Feminisation and Paradox: Stratification and Segmentation in Professional Contexts

DANIEL MUZIO*
SHARON C. BOLTON**

ABSTRACT

The past three decades have been characterised by dramatic labour-market developments including the mass entry of women into formerly exclusively male domains. Professional work is particularly indicative of this trend where growth in female membership has fuelled optimistic predictions of shattered glass ceilings and gender equality. This paper seeks to challenge these predictions and to explore the associated assumptions linked with the feminisation of professional work in the United Kingdom. It will do this by focusing on two professional groups: law and management which, despite some substantial differences, present a common and recurrent theme in that they celebrate and sustain a masculine vision of what it is to be a professional. This leads to a series of paradoxes as the professions are increasingly dependent on the contribution of their female members, yet women and women's work continue to be marginalised, downgraded and exploited.

Key words: professions; feminisation; gender; vertical stratification; horizontal segregation.

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* *Lecturer, Department of Organisation, Work and Technology, Lancaster University Management School*
** *Reader in Organisational Analysis, Department of Organisation, Work and Technology, Lancaster University Management School*

INTRODUCTION

The last ten years have been characterised by dramatic developments in the labour market. In particular, we have witnessed the mass entry of women into previously exclusively male domains such as the traditional professions. These developments have led to increasingly optimistic predictions with regards to female emancipation and equal opportunities in what has become known as the feminisation thesis. For instance, the legal profession, traditionally a bastion of male privilege, provides an effective example of these developments. In England and Wales women were altogether excluded from the profession until the 1920s (Sugarman, 1995) whilst their numbers never exceeded the 5 per cent mark throughout most of the twentieth century. However, today female solicitors, following a sustained period of growth, represent 40 per cent of practicing solicitors (SRU, 2004) whilst providing the absolute majority in the crucial under-35 age band. Moreover, given that these trends are set to continue, the days in which the profession will be (numerically) predominantly female are not that distant. Similar trends are noticeable in other white collar and professional occupations, including management. Much like law, management was a predominantly male domain characterised throughout most of the twentieth century by extremely low female participation rates. It was only over the last twenty years or so that this began to change. Today in Britain, women represent over 30 per cent of this occupational category (Wilson, 2005; Chartered Management Institute/Remuneration Economics, 2004; Office of National Statistics, 2004) compared to less than 20 per cent in the late 1970s (Davidson and Cooper, 1993). Therefore, these two key occupational groups seem to be experiencing some similar developments as women move into traditionally male domains.

Despite mounting evidence revealing women's growing numerical dominance in the professions, this paper seeks to challenge the feminisation thesis by exploring the associated assumptions linked with the feminisation of work. It will do this by focusing on two forms of professionalism: law as a liberal professional occupation and management as an organisational profession (Reed, 1996). The analysis is supported by a range of quantitative sources, including: Labour Force Survey (Office of National Statistics, 2004), the Law

Society Annual Statistical Reports (SRU, 2004), and the National Management Salary Survey (Chartered Management Institute/ Remuneration Economics, 2004). These data-sets, which are provided annually by the respective professional associations, were compiled in a database and used to analyse long-term historical trends with regards to the realities of female work within these occupational settings. These quantitative findings are integrated with existing literature and surveys. This contribution focuses on the situation in the United Kingdom but similar processes are typical of a wide range of western economies, including Ireland.[1]

Law and management, besides sharing an increasing process of numerical feminisation, represent two distinct forms of professionalism, thus their comparative analysis may provide some interesting insights into the relationship between gender and professionalisation. Law represents the archetype of the *liberal* or *traditional* profession which has recently been confronted by a more hostile institutional, ideological and operational environment; thus, feminisation is linked to the profession's attempts to develop more profitable organisational configurations, characterised by better leverage ratios and elongated professional hierarchies. Management, on the other hand, may be conceptualised as an *organisational* profession where increasing numbers of women are seen to bring the necessary people skills that are required by commercial success within a new context characterised by female consumer power and a focus on 'soft skills' and the extraction of employee commitment and discretionary effort. Thus, for management, feminisation assumes a functionalist connotation and becomes essential for the profession's expansion and for its success within the present economic context.

