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There is a widespread perception that public sector offers an employment advantage for groups disadvantaged generally in the labour market. For example women are more than twice as likely to work in the public sector as men. The relative concentration of these protected groups within the public sector has increased over the past decade of public sector employment growth and also as employment has contracted during the early years of the recession from 2008. The public sector also offers pay premia to its employees relative to the private sector and this is reflected in lower pay gaps for disadvantaged groups (Elliott et al 1996; Perfect 2011).

Explanations for public sector advantage include the status of government as a model employer which recognises its employees as stakeholders (Beaumont 1981), a set of cultural values (Woodhams and Corby 2007) and positive employer attitudes (Kumar 1993) which have promoted the proactive recruitment of minority groups, more sophisticated and advanced equality and diversity management (Bender and Elliott 1999; Cai and Lui 2011; CIPD 2007), including greater adoption of substantive equal opportunities policies (Hoque and Noon 2004). Stricter regulatory controls apply in the public sector, for example the Single Status Agreement 1997, the NHS Agenda for change 2004 and, since 2011, additional demands contained within the Public Sector Equality Duty. A recent literature points to a positive association between unionization and workplace equality practices (Blanchflower and Bryson, 2010) and Hoque and Bacon (2012) propose an interaction between regulation and unionization where the stricter regulatory structure might provide public sector unions with additional leverage in negotiations over equality issues.

What are the implications of austerity policies in the public sector for workforce representation and wage differences for the female and disabled working aged population? Both groups are reported to have benefited from 'public sector protection' during the preceding decade. This research represents the first comprehensive analysis of the relative performance of women and disabled employees by sector over a period of growth and retrenchment.

Two broad research questions drive our empirical work:

- To what extent does the public sector provide conditions in which the experience of women and the disabled is more similar to the experience of their male and non-disabled counterparts with regard to two broad indicators – employment chances and wages?
- Has public sector employment exposed or protected women and disabled people within the workplace from adverse employment effects since 2008?

This descriptive paper summarises the two major impacts of job growth and job loss and changes in pay determination in the public sector: the relative employment impact and the relative wage impact. Both are based on an analysis of data taken from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) over the period 1998-2012. The public sector is not homogeneous either in terms of its employment and wage structures or in terms of its exposure to austerity budgets and the analyses below are compared by occupations and sectors within the public sector (e.g. health, education, defence etc).

Findings are presented in summary form as a set of graphs:

- % women and % disabled in (i) the working-age population; (ii) employees; (iii) and employees in the public sector over time
- Gender and disability wage gaps and wage penalties (with controls) over time separately in the public sector and the private sector.

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