



Research Article

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Women's Perceptions of Training and Employment

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Abstract

Despite institutional declarations, women still rank second in key areas of society related to employment. The goal of this study was to analyse the perceptions of Spanish women taking occupational training courses and of gender equality experts with respect to the relationship between initial formal education, occupational training, continuing education and employment, as well as the role played by the family in this relationship, in order to elucidate conceptions of women's social reality in the fields of education and employment. A qualitative methodology was employed, consisting of semi-structured, in-depth individual and group interviews with women taking occupational training courses. Interviews were also conducted with experts in gender equality. Working women's conception of the relationship between training and employment is heavily influenced by the effect of gender socialisation, which leads them to assume the role of carer in the family. Women's choice of training presents a clear gender bias that directly influences the jobs they hold. In many cases, these comprise subsistence activities that coincide with traditional female roles. However, women with a higher education present less dependence on gender roles. Socialisation in gender stereotypes is evident in working women's discourse, and generates frustration at the impossibility of reconciling all the areas of responsibility assigned to them, leading them to relinquish any expectations of professional or personal development.

Keywords: education, family, employment, sex discrimination.

1. Introduction

Equality between men and women is a basic right established in article 14 of the Spanish Constitution, in article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. However, the elimination of gender inequalities remains an unfinished project in today's society, well into the 21st century. The institutional declarations of the European Union and Spain state that it is a priority to tackle the greatest area of inequality still existing in developed countries today (European Commission, 2010); however, the data confirm that in reality, vast differences remain between men and women in aspects as basic as training and employment. In Spain, for example, the average wage of women in full-time employment in 2012 was 84.9% of that of men, and 90.5% in the case of part-time employment (Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2015a). According to the OECD, women are more likely to work in part-time and low-paid jobs. In 2013 in Spain, 7.3% of men worked part-time, compared to 23.4% of women (OECD, 2015a). Furthermore, women spent 104 minutes more each day than men performing unpaid tasks (153.9 min vs 258.1 min) (OECD, 2015b) and the percentage of women employed in business leadership and management roles was 3.2% in 2013, whereas 6% of men occupied positions in this category (OECD, 2015c). Together, these data indicate that there is a gender gap in the labour market, and one which is also linked to greater poverty among older woman as result of

paying lower contributions to the pension and social security system. Inequalities in education and training are among the key reasons behind the persistence of a gender gap in employment (Aisa, Gonzalez-Alvarez, & Larramona, 2016). Although indicators confirm women's higher level of education and training, both in higher education (in 2012, 128.1 women graduated in higher education for every 100 men) (Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2015b), and in continuing education and professional development (in 2014, 10.5% of women participated in continuing education vs 9.2% of men) (Spanish National Statistics Institute, 2015c), the reality is that gender socialisation seems to play a very important role in the learning paths women choose, with the majority opting for courses traditionally associated with the female role of caregiver or oriented towards the humanities. Recently, Meyer, Cimpian and Leslie (2015) have suggested that the under-representation of women in academic and occupational fields related to science, engineering and mathematics is related to "field-specific ability beliefs", which are internalised beliefs that women are poorly equipped to carry out certain tasks in these fields. Thus, in 2012 in Spain, 21.3/1,000 men aged between 20 and 29 years old graduated in science, mathematics and technology, as against 9.8/1,000 women (Eurostat, 2015).

It should also be borne in mind that women have traditionally been steered towards caring for the family, a role that continues to prevail today. From the ages of 30 to 35 years old, women start to leave the labour market in order to care for their children, and this is especially noticeable in women working in lower-paid and lower-skilled jobs, in which it is more difficult to achieve a work-family life balance since the excessive accumulation of tasks (the triple working day) is not economically, personally or emotionally viable (Mercadé, 2007).

In Spain, Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March, on effective equality of men and women, represented an attempt to foster gender equality in the labour market by establishing a legal framework for eliminating discrimination against women. However, there is a lack of social support for childcare and family caregiving because gender inequality is rooted in structural problems (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt, 2010).

Consequently, in addition to the statistical data that reflect this situation, we also deemed it necessary to explore women's perceptions of the relationship between training, family and employment in order to identify the beliefs, opinions and experiences of women on which the reality of gender inequality is partially based. Here, we report women's opinions and experiences of employment and how this has been affected by the training acquired and family circumstances. We also analyse how aspects of business organisation have affected women's lives.

2. Background and Theoretical Foundation

Several factors are strongly linked to gender inequality and help explain women's marginal position in the labour market, two of which are the sexual division of labour and gender socialisation.

