Public sector employment is characterized by its high levels of gender segregation and, in many countries of the world, it is feminized, providing both high and low skilled work for women (e.g. Rubery and Fagan, 1995; Burchell, 1996; Connell, 2006; Grönlund et al., 2017). Public sector employment is inevitably politically charged because the state is often both employer and paymaster and because adequate public services rely on significant levels of taxation, making it a target for neo-liberal reforms fuelled in recent times by austerity (e.g. Adkins et al., 2019, Kylä-Laaso and Koskinen Sandberg, 2020). Furthermore, trade unions still have a significant representation and collective bargaining presence, which periodically result in industrial unrest (e.g. Briskin, 2012; Saari et al., 2021).

Public sector employment is emotionally charged because it often involves work with the most vulnerable members of society – the old, the young, the sick, the homeless, victims of crime and other emergencies, which has included being on the front line of a global pandemic. Despite this, the rewards for public sector employment, particularly in relation to gender pay equality, are frequently called into question (e.g. Thornley, 2006; Austen et al., 2013; Conley, 2014; Koskinen Sandberg, 2021). However, these issues also mean that public sector employment has often been the focus of developing gender equality policies, practices and legislation (Conley and Page, 2015; Sigafoos, 2016; Olatokun, 2021). These debates provide fertile ground for feminist and academic research on equality, from which the contributions to this Handbook are drawn. The volume explores theoretical, conceptual and empirical research from established and early career researchers. It takes an international and intersectional perspective, which acknowledges that those who work in public sector employment have differences in demography that shape their experiences at work. These perspectives are woven throughout the contributions rather than confining them to a particular section of the book.

The book is structured in six parts, which cover the key thematic areas of research. The introductory chapter sets the scene and introduces each of the themes, highlighting their importance and relevance to the volume. Part I of the book contains contributions that examine the macro issues concerning the politics of gender and public sector employment, particularly in relation to the pressures of neo-liberal reforms. Part II contains contributions that examine changes to job quality, often related to neo-liberal reform. In doing so this section examines how gendered occupational segregation in the public sector means that reforms often have a particular impact on women’s employment. This section covers a wide range of gender issues in public sector employment, which range from work–life balance, flexible working and bullying and sexual harassment. Part III carries on the theme of occupational segregation by examining its impact on gendered pay and pension inequality in public service employment. Part IV examines the sources of feminist activism in public sector employment, where women can give voice to their experiences or, conversely, how they are silenced. Part V of the volume explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on feminized public sector occupations.
GENDER AND THE NEO-LIBERAL STATE AS EMPLOYER

The first two chapters in Part I of the book examine the role of the state in providing care, highlighting how it is institutionally and economically gendered. To begin this section of the book, Gottschall and Abramowski’s chapter reviews the history and developments of the German welfare state, as well as its role in providing employment for women. Public sector employment in Germany, although less pronounced than in Scandinavian countries and France, has enhanced labour market integration of women. Nevertheless, gender gaps in pay and career persist, not least due to structural disadvantages in the women-dominated social services, including an undervaluation of care work. The authors highlight that, in Germany, care has historically been provided by women within family networks and has been supported by charitable sources or local social assistance. Thus, care services in Germany are characterized by semi-professionalism deriving from low levels of standardization in training and career prospects. Continuing these themes, Mulinari and Selberg’s chapter uses Olin Wright’s (2011, 2013) concept of Real Utopias to argue for a future in which care work and time to care is valued above profit. Drawing on empirical qualitative data from the Swedish healthcare sector, the researchers argue that any sustainable vision for a better future must involve and build upon the voices and experiences of care workers themselves rather than managerial models that are guided by profit and neo-liberal politics but are distant from the human experience of day-to-day care work.

Focusing on neo-liberal reform, Kylä-Laaso’s chapter examines the historical relationship between national competitiveness and the public sector in Finland. This relationship is critically analysed through the concept of a social democratic gender regime. The chapter examines how the role of the state as an employer of women is significant, but gender relations are conditioned by the needs of the state. Special attention is given to competitiveness policies that have gained a dominant role in government labour market policy, the public economy and welfare services in Finland.

