Women bus drivers and organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the gender practices of a female urban bus driver who retired after 40 years (1967-2007) in an urban bus company in northern Spain. The main objective of this study was to explore and understand the move from irreflexive to reflexive practices from a gender perspective, and to uncover new key aspects relating to the influence of women in organizational changes.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative exploratory study (interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)) contains semi-structured interviews which explore, using a process of analytic induction, the personal- and work-related experiences of a woman who was a pioneer in the traditionally male-dominated field of urban bus services. In order to obtain a broader overview of the organization, and using the same method, four other female bus drivers from the same company were also interviewed, along with the personnel manager.

Findings – Three different situations are presented. The first summarizes the woman's personal motivations and hesitations during the 1960s regarding her decision to become a bus driver, occurring during her adolescence and pre-professional phase; the second illustrates the organizational and social reactions triggered by the (visible) presence of a lone woman in a traditionally male professional environment (resistance); and finally, the third situation shows the empowerment and organizational change which occurred, focussing on the possible deconstruction of the masculine hegemony at the heart of the organization.

Originality/value – The IPA points to a new level of visibility of this transgressed traditional role, which combined both individual and collective actions. Her experiences recount how she overcame individual, organizational and social barriers. The authors suggest a new interpretation of this visibility, enabling us to imagine gender practice as an intersection of people, organizational change and society.

Keywords Organizational change, Working women, Narratives, Gender practices

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Based on the testimony of a woman who spent her whole professional life performing a traditionally male job, this paper examines the social representation of gender in the labor field and the coexistence of social and personal factors in the theoretical framework of gender and organizational change. To this end, we have taken into consideration the personal motivations and hesitations of our informant, her gender practices (both reflexive and non reflexive) and her visibility in response to the resistance manifested by men and women, charting her experiences from adolescence, or her pre-professional stage, right up to her retirement from professional life.

Like a narrow, suffocating journey through a time tunnel, legislative development mirrors the ideological framework of beliefs held by legislators during certain

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moments in history. Moving forward despite these heavy shackles has involved a heroic effort by those women who have, over the years, refused to accept their legal and social "predestination." One such example is the case we are studying here.

First, in order to understand the episodes from the working life of the interviewee, we believe it is important to place her experiences in context by charting the evolution of and principal landmarks in the development of labor laws in Spain.

Legal context

Women joined the wage labor market late in Spain, mainly as the result of both the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), which severely hampered industrial expansion, and a set of ideological conceptions that firmly established a woman's place as being in the home (Garrido, 1997). Franco's dictatorship defended the *Fuero del Trabajo* (Labor Act) of 1938, which was based on a totally patriarchal set of laws that relegated women to the private and domestic spheres (Garcia-Nieto, 1993). Later on, in 1957, although the Spanish market itself had gradually opened up, women were still prohibited from accessing certain types of jobs.

Up until 1961, the law forced women to give up work when they married, and even after the law itself had been rescinded, a segregationist ideology of women in public life and the workplace still remained in the social mindset, preventing any major organizational changes from taking place.

As a result of increased industrialization during the 1960s and growing pressure from the feminist movement, in 1976 the Labor Relations Act was passed, which eliminated the need for women to gain their husband's consent before exercising their labor rights. Two years later, the Spanish Constitution (1978) recognized the principle of full equality between the sexes, thus transforming labor law in Spain.

Also, during the 1990s, a new policy of subsidies was established throughout the European Economic Community (EEC), aimed at funding labor market insertion programs for unemployed women. It was within this framework that the participation and insertion of women into traditionally male professional roles (such as bus driving, for example) began to be fostered. As a result, the number of women joining this profession grew, and transit companies were forced to face up to a new challenge, namely that of questioning old gender practices and establishing new ones in the heart of their organizations.

Later on, in 1999, the Family and Work Life Reconciliation Act was passed with the aim of rendering the right to work compatible with the right to a family life, so as to foster a balanced distribution of responsibilities in both the private and professional spheres. Currently, the Ley *de Igualdad de Género* (Gender Equality Act) of 2007 governs and regulates labor issues in Spain in terms of equal rights and duties for both men and women in any area of life and, in particular, in the political, civil, labor, economic, social and cultural fields.

In short, we propose that legal matters influence social matters, and that social matters influence the private sphere, constructing collective representations not in a unidirectional manner, but rather in a circular pattern. Thus, even when established gender practices exist, there are always opportunities which, through their attitude and behavior, gender agents may use to transform the situation both reflexively and non reflexively, even if it is only at the micro-social scale.

