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A Woman in a Working Place. Part I. French Case

1. Introduction

“Les faiblesses des hommes sont la force des femmes”. (“The weaknesses of men are the strong points of women”). This sentence of Voltaire is just one of many possible interpretations of a perception of a woman by a man. However, knowing the history and the personality of Voltaire, while giving him his due as a great thinker, one may say that there are as many points of interpretations as there are human perspectives. However, considering the very title of this article, which more anthropological ambitious, than the prescriptive one, we may admit that the very concept of a “woman at work”, can differ considerably. Say a woman and it sounds beautiful. For some other people, due to their life experience, the image of a young, blonde girl driving the tractor through the fields in the “fight for a happier, socialistic countryside” may occur. Some would think of an African woman with children walking several hours to get water, others of a woman in an Israeli army uniform. The connotations may be numerous. However, the question is if it is possible to draw a certain profile that would help to understand the position of a woman in a working place. Part I of this attempt is concentrated on the situation of a French woman. The method is purely anthropological – the use of direct observation as well as the propositions of interpretation offered by certain historical and statistical data. Finally, some specific cases will be analysed. In the paper the problem of a working woman in France is being studied from several perspectives – as far as the legal aspects are concerned, and from psychological and sociological perspectives. The paper does not pretend to give the final answers. It is rather an attempt to show some elements of the phenomenon of a woman in business life of contemporary France constantly bearing in mind the very truth included in a French proverb – “Souvent femme varie” (“A woman changes rapidly”). It needs to be added that the conditions in which she works changes rapidly too.

2. Legal Aspects and Some History

In common perception there exists a stereotype of the emancipated French woman – she smokes very strong cigarettes, has sex without any restraints as she was sexually liberated and could express herself freely. As with every stereotype, it is nothing else but perceptual error as described in the most classical books of modern psychology. Probably the roots of this stereotype should be searched in the images from the times of French bohemia, Quartier Latin, Juliette Greco, Simon de Beauvoir or may be even in the times of George Sand. That muse and mistress of Frederic Chopin was famous of her “masculine” look. It was understood as a very strong act of rebellion and the fight for women’s rights. Some of the traces of this “masculinisation” as a sign of rebellion may be still found nowadays in language and in ...driving of the French ladies. In fact George Sand was not “that” rebellious. The law in mid XIX century prohibited women from wearing the “male look”. If a lady wanted to wear trousers she had to ask the prefect for agreement. So did George Sand. This law was twice amended by the verge of XIX and XX century, when women were allowed to wear trousers only while bike and horse ridding. The law still exists nowadays. So that majority of female members of French Parliament wearing trousers violated the law. This example could be interpreted both ways – from the point of view of incompatibility of the legal aspects to the changes in contemporary life, which is not a subject of interest from the perspective of this paper and from the point of view of a fight of a woman for her rights. Her priorities have changed – not wearing trousers but career development counts. However, the English woman at the BBC while being addressed with a title of “a manager” revolted. She wanted to be named not in a “masculine” way, but with the title that corresponds with her gender – “a manageress”. The French woman in similar professional position revolted while hearing the title of “a manageress”, as she thought to be a signal of her social inferiority, therefore she demanded to be called “a manager”. The same title as her male work male. “Am I worse than him that you call me a different title”? she asked an imprudent speaker. It reflects the problem that will be discussed later on in the chapter on “sex and language”. However, it may be stated so far, that the need to emancipate may go various ways – either by rebellion against the existing law, or with rebellion of the “fortress build by men”. By the beginning of the XXI century not very much has changed in this mechanism.

The stereotypes are generalizations based on the most catchy or unusual features. Thus the image of a French woman as an emancipated person. However if a Polish single woman has got a right to vote in 1918, a Turkish on in 1930, the French woman obtained this right in 1944. Twenty years earlier it happened to women in Albania, Mongolia, Great Britain or Belgium. Paradoxically women in France could vote in the Middle Ages (1). This right was suppressed in 1498 but till the times of the French Revolution a woman could vote in local elections if

