

Women, Economy and Labour Relations



Gender Equality in the Professional Workplace

**Pioneering Radical Action
for Women's Empowerment**



Karen R. Vollum-Dix

Gender Equality in the Professional Workplace

WOMEN, ECONOMY AND LABOUR RELATIONS

Series Editor: Martina Topic, University of Alabama, UK

This series aims to publish monographs and edited collections that tackle the position of women in the economy as well as explore labour relations. By labour relations, it means studying human relations in work in its broadest sense and analysing how labour relations affect social inequality with particular reference to women. In terms of social inequality, this series particularly welcomes analyses of women and class and broader analyses of labour relations. The series will publish perspectives from around the world, and thus, the series fits into the understanding of labour relations through both work relations in a Western sense and non-Western forms of labour. The series is also interested in studies of the position of women in worker's unions, the stance on women's affairs within workers' unions and the position of women and women's affairs in labour movements. Both historical and contemporary perspectives are welcome. Studies in industrial and economic sociology are particularly welcome.

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Gender Equality in the Professional Workplace: Pioneering Radical Action for Women's Empowerment

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book is for you if you are interested in improving gender equality in society and in the workplace. In writing the book, I have drawn on academic theory, current affairs and contemporary ‘non-academic’ sources in the context of gender equality and feminism. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the feminist themes I cover are globally relevant; however, many of the statistics and workplace references are UK centric. As I write, I draw heavily on my personal experiences as a female growing up, being a student, mother and career woman, at times juggling several of those roles. As I reflect on my experiences, and those of others that we can access through the media and social media, I can see some significant progress towards gender equality and some persistently ingrained attitudes and behaviours which seem to halt progress in its tracks.

The purpose of the book is to consider gender equality through several different perspectives, which are radical feminism, ecofeminism and futures and foresight thinking. I use a methodology which I call auto-duoethnography, which is based on discussion; there are many aspects of feminism on which I can see different points of view, and in the chapters of the book I internally debate these aspects, I refer to my internal voices as ‘self’ and ‘alter-ego’. The methodology and different perspectives are briefly introduced at the end of this chapter and in fuller detail in later chapters. The aim of the discussions is not to reach a conclusive conclusion but to catalyse thinking. I am aware that in many aspects of life there is no absolute right or wrong, and people have different experiences, views, cultures and expectations; therefore, conclusions are inevitably subjective. My purpose here is to start a debate, in which I hope that you, the reader, will engage. I do not expect you to agree with all my points, but I do want you to think about them and act in whatever way you feel is appropriate and possible. Merely reading and thinking is not enough. To achieve real gender equality, there is much work to be done and that requires action. I hope that as you read, the discussion will trigger your voice and that you will engage in the discussion as a third party and then continue the debate in your own circles. I start with an introduction to myself; we are who we are because of our background and experience, our

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culture, family and education. If you know a little about me, then you will understand what has influenced my thinking.

My Background and Experience

I was born in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe), to expatriate parents. My father worked for an American organisation, posted overseas, mainly in Africa for virtually all his working life. He eventually stopped working when he was 80. I know that his strong work ethic has influenced my approach to life. My mother was an expatriate wife, a strong woman who persuaded the local registrar to put 'expatriate wife' as her profession on my father's death certificate. None of the usual categories, which include housewife, really defined her, and she would settle for nothing less than her reality. I started school aged five at a convent in Johannesburg, South Africa and learnt to read watching over the shoulder of my older brother. From South Africa, we moved to Zambia, and because I could read, and there was no space for another child in grade 1, I was moved up to grade 2. I stayed a year ahead of peers my age throughout my school career. As a result of my age and because the Zambian school year ran from January to December, rather than September to July as in England, I completed my final year at Kansengi Primary School in Ndola, Zambia, and came to a boarding school in England in the January term of 1973 aged just 11.