Theoretical context of the analysis of the relationship between the social and personal spheres

Traditionally, the two main approaches from which gender relations have been analyzed are the theoretical approach of West and Zimmerman (1987), which posits that, from an ethnomethodological perspective, men and women "do" gender in social interactions, and the poststructuralist model proposed by Butler (2004), which uses a discursive method addressed at people "undoing" gender. Subsequently, Knights and Kerfoot (2004) talked about gender binaries and their influence on organizational transformation policies, occupying a space between representations of gender and the conditions of subjectivity and language that make them possible.

Martin (2006) argues for an understanding of the gender accomplished through interactions within the organization. Indeed, she uses the term "practicing" to refer to a series of interactions embedded in a whole system of actions which can be both intentional and reflexive, or their polar opposite, totally lacking in intentionality and reflexivity (non reflexive). These interactions occur in real time, quickly, immediately and in an emergent manner, and are almost impossible to predict. For its part, the less dynamic side of the gendering practices interaction is inherent to accepted dress and language codes and forms of expression; in other words, the accepted rules for men and women. For Martin (2006), the practicing of gender is something that people do in different directions, sometimes unexpectedly and harmfully.

In a more general framework, Jones and Murphy (2010) define practices as stable, routine or improvised actions that constitute and reproduce the economic space. They undoubtedly pose generalization problems when they aim to expand out to a macro-social level (institutions and social structures) from a micro-social one (workers). According to these authors, there are some practices (e.g. perceptions, patterns, performances and power relations) which stem from an interaction between individuals and the organization, based around a time-space assemblage. For their part, Wood and Valler (2001) believe that the practices of agents in an organization (managers and workers) reproduce social structures. We too take the structure of the organization into account, but unlike Wood and Valler (2001), we also observe interactions in the other direction, i.e. organizational change based on gender. In other words, we are interested in those gender practices (both reflexive and non reflexive) that are aimed at deconstructing the male hegemony of an organization, as opposed to interactions that perpetuate the established order and prevent organizational change. In our study, reflexivity refers to the capacity of a woman bus driver to recognize the forces and resistance which promote and defend traditional roles and masculine hegemony within the organization, and to alter her place in the organizational structure through gender practices. Non reflexive gender practices refer to practices engaged in unconsciously, without any thought being given to their consequences; for example, unintentionally and/or unconsciously obtaining an improvement in working conditions.

As such, these interactions are difficult to study, but at the same time, their deconstruction is vital for research, since they can help reveal how gendered organizations (Acker, 1998) may purposefully inhibit gender-neutral policies in order to maintain the gendered organizational status quo.

In this sense, Payne (2002) underscores the need to identify organizations as gendered sites, i.e. places where gender is socially constructed and reconstructed on the basis of a specific belief system. Martin (2006) rejects the concept of organizations as gender-neutral entities, although Acker (1992) does in fact state that organizations are systems with a gendered substructure, a central core which houses the processes which

support gender inequality, as expressed through individual thoughts, beliefs and activities. We therefore understand organizations to be whole entities, complete with their internal and external components, people, work processes and overall organizational environments mediated by the gender system. In the words of Martin (2006) herself, an approach to gendering practices is vital in order to understand how the gender system (gender-based division of labor) is reflected in organizations through rules, stereotypes and power imbalances, etc. (Saltzman, 1990).

Many studies have observed resistance to the presence of women in traditionally masculine professions (Houel, 2002; Alemany, 2003; Mathieu-Fritz, 2004; Michaut-Oswalt, 2005), revealing how masculine values tend to perpetuate themselves. Nevertheless, the contribution of women to the evolution of these values and to the flexibilization of gender roles is also evident (Houel, 2002). Also, the public sector (in which a large number of public transport companies are located) emerges as space which is particularly conducive to this kind of incorporation (Ibañez-Pascual, 2010).

Within these activities, women bus drivers also reorganize (more by necessity than choice) their time, their diaries and, although this is nothing new, their domestic chores and duties. There is a prolific amount of scientific literature on the issue of work-life balance, with different papers tackling the problem from different perspectives, including feelings of guilt (Livingston and Judge, 2008), economic factors (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006), and organizational factors (Grosswald, 2002; Gröndlund, 2007), among others.