she was a head of the family. But the very change came with Napoleon Bonaparte. Probably in his times the roots of certain aspects of a modern French woman should be sought. The Codex of Napoleon brought serious consequences as far the perception of a role of a woman in French society. It should be seen from two perspectives – a perception of a woman's role by French men and the self – perception, in other way how the women see themselves. The first influences the latter. The result of how women perceive themselves can also take few dimensions. A woman may act according to what she thinks is expected from her, so in consequence she models her role to a pattern that in fact may be not real. A woman may try to take man's position and pick up his behavior as the one that is wanted and expected by the society. Third, but not last option is that she would act contradictory to "male" pattern in order to underline difference of her gender. These consequences of Napoleonic Codex are seen in contemporary business environment in France. How huge was the influence we can imagine studying few facts. Codex of Napoleon requires that a woman must live in her husband's house. This law was cancelled in 1975. A woman cannot administrate her property – this regulation became invalid in 1965. In the same 1965 a woman could finally engage in professional life without the permission of her husband. Napoleon Codex assumed that a woman should be treated as a minor, as a child, thus a man, her father, later her husband should make all important decisions in human life. This attitude had to have an influence on the behavior of a woman in a contemporary society as well as on the woman – man relations in the working place. In 1874 France introduce the first law that protected a working woman. She was prohibited from working in the mines and on Sundays. In 1935 the time limit was introduced, she could work for not longer than 11 hours a day and could not work in the nights. This law is valid until now. However, working for French Radio, very often I had the pleasure to work with female studio producers and technicians. In 1907 the law allowed a woman to collect her salary. In the 80' one of the Polish immigrants married to the French man told me the story that still in the 70' she was to present her husband's permission to open her own bank account despite the fact that the law that a French woman can work and open a bank account without her husband's permission was introduced in 1965. This show to what extent the sex discrimination works despite the law against it. In 1983 sex discrimination became punishable. In 2009 it still exists. In 1946 according to the French Constitution a woman and a man in a working place are equal. However when it comes to money, they should wait till 1972 to get the guarantees that man will get the same money as the woman doing the same job. It was still the law on paper. In reality, in November 2009 the French government proposes to punish the companies that would not reduce the divergences between the wages of a female and male employee. Usually a woman gets from 16% to 27% less than a man doing the same type of job with the same responsibilities.

3. Some Statistics

Women in France they make the majority of part time workers. In comparison to other European Union countries the situation is neither dramatic nor depressing. The average for the UE part time working versus full time working is 18.2%. In France is 16.9%. In Germany it is even 25.9%. Then French women are one third of the part time workers, whereas in Germany the numbers go almost to the half. But paraphrasing Goethe we may say, that “the only numbers are grey”. We need to have other data to be able to interpret the statistics. Majority of French part-time female workers are the employees of huge chains of stores. They usually are employed to do the job on the basic level of the hierarchy of the company. After interviewing women working at the cash desk for few of the largest chains of hypermarkets we can draw the following conclusions. The women are always in inferior position in the structure of the company in comparison to men. They get the considerably little money. Many of them work part time but it means staying in the shop for the whole day. They start at the opening hours. Work for hour and a half. Then they an hour and a half break, too short to have time to go home. Then an hour of work during rush hours. Break. And hour of work during the evening rush hours. They stay the whole day at work, in their shop, but are paid only for few hours. In services in France 61.8% of a working force is a woman. In education, health services and social services women are in vast majority (74.9%). However the stereotype works both ways. A Parisian, nine months pregnant, in one of the local clinics confessed that she was shocked when she saw that at the birth of her child the man, not a woman, would be present. Then she learnt that he was perfect professional. Seeing through the perspective of gender stereotypes could be echoed on both sides of the wall of sexes. A surprisingly high number of female employee works in finance and house estate – up to 58%, in energy 20%, what could be explained by the fact that so far this domain has belonged to public sector that in general is much more open in employing women. On the other hand however, the public sector is highly “over bureaucratic”, has got its administrative part developed. And in this domain women are more likely to be employed. (Does it mean that they cope better with paper work than men? This is just a question). Consequently to common expectations women deal more in social aspects of a human life which is in agreement with the research of many psychologists, who, like McClelland stated that a need – for affiliation is the main engine of motivation. 99% of kindergarten teachers, 97% of secretaries, 91% of nurses, 64% of teacher, in principle in primary and secondary schools, and 39 % of female managers (manageresses) are female.

