

**Is unequal gender distribution across jobs****acceptable from the perspective of equality of opportunities?*****Is unequal gender distribution necessarily unacceptable?***

We start with a simplified example with only two jobs. The salary is the same for both jobs. They are equally prestigious. Freedom of occupational choice between them is complete. And equality of opportunity is guaranteed, meaning that two individuals with equal qualifications have equal chances to be hired for the job.

We could think that an equal gender distribution within each job will follow. It is not the case. Assuming that men and women are equally qualified for jobs 1 and 2, an equal gender distribution obtains if and only if men and women equally apply for both. We could imagine reasons why women would prefer job 1 and men job 2, leading to a distribution of 70% of women in job 1 and 70% of men in job 2. This unequal gender distribution, exclusively resulting from differences in gender preferences would be perfectly acceptable as both genders are free to choose and have equal opportunities to be hired. In fact, if such preferences exist within one gender for a given job, then unequal gender distribution seems even fairer than an equal one as this would imply that some individuals ended up choosing a job which is not their preferred one. Hence, forced equal gender distribution would reduce the liberty of choice of each individual, with no benefit from the point of view of fair equality of opportunity. Therefore, as long as the four requirements are met - equal wage, equal prestige, freedom of occupational choice and equality of opportunities -, unequal gender distribution across jobs is acceptable. One question is whether all four conditions are required.

***The sufficiency of two requirements – static analysis***

First, equality of opportunity is absolutely necessary. There is no justification for treating differently people equally qualified, would it be on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or other elements unrelated to qualification.

Freedom of occupational choice is equally necessary. However, this does not entail that everyone should be able to do the job he wants. One should not be allowed to do a job for which one lacks proper qualifications. For instance, one should not be allowed to practice medicine without medical qualifications. What people should be free to do is to access the education they want to get qualified for the job they want. And then be free to apply for the job they want. Finally, equality of opportunity should be respected during recruitment.

Let us now assume that while the two jobs at stake are equally prestigious, one job involves a higher pay than the other. Freedom of occupational choice and equality of opportunity both obtain. Under those conditions, there is nothing unfair in an unequal gender distribution as this results from the free choice of each applicant. Many reasons could justify the salary difference: flexible hours, less stress, etc. Therefore, the difference in salary *per se* does not suffice to conclude that the unequal gender distribution is unfair.

Finally, let us envisage a case in which one job is more prestigious, and better paid. As long as the occupational choice is free and informed, there is no problem in choosing a less prestigious job. People could choose to have non-prestigious jobs and receive less for it, without it being unfair, for example if this job is considered less socially useful.

In short, only equality of opportunity and liberty of choice are necessary. If they are satisfied, then unequal gender distribution across jobs is acceptable independently of equality of salary and prestige. We assumed that equality of opportunities and liberty of choice could be satisfied despite unequal wages and different levels of prestige. However, is it plausible to assume such a compatibility?

### *The necessity of four requirements – dynamic analysis*

The problem is that if one gender systematically holds better paid jobs, in the long term this might reduce the freedom of occupational choice of the other gender. Indeed, within a couple, if one partner has a significantly better paid job, the lowest paid partner is likely to be the one sacrificing his job, e.g. to follow his partner abroad or take care of their child. This choice of giving up on his job might be done freely but since it seems the best choice for the couple's wealth, it can be seen as a constrained choice. Therefore, the freedom of occupational choice of the least advantaged partner is reduced.

Similar effects can also obtain with respect to prestige. Consider two equally qualified applicants to a prestigious job. One of them previously held a job unrelated to the current one but with a similar level of prestige. The other applicant's earlier job was less prestigious. The recruiter is more likely to select the first candidate simply because his career is perceived as more prestigious. It better fits the image of the person sought after. If one gender systematically holds more prestigious jobs, then it is likely to be perceived as more fitted for prestigious jobs and, therefore, to be favored during recruitment. Therefore, equality of opportunity might suffer from systematic unequal gender distribution across prestigious jobs.

A third long term effect is the influence of the current gender distribution on the choices made by students, before they actually enter the job market. Jobs predominantly occupied by one gender might give young students the impression that they are specifically designed for this gender. They may think that they will be disadvantaged if they try to access them while belonging to another gender group. For this reason, they might choose to follow other studies, feeling a lack of equality of opportunities and of freedom of occupational choice.

### *Solution?*

What is decried in our society is the unequal gender distribution through the fact that men generally hold better paid and more prestigious jobs. We showed that unequal gender distribution in itself does not necessarily need to be an issue. It can be acceptable if freedom of occupational choice and equality of opportunities to get a job are satisfied. However, from a long term, dynamic perspective, unequal gender distribution across jobs of different wage levels and prestige might prevent equality of opportunities and freedom of occupational choice to be satisfied.

An often proposed solution is the use of gender quotas. However, we showed that imposing a specific gender distribution might prevent the realization of the true objectives that are equality of opportunities and liberty of choice. For us, the problem is the domination by one gender that can occur if he systematically holds better paid and more prestigious jobs and the false impression that some jobs are meant for a specific gender. We think that education and revalorization of the women-dominated jobs constitute a solution.

First, children should learn at the earliest age that gender in itself is not a qualification for any particular job. Even if some jobs tend to be held more by men due to career preferences, it does not prevent women to be successful in those jobs. Emphasizing this should prevent young students to limit themselves just because they perceive that society considers that some jobs are more suited for a specific gender.

Next, through education, jobs dominated by women should be more valued and seen as more prestigious. This is also true for other life experiences. If a mother takes parental leave it is often seen as non-valuable for her career while actually it develops multitasking and organizational aptitudes. Managing teenagers or taking care of sick child or elderlies also develop empathy and influencing skills that should deserve more recognition and be considered as valuable and prestigious experiences during recruitment.

Finally, rather than trying to reach wage equality across genders through aiming at an equal gender distribution in a given profession, we would suggest to harmonize the salaries by increasing the salary of some women-dominated jobs while limiting the salary of the highest paid men-dominated jobs.