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Schrover, M.L.J.C.; Leun, J.P. van der; Quispel, G.C.

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Niches, Labour Market Segregation, Ethnicity and Gender

Marlou Schrover, Joanne van der Leun and Chris Quispel

The topic of this JEMS special issue is how the formation of ethnic niches is gendered. We combine theories on niching with those on gendered labour market segregation and show that there are similarities in the underlying processes and explanations. The interaction between niching and gendered labour market segregation takes place at four points. In the first place, entrepreneurship is less of an option for immigrant women than it is for immigrant men. Yet, in some sectors, immigrant women have more options for entrepreneurship than they had in their countries of origin. Their participation in the niche, as workers or as entrepreneurs, strengthens the niche and ensures its continuity. Secondly, women's participation in some niches leads to demands for highly flexible child-care and thus the development of a further niche. In the third place, the concentration of immigrant women in domestic work takes shape as a niche, especially as this sector becomes more ethnicised. The domestic sector, furthermore, is divided into sub-sectors, which leads to niching within a niche. Niches—including domestic work—offer an environment that is regarded as safe, and near to the private sphere. Fourthly, earlier studies have shown how the labour market is divided into a primary and a secondary segment. In the first segment, jobs are fixed and there is a career perspective. In the second, work is flexible and there is no career progression. Immigrants and women are more often found in the second segment. Research presented here indicates that work that is generally regarded as women's work proves also to be accessible to immigrant men. This implies that segregation occurs less between sexes and more between the second and the first segment of the labour market.

Keywords: Gender; Ethnicity; Niching; Labour Market Segregation

Marlou Schrover is a Migration Historian working at Leiden University. Correspondence to: Prof. M. Schrover, History Department, Leiden University, PO Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands. E-mail: M.L.J.C.Schrover@let.leidenuniv.nl. Joanne van der Leun is Associate Professor of Criminology at Leiden University. Correspondence to: Prof. J. van der Leun, Criminology, Leiden University, PO 9520, 2300 RA, Leiden, The Netherlands. E-mail: j.p.vanderleun@law.leidenuniv.nl. Chris Quispel is Assistant Professor of Social History at Leiden University. Correspondence to Prof. C. Quispel, History Department, Leiden University, PO Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands. E-mail: G.C.Quispel@let.leidenuniv.nl

Introduction: Divided Literatures

The awareness that gender is important to the study of migration has led to the publication of several excellent studies in recent decades (see, among others, Chant 1992; Gabaccia 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Simon and Brettell 1986; Willis and Yeo 2000). Furthermore, it has become clear that gender and ethnicity intertwine in a complex way (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Frager 1999). Both are part of systems of social closure, exclusion and control, and each forms relationships that produce and perpetuate inequalities and social hierarchies (Tilly 1998). Ethnicity has been recognised as a key factor in explaining niching, but the extent to which the process of niching is gendered is not clear. The articles in this special issue try to put gender into the study of niching.¹

Both niche formation and gendered labour market segregation rank high on the research agendas of historians and social scientists, but they have so far been studied rather separately. There is a large body of literature on the development of niches, on the relationship between niches and specific labour market conditions and on the role of migration in the process of niche formation. We will discuss this literature in more detail below. It focuses largely on men who own businesses or who are self-employed. Women are often overlooked, as is wage labour. There is also a large, separate literature on labour market segregation according to gender. This literature focuses on women in wage labour and ignores self-employment. It also generally ignores issues of ethnicity. The division between the two literatures is unfortunate and artificial; unfortunate because there are similarities between the processes that lead to niching and those that lead to gendered labour market segregation; and artificial because women make up about half of all migrants. It is clear that the same mechanisms that allocate women and men in general into separate economic spheres also apply to migrant women and men.

Some notes on terminology have to be made before we proceed. First, because the literature usually focuses on either immigrants or women, it refers to these groups as if they were mutually exclusive categories. This contradicts the joint consideration that we hope to achieve in this collection. We often use these labels for the sake of brevity, but it must be realised that the term ‘immigrants’ implies both men and women, and ‘women’ includes both immigrant and non-immigrant women.

Second, the definitions of self-employment differ across countries and across time, as do the boundaries of the formal and the informal economy (Kloosterman and Rath 2003). When we speak of the labour market, we refer to the labour market in the broadest sense, and include both formal and informal self-employment and wage labour.

