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## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GENDER AND DIVERSITY IN MANAGEMENT?

All organizations have inequality regimes, defined as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations. (Joan Acker 2006: 443)

### Introduction

In the past thirty years, the literature on women and men in management, on diversity in management, and what Acker terms 'inequality regimes' has grown (see, for example, Halford and Leonard 2001; Maddock 1999; Alvesson and Due Billing 1997; Prasad et al. 1997; Mills and Tancred 1992). Changes to legislation and policy have focused on equality of opportunity and diversity, meaning that, *in theory*, the possibilities of careers in management should be open to everyone, regardless of their gender and/or ethnic background. So why do we need a book entitled *Gender and Diversity in Management*? A quick analysis of the gender and the cultural backgrounds of board-level managers within many public and private sector organisations will rapidly demonstrate that the top positions in business, and in the public sector in the UK, are largely filled by white, able-bodied men. Furthermore, studies by government agencies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC 2005a), research by academics (Ahmed et al. 2006), and surveys utilised by activists such as the Gay Rights group Stonewall (TUC 1999) show that discrimination within the workplace and leading to further inequalities outside the workplace remains widespread and persistent. Thus, legislation and policy notwithstanding,

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'minoritised' groups (by which we mean social groups who are actively constructed as 'other' or outside the dominant norm) continue to face oppression and unequal treatment at work through inequality regimes. The forms of inequality, discrimination and oppression in the workplace can vary but include:

**systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations. (Acker 2006: 443)**

Oppression can also refer to symbolic and actual violence.

Women from a range of social locations are still held back by the existence of a wide range of formal and informal organisational practices and processes, often referred to as the 'glass ceiling', and each year tens of thousands of women face pregnancy-related discrimination at work. In terms of career advancement, black and minority ethnic workers experience what is called a 'concrete ceiling', and are often pushed by employers into roles which give them responsibility for diversity in their workplace, but which are not recognised when it comes to promotion or recognition. They thus experience a range of racisms (Ahmed et al. 2006). Workers with disabilities may be seen as a 'problem' by employers who are reluctant to make 'reasonable adjustments' in the workplace so as to offer workers with disabilities a workplace that is less disabling (Disability Rights Commission c. 2004). And gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered employees face discrimination, and even abuse, in their daily working lives (TUC 2000).

Glossing some complex debates, we can say, in sum, that there is a disparity between the ideals espoused in policies and in theory and what is actually happening in practice. Furthermore, while there continues to be a growing level of scholarly interest in the field(s) of gender and diversity in management, there are still many debates from which the notions of gender and diversity are excluded. Thus, for example, so-called 'mainstream' discussions about 'strategy', 'power', 'economy' and 'knowledge' are often played out in management or organisational journals and books without any reference either to gender or to race, sexuality, or disability, as if these

organisational concepts and practices are somehow neutral when, arguably, the reverse is true. Organisations themselves tend to be constructed as gender-free, colour blind or asexual. In examining processes of inequality in organisations, we can help improve workplace practices but also enhance management and organisational theorising by opening up what has been a partial view of workplace life. Influential feminist organisational theorists see this as a radical move which will produce a new account of organisational life.

The purpose of this mini-guide is twofold. Our main aim is to provide an accessible introduction to gender, race, sexuality and disability, and diversity in management. Our main focus is on waged work and employment, rather than unpaid labour that women do in the home or community. As such, we cover contemporary issues which are central to the debate among scholars and practitioners. At the same time, however, while attempting to present these topics in a straightforward manner, we attempt to set in context the various debates around gender and diversity in management. Even the terms 'gender' and 'diversity' are highly contested and examined from quite different perspectives, which we introduce in the following chapters. *Gender and Diversity in Management* is designed for students on courses across a range of business and management subjects, including women in management, gender in management, equal opportunities and diversity, and human resource management. We also hope it will be valuable to managers from a range of organisations and sectors who wish to understand better the debates around gender and diversity in management, or who seek a practical and up-to-date guide to contemporary thought and practice.

