

FAMILY AND WORK OF NOTARY WOMEN. FROM SAFETY TO INSECURITY

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Traditionally, the profession of the notary in Greece was synonymous with elevated status, social prestige and increased financial rewards. In a country, wherein citizens were attempting to address the conditions of economic and social instability by investing in property, the notary always exercised a distinct role, that of the symbolic guardian of the property of Greek citizens. The notary would act as a latent and discreet consultant of families, in several legal issues, which gave the profession an important social role. In fact, within the post-war era, the rapid growth of the construction sector had given the profession a lot of financial glamour, and it was deemed privileged in every respect. The profession of the notary has always had a dualism of aspects: that of the public official and that of a liberal professional, though the emphasis has always been placed on the characteristic of the public function.

The above parameters of the profession of the notary had created a safe environment. They were linked to the reasons for high-school graduates choosing the legal studies. Concerning the work-life balance the female graduates of legal studies chose the notary profession because of the conditions of its practice considered as facilitating the creation of a family: the possibility of regulating flexible working hours and sufficient income ensuring paid help in both the office and at home, as well as prospects of a high living standard. There were strong counter-balance incentives involved in assisting the reconciliation of family and work.

In the advent of the present economic crisis, the working conditions of notaries gradually began to change. These changes are related to the transformation of the state, the strengthening of overregulation, and the swelling of bureaucracy. At the same time the notary profession has been seriously affected by the collapse of the construction industry and the over-taxation of property and income that, incidentally, is constantly decreasing. It has been also affected by the imposition of new laws and regulations modifying the conditions of its practice. As a public official the notary has been gradually entrusted with more and more state competences, expected to be offered for free. Simultaneously, the notary as a liberal professional is continuously affected by the imposition of new and increasing taxes. Our case study designed to investigate the relationship of work and family during the crisis has shown that the conditions of practicing the notary profession have changed dramatically.

1. The research

Our investigation focused on the relationship between professional and family life, as experienced by women notaries under conditions of the present economic crisis, as well as on the practices adopted by them in order to achieve work-life balance. The research material was produced on the basis of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten women notaries, up to 50 years of age, that were also mothers of minors, and were practicing the notary profession within the region of Athens. Meeting the women notaries was not an easy process. Lack of time on their part and reserve towards our project hampered the research process. We have met with several rejections as well as postponements of meetings already arranged. However, there were also cases of interviewees with a positive stance towards our undertaking. Though the initial response of women notaries to our request was merely kind and formal, they gradually developed a more confidential stance which led to narratives of a confessional nature. In these cases, women notaries who professionally acquire the

role of a careful and discreet attender were gradually 'transformed' into confessing narrators. Thus, they temporarily relinquished to the researcher the role they usually hold for themselves, that of the confidential and careful attendant.

From the wealth of material collected, we have compiled themes repeated in most interviews. It should be noted that the issues mentioned in the present text are indicative and in no way should lead to generalizations.

2. Themes related to work-life balance

The key recurring issue present to all women notaries' narratives is *the continuous and never-ending quest for time*. Time operates like a 'tug of war' between the profession and the family. Time is not sufficient to combine the daily requirements of the profession and the family, without paid help, but only with the support of the family network, when possible. Time is always pursuing the women notaries, sometimes until suffocation, trapping them in a daily venture in order to fulfil an endless list of obligations at both, the office and home. Women notaries confront the lack of sufficient time for the fulfilment of the long list of tasks ahead by precise and continuous organization of their activities into strict daily schedules. But this way of planning often implies for women notaries constant stress and psychological torment.

Another important theme that runs throughout the narratives of women notaries is the so called «*home-office*» and «*office-home*» relationship. Many women notaries have transformed their home into an office, and in some cases, their office has been turned into a home. At this period, due to the technological advancements that can facilitate communication, and thus the availability of professionals even outside their working hours, the family asylum and the private sphere have been breached with professional obligations. These obligations are transferred into the personal domain and, occasionally, they can be extremely invasive. The private domain of the house,

nowadays, may host all the necessary office equipment as well as all folders of contracts, that regularly accompany the daily routes of women notaries from the office to home and vice-versa. In the face of the absence of assistance in the office and at home, women usually try to compensate not only by reducing their presence in the office, but also by fulfilling, within the household, their professional and family obligations simultaneously. Exceptionally the lack of assistance sometimes drives the transformation of the office into a home that can host for a few hours during the workday new-born babies (*"the working baby"*) or young pre-schoolers.