Third, it is important to point out that there is no consensus in the literature on what defines an ethnic niche. The simple definition of a niche is ‘concentration of ethnics in one sector in the labour market’ (Wang 2004: 482). This definition requires that we specify what concentration is. According to the sociologist Model (1993: 164), the term niche refers to the over-representation of ethnic minorities in particular

jobs. Over-representation occurs, according to Model, when the percentage of workers in a certain profession, who belong to an ethnic minority, is at least one and a half times larger than the percentage of that group in the total labour force. Waldinger (1996: 21) followed this definition, but stressed that ethnic niches are also closed to outsiders. According to other authors, the term niche should be limited to those companies and economic sectors in which members of the particular ethnic group are actually owners of the firms.

Recent research (Kloosterman and Rath 2003; see also Bastia, Moya and Gratton in this issue) tends to take a broader view. Ownership by an ethnic group is considered to be of less importance. A distinction is made between, on the one hand, an ethnic-minority-owned business, regarded as an entrepreneurial niche or enclave economy, and, on the other, a worker-dominated niche in which a particular ethnic group dominates a sector regardless of ownership (for a discussion on this point see Wang 2004: 482). Within this last definition, the over-representation of, for instance, Italians and Irishmen in the building sector in many American cities at certain times can be considered a niche, despite the fact that ownership was not in their hands. Light *et al.* (1999) make a distinction between the immigrant economy and the ethnic economy. In an immigrant economy an entrepreneur from one immigrant group hires workers from a different immigrant group. In an ethnic economy the immigrant entrepreneur hires co-ethnics. Within our definition we include both the entrepreneurial niche and the worker-dominated niche, as well as the immigrant economy and the ethnic economy. Furthermore, in our view, niching can be measured not only in quantitative ways, but also in qualitative terms. Some work may be labelled as typical for an ethnic group, without an actual over-representation of members from this group within that sector. Baking pizza is seen as typically Italian, although in some countries most pizza bakers are not Italian.

In this special issue, we consider sectors that are important to immigrants as niches, even if the immigrants are not dominant within the sector. As the articles which follow show, this is especially important in the case of domestic workers (Moya, Gratton and Daniş). Domestic service has been an important sector of employment for immigrant and non-immigrant women for centuries. Many immigrant women worked as domestics, so from that point of view domestic work could be labelled as a 'classic immigrant women's niche' (Green 1997). This does not imply, however, that most or all domestics were immigrants. The sector was important to immigrant women, but immigrant women were not in all times and places important to the sector. For immigrant women it may be important because it is the only option for finding work, although at the same time they might be grossly outnumbered by non-immigrant women. Furthermore, the sector was important to immigrant women from some countries, but not from all (Moya, this issue). In recent decades, domestic work has undergone drastic changes. Domestic work was important in the nineteenth century, but the number of domestics sharply declined in the second half of the twentieth century. The sector is now on the rebound and offers new opportunities to immigrant women (Moya, Gratton and Daniş in this

issue). Migrant women manage to dominate certain sub-sectors of the labour market for domestics such as live-in child-care or elderly-care (Moya, Ceccagno and Daniş). As a result, domestic work can be related to niching in three ways. In the first place, at some periods and in some countries it can be considered an immigrants' niche. Secondly, in other times and other places immigrant women did not dominate the sector, but it was important for immigrant women because it was one of the few options open to them. In the third place, domestic work is a sector in which we find niching within the niche (Daniş, this issue).

Below we review the literature on niche formation on the one hand, and on gendered labour market segregation on the other. As we will show, there are seven points at which theories on each intersect: networks, preferences, discrimination, turnover, wage, skills, and the processes of ethnisation or feminisation.

Intertwining Theories on Niching and Gendered Labour Market Segregation

There is a vast literature on niching (see, amongst others, Brettell 2000: 112–13; Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Rath 2002; Schrover 2001; Wang 2004) and on labour market segregation according to gender (for an overview see De Groot and Schrover 1995). It is however not clear how the niching process is gendered (Wright and Ellis 2000: 585). Light and Karageorgis (1994) made some reference to the interaction between gender and niching when they observed that the nature of niching is determined by, amongst other things, the possibilities it offers for family members. When both men and women can work in the niche, a much closer relationship develops between the group and the economic sector. The possibilities for family members to work in niches depend not only on the nature of the sector, but also on work options outside it. When there are many possibilities for both men and women within the niche, and only few outside it, entrepreneurs can profit from the existence of a large reservoir of cheap labour. This will strengthen the success and continuity of the niche.

