

THE DAUGHTERS OF CLIO BETWEEN HOME AND HISTORY. WOMEN HISTORIANS IN ACADEMIA

Ioanna Papathanasiou

Gender equality, as is portrayed within this text, although provisioned in the present context by a rigid institutional framework, in practical terms, is hampered. This occurs even in occupational groups that may be effortlessly classified within the social and intellectual 'elite' of the country. The problems are not due exclusively to the traditional distinction between the private and public sphere, that persists to classify women in the first, nor within the 'hierarchical sexual division in the labour market'. Senior public structures inherently favouring males, a widely debated phenomenon during the past years, is the symptom of a broader gender-based *status quo* still underlying in modern societies.

The rise in the educational level of women and the continuous improvement of their position in employment, have allowed them, in the post-war era, but especially in recent years, to enter domains previously established as stereotypically 'masculine'. Elevated educational status and celebrated careers, however, do not seem to prevent the prolonged (albeit gradually diminishing) underrepresentation of females in key positions of the scientific, as well as the administrative hierarchy. In addition, there are extremely low rates of women participating in high level planning and decision making. The phenomenon, certainly, is not only Greek. As was pointed out several years ago, by Laura Maratou, "in all countries-members of the EU there have been highlighted clear differences between men

and women, both in training and in their professional paths; women are the minority within universities and research centres, as reports on data portray”.¹

These estimates have been corroborated by a recent qualitative survey we conducted in the summer of 2016, focusing on one of the most populous, in numbers, of women disciplines; historians working as Teaching Scientific Staff at various Greek universities. Ten Greek historians were asked to answer questions about the problems faced in the venture to harmonize the different roles undertaken as mothers, wives, daughters and academics, in higher education and as women scientists, within the male-dominated and competitive academic environment.

1. The ‘daughters of Clío’ as the population of our survey

The search for balance between family life and work, for this female population, has its starting point in some data, which lead to corresponding questions. Is the prolonged (albeit gradually diminishing) under-representation of females in the academic and research community and the scientific hierarchy exclusively due to the resistance and hurdles posed by the patriarchal gender staffing of senior public structures and the hierarchical sexual division within the work pool?² Is, after following social perceptions and stereotypes, the advancement of women even in professional categories that are classified as ‘elite’, hampered by rivalries of gender and other factors not only limited to the professional environment? Does the female presence in the social and life sciences relate to the revival of another level of traditional roles that correspond to ‘natural’ female abilities, and in how women can manage their own issues arising from other traditional roles that they maintain as women, mothers,

1. Maratou, 2004, pp. 7-10. On women academics see also Iliou, 1988, pp. 3-24. Vosniadou and Vaiou, 2006, pp. 45-49. Kaltsogia-Tournaviti, 2011, pp. 421-438.

2. A theoretical and historical review of this issue can be found in Avdela, 1990, p. 292.

daughters and wives and both as professionals in a predominantly male-dominated working environment?

The population of the qualitative research consisted of Greek women historians, specializing in modern and contemporary history, that are aged between 45 and 55 years, holders of doctorates from universities in Greece or abroad, and a stable working relationship at different universities and in different ranks. The age limit of the research, set at 55 years of age, that included women respondents and especially the ones with children that are minors, has held ramifications for the project, since our options were limited to the search of the survey population to universities within the country.

2. Between home and history

Historians, that have shared their views with us, highlighted aspects of their family and professional life, especially related to the specificity of their gender. The most important issues that were extracted are allocated within the four sections that follow.

2.1. Motherhood and academic career

Although it is not systematically studied, it is apparent that a significant number of women in academia remain, or prefer to remain, childless. The neutral phrase that is expressed, *“this is how life brought things”* comprises essentially two realities wherein a physical dysfunction, as is expected, is not included. The first relates to an informed decision, of *“putting the career first”*, that is associated predominantly with the difficulties and the competition of the profession, as well as the consequent refusal to undertake the obligations that are required to start a family. The second is closely linked to the first, without implying a premeditated decision, that is coupled with deflecting as to the point in time to bear a child, due to the dominant path of career building.

All ten historians with whom we discussed, were linking motherhood with a unique experience that they would not trade for

anything; the instance of having children is described as “*a unique gift of nature and life.*” At the same time, however, they emphasize the radical changes in the commitments and obligations arising from the creation of the family. For this reason, they explain that the role of the mother (that is not easy at all), was not imposed in their lives by chance, but because of a joint decision taken by themselves and their partner or their spouse.

The joint decision and choice, the division of responsibilities between the couple and any external assistance, which was recruited and came either from the family environment, or in the context of paid services, has balanced the conflicts, as much as possible. However, given the nature of the mother-child relationship, they cannot overturn the established and prevalent perception that the foremost and primary responsibility for the child belongs to the mother.