It would be impossible, in one mini-guide (or even in a heavy-weight textbook), to cover issues of gender and diversity across the globe. For this reason, our main point of reference is the UK. However, although localised and legislative differences mean that there are different cultural perspectives on gender, diversity and management, many of the concepts and practices outlined here are of international relevance. Thus, although many of the examples given in this book are from the UK, the ideas and theoretical perspectives may be applied to a wider context, albeit reconfigured to take account of national and cultural perspectives and political contexts. Before we proceed, we will briefly define how we are using the core concepts of 'gender' and 'diversity'.

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### What do we Mean by 'Gender'?

The term 'gender', although widely used in everyday discourse, policy documents and academic literature, is hotly debated. There is no one definition that works across all contexts or that is used by all theorists or activities. As leading organisational theorist Joan Acker writes, 'although the term [gender] is widely used, there is no common understanding of its meaning, even amongst feminist scholars' (1992: 565). Gender, then, is not self-evident or unproblematic but has immense consequences for the way that the workplace and outside the workplace are organised and experienced (Wharton 2005). Gender not only organises bodies but bifurcates the whole social world into segregated domains in the workplace, in cultural practices and in the home. In spite of many differences, contemporary gender theorists and activists tend to move away from understanding gender as a natural, unchanging or even biological essence (sometimes referred to as 'essentialism'). For most social theorists, gender is a social construction. This means that gender – and, in fact, other social categories, such as race, sexuality and disability – are seen as the result of human social processes, actions, language, thought and practices. There are many debates on what it means to say that something is socially constructed. For our purposes, we can say that it emphasises the ongoing and dynamic processes and mechanisms through which gender, race, sexuality and disability are brought into being in the workplace.

To stress the ongoing production of gender, race, sexuality and disability, many social theorists also refer to verbs: for example, gendering, racialising, or disabling. This use of the participle attempts to get at the way that gender, race, etc. are not simply pre-existing as one enters the workplace. Rather than seeing gender, race, etc. as an individual's properties, they are understood as outcomes of social practices and as being continuously produced and reproduced outside the workplace but also through workplace structures, discourses, cultures, practices, policies, interactions and procedures. Gender and other social differences are thus seen as processes rather than as given traits or essences: thus, gender is actively produced in and through the workplace, and does not simply exist as something that is static prior to or outside the workplace.

There are still debates among activists, feminists, critical race theorists and organisational theorists on which of the above is the most salient practice through which gender and gendering are

reproduced. One useful summary model comes from sociologist, Amy Wharton (2005). She suggests that there are three main levels at which theorists suggest gendering can operate. First, it operates at the level of individualised processes or practices, such as socialisation, psychological factors, and/or personal preferences. Thus, it might be imagined that women are more co-operative and nurturing than men, and men more aggressive and individualistic than women. Secondly, gender and gendering are seen to operate at the level of social interactions. For example, influential ethnomethodologists, Candace West and Fred Zimmerman (1987: 127), suggest that gender is the 'activity of managing situated conduct in the light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' and emphasise that it is 'not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings' (1987: 129). They focus on the way that social interaction is a means to 'do' gender. Finally, Wharton argues that for other activists and academics, gender, gendering and gendered inequalities are reproduced through social practices, structures, processes, cultures of organisations and institutions.

These ways of understanding gender move away from individualistic or interactional models: gender is not an individual possession but is created and reproduced through cultures, practices and structures (Wharton 2005). For example, Joan Acker (1990) argues that organisational structure is not gender-neutral and that assumptions about gender underline organisational contracts, documents, hierarchies and job descriptions. While each is partial, these different perspectives point to the complexity of gender and also the different types of intervention needed to address regimes of inequality (Acker 2006; Wharton 2005).

These different views on gender in the workplace lead to an ongoing debate about whether a theoretical and a practical focus should be on gender in management, rather than on women in management. The idea of 'gender and gendering' as opposed to 'women' in management as an analytic lens means that the relationality between men and women, masculinity and femininity – the way that they cannot be thought apart from each other – can be emphasised. The notion of gender and gendering also draws attention to the social construction of masculinity and femininity: the active practices through which they are reproduced in the workplace in different ways (Kerfoot and Knights 1996; Wajcman 1998). Some have argued that the term 'women in management'

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can reinforce notions of biological or cultural essentialism – the idea that all women are alike and have the same political interests. It is also deemed to focus on women as individuals, or a social group, rather than on management or organisational processes. In contrast, it has also been argued that the notion of gender threatens to dilute the achievements of first- and second-wave feminists in erasing the term ‘women’. For example, the question has been raised whether the concept of gender ‘undoes the accomplishments of the past thirty-five years in bringing women and women’s standpoints to the forefront in research knowledge and cultural production’ (Davies et al. 2006: 2). The concept and politics of gender in the workplace is still contested and these debates are reflected in the following chapters.

