

WOMEN ARCHITECTS AND CIVIL ENGINEERS FACING UNDEREMPLOYMENT, UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE PURSUIT OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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Architects and civil engineers belong to the occupational category of “qualified engineers” along with seventeen other sub-categories. To practice these professions a membership in the Technical Chamber (TEE) is required, as well as the acquisition of a professional license. The professions of architects and civil engineers were amongst the most prominent and profitable in Greece. However, the 2008 economic crisis has hit hard the construction sector and consequently those professions. According to the Institute of Economic and Industrial Research (IOBE), business activity in the construction sector fell by 80% since the beginning of the economic crisis,¹ while total employment in the construction industry decreased from 363.5 thousand in 2006 to 154.7 thousand in 2016.² The 2009 TEE survey showed that, the profession of the architect consists of 50% women and 50% men, while civil engineers comprise of 73% men and 27% women. In a more recent survey focused on the new graduates of the period 2002-2010, women comprise 71% of the new architects and men 29%. As to the civil engineers, 61% are men and 39% are women. Both architects and civil engineers are mainly working in the construction sector, while the clear majority of them are self-employed (86% and 83% respectively).

1. IOBE, 2015.

2. Data refer to the second Quarter of the Year. Eurostat database, LFS.

The present text is devoted to female self-employed architects and civil engineers, with an emphasis on those who are currently facing under-employment or unemployment. The main goal of the research was to highlight the complex interaction between work and family life by exploring the experiences and recording the practices that working mothers - architects and civil engineers - use in their everyday life in order to cope with their family and work responsibilities. More specifically we attempted to explore the practices followed by female architects and engineers in their working and their personal lives and to capture the changes that have occurred in balancing family and professional life due to the economic crisis. A qualitative research was conducted drawing material on in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten self-employed architects and civil engineers mothers of minors up to 17 years. A snowball technique was used to reach the research participants.

The women of our research population aged between 30 and 56 years. Half of them hold a master's degree, while the other half are university graduates. Out of the ten interviewees, six were architects and the remaining four were civil engineers. The interviews covered four broad thematic areas: 1) Work characteristics, 2) family life, 3) childcare facilities and support, and 4) work-life balance. The consequences of the crisis in all these aspects of their everyday life are also discussed and analysed.

Research findings

a) Working conditions

Except for the two youngest interviewees aged 33, the rest have a long working experience from thirteen to thirty three years. Most began working while still in university. After graduation, the majority opted to work for companies to gain experience and expertise, the exception being those who already had a business waiting for them from their parents. Nevertheless, after a period of time, most architects and civil engineers stopped working for these companies

and started up their own business. The main reasons mentioned for this change were professional evolution, autonomy and flexibility, control over own work, family responsibilities and bigger earnings.

It is worth noting that the clear majority of architects and civil engineers are considered as self-employed regardless of whether they are working in companies or in their own offices. The reason is that most companies do not hire them as employees, but as collaborators. Thus, their status implies that of 'dependent self-employment'.³ In other words, despite working exclusively or mainly for a specific company, they are hired with a private contract rather than a labour contract, thus excluded from the rules of labour law.

Most respondents do not seem to identify any difficulty in exercising their profession, other than the long working hours and the management of the interpersonal relationships with the clients. In addition, civil engineers highlight the difficulties of being a woman in the construction sites, which brings up to the front gender equality issues at the workplace. Most civil engineers seem to overcome this problem by adjusting themselves to the dominant masculine culture and behaviour. Some women also claimed that they had felt discrimination in the labour market not owing to their gender, but to their motherhood. This was experienced by most of the women working in companies and it mainly concerned their hiring procedure.

Despite the above shortfalls, the vast majority of the respondents were very satisfied and proud of their professional lives until the emergence of the crisis in 2008. Job satisfaction is attributed to several reasons such as good cooperation, creative working projects, friendly working environment, travelling opportunities, big scale construction activities, high financial rewards etc. Indicative are the answers of an architect and a civil engineer:

"[Architecture] provides you with everything you want! Everything! Human contact, art, contact with politics etc. It's very nice, very

3. Dependent self-employment describes work relationships where the worker is formally self-employed yet the conditions of work are like those of employees.

nice! I love this profession very much. I believe that it has unlimited possibilities”.

“There were some good years! When I first started working I didn’t have enough time to eat! Within one day I had to supervise three construction sites. All this, I enjoyed it very much! Very much!”

Today, after eight years of recession in the construction sector, all the professionals interviewed feel hopeless and disappointed with the labour market situation. Some women face economic difficulties, others have no more clients for some years now, while all the professionals who were working as dependent self-employed in companies were left without a job. Not everybody experienced this downturn at the same time or with the same intensity. Nevertheless, all the respondents believe that the construction sector in general and their professions will not recover soon.

“Engineering is dead. For the construction to recover it needs at least a decade”

“I believe that architecture was the first to fall and will be the last to rise”.

What are the practices those women follow to deal with this situation? Based on their responses, they can be grouped into three categories: those that keep their own offices, mostly of women in their fifties, facing under-employment and recession rather passively, waiting for the time to pass; those who were made redundant’ by the companies they were working for and are currently in a transition phase, thinking about changing their professional orientation, and those self-employed, mainly in the middle of their careers, who struggle to make ends meet by taking up all kind of relevant jobs.

b) Family life

The clear majority of architects and civil engineers became mothers after the age of 35. Only two women had children before the age of 28. Half of them stated that they postponed having a family for professional reasons.

