

OCCUPATIONAL RISK AND MASCULINITY: THE CASE OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IN SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

The manual trades in construction in Spain have been characterized by their hard working conditions and high accident rates. They have also been viewed as part of a “low-road” model in terms of industrial development and of employment relations. The hiring of labor is carried out by means of small and very small subcontractors competing with each other, with atypical contracting practices and with strong competition among workers, little recognition for formal qualifications, and little power for the workers to engage with risk prevention or to negotiate working conditions in the workplace. This is coupled with the fact that the sector is almost entirely closed to women. Following the first part of this article, in which the elements under consideration are explained and contextualized, the article analyzes these relationships through in-depth interviews conducted in 2010 with women who had completed a two-year training course in the painting of finished construction and drywall that ended in 2004; most of them had experience in the industry. Their outsider’s point of view gave us a perspective on the relationship between the labor market characteristics of the construction sector and the masculine subculture that dominates the work environment. We conclude that in the context of the industry’s development pattern and “low-road”

employment relations, the masculine work culture functions in two ways: it makes more tolerable (for men) the physical effort and forced acceptance of safety risks, and it helps to construct a “masculinity” that functions as a mechanism for the social exclusion of an entire social group, that of women, who encounter great difficulties integrating themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The construction sector has had enormous influence on the Spanish labor market and was the biggest job creator in the strong growth cycle that operated from 2001 to 2006. Specifically, those employed in construction accounted for 9.5% of total employment in Spain in 1997, while in 2004 the proportion had risen to 12.5% (Colectivo IOE, 2005). It is also a sector that is highly segregated by gender, where it is rare to spot a woman, especially in manual occupations. Bearing in mind this background, in 2004, when the industry was looking for workers, public institutions, taking advantage of European funds, came up with the idea of offering training for women to enable them to join certain construction trades. The aim was twofold: to reduce gender segregation in the industry and to increase the supply of labor to a sector that was growing. The experience of women working in the construction industry gives us a privileged vantage point from which to analyze how the masculine culture in construction relates to the sector's working conditions, which are the result of and are in turn sustained by the industry's pattern of development and employment relations. We have approached the topic of the work culture through in-depth interviews with women working in construction, where they encountered it when they joined the workforce, who have related their perception of the “masculine” culture and some industry characteristics, including the job insecurity, the physical effort, and the high accident rate.

The first part of this article outlines the scope of the research in the building industry to be covered in the empirical part that follows. Firstly, we look at the type of employment relations in construction, with particular emphasis on the labor model and the highly fragmented business structure, with high proportions of temporary contracts and extensive subcontracting and, concomitant with this, little union representation in the workplace. Secondly, we examine the poor management of occupational risk prevention, which affects not only “accidents” as such but also injuries, strains, and other issues affecting health and safety. Finally, we consider gender stereotypes and the masculine worker subculture, including the ways in which people present themselves to their peers. Physical gestures, forms of speech, and what is said are all elements in constructing masculine identity at work and function as a barrier that maintains the industry's deep segregation. After the section on methodology, the relationship between these elements—the models for production and employment relations, including the lack of risk-prevention management, and the masculine work culture—shows how the

“macho” subculture makes it possible for male workers to adapt themselves better to the model’s bad working conditions. To examine all this, in the analytical sections, we bring together, in a slightly different form, the aspects that we have found most salient in the women workers’ interviews. The first analytical section focuses on the analysis of flexible employment relations: the marked lack of continuity in the industry’s employment relationships, as well as its deregulated nature. The second and larger analytical section goes further into the characteristics of the masculine subculture as extracted from the interviewees’ words and arising from contrasts—in other words, from the women’s surprise at what they meet on a daily basis in their work. Throughout the analysis, we attempt to make clear how these women perceive the gap between formal regulations and informal “rules,” and how this affects everyday behavior. The findings at the end of the article focus on this intersection between the industry’s “structural insecurity,” the masculine worker subculture, and the emphasis placed on physical strength and risk.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Several comparative studies of the characteristics of the construction industry in the developed world have drawn a picture of dichotomous typologies in patterns of development, as a result of different countries’ differing responses to common industry challenges, especially the impact of economic cycles and a high level of competition (Bosch & Philips, 2003; Byrne & van der Meer, 2003). According to these studies, some countries follow a “high-road” development model, with deliberate connotations of “taking the high road” as the morally superior or more high-minded option. This denotes an employment pattern defined by the centrality of skilled workers, who hold professional qualifications, which are awarded by agencies separate from the businesses (government agencies or industry bodies) and are recognized in hiring, in addition to stable contracts. In this model, there are institutions designed to protect workers from the vicissitudes of the production cycles, as well as mechanisms of cooperation between companies. Contrasted with this model, there is an inferior, “low-road” type, which is where the Spanish construction sector is located. In this model, most workers do not have recognized occupational training; nor are there external mechanisms to control professional qualifications. Qualifications are not the usual criteria for entry or the route into employment in the sector, except for the few occupations where an authority has intervened to ensure work safety, such as for electricians, gas fitters, and, more recently, crane operators (Banyuls et al., 2009). In all other trades, in this model, “on the job” training predominates, so that learning is done while working, on the basis of the master-apprentice relationship, while, in the absence of any objective professional accreditation, recognition of professional status depends largely on the employer and on traditional mechanisms of internal promotion.

