

Paradoxes of Emancipation



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To achieve success in large corporations, women are adopting strategies which do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes

Femininity and masculinity can be perceived from two perspectives: essentialism and social constructivism. Advocates of the first theory believe that femininity and masculinity are biologically conditioned. From this viewpoint, the psychological and physical characteristics ascribed to each sex are to some extent universal absolutes, independent of socio-cultural or economic-political factors. There is a conviction that women are by definition empathetic, sensitive, delicate, tender, sensual, and caring, while men are inherently strong, brave, self-confident, egotistical, and competitive. The crowning argument of the essentialists, confirming for them the distinctness and the complementary nature of the two sexes, is the maternal instinct they believe women to possess, along with their exclusive ability to bear children. And it is these features and attributes which, according to essentialists, delimit a woman's life calling and the social functions she performs as being centered around motherhood, marriage, and caring for others. Women, regarded as embodying "nature," are assigned the role of cultivating the private sphere, while men, symbolizing culture, are expected to act in the public arena and strive to achieve worldly success. Critics claim that the essentialist approach inevitably leads to a dichotomous view of the sexes, with victorious man at one extreme and defeated woman at the other, and consequently the propagation of sexual inequality from generation to generation.

Constructivists, on the other hand, believe that femininity and masculinity are shaped by social processes, and that sexual identity is always dependent on factors such as the historical era and socio-cultural conditions. This approach rejects the idea of "natural" feminine and

masculine features or attributes. In this context, the decisive role is played by socialization, in the course of which multifarious versions of sexual identity are "written into" people. Femininity and masculinity are not universal concepts, but are fluid and changeable, dependent on time and place. In the extreme version of constructivism, it is even assumed that femininity and masculinity are repressive, power-imbued terms. In any case, the constructivist approach opens a wide field for the emancipation of women, since it contains no ideological restrictions on the features of identity they can take on, or the social roles they can fulfill.

Self-made women

The essentialist view of "traditional" femininity is inconsistent with the aspirations of professional western women intent on successful careers in large corporations organized according to masculine principles. In this environment, many western women must attempt to resolve basic conflicts of identity.

The starting point for describing these conflicts is the liberal concept of meritocracy, in which the idea of fair competition for educational and social success is rooted. This political ideal translates in practice into the principles of "equal access" and "equal opportunities" Although critics of meritocracy correctly point out that its ideology leads to the perpetuation of cultural and economic inequalities, it is through the meritocratic approach that the equality of women with men (even if only potential) has come to be regarded as common sense and a part of everyday life. Meritocracy has opened up new dimensions of emancipation, and even if these have proved – on a mass scale – to be illusory, nevertheless "the impossible has become possible."

In western societies, with each passing decade, women are climbing higher and higher up the social ladder. An ever-greater number of them are gaining higher academic qualifications (of increasingly impressive standards), and they are moving in large numbers into professional domains which had previously been exclusively male. There seems to be in this a return – though in a rather different ideological and social context – to the American idea of the self-made man: a person who owes his success to no one but himself. The contemporary, neoliberal version of this is the "self-made woman," who has "taken life into her own hands" and rejected traditional feminine attributes. The neoliberal reconstruc-



Dilemmas of the dualism of gender roles

tion of women's identity has also given rise to the term "Thatcher's daughters," to describe young women who desire economic independence, wish to pursue a professional career, and do not expect support from men.

The corporation is a man

Critics of the neoliberal approach claim, however, that the labor market functions according to the logic of social development, as defined by the ideology and structures of patriarchy. Metaphorically, it can be said that the large corporation "is a man." It follows that in such an institution, the greatest professional success will be achieved by those who personify its "principles," in other words, its masculinity (in the unequivocally traditional sense).

This gives rise to the "fear of masculinization" experienced consciously or unconsciously by many successful women. C.F. Epstein draws attention to the conflict between traditional ideas of femininity in western society and the qualities required from professional women,

who, if they are to achieve success (especially in such professions as doctor, manager, or lawyer), must possess "masculine" personal attributes, in particular the ability to assess a situation unemotionally. Many critics believe that women occupying positions which involve exercising power over people and taking decisions are peculiarly trapped between femininity and masculinity, as a result of the contradictory expectations society has of them.