A number of researchers (Scheller, 1996; Sánchez de Miguel *et al.*, 2008) coincide in asserting that the profession of bus driver fulfills part of the professional identity profile. However, a number of factors relating to bus drivers have also been researched. These include, among others, an exploration of the different roles played by bus drivers (Joseph, 1992; Scheller, 1996; Thomas-Charra, 2001; Hattab, 2003), which indicate professional practices in continuous negotiation, the establishment of different innovative behaviors in the case of women bus drivers (West, 1987; Farr and Ford, 1990; Munton and West, 1995; Almudever *et al.*, 2004), the analysis and prevention of stress in bus drivers (Aust *et al.*, 1997; Aronsson and Risller, 1998; Kompier *et al.*, 2000), dissatisfaction with work and its relationship with maintaining a work-life balance (Hughes and Bozionelos, 2007) and absenteeism problems in relation to the perception of inequality (Geurts *et al.*, 1995).

Narratives and life histories focussed around work

Within the framework of this piece of research, we will focus on one specific life and work story. We have therefore opted to conduct an in-depth interview with the only retired female bus driver in Spain, a women who spent nearly 40 years of her life driving urban buses.

According to Hytti (2005), a key element in the analysis of narratives is the concept of time. This author defines the present as the time of remembering and the past as the time of the event. In this sense, Luborsky (1987) stresses the importance of the discourse ordering process, in which the researcher actively participates by organizing the semi-structured interviews, delimiting the transitions of nature's cycle chronologically (growth – maturity – death).

In the context studied here, and given that we are dealing with a masculinized organizational environment, it is interesting to analyze the distinctive nature of the accounts given by the women interviewed, which Kaplan (1995) defines as women's voices. The other, by no means less important, question is how to integrate the time and gender perspectives in a single inductive analysis.

In this sense, the method known as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2004) is applied through interviews and group discussions, etc. No prior theory is established and the aim is to use a process of inductive analysis to identify patterns of meaning in a small group of people who offer multiple perspectives on a shared experience (workers vs managers, e.g. or male bus drivers vs female bus drivers, old female bus drivers vs young female bus drivers, etc.)

In this study, the IPA consists of a detailed examination of each participant's response and an exploration of how their personal experience addresses the questions being asked about the phenomenon of gender practices (both reflexive and non reflexive) as related to organizational change. A similar piece of IPA research was carried out by Millward (2006) with women interviewed during pregnancy, examining how they maintain their identity as employees and mothers and the consequences of this within their organization. IPA focusses its attention on the way in which the subject makes sense of their own experiences. This has (at least) two epistemological implications.

The first of these is the phenomenological experience, i.e. the fact that the subject, from their subjective viewpoint, offers material we have to try to make sense of from an idiographic approach rooted in Husserl's phenomenology and philosophical science of awareness (Bernet *et al.*, 1999), and which basically located the researcher in the field of hermeneutics. The second aspect is related to symbolic interactionism (Blummer, 1969). The subject transcends their own individuality insofar as they interact with other subjects and, in our case, an organization which is not itself without symbols, some of which denote what is permitted, while others represent that which is prohibited.

Known in scientific literature as "work-life histories," unlike the extensive life history analyses which, for therapeutic purposes, strive to influence the subject and help him or her reconstruct the self in a reflexive manner (Lalive d'Epinay, 1985), these less conventional biographies aim to explore the beliefs, practices and subjective experiences of the informant, and are used as a means of discovering the self, social actor, organizational change and social context (Luborsky, 1987) using a process of analytic induction based on several master themes.

One way to make the practicing of gender more visible and available is to collect stories. Letting people describe their work experiences can provide some access, although a far from perfect one, to gender dynamics that are otherwise hidden from view (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001). Gender dynamics are not simply a product of culture, but are influenced by it. In this sense, our study of gender dynamics aims to show and understand how gender, and therefore practices between men and women, change and are perpetuated within an organizational context.

Our theoretical framework is similar to that proposed by Acker (2006). We are particularly interested in uncovering the systemic inequality present in organizations, which manifests itself in work and power relations and the way in which these relations are organized. According to Acker (2006), gender practices and the meanings that emerge from these practices reveal the inequalities present in organizations. These practices, both reflexive and non reflexive, can show key aspects related to how women influence organizational change.

We believe it is important to explore this dimension, which encompasses both the individual and their organization. As a reflection of a continuous process of solitary reification, and as a woman in a masculine profession, throughout the different interviews our informant recounts her journey through a series of different stages.

Methodology

Given the scarce amount of information available in relation to the number of women bus drivers who have reached retirement age after a long professional career, we decided to use a qualitative exploratory model aimed at exploring and describing, in a retrospective manner, the life and work experiences of our informant. The approach chosen to explore the work and life history was that of IPA (Smith, 2004). For this research study, we decided to combine an exploration of nature's cycle with an exploration of the professional life cycle (joining – performance – retirement), guiding the interview toward a discursive exploration of the elements and factors in which we were interested, which can be represented as a continuous dialectic bringing together of the public (professional performance within the organizational framework) and private (family life) spheres throughout the life cycle.