"Differential and hierarchical identities are established and maintained through a constant campaign of symbolic imposition" (Gómez Bueno et al., 2001: 55). This question is essential to understand the segregation of woman in the labour market as a central mechanism for restricting their access to the benefits of the social system, rendering them financially dependent on men and obliging them to become men's servants through the institution of marriage (Hartmann, 1976).

As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2015) have indicated, concern about occupational segregation by sex remains fully justified for three reasons: to) it is strongly linked to inequality (lower-paid jobs); b) it limits autonomy, freedom and recognition in accordance with individual merits; and c) it hinders the development of society since women work in jobs that do not correspond to their talents. It is necessary to understand the role of culture in the generation of gender inequalities and the persistence of sexism, since it is only once this process is understood that it becomes possible to analyse, explain and modify inequalities in the way in which men and women use working times and spaces.

Inequalities in gender role socialisation from earliest childhood result in internalisation of the roles associated with men and women. Several studies have analysed the influence of gender socialisation on career paths (Ballarín, 2001; Borderías, Carrasco and Alemany, 1994; Eccles, 1994, 2011; Moreno, 2000). Research results indicate that the gender stereotype whereby men are better at mathematics than women is formed in the early years of the education system (Cvencek, Meltzoff and Greenwald, 2011). The belief on which this stereotype is based is that women are innately worse endowed to perform tasks associated with social success (Meyer et al., 2015; Paustian-Underdahl, Walker & Woehr, 2014). It has been demonstrated experimentally that an act as simple as requesting innate talent rather than commitment and dedication when advertising an employment or educational opening prompts a significant decrease in women's motivation to present themselves as candidates (Cimpian, Bian and Leslie, 2014). Ceci, Ginther, Kahn and Williams (2014) have claimed that gender discrimination in this sense no longer exists; however, the argument that women are inferior to men in certain contexts perpetuates the under-representation and unequal conditions of women in some fields of employment. Other studies have explored the influence of gender on career choice, and the consequences for

women's and men's personal and professional development (Suárez, 2006).

The sexual division of labour is one of the most evident manifestations of the social construction of gender. It is based on "the social distribution of tasks according to sex" (Amorós, 2000: 257). Such distribution has varied over the course of history, but what has been and continues to be a constant in all societies is that women's biological capacity to gestate and give birth has served to confine them to the domestic sphere, assigning them a reproductive and caregiving role in society that limits their possibilities of entering the world of paid work and thus renders them economically dependent on men. For their part, men assume the role of providing the family with the resources necessary for sustenance. In fact, almost half of all adult women worldwide are exclusively devoted to the production of goods and services for family consumption, i.e. to domestic work (Rendón, 2002). In addition to the social construction of gender, it is important to note that there is a close relationship between patriarchy and capitalism (Hartmann, 1994; Carrasco, 1998). Capitalism only values one specific type of goods and therefore does not recognise others. It attaches importance to material objects, whatever can be bought and sold and has a price, but does not value well-being or whatever is done for pleasure or because it is necessary without expecting anything in return. Money is the measure of the importance of things: whatever can be bought and sold has worth, whereas that to which a price cannot be attached is ignored or considered of no value. The sexual division of labour has had and continues to have great importance and serious repercussions for the goal of achieving equality. For example, it is one of the reasons why there are more "inactive" than "active" women; why women encounter barriers to workforce entry and when they do enter, it is into typically female professions where the tasks carried out are an extension of those performed in the family; why women experience difficulties in attaining positions of responsibility, even in these professions; why women are required to have more training to perform a job; and why wage discrimination exists.

3. Design and Methodology

3.1 Study design

The goal of this study was to analyse the perceptions of women on occupational training courses with regard to the relationship between initial and continuing education and employment, taking into account the strong impact exerted on this relationship by their caregiving role in the family. We aimed to answer the following questions: is there any continuity between women's learning paths and their professional careers? Do women perceive the presence of gender roles in academia and work? What distinguishes women with a higher education from those who left education before university? Is women's employment influenced by their role within the family? How do women experience gender inequalities in education and employment?

