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# Job evaluation and gender pay equity: a French example

Job evaluation  
and gender  
pay equity

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite significant anti-discrimination laws in most countries, gender pay gap still remains a substantial concern. The notion of comparable worth has been promoted for several years by the ILO and a few countries to fight against relatively lower female salaries. The purpose of this paper is to review the rationales for comparable worth and explain how gender biases, generally involved in traditional job evaluation, can be prevented.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To do this, after reviewing the motives, logics and three major applications of comparable worth logics in pay equity policies, the authors expose an analysis of a French sectorial job classification that the authors carried out as experts for establishing a French Equality Ombudsman's guide.

**Findings** – The findings show how the redundancy and definition of job evaluation criteria, along with the weighting system, contributes to undervaluation of clerks jobs, predominantly held by women. The authors also highlight the main recommendations of the guide to prevent gender bias in job evaluation, that are derived from this case study, among others. The authors conclude on the difficulties of implementing comparable worth in France, in a period of long lasting economic crisis and of weak union power.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper is based on a single case study, conducted for policy actors. It was not conducted at first for academic research purposes, and may thus have some methodological limitations. The implications of the research are, however, important at academic level – highlighting the persistence of gender bias – and at policy level, as it provides recommendations for negotiators.

**Practical implications** – The guide originally aimed at giving guidelines and “good practices” in order to prevent gender discrimination in job evaluation.

**Social implications** – The paper draws attention to the importance and difficulty of undergoing such classification changes in times of economic crisis. Stronger legal action seems necessary.

**Originality/value** – This experience is the first of its kind – promoted by the Ombudsman – in France. It has never been related in an academic journal as far as the authors know.

**Keywords** Gender, Women, Employment legislation, Job evaluation, Pay gap

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

Despite advances over the last 30 years, the gender pay gap (GPG) remains a concern. According to the International Labor Organization (Oelz *et al.*, 2013, p. 12), globally, “women earn 77.1% of what men earn.” In this paper, we focus on the portion of the GPG that is attributed by some researchers to the undervaluation of female-dominated jobs. In our view, this “comparable worth” issue is of great interest for public policy actors, researchers and human resource practitioners, as it questions the way jobs are graded to establish pay structures.

The aim of our paper is to provide elements to answer the question: how to prevent gender bias in job evaluation and pay grading systems, specifically in France? The paper is structured in three parts. First, we conduct a literature review on



comparable worth and gender bias in job evaluation. Second, we describe three national or regional pay equity policies which promote gender-neutral job evaluations and could be sources of inspiration for France. In the third part, we provide examples of gender bias underlying the French retail job grading system, based on our work as HRM academics in an Experts Committee which designed a Guide for Non-discriminating Evaluation of Female-Dominated Jobs (Guide) (Défenseur des Droits, 2013)[1]. The Committee gathered academics, lawyers, trade-union and government representatives from 2011 to March 2013, under the authority of the Equality Ombudsman. It was coordinated by Rachel Silvera and Séverine Lemièrè, Economists, with the objective of providing employers and employees representatives with guidelines to prevent undervaluation of female-dominated jobs. Based on our analysis, among others, the Committee wrote recommendations for conducting gender-neutral job evaluation, which we sum up at the end of the paper. The impact of this Guide and the introduction of comparable worth practices in France are discussed in a concluding part.

### Gender pay equity and comparable worth

Across the world, all other things being equal or rather “unequal” (Silvera, 1996), women still earn less than men. Various factors account for the GPG, many relating to the domestic work of women – part-time work, maternity leave, delayed career investments due to children’s upbringing. In addition, a significant proportion of the GPG stems from occupational segregation as jobs mostly held by women have lower wages than those predominantly held by men (Blau and Kahn, 2016). Not everyone agrees that this differential is due to discrimination (Levine, 2003). For the comparable worth proponents, however, the pay gap between male and female occupations is caused by a systemic and historical undervaluation of female work (Acker, 1989, 2006; England, 1992; Figart and Kahn, 1997; Chicha, 2006), which can only be reversed by “a public policy that advocates remedies for any undervaluation of women’s jobs” (Noe *et al.*, 2010, p. 530). We refer to such policy as “comparable worth” (Acker, 1989), although it is sometimes called “pay equity.” As we develop *infra*, the comparable worth proponents question the gender-neutrality of labor markets and traditional job structures (Steinberg, 1987). They promote the use of gender-neutral job evaluation to better adjust wages to the relative value of jobs in a non-discriminatory way. Their work inspired changes in pay practices in the USA and in Canada. Comparable worth is becoming an issue in European countries.

