NEGOTIATING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES: WOMEN AND MEN FACULTY IN SPANISH GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract: In Spain as in many other western countries neoliberalization processes are taking place within the context of the universities and the presence of female geographers is decreasing in relative numbers and their professional status is not improving. The aim of this paper is to focus on the experiences linked to women’s professional careers within Spanish Geography departments, a professional space that is becoming increasingly competitive and masculine. We will focus on women’s strategies and practices in reconciling work and family life as well as in obtaining promotion and power. The paper also draws upon male academic’s accounts to compare the “masculine” and the “feminine” professional career. Many quantitative analyses have been published in the US/GB and elsewhere on the situation of women in academic geography but few qualitative analyses have been carried out on the topic. The research of this paper is based on qualitative analysis, mainly in depth-interviews.

Key words: gendered careers, academia, Spanish geography, work-life balance, women’s promotion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Spain as in many other Western countries neoliberalization processes are taking place within universities (Dowling, 2008). These include the diffusion of market and competitive logics, the rise of audit processes and cultures of accountability and the replacement of public with private funding. These processes are having an important impact on the perception and practices of Spanish geographer’s professional career. Within this context, the presence of female geographers is decreasing in relative numbers and their professional status is not improving. The aim of this article is to study the experiences of women’s professional careers within Spanish Geography departments, a professional space that is becoming increasingly competitive and masculine.

We will focus on women’s strategies and practices -as well as their feelings and experiences- in reconciling work and family life and in obtaining promotion and power in academia. The research also draws upon male academic’s accounts to compare the “masculine” and the “feminine” professional career. This paper is based mainly on qualitative analysis (in-depth interviews). Many quantitative studies have been published in geography on the topic (from Zelinsky, 1973a, 1973b and McDowell, 1979 to Crang, 2003) but very few qualitative analyses have been carried out and we believe that this is the most appropriate method to study this topic. The reason we focus on the discipline of geography is because, as geographers, we know the context very well and this is necessary to analyze the qualitative results. Moreover, geography stands between the social sciences and the physical sciences and this makes the findings applicable to a good number of disciplines.

In 1988 we published a survey of the situation of women geographers in the academic structure of Spanish universities (García-Ramon et al, 1988) and we found that their presence was quite significant (about a third of the teaching staff, although concentrated in low positions), in particular if compared with Anglophone geography (Monk, 1994). Nevertheless, in the present this appraisal should be modified as the proportion of geography staff who are women falling (Pujol, 2004). Some recent studies point out that in the Catalan Universities the ratio between men and women in the geography staff has moved from 1.6:1 in 1996 (Lluch et al, 1998) to 2.1:1 in 2008 (Pujol et al, 2008). This is probably due to the fact that in the 1980’s the image of geography in Spain was linked to an image of a professional practice of teaching in secondary school and not to a more masculine one – as it is at the present- linked to the recent growth of technical geography and professional practice (Garcia-Ramon and Pujol, 2004).
2. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative fieldwork for this research has been carried out from 2007 to 2009 and it included in-depth interviews with a total of 57 people from the staff of twelve public Spanish universities (almost a quarter of the total of the geography staff of those universities). Of this total, 43 were women and 14 were men. All of them held permanent positions as associate or full professors, the two basic permanent categories in Spanish Universities. The main criteria for inclusion in the sample were age, family situation and professional status within academia.

The largest age group is that between 46 and 60 years of age. Some features relevant for our research are that: (i) a majority of middle aged women have a partner and the single ones are full professors or very young associate professors, (ii) all men have a partner and all but one have children, (iii) almost a third of women don’t have children and (iv) 11 out of 13 female full professors have gone through a process of divorce while none of the male counterparts have.

The fieldwork has been carried by the three authors. One of them is full professor, another one is associate professor and the third one is a doctoral student. Some of the authors have been dealing with this topic for quite a few years, mainly from a quantitative perspective. Lately the qualitative perspective has been introduced. The PhD thesis includes the qualitative as well as the quantitative material.

In this contribution we will analyze first the conciliation of work and family (I), then promotion and power (II) and finally service to the institution (III).