The work of Wright and Ellis (2000: 590) is exceptional because it tries to gender immigrant niches. These authors found that immigrant women were less concentrated in immigrant niches than men. Newly-arrived immigrant men were more likely to work in same-sex-dominated sectors than newly-arrived immigrant women. Wright and Ellis assume that differences between immigrant men and women can be explained by differences in networks. The networks of men and women (belonging to the same migrant group) are only distantly related. Occupational choices, and hence niching, are influenced by the fact that the migration patterns of women are different from those of men, the timing of their migration is different, they encounter different restrictions, and partly have different reasons for migration. Although gender, rather than ethnic ties, seems to be the main sorting mechanism, Wright and Ellis point out that it would be wrong to conclude that ethnicity matters less than gender. There is a broad division of labour between immigrant men and women within which there is a substantial degree of niching among workers of the same sex (2000: 597).

Wang (2004: 489) made the assumption, based on earlier research, that being female would contribute to the likelihood of working in ethnic niches since immigrant women were doubly handicapped: as women and as migrants. But Wang found this to be true only for Filipinos: women workers were 2.4 times more likely to work in a Filipino niche than men workers were.

When we combine the literatures on niching and on labour market segregation according to gender, seven similarities emerge. First, there is the role of *networks and agency*. Niching is explained by the fact that immigrants find work through networks (Waldinger 1996), and that those networks are different and more restricted than those of non-migrants (Bonacich 1973). The exchange of information and recruiting of personnel take place through these networks and this results in a concentration in certain sectors and maybe also in strategies of ethnic closure. Immigrants may fill a gap in the market left vacant by others (Wilken 1979) or may find a new niche (Stepick 1990). The established population can also withdraw from a field that is no longer considered to be profitable, to be replaced by newcomers willing, forced or able to work with lesser margins. This mechanism has been labelled the vacancy chain (Waldinger 1996). Immigrant entrepreneurs can profit from the existence of a large pool of co-ethnics who agree to work under bad conditions, because they do not speak the language or have restricted networks, but also because they have an illegal status or fewer legal rights than natives (Van der Leun 2003).

Gendered labour market segregation is also explained by the fact that the networks of women are different from those of men (Bradley 1996). In theories on labour market segregation, this factor is given less weight than it is in theories on niching (for an exception, see Ross 1983). Researchers, however, have found substantial gender differences in interpersonal and business networks. Women's networks are typically smaller and more homogeneous than are those of men (Moore 1990). Moreover, women tend to have more ties to kin and fewer ties to co-workers (Moore 1990; Renzulli *et al.* 2000).

Studies that deal with gender and migration do mention the differing networks of immigrant men and women as an important distinction between the sexes (Accampo 1993; Page Moch and Fuchs 1993). Immigrant men have job-related non-kin networks and immigrant women develop more kin-based networks (Fuchs and Page Moch 1990; Schrover 2003; Wright and Ellis 2000). Networks are different in form and function for men and women, including immigrant men and women. This can explain, in part, both labour market segregation and niching.

Secondly, *choices* made by both immigrants and women are seen as the explanation for inequalities. Preferences for part-time work, flexible hours, working with 'your own kind' (Portes 1994), work in or near the home, work that offers security and stability and the choice to invest less in training and education, are all linked to women more than men (Hanson and Pratt 1995; McGraw 1997; Thompson 1983; Waldinger 1996).

Thirdly, *systematic discrimination* is seen as restricting the chances of women (Goldin 1990; Tilly 1993) and immigrants (Fairlie and Meyer 1996; Spener and Bean

1999). Discrimination not only relates to employers or unions denying women and immigrants access to certain jobs, but also to denying them access to training, education, unions and political power (DeVault 1999; Lown 1990). This means that women and immigrants can be used as a reserve army, which employers draw onto the labour market at times of high employment, and is made redundant in periods of recession (McAllister 1995). Both women and immigrants display low levels of unionisation. Trade unions have sometimes deliberately excluded immigrants and women (Stepick 1990).