#### *Analyzing the GPG*

Econometric models try to explain the GPG[2] using the following variables (Gundersen, 2006; Lemièrè and Silvera, 2008):

- (1) Working time differences between men and women, particularly where the share of part-time work is high such as in the Netherlands (Meurs and Ponthieux, 2004).
- (2) Human capital as measured by education, experience and job tenure (Lemièrè and Silvera, 2008). In France, men and women hold comparable levels of education but these qualifications result in smaller return for women (Meurs and Ponthieux, 2004). Women have a lower average tenure and experience more frequent career breaks (Cornet and Dieu, 2008).

- (3) Employer characteristics: women more often work in small companies (Petit, 2006; Gunderson, 2006) and in lower paying industries (Sorensen, 1989; Gunderson, 2006).
- (4) Last, and this is what comparable worth proponents seek to amend, part[3] of the GPG is due to the concentration of women in a few occupations which remunerate less than male-dominated occupations (Sorensen, 1989; Groshen, 1991; Lofström, 1999; Chicha, 2006). As an example, in France, women represent over 70 percent of the workforce in only 14 (out of 84) occupational fields[4], whereas 43 occupations have more than 70 percent of male workers (Meron *et al.*, 2006). A recent study showed that “gender differences in occupations and industries are quantitatively the most important measurable factors explaining the gender wage gap (in an accounting sense)” (Blau and Kahn, 2016, p. 49).

#### *Why do female-dominated occupations pay less than male-dominated ones?*

In 1970s, in an action for gender pay equity in San Jose, USA, a pay audit revealed “that nurses earned \$9,120 a year less than fire truck mechanics” (England, 1999, p. 3, citing Blum, 1991). This situation did not change subsequently. In 1999, US women represented 84 percent of primary schools teachers and men, 93 percent of mechanics. The median weekly wage for teachers was \$697 compared to \$1,041 for mechanics (Levine, 2003). In France, Lemièrre and Silvera (2010) highlighted wage differentials between jobs with comparable skill requirements and working conditions, namely, nurses vs chiefs of maintenance in hospitals. Chicha (2006, p. 13) sums up the situation as follows: “There is a close match between female or male predominance and pay levels. Generally speaking, both in the labor market and in organizations, the most poorly paid occupations are those where women predominate, while the better paid are those where men prevail.” Men who work in female-dominated occupations receive lower wages than men who work in male-dominated occupations (Lofström, 1999).

Some economists explain this difference through the crowding effect (Sorensen, 1989; Gunderson, 2006), where increased competition among applicants in women’s jobs has a depreciative effect on the wages (Levine, 2003). For many experts, however, the crowding effect does not entirely explain the differential (Steinberg, 1987; Acker, 1989; Sorensen, 1989; Figart and Kahn, 1997; England, 1999; Chicha, 2006), and its main cause is undervaluation of women’s work. According to them, these jobs are paid less because their incumbents are women (Jacobs and Steinberg, 1990; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007) and because of the social stereotypes that undervalue “feminine” work and the skills associated to it (Figart and Kahn, 1997; Chicha, 2006). “The kinds of skills traditionally exercised by women [e.g. nurturing social skills] are valued less in wage determination than are traditionally male skills [e.g. physical or supervisory skills]” (England, 1992, p. 40). Those skills are required in service jobs but are usually not recognized nor valued (Hampson and Junior, 2005). This is also due to lower bargaining power linked to the historical absence of women in unions (Figart and Kahn, 1997; Chicha, 2006).