3. NEGOTIATING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIVES

3.1. Conciliation of work and family

In relation to the balance between family and work in academia scientific productivity and gender differences emerges as a key question. The lower productivity of women in academia has been explained by the difficulties of reconciling professional and family life for women and by the lower access to informal networks and personal contacts that facilitate publications. Research by Garcia Ramon and Castañer (1992) and Ramiro (2005) points out to the important role of women within the family when taking into account their production. However they also remind that the lower proportion of women staff in the case of university geography departments is also an explanation by itself of the lower number of publications.

But some authors do not fully agree with this explanation and Winkler (2000) observes that single women also publish below the average in some cases but when asked about this always answer in terms of a feeling of exclusion and social and
intellectual isolation leading to a limited access to resources. The lack of integration in the social networks of the department leads to an exclusion from the invisible negotiations among members and eventually leads to a lower ability to identify possible collaborators, even research assistants (Hanson, 2000). Influence in informal groups requires considerable spare time and this is what many women, especially married ones with children, cannot afford. Similar conclusions have been observed for the academic career of women in Spanish universities (García de León et al, 2001).

Some authors (Deem, 2003; Wood and Newton, 2006) have analyzed the careers of men and women in academia in order to discover to what extent their careers and their expectations have been affected by gender relations. Women feel that family duties are hindering or retarding their career and they perceive a sexist bias in promotion decisions. Men, on the other hand, do not see paternity as a problem and recognize that had they been women it would probably have been more difficult to reach their present academic position. They do not report the same feelings of incompatibility between family duties and academic careers as that expressed by women.

In relation to our sample, most of the interviewees (women and men) agree that women have a double burden, their professional career but also the main responsibility in the organization of domestic life. At the same time all women interviewed insist that a flexible working schedule is the most highly valued aspect of academic life in order to combine work and family, particularly if they have children. Teaching in the classroom and personal attention to the students require rigid schedules but other research and administrative duties can be more or less adapted to their needs and timetables. Curiously enough, most of the men do not refer to this flexibility of schedule.

“I believe that we are privileged in comparison with other women, those who work in a shop, in a factory, a hospital... We should not victimize ourselves. Women who work with rigid schedules and to whom conciliation is very difficult and moreover, in less gratifying jobs... I mean, all our conflicts on how to balance are nothing in comparison with the real world, the world outside the academia” (Clara, 31-45 years old, married with children, associate professor).

A flexible working schedule is considered advantageous not only by women with small children but also by those who have to care for dependent persons in the family, especially elderly parents. Nevertheless many of them refer to this flexibility as a “trap”, as you need to compensate “the stolen hours dedicated to the family” according to one of them.

Despite the advantages they see in flexible working hours, the idea of “sacrifice” is always present in the discourse of the interviewed women regardless
of their age. In particular it is associated with the years when they have or had small children and they had to make up the hours devoted to child with work carried out during weekends or late at night. Feeling “guilty” for not caring enough for the children and even for elderly parents is one of the most common feelings among women with family responsibilities. This feeling of guilt is never mentioned by the men.

In most of the cases, family help especially by grandmothers and paid help become the main strategies women use to cope with the double burden. Research carried out by Deem (2003) on men and women at different British universities has shown that women felt that family responsibilities had slowed down their career while men usually recognized that paternity had not been a problem for them. In our sample women also mention that their family responsibilities might have slowed down their career although they don’t say it very openly. On the contrary, men, with a few exceptions, don’t refer to it. Nevertheless, some interviewed women mention that their partners help them, in particular with the care of the children.

It is worthwhile mentioning that some of the interviewed men said that family life had been a very important stabilizing factor for their emotional well-being and for their career:

“I could point out to some costs (in relation to the family) but I should mention that it also has a compensating effect, as it can be stimulating… so I have a support (for my career), and I believe that this is very important. To have someone with whom to share when things may become difficult” (Eudalt, 46-60, with partner and two children, associate professor).

Curiously enough this emotional stabilizing factor linked to the family is never mentioned in the interviews with women, although some of them might have similar feelings.

