“Meritocracy vs. Gender. Neoliberal ideologies and Female Subjectivities in a group of Young Professional Women in Barcelona”

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Abstract

In the last decades, women in many Western societies have gone through substantial changes: They got full access to all educational levels but also, they were witnessed of many constitutional reforms that would ensure their right to work or earn an equal wage as their male peers. Drawing from a qualitative study, I explore some of the ambiguities regarding employment for a group of young professional women in Barcelona (Spain). The main purpose of this research is to depict the difficulties that young women may encounter in their attempt to get access to top positions in the labor hierarchy considering not just the organizational aspects but also the informal dynamics associated with cultural representations of gender roles in management positions. A series of deep-interviews with young career women reveal the complexity of the paths that these women have chosen and the concessions they were forced to make, in order to continue with the organizational norms or bypass them. Finally this paper will challenge the contemporary assumptions of the celebratory discourse about “successful women” by illustrating the context of how (mis)conceptions of educational achievement are easily assimilated into individualizing neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and gender equality.

Keywords: Professional Woman, Labor market, Gender Roles, Educational Achievement.
Introduction

In last decades in Western societies has been a substantial change in the relationship that women have with paid work. Their progressive incorporation to the all educational levels has situated their level of qualification almost at the same level of men, this is especially evident in the case of the younger cohorts. Even so, the large increase of women’s participation in paid work did not bring the respective access to high labor hierarchies, nor meant the liberation of women from domestic work and a more equitable distribution of it.

We can see how in many sectors, women have a reduced access to certain promotions even in cases where they have identical levels of education, stock of human capital or the same commitment to the work (Borderías, 1984). This makes clear that any analysis of the conflict experienced by women in the access to power positions into organizations cannot be totally explained only from the labor perspective. The articulation between work and private life, as a continuum and not as two separated spheres of life, is an essential requirement in the analysis of women’s difficulties in accessing power (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009, p. 16).

The work–life balance issues, i.e., the combination of the domestic/familiar duties with high workloads, is a serious obstacle for women who want to pursue a career, and the lack of conciliation often discourage them to strive for a promotion in the occupational hierarchy.

Although the consideration of the reproductive role of women as dominant or exclusive may vary according to the context, the social perception about females as leaders still faces the expectations inherent in the female gender role (García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2009, p. 453). This makes, to some extent, that their labor patterns remain strongly influenced by social representations about the traditional feminine roles and that the stages of their biological life cycle as women, continue to play against them—contrary to their male peers—in the pursuance of a professional career and in the access to the top labor hierarchies.

In this article I focus on a group of professional women who were born in the Transition Period in Barcelona. My interest in this group lies in the fact that they represent the first generation of Spanish women who experienced the legal changes in education, labor, family structure, etc., that sought to eliminate the gender inequality, highly sponsored by the Franquism. To move towards this conceptualization I pose a series of questions: How the trajectories of this particular group of women can be related with the multiple changes in female labor trends?, what are the specific processes involved in their negotiation as highly-qualified female workers? and what the Young Professional Women experiences tell us about the current women’s empowerment?.

I suggest that the experiences from this group of women will give us a clearer understanding of the ways in which seemingly non-economic life experiences can be mediated by the capital forces. So my analysis will attempt to contributes to the many debates within feminist political economy about the nature of gender and labour in the current capitalist system.

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1These changes have had different expressions around the globe or even within the same society, revealing that women are a diverse group not homogeneous at all. While in recent decades, many of them have stood out in different fields (academia, the public administration, sports, etc.) yet there are millions of women around the world who never in their life have stepped into a classroom or who have to leave it early in order to comply their the tasks that—supposedly, their role demand.

2In Spanish “La Transición” refers to the restoration of democracy in Spain after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975.
Methodology
Research on women in power positions usually until now has been based on the analysis of statistical data or large-scale surveys. These studies have rarely focused on the articulation “between work and private life as if it was possible to separate these two spheres of life” (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009, p. 16). Certainly such data provides us with a general overview but the information is only useful to show patterns and variations around certain socio-demographic factors of women's work. Sometimes the numbers seem detached from the processes of accumulation and class formation, from the changes in gender configurations or the fact to the belonging to a specific race or ethnicity.

This research is supported by and ethnographic analysis of a group of professional women in Barcelona (Spain) during 2012 and 2014. Ten women who fit with the young professional woman profile were subjects to depth individual semi-structured interviews. The selection of such generational cohort was based first, to find women who were born during the Transition period and subsequently, as I am trying to show the real effect of educational training in the labor market; the women in this project had to have a postgraduate degree. another requirement was that these women should be active workers, settle in positions of power or with decision-making capability.

The contact with the women in the study was the result of the "snowball" technique. Initially I attend to events such as the International Forum of Mediterranean Women (FIMM), the Monitoring Centre for Women and Business in Catalonia, Association of Directive and Professional Women in Barcelona, Association of Women Researchers in Technology, among others. Not all women who are part of this study belong to these associations but the presence in these events allowed me to contact people who serve as intermediaries. Through exchanges with people in these circles it was possible to reach this group of women.

To achieve a broader perspective, I sought young professional women who were working in the private and public sector. The dynamics within the group were focused on a series of depth interviews with non-schematized questions but highly related to the formation of their every-day life as young professional women.

In total I have 44 individual interviews from 60 to 90 minutes long. My intention was to know more about the particular subjectivity of each women who make part of the study, so to get us more involved in their particular dynamics, I asked to visit their workplace, their private space (house) and their leisure places (gymnasium, coffee places, grocery stores, etc.) The interviews were a challenge in many ways. The time is a valuable resource for these women in management positions and to get an appointment within their agendas was a complicated task. In general the access to observations in the workplace was not restricted, however, I found myself confined to

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3 The term of “young professional women” refers to the rise in recent decades of highly qualified young women focused, in most cases but not always, on consolidating their career as professionals. This concept has been developed more broadly in the US (it has also certain impact in the UK) due to prior access to civil rights for women. These young women from Western societies who have the chance to experience “egalitarian” conditions and with this to carry out their full potential as professionals (McRobbie, 2007).

4 We have limited access to a few work meetings, informal meetups and social reunions which gave us valuable extra information about co-workers, subordinates, partners, couples and nuclear family.
wait for them in a room, isolated from the rest of the labor dynamics. The driving of the interviews in the labor space posed difficulties due to constant interruptions and the fact that the interviewees were pending of office issues, decreasing their attention to our conversation. As well, the act to go through to their private space was not easy and sometimes many women showed some reticence to the idea to carry on the interview in their houses. In any case, we always conducted ourselves carefully, preventing not to transgress the privacy and confidence of our interviewees.