#### *Gender-neutral job evaluation*

Whereas mainstream economists postulate that jobs worth is set by labor markets in a non-discriminatory way (Levine, 2003), comparative worth proponents advocate that there is discriminatory functioning of the markets (Ames, 1995). To remedy it requires that “employers compensate workers in comparable jobs comparably” (Ames, 1995, p. 710), i.e. they should give similar wages to jobs which differ but

require comparable skills and demands. Employers can use job evaluation methods, designed to determine a relative value of jobs. Nevertheless, research has shown that traditional job evaluation can be biased against women (Acker, 1989, 2006; Steinberg, 1992; Chicha, 2006).

Such bias occur at several stages of the job grading process. First, women-dominated jobs can be less clearly described than men's and with less specificity (Acker, 1989). Acker (2006) also found that gender-typed women's jobs were grouped in large categories at the bottom of the ranking whereas men's jobs were spread across all wage levels. Other researchers proved that the ranking of jobs is influenced by existing hierarchy of jobs and pay levels, suggesting "a form of 'predictor contamination' (i.e. criterion scores influence prediction evaluations)" (Grams and Schwab, 1985, p. 288). This logic reproduces historical pay structures which favor jobs predominantly held by men (Steinberg, 1987).

Criterion-based methods, which evaluate jobs on the basis of criteria such as level of knowledge, responsibility, autonomy, etc. may seem more objective than methods which compare jobs on a global basis. However, the use of criteria does not guarantee the absence of gender bias, as we will show with the example of the French retail grading system. Steinberg's study of the Hay system emphasizes that the former reflects gender bias which were dominant in the 1950s and perpetuates discriminatory hierarchies of jobs biased toward managerial and executive functions. It does not value job characteristics associated with non-managerial work, especially that performed predominantly by women (Steinberg, 1992).

To conclude, in so far as human resource management devices are conceived and used in gendered organizations (Acker, 1989), their gender-neutrality cannot be taken for granted but needs to be monitored. Before relating examples of public policies and turning to the French case, we should mention that comparable worth generates debate among economists. For orthodox economists, the fair value of jobs naturally derives from the market and wages are fixed according to individual marginal productivity (Austen *et al.*, 2013). To increase them would harm productivity and reduce employment (Levine, 2003). Comparable worth theorists answer that discrimination is institutionalized in labor markets. To undermine it through better valuation of jobs would improve markets' efficiency (Jacobs and Steinberg, 1990; Levine, 2003). They argue that a great number of female-dominated jobs are in civil service, non-profit organizations and large companies. These jobs are in internal labor markets and have weak links with external markets (Jacobs and Steinberg, 1990). Besides, the job evaluation methods ensure consistency with markets wages (Steinberg, 1987). Another debate concerns how effective comparable worth is to reduce the GPG (Steinberg, 1987; Levine, 2003). We will provide the few available elements on this in the national examples *infra*.

## **From theory to practice: legal aspects and examples of public policies**

### *Legal provisions*

Equal pay for work of equal value appears in the 1919 ILO founding constitution. The ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) reiterated the principle that wages should be the same for jobs of equal value without discrimination on the basis of sex. ILO issued guidelines (Oelz *et al.*, 2013) specifying that work is of "equal value" when the jobs differ but are of comparable value based on skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions, and guides promoting gender-neutral job evaluation (Chicha, 2006, 2008). In the European Union, the principle of "work of equal value" lies at the heart of the Directive 2006/54 on

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equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment[5]. The OECD is also promoting pay equity between jobs of comparable value and reports that most members guarantee it (OECD, 2012).

*Advances in implementing comparable worth*

Policies based on comparable worth were first adopted in the USA in the 1980s to reevaluate female-dominated jobs in state and municipal civil service workforces (Chicha, 2006). By 1989, 20 states had made pay adjustments (England, 1999). Pay equity was then implemented in the Canadian province of Ontario[6], paving the way for a law in Quebec. Hereunder, we present three examples of proactive pay equity policies. The first two, Quebec and Sweden, fall in Chicha's (2006) first, most proactive, group of strategies: "Seeking to correct discriminatory pay practices and eliminate the discriminatory pay gap." The UK belongs to the second category "Seeking to correct discriminatory pay practices." We also describe the framework in France, which stands in her third category "Seeking to correct certain discriminatory practices and eliminate the overall pay gap."