Broadening the analysis outside of Europe, Wright’s chapter considers the roles of the state as owner, regulator, procurer and funder of public transport, and in providing employment training and skills in this sector in five cities in the Global South. It identifies key ways in which national and local states shape the experiences of transport workers, drawing on research on the future of work for women in public transport.

Chapters 6 and 7 in this part focus on the gendered nature of academia and public universities. Gaiausch’s chapter examines the gendered impact of neo-liberal reforms in a life sciences department of a large Italian university. The chapter draws on qualitative interview data to illustrate how the change from old regimes of patronage to new regimes of metrics and performance indicators appear to be meritocratic and offer greater opportunity and agency for women academics. The author, however, shows that, whilst some women academics have been able to take advantage of these new spaces, it is at some cost to their personal lives and particularly their reproductive decisions.

Einarsdóttir and Steinþórsdóttir’s chapter explores how neo-liberal reforms and union policies have shaped the management structure and employment in public universities in Iceland. International competition, marketization and new managerial techniques have impacted on the working conditions within higher education institutions. To elucidate gendered outcomes of the situation in Iceland, the chapter focuses on the University of Iceland (UI). The analysis
is based on a systematic review of data obtained from institutional and archival documents, policy reports and academic literature.

GENDER AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Part II opens with Williamson and Colley’s analysis of the gendering processes within public sectors in Australia, examining how formal processes are gendered and ‘administrative man’ continues to perpetuate gender norms. The chapter analyses formal processes at the macro level, focusing on regulating for public sector gender equality; human resource processes, which occur at the organizational level; and the individual implementation of gender equality initiatives, at the managerial level. The argument is made that unless gender is ‘redone’ at each of these levels, gender equality will not be achieved.

Brodin and Peterson’s chapter examines privatization of home-based eldercare in Sweden from the perspective of small-scale entrepreneurs. Contrary to state rhetoric that the privatization of eldercare would provide opportunities for women and migrant entrepreneurs, this chapter provides data that highlights how government policies on procurement eligibility have contributed to many women- and migrant-led small-scale businesses exiting the market, leaving large companies and multi-national conglomerates to dominate. Whilst most small-scale entrepreneurs have struggled to remain in the market, this chapter highlights intersectional differences in the experiences of women and migrant entrepreneurs in comparison with Swedish-born male small business owners.

Examining teaching in the public sector of Pakistan, Khan’s chapter analyses the reasons why women have sought to enter the profession in the context of male resistance. It shares perceptions and experiences of female teachers and uses their interpretations to analyse dynamics in a wider social context influencing women’s career choices. The results show that the inclusion of women in teaching depicts the gender segregation of the wider society in Pakistan by associating elements of teaching with ‘women’s work’, but also presents women with an opportunity to gain entry into a socially and culturally respected and accepted profession while empowering them to reduce their economic dependence.

Aho and Mankki’s chapter examines the gender relations of lean management in Finnish healthcare. Lean production methods are argued by proponents to embody feminine qualities, such as cooperation, communication and teamworking, which make lean management a good fit for the promotion of women leaders in healthcare. Drawing on qualitative data from experts in lean healthcare, the authors illustrate how these arguments do not serve to challenge the undervalued work in feminized healthcare sectors but instead introduce ‘hybrid masculinity’, which appropriates ‘soft’ skills but still values ‘hard’ skills that focus on cost-cutting and increased production.

Chapters 12 and 13 consider the gendered nature of leadership in public authorities. Rauhaus, Webb Farley and Eskridge’s chapter highlights women’s experience in city management in the United States and highlights the narrative of women leading local government administration. Despite efforts to increase the number of women in chief local government positions, city management continues to be a male dominated profession. The findings of this study suggest women are more likely to have distinct career experiences, which includes being less likely to have children at home and more likely to be new to city management. Women are also more likely than their male colleagues to have faced bias and discrimination. Through
an analysis of media reports and using the glass cliff as a framework, Rabe-Hemp, Schuck and Navarro’s chapter examines the conditions in which female police chiefs are hired. Results suggest that, despite arguments to the contrary, women police chiefs are not more likely than male chiefs to be hired into positions that are risky and precarious but are likely to be hired to signal change or reform.

