

# Women and Work: A Comparative Analysis of Neoclassical and Feminist Labour Theories



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# Introduction - What are labour economics? (*IZA World of labour, 2024*)

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Labour economics examines the labour force's role in production, encompassing all individuals engaged in the labour market—employees, employers, self-employed individuals, and the unemployed actively seeking work.



It investigates factors influencing workers throughout their lives, including childcare, education, pay, incentives, fertility, discrimination, work-life balance, and retirement policies.



Labour markets operate through the interactions between workers and employers, functioning at local, national, and global levels.

Additionally, labour economics studies worker mobility across markets and employers, addressing both geographic and occupational movement.

# Purpose and Methodology

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## Purpose

The present paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of women's work and the economic implications of gender, through a comparative analysis of the neoclassical and feminist view on labour.

## Methodology

The present paper's aim was accomplished using a qualitative research method, namely, *the content analysis*; views on the neoclassical and feminist approaches towards labour being analysed in a comparative manner.

# Neoclassical Economic Theory on labour

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- Neoclassical theory views labour as one of the primary inputs in production, alongside capital and land. Labour supply and demand interact to determine wages, which represent the price of labour in the market. Firms demand labour based on its productivity, while individuals supply labour based on their preferences for work versus leisure (*Marshall, 1890*).
- Wages are determined by the marginal productivity of labour, meaning workers are paid based on the additional value they add to output (*Hicks, 1932*).

# Neoclassical Economic Theory on labour

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- Neoclassical theory assumes that individuals make rational choices regarding labour supply, aiming to maximize their utility. Workers decide how much labour to supply by weighing the benefits (wages) against the costs (loss of leisure). Similarly, firms make rational decisions in hiring, choosing the quantity of labour that maximizes profit based on labour costs and productivity (*Becker, 1965*).
- Neoclassical theory posits that labour markets tend toward equilibrium, where supply equals demand. This equilibrium is achieved through adjustments in wages: if there's a surplus of labour (unemployment), wages will fall until supply meets demand; if there's a shortage, wages will rise. In the absence of external interventions, this self-regulating mechanism leads to an efficient allocation of labour resources (*Pigou, 1933*).

# Feminist labour Theory

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- ★ Feminist labour theory emphasizes the importance of unpaid labour, particularly domestic work and caregiving, predominantly performed by women. It argues that this labour is essential to the economy but remains undervalued and invisible in traditional economic analysis (*Folbre, 1994*).
  
- ★ Feminist theory highlights persistent gender-based wage gaps and employment discrimination. It critiques how systemic biases lead to lower wages and fewer advancement opportunities for women (*Blau & Kahn, 2000*).

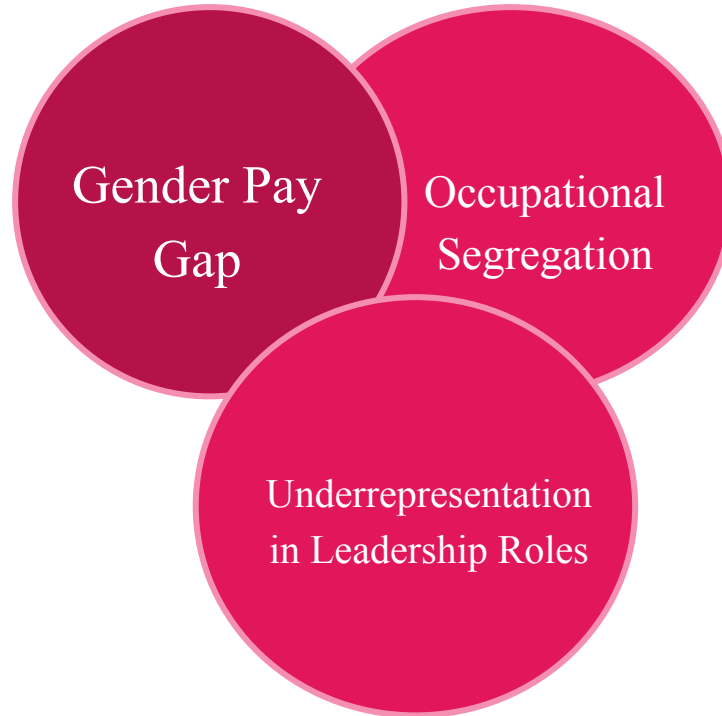
# Feminist labour Theory

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- ★ Gender inequality intersects with race, class, and other identities, affecting employment opportunities and working conditions. It addresses how overlapping identities compound discrimination and disadvantage in labour markets (*Crenshaw, 1989*).
  
- ★ Feminist labour theory broadens the definition of “work” to include activities beyond traditional paid employment, advocating for economic policies that recognize and support caregiving and other forms of labour that sustain society (*Fraser, 2016*).

# Key Issues in labour Market Gender Disparities

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# Key Issues in labour Market Gender Disparities

## Gender Pay Gap

### — — — *Neoclassical Economic Theory on labour*

- Much of the gender pay gap is attributed to differences in human capital, such as education, experience, and skills;
- Women may earn less than men on average due to career interruptions (e.g., for child-rearing) or differences in fields of study and work preferences (*Becker, 1971*).

- Wage disparities reflect individual choices, with women potentially choosing more flexible or part-time work to balance family responsibilities.
- These choices are seen as rational decisions based on preferences, and wage differences are viewed as an outcome of these choices rather than discrimination (*Polachek, 1981*).