### What do we Mean by ‘Diversity’?

Having discussed the concept of gender, we now turn to ‘diversity’. Diversity is a fascinating notion in relation to management and the workplace. For one thing, it is a very ill-defined and slippery term. In this book, we use it in two main ways. First, in relation to management practices to deal with the changing demographic of employees and customers, and inequalities in the workplace. Thus, in Chapter 4, we explain how ‘equal opportunities’ policies have, in many cases, been superseded by notions of diversity. For some, the notion of ‘diversity’ is seen as more inclusive than the idea of equal opportunities. The second way that we use it is to bring other social categories into discussions of management and the workplace. This second notion of diversity allows us, in Chapter 5, to explore in some detail the disadvantage and oppressive treatment faced by a range of social groups. We consider, for example, the problems faced by those who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, in relation to management. We suggest that, while some aspects of social policy and legislation may *appear* to offer equality of treatment (for example, enabling gay couples to become civil partners, with similar rights to married heterosexual couples), the experience of some gay employees is one of social exclusion and of being expected, at work, to comply with heterosexual ‘norms’. Thus, while, on the surface, the situation of gay managers seem improved, in practice life in the workplace may appear to have changed very little – this presumably motivating the Gay

Rights group 'Stonewall' to observe in their present advertising campaign: 'It's 2007 – not 1977'. In relation to black and minority ethnic staff, we discuss organisational processes of racialisation and racism, and the different ways these are understood by activists and academics. Once again, we are emphasising sexuality, race and disability as social constructions, the products of active, dynamic workplace and socio-cultural practices and not biological or natural essences.

The book is presented in two sections, 'gender' and 'diversity'. This is not because we see the two issues as somehow separate. In fact, as many theorists argue, social categories need to be understood as 'mutually reinforcing or contradicting processes' (Acker 2006: 443). As black feminists and lesbian activists have pointed out, there are immense problems in assuming an undifferentiated and universal category of 'woman'. Sometimes referred to as *inter-sectionality*, social categories of race, gender, sexuality, disability, age and class are understood as interrelating and mutually constituting. Analytically, these distinct social markers of differences are understood as both interconnected *and* as separate and specific. In this book, we separate them out for analytic purposes. This is partly, because the debates, histories and forms of discrimination and oppression are in some respects different, and partly to emphasise issues to do with race, sexuality and disability in the workplace, as these are often ignored in much organisational and management theory.

We do not deal with class or age in any depth as this is a concise introduction and we could not cover all areas: class has been covered in some detail in organisational theory and age now needs to be thought about in relation to the very recent legislation. Throughout the book we have tried to emphasise the importance of the way that minoritised groups have developed significant individual and collective coping strategies to deal with persistent disadvantage and oppression. We thus consider struggles and political activism among disadvantaged groups, to demand and influence change. We also point to the way that activists and academics have been debating the role of social groups in society, and in relation to employment for over a hundred years. There have been many black and ethnic minority, disabled, sexuality and women's activist movements which have influenced policy and academics. Recognising the importance of

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this work means moving away from presenting minoritised groups as passive victims.

We also cover a range of different perspectives on what causes inequality and discrimination in the workplace. Thus, we provide an overview of economic arguments that derive from Marx and which emphasise the importance of capitalism as an economic system in producing gendered and racialised inequalities and oppression. We also introduce theories which suggest that gendered discrimination is the result of patriarchy and male domination. Subsequently, we show how more cultural theories suggest that gender-, race- and sexuality-based discrimination operate at the symbolic level in the workplace through processes of invisibility and subjectivity. In presenting a range of theories, we are not privileging the need for symbolic equality over economic equality but showing how different theorists separate out these concerns and also bring them together for analytic purposes.

For convenience, we provide a summary at the start of each chapter. We hope you will enjoy the book, and that you find it a useful introduction to gender and diversity in management