*Quebec (Canada)*

A 1999 law requires firms to reach gender pay equity if need be through salary adjustments between work of equal value. It applies to firms of ten or more employees, in public, private or para-public sectors. By 2001, employers had to determine if salary adjustments were required and had to correct them before November 2005. We will not detail this legislation[7] but highlight the comparison between male- and female-dominated jobs.

As Marchand (2007, p. 7) explains, the employer must "determine equivalence between male and female jobs. To do that, job evaluations must be conducted, for example, by attributing points to each job category according to the four criteria provided by law:

- (1) required qualification (education, skills and competencies required by the job);
- (2) responsibilities (responsibility for people, materials, financial and/or confidential data);
- (3) required efforts (physical or mental, and so on); and
- (4) working conditions (noise, physical and psychological risks, isolation, and so on).

[...] The next step is the comparison of each category of female dominated jobs to those of male dominated jobs and thus estimate any existing salary gap and bridge them by adjusting the salaries of those concerned."

Cited by Chicha (2006), statistics showed that, in 2005, the average adjustment for the female-dominated occupations concerned was 5.6 percent[8]. The frequency of adjustments was higher for office staff, service employees and workers. Between 2000 and 2010, the difference between the hourly salary of men and women decreased from 16.51 to 11.93 percent[9].

*Sweden*

According to the Equal Opportunities Act of 1991, all organizations with ten employees or more must design a pay equity action plan, which includes a survey of pay disparities between women and men. Since 2001, remuneration must be fixed on the

basis of objective criteria common to all jobs (Chicha, 2006), which include qualifications, responsibilities, effort and working conditions.

However, Swedish GPG remained high – 16.4 percent in 2007 (OECD) – and the country has a very gender-segregated labor market (Numhauser-Henning, 2015). The 2009 Discrimination Act further urged employers to remedy pay inequalities[10] in collaboration with trade-unions. A brochure of the Equality Ombudsman explained the difference between equal work and work of equal value, setting out the steps for pay surveys (Oelz *et al.*, 2013). It provides a method to determine job requirements and helps to ascertain whether differentials in wages are due to sex discrimination (Oelz *et al.*, 2013). The Ombudsman investigates complaints and, if not successful, will take the matter to the Labor Court[11].

We did not find any evaluation of the effect of this legislation on the pay gap between male and female-dominated occupations. The Swedish GPG has slightly decreased since 2007 (to 15 percent in 2014) (OECD). The question remains whether this is linked to better valuation of female-dominated jobs (Numhauser-Henning, 2015, p. 18).

### *The UK*

This country, where the GPG has declined over the recent years (21.6 percent in 2007 to 18 percent in 2014, OECD), chose a middle road described by Chicha (2006) as “Incentives and increased awareness of employers, with legal risks if defaulted on.” In 2010, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a code of practices for employers[12]. It specifies practices to reach pay equity and has the strength of law since 2011. It stipulates (Section 27) that a woman can demand equal remuneration to her male “comparator” if the latter performs work that is the same or similar to hers, a job that is different but recognized in a job evaluation scheme as being of equal value (work rated as equivalent), or a job that is different but of equal value in terms of required effort or capability (work of equal value). Adherence to this Guide will operate in favor of the employer in case of employee complaint on pay equity. To be considered as validated by law, the method of job evaluations must (Section 41):

- (1) be applied for female employees as well as their male comparator;
- (2) be rigorous in its analysis and impartial in its implementation;
- (3) only take into account factors related to the demands of the job; and
- (4) be analytical in its evaluation of job components rather than operating a global evaluation.

A method that would result in point differentials between jobs based on the different valuing of demands of jobs traditionally occupied by women differently as compared with job demands of those occupied by men would be considered discriminatory.