I was put on an aeroplane with an unaccompanied minor wallet round my neck and was met and despatched to the school by an aunt and grandmother who, at that time, I hardly knew. January is not a good time to join a new school, especially when your previous life and school experience is so different to that of your new class mates. In the September term, friendship groups had already formed, and girls had a term's learning under their belts. In Zambia, we had no TV at home, so my access to popular music and fashion had been minimal. The history and geography we learnt at school were all Africa centric. I knew about Shaka Zulu and could name all the countries in Africa and their capital cities but knew nothing about the Kings and Queens of England, and I had never played any team sport. I was very self-sufficient, I read, played the piano moderately well, swam competitively and for leisure, enjoyed nature, arts and crafts and had travelled widely with the family throughout Southern and East Africa. Staff and girls at school seemed far more concerned about all that I did not know and the ways I did not fit in, rather than being interested in what I did know and could do. This was my first experience of being an outsider and being different to those around me. I even had people ask me if I wore a grass skirt and lived in a mud hut at home.

When I reflect on choices I have made throughout my life, this 'difference' seems to be a recurring theme. I think too that when presented with choices, I have a subconscious aversion to taking the easy route. When I was 12, I took up a second musical instrument, alongside the piano. I wanted to play a wind instrument, and whilst the clarinet was probably the most popular instrument, followed by the flute, I chose the oboe, just to be different and because it was a challenge.

Throughout my time at secondary school, I was in the swimming team, both representing my boarding house and the school; I chose to specialise in butterfly because there were fewer people who could do that, easier to get a place in the team when you do something different to the majority. When it came to A level choices, I did double maths, physics and chemistry; I sometimes wonder why I chose physics over biology, which I enjoyed more and was better at; however, my memory of school was that there was an assumed progression from science A levels to studying medicine, and of course, I did not want to follow the crowd or do what anyone expected me to do. I studied Mechanical Engineering at the University of Bristol. Ten percent of the students in the engineering faculty were women; I was a student between 1979 and 1982. A research report by the Engineering Council published in 2022 showed that 16.5% of those working in engineering in 2022 were female, a number that had risen from 10.5% in 2010 (Engineering Council, 2022). There was very slow progress in increasing female representation in the sector. During my first summer vacation, I had a job working in industry and from that picked up a sponsorship for the rest of my time at university. This meant that I had a job every summer and benefitted from the additional experience and training and some money in my pocket. I still had time to travel, visiting my parents who by then had moved to live and work in Pakistan.

My father was passionately anti-smoking, so, of course, when I went to university, I started smoking. I remember leaning out of the window in my halls of residence and lighting up for the first time. How sick I felt, but I carried on. Travelling was a great opportunity to buy duty-free cigarettes in bulk, and when I ran out of those, I rolled my own.

When I graduated, I continued working in manufacturing industry until 1989, initially as a graduate management trainee, experiencing a variety of different roles in the factory, including shop floor supervisor, production control supervisor and projects officer. At shop floor level, there was a reasonable mix of men and women, so it was not gender that singled me out; instead, it was the fact that I was working in the East End of London, in Silvertown, and I was not from around there. This was long before the Docklands Light Railway; I lived in a bedsit in Islington for a while and would get the last night bus to Aldgate East station and then the first District Line train from there to West Ham. I could walk from West Ham to work via Canning Town flyover without being overtaken by a bus. Getting to work was not an easy trip, but all that walking kept me fit. The East End of London was, at the time, a very close-knit community; it also seemed to me to be very male centric. I remember walking into a pub one lunch time with work colleagues – as was common practice in the early 1980s, I made what I thought was a very tame remark; I wish I could remember exactly what I said, but it would have been something to do with female equality. Well, that went down like a lead brick! One of the locals who propped up the bar, probably in his thirties, well known and popular with those who knew him, heard me, got up and walked out. From that day on, if I entered a pub, he left; if I was on a bus, he either got off or changed his mind about entering. I was warned that my (mildly feminist) comments had so offended him that I should be careful and make sure that if I was ever in the area

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after dark, I should not be alone; he had been known to have and use a knife. Should standing up for your beliefs put you in danger? I don't think so. Did it stop me from voicing my beliefs in female equality? Resoundingly no.