WOMEN’S PAY, REWARD AND PENSIONS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

In the first chapter of Part III, Parker, Donnelly, Sayers, Young-Hauser, Loga, Paea and Barnett provide an intersectional overview of historical developments in women’s pay equity progress in Aotearoa/New Zealand public service. They focus on two studies in which public service stakeholders engaged in organizational challenges to the attainment of gender pay and diversity parity in various public service agencies. Particular attention is given to the situation of Māori and Pacific women in Aotearoa/New Zealand public sector employment, who still typically remain in less advantageous positions. The chapter makes several recommendations on actions to advance pay equity in Aotearoa/New Zealand’s gender diverse public service.

Continuing an analysis of pay equity in Aotearoa/New Zealand’s public sector, Ravenswood’s chapter explores the persistent gender inequalities, especially in the outsourced, feminized occupations such as healthcare assistants in aged care. Workers and their unions challenged the inequity for aged care workers, resulting in new legislation that prescribed higher wages and training opportunities. There were, however, some ‘unintended’ negative consequences for the implementation of the legislation. These include increased workload and responsibilities to ‘earn’ the higher wages, and decreased weekly working hours, which impact on earnings.

In a comparative analysis, Conley and Koskinen Sandberg’s chapter examines the different routes by which Finland and the UK have sought to achieve equal pay and the role of the public sector in implementing it. The analysis indicates that pay transparency operationalized in the gender pay gap regulations in both the UK and Finland is narrow and limited, relying on aggregated mean or median measures between men and women. Transparency is not sufficiently extended to include differences of pay between men and women doing different but equivalent work. The chapter argues that debate on pay transparency and gender pay gaps should be extended to include questions of equal value.

Continuing these themes, Salminen-Karlsson and Fogelberg Eriksson’s chapter discusses gendered pay in Swedish public service employment, with a particular focus on gender pay audits as tools to improve gender pay equality in the municipal sector. The findings show that gender pay audits are compliantly performed, but only result in marginal changes in salaries between women and men. This is discussed in relation to competing institutional logics, where a market logic based on workforce costs competes with a state logic that expects gender-equal pay.

In the final chapter in this part, Hunt, Rucker, Taylor and Kerr examine gender-based occupational segregation and pay equity among administrative workforces using Equal Employment Opportunity Commission data on US public sector employees. Occupational segregation is examined with glass walls (30 per cent) and gender parity (50 per cent) benchmarks. Pay equity is examined by comparing the percentage of female administrators in the top salary category to that of male administrators. Overall, advances in representational
equality have occurred over time and across functional policy areas in municipal and state governments; however, progress has been inconsistent across functions.

WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION AND VOICE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Drawing on case studies of trade union organizing for female-dominated care work occupations in Ireland, Cullen’s chapter asks what ideas about gender and care work are produced in trade union campaigns and with what consequence. Two modes of knowledge about gender and care that the author understands as feminist and feminized feature in trade union campaigns. Feminized frameworks rely on a valorous coding of supposed female qualities and virtues to secure their valuation. Feminist frameworks centre the recognition of the social and economic value of unpaid and paid care work that acknowledges women’s and men’s different structural positions in the economy and society.

In Chapter 20, Guillaume and Kirton examine trade union organization in two of the most feminized occupations in the UK public sector – nursing and midwifery. The research draws on qualitative research in the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and the Royal College of Midwives (RCM). The research focuses on the challenges of building lay trade union representative structures in occupations where long shift patterns and staff shortages amongst a predominantly female labour force leave little time for trade union organization. This chapter highlights the tensions that exist between trade union and professional objectives that are embedded in the culture of both unions.

Examining a different form of collective organization, Ryan Bengtsson’s chapter examines how healthcare workers in Sweden have used social media channels to develop a range of strategies to resist neo-liberal attacks on public services that have led to deteriorating working conditions. The chapter uses Hirschman’s (1970) concepts of Voice and Exit to show how healthcare workers, trapped between national collective agreements and local managerialism, have adopted strategies of collective whistleblowing, local protest actions and revolts to politicize care work in Sweden.