The general research topic was the relationship between women's education and employment, mediated by their reproductive and caregiving role in the service of the family. We recorded the opinions of women on occupational training courses regarding the relationship between initial and continuing education and employment, taking into account the impact of family circumstances on this relationship. Specific areas of study included the following:

- The relationship between training and employment
- The relationship between employment and family circumstances

Methodologically, this study was based on the premise that reality is constructed through the meanings that people formulate and assign and which are reflected in the act of speaking, in line with the thesis of Taylor and Bogdan (1986), who proposed that social realities are "constructed" by those who participate in them. It is thus essential to explore people's ideas, assumptions and meanings in order to elucidate reality, and this therefore represented the primary source of information in this study. Given this premise, the interview represented the ideal research instrument, since it enables one to learn informant opinions and endow them with meanings in their own contexts. With this technique, the researcher guides the conversation with interviewees (Olabuenaga, 1999) and records their speech acts for subsequent analysis.

For data collection, we conducted open, semi-structured interviews with individual women on training courses and with experts, and also held a semi-structured interview with a group of women on training courses and a focus group with representatives of the business community.

In terms of the study area, all subjects who participated in the field work came from a municipality on the periphery of the Community of Madrid.

3.2 Participants

We established two groups of informants: a) women on training courses; (b) experts in gender equality.

Recruitment of women on training courses was conducted through two channels:

- a) The Women's Advisory Centre, run by the Women's Department of Alcalá de Henares City Council. In this case we selected women who were taking occupational training courses organised by the General Directorate of Women, of the Community of Madrid, as part of the *AMPLÍA* programme. This programme is aimed at training women as teaching and leisure assistants, and promoting the creation of childcare services to facilitate a work-family life balance. We held a first block of four interviews with women participating in the *AMPLÍA* programme, one from each age bracket.
- b) Women with a university education were again recruited through the Women's Advisory Centre, but in this case not from the *AMPLÍA* programme.

Thus, four women were selected from the *AMPLÍA* programme and four with a university education, with one woman from each group corresponding to each of the following age ranges: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44 and 45-65.

Subjects were selected using theoretical or intentional sampling (Guba and Lincoln, 1991). Informants on training courses were selected according to the criterion of representativeness of the "average" Spanish female population, and non-native origin was applied as an exclusion criterion since it might bias the sample.

The sample was segmented by age, considering that the content and meaning of female experience would vary according to this characteristic. To conduct the field work, we established four age groups:

- a. From 18 to 24: this age range coincides with the age of majority, the pursuit of initial independence from the family unit, career choices, job-seeking and the purchase or rental of housing, and is also the mean age at which higher education is completed, returning to the previous questions.
- b. From 25 to 34: this age range coincides with true economic independence and independence from the family of origin and the creation of one's own family unit, and may include the birth of the first child.
- c. From 35 to 44: this is the age range in which the consequences emerge of the difficulties that began in the previous stage, and new problems related to a work-family life balance become more apparent.
- d. From 45 to 65: from 45 onwards, people form part of a priority group for employment policies, until reaching retirement age.

For the group interview, we selected four women, one from each of the four established age ranges, who were participating in an employment workshop programme run by the Women's Department of Alcalá de Henares City Council. Three experts were interviewed: an expert on feminism, a trade union expert (head of the secretariat for women) and a sociologist (an expert in work-family life balance and social security). Thus, we addressed the major lines of this research: the education, employment, and work-family life balance of women.

4. Results

The relationship between training and employment

In terms of the relationship between training and employment, the women's statements indicated their intention of working in jobs that corresponded to their learning paths. However, the reality was that interviewees were mainly working in highly feminised professional fields. Horizontal discrimination in the market labour is in part related to educational choices that are similarly biased or differentiated by gender:

So, only women take degrees in social work, psychology and social education, there is a tiny percentage of men in the university, and the same happens with jobs, we are nearly all women, and if there was a man he was (...) an executive or a member of the Board or something similar. But I've always worked with women. Basically, the staff are all women (M2-1, 6).

It has been observed that when a woman achieves a position that is related to her personal and professional interests, certain working conditions (such as salary) do not influence her decision to accept the employment. However, salary does become a criterion for professional choice if there is no association between training and employment, in which case professional choice is based on monetary exchange:

But then on the other hand maybe not... it's quite difficult to find a place that (...) due to the problem of job insecurity, of hours, (...) that you like what you're doing in this association (...) that you aren't being exploited or anything (...) But basically, on a personal level, I'm working in something I like, so I'm very happy. However if I was working perhaps (...) I don't know, if I had continued working like when I started at the beginning when I didn't have any qualifications, as a shop assistant or cashier, well I wouldn't enjoy it as much as this, which is what I have studied. I don't think anybody finds it an effort to work in a job they like (M2-1, 3).