I had the opportunity to move into Personnel and do my Institute of Personnel Management postgraduate qualifications, and I did this in the mid-1980s; of course, this is currently known as Human Resource Management (HRM), and I am still a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). At this time, I also got married after a whirlwind romance. I was working in a factory in High Wycombe, he was 10 years older than me, he was not a graduate and his family was from the East End of London; our backgrounds were completely different, and not all my family approved. Once again, I had followed my heart and made choices that were different from what others expected of me. Our life together was cut short when, on my 25th birthday, he collapsed with a subarachnoid brain haemorrhage and was declared brain dead; we had known each other for 22 months and been married for just 14 of those. Navigating life and work as a young widow was challenging and not a role I would have chosen. I think I learnt to cope by locking emotions away and focusing on very little other than work. I smoked too much then; that and possibly a glass or two too much gin and tonic kept me going. I did however make a conscious decision when I realised that we have no idea how long we have on this earth. There is no point being an armchair politician or social advocate and just talking about things that are important to you, change only happens if we act. I also gave up smoking. After dinner on a work's night out, when we all ate and drank too much, waitresses dressed in short skirts walked around the tables with trays of cigars that were offered to the men. Well, how could I sit there and let that happen. I smoked two very large cigars that night. I felt so ill after the combination of alcohol (I specifically remember the Pernod, which I have avoided ever since) and cigars, that the next morning I vowed I would never smoke again. Apart from a handful of occasions, I have remained true to that pledge.

When I was working in the East End of London in March 1981, the first London marathon took place. I had never been a runner; I remember running a mile in a race at school and being overtaken by someone who was walking, mortifying. I was at the time very body conscious; on one of my first visits home during a summer break from boarding school, a family friend said 'gosh, haven't you grown white and fat while you have been away at school'. I still cannot really believe that an adult said that to an 11-year-old, but I can still hear it being said now. While I was at University, I remember a fellow (male) student (and no, not one that meant anything at all to me, no love lost there) telling me I was like an elephant. I was at the time 11 stone (70 kg), and I am just under 5 foot 8 inches (172 cm), judge for yourself whether that represents an elephant. It was about the heaviest I have ever been, the only time I have been close to that weight since is when I was 9 months pregnant with my first child. In my final year at university, I went on a 600 calorie a day diet, which probably did nothing for my ability to focus on work and study; my relationship with food and with my own body image took a serious down turn, and I over dieted, binged and

purged and had periods of excessively exercising to try and become a shape I could feel happy with. Mentioning the word period – those stopped too; for me, dieting to excess and amenorrhoea were loyal companions. It was not until I had a daughter of my own and thought about what impact my body image issues might have on her, that I started (not entirely successfully) to come to terms with this body that I have.

Back to the first London marathon: I was not a runner, but I liked the idea of running and saw it as a good way to work on my body shape. I did become a bit obsessive and fell into a pattern of running, binging on mars bars (yes, in the plural) and then having to run again to use up the chocolate calories. When I moved to High Wycombe and met my first husband, the smoking continued, but the running stopped. After he died, I started running again, how my lungs ached; running and smoking are not a marriage made in heaven. After the cigar incident, cigarettes stopped, running became easier again and I entered a 3-mile fun run. The run was near Marlow in Buckinghamshire; we navigated a course that was quite steep and hilly (or at least it felt steep and hilly to me) and ended with a lap around a football pitch. As I entered the stadium (probably one of the last runners to do so) to a small crowd of spectators, the DJ who was commentating said loud and clear ‘well, look at this, the number 42 pinned to her chest is very appropriate, matches her size’. I have not been flat chested since I was about 12, but the only time I have ever measured 42” was when I was 9 months pregnant with and then breast feeding my first child. I had to grin and bear it, finish the race and disappear feeling humiliated. Why do men think it is OK to say such things? Why do they pass off such comments as just a bit of banter and fun? Banter is always at someone’s expense. I eventually ran (and completed) the London marathon in April 2000.