For the size of the sample, I do not pretend to make generalizations but rather to offer a deeper insight that can provides new reference points and also to encourage the review of the established categories about this phenomena. In this sense, this research is located in the claim to the political necessity to keep going in the dismantling of the traditional gender discourses that justify the institutional subjugation of women in many societies.

Notes about the Young Professional Women
In this section I briefly outline info about my research subjects to provide an overview of the sample in order to offer an idea of the women who conform the group. The age of the women interviewed were from 32 to 39 years old. All of them had Bachelor’s Degree and Master Studies. Just in two cases, the interviewees had a PhD Degree. Most of them are in Management or Professional Positions but they are not part of the directive board, although in two cases the interviewees established their own company.

Since this is a group that has invested more in their educational background, we observe that the half of them attended to private schools (prior to the University), three of them attend to a semi-private school and the rest attend to a public school. Also all they have a fully manage of four languages (even half of them manage a fifth language) and all of them have studied at least, three years abroad.

In reference to their current partner and family status, we observe that one of the interviewees is single, one is in a relationship without cohabitation and the majority (eight) lives with their partner without marriage. Only one of them has had children (two girls) and another one collaborates to raise the children of her partner (one girl, one boy) product from a previous marriage.

More than a half of the interviewees (six) are working in the private sector, two in the public sector and finally, two of them in the NGO sector. As a group which has spent more time in their qualification, the average years in the labor market is very low: six years with an average annual salary (net income) of 31’429 euros.

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5 In this sense, six of them have studies related with Management and/or Business, three of them have studies related with engineering, industry or technology and one of them have studies related with Human Resources.

6 In Spain “escuelas concertadas” are centers created on the initiative of civil society but publicly funded. The education expenditures are supported partially by parents and by the state.

7 According to the latest figures, the annual average income (gross) in Spain is 25’479.44 € for men and 19’735.22 € for women. In the case of management positions with less than three years of experience, there is an average salary of 37’000 euros. If we notice that the Gender Pay Gap in Spain is 17.8 percent, we can see the correspondence between the statics and our research: 30’414 euros vs 31’429 euros. This salary does not include extra commission or benefits.
Some Aspects of the Historical Perspective

To understand the patterns of professionalism opted by the women today is necessary to point the change of their educational status as a woman at the different stages of political and social history of Spain.

Is not a new fact to assert that the professionalization of women have been conditioned by the social role assigned to them in an specific socio-historical context. For a long time in different places, a model of female education was imposed to ensure the division of male-female roles in line with expectations of each specific social situation.

In the case of Spain, a crucial and important step was given during the Second Republic (1931-1936). In this period converge a range of favorable circumstances to the equality between men and women, taking place a profound rethinking of the educational parameters. The educational policy intended to create a unique, free, compulsory and secular school. This period is characterized by a certain liberal air, specially related to pedagogy issues centered by the concern of female education (Agulló, 1990).

However, this period will also be characterized by a confrontation between the conservative view on women and the progressive vision that defended her right to get access to the education and her development outside the private area (Arenas, 1996).

In this period, the access to secondary and higher education for most of the women was an extremely complicated task. In addition to overcome the ideological impositions which considered that her formal instruction was not necessary, they had to pass the monetary fence to pursue higher levels of education and it was necessary to have a family with enough income that could bear the cost that education entails.

With the start of the Civil War in 1936 and the rise of Franco, the female education was rooted in concordance with moral attitudes linked to the Catholic Church. The establishment of the “new national school”–essentially Catholic and patriotic, sought that the education for women was in function on the family according with the church and State.

The years between 1936 and 1975 posed for women a long and expensive road which implied the submission under a model that conditioned and limited their presence in society (Flecha, 2010). One of the main policies of the regime was to eradicate the co-education from all institutions. A multitude of reasons (biological, religious and pedagogical) endorsed this idea to keep up the separation between the sexes in the classrooms to maintain a “healthy moral” in the children.

Through a series of decrees and regulations is intended to make up the ideal woman, which had to be submissive, pious, measured, of course, feminine. Nothing was accidental: the ordering of the training for women should respond to social functions properly considered as feminine. So

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8 It is not surprising that of all students enrolled in primary education is this time, almost no girl continues a career, even though the majority of them had higher notes. This confirms how a large number of women acceded to a basic education but they could not continue to make a professional path.

9 Order from May 1st, 1939.

10 The Educational Policies of the time kept clear the principles of separation of the sexes even among the personnel working in schools.
education should respond precisely to the domestic sphere. The laws\textsuperscript{11} that regulated the female labor discouraged the women who seek a career or want to participate in the labor market. The laws make clear that the work of women is was not necessary for social development. This was justified in those that either did not have a husband or/and were suffering financial need. It is noteworthy that although the strong imposition of the “model of femininity” under the Franco regime, the speech was not totalitarian. The guidelines affected in a greater degree the rural areas and the lower classes. The middle and upper classes crossed the barrier of class to make the issue of women's education a “family” decision. However, those women of middle and upper classes who crossed the gender barrier gaining access to a higher education were ridiculed and stigmatized (they were attacked as 'Republicans') for neglecting the marital and family responsibilities. A special case were women who were part of the Women's Section (the women's official branch in the Francoist era) founded in 1934 and disbanded on April 1977. In this group we found women from wealthy families who often had a college education. For them, the belonging to this institution provide them the access and the use of public spaces (freedom of mobility, social outings, use of grandstands) without being accused of feminists or Republicans.

With the end of the Franco regime was intended to improve the access of women to all levels of education, especially in a population seriously marked by inequalities. The 1978 Constitution was a great progress for policies that sought to erase the discrimination of women in public life. The Transition period marks a shift in the strategies of the educational field. The changes claimed by the progressive groups, especially the feminist movement; raised various projects and pedagogical proposals to strengthen changes in the schools, in educational speeches and in teaching practices. Here the educational guidelines began to reframe the equality between men and women in rejection of the discrimination based on gender. Yet, the idea of specific tasks for each gender, according to “natural characteristics” was still present.

The last two decades of the twentieth century were marked for the increase of the female population in both Universities and Technical Schools. While women were able to overcome the legal barriers that prohibit them to get access to higher education levels, the socio-cultural barriers were resistance to fade. Such progress although timid, marked a breakthrough about the position of women under Franco regime. This new stage intended to go beyond the recognition of equal opportunities and completely dispel the idea –so widespread by the regime, of female inferiority. From these actions, it was possible to declare lawful the access to all levels of formal education for women. Thereby the Spanish women are been able to benefit themselves of an increase in their human capital to gain a better entry into the labor market and more and better spaces in public life.