Fourthly, the work of both immigrants and women is labelled as *temporary* (Summerfield 1984). Women are seen as temporary workers because the assumption is made that they will marry; migrants are viewed likewise because they will return to their country of origin. Employers do not want to spend money and time training these workers and this enforces the temporary nature of their work (Thompson 1983).

Fifthly, there is the issue of *wages*. Wages are not a neutral concept, but are gendered (Kessler-Harris 1989) and ethnicised from the start. Employers, unions and government see women as having lesser needs because they are regarded as auxiliary workers and are not supposed to be breadwinners for the family (Land 1980; Scott 1987). Immigrants are expected to live on lesser means because they are used to lower incomes in their countries of origin.

Sixthly, there is the issue of *physical or innate differences* between women or immigrants on the one hand, and indigenous men on the other. Employers see women and immigrants as workers who are 'willing', 'fit', 'able' or 'suited' to do badly paid and little valued work (Phillips and Taylor 1980). Unions see women and migrants as competitors to indigenous men because their lower wage costs instil fears of replacement amongst men. These fears lead unions to depict the possible replacers as untrustworthy, irresponsible and (especially) less skilled. 'Skill', like wage, is not a neutral concept. Whether a job was classed as 'skilled' or 'unskilled' was mainly determined by the social negotiations that surround the definitions of skill. Work is designated as skilled as a result of the workers' collective efforts to protect and secure their conditions of employment. They did so by excluding outsiders (women and immigrants). Instead of skills, unions and employers attribute to women and immigrants other qualities, sometimes regarded as innate, which make them suitable for specific kinds of work. The alleged caring nature of women is seen as making them more suitable for care-related work. The concentration of immigrants in the food business, laundries or the garment industry—commonly seen as women's work—caused immigrants' work to be associated with femininity. Some groups of immigrant men were seen as submissive, undemanding, servile and arduous (see McKay, this issue); descriptions also used for women.

The discussion on physical or innate differences and skills is related to that on human capital. Women and migrants are both considered to be disadvantaged groups on the labour market because they have less human capital (or human capital that is

less valued). Human capital theory is used for explaining differences amongst migrants and for labour market segregation according to gender.

Lastly, immigrants can *monopolise* a sector when a link is made between indigenous assumptions about pre-migratory skills and a specialisation (Schrover 2001). Ideas in the host society about the qualities of the newcomers can lead to exclusion, but can also reserve an economic sector for them in a more positive sense. Ethnicisation is a process whereby an association develops between a certain economic sector and an ethnic group. In current Dutch society, pizza parlours are associated with Italian migrants. This makes it difficult for other migrants to set up a similar business. Turkish immigrants who want to run a pizza business pose as Italians by wearing striped T-shirts and using a handful of Italian phrases (Larsen 1995). The sector is thus not completely closed to outsiders, but gives opportunities to people who are able or willing to be part of a masquerade.

In the case of the gendered labour market, we see a process that is similar to that of ethnicisation. Feminisation means that an association develops between the low status, the reward for the job, and the fact that it is performed by women. According to the so-called Sullerot thesis, the image of a job devaluates as women move in (Sullerot 1968). The degradation of jobs, when taken over by immigrants or women, relates less to the work itself and more to the image of the work. There is thus a clear parallel between the processes of ethnicisation and feminisation.

There are not only similarities in the explanations, but also in the segments of the labour market in which we find women and immigrants. According to segmentation theory, the labour market consists of two segments (Bonacich 1973). In the first or primary segment, we find fixed jobs and good career perspectives. The second segment consists of temporary jobs, often in the service sector. Salaries are low, working hours long, labour conditions substandard, and career opportunities almost absent. In this segment of the labour market, one can expect frequent job changes and periods of joblessness. It is difficult to move from the second segment into the first. The jobs in the first segment have traditionally been more available to men, especially those of the dominant ethnic groups. Women and members of ethnic minorities, in particular those lacking formal permission to work in the host country, are both over-represented in the second segment. Allocation to the secondary segment results from restricted opportunities such as (assumptions about) skills, restricted networks and agency, and discrimination by employers, unions, and through government regulations.

Conclusion: New Insights

The observations presented above are largely based on a reconsideration of two literatures that have heretofore been contemplated separately. The articles in this issue, mostly based on empirical research, allow us to make important new observations not only regarding the two individual (and jointly considered) theories, but also on the empirical interaction between niching and gendered labour markets.

