

ACADEMIC CAREERS IN SPANISH GEOGRAPHY: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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The aim of this article is to study the experiences of women's and men's professional careers within Spanish Geography departments, a professional space that is becoming increasingly competitive and masculine. Within this context, the presence of female geographers is decreasing in relative numbers and their professional status is not improving.

In 1988 we published a survey of the situation of women geographers in the academic structure of Spanish universities and we found that their presence was quite significant (about a third of the teaching staff, although concentrated in low positions), in particular if compared with Anglophone geography. Nevertheless, in the present this appraisal should be modified as the proportion of geography staff who are women is falling, in particular in the young cohorts and the gendered bias in the assessment of academic achievements is leading to a masculine model of the academic career.

The present research project was carried out with quantitative and qualitative methods, though in this article we mainly include the qualitative data and the quantitative data are only used to provide a general context. This qualitative analysis was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews to faculty staff of several Geography Departments. The research also draws upon male academic's accounts to compare the «masculine» and the «feminine» professional career.

The fieldwork has been carried out from 2007 to 2010 and it included in-depth interviews with a total of 58 people from the staff of the twelve universities (almost a quarter of the total of the geography staff of those universities). Of this total, 44 were women and 14 were men. All of them held permanent positions as associate or full professors, the two basic permanent categories in Spanish Universities. The main criteria for inclusion in the sample were age, family situation and professional status within academia.

The largest age group is that between 46 and 60 years of age. Some features relevant for our research are that: (i) a majority of middle aged women have a partner and the single

ones are full professors or very young associate professors, (ii) all men have a partner and all but one have children, (iii) almost a third of women don't have children and (iv) 11 out of 13 female full professors have gone through a process of divorce while none of the male counterparts have.

Scientific productivity and gender differences emerges as a key question in the work/life balance. The lower productivity of women in academia has been explained by the difficulties of reconciling professional and family life for women and by the lower access to informal networks and personal contacts that facilitate publications. Most of the interviewees (women and men) agree that women have a double burden, their professional career but also the main responsibility in the organization of domestic life. At the same time all women interviewed insist that a flexible working schedule is the most highly valued aspect of academic life in order to combine work and family, particularly if they have children. Teaching in the classroom and personal attention to the students require rigid schedules but other research and administrative duties can be more or less adapted to their needs and timetables. Curiously enough, most of the men do not refer to this flexibility of schedule.

In most of the cases, family help -especially by grandmothers and paid help become the main strategies women use to cope with the double burden. In our sample women also mention that their family responsibilities might have slowed down their career although they don't say it very openly. On the contrary, men, with a few exceptions, don't refer to it. Nevertheless, some interviewed women mention that their partners help them, in particular with the care of the children.

It is worthwhile mentioning that some of the interviewed men mentioned that family life had been a very important stabilizing factor for their emotional well-being and for their career. Curiously enough this emotional stabilizing factor linked to the family is never mentioned in the interviews with women, although some of them might have similar feelings.

In Spanish universities, as in many countries, academic careers are strongly gendered as few women reach the highest academic position, which is a full professor. In the interviews criticism was made of the evaluation systems prevailing in academia, based on criteria that ignore the specificities of female careers. A typical academic career is structured according to masculine perceptions of success and the system of meritocracy adopted for promotions reflects and reproduces discursive practices of masculinity and discriminates against a majority of women and some men. This image of the academic career percolates into all the processes of assessment that lead to academic positions that value not only the intensity of scientific production but also the uninterrupted character of it .

Quite few women feel that they have wider and more diverse interests in life than men and therefore they say that they don't want to enter the fierce competition usually associated with attaining a full professorship. The full professorship is considered as a «natural» outcome of a brilliant academic career for a man, whereas for a woman it is mainly seen as a result of an «unnatural» ambition. It stands out very clearly that all female full professors declared that they have had to make an extraordinary effort to become professor and they had to pay a high price, mainly in their personal life. This high price in the personal life seems to be a deterrent factor for women more than for men.

But hopefully, among a few younger male associate professors a new academic model seems to emerge, one that contradicts the image of somebody living in an «ivory tower» fully dedicated to science and no being distracted by other «common» worries as family life.

The results of our research show clearly that in the last decade academic careers in Spanish universities have become longer and tougher. A competitive (and masculine) image percolates into all the evaluation processes that lead to academic positions. Thus, women find their way to academia (as well as their promotion) harder, mostly due to their family responsibilities.

Except in very few cases in which household and family duties are truly shared by both partners, academic women take a much larger load in their daily life. There is a general feeling that family duties are a burden for women's academic career although this does not exclude personal satisfaction by women in taking the main responsibilities of the family. Family duties are also the main drawback for women to accept institutional responsibilities for higher administration.

The female full professors we interviewed suggest that they mostly had to follow the so called «masculine model» of an academic career, that is, they have given priority to their professional career paying a price in their personal as well as academic life (the model that is called Olimpo in the literature). Nevertheless there are some signs for change in the future. In the interviews discourse many women and a few young men are trying to build up a new kind of academic career model that is more gender balance (that is called in the literature Agora), that is an hybrid model between the traditional masculine model and the feminine one.

It should be pointed out that increasing competitiveness in the university careers is one of the reasons for the masculinization of the discipline of geography. But there are other reasons to be added. The image of geography in Spain has moved since the early 1990's from a more traditional and feminine look- linked to a teaching job- to a more masculine and technical one- linked to the sudden growth of technical geography and professional practice outside the university.

In effect, the job market for teaching geography in secondary school was shrinking (and in part has also been taken by historians) while the number of graduate students in geography was enormously expanding; therefore, there was a strong need to look for new outlets for the increasing new arrivals in the job market and in the new curricula of the 1990's the weight of the technical and instrumental subjects was very high (and women seem to be less attracted than men to technical fields).

And, finally, let's say that in order to balance academic careers between men and women geographers it will be difficult and it will take time and effort. But it will also need relevant public policies against discrimination, not only in relation to family life but also in relation to the academic world.