\textsuperscript{11}The Order of 26th March, 1946; marked the incentives, or even an obligation to leave work when the woman agrees to marriage, the plus wage that the husband had to received if the wife did not work outside the home or the deprivation of it if she did it. Also the Act of the 13th July 1940 for Public Employees marked “The prohibition to exercise multiple professions and certain positions in the Public Administration or the conditions that she must fulfill to get access to a position in the public administration: female heads of household, single, or widowed, who do not have means to address their needs” (Flecha, 2010).
Incompatible postures: divergence between the woman and the professional.

In this section we focus on analyze how circumstances in appearance personal, have influenced the current position in the occupational hierarchy of the interviewees. As such, these women are a privileged object of study because they represent an “exception” into the spanish society because they move and perform in circles–almost exclusively– male dominated.

The professional young women certainly represent a social change. These women are far away from their female predecessors who were attached to a strongly patriarchal womanhood –highly accentuated by Franco’s regime– and currently they are able to enjoy of a social status protected by a society in pursuit of equality and gender parity (García, 2011).

However, the access to the highest labor hierarchies is not an easy process which requires not only credentials but also the interaction within formal and informal dynamics. From this perspective, I believe that, despite the important shifts of emphasis on “gender parity” that have affected corporate jobs and careers and the increasing rhetoric of “female success”, women’s access to top positions must focus on the ways in which women’s employment prospects are mediated by their class and family background and by their capacities to embody—or reject—normative femininity.

The narratives below will give us a biographical grid that will make possible to understand not only contemporary labor processes but also the constrain women’s involvement at work, the different expressions of the work–life balance conflict and the arising resistances against the patriarchal nature of organizational structures.

a) “...but if we were raised as equals\textsubscript{12}”. Conflicts between the familiar upbringing and the guidelines in the workplace.

“I'm happy because I did it by myself”. This was the answer of Maria S when in one of the interviews, she told me about a project under her supervision in her former job, which was accepted in an office in New York. She looked very happy and She was gushing about the project (a new pigmentation technique on textiles) and the difficulties that implied work on it.

I asked her if she would have liked to be in the US to supervise it. “Joder\textsuperscript{13}! Of course! It was something in which I worked day and night. I spent a bunch of time between the Istanbul office, experimenting with the pigments and the Barcelona office, working with the painting machines” Then she changed her tone “Too bad I couldn't stay”. Seemingly ashamed, she tells me the reason for her departure from the company. After spending three years on the project she expected a promotion. Her boss told her, “Well, I can move you up but I can not let you be the head of the departement, It would be very problematic and I would have a lot of people touching my balls”.

Maria S told me that despite she was the most experienced person in that department a female manager “was kind of problematic”. She stayed for two more years and then she quit. She told me “as much I like the company, and as much I appreciate my boss, I had to quit because, man! I had the job but I had not the title”. Maria S laughs nervously, she folds her hands and she looks at me “I do not understand what it has to do that I am woman. I did my job and did it well”.

\textsuperscript{12}Extract from the interview of Maria S., June 18th, 2012.

\textsuperscript{13}Spaniard apocope for ¡joder! (fuc$k!).
She currently works for a big NGO that helps women to start their own businesses. Even she participates in the executive committee she is in a less important area: the communication office. When I asked her how she feels in this company she responds “Hala! It took me a while to be comfortable with the change. You wonder, what it has do with the other? Maybe not much, but here I have the chance to support projects no matter the genre. I have power of decision, which I did not have in the other company”.

Across the Maria’s narrative, it is visible how she can not understand how despite she has followed the rules of the game (to have the proper credentials, enough experience, spent extra time working, etc.) she did not get the promotion. This feeling is not uncommon, with the aim to create an idealized workplace, the organizational discourse commonly dismissed the importance of gender and the conflicts rooted in preconceptions and expectations about how the two binaries (female and male) have to be. It is this sense, the managerial discourse joins to the politically correct speech, considering itself “gender-blind” even though by definition senior management has been carried so far, mostly by men (Tomlinson, Brockbank, & Traves, 1997). However why the reflections of Maria S do not perceive gender discrimination? or why she did not understand that there was a predicament about her gender?

Maria’s narrative let us see that the two biggest influences in her life were her grandfather and her father. On several occasions she mentions how her organizational gift comes from her family, especially his father, who was a sort of first mentor for her. She also remarks how throughout her life, he was her greatest support: “He always looked for the best for us” Maria continues “When I was in high school, it was a contest to elaborate an alternative energy project, the winner would travel to Germany for a special course. My father helped me to develop the project and we win, you know?”. However, she also confess that she was sad because she was the only girl in the camp and the boys did not have a positive attitude with her presence. At some point she called to her father because she wanted to to drop out the camp. She told me that her parent answer firmly: “there are no guys or girls, only future engineers!”. Maria S express how in his home her parents never made differences between she and her brother, both they were raised equally.

Lidia R is one of the most famous researches on Web Accessibility in Spain. The last year she received the award as one of the best young researchers in the country. Throughout her doctoral career she published many of scientific papers and she received important awards. One of them, granted by the largest internet search company in the world, helped her to start her own company. Her firm is a software company focused to develop games to help children with learning disabilities to improve their performance in the computer.

14 Spaniard expression commonly used to encourage someone.
15 Is to highlight how she refers to this as a gift from the outside or something that somebody transmitted to her and not as a result of her skills or personal effort.
When we first met us and asked her to give me a little recount of her childhood, she sighed deeply and said “Uff Tía¹⁶, this will be long!”. She told me she had a very difficult childhood due to the abuse suffered by some teachers and classmates during the elementary school. The reason? She had a learning difficulty, which by the time had not been diagnosed. She remember how the school teachers always treated her as a “stupid”. “I am not kidding” she tells me with a laugh “They were desperate because I was not able to learn, and they treated me very badly. Man! was the Spain in the 90's, in a private catholic school, there was not much to do about it”.

She also narrates me that her parents, defeated by the situation, they decided to send her to piano lessons, to painting classes, to knitting classes, among others. Lidia R says “They had the idea of finding a way in which I could make a living in the future”. By the suggestion of a family friend, she went to visit a psychologist. Lidia tell me that this was hard because for her parents, to do this meant the acceptance of a disability, specially for her father who always used to say "there is nothing wrong with my daughter".

After the diagnosis, Lidia R said that the things changed a lot: “My parents put me a with a specialized tutor who helped me to develop a learning technique, alternative to the one in the school. I started to get better grades, I felt less depressed, I began to make friends[...] ironically, because at the end of high school I got the highest grade in my generation”.