Job grading revisions concerned the public sector and local authorities (e.g. National Health Service, Universities, BBC).

### *France*

In France, the 1983 law on gender equality at work defined “equal value” as involving a comparable level of professional knowledge or equivalent qualifications, experience and responsibilities. A 2001 law made collective bargaining on gender equality compulsory at the company and sector levels. It reinforced employers’ obligation to publish a report of

the situation of women and men regarding employment, training and pay and to set objectives to improve gender equity (Bender *et al.*, 2010). As little happened except in large companies (Laufer and Silvera, 2006), another law was voted in 2006, followed by another one in 2010 mentioning financial sanctions that were applied in 2013. The French GPG has stalled over the last eight years at around 14 percent (OECD).

Regarding comparable worth, no proactive measure was taken and there is little academic work on it at the exception of Lemièrè and Silvera's (2008, 2010). This is why, in 2010, the High Authority for Equality – predecessor of the current Ombudsman – asked these economists to gather an Expert Committee and work on a guide for wage negotiators, an experience for which we developed the analysis below.

## How to prevent gender bias in job evaluation?

### *Methodology*

The Expert Committee met every two months over two years. Its objective was to provide employers and unions with guidelines to prevent the undervaluation of female-dominated jobs. We have been involved as HRM researchers. Our contribution was to analyze how the job evaluation process in French pay systems may be gender-biased although using an apparently neutral criterion-method. The committee completed this analysis in a plenary session and used it to elaborate the guidelines which were incorporated in the Guide.

We studied the French retail trade job grading system (see “national grading system in French retail trade”) since it is highly feminized. It covers 8 percent of the working population in France (Bodier *et al.*, 2011)[13], of which more than 60 percent are women. Most people have low qualifications: only 8 percent are manager or expert, 20 percent are middle manager but 55 percent are employees or clerks and 17 percent blue-collar workers. We have studied the way jobs are described in this grading system. We also analyzed how each criterion was valued on a five-point scale, indicating each step from the least paid level to the highest.

National grading system in French retail trade:

- (1) Five criteria are used and have different weights: knowledge, 12.5 percent; abilities, 12.5 percent; relations, 25 percent; responsibilities, 25 percent; autonomy: 25 percent.
- (2) Each criterion is graded on a five-point scale and gives points so that each job is valued between 100 (minimum) and 600 (maximum) points.
- (3) Nine levels organize the hierarchy of jobs:
  - from 1-4: blue-collar workers, employees and clerks;
  - from 5-6: middle managers; and
  - from 7-9: managers, experts and executives.
- (4) An amount of 55 points separate each level. There is no overlapping between two consecutive levels.

### *Analysis of the case study*

Our analysis shows that biases are derived from the three following points.

*Criteria are redundant, which leads to the overvaluation of management jobs.* Each criterion comes with a precise definition. The analysis of these definitions show that three criteria are very comparable with one another: abilities, responsibilities and autonomy.



The definitions of abilities and autonomy are not very different. To a large part, the definition of abilities involves cognitive skills in handling information and taking actions. The first three scores in the scale to measure abilities deal with well-known solutions or situations that have already been encountered. The higher scores correspond to complex problems that demand more information, time and thinking. It requires that the worker imagines solutions which are, in fact, directly linked to his/her job autonomy. Indeed, autonomy indicates the ability to make choices on what to do to meet the work demand. Cognitive ability should not be the only ability criterion to differentiate between jobs, as it favors expert and managerial jobs.

Also, the definitions of responsibility and autonomy are both related to financial demands and business objectives. The system adopts a restrictive definition of responsibility, defined as the management of teams or business units. We also noticed that the criterion relations is mainly oriented toward management requirements. The relations with customers, an important part of a clerk's job, are much less valued although these relations are important for firms.

The criteria thus converge to give higher value to similar work situations. This grading system overvalues management and expert jobs and undervalues execution, reproducing a caylorian division of labor. Another caveat of this grading system is the absence of the criterion working conditions. As a result, most jobs situated at the bottom of the hierarchy are not completely nor fairly described and valued. Their more difficult working conditions should be taken into account in determining pay.