As can be deduced from the interviews, a higher educational level enabled women to access higher-skilled employment. In addition, women in this situation presented a lower rate of abandonment of the labour market when they had children. Thus, training acts as a protective factor against abandonment, although significant difficulties remain:

...but my experience is that I always relate now with highly qualified women, (...) with an excellent CV, but even so it's very difficult for them to work and have children, they are very scared of getting pregnant, much more than I was thirty years ago; they perceive something in the labour market that indicates they will be rejected, that difficulties will be created for them... (E2, 4).

This statement indicates women's loss of freedom of choice associated with motherhood. More specifically, this expert stated that these difficulties have increased due to a combination of the present problems in the labour market on the one hand and cuts in public services on the other, because a return to work is dependent on the childcare options available (subsidised nursery places, family caregivers, etc.).

Another feature that was confirmed regarding female employment is that with the same qualifications, women earn less than men because they are unable to attain the posts that correspond to their educational level or to break through the glass ceiling:

It's satisfying in the sense that if you want to learn more, you do more training, as the first objective is personal development; and besides, it can open up more job opportunities, but it certainly doesn't benefit us in employment terms as much as men. Because there are still many prejudices, obstacles, no matter how much training you do, there are other barriers to whatever it was you wanted to do that have nothing to do with a lack of training. I think this is important, because I always say that we've got more than enough training, we've got much more training than men (E2, 9).

The relationship between employment and family circumstances

As regards the relationship between employment and family circumstances, we found that the women perceived a continuum between their working and family lives, whereas they felt that men separated these two areas of experience:

Men experience working time very differently to women. I think that men go to work and don't think about anything else, if the child is ill; I imagine there are exceptions, but you know what I mean. But... for a woman, because of the maternal bond with the child, even when she's at work she's also thinking about how things are going... perhaps her children are with their grandmother and she's wondering how they're getting on and so on, or they're at the nursery and she's wondering how their day has been (M2-1, 8).

The above statement would not have any negative connotations if it were not that it creates an image of women as being unable to set aside their family problems when at work, since popular stereotypes about employment associate women with lower productivity, whereas other, male behaviours in this sphere are not perceived in the same way:

For example, men spend a lot of their time at work talking about football. However, the stereotype is that women are always calling home to see how the children are if they're small, or are caring for their mothers if these are elderly... There is a belief that women don't know how to separate work time from personal time. However, men's time is also mixed with things that have nothing to do with work. There is a stereotype there, and time is experienced differently because for women there is a continuum between their personal and professional lives whereas for men there isn't, they separate these but bring other things to their work that are disastrous in terms of productivity and everything else that the market measures (E2, 5).

The women's perception of differences between men and women in the experience of working and family time may stem from the values generated by the traditional distribution of roles, which persists today. Although women have entered the labour market, they are still largely responsible for domestic tasks and caring for dependents. Meanwhile, legislation aimed at eliminating job discrimination and helping women and men to achieve a balance between work and family life has not produced the desired results, since the data indicate that it is usually women who avail themselves of the legally established measures, and thus the unequal distribution of roles continues:

...probably due to cultural expectations, women take more responsibility for children, when the hours are the same, the possibilities are the same, it's usually the woman who applies for a reduction in hours (M4-2, 6).

This particular experience of working time, combined with the negative prejudice mentioned above concerning women's productivity and commitment, exerts a negative effect on women's health, leading to what has been called the

“double presence and double absence syndrome”.

This is the double presence and double absence syndrome. Double presence is when you're at home and at work, and double absence is when you fall short in one of the two spheres, which generates a feeling of guilt and is related to a level of stress in women that is higher now than that of men. This double presence and double absence, working in two places or feeling guilty that when you're not at work because you're at home you're neglecting your work and vice versa (E1, 19).

This statement clearly illustrates the impact of gender socialisation on women's lives, marked by their reproductive and caregiver role, while they fight to achieve their desire and right to enter the labour market.

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to identify the perceptions of women on occupational training courses concerning the association between initial education, subsequent training and professional occupation, taking into account the role of family circumstances. We wanted to determine their opinions about three fundamental constructs that govern women's learning paths and employment: patriarchy, gender socialisation and the sexual division of labour.

An analysis of the interviews with women on occupational training courses and experts in gender inequality indicates that the role traditionally assigned to women via gender socialisation within a patriarchal society continues to persist in women's worldview, and this is reflected in a clear sexual division of labour. Employment sectors still persist in the labour market that are largely occupied by women as providers of care, not only among women who have obtained a university degree (social work, psychology and social education, in particular, were strongly represented in the interviews, although there are many others, such as nursing, teaching, etc.), but also among early school leavers who work as cashiers, hairdressers, administrative assistants, cleaners, cooks and other jobs traditionally associated with the aforementioned female role. These results are consistent with the argument proposed by Iglesias and Llorente (2010), namely that occupational segregation is a structural fact of society. Such segregation is based in the patriarchal model that sustains women's subordination to men, in accordance with the model suggested by Hartmann (1994). Hence, it is of fundamental importance that education should be focused from earliest childhood on gender equality and the emancipation of women, delivering a non-sexist professional and personal education.