She continues: “well it was not easy. My father helped me a lot. He encouraged me to always read, he bought me educational games[...] shortly afterwards, we were walking nearby the Francisco de Vitoria University and my father told me ‘see, you're going to study here’”. Lidia R laughs uncontrollably “I always have been a bit crazy, you know? but also I always have worked hard, with all my strength, with so much effort”.

When I ask, What do you mean with strength? She answers me “computer science is a very masculine field, you know? I have never suffered discrimination, true, but many people treat me like the pretty one, just an ornament”. She continues “I have put so much effort to get a place in the field, because sometimes as a women you have the risk of being as unimportant”.

At some point we start to talk about the gender gap in computer science, she told me, emphatically “Man! It is not that as a girl you are not allowed to study comp, it is just that a few girls are interested on it. I know many informatics chicks, very capable, you know? very cute, who are doing some things that freak you out. Nobody banned them to study informatics but they had to work hard to get where they are now”.

In Lidia’s narrative we observe that she does not see a barrier which limits the access of women to the computational field and she insists that what is needed is interest and effort and she argues that “any girl can make it if she try hard enough”. Once again we note how the “effort discourse” comes to take place in the narrative of the interviewees. Effort and strength as the main features of her career. These individual features innate in her persona, helped her to overcome the obstacles derived from a learning disorder and by which, she made it. It is also remarkable her singular perception of gender conflicts in her field. Even when she points that informatics is a male domain where women sometimes are treated as “ornaments” she does not consider this as a harmful practice or even related with gender bias.

As contradictory as the narratives could appear, we can not forget that “theories of ‘individualization’ and ‘risk’ have shifted attention away from the material and structural roots in

¹⁶ Colloquial nickname in Spain to refer to a: dude, pal, buddy, guy / chick.
the access to in the access to several resources” (Gillies, 2005, p.853). In this, we can observe class distinctions in terms of personal qualities. Discourses of ‘meritocracy’ construct the false perception of neutral panorama where individuals can produce their own biographies based just in personal skills.

With the progress of the meritocratic discourse, the individuals see in the deployment of their effort, their skills or their gifts—presumably present in all people—as the reason why they have a prominent place in the social scale. Therefore, in a society of “equal opportunities” everyone is responsible for its own social position. Decisively this discourses give a mandatory message: in a just society it is not possible to be a nobody (Sennett, 2006).

Emilia C takes a small sip of her coffee, she make a pause and says “Joder!... no one has given to me anything! People think that because your father is famous you have everything arranged and it is not true. I have worked very hard, just to say: I earn this by myself”. By a moment, I find surprised myself by her emphasis because during all the interviews she always showed herself extremely “well behaved”: clean clothes not wrinkles at all, impeccable manicure, any hair out-of-place, friendly tone of voice, slow movements with an overwhelming composure. She apologizes for the bad word and says “I always have been a quiet girl, very house-lover. My family is very traditional, my mother always taught me to have good manners”.

Emilia C is a senior partner for a prestigious English branch banking. She is one of the two senior women at the firm in the area. She tells me “At the office, I am the only woman who sits on the board, the others are behind their bosses. I guess I was like that, behind but I could not see it. It cost me a lot of effort to get here”. She continues “my father always taught us discipline and effort. He told us that those are the only two things you need to succeed in life. I always take him as an example. He came from a small town, his parents died when he was ten and he lived with his aunt, who did not have much money, even so, he could break through and he became a successful”.

When I ask her why she choose the harbor activities she said to me “Actually it is not what I would have chosen, you know? I started by chance: a friend of my father offered me an internship and at the end I stayed there, but hey! it was not by influences, they required a graduate in law with full English and Italian and it turned out that I had those competencies”.

Emilia C recognized his father as a figure of effort, as a man who has made “himself” against the circumstances. This has set up her life narrative about the endeavor as the only means to succeed in life. Through these interviews, we observed a clear point: how the narrative of meritocracy make invisible gender issues and blend class privilege. This phenomenon is not surprising if we consider the influence of the domestic group in the constitution of one’s labor paths, in fact, in the formation of the individual itself.

17 Spaniard interjection to to express anger, irritation, surprise, etc.
18 To her and to her two sisters. One of them, Martha C, her younger sister, also participates in this study.
19 The father of Emilia C is a former soccer player from the most important team in the city. After his retirement, he worked as a coach in many professional teams in Europe. Currently he participates in the management committee of the club.
In these sense, we have to consider the departure point of the interviewees\textsuperscript{20} as crucial in their perception of a “non-genderized” society. In this case, their class experience became normative because the existence of certain material conditions, which could minimize the effects of the gender expectations during their primary socialization. Within this framework, it was possible to bypass the practices with “gender bias” and reinforcing dominant discourses around mobility and merit.

The recent crises have left a deep mark on the perception of people. Facing the wear of the welfare state, the values of the new economy have become a benchmark on how the individual conceives its way to develop itself in the world (Sennett, 2006). The idea that it is the individual itself (leaving aside its social dynamics) with its own abilities who constructs its personal journey and with this, its place in society, has been part of the cultural ideal within the capitalism in recent decades.

From the creation of speeches of self-management, meritocracy has functioned as an effective discourse, hiding a variety of conflicts into the social relations. With this, the talent is embodied as the most important feature to climb the social scale (Sennett, \textit{ibid.}), a feature apparently \textit{neutral} because is not “inherited” and that in “theory” everyone can have it.

The analysis of the particular experiences of this group of women shows us more about a bigger problem in the society. By setting out the individuals in terms of a “superior power” or “personal strength”, help to reproduce the positions of power in the social system. In this sense, the meritocratic discourse of this group of women has created two problems, both highly interconnected.

First, it has created a particular view of subjecthood (Rose, 1999) in which this group of young professional women perceives that it is the sum of their individual talent and effort which empower them to reach into the top levels. However, this hides that as daughters of households with high incomes, they could have access to an educational path that daughters from lower classes do not. Their class conditions increased the range to respond to contingencies and provided them with more opportunities by virtue of the familiar networks.

Secondly, thanks to their material conditions these women had the chance to experience a “non-gendered” upbringing. This was possible by a educated father with managerial experience who was decisive in the development of a successful educational path and their subsequently perform in the labor market. The narratives show us the effort realized by male parents to promote their careers. As suggested Kvande and Rasmussen (1994) these women are \textit{daughters of their parents}, and in this sense, the women in this group benefited with the technical knowledge of their parents professions.