In any case, the academic career and motherhood are two distinct poles, that each requires a great amount of availability, investment and time. Although working hours at a university may not correspond to an eight-hour work day, the nature of the work, the preparation of courses, the research and writing requirements, that demand extreme concentration and isolation, come in contradiction with the needs of children. Added to the list of problems to be solved, is what happens due to the transportation requirements of a parent, or both parents, to and from work.

2.2. Routine and organization of time

As references of ‘discipline’ and “*running to catch up to it all*” are the keywords that describe the functions of the new system of family. The ways which are selected for the everyday mitigation of issues vary by each case, and by the different child development stages. Some of the historians who shared with us their experiences, explained that as their children were infants or very small, they would rather be isolated and working at home. Others chose to work every day outside the home, most often in the workplace, as their office better allowed for the concentration required; for others, the transportation

to their workplace within regional universities imposed, after the end of their maternity leave, their absence from home, at least for some days of the week.

The allocation of tasks within the family proved to be, in most cases, a life-saving solution. The father, at hours where he was available from his own professional obligations, assumed an active role in the children's daily life, along with the grandparents. The paternal presence worked positively, mainly in cases where the mother had moved away from the house, due to the requirements of her position, and at the night 'shifts' when she needed rest. In the same way, the ancestral family, especially of the mother, contributed effectively when her parents were still alive and able. Their absence or unavailability was compensated by 'external aid'.

Different types of responsibilities are obviously connected with family strategies aimed at the proper functioning of the system. It is probably no coincidence that in most cases where the mother had to be relocated because of her work assignment, the father would stay at home, and that their ancestral families would surround them with their care.

As effective though different family strategies may be, they only proved to solve practical issues. The phrase "*I am full of remorse and guilt*" is constantly recurring within this research, when referring to the hours devoted by our interviewees to their children, regardless of their situation and the solutions they have adopted. The designation of scarce engagement with the daily routine of the child, as 'creative' and quality time, especially at tender ages, does not exclude the 'guilt' unfolded behind closed doors, the two-day and three-day absences every week in the university, or the travel imposed by the participation in an international conference. On the other hand, when their research is not a priority, because of obligations to the family, then, anger may prevail. This pervasive sense of failure is found within historians who do not have to move, to be in proximity to their workplace.

The harmonization of roles occurs gradually. As a non-taken for granted process, it may express itself due to the new balance

achieved as “*the child proceeds to the next stage of life*”, grows and becomes autonomous slowly. In the new phase, the school, especially the “*good school*”,³ assumes responsibility, when the family finance permits it, a sharing of the upbringing of the child, along with the family, amidst its education. However, our research has shown that in the organization of everyday life, what really counts is the gradual change of the character of the obligations towards the child, the acceptance of the already established system of gendered roles within the family and most importantly, the reduction of family stress.

Through acceptance, the feeling of the mother’s failure may subside, but guilt for her absence is prevalent, as children look after it, and sustain it themselves. The mother’s work and the void this precludes, formulate an “*unwanted part of life*” which they know they cannot change.

2.3. *Gender relations at work and in the family*

The ‘glass ceiling’ phenomenon, namely, the limited access of women to management positions and positions at the university and in the first stage is correlated, by most of our interviewees, with the lack of encouragement from their male colleagues. In other words, this situation includes ‘mild’ symptoms of gender inequalities and rivalries in the academic workplace. But this is not only restricted in this phenomenon, that is observed in other countries as well.⁴ Within the Greek academic community, where gender antagonisms are of excess, these seem to be “*kept very well*”. Decency and culture may operate as self-control mechanisms, keeping the public utterance of sexist comments limited, but the merit code of the masculine Greek university still contains traces of scattered sexism, that can be inherent throughout the Greek society.

3. “*Fortunately, there are good schools that care for them,*” as one of our interviewees referred. The couple could not meet all extracurricular activities’ requirements, due to lack of time, so they preferred to send the child to a private school that provides in addition to excellent training, the necessary foreign language courses and sports activities.

4. See the collective work Blanpain, 2006, p. 320.

In direct relation to the previous statements, gender relations and inequalities document another important issue: whether the attitude of the women themselves can be affected by the criticism and the negative comments of their professional environment. An aggressive attitude, as well as indifference, are the most likely emergency response scenarios. In the long term, however, women appear to have a different attitude with respect to their proximate context. They accept that within the domain of work, it seems that it is much easier for social stereotypes to be prevalent, and they are willing to grant to other sex what rightfully, they may themselves, claim.

2.4. The 'privileged' university and the economic crisis

Working in academia is considered as a 'privileged' profession, with a 'secured special payroll'; academics and researchers do not seem to be affected by the economic crisis of the recent years to the extent that has affected other professional groups.

