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The Role of Associations in Women's Access to Public Space through work¹

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Introduction

Working women are the social norm today in France. 46.5% of working people are women. However, the barriers to entry or retention in the labour market remain a reality (Flahault, 2006) and inequalities between men and women remain stark. The general picture shows “the conjunction of essential social change with the permanence of tough inequalities” (Maruani, 2003). In such a context, this paper will consider the role of the voluntary sector² in women's access to a particular public sphere: the labour market. Indeed, even beyond associations whose primary objective is bringing back to the labour market people who have become distanced from it (work integration businesses), recent investigations conducted by economists or sociologists show that the nonprofit sector seems to be conducive to women's employment.

Analysing voluntary sector as employer is recent in France, probably because the sector is generally regarded as unpaid volunteering. Indeed, 84% of French associations operate only through a volunteer labour, without resorting to paid employment. But on the one hand volunteering can be analysed as work (Simonet, 2004), and on the other hand the voluntary sector currently uses 1.9 million employees (all fields combined and encompassing an extreme diversity), which represents 1.05 million full-time equivalent employment (FTE) and nearly 10% of wage employment in the private sector (Tchernonog, 2007). Finally, it should be noted that the limits between the various statuses of employee, volunteer and activist are far from being clear cut.

In this paper, we draw upon sociology of work and sociology of gender to analyze women's position in the voluntary sector when the association is the employer. We will begin with an overview of women's situation as regards paid employment in nonprofit sector. Then we will examine the specific relation that voluntary sector employees can have to their work, and we will explore the effects of this particular relation, the assumption being that it may participate

¹ Thank you very much to Maroussia Raveaud for her attentive rereading of the English translation of this text; and to Annie Dussuet for her contribution to this paper.

² In France the social economy includes associations, cooperatives and friendly societies. In this text, we will only consider associations. However, for an easier reading for English-speaking people we will use the terms “nonprofit sector” or “voluntary sector” instead of associations.

in making the nonprofit sector a space of relegation for women, or for certain categories of women.

Our considerations are based on a review of the literature, field research on employees, volunteers and leaders of associations in three major sectors of activity (personal services, environment, women's rights) and on interviews with voluntary sector employees, all sectors of activity combined, on their satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction at work.

Associations and women's employment: an ambiguous relationship

In the French context where inequalities between men and women in the labour market are still marked, the voluntary sector is both open to women and relatively more egalitarian than either the private profit sector or the public sector.

A source of jobs for women

Indeed, if one excludes work integration associations whose specific objectives introduce a bias³, the voluntary sector is conducive to women's employment through three dimensions.

Firstly it is a labour market that is wide open to women as on average 68% of the voluntary sector's jobs are occupied by women (Tchernonog, 2007). These figures vary significantly from one sector to another, with a proportion of women reaching 83% in the field of social action. If we stick to the activity rather than the sector we find up to 99% women in the home services (Dussuet, 2006). Voluntary sector is a gateway to employment, including for women who had been far from it.

On the other hand, associations open career opportunities to their employees that the lucrative sector does not necessarily offer them. Thus the proportion of women in management positions, despite the existence of a glass ceiling as everywhere, is a little higher than in profit organizations. Women proportionally access more management positions.

Finally, even if the wage gap between men and women remains, it is lower than in private profit sector organizations (Narcy, 2006).

In the light of these findings one could be optimistic and consider the voluntary sector not only as an open space to women, but also as an arena reducing inequality between men and women on the labour market. However a critical examination of these findings is necessary.

But poor quality jobs

A closer look at the quality of jobs offered by the nonprofit sector, especially to women employees, shows that it is not so simple. In fact the main indicators of job quality converge to draw a grim picture.

Firstly, the share of fixed term contracts is significant: nearly a quarter (24%) of voluntary sector jobs identified in 2005/2006 are on fixed term contracts (vs. 8% in general); only 65% of jobs are permanent (vs. 85% overall) and 11% are made up of various statuses (trainees, casual...) which do not stand out for their stability or their quality (Tchernonog, 2007).

The high proportion of temporary statuses is partly due to the use of subsidized jobs. Thus

³ Unless otherwise stated, data are all sectors combined, with the exception of work integration businesses.

42% of associations declare using such subsidized jobs. These “subsidized contracts” represent approximately 15% of voluntary employment (Hély, 2005). The voluntary sector, “as a space for experimenting with public employment support policies, has also been at the forefront of inventing new work statuses which, in the name of the right to work, have sometimes developed outside the labour law” (Bec, 2007).

In the same logic, part-time workers are legion, including people in management positions. Finally classic employment seems to be atypical in the voluntary sector (Chapron, Choquet, 1995).