The combination of these factors provided them with the necessary tools to allow them to compete in the top levels of power. However the perception of a “neutral” stage creates the difficulty to recognize and subsequently to face gender conflicts in their access to high labor

\textsuperscript{20}With two exceptions, all the interviewed came from upper middle class households, with similar family structure: a male breadwinner and a female homemaker. In the case of the male breadwinner, all they have university education and all they had managerial jobs. In the case of the mothers, many of them had high school education and a lower number had university education but never participate into the labor market. Being–basically, a household with female descendants: an only daughter or a set of sisters.
hierarchies. Unable to understand the informal mechanisms of male domination present within workplaces, this group of women find themselves in a deep state of confusion between the politically correct discourses and their immediate social reality.

2) You are always the odd one out. A constant quarrelling between the gender expectations and professional expectations.

“Once I dated with a colleague, a manager from the engineering division. At one point we start to talk about design. I told him that I have designed some things that were exhibited—man! And I did not mention that I won an award—in Valencia and Milan. He got serious and he talked with a sarcastic tone ‘but you girl actually have interesting ideas’. It was delirious!”

Sofia R is a Chief Design Officer in a large Renewable Energy Company. She tells me that she has always been of “those who get good grades”. She continues “at school, the nuns loved me!. Even in college I was not badly behaved. Well, I was living in a Catholic residency, the nuns were very restrictive and there was not much chance to do much”.

One year before completing her Bachelor in Architecture she took an internship in a Swiss company. “I took it because it was far from my house parents” she says. After the exchange she returned to Barcelona and the company offered her a job at the local offices. She says that maybe she did not see discrimination dynamics because she access soon to the labor market:

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Hala! Interns are disposable not matter the sex!”. Sofia R adds “Over the time, I was getting promotions but in fact, I do not think that I am in the place I should”. On a trip to the headquarters in Zurich, she asked for a “review of credentials” an act that dictates if an employee can be promoted. She was confirmed that she had the credentials and the committee proposed her for promotion. This was two years ago and she still remains under the same position.

Sofia R narrates “My male peers agree that a woman can not rule, that a woman should not be the boss because she will get pregnant or because she has to care for her children and her husband.” She breaths deeply and says “I’d feel better if in my personal life things were better, you know?”.

We observe a constant struggle in this group of women, who continue to be sublimated into traditional feminine features and although feminine gender stereotypes have been changing recently, men are still perceived as more characteristically managerial than are women. Cultural stereotypes, assert Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra (2009) create a double bind against female leaders. Women are expected to be communal because of the expectations inherent in the female gender role, and they are also expected to be agentic because of the expectations inherent in most leader roles. However, because agentic displays of confidence and assertion can appear

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21 Extract from the interview of Sofia R. May 23th, 2012.

22 Sofia R said about her mother “She is very old-fashioned and we always fought because she watched me all the time”. Because of this, she went to college in a different city and since then she never returned to live (full time) in her parents’ house. Even so, his father was always in charge of her expenses (fully or partially).
incompatible with being communal, women are vulnerable to becoming targets of prejudice (p. 492).

Studies in traditional male sectors (Kvande and Rasmussen, 1994; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2009) in different countries has shown the difficulties of the integration of women to top positions. The studies highlight how is not just about the skills or the professional qualifications, but the existence of a culture in management strongly marked by specifically masculine values.

We have to remember that the designations for female and male behavior are socially constructed to throughout our lives and they operate even within institutional contexts (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The gender stereotypes have profound effects on the social imaginary, this creates a gender prejudice which marks that a woman is “unfit to lead”. The case of Sofia R make clear the gender dynamics in the workplace: even she has all the credentials and that she has demonstrated her ability in the workplace, she is not good enough to be in command and because of that she perceive herself as “the odd one out”.

“I was in a meeting with a representative of the council. We were talking about an initiative to certify women in SAP. He was very happy with my idea but at the end he said ‘okay, but first we must check this with you boss, right?’” Anna R continues “I know, I shouldn’t be amazed with such gilipollas, but I can not avoid it”.

Anna R owns her own firm in Human Resources. For a long time she worked in the Barcelona Public Administration as a coordinator of gender inclusion in the Labor Office. She shows a critic voice not common in the group but she emphasizes “it was not easy. I married very young, in my second year in the University, with my high school sweetheart. He was older and I was poor. Somehow we both knew our part in the bargain”.

Unlike the rest of the group, Anna R came from a lower class household. Her parents migrated from the south of Spain to work in Barcelona. Anna says that she does not has many memories of his father working. Her mother was who had to carry with all the familiar issues. Her mother worked as a janitor in a building in where they receive free accommodation. Anna R remember her mother always working “She took a course to cut hair, I do know when or how. In her free time she receive clients in the house, it was kind of beauty salon”.

Anna R says “Unfortunately I was naïve. When my boyfriend got a huge job he told me ‘hey! let’s get married, you can go to college without working’. For me those were the magic words” Anna mentions that she did not have idea of contraceptives and she got pregnant in the honeymoon. However she was determined to finish the college and she did it but her ex-husband reproached her all the time for leaving her children alone.

Anna R says “There is always someone who is reproaching you something ‘if you leave your daughters alone so you’re bad mother and because of that your husband leave you, and so on’”. She mentions that apparently all the questions are for us (women). She exemplifies this with a phrase ”When you get pregnant the people say to you, ‘Now, what are you gonna do?’ while for a man they always say ‘congratulations!’”.

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23 SAP Business Suite is a bundle of business applications that provide integration of information and processes, collaboration, industry-specific functionality, and scalability. [http://scn.sap.com/community/getting-started](http://scn.sap.com/community/getting-started)

24 Spaniard expression: refers to a stupid act or comment.
Anna R draws attention to the outrage and stigma that arises when women claimed a place in the top hierarchies and she is aware of the double standard that works in favor of men and against women. The simple claim is a transgression because society in general remains linking women to two intertwined topical: family and feelings. In this sense, men within workspaces repeatedly treat their female colleagues under a gendered role: as a woman they are fragile so they need care, they are rambling so their opinion is unimportant, they are women so if they want power, men will decide how and how much.

Martha C arrives running to our appointment. She mentions that she hates to wait so she does not make people wait. She is straightforward and she immediately asks me “you are not of those who will ask me ‘why you work hard if you are so pretty?’ Right? People do not see a pretty girl working hard. I do not know if it is because they believe you already have an arranged life or because they believe you are too dumb”.

Martha C is a tall and thin woman with brilliant long hair and big green eyes. Ostensibly her presence cannot pass unnoticed and it is visible that Martha C gets the attention of people. In public spaces I observe how many people look at her and also I can notice that she is not so happy about it.