Regarding parenting responsibilities these are borne predominantly by women, most of whom use, in turn, a combination of informal networks, salaried staff and care facilities to meet family obligations. Most of the husbands and fathers have only a minor role in parenting during the weekdays, while they seem to be more actively involved on the weekends. As to the gender division of household responsibilities, most of the women in our research admit that they are exclusively in charge of all household responsibilities regardless of the working status of the men. We can thus safely conclude that the gender division of responsibilities, both in terms of child care and housework remains unequal, with women maintaining their traditional role as housewives, and assuming almost entirely responsibility for these tasks.

“I am responsible! That is, I do the shopping, I clean, I do all the housework. If we also include the childcare, then the sharing of responsibilities used to be 95% -5% and now it is 80% -20%”. That is, 80% is on me”.

The crisis has led most of the families to cut down expenses, especially those related to children's out-of-school activities and to housework. This situation has caused additional psychological and physical stress to mothers, who bear most of the burden of these consequences.

“I get more tired than I used to. Because now, I must go to work and I also must help with my child's homework, and to do all the household tasks and all these by myself. Not to mention that I feel psychologically tired with all these things going on. The whole situation depresses me”.

c) Childcare facilities and support

To cope with their dual role as mothers and as professionals, women follow different strategies. These strategies have been affected to some extent by the crisis. Before the crisis, most women after giving birth chose to return to their jobs much quicker, while they used paid help and family support more extensively compared to the women who gave birth during the crisis.

“My daughter had a nanny from the fifth day of her life and I continued working. The only difference was that I returned home earlier i.e. at 20:00 and didn’t stay at work until 22:00 or later, as I used to do before having the child”.

Today, most mothers choose to take care of their children alone, with support mainly coming from the parental family in the form of meals provision.

“I could hire a nanny for my baby if I were to go to work. But today there is absolutely no reason, for I have nothing to do at all”

Childcare facilities - both private and public - are widely used by all the respondents for their children after the age of 2 or 3. The main reason is to give their children the chance to socialise. The crisis may have led to cuts in other outdoor and afternoon activities of the children, but it has not affected - in most families- the choices of the parents about the kindergartens and the schools that their children attend.

d) Work-life balance

Most women claim that having a child affected, one-way or another, their professional lives and their career. They also believe that it is very difficult to achieve work-life balance. As they pointed out, there is always an imbalance between work and family, because

priority is usually given either to work or to family, depending on the circumstances.

“They are both very demanding. If you are a perfectionist, it is impossible to do both perfectly. So, inevitably, either none will be done perfectly or if the one is done, then the other will stay behind”.

So, at times when most of their attention was paid in their professional life, mothers identified deficiencies and problems in their family life. Similarly, in times when childbearing absorbed most of their personal time, this had a negative impact on their job.

“There is no such thing as work-life balance! That is, when I used to be overloaded with work, working overtime, I used to feel that I missed my children, and now I miss my job!”

“To strike a balance... It is not an easy task to strike a balance between work and family life, and to be able to respond to the multiple roles you perform as a mother, a professional, a friend, a wife, as everything”.

The current crisis on the one hand has brought about a significant deterioration in the professional career of women. On the other hand, it has, in a way, contributed to their spending more time in family life and parenting. In fact, today, the balance between work and family life is geared towards the family.

“If we were in a different period, a period with too much work, then I would have spent less time with my child and my husband, being at home. The crisis has negatively affected my profession, but for the family I think it was a good thing, because now I spend more time at home.”

“The crisis resulted to my withdrawal from professional life. Spending more time with my child has –to some extent- counterbalanced my sadness for losing my job”

Conclusions

Liberal professions such as architects and civil engineers are traditionally characterised by long working hours and competitive working conditions. Professionals who are mothers find it very difficult to achieve the right balance between work and family life. To respond to the demands of their roles they use a combination of supportive mechanisms, such as paid help, family networks and childcare facilities, which are all used for facilitating them with their family responsibilities. The division of responsibilities for childcare and household work is still unequally shared between the two genders in Greece, with women preserving their traditional role as housewives, expected to assume the largest share of the workload in both tasks.

During the last years, however, architects and civil engineers have been hit hard by the crisis resulting in under-employment, unemployment or even inactiveness, while there are no visible perspectives for their professional recovery in the immediate future. Most of the respondents have experienced a significant loss of income from work and rely now on their savings and on the husband's financial earnings.

The crisis has, nevertheless, resulted in mothers obtaining a more active role in parenting, due to the increased availability of time. Women spend now more personal time in childbearing than mothers who raised young children before the crisis, when the workload and the professional responsibilities were at a peak. These new conditions, however, do not contribute to the establishment of a work-life balance, but rather tend to result in the loss of the women's professional identity. Work-life balance remains a challenge for most of the women architects and civil engineers in our research.

As to the measures and policies proposed by the mothers to facilitate the balance between work and family life, these mainly concern the establishment of better quality and accessible to all day care facilities for children and creative programmes and sports infrastructures in the municipalities. Most mothers highlighted that there are no specific provisions by the state to facilitate work-life

balance for those in liberal professions. Indeed, public policies for the self-employed were until very recently completely missing in the social policy field. In general, the Greek state is still lacking an adequate and integrated set of policies that would aim at balancing work and family life for the self-employed.

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