The access of women to management positions must also be relativized insofar as the voluntary sector offers proportionally fewer management positions than other sectors. Furthermore, management roles in this context are a little atypical, and this trend is spreading (Bouffartigue 2001). These roles are characterized by narrower responsibilities (employees being few executives manage a small number of people), a limited career (as a result of the flattening of the hierarchy, peaks are achieved faster), no job security (continuity of funding is never guaranteed).

Finally, if the wage gap between men and women is less obvious, it is also because wage levels are lower than elsewhere, all the more so as the employees first began as volunteers in the same organisation (Hély, 2007). “At an equivalent professional level, working for the voluntary sector leads to a decrease in the remuneration received by approximately 18%” (Le Gros, Narcy, 2004), “Wages in the voluntary sector are weaker than that of private employees (the unit of measure is the gross median hourly wage). Nevertheless, it is higher than that of local authorities employees, which can probably be explained by the presence of more highly qualified staff, consisting of intermediate professions in voluntary businesses” (Hély, 2005). In this respect, it may be recalled that the hierarchy of wages is flattened in the voluntary sector, a flattening which penalizes particularly the highly qualified, who are paid less than they would be in the market sector. It is worth remembering that many associations fall outside the remit of collective bargaining, or are subject to a collective bargaining adopted “by default” in the absence of negotiations in their own activity. Furthermore the presence of unions is particularly weak due to the small size of the vast majority of associations, and there is also a historical distrust on the part of trade union confederations towards the social economy.

It may finally be asked to what extent these voluntary sector job characteristics are linked to the presence of women in this environment. But it is difficult to determine which way to consider the relationship: are there more women as graduate men would not accept such low wages, women being more likely to adhere to values such as commitment and thus to accept a lower salary in return for an interesting job (Baudelot, Gollac, 2003), or on the contrary are the wages so low because of the combination of a feminine workforce and the non profit sector which is indeed located in the sectors of activity most often derogatory to labour law?

What mechanisms are at work?

The nature of the mechanisms at work may thus be queried. In particular, aspects of informal organisations, the fact that employees and volunteers coexist in the same organisation, the humanist values they defend: are such characteristics neutral in terms of gender? It can be assumed that these elements can introduce a “public space close-by” (Laville, Nyssens, 2001), as an intermediate space between the public and private spheres, making it more easily

accessible to women than the public sphere.

A feature of voluntary sector employment (with still very high specificities from one sector to another) is the existence of a blurring of boundaries between volunteers and employees, creating an interference often conducive to a deterioration of working conditions. Given the values of the voluntary sector, there is a certain acceptance on the part of employees and / or a strong demand for acceptance from the employer⁴ of working conditions which would not be accepted in other circumstances where commitment is not expected. And one may wonder whether this blurring of boundaries and degradation of work relationships is not all the easier as employees in associations are often women. Women may be pressed into accepting atypical working conditions or employment given their objectively weaker position on the labour market, and with reference to values. Indeed, the values of altruism and solidarity as well as the notion of giving that characterise many volunteers would then join the gender factor to construct a gender-specific standard of employment, derogatory to the common standards.

An original relationship with work...

The interviews carried out with voluntary sector employees show that they have an original relationship to their work, which partly echoes the relationship of workers in services (contact with users, social utility...) and that of public sector workers (public service, general interest...), yet retains its own specificities.

When asked about their job satisfaction, voluntary sector employees mention causes for dissatisfaction, which they quickly however put into perspective by listing their reasons for satisfaction.

The reasons for dissatisfaction mentioned are twofold. Firstly organizational constraints have consequences on their working conditions. The lack of financial resources translates into inadequate or obsolete working tools available to employees; the perpetual quest for new sources of funding can lead them to spending less time on what they regard as the heart of their missions; an obligation to work with volunteers multiplies decision-making spheres and can lead to a “waste of time” in decision-making and complicating the organization.

Secondly types of human resource management constrain their conditions of employment. All criticism concerns inadequate recognition of the work achieved, of working post and of the importance of missions performed for the association. This lack of recognition may be expressed directly (“my work is not recognized”) or indirectly through complaints on wages or working time. The difficulty to strictly limit working time is reflected in the increase in overtime which is rarely paid, sometimes compensated for, but more often ignored as such and counted as an asset of - more or less spontaneous - a voluntary commitment in addition to contractual working time.

But the interviews make clear an important point. The reasons for dissatisfaction appear both fewer and less “serious” than the satisfaction that the employees of associations gain from their work; when they are not simply non-existent. For a substantial proportion of respondents, discomforts which are pointed out, especially those related to remuneration, are played in perspective, and instead they highlight the advantages and “compensations” due to what is regarded as the specificity of voluntary sector.