Alonso, Biencinto, Gómez, González and Soliva (Spanish Equal Opportunities Working Group, UAFSE, 2012) have identified five macro factors that underlie gender inequality in employment: gender stereotypes, the burden of domestic work and care, the lack of recognition of authority and prestige for representation and management, a sexist corporate and organisational culture and the lack of a gender perspective in employment policies. All of these comprise dimensions of the fundamental construct, which is none other than the patriarchal organisation of society and the corresponding gender socialisation, as highlighted when the interviewed women themselves reported that some university degrees and career opportunities were “entirely populated by women”. This illustrates the continuing validity of the argument put forward by Meyer et al. (2015), according to which gender socialisation has created stereotypes whereby women are perceived as having less training and capacity to perform certain jobs regarded as male and geared to success and excellence. This way of thinking was exemplified in one of the statements obtained, according to which women are unable to separate family from work, which could give the impression that they cannot put aside family problems or responsibilities, with the consequent negative impact on their professional performance. This finding suggests that the idea of inability that forms part of the present day gender stereotype is perhaps based on emotional and cognitive difficulties in separating the public and private spheres of women's lives, and corresponds to the notion that women have a greater capacity for emotion while men are better equipped for rational thought.

It would appear that the only way to break through the glass ceiling that prevents women's access to certain jobs would be to facilitate access to higher education, although it will only truly shatter when structural changes occur. Women graduates are professionally oriented to choose jobs related to their training, without taking other factors such as remuneration into account. However, women with a basic or secondary education tend to occupy subsistence jobs in which selection is fundamentally based on their qualities as a representative of the stereotype of women as caregivers, or low-skilled jobs (cashier, shop assistant, etc.).

Motherhood appears to be when women begin to assume their role as caregiver and experience difficulty in working while having children, which in many cases was seen as exclusion from the labour market. In addition, women experience the so-called double presence/double absence syndrome (Balbo, 1994), which adds further stress to the already stressful activity of caregiving while also working outside the home and can negatively affect their physical,

psychological and emotional health. This syndrome implies that the woman is present in both the domestic sphere, as family caregiver, and the public sphere, as provider of the resources for family life; furthermore, when she is present in either one of these spheres, she perceives the other to be neglected, triggering a feeling of guilt.

Ultimately, working women's discourse is a reflection of the patriarchal society in which the sexual division of labour occurs through the mechanism of gender socialisation, which is present both in formal and informal education alike. However, there is a perceived desire among women to reconcile their learning paths and professional careers beyond the limits of gender stereotypes, which will be difficult to achieve unless the educational system, culture and the organisation of society and employment are modified. Meanwhile, it is women who are paying, in the broadest sense of the word, to exercise their rights.

6. Conclusions

Initial and continuing education is mediated by gender stereotypes that steer women's learning paths towards careers related to the provision of care and affect their position in the labour market: women with a university education are more likely to fulfil their employment expectations in relation to the education received, whereas women with a basic or secondary education sacrifice their vocational aptitudes in order to devote themselves primarily to family care, accepting subsistence jobs traditionally associated with the female role. All women evidenced the impact of gender socialisation in the assumption of family responsibilities as their primary role in society. This stereotyped orientation generated frustration in the women, who felt that it was impossible to reconcile work and family life without renouncing their aspirations as regards personal and professional development.

Such discrimination and inequality entails a high opportunity cost for society, which loses skills that possibly only women, with their perspective, can contribute, relegating them to the role of providers of care for the family. The education system should focus from earliest childhood on correcting this imbalance, and the public authorities and society in general must adopt measures that empower women and leverage their intellectual, emotional and social skills in all areas of life, both in the public sphere of work, civil society and politics, and in the private sphere of family life.

7. Study Limitations

This study examined women's perceptions of their role in training, employment and the family. As such, the conclusions that can be derived from it require confirmation in larger studies, since the greatest limitation of this study is probably the impossibility of generalising the findings to the Spanish female population which the sample was intended to represent. In addition, the fields of inquiry should be extended and interrelated in order to formulate a system of ideas present in society's collective imagination concerning the position of women in society.

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