### *Feminist labour Theory*

- Feminist theory argues that systemic discrimination, reinforced by gendered stereotypes and occupational segregation, undervalues traditionally female-dominated fields (e.g., caregiving, teaching).
- This structural bias perpetuates the gender pay gap, regardless of individual skills or education (*England, 1992*).
- Feminist theory emphasizes the role of unpaid labour, particularly domestic work, that women disproportionately perform.
- This unpaid labour limits women's access to higher-paying opportunities, a factor not accounted for in traditional economic models but critical to understanding the gender pay gap (*Folbre, 1994*).

# Key Issues in labour Market Gender Disparities

## Occupational segregation

### — — — Neoclassical Economic Theory on labour

- Neoclassical theory argues that occupational segregation results from individual choices based on preferences and skills. Men and women may self-select into different fields due to innate preferences or comparative advantages, leading to gender-based occupational patterns (*Polachek, 1981*).
- This theory also suggests that men and women have different risk tolerances and attitudes toward career rewards, leading to segregation. Men may choose high-risk, high-reward jobs, while women may prefer stability and flexibility, leading to occupational patterns that reflect these choices (*Filer, 1985*).

### Feminist labour Theory

- Feminist theory emphasizes that occupational segregation is shaped by socialization and cultural norms that channel men and women into “gender-appropriate” jobs. From a young age, societal expectations influence career choices, steering women toward caregiving and administrative roles and men toward technical or leadership positions (*Charles & Grusky, 2004*).
- Feminist theory argues that occupational segregation is reinforced by structural discrimination and institutional barriers within workplaces. Gendered hiring practices, lack of support for women in male-dominated fields, and limited advancement opportunities for women contribute to the division of labour along gender lines (*Reskin & Roos, 1990*).

# Key Issues in labour Market Gender Disparities

## Underrepresentation in Leadership Roles

### — — — Neoclassical Economic Theory on labour

- Neoclassical theory suggests that differences in human capital, such as experience, skills, and career interruptions (e.g., for child-rearing), contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles. Women may accumulate less relevant experience or face gaps in their career trajectory, which affects their likelihood of reaching leadership positions (*Mincer & Polachek, 1974*).
- Neoclassical economists argue that women may prioritize work-life balance over career advancement, choosing less demanding roles or avoiding high-pressure positions. This leads to a self-selection process where women may opt out of leadership tracks that require significant time and commitment (*Hakim, 2000*).

### Feminist labour Theory

- Feminist theory argues that gender bias and stereotypes play a significant role in limiting women's access to leadership roles. Women are often perceived as less authoritative or assertive, and this bias hinders their progression in male-dominated environments, reinforcing the leadership gap (*Eagly & Karau, 2002*).
- Feminist theory highlights structural barriers, such as the "glass ceiling," that prevent women from advancing to top positions. These include exclusion from informal networks, lack of mentorship, and discriminatory promotion practices that disproportionately affect women in their rise to leadership (*Cotter et. al., 2001*).

# Policy Implications and Recommendations

Issue	Neoclassical Perspective	Feminist Approach
<i>Gender Pay Gap</i> — — —	<b>Focus on Human Capital and Market-Driven Solutions:</b> Suggests education and skills training to close human capital gaps, helping to equalize pay. Policies include scholarships for women in higher-paying fields and incentivizing continuous career participation. <i>Becker, G.S. (1971).</i>	<b>Structural and Legal Interventions:</b> Emphasizes structural policies such as pay transparency, gender wage audits, and parental leave to address both skill gaps and discrimination. These policies aim to make pay practices fairer and more transparent. <i>Blau, F.D., &amp; Kahn, L.M. (2000).</i>
<i>Occupational Segregation</i>	<b>Equal Access and Incentives:</b> Advocates for providing equal educational opportunities and incentives for women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields (e.g., STEM scholarships). Believes individual choices drive occupational patterns and that removing barriers will allow self-selection. <i>Polachek, S.W. (1981).</i>	<b>Challenging Cultural Norms and Structural Barriers:</b> Supports cultural reforms like school-based gender-sensitive career counseling and structural changes such as gender quotas and mentorship programs to counteract socialized gender roles. These measures aim to reduce biases that deter women from certain fields. <i>Charles, M., &amp; Grusky, D.B. (2004)</i>
<i>Underrepresentation in Leadership Roles</i>	<b>Professional Development and Voluntary Mentorship:</b> Emphasizes voluntary mentorship and training programs to build women's leadership skills and enhance their qualifications for executive roles. Focuses on individual choice and preparation rather than structural change. <i>Hakim, C. (2000).</i>	<b>Diversity Targets and Anti-Bias Policies:</b> Advocates for diversity targets, blind recruitment practices, and promotion reforms to dismantle barriers like the “glass ceiling” and encourage gender balance in leadership. These policies tackle biases in hiring and promotion processes. <i>Eagly, A.H., &amp; Karau, S.J. (2002).</i>

# Conclusion

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*Neoclassical policies* focus on human capital and individual choices, *Feminist policies* address structural and systemic barriers. *Neoclassical approaches* may improve opportunities through education and skill-building, but they often overlook social and organizational biases. In contrast, *Feminist approaches* tend to offer more comprehensive solutions for reducing gender disparities by directly addressing discrimination and bias in the workplace.

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**Thanks for your attention!**