Management and law, therefore, present distinct case studies of professionalisation and different patterns of feminisation. However, despite some important differences, professionalism, whether established or emerging, seems, in the context of this analysis, to be underscored by a persistent process of masculinisation as men monopolise senior positions and lucrative, high status specialisms whilst women are confined to a lesser, often transient and, ultimately, proletarian role. This, we argue, reflects a gendered code of professionalism that has been forged in historical processes and

relies on cultural conceptions of masculinity to feed its continual reproduction. In effect, we aim to assert that, whilst the professions may indeed become numerically feminised, professionalism remains a male occupational project. Thus the patterns of vertical stratification and horizontal segregation, identified in the following analysis, expose a series of paradoxes as feminisation may not represent an example of gender equality but may be better explained by processes of intra-professional subordination, exclusion and exploitation whilst the professions' attempts to re-organise for the challenges of the twenty-first century may be paradoxically linked to the undermining and devaluation of whole areas of professional activity.

The Professions: Liberal and Organisational

A great deal of work on the professions has historically been dominated by the attempt to provide universal definitions of what constitutes the foundations of professionalism and professionalisation. However, these 'check list' type of analyses are increasingly unfashionable. Gerry Hanlon, for example, defines this approach as sterile and laments the ink that has been wasted on semantic nuances (1999); after all, professionalism is not a static concept but 'the product of a dialectical relationship with its environment' (Hanlon, 1999: 3). Accordingly, there has been a progressive tendency (Dingwall et al., 1988; Hanlon, 1999; Brock et al., 1999; Watson, 2002) to bracket this whole debate and to simply treat as professions occupations which are commonly seen as such. Indeed, recently there have been attempts (Fournier, 1999) to treat the idea of professionalism as a 'responsibilisation' strategy, used by management to elicit staff commitment and self-regulation. This allows the extension of the concept of professionalism to include occupations such as supermarket workers, where appeals to professionalism might work as a disciplinary device. It is therefore clear that notions of professionalism are being stretched well beyond their traditional boundaries and that there is a growing awareness of multiple patterns of professionalisation. In particular, Mike Reed in a seminal article on the institutionalization of expert labour (1996) distinguishes between a *liberal*, an *organisational* and an *entrepreneurial* form of professionalism.

This contribution builds on this work by focusing on two occupations: law and management, which respectively act as examples of *liberal* and *organisational professionalism*, indicate different patterns of professionalisation and different levels of professional accomplishment. Though representing different professional projects, these two occupations present some core aspects of professionalism and are experiencing comparable structural and cultural developments, including a process of feminisation and its associated patterns of gender exclusion, subordination and discrimination.

Law represents the archetypal model of the *liberal profession*. It presents the formal traits traditionally associated with professionalism, including an esoteric and systematised body of knowledge, formal training and certification, self-regulation and a publicly spirited ethos (Millerson, 1964). Furthermore, it has historically enjoyed a robust jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988), an effective closure regime (regulation of the production of producers) and a solid grip on professional practice (regulation of the production by producers) (Abel, 1988). Law, given its historical success and high degree of accomplishment, has provided an authoritative example for occupations embarking on professionalisation projects and it has been used by sociologists as a benchmark of professionalism (Etzioni, 1969; Johnson, 1972).

Management fits very well the prototype of the *organisational profession* (Reed, 1996). Its knowledge-base, despite the development of advanced managerial qualifications such as the MBA and DBA, is by nature more local and organisation-specific and less amenable to formalisation, systematisation and 'black-boxing'. Traditionally, these occupations, which include managers, technicians and administrators, have tried to succeed by occupying key positions in their organisational hierarchies. This will feature partial processes of closure as well as attempts to extend their knowledge bases to colonise new areas of organisational activity.

