Women, work and power

Stalled equality in the UK

Recent research from the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics suggests that the percentage of young women in the workplace in the UK has fallen for the first time in three generations (see Figure 1). In 2013, around 70% of women born between 1985 and 1994 had a job by the time they were 23 or 24 — down marginally on the decade beforehand.

It is the first time in the post-war period that female employment in the UK has actually declined. The change has been interpreted to suggest that the wider female drive for equality in the workplace has also stalled. Alan Manning, author of the research, commented: ‘It is fairly clear that the view people had for a long time — that men and women were heading towards equality in their working lives — is not happening.’

Comparison with the EU

Does this downturn in women in employment signal wider social changes in relation to gender equality and power? New research from the European Institute for Gender Equality aired in Brussels in 2014 seems to point in this direction. It found that the UK was one of only two EU countries — alongside Lithuania — to see women’s share of power decline between 2004 and 2013.

The power score is calculated in this context by adding up the number of women occupying influential positions in each EU member’s national institutions: government, parliament, central banks and company boards (see Figure 2). The UK falls just short of the EU average ‘power index score’ of 34.1, where a score of 100 would signal parity between men and women. However, significantly perhaps, the position of UK women has worsened considerably since 2004.

Women in senior management

Research by global finance advisors Grant Thornton for their report ‘Women in business: from classroom to boardroom’ (2014) shows that less than a quarter (24%) of senior management roles globally are currently held by women. The figure for the UK is lower, at 20% (see Figure 3). This global figure is unchanged from 2007. The authors suggest that the proportion of women in senior management has returned to its ‘natural level’ following the financial crisis, during which women were disproportionately hit.

In east Asia, the relatively high proportion of women in senior management is partly explained by the tendency for families to live with or near parents and grandparents. This provides a free, in-built childcare infrastructure, allowing more mothers to go out to work. The lack of free childcare is used partly to explain the lower rates of female success across the G7 countries, where just 21% of senior roles are held by women.

But the authors also argue that women in the UK may have lower career aspirations compared with emerging economies, where growth and cultural shifts have spurred female ambition and where a higher proportion of family-owned-and-run businesses are present in emerging markets.

Are the odds for women in senior business roles — and for women to hold more power in the UK — lengthening once more?

John Williams
is a managing editor of Sociology Review.

Figure 1 A decline in UK female employment

Figure 2 Gender equality index scores (power) by EU member states

Figure 3 Proportion of women in senior management