Women without children are fully aware of the difficulties they would face if they were to have children in carrying out their academic activities as they do now (e.g. attendance to congresses, long term field work etc.) and sometimes children are thought as a drawback for the academic career:

“I have devoted all my life to my academic career... I never felt the need to be a mother. And I do not miss it now because I see very clearly that the two things are incompatible... I have had a life with full availability, without time restrictions, if you need to travel you just go, if you need more hours to work you do it... this has been my life” (Mila, 46-60, divorced and without children, full professor).

The difficulties they anticipate in reconciling family life and a professional career that has become increasingly competitive since the 1990’s are perceived by women from the very beginning of the career, according to most of the
interviewees. It is an observable trend in our universities that among doctoral students holding grants significantly more female than male students drop their research before the PhD. A plausible explanation is that an academic career is too demanding for a young woman who does not want to give up having a family and children.

“The drama is that they (women) drop out when they are doctoral students with a scholarship. Male doctoral students go on and female ones quit for any stable job. Academic life is too demanding, research is too competitive, too long... it is perceived as more uncertain than it really is... after the thesis you have the tenure track, always insecure, what will happen to me?... they don’t like it because they want to have children, they have to pay the mortgage... it is not that they do not want to work but they want to do it from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. so they know what exactly is expected from them...” (Tania, over 61, divorced with children, full professor).

3.2. Promotion and power

In relation to promotion and power, Spanish universities, as in many countries, academic careers are strongly gendered as few women reach the highest academic position, which is a full professor. It could be presumed that this question of promotion is a matter of time as women have tended to become staff more recently than men. However, García de Cortazar and García de Leon (1997) and Simelio and Rovetto (2008) have argued that Spanish statistical data show that there has been a sufficient flow of female students and teachers with the qualifications required to be promoted to a full professorship. They also assert that the percentage of female professors are anomalous and reflect the androcentric circles of power within academia: “the effect of the Old Boy’s Club” (the almost always unconscious cooptation by men of candidates among ‘their equals’) (García de Cortazar and García de Leon, 1997, 75).

Brooks (1997) points out that in British universities women have quite often heavier teaching loads, more administrative duties and more tutorials than men. Women often participate in many time consuming committees (students’ admissions etc.) but are hardly present in more important decision making bodies or in executive positions. This situation is not helpful for their academic careers and promotion as they have less time for research and publication which are the real measure indicators for academic productivity.

Criticism has been made of the evaluations systems prevailing in academia, based on criteria that ignore the specifics of female careers and for this reason they see their contributions are undervalued or marginalized (Martinez, 2008; Wilson and Nutley, 2003). A typical academic career is structured according to masculine perceptions of success and the system of meritocracy adopted for
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promotions reflects and reproduces discursive practices of masculinity and discriminates against a majority of women and some men (Knights and Richards, 2003). The image of the academic career percolates into all the processes of assessment that lead to academic positions that value not only the intensity of scientific production but also the uninterrupted character of it (Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Wilson and Nutley, 2003).

All the women of our sample are fully aware of the facts that standards to evaluate academic work are derived from this model or image, a clearly masculine one. It is strongly expressed by those with small children and women who are above 45 years old and have not reached full professorship. Both groups feel that they have wider and more diverse interests in life than men and therefore they say that they don’t want to enter the fierce competition usually associated with attaining a full professorship (or perhaps it is too late to start competition for it?).

For Homer, instead, the promotion from associate to full professorship was not only a matter of inertia but also a way of meeting the expectations of his professional environment. As he says:

“It was expected that I applied for a full professorship. What would my colleagues in the Department have thought if I hadn’t tried to?... It was considered as a normal evolution if I had to follow this line of leading a research group, obtaining funds, publishing... then I had to become a full professor” (Homer, 46-60 years old, married with children, full professor).

But when Homer was asked about the promotion of her partner (who is an associate professor in another discipline at the same university) he answered that they have talked about the subject with her and that she never had cared much about being a catedrática and that she was not ready to make any sacrifice for it.

In contrast, the experiences for promotion to full professorship for women seem to have been more difficult. As another man says “women who wanted to become full professors have always been stigmatized as very ambitious”. Then, full professorship is considered as a “natural” outcome of a brilliant academic career for a man, whereas for a woman it is mainly seen as a result of an “unnatural” ambition.