Thus respectively, as an example of a *liberal* and an *organisational* profession, law and management offer a valuable opportunity for comparative analysis. These are two very different occupational groups that, for various reasons, are at different stages in their respective professional projects and have experienced different patterns and degrees of feminisation but which, despite obvious structural differences,

share a core characteristic – that is a masculinisation process which, we argue, is an inherent part of any professionalisation project regardless of its strategic and tactical orientation. Professionalism, it seems, continues to be rooted in a male cultural project, which devalues and marginalises women's work whilst, paradoxically, relying on increasing female participation for its own expansion and survival.

The Gendered Code of Professionalisation

Every occupation has a gendered code that offers participants both symbolic and material resources that guide and shape action, interaction and processes of institutionalisation. Seeing gendered codes as a resource highlights how gender is an active and continuing process situated within broader institutional and interactional arenas. That is, gender is treated not as an adjective but as a verb and in doing so it emphasises that both men and women actively 'do' gender, sharing the same space and cultural resources (Davies, 1996; Segal, 1987; West and Zimmerman, 1987). It must be emphasised that a gendered code is not a singular resource referring to either masculine or feminine characteristics but a set of social relations that shape lived experiences for both men and women.

Moreover, it is necessary to note that different gendered codes do not share the same authority or access to institutionalised arrangements, such as the labour market and the professions. Women, and the stereotypical gendered code of femininity which is assigned to them, are often excluded from professional and corporate life precisely because the world of 'work' is still defined in terms of men's experiences of productive labour (Tancred, 1995). Using gendered codes as a device it can be seen how the 'masculine cultural project' of professionalisation (Davies, 1996) introduces practices, processes and structures that produce control, accountability and performativity, but, above all, the exercise of exclusive skill and knowledge in professional practice. Such an emphasis celebrates authority, individuality, competitiveness and predictability, ensuring that a very particular gender code dominates and defines what it is to be a professional. Thus, despite gender being a lived process that is open to continual re-negotiation and change, the masculine cultural project is embedded in the institutionalised structures of the

professions and is self-producing and reinforcing. To attempt to operate outside of the 'code', as the case studies below will show, can be a distinctly uncomfortable experience.

The Paradoxical Processes of Feminisation

Looking at the gendered code of the professions not only highlights the elevation of masculine forms of knowledge and the devaluation of women's knowledge, but also displays women's problematic place within the professions. As the close examination of structural processes within two very different professional projects (law and management) show, gendered codes, despite numerical feminisation, have both symbolic and material consequences.

Law

In the legal profession, feminisation is intrinsically bound to patterns of vertical stratification and horizontal segmentation. For instance, women solicitors are more likely to be in salaried supportive positions, to work part-time, and to work in less lucrative and lower status areas of practice. In a context characterised by mounting financial and operational difficulties, a rapidly expanding cohort of predominantly female salaried solicitors are generating the surpluses which support the earnings and privileges of a relatively prosperous and autonomous elite of predominately male partners. This emerges clearly from the analysis of vertical stratification patterns, whereby women account for over 55 per cent of salaried solicitors but represent only 22 per cent of profit-sharing partners (similar trends emerge from the consideration of Irish data – see Bacik et al., 2003).

Furthermore, if we analyse the work of women solicitors, it is clear that they are confined to certain 'female specialisms' which typically attract lesser terms and conditions. The typical example would be family law, which in the anthropomorphic construction of the law (Sommerlad and Sanderson, 1998) is instinctively associated with the allegedly female traits of empathy, consideration and mediation. Conversely, women play a considerably less significant role in areas such as corporate and commercial law, which are defined in terms of ruthlessness, assertiveness and stamina and cordoned off as male preserves. Accordingly, we have a clear

pattern of horizontal segregation as women do 'women's work' whilst being excluded (or induced to exclude themselves) from the more lucrative and prestigious areas of practice.

