Introduction

Employers are central to any discussion on inequalities. They and their agents have the hierarchical power to influence if not determine the shape and degree of inequalities in their organisations. This important component was identified in Chapter 3 by drawing on the work of Acker (2006). Employers set the standards of behaviour, monitor those standards and have the power to punish or condone those who do not conform to the set standards. In most countries the employers are the authors of the rules in the workplace. To some extent as we saw in Chapter 4, this authorship is mediated by government intervention through legislation. In rarer cases, trade unions may be joint authors of organisational rules through collective bargaining and more recently through partnership agreements.

Yet as Chapter 3 has shown, employers have high degrees of freedom in the way that they act and often this results in what Collinson et al. (1990) characterise as vicious circles of segregation underpinned by discriminatory partial truths. Whilst rules may be recorded, they may not be implemented or enforced. Further and importantly, there may be a set of unwritten rules and behaviour shaping the norms and values of an organisation that may encourage and collude with discriminatory practice. We begin with these points as it seems to us that organisational norms and values lie at the heart of the success or failure of equality initiatives. Furthermore, the norms and values that legitimate racism and sexism are embedded in society and subsequently reproduced in organisations.

How did we reach this position? We begin by reflecting on the part played by the organisations in the postwar era (late 1940s on) in the
way that racist and sexist practices became embedded. Following this historical reflection, we then introduce a typology of equal opportunities organisations and locate the findings from the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) 2004 within the typology to understand how far organisations have progressed. This chapter also includes a discussion on the debate between equal opportunities and diversity management and introduces some specific case study examples of policy and practice relevant to the women in this study.

Shape and degree of inequalities in organisations

The demand for labour has been central to employers’ strategies in influencing one of the components of inequality regimes, that is, the bases and the shape and degree of inequalities in their organisation (Acker 2006). The state of the British economy in the postwar era created a huge number of job vacancies in essential services and manufacturing. This prompted invitations to British citizens from the then British Empire to come and work in Britain, but it also led to the institutionalising of racist segregation practices, many of which continue today.

It is useful to remind ourselves how discrimination in organisations worked in the early years. This allows us to consider the extent to which the world has really changed. It also offers a good example of Collinson et al.’s (1990) ‘partial truths’ in the interrelationship between economic demand for cheap labour and a labour supply prepared to work for low wages and do unpleasant work due to economic necessity.

The impression given in much contemporary literature is that employers have only demanded women’s labour market activity in the last two to three decades. This is clearly a nonsense. Working-class women’s economic activity has long been in demand and such women have always worked in one form or another. Further, the gendered demand for labour has long been a part of employers’ labour strategies.

The gendered nature of early work is well spelt out in Bradley’s (1989) sociological history of the sexual division of labour. Whilst this demonstrates that men and women do very different kinds of work, it also clearly shows that working-class women played a significant role in the economic activity of their own and their families’ lives. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, women worked on the farms and created cottage industries in their homes. These economic activities were rarely ‘counted’ in the official statistics. Even today, women’s economic activity in rural communities may not be captured by statisticians and the same is true