Drawing upon the articles in this issue, we find this interaction occurs at four principal points.

In the first place, immigrants, largely men, tend to counter the restrictions they face in foreign settings by seeking greater opportunities through self-employment. The extent to which this is possible differs across countries of settlement. Women (including immigrant women) are much less likely to be involved in entrepreneurship (Light, this issue). Ethnic entrepreneurship is not female ethnic entrepreneurship, just as entrepreneurship is generally not female entrepreneurship. Related to entrepreneurship is the issue of networks (Bastia, this issue). Since networks of immigrant women clearly differ from the networks of immigrant men, this may explain differences in niching.

Although entrepreneurial opportunities for women may be restricted, there are some opportunities within niches for the entrepreneurship of women (papers by Ceccagno and Rangaswamy, this issue). Women not only participate in niches as part of families, but also as entrepreneurs in their own right. Furthermore, some domestic servants have started to define their work in terms of entrepreneurship. They regard themselves as entrepreneurs, and the families they work for as their clients. The highly irregular nature of domestic work tends to make these forms of entrepreneurship invisible, but a redefinition of entrepreneurship could prove that women's entrepreneurship is more widespread than as been assumed. Ceccagno and Rangaswamy, moreover, both illustrate that there is segregation according to gender within niches. The earlier idea of Light and Karageorgis (1994), that niches in which both men and women participate show a greater persistency than niches in which we find only men or only women, is sustained.

Secondly, Ceccagno's description of the Chinese in the Italian textile industry leads to a related interesting insight. The activities of Chinese immigrants in textiles fit the classical image of niching (cf. Werbner 1980). The participation of both Chinese men and women in the textile industry, combined with long and irregular working hours, necessitate that Chinese immigrants find child-care options which are, like their working hours, highly flexible. One of the options they choose in Italy is hiring Chinese live-in carers. Thus, the participation of Chinese men and women in the textile niche leads to the creation of a second niche (for women only) for new Chinese migrants, who—rather surprisingly—come from a different part of China than the textile workers.

Thirdly, many immigrant women make use of the opportunities offered by the domestic sector. Gratton, Daniş and Moya all show how the unregulated, informal sector of domestic work offers opportunities to undocumented immigrant women that other formal and more regulated sectors do not. The domestic sector can be regarded to some extent as an immigrant niche, especially in certain sub-sectors, such as live-in child-carers (Gratton). The niche-like nature of domestic work has increased over time as domestic work ethnicised (Moya). Daniş shows how the temporary status of the Iraqi Christian migrants in Turkey benefits immigrant women more than men. Iraqi migrants do not plan to stay in Turkey, but they usually

have to wait one to seven years until they are admitted to another country. In this period, men refrain from setting up a business of their own. In the meantime, however, the Christian Iraqi immigrant women do use and enforce non-Muslim networks that enable them to find gainful employment as domestic servants. The work of Iraqi immigrant women is shaped like a niche, or rather a niche within a niche, since they work for non-Muslim households only. It gives these mostly young and unmarried women a form of employment that is perceived as sheltered, and hence acceptable to their families.

Domestic work (or parts of it) offers opportunities to immigrant women because the work is on the verge between the private and the public sphere. This brings us to a related issue that ties this point together with the two previous ones. Interviewees cited in the Dunkin' Donuts niche (Rangaswamy) or the Chinese niche in the Italian textile industry (Ceccagno) refer to the niche as a family. This discourse mirrors that which is used for domestics, who are also referred to as being part of the family (Moya, Daniş, Gratton). Within these niches, women are thus perceived to work on the cusp between the private and public sector. This rhetoric makes it possible for some immigrant women to work within a niche, while work outside it—in the public sphere—is not an option.

Fourth, the work in some immigrant niches, done by men, has been depicted partially as feminine (McKay). In principle, this could encourage the exchangeability of positions between men and women (cf. MacKay, this issue). This is a surprising interaction indeed. Labour markets are assumed to be strongly segregated according to gender. If immigrant men can move into sectors dominated by non-immigrant women, this suggests that segregation occurs less between the sexes and more between the second and the first segments of the labour market.

Note

- [1] In order to bring together researchers from different backgrounds, we organised a conference at Leiden University in June 2004, which was generously sponsored by Leiden University, The Dutch Science Council NWO, KNAW, Pallas and the Leids Universiteitsfonds.

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