even store manager (and beyond) go to her male co-workers. A great deal has been said and written about the “glass ceiling”, but what Anna is experiencing is the “sticky floor”. Most of the female employees in the company remain stuck to the floor, stuck to the lower levels of the promotion ladder.

But Anna is a good worker, and despite feeling demoralised, she keeps up her good work, and keeps pushing for promotion. She is helped here by the existence of a well organised labour union. Union membership in the workplace is almost totally female, her representative is female as is the local full-time official – although the general secretary of the union is male. The union keeps a close eye on the company’s activities relating to its stated equality agenda. Although there is not always a lot it can do to ensure female employees do not get overlooked for promotion, its presence acts as a causal factor stemming overt discriminatory action and keeps managers “on their toes”.

When she is thirty, having worked for this company for 5 years, she is eventually promoted to assistant manager in the grocery department.

Anna starts a family

When she is thirty three, Anna decides to start a family, and announces her pregnancy. Whilst as a human being, her line manager (Peter) congratulates her, as a manager he has to deal with other sentiments too. First, as a man, pregnancy is a kind of “closed book” to him. He does not understand it and is even a little uncomfortable by the prospect of eventually having what Gatrell (2005) refers to as women’s “leaky bodies” in the workplace. Second, as a manager, pregnant employees bring problems and costs associated with sickness and hospital appointments. Third, Peter now has to arrange for a temporary worker to cover Anna’s job whilst she is on maternity leave which, once again brings more problems and costs. These may not be major problems or costs, but they are nevertheless real. Any form of extra costs is frowned upon by the finance director and Peter will have to explain (yet again) why he has gone over-budget this quarter – and be reprimanded for poor management. Any extra problems add to the burden of the line manager’s work – and Peter is already close to burn-out after regularly working 60 hours per week. Peter is not a sexist and realizes that pregnancy and maternity leave are the normal run of things, but the fact is, he is not best pleased by the news. This does not affect Anna directly, although it is hard to know the extent

to which Peter harbours any resentment due to the extra costs and problems – indeed, he does not really know himself. But it does affect Peter’s decision to hire a new employee: he recruits the male rather than the female, because the male employee won’t get pregnant and want maternity leave.

Towards the end of the maternity leave, Anna and Peter discuss her return to work. Anna is not sure if she wants to return to work and if she does, whether or not she should work part-time or full-time. They consider several options under the guise of “flexible working arrangements”. UK Employers are under a legal duty to consider such requests – although the legislation does not provide the automatic right to work flexibly. Indeed, the company can refuse such a request if a sound “business case” can be made that working flexible hours will cause harm to the business.

Anna considers flexible working

Not all forms of flexible working are “family friendly” (and some are downright “family unfriendly”, such as Saturday and Sunday working, annualised hours, and stand-by and call-out arrangements), but Anna considers things like flexi-time (i.e. flexible start and finish times), term-time working, voluntary part-time, job-share and twilight shifts. She eventually decides to ask for part-time hours, 10.00 to 15.00 Monday to Friday as this will allow her to take her child to and from nursery.

Peter discusses Anna’s case with his fellow manager – one of whom is female. They are not happy with requests for part-time hours for two main reasons. First, rightly or wrongly, they believe it signals a lack of commitment to the job and the company. Second, they feel that an assistant manager should be available during all hours where her subordinates are working because no-one can say in advance when she will be needed to make important and unforeseen decisions: and this is part of what it means to be an (assistant) manager. They discuss the possibility of offering her part-time work, but only if she accepts being downgraded from (assistant) manager to administrative assistant. One of the managers warns that this is probably illegal. If they are only prepared to allow Anna to work part-time work if she accepts a downgrade, this would be a case of direct discrimination under the *UK Equality Act 2010*. The reason why she is asking for part-time work is a direct result of her recent maternity, in order to be able to combine the two roles of parent and (assistant) manager. In the end, Peter simply refuses Anna’s request, on the grounds that an assistant manager should be available during *all* hours

where her supervisees are working – what if one of her supervisees needs her urgently half an hour after she has left for nursery?

The union representative tells Anna that the company has the right to reject her claim because it does have a *bone fide* “business case”. Just like a few years ago, when she considered bringing a sex-discrimination case against her previous employer, Anna is once again faced with the problem of bringing a legal case against her employer because if she loses there are serious repercussions.

Feeling angry, Anna reviews her options. If she returns to work full-time, a large part of her wage will be spent buying childcare services – she will be, essentially, “working for nothing”. If she does not return to work full-time, then she has to give up the things that being a working person brings – a sense of identity, purpose, network of friends and so on. Moreover, if she returns full-time, she will be left to shoulder the “double burden” of having two jobs (i.e. a paid job as an assistant manager) and an unpaid “job” in the domestic sphere (i.e. caring for children and elderly relatives and performing domestic work). Although her partner is reasonably good about housework and childcare, he is just not as good as Anna would like and anyway, he works long hours in his own job.