In the “low-road” model, relationships between companies are dominated by hierarchical links of subcontracting and horizontal competition. A small group of large companies acts as developers and contractors, with a high degree of cooperation between them (Recio, de Alós-Moner, & Olivares, 2006). The manual work (although it is part of the technical work) is outsourced to external companies, which tend to be small or very small and to lack protective mechanisms against volatility and conditions of tough competition. These companies hire most of the workers who carry out traditional manual jobs under “atypical” conditions, involving temporary positions (50% of total employment in the first quarter of 2008, according to the Economically Active Population Survey [Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012]) and, in particular, self-employment (with characteristics that are peculiar to this industry). This model thus gives the large companies access to a secondary labor market, and sometimes even to the extensive informal labor market. Workers operating through subcontracts are isolated from secure, stable employment and rotate between jobs and between firms that are in direct competition with each other, and these workers suffer high levels of unemployment even in boom periods (Recio, 2007).

In this industry, collective agreements are for the sector as a whole and function primarily as a frame of reference. Although contractual wages are not low, there are many workers who earn less than the agreed rates, because categories are often applied at a lower level than the actual work being performed, according to the provisions of the collective agreement (Pajares, 2007), and the working day is often lengthened. Workers are often paid piecework rates.

The unions find it difficult to enter the world of the micro-businesses that make up the subcontracting chains. The lack of personnel continuity caused by temporary hiring in an environment of business fragmentation and subcontracting (Colectivo IOE, 2005) means that in micro and small enterprises, where the bulk of the workforce is located, the election of workers’ representatives is rare and the vast majority do not have working agreements. Although we found no data on union membership in the sector, it can be assumed to be low, since the overall rate of union membership in Spain in 2005 dropped to only 12.2% (Richards, 2008). The rate is even lower for groups that are vulnerable or marginal (Pitxer & Sánchez, 2008). Thus, the “low road” creates conditions with plenty of jobs that can be characterized as hard, dirty, and degrading (Byrne, Clarke, & van der Meer, 2005).

In summary, while the “high-road” model is characterized by being intensive in terms of both physical and human capital, and technologically very dynamic, with the involvement of the state and/or the industry itself in the training of its professionals, the construction sector in Spain is characterized by the “low-road” model, hiring a workforce with little formal professional training. As Recio said: “The low-road type is based on learning on the job, strong competition between workers and subcontracting, which leads to poor working conditions and insufficient safety nets, only palliated in recent years by strong growth in

the countries where this model is predominant” (Recio quoted in DYNAMO, 2007: 52).

Working Conditions, Accidents, and Dangers to Health

It is recognized that the construction industry worldwide is a sector of comparatively high accident rates, associated with risk factors that directly endanger life, including falls, blows, electrocutions, and crushing. The industry also suffers from a very high prevalence of work-related ill-health, resulting from exposure to physical and chemical pollutants (causing dermatitis, asthma, cancer, deafness, etc.), physical exertion, repetitive movements and work in dangerous or stressful physical positions (leading to musculoskeletal injuries), and also psychosocial risks that derive from the way work is organized (causing stress, etc.) (Murie, 2007; Stocks et al., 2011).

There is a huge number of institutional variables in different national systems for reporting accidents and work-related ill health, so comparison of their statistics must be undertaken with extreme caution (Benavides, Delclos, Cooper, & Benach, 2003; for the year 2005, see, for example, CPWR, 2008). Despite these caveats, there is no question that, during the boom years in real estate, the accident rate in Spanish construction reached truly alarming levels and presented its own set of case profiles. In this context, a report by the Spanish National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (INSHT) notes the impact in this sector of musculoskeletal conditions, particularly their high incidence among those workers with one year of seniority or less (Vicente Abad, 2009), a figure that is consistent with a higher likelihood of accidents among workers on temporary contracts (Camino López et al., 2008). This INSHT report also indicates that the highest workers’ accident rate was found in companies with fewer than 25 employees, rising even further in companies with fewer than five workers.

The severity of the situation was recognized by the central government when it introduced an amendment to legislation for the industry in 2006 in the form of Law 32/2006, on October 18, to regulate subcontracting in the construction industry. This addressed the lack of coordination in projects involving multiple companies, established that contractors had safety obligations toward workers employed by subcontractors, and limited the subcontracting chain. In addition, various regional governments, in concert with social agencies, developed “accident plans” designed to monitor the industry’s compliance with the regulations, usually with good results. Despite the crisis in the sector, that led to a dramatic reduction of the figures of accidents in the construction industry in Spain, it still had the highest rates of incidence for accidents.

