

THE BONDS OF A LIBERAL PROFESSION. ARCHITECTS IN MOTHERHOOD*

Collective contribution to the memory of Fray Kamoutsi

The interrelation between the work and family spheres, as is developed within high qualified professions, has not until now been sufficiently dealt with into the Greek research bibliography. The main subject of the present case study has been the examination of the types and modes of the configuration and tuning of the professional and private life of a category of women exercising a profession of high qualifications, namely the female self-employed architects. In view of investigating the various facets of the work-family relationship, emphasis has been placed on issues such as the working conditions, the way of life and the work-life balance. For research purposes, ten female architects with underage children, who are self-employed, were chosen through the “snowball” technique.

In this particular study the interview guide has been specialized in order to adapt to the particularities of the aforementioned profession thus pertaining to twelve distinct research units: a) Demographic and social characteristics of the respondent, as well as the household, b) retrospection: choice of studying at the Department of Architecture, c) parental environment, d) educational route and empirical

*The present case study was designed by Fray Kamoutsi, a colleague and architect mother who has undertaken the research tasks with personal involvement and much enthusiasm. Unfortunately serious health problems impeded her from finishing her research work. In the accomplishment of the remaining field work tasks contributed Dimitra Kondyli and Ioanna Papathanasiou. The editors of the present volume tried to put together the research results in a way exhibiting the significance of this specific case study on architect mothers within the whole qualitative research undertaking.

experience during studies, e) configuration of personal professional targets and choices, f) professional profile and office organizational structure, g) requirements that emerged through professional life and their influence on social life, h) interrelation between professional and personal life, i) employment during the crisis, j) interrelation of professional and family life cycle, k) exercising multiple roles and giving prominence to tensions, balances, manifold and conflicting emotions, l) opinions and judgments regarding the provided social infrastructure. So all the research units aimed at reconstructing the life trajectories of the women architects to be interviewed.

Main research findings

Female self-employed architects have chosen their profession consciously. For some women, this choice was the natural continuation of and complementary to their family history when coming from families of self-employed architects, who are socially reproducing themselves through the continuation of this profession from generation to generation. Indeed, in some cases the intergenerational continuation of the profession is extended across three generations. In other cases, the choice of this profession is based on its subject matter and the notion that it is underpinned on the one hand by science and on the other by the arts.

All ten respondents' choice of profession is affected by what they call "*love for architecture*". This expression could allude to a type of elitism, but also to a need for forming or, at other occasions, for confirming a special identity, that of a female architect. An interesting element that our research also revealed was that most of the participants were married to men who were coming from similar working environments. Their husbands were either architects or civil engineers, a fact that underlines the dual nature of the interrelation between work and family for female architects.

Studies abroad, as well as the social circle that most of the respondents have, constitute an important educational and social

capital that supports the exercise of the freelance profession. This support is particularly important in the case of women architects, who are facing the existing special gender relations within the construction sector (contractors, male-dominated crew, suspicion by clients etc.). As far as the profession is profitable, balancing life and work is feasible provided that paid help is available at work and at home. In parallel, the exercise of a freelance profession is supported as well by the family network, parents who help at the office and the house in different ways.

With the advent of the current economic crisis, the crumbling of the construction sector, the decrease of income, the over-taxation of self-employed professionals, architects included, and the over-taxation of properties, the profession has been seriously affected by adverse pressures. The continuing operation of female self-employed architects' offices has become a challenge and it is with great difficulty that can be maintained. Female architects, in the face of additional financial obligations and constraints, are forced to undertake ad hoc activities related to simple transactional works, such as processes of legitimization of planning, building code violations, dealing with excess bureaucracy. Subsequently, they are experiencing the consequences of the transfer of some part of state responsibilities to the engineers and of the aggravation of bureaucracy. In addition, the relations of female self-employed architects with their clients are strained, since clients are suspicious and demanding, while, at the same time, they delay outstanding payments.

This newly formed situation leads to a feeling of annulment of female architects' expectations. From the exercise of a profession that was considered as an "elite" profession, they are made to adapt to a new reality of simplistic activities of a procedural and bureaucratic type that are at a distance with the scientific and artistic nature of their profession and their initial high expectations.

In many occasions, the crisis at the profession has brought a shift in the means of acquiring income. In parallel with the office that is underperforming and does not bring income to the female self-employed architects, they are looking for ad hoc projects or to other

means of contributing to the family income. They are often led to traditional means of home crafts and are crafting homemade items for everyday use (bags, knitted garments e.t.c.) that are being sold in open markets or through their social circle.

The great difficulty in living by their own means faced by female self-employed architects has a direct effect to the interrelation of work and family. Usually, the working hours at the office and home are extended at the detriment of time for family and sleep. The lack of state support as well as the incapacity of paying to get support for the children lead these women to take on almost entirely the weight of house 'burdens'. Even in cases where husbands contribute equally at the allocation of family responsibilities, female self-employed architects are those who take over the responsibility for coordinating and scheduling all the household activities.

With virtuosity, sacrifices, ingenuity and patience, like traditional Greek housewives, those women administer the everyday requirements, while undergoing, through this constant struggle for survival, multiple frustrations: frustrations that are related to the scientific subject of their work itself, as well as the loss of the high prestige of the profession and the affluence that accompanied it.

Conclusions

The exercise of the liberal profession of architects is seriously affected by the current financial crisis. As it is pointed out through this case study, what characterizes the female self-employed architects' employment status is underemployment or part-time employment. At the same time, within the context of the crisis, office needs awaiting to be covered and constantly rising tax burdens imposed to liberal professionals are being accumulated. On the other hand, underemployment releases more free time for women architects in order to be devoted to upbringing their children. This increase of hours at home however entails the time dealing with office work as well as the time required for undertaking house chores since "help at home" is no more available.

Whichever balance is being achieved between professional and personal life by female self-employed architects is at the expense of the scientific and artistic dimension of their profession, as well as of their professional expectations and personal needs. These women face the future with uncertainty. Every day they try to keep a difficult balance between family and work in order to avoid feeling the full annulment of their youth dreams regarding the profession and the family.

So the narrations of female self-employed architects, mothers of underage children, have brought into the forefront frictions related to the exercise of their profession within the context of the current crisis and to their efforts to achieve work-life balance. The study depicted the multiple novel ways that come up and the practices that those women adopt during the exercise of their complex role in view of responding to the multiple requirements of their professional and family life. Subsequently, through this study what has been prevalent was that within the current crisis, women architects and mothers are basically experiencing the “*restraints*” of an in name only “*freelance*” profession.

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