4. Special Case – Army

French Army is assumed to have the largest number of the women – soldiers in the ranks in Europe. The women are 14% of the military staff. It means the French forces include 36 000 female soldiers. Majority of them serve in

administration and in health services. Minority serves in infantry, marines, as tank/car mechanics and in Air Force. The most “male” fortress of the French force is the “gendarmerie”. This part of the army is very hostile toward women. It may be understood by their self perception. “Gendarmerie” perceives itself as the elite of the French forces. Getting into its very closed circle is difficult for a woman.

In France a woman can serve in almost every unit apart from the submarine. It is assumed that the lack of space in this particular man-of-war is an additional stress factor. The tension among the crew is easier to create in abnormal conditions that are created by the very logic of the ship – small space that for many days is submerged under water. This is a technical reasoning. Behind it we may find logic of female inferiority while a human being faces a major challenge in an extremely stressful situation. In this assumption probably is reflected the same attitude that comes out of the Napoleon Codex that a woman should be treated as a minor. In XXI century a typical French woman – soldier¹ joins the army at the average age of 29.4 years. 70% of them have got higher education which is probably also due to the fact that a modern army requires highly qualified staff. The technology has changed so drastically that a soldier must be a well-educated person. The modern strategy is not the battle field, but a fight for the control over the towns. 41% of French women soldiers are mothers, and 66% live in a couple. 75% are married to a military man and the same number of questioned female soldiers claims not to have problems with separating their private life from their professional life. There are, however, some problems due to sex differences and a perception of the position of a woman in French society, in general, not only in a very specific place that is army. The majority of female French female soldiers (86%) think that they are treated in the same way as male soldiers, on the other hand, 12.6% have problems with male soldiers due to the sex differences. The interrelations within the units are one thing, whereas the other is a “glass ceiling” phenomenon. In this respect army reflects general situation in French working environment. 70% of French woman soldiers assume to have problems with getting to the higher commanding posts which in civil business correspond to higher managerial positions.

5. A woman at work without the military uniform

According to Dares² more than half of working women in France have jobs in 10 categories of employment among the 84 professional categories which exist in this country. If a woman is in 39% present among the managers and only 20% among computer programmers than 99% of kindergarten teachers, 97% of secretaries, 91% of nurses, 87% of nurses in maternity clinics are women. Now

¹ Information provided by the French Ministry of Defence.

² Dares – Direction de l’animation et de la recherche des études et des statistiques, 2002.

the question is if this is a result of a “female predispositions”, i.e. higher need for affiliation and lower need for power or is it a result of a pattern of roles in the society due to the gender. In the first case a woman chooses to become the nurse or secretary because this perfectly fits her personality and the system of needs. In the other case she is socially and culturally “forced” to choose her professional future. The second leads to many stereotypes and prejudice in both senses. It leads to thinking that “a woman is not apt to become a manager or leader” but it also creates prejudice that a man may face. This is a case of a pregnant mother who on her arrival to the maternity clinic noticed with disappointment that the nurse is not a woman but a man. She thought that “he would be unable to feel what a woman giving birth to a child feels”. Later on she changed her negative opinion about a male-nurse that stemmed from the stereotype.

6. Motivation and behavioral changes

Among the main motivational factors that make a French woman to join the army are also the ones that could be applied to civil professional life. A French woman becomes part of the military because of the social pressure to recognize the opening of different professions to women. This social pressure comes from the European Union legislation as well as from the new generation of politicians who are less hostile towards women doing jobs assumed to be “traditionally” male. It also reflects the changes within the society, but it is difficult to statistically evaluate if this relates to all French or if it is culturally determined. The “ethnic” statistics is prohibited in France. Therefore it may be only presumed that these changes in mentality are not very popular among several millions of immigrants who originate from North Africa and Black Africa. Among those social groups the more traditional model of family, in which father works and mother rear children, seems to dominate. Sally Adamson Taylor (4) considers the role of a woman in the French working place more conservative than in the USA. She underlines that the male head of the family is still the norm and that “the authority carries through into the business world”. The existing stereotypes and prejudice are still omnipresent. Pineau and Kelly [Pineau, Kelly 1991] quote the example of Chiara Rosen, a woman who moved from Israel to France. In Israel she quit a very good and challenging job. In France she could not get a new one despite her professionalism and fluent French. She was called back for many interviews during which one question was always repeated – how old is she and how long has she been married. The interviewers just assumed that she would be pregnant within a short time. And then one interviewer, an executive of a well-known Fortune 500 company asked about her husband’s job. When she said that her husband is a radiologist the interviewer expressed his surprise that she wanted to work, as the wives of radiologists play tennis and do not work [Pineau, Kelly 1991, p. 46]. The relations between a woman and a man in the working place are predominantly based on submission-dominance polarization despite