*Weighting of jobs contributes to increased salary gap between management and execution.* First, the effects of the definitions of criteria are reinforced by their weighting, through the level of importance which is attributed to each of them. Two criteria knowledge and abilities count for only half of others (see "national grading system in French retail trade") and lead to the undervaluation of clerical jobs, though they require specific abilities. The situations evaluated at the bottom of the hierarchy are the most repetitive ones whereas the one at the top concern complex and unforeseen situations. However, repetitiveness does not systematically prevent unforeseen situations, especially when jobs involve dealing with people, like customers. Clerks have to repeatedly manage impolite or demanding clients. In terms of abilities, these kinds of jobs require experience and a good level of vocational training.

Second, the number of "points" given to jobs (from 100 to 600, see "national grading system in French retail trade") and the distribution of jobs between the nine levels lead to the fact that the vast majority of jobs in retail are concentrated between the first and the fourth levels, which concerns almost the three quarters of employees. Due to this weighting, management jobs are much more valued than functional and execution jobs, which are female dominated. The critics made to the Hay system (Steinberg, 1992) can be formulated here: by applying such factors definition and weights, this system prevents better recognition of female-dominated jobs.

*Female abilities and skills are not made "visible" in the job evaluation system.* Many researchers have given evidence of the way industrial jobs held by women – especially in the 1960s and 1970s – are close to domestic work (see Part 1). In services like the retail trade, these archetypical "feminine" abilities have to do with care: attention paid to customers, sense of service, communication or empathy, and are not valued as professional skills. The job evaluation system we studied values mostly management of business units, i.e. archetypical male jobs.

The following list summarizes the main biases of this job evaluation system:

- (1) Redundancy: four out of five criteria value management jobs. Other jobs that require abilities which are also important for firms are undervalued, as important criteria are absent (customer relationship, working conditions).
- (2) The weighting of criteria: it gives less weight to criteria to which female-dominated jobs are most linked. Priority is given to characteristics assigned to managerial jobs, like financial and team responsibility. Other jobs requiring organization or customer relationship skills are undervalued. Such jobs are female dominated.
- (3) Invisibility of archetypical “feminine” skills, such as good sense of human relations, ability to serve with care, communication, etc. The way women are socialized tends to make these professional characteristics seen as “natural,” so that it is not necessary to recognize them.

### Discussion

Our analysis, along with others conducted in the committee, informed the choice of recommendations written in the Guide. We expose here the main recommendations regarding job evaluation. We then discuss the potential progress achieved by this Guide and the shortcomings of the French model.

#### *Guidelines to prevent gender discrimination in job evaluation*

The Guide is a three-part booklet (Défenseur des Droits, 2013). The first two parts outline hidden bias in job evaluation, helping readers (employer and employee representatives, HRM experts or managers) to become aware of discrimination effects. The third part draws up a list of good practices which answer the question raised at the beginning of this paper: how to prevent gender biases in pay grading system and job evaluation?

*Involve social actors and prepare the groundwork for negotiation.* The first step is the preparation of a job evaluation committee in which representation of employer and employees is fair. It is important that not only the usual representatives are involved. Other people, such as HRM experts and managers, should be included as they will be responsible for the implementation of the agreement. These actors must share a diagnosis and agree on the goal of gender equality. This necessitates wages transparency and for each salary grade, the percentage of women and men in the grade should be indicated. Women must be represented on the committee. All members must be trained on salary discrimination in order to understand how discrimination can be hidden behind non-discriminating intent.

*Describe jobs and salary practices.* An important issue is to identify the “female-dominated jobs.” Jobs which gather 60 percent of women will be taken into account, whatever the contract (part or full time, long or short term). These jobs should be described as neutrally as possible, based upon facts rather than opinions. It is necessary to report with precision the task to be done without judgment about its difficulty. Each job description will be matched with salary including all its elements (basic pay, bonus, grants and so on) for both men and women in order to compare them.