I have always felt very strongly about equality and was working in an environment, in manufacturing industry, where I was often the only female manager in the factory management team. I remember, when I was the Personnel department (yes, the department was just me), in a factory employing around 400 people, spending hours calculating options for pay negotiations with the Unions, in the days when there were no office computers, no Excel, just large sheets of paper, a pencil, eraser and calculator. In that factory, we had complex shift patterns and lots of overtime worked. Negotiations followed a standard pattern; the Unions asked for 5%, we offered 2.5%, and eventually, after a predictable series of meetings, we would agree an offer somewhere in the middle, probably 3% or 3.5%. We needed to know the cost of every option they put to us, and every option we offered in return. That was hours of work with my trusty pencil and calculator. Data security was different then too; initially, I thought that locking my papers in the desk in my office on the shop floor and locking my office door would be sufficient. When the night shift supervisor, who was also a senior Union representative saw me one morning (he was going home as I arrived for work), he said ‘I know exactly what you are planning in your next round of negotiations, I have a key to your office and your desk’. Thereafter, I took everything home with me and realised that trust could not be assumed. In that same factory, I remember one fellow manager, who was much older than me; he was a known womaniser and had a leeriness about him. I had a meeting with him to discuss a factory

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workforce plan that I had laboured over for hours, for him to look at me and say 'I like your brooch'. I was wearing a blouse which tended to gape, as buttoned blouses on a body without a flat chest are prone to do. The brooch was nothing special, but it was strategically placed to prevent unintended exposure. I was horrified – I knew that he was not looking at my brooch, and that if I had been a male colleague, he would have taken my work seriously, even if a shirt button was at risk of misbehaving. Forty years later and I remember it as if it was yesterday.

Fast forward to 1989: I was introduced to my second husband by a mutual friend. I moved to South Yorkshire, and we were married within 6 months of meeting. At the same time, I retrained as a colour and image consultant and started my own business. My choice of new career was made for two reasons. First, I knew that my biological clock was ticking, and we wanted a family. At that time, 30 was considered old to have a first child; it is much more the norm now. I did not feel comfortable taking on a new role in HR and then immediately asking to take maternity leave. I had observed how much, especially in a workplace dominated by men, people's attitude towards you is influenced by your appearance. I was also politically active at the time. Moving to a new part of the country, where your politics is not the same as most of the population, where you have no networks of friends and contacts, and starting a business in a field that was emerging as important in and around London, but had not yet taken root in the north, was not an easy choice. I learnt a lot, kept busy, earned enough to make it worthwhile, but not to become rich, and became comfortable giving talks and doing colour and make-up demonstrations. I must have spoken to most of the local Women's Institute branches between Sheffield and York and could sing Jerusalem in my sleep.

Over a period of 6 or 7 years, until 1994, I worked to raise the profile of women in politics and public life. With a group of political, female friends, we set up a network for young women in politics, using the acronym WIN 1990s. We wrote, edited and circulated newsletters – in the days before email, when it meant printing out paper copies, addressing and stuffing envelopes, and licking stamps. I was a member of the 300 group and Women in Management, I was a Young Enterprise adviser and I spoke at more than one party conference. I was for a while an agent for a local (male) Councillor, which meant that we had to spend time together planning campaigns. He and I were both married, yet there were rumours flying around that we were having an affair. Definitely not my type, and I was newly married, but so many people look at a man and a woman working together and assume that there is more going on than a work relationship. Men can work together without insinuation, women can work together without insinuation but work in a mixed gender pair and things are immediately different, with accusations more likely to be made against the woman than the man; double standards apply. After that I stood as a local Council Candidate, and though I was not elected, I did, over the several years that I campaigned, significantly close the gap between first and second place in the polls. I was also a Parish Councillor for a total of 12 years. I have a strong work ethic, and being busy is a method of self-protection; it can become hard to separate the ethic and the habit. I still feel more comfortable when I am busy.

By September 1994, we had three wonderful children, yes, two weeks with all three under the age of three. Politics took a back seat as I juggled family responsibilities and returning to full-time work. I kept the colour and image business and a bit of multi-level marketing with skin care, cosmetics, clothing and jewellery ticking over in the background, but for the most part, I was working as a management consultant, initially as an associate, then as an employee, finally as a director, before I broke away and became fully self-employed again, as a management trainer and management consultant. I prefer to keep my interests and options open than to specialise. It took 6 years to get to this point of self-employment and 5 years of self-employment before I moved on again. During this time, I completed an MBA, trained as a neuro linguistic programming (NLP) practitioner, master practitioner and trainer. In my spare time, I qualified as a life and executive coach and took up Taekwondo, eventually achieving my second dan black belt. Exchanging Parish Councillor for School Governor, I continued in public service, and I experienced more blatant misogyny.