In relation to promotion, it is clear than men have had found their path rather easier in finding help in stressful moments of their academic career, for example in writing the PhD Thesis or for the “oposiciones” (public exams to obtain tenure). In particular, they frequently have had the help of their wife.

A male full professor explains that he has always had the help of his wife-who did not work outside the home- not only for household and family duties but also for professional ones. If necessary the extended family took care of the children in order to meet the academic demands in very stressful moments:
“Elena [she helped me] from typing to the most basic statistics and gathering material... let’s say she has helped me with all kinds of “administrative” jobs if necessary. And if the work was overwhelming then, the children were sent to her sisters’ homes to be taken care of for a while. Children enjoyed it a lot!” (Roger, over 61, married with children, full professor).

Some men refer to the fact that the effort devoted to his promotion has might have slowed down her partner’s career but they also seem not to feel guilty about it:

“She always complains that it is me who has made a career while she is stuck where she was when we started… what happens, and she would kill me if she heard it, is that I am not that sure that this is my fault, it is rather because she did not want to do it” (Cosme, under 45 years old, with partner and two children, associate professor)

Probably it is considered more “natural” for a woman not to be ambitious…!

It stands out very clearly that all female full professors declared that they have had to make an extraordinary effort to become professor and they had to pay a high price, mainly in their personal life:

“If you want to play in the Premier League, the demands on you are extremely strong. This is a choice and I chose it... the demands associated to stay in the Premier in personal and professional terms are not compatible with a standard family life. You have to pay a price. I paid the price and I am ready to pay it three times because I decided on it, but I had to pay... what should I have renounced? Well, many things. How many hours sleep?... If I have to read a PhD thesis or make a powerpoint presentation for a conference somewhere... and besides it I have to go shopping with my daughter? I have to do it. Somewhere I have to find the time. If it is to wake up at 4 a.m. I have to do it” (Kiruna, 46-60 years old, divorced, with children, full professor).

This high price in the personal life seems to be a deterrent factor for women more than for men.

Finally, it is important to point out that some young men seem not to be so ambitious -as it is socially expected- and they have learned to reconcile work with a full family life. For example, Dario’s wife has a more rigid working schedule than him and he has tried, not without effort, to adjust his dedication to the family’s needs (once he has already obtained tenure), and he is very proud of it:

“Perhaps I could try to spare time and publish and go somewhere, but my daughters are seven and nine years old and I wanted to enjoy them... I have involved myself in the education of my daughters and spend a lot of time with them. It was not at all easy to renounce to spend 14 hours a day at the university,
but now I think they were not necessary…” (Dario, under 45 years old, with partner and two children, associate professor)

Hopefully, among a few younger male associate professors a new academic model seems to emerge, one that contradicts the image of somebody living in an “ivory tower” fully dedicated to science and no being distracted by other “common” worries as family life.

3.3. Service to the institution

In relation to service and institutional responsability, Tomas et al (2008) suggest that despite the growing participation of women in goverment bodies in Spanish universities they are less visible as a result of a less agressive style of intervention (they use expressions like “in my opinion”, “from my viewpoint”, contrary to the masculine style), they seek more dialogue and consensus and they are more concerned about the process of taking a decision than by the decision itself. There is also a sociodemographic specificity of women in service positions: most of them are older than their male counterparts as ussually their children are already grown up.

In Britain it has observed a growing presence of women in service positions which are avoided by their male colleagues because they take time from research and they are mostly considered as typical feminine caring tasks (Brooks, 1997). This is why Hanson (2007) recommends to women geographers at the beginning of their career to avoid such positions in order to have more time for research and teaching.

At this point it is important to bear in mind that since the 1980’s most positions of power and responsibility in Spanish universities are elected by a large constituency (including non-permanent staff and a representation of students) and they have to share the decision-making capacity with an elected board. In fact, it is a structure that allows only a small measure of personal power (and responsibility) and it is in this context that a growing number of female academic staff has held such positions in their departments or in the Faculties. Very often men don’t want to take them as they are too much worried about their academic promotion. One of the women of our sample told us:

“In general, my male colleagues are reluctant to take responsibilities; they do it only if there is no other choice. University administrative responsibilities are only a source of work and headaches and the extra salary is not worth it... I am not a full professor... I have not published much because I have spent a lot of time on administration duties... I have spent my time on it and I believe I am pretty good at it and I tell to myself ‘let’s get some benefits for the collective’ because it takes many hours and few people are ready to take it. You get little money and very little
recognition” (Ginesta, 46-60 years old, married and with children, associate professor).