What strategies do women adopt in the face of this masculinization of their identity and appearance? Some of them eliminate the problem at the outset through specific educational choices and by taking up occupations geared towards "caring for others," despite their low status and remuneration. The academic choices of many women (and men) are still based on their acceptance of essentialist, normative premises, which associate "feminine values" with such fields as the humanities and fine arts, and "masculine values" with management, the natural sciences, mathematics, and engineering. This

The professional success of contemporary women – crossing boundaries?

leads to the cultural perpetuation of the gender-specific-occupational structure of society, with women avoiding the masculinization – and men the feminization – of their identity and life choices.

On the other hand, some of the women who decide to compete with men in a game based on masculine logic and rationality have no problems with accepting and adopting a masculine identity. They study traditionally masculine subjects, take up traditionally masculine occupations, and pursue careers in large corporations. It follows that they must fight within themselves against their redundant feminine qualities, and willingly accept a masculine “corporate identity,” with all its consequences. In this way, they attempt to eliminate the possibility of emotional attachments with men, and avoid the “turbulence” in their private lives that might hinder them in their careers. Moreover, bearing in mind that “career women” spend a considerable amount of time at work and command high salaries – often earning much more than their partners – it is not surprising that the divorce rate among this group is higher than among other groups of women.

The queen bee syndrome

This characteristic masculinization of career women is confirmed by research, which shows that women in managerial positions are more similar to their colleagues in comparable posts than to other women who are not managers. Nor is it hard to notice that such women sometimes stylize their external appearance in order to look (stereotypically) more credible, serious, and responsible – in other words, more masculine.

In this context, a significant phenomenon is the “queen bee syndrome,” whereby women pursuing successful careers, in accepting masculine standards and values, feel contemptuous towards traditional feminine values and towards other women. Such women emphasize their own differentness, distancing themselves from other women and not feeling any solidarity with them. They illustrate what was described by Karen Horney as an “escape from femininity,” since femininity, in their opinion, is something inferior and devoid of value.

Analysis of this masculinization, particularly in the context of successful women identifying themselves with men, reveals another paradoxical element of women’s emancipation. On the one hand, women in the neoliberal world who have achieved professional success on “masculine terms,” and in corporations functioning on the basis of masculine logic, are a symbol of liberated womanhood; since who could more completely fulfill women’s emancipatory dreams of equal rights? On the other hand, such women confirm the androcentrism (and patriarchalism) of contemporary society in general, and in particular of “organizational culture,” not to mention corporate culture. In neoliberal society (ostensibly blind

to sex, ethnicity, or race), successful women are adopting the identity of the dominant group – men – and losing their traditional femininity.

Another aspect of the masculinization of women in positions of power should also be mentioned. In contemporary societies, women are still perceived as sex objects, or “fields for conquest”; to recall the views of Pierre Bourdieu, women are “symbolic objects,” who are expected to exhibit themselves for the approval of men (and women), and thus feel varying degrees of insecurity about their appearance. The consequence of this is that in the social perception of women, one of the fundamental forms of classification is not on the lines of traditional sociological divisions (class, level of education, or socio-economic status), but according to specific socio-biological criteria connected with sexual attractiveness. Research has shown again and again that the feeling of being attractive to men is, for many women, one of the most important components of their sense of self-worth. How then can women in positions of power retain their sexual attractiveness at the same time as maintaining their full authority? The simplest and most obvious solution is to adopt the traditionally masculine method of exercising power, by distancing themselves from their male colleagues and subordinates. In this way, they create an image which says, “On the outside I am a beautiful woman, but inside I am a hard man.” The masculinization of identity in such cases seems unavoidable.

Dilemmas of identity

All of these theses and suppositions were confirmed by the results of the qualitative research I conducted among Polish women occupying higher managerial positions, who are continuously faced with dilemmas and life choices which touch directly on their sexual identity and femininity. They sometimes give the impression that they are balancing on specific life boundaries: between motherhood and career; between traditional femininity and masculinized femininity; between an empathetic identity and a masculine corporate identity. It should be noted that for the majority of women managers, the neoliberal ideology of success, allowing women to take up roles previously reserved exclusively for men, is considerably more attractive than traditional femininity, with its emphasis on the family and children. For these women, there is no problem of masculinization, since they have incorporated it into the version of femininity which they embody: working like men, they feel a hundred per cent feminine.

However, it is worth considering the question of whether it is possible for the world of management and business to accept a more womanly style of exercising power, calling on the virtues of “traditional femininity,” and based on more democratic and horizontal relations. In practice, this seems to be possible only at the lowest



BE338

Equality, or just new forms of gender asymmetry?

levels of decision-making. Thus, in view of the ever-increasing number of successful professional women, the “masculinization dilemma” is a problem that is sure to become more widespread. ■

Further reading:

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