One work related incident that stands out in my mind is when my boss and I visited a factory in Leicester one Friday afternoon. We were visiting a potential client to pitch for a job which involved setting up assessment centres and selecting supervisors to attend a management development course that we would write. I had done this successfully, on a larger scale before, and did much of the talking in the meeting. On the way home, with all the details gathered to write the proposal, my boss said to me

I had to work really hard on your behalf to get agreement that we should write the proposal, the factory manager did not believe that a woman in a pink suit, wearing court shoes with a heel, would be capable of doing the work.

I think I was supposed to be grateful for this insulting double whammy: First, my capability was in question because of the colour I chose to wear (this was a mid-calf skirt, with matching jacket, sensible blouse, in a medium-dark shade of pink and the heels were Cuban, not a fragile stiletto, as if that matters) and second, that I should be grateful for the intervention of a man. I have lost count of the times I have attended business meetings with a male colleague, asked questions of a client and had the answers directed back to my colleague and not to me. Why is it that women can be present, yet invisible? Why do men let it happen, rather than calling it out, giving us the visibility that should be our right?

By 2005, I completed a Further Education (FE) Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) qualification and started working at the local University Centre, part of an FE college. Having, during my time as a consultant, set up an in-house training centre with what is now the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), and the same for the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), delivering taught qualifications and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), I did the same for the University Centre, leading a CMI centre for the delivery of management, coaching and mentoring qualifications, both taught and NVQ. We later added qualifications in Enterprise and Business Start-up.

Alongside this, I became involved in the delivery of the MBA and a masters in HRM, eventually managing both qualifications. While my career in education was taking shape, sadly my personal life was going in the opposite direction; by early 2009, I was divorced and had to move out of the family home. Life was not easy, but I felt I had to work even harder. I had to be completely financially independent. I was hard on myself; I was physically and emotionally exhausted and did not feel great about myself. With hindsight, though I never really thought about it at the time, I was also menopausal, and that triumvirate of divorce, exhaustion and menopause knocked me out. I had to have about a month off work and slept for most of it. I know that I made some very poor relationship choices during the next few years and was not always my best self. Do I regret that? Yes. Could I have changed it at the time? I wish I could say yes to that; however, I did not feel able to.

In 2011, I moved to a new job, teaching at a university a commutable distance from home. Working on a part-time lecturer (PTL) contract for several years, I was able to accept short-term contracts to teach overseas for another university and do a little private consultancy work. I juggled teaching, marking, travel and the role that has always been most important to me (though I know others have observed and questioned my commitment to it) that of being a mother. I am immensely proud of my three children. Teaching took me to Vietnam, Germany, Zambia, Eswatini, Malawi, Sri Lanka and Singapore. I spent a summer in Malawi working with an exciting start-up business and had the less pleasant experience of being held up at gun point and robbed of everything; passport, money, phone, tablet, handbag, make-up and dignity.

I like a challenge, so started my doctorate in 2012, finally completing my 'Phenomenographic study of the variation in individual perceptions of values' in 2020. Yes, as a part-time qualification alongside full-time work, it was a marathon study, definitely not a sprint. Writing about values, and particularly integrity, respect and fairness was not only interesting but also both reflective and reflexive. I have done a lot of soul searching as a result, and the work continues to influence my thinking, research and teaching.

Married for the third, and I hope the final time, my work is now an ideal balance of teaching, research and working with small- and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) to support the people and culture side of strategic growth. I really am trying to develop a better work-life balance, with time for the people, travel and activities I love. I work because I want to and because I enjoy my work, I hope, no longer as a subconscious strategy to block out pain and difficult emotions. I am getting better at relaxing, but seldom go anywhere without at least one book or my knitting. I am not comfortable with my body image but am no longer obsessed with standing on scales or counting calories. One thing that has not and will not change is my steadfast belief in the equality and rights of women.

I hope and believe that my background of rich experiences is clearly incorporated in my work and teaching and in my approach to life. I will always be passionate about working towards a more inclusive society, with greater tolerance and opportunities for all. Key learnings from my doctoral studies emphasise the value of experience, education, travel and collaboration in the development of open mindedness and tolerance.