Just before she has to make a decision, Anna gets some good news. Her partner, an electrical engineer in a large multi-national company, gets promoted and with it comes a substantial pay-rise, but it means re-locating to another part of the country. Given that his job is reasonably secure, they both decide it is financially viable for Anna not to work and become a full-time mother and home-maker – they joke about it, referring to her (self) as a “domestic engineer”! The decision is, effectively, made for her and Anna informs the company that she will not be returning to work.

Anna starts to slide down the job hierarchy

They re-locate and after a while they have another child. After six years, when both children are in school, Anna decides she would like to work again and starts seeking a part-time job. Unfortunately, there are very few part-time jobs at assistant managerial level and she soon realizes she will have to lower her horizons. She manages to find a job as a part-time administrative assistant in a company that describes itself as offering flexible working arrangements to assist with “work-life balance”. Indeed, her job was part job-share with another woman who had just reduced her hours after having her first child. Unfortunately, the economic climate has deteriorated in the last few years and although the pay (adjusting for inflation) is similar to what she was earning as an administrative assistant

eight or nine years ago, the pension provision is very poor. Fortunately, her partner's pension is reasonably good.

After five years (Anna is now 39) Anna's father, who has been looking after Anna's mother who suffers from multiple sclerosis, dies. As well as losing her father, Anna now becomes responsible for looking after her mother. Her mother moves into Anna's house, and Anna becomes caregiver to her mother. Her mother's situation deteriorates and gradually she begins to need more and more care. Anna decides to stop work completely and look after her mother full-time. This situation continues for four years until Anna's mother dies. At 43 Anna sets about looking for a job once again. She manages to get another job, but cannot find anything as an administrative assistant, so takes a job working as a shop assistant (checking out and stacking shelves) in a local supermarket. The economic climate continues to deteriorate. In addition, her pay as a shop assistant is lower than her previous job as an administrative assistant. There is no pension provision. Anna continues working in a series of low-paid jobs in shops, interspersed with a few months when she had no option but to take social security payments, until she retires. Her and her partner split-up when she is 53.

Anna retires

On reaching 67 Anna retires. A combination of broken pension contributions and poor pension provision in her latter jobs means her occupational pension is extremely poor. The one-off payment her ex-partner paid her twelve years ago has long since been spent – actually, it all went helping with her children's university fees. After a lifetime of mainly (paid) working, paying tax and National Insurance contributions, making some pension contributions, bringing up children, running a household, ensuring that her ex-partner was able to devote most of his energies to his paid work, and looking after her ill mother, Anna finds herself, at the end of her working life, in one of the poorest groups in the country – single pensioners.

Conclusion: Inequality and austerity

The above sketch of Anna's working-life-cycle largely abstracts from the state of the economy. We are, however, currently in the middle of an economic crisis characterised by austerity measures - i.e. government policies specifically aimed at reducing state budget deficits. This cannot pass without comment. By way of a conclusion, then, I want to briefly

consider some of the effects of these austerity measures on gender inequality.

A recent report by the *European Women's Lobby* entitled *The Price of Austerity: The Impact on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Europe*, analysed the impact of austerity measures in thirteen EU countries. Its findings are set out in terms of employment and wages; services and benefits; and promotion of women's rights and gender equality – see also Karamessini & Rubery (2013).

In terms of employment and wages, austerity measures are undermining years of (limited) progress towards labour market integration with female employment rates falling in twelve member states. Whilst a key feature of austerity measures is cutbacks in funding of public sector organisations and, therefore, employment in the sector, this has a bigger negative impact on women than men because women constitute almost 70% of public sector workers. In addition, wage cuts in the public sector threaten to worsen the gender pay gap between men and women.

In terms of services and benefits, there is a real possibility of a return to traditional gender roles due to cuts in availability, and cost, of childcare and reduced services for the elderly and disabled. Cuts and closures in hospitals and hospital departments transfer the responsibility of care, primarily, onto the shoulders of women. Cuts in family-related benefits such as maternity and child benefits reduce the income of women with family responsibilities. Of particular concern is the value of state pensions which have been the target of many government policies. State pension levels have been frozen in one EU member state, special taxes have been introduced in another, and many states have changed the (public and private) pension rules. Increases in minimum contribution periods and a shift from final salary to career average calculations penalise women for their shorter working lives and intermittent work patterns. Austerity, then, has a double impact upon women. Women's economic independence is compromised and their income reduced, whilst they are simultaneously forced to shoulder the burden of the cutbacks in public services. Austerity measures have also had an adverse effect on the provision of paternity leave, undermining (limited) attempts to encourage men to share childcare responsibilities.

In terms of organisations dedicated to promoting women's rights and gender equality, austerity measures are having an adverse effect. These include non-governmental agencies dealing with rape and domestic violence. Some of these organisations have been abolished, some have been merged and others have had their funding reduced. In the UK, for example, the government has proposed a £10m cut in the budget of the

Equality and Human Rights Commission. The net result will be to reduce women's voice even more.

Clearly, no-one knows how long these austerity measures will continue to be promoted, no-one knows how severe the cuts will be, and no-one knows what kind of response they will ultimately generate from those who bear the brunt of them. But for the immediate future, one thing is clear: austerity is making gendered inequality worse.

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