In a way, employees moderate their dissatisfaction with pay by shifting perspectives. From a

⁴ Remember that the employer here is a volunteer

pure market and instrumental point of view, their wages per number of hours worked would appear clearly insufficient. But they refuse this justification, to adopt another reference of Justice, which may be that of the “domestic city”, or even the “civic city” (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991). Therefore, low wages may be ascribed to personal characteristics of the employee (at the beginning of his/her working life, young people with few needs because no family yet, women in a couple and the ideology of the “male breadwinner”...), or the specificity of the associative organization (limited resources, social utility...). But one can assume that the displacement of reasoning out of the market logic, carried out by many of their employees, is used by organisations to use their work at a reduced cost.

Finally, the best way for voluntary sector employees to distance themselves from the inconvenience mentioned above, is to identify the numerous positive aspects which pepper their lives at work. Indeed, we have pointed out that for the majority of them reasons for satisfaction prevail, often by a wide margin. Respondents speak time and again the sense of social utility, human contacts, autonomy, the variety of roles, a friendly work atmosphere, self fulfilment.

... based on shared values

Working in the non profit sector appears equivalent to a commitment in the name of values. Thus the values present in the voluntary sector that emphasize human and not financial results are reported to induce more pleasant working conditions. In particular, a different relationship to money diminishes the weight of quantitative targets and sets goals of a qualitative order. In such conditions it understandably becomes difficult to distinguish between factors relating to the job for which the employee was hired by contract and those characterising activism: in the voluntary sector, these two settings of experience (Goffman, 1991) seem inextricably intertwined.

Another dimension frequently put forward by respondents is that working in the voluntary sector gives meaning to work. One could even consider that these two settings of experience are confused by giving meaning to the work done: like volunteers, voluntary sector employees can often determine the impact of their work. In associations focused on helping others, the dimension of proximity is essential: employees do not only know that they are useful, but they know specifically to whom and how. Thus the meaning of work often offsets its monetary aspects, especially when there are interpersonal relationships with the people helped. The logic of the gift, introduced by employees, intervenes here to counter the logic of the market. Being paid less than that which one could otherwise claim becomes acceptable, in the name of the relationship with others.

Being a voluntary sector employee is also said to create a place for the human factor and for autonomy. Thus, employees interviewed seem to agree they enjoy a good atmosphere in the organisations where they work. And they seem to consider that these good relationships with colleagues, with interpersonal meetings and cordial – even friendly – relationships are based on voluntary sector values. Some even refer to a “family” atmosphere. This concern for people is also said to be reflected by autonomy at work and freedom, which sometimes open up spaces for innovation in organizations, which allows for a recognition of inventiveness and creativity as sign of one’s being unique. According to the interviews, the work of voluntary sector employees does not appear monotonous. With few exceptions, respondents said they did not have a standard working day. Diversity of tasks, flexibility and freedom of

organization are put forward as assets of the sector. The recurrence of this sense of variety also reflects management methods of work in nonprofit sector: Employees are not subject to prescription, their work is not repetitive, and they are instead asked to accomplish a mission. Although employees seem to believe that this is a characteristic of associations, this sort of management is very close to what is also practiced in private for profit companies under the name of management “by objectives” or “by project”.

Finally, working in the voluntary sector is seen as a source of self-fulfilment. If the grounds for satisfaction are multiple and diverse, they tend to be linked to notions of personal development and self-realization. In carrying out the work itself, voluntary sector employees find reasons to be satisfied with their conditions of employment, even if they are objectively worse than in other sectors. The intrinsic interest of the work is then seen as a counterpart for lower pay. It is clear that the work is not considered in the manner of classical economics as a penalty, like a hard alienating time in exchange for which one expects to be paid the largest possible amount, but as a way of becoming a rounded fully-fledged human person.

In other words, it is in their relationship to their work itself that the voluntary sector employees seem to find grounds for satisfaction, not in the monetary counterparts involved. This is one reason why, for many respondents, working in the voluntary sector is a choice – one which is not always made originally, but often constructed in the course of the experience.

Conclusion

Between commitment and work, between private and public space, the association's world appears to be an intermediary space, favourable to women's access to the labour market, including those who are the farthest from it. In this way, it participates to the empowerment of women through access to public space. But because of this specific position in the public sphere of work, certain features of voluntary sector as employer are risk factors for the sustainability and the quality of women's employment. The concentration of non profit sector activities in sectors derogatory to labour law, the important place of humanist values which can lead employees to a commitment beyond their employment contract, the coexistence of volunteers and employees sometimes involved in the same actions within the same association, the fragility of the status of employment in many structures, especially the relationship to employment developed by the majority of voluntary sector employees, all these factors weaken employees. It can thus be feared that the associations may become, if they are not already, spaces of relegation, contributing to confining women they employ in devalued segments of the labour market. To limit this risk of voluntary sector instrumentalization leading it to "produce" lower quality employment, particularly for women, associations have assets that are not to be neglected. This consist in the attention they give to training their employees, but principally in the “political” character of these organizations and the importance of controlling the orientation followed by the decision-making bodies, the governing bodies.

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