Martha C is the chief content in a public radio in one province of Catalonia. It is her second year on the job after she resigned from a television network for mobbing allegations. Martha C says “It started as a casual remark from one cameramen ‘Tía!, you are identical to the Carbonero\(^{25}\)’ After that many people referred to me as “La Carbonero. I know that many would take it as a compliment but for me was extremely uncomfortable”. She mentions that one day she was pressured to make a role in front of the camera “I said \textit{ok just this time} because it was not the kind of job that I want. They did not care, they wanted a pretty face on that segment. If the pretty face is also the daughter of someone famous\(^{26}\) you have a great deal!”.

After this, she mentions that she was pressured by various means to take that job “suddenly they decreased my workload, they did not send me the emails from the group, no one tells me about the meetings”. Martha C says that after this the division chief called her to tell her “it seems that you are not doing your job, maybe it is very difficult for you and it would better to take the job as a reporter”.

Martha C was outrage, she had begun her career there, she had spent time getting involved in the management of the content, of staff, of casting. She says “I spend whole weekends there. The only year I got disconnected it was when I did my internship in FranceTV as a part of my master but even there, I manage myself to read emails and to exchange opinions with the department”. She was upset not only because the pressure to make her lose her job but the people thought she could not performed well just for being a pretty woman.

Martha C initiated a formal process to complain about the harassment that she suffered. She mentions that the division chief refused to see her again and a woman from the legal department suggested her to give up the complaint. The woman told her “we will not give you back your old job and certainly we will not give you a new one”. Also she assured her that they will put into

\(^{25}\) Sara Carbonero Arévalo is a Spanish sports journalist who is highly known for its beauty and great physical appearance as well as her relationship with a famous Spanish football player.

\(^{26}\) Martha C is the younger sister of Emilia C., as we mentioned previously.
question not only her job performance but also her reputation as a woman: “this will be your nightmare, you will be known not only as a stupid but also as a whore”.

She got an agreement compensation but she mentioned: “it was at a very high cost”. In the meantime she had a big fight with her family. Her father did not want that the fact pop up in the media because it would damage the family reputation and his mother thought she was “overreacting”. Her only contact for a while was her sister “Ems” (Emilia C), who despite her support also asked her to leave the matter.

Although the prejudices around the advantages often attributed to the good physical appearance are highly questionable, there is no doubt that being considered “attractive” regards a number of positive characteristics in people (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). However, be an attractive man is not same thing as being an attractive woman. For men, being attractive gives them an advantage, because they have desirable features that are considered as successful (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). For women, especially those seeking a management career, to be perceived as “highly attractive” is negative because they are commonly associated with typically female features (unintelligent or incompetent).

Studies (Eagly & Karau, 2002) show how the more attractive the woman is, she will be judged as less competent for a managerial position. In this sense, there is a strong tendency to consider that attractive women have a better perform in typically female jobs and the opposite when it comes to managerial or not typically female jobs. For Schein (1994) attributes that usually characterize a successful management are mostly attributed to men. We observed how our group of young professional women are often in disadvantaged not only because of their gender, but also for their age and their appearance.

Douglas (1995, p.244) marks how allegations of discrimination and sexism are always questioned, suggesting that in many cases, such accusations are merely inventions from angry women and not real facts. The author suggests that there is always a punishment for the woman who wants to “cross the line”, i.e., the woman who wants to carry out or to do something that is not really characteristic of her genre, typically feminine.

The woman as a subject, it is seen as transgressor when she claims her own space, her own achievements. Rowe (2011) argues that the unruly woman is the one who decides to express openly her feelings, emotions or subjectivity challenging the invisibility where many women are subject within the social sphere. However, visibility is a tricky concept for women: the woman who decide to show herself “too much” in the public life is often labeled as insane or perverse.

When the young professional women try to exercise authority through a stronger tone or simply carrying out gestures or actions of authority, they transgress the limits implemented by the male dominant order. They always are under the risk of liminality, because according to the rules of gender roles, the rage, angry, fury or power of woman must always fit within “a good girl”, without being offensive. Women should always keep her composure and remain silent, static and even invisible.

In these narratives we observe how the hierarchy in labor spaces operates according to gender roles. The spaces of power at work confirm the symbolic association of masculinity with leadership and femininity with the care. As we mentioned before, the traditional forms of power between the sexes are preserved through the multiplicity of social spaces, and the workplace is
not an exception. The gender hierarchies are so persistent that each form of work organization contains new forms of discrimination for women's work. Today can see highly educated young women in many branches of the labour market, but in top positions they still remain a rare phenomenon. We can recognized in the stories of the women that were interviewed, two juxtaposed logics: the image of the ideal mother and housewife on the one hand and the agentic character of a contemporary woman on the other. In many cases, the consequences of the lack of access to power positions or the failure to achieve a successful career are experienced by women as personal failings rather than structural conditions. Although these feelings may seem significant only at the subjective level, are important part of the social interaction because they are the direct product of individual experience–seemingly distant– with the economics and political processes.

3) “for love of one's country”²⁷. A non-stop dynamic of disagreement product of the lack of reconciliation between their personal/family life and their work life.
“Jolín!²⁸ I did not ask much. I am working all day and he can not even put food in the microwave…” Lourdes B says to me during the interview. She cleans the kitchen while we talk “It is not that he does not help me at all, but he could try harder, the children are not mine. Now he is taking the kids to the school and with this he thinks he has done his job.” She runs to brush her teeth and she holds her high heels in one hand. She tells me “I can give you a ride I've already lost a lot of time”.
Lourdes B was²⁹ the chief banquet in a luxury hotel in Barcelona. She used to plan the most exclusive events of the upper class society in Barcelona: political events, business dinners, weddings, etc. She is considered a “guru” of the event planning and just get a place on her agenda was a feat.
She mentions that she started very young, with the classic job as a waitress. “I had to pay for college. Merely I had to earn a living and I had no experience at all, so I had not so much options”. Lourdes B comes from a working-class home in the periphery of Barcelona. Neither his father nor his mother have university degrees. Her mother did not finish the high school and his father barely did it.
She worked for three years as a waitress and then she ascend as an auxiliary for banquet facilities. Then they were two hard years in which she had to stay in the position because she did not have a college degree. After she got the titled—and the promotion—she also wanted to studying a master, She says “I wanted to go outside of Spain because I have never left the country. In Rome, I found a job in a hotel so I studied the master in there³⁰. It was tough, I spent all my savings and I worked like a mule, but hey! there I met Xavi!³¹,”

²⁷ Extract from the interview of Lourdes B. October 3rd, 2014.
²⁸ Spanish interjection: It is used to express disgust or annoyance, or admiration.
²⁹ She quit her job during last part of this research.
³⁰ LUISS “Guido Carli” (Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali "Guido Carli")
³¹ Xavi is her current partner. He owns a large chain of food supplies for hotels.
After her return to Barcelona, she and her partner must deal with two things: Xavi’s children and how to hide their relationship in the workplace. She did not want that the people will think badly of her “this slut is involved with a big fish. It sucks, you know? because one has made its reputation and things like these can easily send it to hell”. Lourdes B says “I never wanted kids, you know? I do not know how I ended up with two that are not mine[...] I also think: I want my time with you and I do not want to share it with your children but here I am, waiting for the daughter to buy shoes”. Lourdes sighs deeply as she smokes her cigarette: “tomorrow I will have a tons of appointments and aldo I have to take the child to the dentist, and the father? Doing business in Andorra. Sometimes it seems that one does it just for love of one's country”.