In the IPA, the ideographic approach begins with a detailed analysis of the case, an in-depth reading, noting and identifying as accurately as possible key episodes which may reveal the meaning of both the various movements and the interactions between the informant and the organization. The story enables us to objectify certain processes within a micro-social scenario, thus turning this individual testimony (which is at the same time a social subject) into a means for exploring the macro-social scenario.

Single case studies (Pringle *et al.*, 2011) pose the problem of how to transfer the informant's experiences to other macro levels. To overcome this limitation, we decided to extend the interviews to include different members of the organization studied.

Both the management of the urban bus company and the informants themselves gave their consent for the study. A total of four interviews were held with the principal informant. The interviews each lasted 90 minutes. With the other informants, a single individual interview was held, lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. All interviews were conducted by researchers involved in this project and recorded in audio digital format. A team of three collaborators subsequently transcribed the interviews. Finally, the IPA analysis (Smith, 2004) was conducted.

Two different formats of semi-structured interviews were established, one for the manager and the other for the female workers. In the first case, the questions focussed on issues related to women's access to the organization, structural changes, or changes in interpersonal relations, in the style of the professional activity engaged in and in work-family life balance strategies. In the second case, the women bus drivers were asked about their professional history prior to joining the organization, the characteristics of their job, the plan established for joining and adapting to the organization and the identification of innovative and resistant behaviors, as well as any possible instances of discriminatory conduct and how they coped with resistance (empowerment or resignation).

For the categorization, identification and ordering of the discourse, WINMAX software was used. WINMAX is a powerful tool for the analysis of text and qualitative data capable of detecting the major points of concern on the basis of open responses that fitted in with our principal themes (framework). This tool is very useful for IPA.

A satisfactory inter-judge agreement was obtained ($\kappa = 0.87$; $p < 0.001$). To conclude the analysis, a researcher in no way linked to the study reviewed and verified the transcriptions, categories and representative texts which had previously been agreed upon by the three judges.

Participants

The informant was a 64-year-old former female urban bus driver who had retired after working for 40 years (five years as a conductor, and 35 years as a driver) in an urban

bus company in a large city in northern Spain. In order to obtain a broader overview of the organization, four other female bus drivers from the same company were also interviewed, along with the personnel manager. Two of the other female bus drivers interviewed (aged 27 and 28) had a temporary contract, had been with the company for less than a year and were members of the company committee. The other two (aged 34 and 35) had an indefinite contract and had been with the company for more than three years. Interviews were also held with the personnel manager in order to obtain a number of different views from within the organization in accordance with length of service, type of contract and participation in the company committee or management team (Table I).

According to Eustat (2001), in the year 2001, a total of 260 women were working as bus drivers in the Autonomous Region of the Basque Country, in northern Spain (5.59 percent of all employees in the sector). In specific terms, the percentage of women working in this metropolitan company in 2005 was 3.87 percent, in other words, 37 women out of a total workforce of 954. In the year 2006, the company employed 1,073 people, of which 62 (5.76 percent) were women. Not including the informant, the average age of the women drivers employed by the company is under 40. For 24 years, until her first female colleagues joined the company during the 1990s, the informant was the only female driver on the staff.

At the time the interview was conducted, our informant was the first woman to have retired from the public transport company in question, located in the north of the country, after having spent her whole professional life performing this job. The informant is a married woman (married 27 years ago at the age of 37) with no children who cares for her now incapacitated father (a former bus driver with the same company). She received an elementary education. We should also mention that her husband also works in the transit industry as a taxi driver.

The framework

Three principal themes were identified and placed in chronological order as phenomenological keys to the individual which give meaning to her life-work experience: first, personal motivations and hesitations during the 1960s regarding her decision to become a bus driver, occurring during her adolescence and pre-professional phase; second, the organizational and social reactions triggered by the (visible) presence of a lone woman in a traditionally male professional environment (resistance); and third, empowerment and organizational change, focussing on the possible deconstruction of the masculine hegemony at the heart of the organization.