Finally in the section, Benjamin’s chapter examines job quality in feminized public sector employment in teaching and social work. The chapter focuses on the role of trade unions in protection of job quality for these two groups by examining strategies to resist New Public Management (NPM) reforms and unionized responses to the treatment of workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis highlights that although the position of these groups as essential workers during the pandemic provided some leverage for trade unions, the decades of NPM prior to the pandemic had already severely depleted their capacity for resistance.

GENDER, PANDEMIC AND PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT

To start Part V, Brathwaite’s chapter uses a post-colonial feminist lens to highlight racial discrimination and oppression experienced by Black and Brown (B&B) nurses and healthcare workers in the UK. The chapter draws on the racially motivated immigration policy of the UK government that became known as the Windrush scandal, the Black Lives Matter campaign and the disproportionate number of deaths incurred amongst B&B nurses and healthcare
workers and in the B&B community in general to illustrate the extent of institutional racial discrimination at all levels of the British state, but particularly in relation to healthcare policy and the National Health Service.

Continuing an examination of the impact of the pandemic on nurses, Gunn, Villeneuve, O’Campo and Muntaner’s chapter reviews some of the intricate ties between the nursing profession, gender inequalities, and public sector employment in Canada. The chapter examines how existing weaknesses in the healthcare funding exacerbated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. While nurses play key roles in health service delivery, state investments in nursing education are often insufficient and inconsistent even outside of a major health crises. Various reasons for the underfunding of nursing education and the continuing worsening of nurses’ work environments are discussed in the context of policies that govern the education, health, and labour market sectors. The adoption of gender transformative approaches could improve access to nursing education and strengthen nurses’ professional status and employment conditions.

Using the concept of liminality, Langan, Sanders and Thompson’s chapter examines the experiences of women police officers in Canada during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors highlight how the pandemic acted as a catalyst for positive organizational change that destigmatized homeworking and recognized the gendered nature of childcare in a male-dominated and male led organization. The authors, however, note that change was short-lived and began to wane as the pandemic wore on. Furthermore, they argue that the costs of recognizing the need for care accommodations passed largely to officers without family responsibilities, whose workload increased, causing tensions between team members.

Lastly, Pla-Julián’s chapter explores how different types of telework and homeworking have differentiated gender implications. A case study design is used to study home-based teleworkers’ experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 in the University of Valencia. The findings reveal that simultaneous paid and unpaid work in the domestic space have widespread consequences that impact negatively on gender equality in terms of labour productivity, well-being, and work–life balance. The chapter highlights the importance of introducing a gender sensitive perspective to research on home-based teleworking.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Taken together, the chapters in this volume produce a wide range of global evidence of the ways in which women’s employment in public services is inevitably influenced by the many political and economic tensions that surround public spending. Women are used as flexible resources to move into or out of the labour market, depending on prevailing political ideologies and economic conditions. Their pay and job quality are used as tools to keep public spending low where neo-liberal ideologies demand this, at the same time as maintaining levels of public service that will not damage the electoral chances of incumbent governments. During the global pandemic, the commitment and dedication of public service workers to the care of others was lauded but their own health and well-being were secondary concerns, with ethnic minority and migrant women faring particularly badly. Some of the chapters in this volume document how the confluence of years of underfunding and pandemic have left public services, and the women who work in them, exhausted and demoralized. Lastly, despite propping
up underfunded public services around the globe, women’s progress into leadership positions in this sector remains tortuously slow and unequally rewarded.

Although the evidence in this volume is international and is shaped by quite different cultural and political contexts, the underpinning logic for the position of women identified in each chapter is consistent: women’s paid labour is universally valued less than men’s and their unpaid labour is generally disregarded. Although one of the main roles of the state should be to uphold the human rights of its citizens not to be discriminated against, the state is complicit in discrimination when it draws on gendered assumptions about women’s lives, skills and motivations to keep public spending low. Most of the contributions to this volume highlight that change is possible, but this would require rethinking how public services, particularly care work, are valued and funded in societies. Importantly, change can only be achieved if women’s labour ceases to be thought of as secondary, low-skilled, cheap and dispensable. For these conditions to be realized, the trade unions and organizations that give women working in public services a collective voice must take this up as their raison d’être and make sure that the exploitation of women is not the go-to solution for limiting public spending.

REFERENCES