Common estimates, however, with respect to the deteriorating economic situation of the country that call for reductions of 40% on their own salaries, do not imply uniformity in the situation. The effects of the crisis reflected do not affect in the same manner the academic community; in addition, a collective experience does not translate to the same working or living conditions, for everyone affected. The variations have, as may be considered logical, a starting point, within the financial situation of each family unit, and are accentuated per several factors. Our interviewees have listed, as important additional factors, the professional and financial position of the husband, additional resources from programs or a second job, and especially the place of work for historians and / or their 'partners', with respect to weekly transportation.

The limitation of family expenditure, however, is no easy task. It is hardly applicable for everyone, when at an age, they have organized their lives in certain ways; this situation may affect the professionals, and their spouses, that move or relocate for their work, as well. In any case, when family planning is concerned, the most widespread

and effective cut, other than books, is the reduction or abolition of paid domestic services for the home and the child.

Humour sometimes conceals, but it does not cover, the gaps created by cuts in everyday life. Most children of our interviewees are already in adolescence, but those that are still young, have been waiting patiently for their busy mother, “*with paint and their colouring books*” in a conference room or classroom. On the other hand, the intensification of the requirements for running a home have spilled over not only to children but also to mothers, especially when the husband is constantly absent due to his own obligations.

Conclusions

As custodians of history and historical memory, the women historians with whom we talked, have managed to make their presence felt in the quality of their work in science; they consider parenthood, despite the difficulties and the exhausting pace of everyday life, as “*the most precious gift*”. The problems encountered in trying to harmonize their professional and family obligations, do not seem to diverge with those of women in other disciplines of the academic community; those who have the pleasure to have children, simultaneously test the peculiarities of a profession that is considered reputable, privileged and without distinct external difficulties.

Having made their privileged area that of social sciences and humanities, and secondarily the health sciences sector, where women’s work meets with a deep tradition, women academics and researchers unreel in professional categories to be classified within the intellectual ‘elite’ of the country, though facing, even today, attitudes and social stereotypes through which gender antagonism may be expressed, deriving mainly from their professional environment.

“*Obstacles are there, so that we may overcome them*”, our historians argue, signifying that the balance in which they operate is not stable. Quite the contrary, in some cases they seem very doubtful, as was evidenced by the different and readjusted family strategies that allow

them to manage flexibly, despite the emotional costs, the roles that they maintain as women, mothers, daughters and wives and as both professionals, within a male-dominated working environment.

Living through these roles, the difficulties and contradictions that characterize their composition, do not portray a personal 'success story', nor necessarily do they adorn their personal and professional journeys. They say that they honour their choices and try to respond at all levels; they explain that none of the roles undertaken "*shows a compulsory course, neither is a must.*"

For this reason, moreover, employing new practical solutions at all levels, allows them to resist wage cuts imposed by the economic crisis of recent years. As genuine daughters of Clio, they are aware of the past, of societies of other times, and the realities of the social topics, as well as the conditions and circumstances restricted to their gender. Amidst the difficulties, they draw strength "*from the gleam of hope in their children's eyes*", and continue with the awareness that "*in a few years, the children go their way and we keep ours.*" Thus, contradicting the view that motherhood is a *cul-de-sac* for their academic future, they believe that a balanced participation in the family and academia may be ensured in the long term, through continuous investment and communication.

Annotated bibliography

- Avdela, E. (1990). *Civil servants of female gender. Sexual division of labour in the public sector, 1908-1955* (in Greek). Athens: Foundation of Research and Culture of the Commercial Bank of Greece.
- Blanpain, R. (ed.). (2006). *Women in academia and equality law. Aiming high - falling short? Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom*. The Hague: Kluwer Law International.
- Iliou, M. (1988). Female academics. Advancement to higher ranks or stagnancy? (in Greek). *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 70, pp. 3-24.
- National Documentation Center. The PhD in Greece: Career and mobility. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development –

- OECD, *International Survey on Careers of Doctorate Holders-CDH* (in Greek). <http://www.ekt.gr/en/node/19878>. (Recovery 29/10/2016).
- Kaltsogia-Tournaviti, N. (2011). The position of women scientists in academia and the principle of equality. In the *Memorial Tribute to Yota Kravaritou, Law – Employment – Gender – Soul* (in Greek). Athens: Sakkoulas.
- Maratou, L. (2004). Does science have a gender? Women in academia (in Greek). *O agonas tis gynaikas*, 77, pp. 7-10.
- Vosniadou, St. and Vaiou, L. (2006). Women as teaching scientific staff at Greek universities. In Th. Paulidou (ed.), *Gender Studies* (pp. 45-49) (in Greek). Thessaloniki: Ziti.