During the course of the interview, various benchmarks were identified in relation to the three principal themes. These benchmarks or quotations were chosen by researchers because, in accordance with Smith's (1995) presentational

Code	Sex	Age	Job
XX-64	Woman	64 years	Bus driver (retired)
XX-28	Woman	28 years	Bus driver
XX-27	Woman	27 years	Bus driver
XX-35	Woman	35 years	Bus driver
XX-34	Woman	34 years	Bus driver
XY-53	Man	53 years	Manager

Table I. Interview participants

recommendations, they were deemed to be "emerging codes," i.e. relevant patterns of meaning (ideas, thoughts, feelings and practices). Thus, the fact that our informant worked for the same urban company for the past 40 years, in the same geographical area, lends added value to the study, in that it renders gender practices more visible and enables us to understand the interactions between the individual and the organization and to discern how people interpret the contexts in which they interact (Martin, 2006). The participating company and interviewees were promised anonymity and all names have been codified.

Personal motivations and hesitations: toward a job seen as "not feminine"

In 1957, at the age of 12, our informant began working at a suitcase factory located in her native city. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Spanish economy began to recover, mainly as the result of the 1959 *Ley de Ordenación* (Planning Act), which reduced inflation and brought Spain closer to the levels of economic growth being experienced at that time by other southern European countries. After the Second World War (1939-1945) Spain was isolated and had problems due to general deprivation and food rationing throughout the country.

According to her account, it was "a men's workplace," in which the only other female workers, besides our informant (who was just a girl) were three young women. In this context, resistance to the presence of women in the working environment took on derogatory tones: the men called our informant by a name different from her own. Precociously, this young girl demanded respect in a hostile environment. She acted as an agent of her own reality, adopted a proactive attitude and fostered the transformation of gender practices. She defended herself against the organizational gender status quo and through her behavior, in keeping with active minorities (Moscovici, 1981), triggered a socio-cognitive conflict and engendered an innovation:

> (XX-64) The older ones called me by another name, and I simply refused to answer them. The supervisors reported this and the management called me in. I explained what was going on and the management reprimanded the workers. At the tender age of 12, I managed to ensure that they spoke to me using the polite form of address ("usted"), and I was just a slip of a girl.

The 1960s saw the second major wave of inter-regional migration, and it was during this time, in 1962, that the informant and her father travelled 550 km north to her current place of work and residence in northern Spain. The informant's father, a driver by profession, began to work as a bus driver in the urban bus company which operated in this large city. The informant herself, now a 16-year-old adolescent, started her second job, working in a small food store. She also began attending a private school in order to finish her elementary education.

At the age of 21 (in 1967), she started working as a conductor with the same urban bus company as her father. Despite the personal effort demanded by this (finishing her studies, completing her compulsory social service, etc.), the reasons for her decision were mainly economic:

> (XX-64) I switched jobs because the bus company paid more than the store. At the store I earned 200 pesetas (€1.20) a week, while as a conductor I earned twice that amount. 3 years later (in 1969) several female conductors were asked whether they would be interested in becoming drivers. […] In order to get my driving license I first had to gain my school leavers' certificate and complete my compulsory social service[1].

During the 1960s, a group of six female bus conductors (including our informant) obtained their driving licenses and embarked on a two-year practical training period. This is how our informant remembers that time:

> (XX-64) We worked in the morning as conductors, in the afternoon we had practical driving classes and in the evening we did our social service. It was awful, because as conductors, in the morning, we used to fall asleep. […] I remember that I was the only one who did not have a boyfriend, which was why I didn't mind taking the last shift of the afternoon to do my driving classes. […] I didn't like driving, I didn't even want to get my license, I was prepared to be rebuffed, but it was an opportunity to improve my financial situation.

When asked about circumstances which may have influenced the decision of the group of women to take up this traditionally masculine profession, our informant highlights the key role played by the Lady Mayor of the city, saying:

> (XX-64) The company agreed to organize a driving course for women, but since it was a municipal company, I suppose the Lady Mayor[2] of the city had a lot to do with the decision. […] I remember that the women drivers joined the Lady Mayor in a public presentation, held in the city's basilica.

The role of the Lady Mayor can be interpreted in the context of the basilica as forming part of a ritualized ceremony which turned women into bus drivers, thus fostering social acceptance and dissipating any doubts the women may have had regarding their choice to follow a path atypical for their sex. These doubts may be related either to uncertainty regarding whether or not they would continue to be feminine enough, or to the first perplexity they would have felt in relation to their gender identity, upon being employed in "men's jobs" (Bloksgaard, 2011).

