

Feminisation and the case of the *Established, Semi, and Aspiring Professions*

The past decade has seen increasing claims concerning the feminisation of labour markets with particular attention being paid to certain sectors and professions. The mass entry of women to the workplace and a renewed interest in the 'soft skills' associated with the feminine has led to a relatively unchallenged prediction that women and 'women's ways' will be one of the major influences on work in the 21st century, with particular impact on the professions and areas of work that typically exclude women, especially in the higher ranks (Brundser, 1996; Haas, et al., 2000; Sommerlad, 2002; Schultz and Shaw, 2003). These claims are supported by a wide range of labour market statistics, covering a broad spectrum of professional and other white collar occupations along with high profile media coverage of particular women 'cracking the glass ceiling' (Carvel, 2004a and b; Quacquarelli, 2003). There seems little doubt that women have made huge progress; numerically dominating areas of the labour market and entering and succeeding in previously male dominated occupations and professional groups.

Despite the apparent strength of, and the prevailing enthusiasm for, the feminisation argument there is a need to challenge the predictions of shattered glass ceilings and to explore the problematic and contradictory nature of the inclusion of women in professional projects. It is helpful to do this focusing on three professional groups: law, management and teaching. These three professional projects have been chosen as they represent various forms of professionalism and differing degrees and forms of feminisation and thus constitute very interesting grounds for a comparative analysis of gender in professionalisation projects. Law is clearly an *established* professional project; traditionally male and middle-class it is experiencing a process of feminisation as part of strategic attempts to develop more profitable modes of organisation, characterised by salaried employment and elongated professional hierarchies (Bolton and Muzio, 2007a). Thus, it can be argued that feminisation acquires the characteristics of a *defence mechanism* mobilised by embattled male elites to retain established privileges and rewards in a context characterised by rising institutional and economic difficulties (Bolton and Muzio, 2007b). Management can be classed as an *aspiring* professional project where increasing numbers of women are seen to bring the necessary people skills that are required for commercial success within the workings of a vigorous but 'soft' capitalism. Thus, here, feminisation assumes a functionalist connotation and is connected with an economic logic linked with performativity. Furthermore, professionalisation may be increasingly appealing as it offers feminised specialisms, such as personnel or human resource management, an avenue for occupational advancement and collective mobility. Teaching is very different to law and management in that it has long been recognised as a feminine or caring profession, which is reflected in its lesser autonomy, status and rewards. Teaching is an interesting group to use in a comparative analysis of feminisation as it provides an indication of how gendered occupational projects are not necessarily supported by numerical representation but that feminisation may fuel patterns of gender exclusion, stratification and segmentation which is clearly highlighted by

teaching's male dominated senior hierarchy and its enduring status as a *semi*-profession. In this context, feminisation, both numerically and symbolically, may be an obstacle towards professional accomplishment.

The occupations of law, teaching and management offer very different scenarios of professional projects and the place of women within the enactment of such developments. They do, however, all have a common and recurrent theme – a continual process of masculinisation. Indeed, to be (or to aspire to be) a professional is 'to do' gender; to comply with behavioural and interactional norms that celebrate and sustain a masculine vision of what it is to be a professional thus marginalising the 'feminine' and devaluing, ignoring and unsupported the work that women do (Davies, 1994). As a result, whether it is an *established*, *semi* or *aspiring* profession, men dominate senior positions and lucrative/ high status specialisms whilst women perform 'women's work' in front-line positions and lesser areas of practice. Such an emphasis serves to advance claims of the gendered nature of professionalism indicating how this distinctive work organisation principle and method is historically rooted in cultural conceptions of masculinity and institutional arrangements based on patriarchal power.

Professor Sharon Bolton

Dr Daniel Muzio

Leeds University Business School

Key Readings

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