Our women interviewees who held positions of responsibility in the university (like vice-chancellor, dean, chair of department or director of research center) were all single or with a partner but without children or were married or divorced with grown up children. One of the women who held one of these positions (Dean of a Faculty) explained that when she had to build up her work team the university began to implement the recent Spanish regulations on gender equality for all committees and boards at the university. She found quite a lot of difficulties in this process of inviting colleagues to participate in a team with gender balance. And curiously enough she got quite different answers from men and women in similar academic positions (associate professors) and age (in their 40’s). The men who refused excused themselves by referring to their professional career and the need to devote more time to research; women, instead explained that it was not the right moment for them because they had small children or some elderly member of the family to take care of.

It seems that in our empirical research supports some of the analysis advanced in the literature. According to Perez Sedeño et al (2008), the status and social acknowledgement associated to professions carried out by men are intrinsically linked to positions of responsability and power which require a degree of ambition and intense dedication to them. These authors consider that the “culture of long hours” and absolute dedication to the job as well as ambition and competitiveness are not “intrinsically feminine values” as women are prone to give priority to interpersonal and affective relations above their professional goals (García de Cortázar and García de León, 1997; Garcia de León and Alonso, 2001).

A perception that women have to prove their capacity and value in a greater measure than men appears in several interviews, in particular in the case of women doing service and holding positions of responsibility. There is a continuous need for women to prove that they have enough capacity to conform to the rules of the masculine game (Krefting, 2003). This happens in the field of research but also in the discussions in committees, where some women told us they felt they were somehow “invisible” to their male colleagues and had to give a tougher image than they would like to:

“You have to be very assertive, without any hesitation... I needed to give a much tougher image than I would have liked... you see that your arguments are not taken into account. Sometimes you have argued something and your male colleagues forget it... they remember the content but they do not remember who said it, while they recognize each other very well. Reasoning presented by women somehow are blowing in the wind” (Mila, 46-60 years old, with partner and without children, associate professor).
4. FINAL REMARKS

In the last decade academic careers in Spanish universities have become longer and tougher. A competitive (and masculine) image percolates into all the evaluation processes that lead to academic positions. Thus, women find their way to academia (as well as their promotion) harder, mostly due to their family responsibilities.

Nevertheless, it is clear that flexible working schedules are perceived by women as a great advantage for reconciling work and family life. It is also clear that most of the women interviewees achieved a balance between family life and profession in good terms (acceptable for them), although many of them give up their chances of being promoted to the highest academic level (that is full professorship). It is not said very openly but full professorship is considered as a “natural” outcome of a brilliant academic career for a man, whereas for a woman it is mainly seen as a result of an “unnatural” ambition.

Except in very few cases in which household and family duties are truly shared by both partners, academic women take a much larger load in their daily life. There is a general feeling that family duties are a burden for women’s academic career although this does not exclude personal satisfaction by women in taking the main responsibilities of the family. By contrast some men refer to family life as a stabilizing factor. Family duties are also the main drawback for women to accept institutional responsibilities for higher administration.

The female full professors we interviewed suggest that they mostly had to follow the so called “masculine model” of an academic career, that is, they have given priority to their professional career paying a price in their personal as well as academic life (It is not only chance that 10 out of 12 female professors are divorced or single and none of the 9 men are in this situation).

Nevertheless there are hopeful signs for change in the future. In the interviews discourse many women and a few young men are trying to build up a new kind of academic career model that is more gender balance (and it is clear that they also do in their daily practices). This new model (that is being created through their strategies, including resistance as well as considerable efforts) has been called in the feminist literature a “hybrid model or a miscegyneaion model” that is somewhere between the traditional masculine model and the feminine one (García de Cortazar, 1997). But this will be difficult and will take time, effort and relevant public policies against discrimination, not only in relation to family life but also in relation to the academic world.
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