Organizational and social reactions

Gender practices were ingrained in society through a gender ideology which perpetuated the asymmetrical relationship between men and women. This is why it is so difficult to question previous gender practices and introduce new ones, as our informant herself recounts:

> (XX-64) People often used to tell me that I'd taken my job from a man, and I always answered that I hadn't taken my job from anyone, because I had earned it by training for two years. […] Women, especially local women[3] were worse than the men; they even went as far as to say that the Lady Mayor had given me my driving license. […] Some women simply refused to get on the bus if I was driving, although little by little they gradually changed their minds. […] There were 6 of us to start with, but within the year my five colleagues all left. They went to work at the explosives factory because the wages were a lot higher and I was left alone. For the next 24 years I was the only woman driver on the staff, until other women started driving buses at the beginning of the 90s.

The presence of these first pioneering women was an act of professional visibility in the public sphere. It was an act that met with initial resistance, mainly offered by the women of the city, who questioned our informant's professional capacity and accused her of having been shown undue favoritism by the Lady Mayor.

However, it was still a male-dominated sphere, an androcentric environment, which put up considerable resistance to the entry of women. Indeed, some of our informant's male colleagues openly speculated about how long she was going to last in the job and her own father was not happy about her move from conductor to driver. Moreover, the power structure of the organization was masculine, with no women being employed in any executive posts.

There is a reflexivity, charged with intent, in the figure of the female worker herself, a message and invocation of challenge and the will to overcome. Gender is practiced within a context of power relations, a context which often amplifies those aspects that are most harmful to women. The speculations engaged in by her work colleagues cast doubt on the competence and authority of women. Despite being seemingly trivial, these actions may in fact be important, regardless of the actual intentions of the person who originally set the ball in motion:

> (XX-64) My father has always been very selfish, he's been that way all his life, because he is an old-style chauvinist. He didn't like me becoming a driver. Up until then, he had always *worn the trousers* at home, and then suddenly I was earning more than him - she smiles – he didn't take that well. […] Some colleagues didn't like the idea of women drivers, and they used to make bets, *you'll not last longer than a couple of days*; then they started saying things like *wow, you're really hanging in there* and when I started driving the more complicated buses, which they couldn't do, they reluctantly admitted *jeez, she can do everything and we can't […]*.

Ashford *et al.* (1998) point out that the organizational context may weaken the perception of the risk (resistance) inherent in these transgressions (from the organizational inertia) toward gender equality. However, it is evident that, in the context of the organization, people can also move in the opposite direction.

It should be noted that the informant has a good degree of reflexivity regarding the situation, she is aware of the resistance with which she met and the challenge that this posed. Moreover, and from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the part of the self-constituted by the "I" (agent) superseded the "me" part (generalized other), thus enabling her to fight against the enormous resistance posed.

However, this does not mean that she abandoned those characteristics linked to her femininity, which in fact formed part of her new role, represented in her amiable, helpful nature, a nature typical of the female-caregiver discourse:

> (XX-64) Everyone here really liked me, I have been valued and esteemed, there were never any complaints. […] I remember that I used to help the older and weaker passengers to board the small buses which had high steps, I even appeared in the local newspaper sometimes because of that. Those customs later disappeared, and I have seen other female colleagues who never do things like that. There were some older women who used to get on the bus just to enjoy a ride around the big city with me; the majority are dead now, because even then they were very old.

Empowerment and organizational change

During the 1990s, seven female drivers joined the staff. These women formed part of a generation of young female drivers who, in the majority of cases, had male relatives (fathers, brothers, cousins, brothers-in-law, etc.) already working in the company.

However, despite the increasing number of women in the organization, it remained a gender site where the deconstruction of the masculine hegemony was no easy task. The gender practices of women drivers became activities of protest and demand, with clear intentionality and reflexivity. The internal and external physical space remained a masculine environment which erected barriers for women. Our informant recalls that:

> (XX-64) I had to request restrooms (WCs) in the depots, because I had no choice but to use the men's room. It didn't frighten me, but it wasn't pleasant having to go in and see all the men inside. Finally, I got a restroom to myself. […] And this was a problem we had also in the street, it's a problem for young girls as well, there are no restrooms in the street, we women drivers have to go and find a bar.

Also, an understanding of how gender is articulated at work, from the perspective of its capacity to bring about change (agency), is a wish and an expectation. As Martin (2006) says, gender practice at work requires the premise that people arrive at the action from different directions, via empowerment routes. As another woman driver says:

> (XX-28) I think that in a few years' time, as more and more women join the company, we will gradually get organized and changes will be made, because at the moment we are not well organized as a group of women.