Thus the position of women solicitors is not an unproblematic reflection of their actual skills and career choices (Hakim, 1995) but a response to processes of discrimination and exclusion, which, although allowing the mass entry of women into the legal profession, are responsible for keeping them in a position of subordination. For instance, a Law Society (2004a) survey of the employment aspirations of newly qualified solicitors indicates how women do not elect to practice in certain female specialisms (indeed there is minimal differences between the aspirations of male and female trainees) but they are expected to do women's work by a combination of gender typing and closure processes. Furthermore, references to choice and human capital fail to explain why women, across all age bands, are considerably less likely to 'make partnership' than men. For instance, in 2004, less than 60 per cent of women who have practiced law for 20–29 years had attained partnership. The relevant figure for men was almost 80 per cent (Law Society, 2004b). One would assume that after such a period women have indeed developed the same levels of human capital and displayed the same dedication to the profession as their male colleagues.

The formulation of promotion criteria in terms of financial success, commercial acumen and managerial capability may be responsible for the slow progression of female solicitors. The seemingly neutral criterion of 'rain making' (the ability to bring in clients) can and does raise additional obstacles for women. For instance, much legal business is conducted in stereotypically male arenas, including golf courses, local mason's clubs, rugby grounds and heavy drinking sessions (Sommerlad, 2002). Women exclude themselves or are excluded from these forums and their male dominated networks, and this may represent a very significant handicap. Equally, a domestic division of labour where women continue to carry the largest burden of nurturing and supportive functions may limit their ability to embrace the long hours culture and the rising billable targets which characterise contemporary legal work. This is again a serious handicap in a profession which often equates merit with commitment and measures this in purely quantitative

terms. Thus, the gendered code of the legal profession symbolises a masculine worldview which emphasises a hard-hitting, hard-drinking and hard-playing version of professionalism which in turn marginalises and downgrades female contributions.

We argue that this process is encouraging the emergence of a gendered division of labour, as the ascriptive biases and informal criteria which pervade internal closure regimes tend to reproduce patterns of gender-based discrimination and subordination. Thus a clear paradox follows as patterns of gendered stratification and segmentation oppress and subordinate the women solicitors who lie at the very heart of the profession's emergent strategy of survival.

Management

A similar route of stratification and segregation characterises the inclusion of women managers. Despite continual references to the feminisation of management – both numerically and ideologically – women occupy the bottom and middle rungs of a managerial career ladder, are often relegated to established 'female' specialisms and, therefore, experience lesser terms and conditions of employment. A consideration of National Management Salary Survey data (Chartered Management Institute/Remuneration Economics, 2004) clearly shows patterns of stratification as women now account for a third of all mangers but that they are overwhelmingly confined to junior roles and less authoritative positions (a finding which is consistent with Irish data – see McCarthy, 2004). For example, whilst women, in the UK, constitute 40 per cent of the lowest managerial position of section supervisor, they represent only 13 per cent of board directors (a finding which is corroborated by the membership records of the Institute of Directors – where women are 12 per cent of all members). Furthermore, despite the number of women managers steadily increasing over a number of years, it seems that growth in the most influential managerial positions of director, function head and department head has recently halted and in some cases reversed. The percentage of female directors has, for example, declined from almost 15 per cent in 2002 to 13 per cent in 2004 whilst over a similar period of time the number of function heads has declined from 20 per cent to 17.5 per cent. This serves to

demonstrate a clear pattern of stratification whereby women have failed to undermine men's monopoly over the control of large corporations.

Vertical stratification in the managerial ranks is accompanied by patterns of horizontal segregation, as women managers tend to practice what are classified as female specialisms which, as in the case of the legal profession, offer less pay, prestige and career promotion opportunities. The soft, allegedly female skills, such as communication, organisation and support, associated with Human Resource Management together with its history as a welfare role, mean that women dominate this particular function (69 per cent) (Chartered Management Institute/Remuneration Economics, 2004). Similarly, women are a growing majority (50.5 per cent) of marketing mangers, and represent almost half (47.5 per cent) of insurance and pension managers, which is again a specialism which calls on the supportive and welfare role associated with women. In specialisms which have a strong technical component, such as production (5 per cent), research (8 per cent), distribution (8 per cent) and IT (12 per cent), women managers remain a small minority. These patterns of occupational segregation draw upon gendered codes as binary opposites: the association of women with 'soft'/personal skills and men with hard or technical competences, and at the same time reinforces and reproduces these fundamental assumptions. Significant in this regard is the low (and recently declining) ratio of female general mangers (11 per cent), (which incidentally is also one of the most remunerative managerial specialisms). This is particularly important in the context of the generalist character of British management (Ackroyd, 2002), where women appear to be excluded from one of the principal routes into more senior positions.

