

Bureaucracy and gender segregation



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The working environment can be very enjoyable and satisfying during and at the end of it all. While working, however, individuals have to grapple with different social aspects at the work setting. These social bombardments at work can affirmatively or negatively contribute tremendously to the meaning and experience that one has at work. This paper will explore some of the experiences that working individuals go through by way of analyzing the work experiences of a gentleman from Shanghai and an elderly lady from Hong Kong aged 27 and 56 years respectively. It will also go further to compare the working lives of the duo in the light of sociological concepts and themes associated with work.

Sociological Reflections of Work Experience:

Harry Braverman (1974) defines work as a goal oriented activity having a product or an outcome. The working environment in the contemporary world is characterized by a steady and progressive advancement in computer technology, non-unionization, and low salaries and wages. As I interviewed the Shanghai gentleman and the Hong Kong lady, I noted that both of them complained about low wages on the one hand but agreed that technological advancement improved the efficiency and quality of their work. In other instances, work sociology involves the application of bureaucracy. In *Economy and Society*, Weber (2002) posits that a bureaucratic authorial structure is characterized by ordering of duties, a commanding structure and a systematic provision of a means to execute those duties. He continues to note that bureaucracy, an authoritative entity, comprises of jurisdictional competency; office hierarchy, a management that follows general rules and that relies on written documents; has a tenured position for officials, and

expert training. Thus, Weber (2002) provides an assurance that bureaucracy is fully rooted in the contemporary world. This kind of leadership is evident in the work experiences of both my subjects; both worked under the supervision of a boss whom they described as “ strict, super careful and detail conscious.” The elderly lady also mentioned that her first job entailed being a “ junior secretary to an executive chef.” She further mentions that she was a “ secretary to a personnel manager.” The duo, therefore, experienced the power and dominance that came with a bureaucratic system. Moreover, both of them had some academic competency with skills (Leadership, Communication and Problem solving) that enabled them to perform at their various jobs.

Moreover, a consideration of both surveys elicits the issue of gender segregation. This type of inequality has been a major player in the sociology of work since time immemorial. However, a paradigm shift has been observed with gender imbalances taking a nosedive over the years especially with regards to paid work. Blau, Brinton and Grusky (2000, p. 245) say that the trends in the market work as far as gender is concerned is convergent even though the progress is not continuous. They also note that changes in gender are asymmetrical since the number of women participating in the paid work (“ male” frontiers) has skyrocketed and thus weakening the patriarchy that has defined work settings for decades; on the flip side, the number of men joining the unpaid household work is insignificant relative to the aforementioned. The Hong Kong lady attests to this notable change of what has been considered a norm in the working arena. Right from her aspirations of being a manager and the need to

improve the financial status of their family, it is noticeable that she has been inclined to venture into paid work. She later on worked as junior secretary, a human resource professional and then settled for a fulltime job working for 9 hours a day. According to economists, the rise in women participation in the paid work is attributable to an increase in opportunity cost allowing one to be a homemaker (Bergmann 2005). The decline seen in men's wages as was noted by the gentleman from Shanghai who claimed that he is not worth what he was being paid, has necessitated the need for a second paycheck in the household. Hence, the Hong Kong lady got into employment to supplement what her father and husband earned. Gender biasness can be seen in the case of the Shanghai gentleman who claimed that one of the ladies he worked with at the Consultancy firm received the same pay package as his even though he invested more effort at work. He claims that perhaps it was because the lady was beautiful.

Dignity at work and Division of Labor

Furthermore, “ Working with dignity is a foundation for a fully realized life. Despite many denials of dignity faced daily in the workplace, people still strive to do their best, to take pride in their work, and to defend themselves against indignities from employers, and sometimes from coworkers” (Hodson, 2001). Dignity at work has been sought by many an employee and more often than not contributes to the wellbeing of an employee and boosts the overall effectiveness of the employee. Most persons prefer to work where their efforts are recognized and valued either by the employer or other colleagues. Workers can produce effectively even in scenarios where they are underpaid as long as they feel that they are dignified. The Hong Kong

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lady for instance, mentioned that at one point she worked as a clerk and received a meager salary of 1800 Hong Kong dollars. She, however, mentioned that she like the job since she understood it and was thus liked by the boss. This understanding and the appreciation reciprocated by her employer uplifted her dignity thus enabling her to cope even with the low pay she received. In addition, her dignity was at low ebb when perhaps, she lacked some hard skills in handling her job at some point in her job life. As the worst experience, she says she “ had no idea [of] how to handle the assigned task” and as the best experience, she says that she “ completed the task through teamwork and [was] praised by [her] boss.” The Shanghai gentleman on the other hand experienced a lowered dignity due to the lack of challenges presented by the work. He also says that his first job was not worth the pay he received because his bonuses remained the same even after flexing time and putting extra effort.

Further, division of labor is a sociological concept necessary for solidarity. Durkheim, in giving a nuanced understanding of the concept of anomie, mentions it in the light of the division of labor in the society. Durkheim observed that the division of labor contributed to social cohesion at work. Weber and Karl Max on the other hand, thought that a capitalistic society was responsible for the social tension that was being experienced during the industrial revolution. In order to reinforce social norms and hence social cohesion, Durkheim saw it necessary to initiate occupational groups to replace normative functions once practiced by organizations. The Hong Kong lady mentioned that she was praised by her boss because of completing some assignment through team effort. Such teamwork is encouraged in most

institutions since it enhances solidarity and fosters integration of the various specialties existing in an organization; the efforts of the employees are converged towards a common goal and vision (Durkheim, 1986).