The other work colleagues interviewed agree with this assessment; they are aware of their prominent role, they think beyond action to its consequences (intentionality and reflexivity). They know that their daily practice is linked to an interaction within the organization. It is propositive and transformational (agency). This is how some of our informant's female work colleagues see things:

> (XX-27) I am currently on the company committee and can think about our possibilities for improvement. We are concerned about the restroom situation. The men don't have so many problems, but it is an issue for the majority of us women. We are going to get some restrooms, and if necessary, we'll talk to the Women's Department at the Local Council.

Despite agreeing with the initiatives of their younger female colleagues, other women drivers expressed more skepticism and resignation:

> (XX-35) As women drivers we couldn't contribute very much at the company meeting level. The best moment for us was when we got together during the night shift. That was when we would talk about how we could improve conditions, but it was always only within our own little group.

> (XX-34) The company doesn't listen much to our proposals, and we hardly feel involved in the decision-making process at all. We really have to insist about some things – that's the general modus operandi we have here.

Despite this, however, there is evidence to suggest that women's representation in the higher echelons of the organization is somewhat antiquated and rooted in past eras when gender equality and work-life balance were not organizational concerns. This is an androcentric, non reflexive gender practice which maintains the status quo. The company's personnel manager (a man) says:

> (XY-53) The majority of female bus drivers are relatives of male drivers, for us this is very important and we take it into account during the selection process. […] Personally, I don't really understand the Family and Work Life Reconciliation Act, because it doesn't distinguish between small and large companies, or between private and public ones. Look, in this company, only one person has ever opted to take maternity leave, and he was a man. Although truth be told, the women here have a lower absenteeism rate than men, and even those women drivers who have had children worked until very late in their pregnancies.

This type of stance serves to reinforce a benevolent attitude toward women, but at the same time it is restrictive, since preference is given to women with family ties to men already in the company, thus ensuring that their move from the domestic to the professional sphere entails only a minimal change in status, despite the corporate gloss. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the reasons women had for continuing to work both during and after pregnancy (objective risk of losing their job, desire to demonstrate that motherhood is not an obstacle for either women drivers themselves or the organization, etc.). These reasons may prompt women to keep working longer into their pregnancies, to

adapt their maternity within the organizational context or to regulate the changes occurring in the psychological contract between employee and employer (Millward, 2006).

Conclusion

We should highlight the fact that from a very early age, our informant was obliged to overcome many obstacles, all rooted in a patriarchal system in which women were relegated to the domestic sphere, and performed and accepted as part of their intrinsic duties social tasks never required from men.

Immersed in a culture of effort, sacrifice and servitude (manifest in the Social Service), our informant formed part of a group of young women workers obliged by the dictatorial regime to perform "purely feminine" tasks, while at the same time managing to transgress established gender roles and perform a traditionally masculine job, i.e. that of the first woman bus driver.

We believe that, to a certain extent, she did so non reflexively, since according to her account, it was her desire to improve her economic situation that prompted her to develop her professional skills, at least until she qualified as a bus driver. From that moment onwards, she decided to remain in that post not so much for strictly economic reasons (unlike her first five female colleagues), but probably more because she viewed it as a personal challenge, for both herself and in relation to her father and her male work colleagues, who, we must recall, questioned her capacity and staying power.

She became, therefore, the only female bus driver, a working woman who retained a series of feminine characteristics (servitude, amiability, "the blond woman") in a predominantly male social and public scenario, and refused to acknowledge her transgression.

This action for change was facilitated by pressure from the municipal government, in this case exerted by the Lady Mayor. This pressure was an important lever for changing both the organizational strategy and existing gender practices, an outlook which coincides with the idea posed by Reskin and Roos (1990): pressure from government is an important lever for change in organizational policies about gender. The environment as a whole was opposed to any change in the gender status, and this is manifested in the resistance shown by the informant's father.

Resistance was also expressed by female users of the bus service. This reaction can be justified by an understanding of the power and domination relations existing at the time, in which women internalized their status as a dominated group and accepted the reasons which justified their situation (Lorenzi-Cioldi and Doise, 1994). Moreover, the attitude of the female clients of the public transport service was reinforced by the speculations of our informant's work colleagues, which called her professional competence into question. In this way, female stereotypes are perpetuated and the established system, in which men and women occupy asymmetrical positions, is justified (Jost and Banaji, 1994). Perhaps, through her actions, the informant called into question the hierarchical relationship maintained with her father, as well as the social identity of the users and the professional identity of her work colleagues. However, in the eyes of others, she was the exception that proved the rule, although at the same time, she posed a threat to the organizational hegemony.