*Choose adequate criteria and weights.* The committee must agree on which criteria will be taken into account when evaluating jobs and establishing their hierarchy.

Not only does the definition of the criteria need to be exempt from possible misinterpretation in a sense of undervaluation of female jobs, but the committee also has to pay attention to the combination of criteria in order to avoid the problems highlighted by our analysis (redundancy, overvaluation of managerial jobs and absence of recognition of other jobs' requirements). For instance, the Guide advises to widen the notion of "problem solving" ability by introducing problem solving in situation of conflict and the capacity to anticipate problems and act before they occur. Such abilities are required in customer relationships and coordination jobs often held by women. Other examples are given.

The committee must choose a way of weighting the criteria which will not discriminate against women. If the system overweights, as in the retail trade job grading, management responsibilities compared to knowledge and ability, female-dominated jobs may remain undervalued. Criteria should also include physical and mental working conditions.

The last step concerns the global balance of the process: are female-dominated jobs undervalued compared to male-dominated jobs? The question must be asked ... and answered! To finish the process, a follow-up procedure must be implemented. Employees should have the possibility to appeal and the committee must monitor changes.

#### *Shortcomings and prospects of the French situation regarding comparable worth*

The Guide provides information on an issue little known or discussed in France. It paved the way for training of union members and hopefully attracted some employers' attention. However, we argue that the Guide may have had little impact on French institutional actors in the short term but that there is still hope in the long term.

First, the US states or cities which adopted pay equity did it after workers actions, at a time when unions had more power. In France, gender pay equity is not a strong union claim as opposed to the UK (Guillaume, 2013) and French unions do not have much bargaining power unlike Sweden. Last, there are few judiciary claims on gender discrimination grounds. Employers face thus little pressure.

Second, comparable worth is not so much a technical issue as a political one. France recently passed a law (2014), asking that negotiators reexamine pay structures and job evaluation criteria to correct those which induce gender discrimination. The Guide may have heightened the awareness of political actors to this issue. Nevertheless, governmental action also depends on economic indicators. France is recording persistently low-economic growth and high-labor costs, which gives little room for raising female-dominated job wages. A general obligation such as Quebec's is hardly possible. The other examples which could inspire French practices concerned civil services in the USA and the UK. Such job grading revisions are, however, unlikely in France, as civil service jobs are regulated by a protective status which the unions will not accept to change.

After stating these difficulties, we would advance three reasons for (moderate) optimism in the medium term.

First, the legal pressure against the GPG is increasing under EU pressure. The fact that collective legal action will soon be permitted in France for discrimination claims should trigger more litigation and bring more pressure on employers.

Second, following the 2015 Rebsamen law, trade-unions will have to present quotas of women delegates on election lists in companies, in proportion to the gender composition of the workforce. This may bring changes in unions strategies.

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Third, some employers may realize the beneficial impact of better valuing archetypical feminine skills. Most jobs nowadays involve communication and customer-focussed behaviors. It is the companies' interest to value such skills for women and men.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we reported a study made for the French Equality Ombudsman which shows how gender bias can be hidden in a job evaluation and pay grading system. To remedy this, we emphasized the importance of questioning apparently gender-neutral criteria and weighting systems which perpetuate gender bias, of sharing a diagnosis and training the negotiators. After three decades of research and concrete experiences in North America especially, knowledge is available for those who aim to reduce this significant source of GPG. In France, the subject has largely been ignored by HRM researchers and practitioners. The Ombudsman Guide is an initiative to raise awareness. It is also up to us to disseminate this knowledge through research and teaching.

## Notes

1. French Equality Ombudsman.
2. There is an unexplained part which could be due to "pure" discrimination or to non-observable factors.
3. Sorensen (1989) found that occupational segregation accounted for 25 percent of the GPG.
4. Healthcare, education, services and tertiary jobs are the most feminized occupations.
5. Directive 2006/54/EC of The European Parliament and of The Council of July 5, 2006, Official Journal of the European Union, L204/24, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:204:0023:0036:EN:PDF>
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