Young, Schieman, & Milkie (2013) observed that couples where both parents work are particularly vulnerable to stress associated with work-family conflict. To be a dual earning couple is a circumstance in which each spouse may work between 30 and 40 hours a week and in the case of women, they must carry out also family obligations. The authors emphasize how the persistent gender expectations are deeply rooted in the family and at work. Because women are socialized to be more deferential to others make harder their time management subsequently they are more affected by the work-family conflict.

In this sense we observed that despite the great incorporation of women into the paid work, their economic function continues influenced by social representations about her genre, keeping strict relation to the development of their life cycle, i.e., age, marital status, the birth of children, the age of them, among others. The predisposition to consider that women are more responsible than men in taking care for the children and the family as well as the housework, restricts women in their mobility, their autonomy and their productivity. Those social norms that link femininity with caring for others have serious consequences and they contribute to gender inequality in the workplace and in personal life (Badgett & Folbre, 1999). Nuria E. smiles nervously to all my questions, especially when I ask how is carry out the domestic work in her place. She touch her fingers and I noticed that she is reluctant to respond. I sense that she fears to be judged. I start talking about me, I make jokes about cooking and she tells me “For me, it is a miracle if a man cook something! I can not make that Edgar cooks an egg, you know how the latinos are”. I laugh and ask her, What about when you travel? “Well... mmm.. he goes out to eat. He is not much a cooker person, you know? Latina’s moms have their men highly spoiled. Personally I do not like it, we spend much money on it, but even so I ask him, Edgar does not want to cook anything”.

Nuria E. is part of the Fundraising Committee in a prestigious Research Institute of Nanotechnology. She is well known for her ability to collect funds. Her companions told me they do not know where it comes such coercive capacity “You should see her in action, It is like she transformed into different person” they tell me.

Nuria E is the only daughter, she argues that she is divided because her heritage: “one Catalan side and the Italian side”. She continues “It is like my life: divided among many places. My first

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32 Lourdes B came back to work in her former workplace (the hotel) but in a higher position. Because her partner is a major trading partner for the company where she works, she prefers to keep the relationship hidden because she does not want that her promotion in the company to be associated with her relationship with Xavi.
years in Barcelona, in Mezzate with my grandparents after my father’s death and then in Milan, just my mom and I. Then I lived in England for five years and finally came back to Barcelona”. Why you came back to Barcelona? I ask her and she answers me “I was a bit uninspired, I just want to change the scenery”. When she return to Barcelona, she quickly found a job. In a working dinner she met Edgar, a doctorate in physics from Bogota (Colombia). Nuria E says “I saw him and I thought that he was very handsome. His accent captivated me. However I had many reservations because of his age, he was four years younger than me, and you know, men are immature and I did not want to be the mom who takes care of him”.

Time after, Nuria E acceded to make the interview in her house. When I arrived she apologizes for the mess. She is sorry because she postponed our appointments. She tells me “we have just returned from spending one month in Colombia”. “Uffff” she exclaims while she shakes a cushion “I will need a break for the vacations”. She tells me that to visit the Edgar’s family is always difficult, she timidly confess that she is not comfortable there. She relates how Edgar's mother rebukes her when she is not treating properly her son. “It is crazy because instead of resting, I have to be a fully housewife”.

Nuria E seems overwhelmed and she continues “I love Edgar but you know? sometimes he despairs me a little. I realize that I waste double time on him: the time I need to take care of him and the time that I need to put in order what he does”. Nuria E maintains a busy schedule that leaves her little time for personal life. Her remaining time is used to do the housework. She narrates me how many times she has leave her work to fix bureaucratic issues for Edgar “Once he did not know how to process the digital certificate. At that time I was in Italy visiting my mother. Can you believe that he made me return earlier, just to do it for him?”. She makes a pause, I noticed her broken voice and she turn her head and continues “I do not know, I prefer to do things instead of face him. He does not understand my anger and I do not understand his attitude”.

Nuria E pretends to do something and keeps talking “this situation severely depleted my relationship. Edgar accuses me of not having time for our romance, but what can I do? I do not know how to get more time. He talks about having children, but how? I can not work less, I am who contributes more to the household. I want to have children but I do not know how”. She stops, look at me directly and says “This is like a confession, you know? I come to realize things that I had not noticed yet”.

We have been discussing so far, the power of socialization of the gender roles. Such socialization tends to create expectations about the proper behavior for each genre and this has a strong impact on everyday couple relationships. Of course, the problems from the lack of reconciliation have different expressions for each gender. In many cases, the husband awareness about the situation of his wife is interpreted through his socialization as a man and what he expects from a woman (Ridgeway, 2011) i.e., the expectations of each one will always be interpreted according to their socialization, under highly gendered relations.

The domestic and family burden remains as a women’s problem. The series of reconciliation policies (in business and in the government) continue with the idea of women’s essentiality in the family. In the case of single parents, homoparental and lesbian families, and even couples without children are seen many times, as incomplete families. Most of the stories reveal a constant tension between the prevailing traditions of gender expectations and their professional
roles. The adjustment of their professional status in the domestic sphere has not arrived yet and this is visible in the distribution of the functions at home.

We observe that although women are climbing in the labor pyramid this does not mean that its has changed their participation in the domestic work. Taking into account the achievements of our interviewees, we could consider them as “ideal”. After all, they are women who have accomplished success and recognition in their career fields. However, despite of their incomes and their status they continue to carry on the largest number of domestic tasks. The respondents realize the extent to which they have progressed compared with previous generations of women, but their satisfaction remain limited, since the sexual division of labour has had a negative effect on their self-esteem.

Although it is possible to see an increase of men’s participation in the housework, they take part in tasks that do not require a deep or constant participation (take the children to the school, home repairs or superficial purchases of supplements to the home). The heavier loads (the care of children in the sense of raising the moral support for children, the visits to the doctor, the care during illness, the care for elderly dependents, among others) which requires a constant supervision, are still held by women. The double presence marks distressing rhythms in women who fully participate in the labor market.

