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Gender, Work and Professionalization

The formation of gender occurs at the intersection between the public and the private spheres as a mode of social reproduction. It is obvious that the working-class masculinity/femininity are different from the professional-class masculinity/femininity because racial and ethnic gender formation are also overlaid by class.

There are **structural reasons** for this, such as: discriminatory hiring practices, unequal pay scales, uneven public education in communities that differ widely in terms of income, but there are also more subtle means of socialization that accompany gender acquisition well into adulthood. Women and men become gendered – i.e. take on "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics – in part through segregated labour practices (including mothering and unpaid domestic work). This explains why "femininity" and "masculinity" mean something different for women and men who are structurally divided by class, race, ethnicity.

A new problem that arises today is the transformation of the workplace into a domestic location. How can one think differently about the paid labour-market when the contemporary view of the market is that it is being systematically connected to households? As Kath Weston writes in *Families We Choose* (1991):

"Occupational settings, no less than households and families, are loci for the production and reproduction of gender." (147)



What jobs are women-related in Romania? What about UK?

Anyone who has a grasp of the history of employment in Western Europe, and especially in UK, knows that women's employment has tended to be looked upon as either "desperate" – immigrant labour – or "supplemental", adding to the wages of the household's breadwinner. This perspective upon woman labour has recently called for the principle of „comparable worth” – that is, equal pay for equal work – which is meant to redress the gender balance. However, the principle of comparable worth is built itself on the myth of meritocracy as it assumes that jobs have objective worth based on measurable skills, education and productivity. But what about emotional skills of caregivers, nurses, etc? What about the racial divide that is usually interconnected with the skilled/unskilled divide?

Kath Weston – a famous anthropologist and Harvard Professor – argues in the above-mentioned book that ideologies of gender and work ability still assist the segregation of women: they are kept out of the better paying, unionized skilled trades.



“Our society describes people in general and job applicants in particular as possessors of inherent ‘traits’ of character and competence – traits that incorporate cultural notions of gender, race, class, age, and what it means to be ‘able-bodied’.” (Ibid.)



What working-class gendered assumptions are made about job-related traits?

For instance, women are said to be more *patient* and to have *manual dexterity* whereas men have *physical strength*, *mechanical aptitude*, and *aggressiveness*. Matching “the right person for the job” appears to be the objective of employers but the depiction of both ideal applicant and job employs embedded subjective preconceptions.



For example, there is a clear distinction between *heavy* and *light-duty* work in trades. One light-duty work would be that one presupposed by microelectronics that is viewed as delicate and requiring small hands.

The fact that women and men do particular kinds of work reinforces certain stereotypes and makes the connection between woman/being a woman and nursing/care-giving, doing piecework sewing or microscope work (manufacturing computer chips and small electronics) seem self-evident. Weston comments:



“Persons do not possess gender-typed qualities so much as they use symbols to fashion presentations of self that incorporate gender.” (Ibid.)

Indeed, there is a lot of work that goes into making the difference between *heavy* and *light* labour appear so striking. At times, people take great pains at acting their roles: for instance, carrying some tires instead of rolling them makes a tradesman seem ‘macho’, i.e. antithetical to being/acting like a woman. Basically, we deal with the same conceptual fallacy as in the case of the conclusion that men are taller than women, which is drawn from the fact that straight couples tend to pair up that way. In fact, gender differences are not essential: they are learned, adopted, adapted and elicited.



What if we apply these insights to the status of students?

How is gender enacted in Romanian education? One sometimes hears the complaint that women students just get good grades without necessarily being creative. Do you agree with this?

How is gender enacted in British culture?

Great Britain has solid anti-discrimination laws today so occupational gender discrimination is kept under control. However gender discrimination does not always operate through direct exclusion. There are several ways through which it works, such as:

- by perpetuating conditions that retain the assumption that the ideal worker has a wife who is engaged in the reproductive labour. That is why women choose not to accept faculty positions at research universities if they are interested in having kids;
- by being underappreciated, that is, not having your achievements recognized;
- through "the tyranny of low expectations" (Susan Hockfield) when it comes to women (who are also mothers and wives), i.e. evaluations that reflect stereotypes rather than reality.