Of course, in numerical terms women managers have made remarkable progress (Carvel, 2004) whilst being celebrated as the 'new heroes of the business world' (Brundser, 1999), displaying qualities of trustworthiness and delegation (Saunders, 2000). However, ample qualitative evidence suggests women do not claim to draw from a feminine gendered code and symbolic resources but refer to themselves in male terms with statements such as 'I'm still my own man' and adopt male patterns of working and socialising

whilst entirely absenting themselves from any form of domestic role as either mother or partner (Seenan, 2001; Wajcman, 1998). This highlights the central paradox in management's claims to feminisation as a route to professionalisation. It seems that in order to succeed in the masculine cultural project of the professionalisation of management, women draw excessively from masculine norms of conduct and exceed the cultural norms of managing like a man. However, rather than being deemed as strong and rational, they remain excluded as a parody of a male manager – a 'she-male' (Grant, 1988). Thus, whilst management appears to have embraced 'feminine' skills as a strategic resource to be deployed in its occupational project, it remains far from being feminised; women are expected to 'manage like a man' (Wajcman, 1998) whilst gendered segmentation and stratification reveal patterns of exclusion, subordination and devaluation.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of employment patterns reveals how in today's labour market women are increasingly likely to operate in professional roles. The professions' expansion is quantitatively dependent on the participation of a growing number of female members whilst, qualitatively, women professionals are seen as contributing a new range of soft skills and capabilities. Feminisation has to be reframed in an economic context, whereby female participation has been linked to increased profitability, to the development of new capabilities and to a broadening customer base. Thus, women and women's ways have become the most recent material and symbolic resource behind the regeneration of contemporary professionalisation projects.

This situation has been characterised as a win:win scenario as feminisation is refurbishing traditional professional values and arrangements whilst advancing the cause of gender emancipation. Our analysis challenges such optimistic assessments, revealing patterns of segmentation and stratification which underlie the feminised professions. Both the *liberal* and *organisational professions* of law and management emphasise how dominant notions of professionalism are wedded to a masculine gender code which celebrates the male values of control, discipline and rationality,

and which sustains a goal-oriented and target-driven approach to professional practice. Indeed, this analysis exposes a series of paradoxes which frame processes of feminisation. Women professionals are accepted insofar as they bring 'new' skills and, more crucially (given their predominantly salaried status), new surpluses but they are expected to operate within a gendered occupational project which continues to undervalue and marginalise them as 'women'. Thus, whilst there is no doubt that a growing number of women are being included in the previously male domains of law and management, a different scenario emerges if we consider on what terms they are included. In particular, patterns of vertical stratification and horizontal segmentation imply how women's careers typically unfold along 'lesser' pathways and attract fewer rewards and privileges than those traditionally associated with professional status.

The analysis presented here suggests that the notion of gender codes, with its symbolic and material dimensions, makes an important contribution to the unravelling of processes of feminisation and professionalisation. In particular we argue that the equation of professionalism with masculinity results in clearly paradoxical consequences: marginalising women's experiences as professionals and yet enhancing their inclusion and wide scale deployment as strategic resources. Rather than witnessing processes of feminisation, we would argue that it is a case of the continuing masculinisation of the professions whereby 'being professional' continues to be closely identified with the acceptance of a male cultural and behavioural paradigm.

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1 Here, these trends are if anything even more pronounced. Today, women, having more than doubled since the early 1980s, represent 44 per cent of all solicitors whilst constituting two-thirds of undergraduate enrolments (Bacik et al., 2003). Similarly, according to data from the Central Statistics Office, throughout the 1990s women managers have been growing over three times as quickly as their male counterparts and constituted, on the turn of the new millennium, approximately a third of this occupational category (see also McCarthy, 2004; Davidson and Burke, 2004).

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