We also observe how the gender socialization makes difficult to developed empathy between spouses or partners. Despite of the discourses of equality between men and women we keep maintaining gender expectations. Even when the man wants to participate in the housework or the child rearing, these activities will always be subordinate to his role as main provider. Men construct their identity from their economic role and their job profile, regardless of their life cycles. The development of their identity is first and foremost as a worker in the public sphere. On the opposite, women are socialized to have as main premise their place in the home (as a caregiver and in base of their reproductive functions). Even when we note that the premises of femininity vary in all our participants, they unanimously find that their development as a professionals is against with the development of other identities: partner, wife, mother. Their adherence or their rejection of certain identity will mark them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ woman. Those who choose to be outside to the ‘traditional’ context are stigmatized (both inside and outside the workspace) for not fulfill the gender expectations.

Conclusions
With the social changes occurred in Spain after the Transition, women throughout the country—in different degrees and forms—slowly incorporated into public life. The Constitution of 1978 incorporated equality between man and woman, the equal rights of all children (between sons and daughters) and equality in the relationship between the parents. Furthermore, the male authority and the female dependency were annulled, which facilitated the transition to the social equality for women.

33 Which is important because this allows them to reduce their domestic loads either by having access to technological or by the pay of domestic employees.

34 Of course this is worse in the case of women with less resources who cannot afford the pay of good or services that will help them to reduce the domestic load.
This research shows a group of women who benefited from social changes such as opportunities for professional growth, self-development and economic independence, fertility choices among others. It is true that the labour force participation rates—especially for younger women in Western societies—have been increasing steadily. However, the women's work and the formation of their identity around this remain full of conflicts.

The analysis of the different experiences of the young professional women in Barcelona reflects very pronounced patterns. First, in most of them we observe a strong conviction that their achievements have an individual nature, i.e., they do not consider that the class position of their families or their membership to a determined gender represents an advantage—or the opposite, in their professional paths. This process is important for two reasons: first, gives a bigger picture to understand the labor market as a part of an ambivalent capitalism system, effective ideology for generating value (Irving, 2015, p.32). Second, show us how seemingly individual life choices and conducts always generated by social interaction as a result of highly gendered as well as classed dynamics.

The narratives gave us the frame to comprehend a particular kind of womanhood in middle-class families in terms of practices and processes. Most of the women in our study believe in the parameters of the contemporary meritocratic discourses, posing themselves a genderless and classless individuals. Although this can be perceived as positive, in many cases this vision show a clear disconnection with feminist vindications. The lacking of knowledge about problematics of gender, at the end, is coupled into the traditional gender roles.

As I propose, the “self-awareness” about personal agency entails a major problem. The interviewees have perfectly internalized the discourse of “gender equality” which is reflected on their performances. However, this “agentic awareness” is not necessarily helping women to survive in a highly competitive environment such as “top hierarchies” neither to disrupt the hegemonic femininity models.

As Ringrose (2013) suggest the popular discourse about the “girls success” has dislocated understandings of gender in education from critiques of sexism and patriarchy. For the author, the persuasive assertion that nowadays women could be “overly successful” gives the false idea that supposedly there are no longer any gender issues to address in our society. Base on this, contemporary girls and young women are encouraged to affirm a universalizing narrative about the competition in a sexism-free, gender-neutral meritocratic world while they are simultaneously struggling with the imaginary of gender roles in everyday life.

The idea of the “successful woman” is not true for all women, especially for those less material resources. The interviewees from low-income households show us how just a minority is able to break the class effects. On the contrary, most of the women on this study had the access to several resources from their households. The cultural and social background of their parents had triggered their break with the female traditional patterns. The parents had encouraged their daughters to follow their own paths and aim for a full career.

Most of the respondents highlights the active role of their fathers, who are central for the configuration of their educational and professional paths. Fathers often, with college education and in positions of management. The fathers are a sort of first mentor for many of them. In our study, most of the mothers do not appear as important figures in the narratives. The mothers represent an outdated female role in appearance without any connection to their career choice.
Although most of the interviewees assured have being raised in a not gendered home, we observe a strong sexual division of labor in their family dynamics: a working father and a stay-at-home mother who was in charge of all the duties in the house but and most important, a father who decided almost entirely on the upbringing of daughters and sons.

As the reflections of the interviewees show, the decision to pursue a profession is not easy even in women with enough material resources. Even when they find a general acceptance with their participation into the labor market they continue to be challenged by the traditional gender roles. The workplace is no so much different from domestic space, and both keep emphasizing the essentiality of women in the home.

The narratives reflect the ambiguity of these women’s patterns: they stand out as capable professionals against the social status of women in public life but on the other hand, they keep their social role of subordination in the private space. This highlights that despite the changes in the employment structure in the private space, the roles remain the same.

Finally, the interviewees show a depletion from the disappointment caused by the impassivity of the male contingent especially of those who are part of their immediate circle: partners, friends and colleagues. We can notice a feeling of guilt in their stories: a large number of our interviewees shows extreme concern about their “failure” in their role as a partner, wife or mother.

Also, these women show anxiety about their lack of access to top hierarchies and many of them assume that this is a reflection of their own ineptitude or their lack of talent. As time has passed, they create—a false—connection between their lack of promotion at work and their failures in their personal life. This take them to think that if nothing happens is because of their own fault. Many of these women are dissatisfied with their working lives. They do not find a direct link between their efforts and their current status in the employment hierarchy. This creates a strong frustration and doubts about their—unstable—position as a woman.

The interviews show us how the subjects interpretations, even those who are “more and better educated” about their own experience, is not a lucid construction. Before to consider this self-awareness as a coherent discourse, we have to understand it as a product of complex struggles of class, gender, ethnicity, etc. The structural position of these women and their identity are not statics. On the contrary, these processes are under fluctuations of many kinds, making them malleable depending of the specific time and place.

The acquisition of skills for the labor market is not a neutral process, and it can respond to specific strategies of the organizations according to specific social relations of production. No matter the process, sector or branch in question, we can find considerations of class, gender, race, etc., which influence the mechanisms of subordination or exploitation. The labor organizations must be analyzed as political systems and gender because they are arenas of conflict and interests for men and women (Kvande & Rassmussen, 1994).

Finally, I emphasize the need for a feminist perspective to analyze the consideration of class and gender in relation to major changes in social organization. The evolution of the female labor within the current capitalist system is a complex process. Beyond perceiving the labor market as a whole, shaped under the same characteristics, we have to focus on observing it as a place marked by the forces of local traditions, which includes different power relations, culture, politics, etc.
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