The balance between work and family is not the only balance to be achieved by women notaries. The third important issue that highlights the narratives of our research is *the need for a continuous and multiple balance within family and work*. The family not only requires the coordination of women notaries professional schedules with the schedules of their spouses and children, but also the combination of working at home with household chores. Moreover, women notaries often have to balance the relationships between family members (the spouse, the children, the children between them, etc.). On the other hand, this situation must go with the fact that the profession is continuously under the imposition of new regulations requiring to balance the different conflicting interests between parties, but also between clients and tax authorities, customers and accountants, civil engineers and customers. The woman notary must demonstrate exceptional coordination skills of orchestration and mastery to harmonize the needs and requirements of different worlds. Complex and laborious effort is required to achieve coordination of all these multiple levels that compose the worlds of work and family; women notaries usually offset this arduous task by the satisfaction deriving from acting the coordinator's role in both, the family and at work.

Within the narratives of the women notaries there is *no reference to state provisions facilitating the work-life balance*. On the contrary any reference to the state is portrayed with a negative connotation. Women notaries believe that the state is absent from the support of the family life of those practicing a liberal profession in Greece

under crisis. In fact women notaries feel that the state acts as an unjust and heartless predator since their professional life has been gravely affected by the transfer of state powers and responsibilities to them, the over-taxation of their profession, as well as by the recent memorandum policies dramatically diminishing their income. The lack of state care for the family life of self-employed women notaries is counter-balanced either by resorting to recruiting family members for their assistance, or by shrinking working hours and personal time. Nevertheless it is worthy to underline that women notaries are confronted with fear and insecurity regarding the future of their profession which, in some cases, is considered to be endangered.

Another important theme that emerges within the narratives is *the degeneration of the professional and personal identity of women notaries*. In the current context of the crisis, the excessive increase of professional responsibilities, that comes in line with a significant reduction in the volume of work and its subsequent remuneration, the deduction of scientific knowledge, the uncertainty manifested due to the fluent nature of the applicable law and the distrust of clients are leading to a feeling of futility; futility due not only to the inability to ensure a fair standard of living through working for themselves and for the future of their children, but also to the loss of meaning, within their everyday professional activities. The crisis of the professional identity of women notaries is sometimes compensated by addressing the possibility of early termination of their career, and the return to the traditional role of mother and housewife at home. In other cases, this is limited to strongly expressing the grief, amidst the deadlock experienced, after the degradation of the social and economic status of their profession. But the deconstruction of the personal identity is also related to the lack of personal free time. It is no coincidence that all the leisure activities of women notaries coincide with the needs and activities of their children. In this case, they outweigh the lack in personal time by resorting to the traditional model of the mother who is content to experience *"bliss through the joy of the children."*

Conclusions

In the context of the current economic crisis the profession of the notary is transformed from safe to unsafe. From initially being a profession that is straightforwardly robust it is slowly transformed into a fluid occupation that, to survive, must adapt to the flexibility and uncertainty that accompany its ever-growing complexity and bureaucracy. In this novel environment shaped and governed by the effects of the crisis the work and family balance of women notaries is predominantly affected by the new conditions regulating the exercise of a profession becoming nowadays more and more precarious. The achievement of a demanding work-life balance for notary women is depended on the flexibility that women notaries can demonstrate to achieve it; on the one side they have to deal with the exercise of a liberal profession constantly charged with state duties and responsibilities that do not correspond to respective financial rewards; on the other side they have to play the traditional role of the mother and housewife, that is not supported neither by the state nor by seeking external paid help. The relationship of family and work of women notaries is also influenced by the merger of personal, family and professional space and time. This entails the inter-absorption of work and family, and the subsequent and complete absorption of personal time, from the family and the practice of the profession.

In conclusion, in the case of women notaries, work-life balance, as it is shaped today amidst the current crisis, diverges from reconciling work and family life. Instead of being set free and opening their wings by experiencing the career market, notary women are witnessing another facet of the traditional model of the woman. They remain traditional mothers and housewives and, at the same time, constantly bear an elevated multitude of professional responsibilities. Indeed, they are desperately trying to create certainty and stability in the workplace and in the family amidst the growing current conditions of uncertainty and instability within the profession of the notary.

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