She seems to have been accepted as an atypical worker who did not threaten the social identity of the group of male employees. Characterized as an agent in the social construction of her own reality, she triggered a certain transformation in gender relations, which in turn resulted in organizational change, mainly due to her personality traits, which prompted her to stand up to established behaviors. Motivated by

achievement, and spurred on by challenge, our informant found a niche in the organization in which she could develop her action. Although it was basically a non reflexive practice, she timidly moved toward reflexive action, and her behavior turned her into an anti-status agent, questioning the established and reified reality, i.e. the professional world of male bus drivers.

At the same time, it could be said that she delayed her personal development in order to achieve a greater degree of professional development, with no obligations toward either a partner or children. This is, de facto, postmodern behavior (Inglehart, 1997), due to her critical rethinking of her socially and legally assigned role.

In short, there are two phases which mark her move from non reflexivity to reflexivity. When new female drivers (e.g. cases XX-34 and XX-35) joined the company during the 1990s, prompted by the need for new labor sources and facilitated by the new labor laws enacted throughout the EEC, our informant was finally rescued from her individual, personalist iconographic status; as a result, she was able to transcend her identity and join the group of women bus drivers. Indeed, this is something that is reflected very clearly in the interviews held with her female colleagues. The fact that more and more women were joining the labor market obliged them to ask questions that were only rendered possible by the force of factual presence; in other words, only in response to their presence did they begin to ask whether, as women, they could indeed do a certain job, a question which led them to re-examine the masculine framework which, until now, had been the only possible choice. This prompts a deconstruction of the image of a driver and the construction of a new social representation which accommodates the new framework and its implications. As Knights and Kerfoot (2004) indicates, the conditions for a binary deconstruction could be stimulated by standing back from the space of representation in order to examine how it reflects and reproduces specific subjectivities, and in our case, how these subjectivities foster a new social representation (Kaplan, 1995), and how organizational change can affect the development of personal identities linked to work (Reissner, 2010).

The notion of driver has to change, along with the set of attributes and concepts which have constructed its representation, the classification of these concepts and, finally, the attitude of the workers and the manager to this social representation.

There is, therefore, a degree of tension between this promotion of organizational change by women workers, in an attempt to ensure greater equality in their working conditions (more evident among younger women drivers, e.g. cases XX-27 and XX-28), and the policy adopted by the manager, which aims to adapt their activities to the masculine model – a key element in this case for understanding organizational change.

In the end, our protagonist is the icon, and later generations of women drivers render her visible by rescuing her from the personal sphere and incorporating her into a new gender practice which, in this case, is collective. Thus, the icon connotes a greater degree of reflexivity. In response to this reality, the organization presents a discourse which outlines its structure as a gender-neutral entity (Acker, 1998), in which the figure of the abstract worker prevails; thus, no conscience intention of demasculinizing the public sphere is evident. All this reveals that gender dynamics and the transition from non reflexivity to reflexivity are located at the intersection between people, the structure of organizations, their change and society. Studies focussing on other masculinized sectors and jobs have shown how women, far from conforming to habitual male practices and habits, promote new attitudinal practices and habits. This is the case, for example, in the study by Houel (2002) involving women hired by an explosives company to work in masculinized jobs. Far from minimizing or even denying the risks inherent in their

activities, as their male coworkers did, these women highlighted the importance of adopting a watchful attitude (change) and respecting company safety procedures.

One of the limitations of these studies is that the transferability of the conclusions drawn from IPAs to other contexts depends on the amount of light they shed (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, our study shows that the insights gained into the experiences of these agents: "changes in gender roles," "individual and group visibility of working women," "new social representation of bus drivers" and "tension between the established order and organizational change" may by applicable to and useful for others who wish to promote similar organizational changes (McWilliam and Ward-Griffin, 2006) in other contexts, based on gender practices. The experiences of women bus drivers may suggest future areas of research in traditionally masculine organizations such as ambulance and rescue services, fire brigades and taxi firms, etc.

Notes

1. Social Service for women was established in Spain in 1937 and consisted of a compulsory six-month service in which women engaged in cooking, childcare and dressmaking tasks. At the same time, they were taught arts, courtesy and civic-mindedness. During that period, General Franco's government required women to complete their social service in order to gain access to certain activities and documents (border worker, university, driving license, passport, etc.).
2. In 1929, the Lady Mayor of this large city became the first woman in Spain to earn a degree in industrial engineering. During her time as Mayor, she reorganized the city's traffic flows, communications, airport and shipping. She won many awards and accolades on many occasions for her work on behalf of the poor and sick.
3. Here, she is referring to the native women of the region, who traveled from the outlying rural villages to the metropolitan area.

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