the fact that more professions are accepted to be done by a female employee. The fact that a French woman is increasingly present in the working environment not only in retail and services but also in finance and law is mentioned by John Mole in his book "Mind your manners". However author stresses the big differences between Paris and other regions in France which seems to be a result of contrast between the more cosmopolitan capital of France and more traditional areas especially rural ones [Mole 1999]. The social pressures, that is visible also in French Medias, to recognize the opening of different professions to women leads to some behavioral changes³. Looking again at the case of a female soldier one may state at least three domains in which changes in behavior may be observed i.e. self identity (or self perception), language and changes in hierarchy of needs. A working woman tries to adopt the "role pattern" to the "male world". She tries to imitate a man-worker. Female managers at Radio France Internationale⁴ wanted to prove that they were fit in the "male positions", so they tried to adapt to what they imagine would be a "male role". It was visible in their language. Similarly to female soldiers, they did not lower their voice, wanted to create an image of a "tough" and "decisive" leaders. The relation between the "sex markers in speech" has been studied thoroughly within the last few decades [Scherer, Giles 1979]. Philipp M. Smith [Scherer, Giles 1979] distinguishes differences in pronunciation, grammatical form, in choice of vocabulary, speech style, code and dialect differences, and non-segmental differences. In the latter case Smith analyses the problem of patterns of intonation and loudness, which is the subject of linguistic aspects of behavioral changes in case of female employees on higher level in some professions⁵. The changes may be also observed in the hierarchy of needs. The increasing presence of a need for achievement seems to be one of the results produced by the changes in the French society toward more egalitarian position of a man and a woman in a working environment.

7. Conclusions

In 1946 the French Constitution introduced the equality of a man and a woman in a working place. But a French woman was to wait for almost the next 30 years (1972) for the law that would introduce the equal salary for a male and a female employee doing the same job. In reality a woman gets from 16% to 27% less than a man for the same type of work. In 2009 French Government proposed to introduce punishment for the companies that would not reduce the divergences in wages between both sexes and would not reduce discrimination. That step as well as European legislation may lead to improvement of the situation

³ Information provided by the French Ministry of Defence.

⁴ The observation made by an author after 21 years of working at RFI.

⁵ It was also observed by author during few days of interviews with candidate for the post of the president of France, Segolene Royal.

of a working woman and to the narrowing of gaps between law and reality. Consequently, the presence of old stereotypes also decreased, as well as that of prejudice and perceptual biases. The situation of a working woman in French society is a complicated matter that may be studied from different perspectives – sociological, psychological, anthropological and legal. The changes that have been observed in a French society in recent years create new opportunities but also new challenges for women who want to work and not only earn their salaries but also make careers and fully use their psychological as well as professional potentials.

Abstract

The situation of a working woman in French society is a complicated matter that may be studied from different perspectives – sociological, psychological, anthropological, cultural and legal. The changes that have been observed in French society in recent years create new opportunities but also new challenges for women who want to work and not only earn their salaries, but also have careers, and fully use their psychological as well as professional potential and skills. The historical aspect of the situation of French working women and French women in general within French society has been studied in order to have a better look at the roots of the contemporary situation of a working woman in France. Statistical data as well as the results of the French Statistics Institute were presented. In the paper the position of a female soldier in the French armed forces is being presented in order to see the “glass ceiling” problems in career development as well as the perceptual errors i.e. prejudice (on both sides), stereotypes and biases. The important influence of the problems with self-identification of a woman working in a «male created working environment” is pointed out. The paper is an attempt to underline the potential problems that may occur in a business/working environment due to the presence of representatives of both genders side by side. The problem is analysed from cultural, psychological and anthropological perspectives, as well as their consequences.

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