A major reason why it is proving so difficult to reduce the number of accidents in the sector is the weakness of prevention in workplaces. The Spanish legislation—the Law on Prevention of Occupational Risks (LPRL)—*Ley de Prevención de Riesgos Laborales*—as in the rest of Europe, explicitly requires

employers to eliminate, reduce, or control risks by means of a plan that must follow the technical criteria drawn up for projects by engineers and prevention specialists, all under government control. But once these are in place, the central process of determining what conditions are acceptable or not will be carried out at each work center, on each job, by means of risk evaluation that includes worker participation. This risk-evaluation process leaves plenty of room for interpretation (see Real Decreto, 1997), as the reference standards in occupational risk prevention do not provide completely categorical determinations of where there is risk, nor of what measures should be adopted to eliminate or control it. Instead, they identify the variables to be taken into consideration. For example, the regulations state that evaluation of the physical effort involved in lifting loads must take into account a huge number of variables: the characteristics of the task, the physical positions that need to be adopted to perform the task, the characteristics of the loads to be lifted, the frequency with which the task is to be repeated and its relationship to other tasks on the job, the characteristics of the people who will perform it, the climatic conditions, and so on. In the weighting of each of these factors, workers' ability to refuse to do something and to negotiate takes on significance—how far they feel able to draw a line with respect to the effort required and state “this is too heavy” or “this cannot be lifted that way” or “this move is dangerous.” In reality, particularly in centers without safety representatives or a union presence, risk assessments are carried out without workers' participation, and often with numerous deficiencies from a technical point of view (CISAL-INSHT, 2010), and in the majority of cases there is no evaluation of the risks involved in physical effort.

Segregation of Male Work by Sex and Subcultures

During the last period of growth in the sector (1999–2007), the total number of employees in the construction industry in Spain increased by more than one million. To be more specific, it rose from 1,610,300 to 2,713,700 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012). The demand for labor at this time was fed by foreign workers, and in this period they went from representing 5.2% of the sector's total official workforce to 19.7% of the total.

The construction industry is proportionally the most gender-segregated sector in the whole economy, in Spain just as in most neighboring countries, so that, although there has been a slight increase in the proportion of women in the sector, it has certainly never risen above 9% and is around 8% as of the first quarter of 2011 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012). However, it is important to remember that women are mostly to be found in administrative and technical positions, not in positions involving the manual labor under consideration. The increase in the percentage of women may therefore be the effect of cutbacks in manual jobs since 2007, as large companies maintain their management and administration infrastructure while jobs on site disappear. Furthermore, it is worth

noting that management in large companies is increasingly technological, with sophisticated computer programs, a field in which women are as much a part of the workforce as in any other office context.

Work in a segregated environment goes together with a framework of explanations, worldviews, and sexual stereotypes, creating a working subculture that in this case is exclusively male and that also constructs a particular form of masculinity. Just as femininity is an outcome, as Simone de Beauvoir showed (“one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman”), masculinity is a social construct subject to historical influences (see Carabí & Segarra, 2000). Given that “gender is not an empirically observable entity but a register on the basis of which a person is inserted into a web of relationships” (Sirimarco, 2004: 72), a general (and abstract) pattern within the rules of interpersonal communication, it does not submit easily to empirical analysis and stereotypes are merely the tip of an iceberg of patriarchal order and attitudes. However, in contrast to the enormous production of texts on the ideal of femininity, it seems that reflection on the ideal or ideals of masculinity is not so abundant, so that it is defined negatively (masculine is what is not feminine) and especially in such a way that it takes over the ground of the gender-neutral, the shared or asexual, so that the masculine paradigm and its values are the cultural standard.

All the same, there are some studies that have focused on the construction of masculinity in certain specific environments, especially in working worlds that are closed to women. A revealing example is provided by a research study on “the production of masculinity in shaping police trainees” (Sirimarco, 2004: 61). This interesting study examines police academies and notes that they “pay inordinate attention to the (appearance of) masculinity. Or, if you will, to over-masculinization. Gait, posture, gestures, tone of voice become thoroughly worked-over details. What matters is the possession of those marks that testify to virility. Thus, framing them within a heterosexual matrix, the police force disciplines bodies and structures them around a monolithic masculine theatricality” (Sirimarco, 2004: 71). The researcher highlights how, in order to build this scenario of “pure” seamless masculinity that police academies pursue, they emphasize specific elements (virility, domination, submission by the other).

In the world of the construction industry, we have research carried out by a number of women. Clara Greed’s (2000) analysis of the industry’s “tribes” is extremely elucidating, showing their ways of seeing/defining the world, their taboos and rituals. In this approach, a key concept is that of a group’s *closure*, particularly inasmuch as it implies to the members’ acceptance of a subculture’s rules and the sense of belonging that each member feels toward the group. In this arrangement, women working in the industry do not feel accepted and do not feel that they are part of the group. Vivian Price (2002) found similar results in her interviews with women working on highway construction in the United States, highlighting how these women not only had to show their worth to their employer, but also had to show it to their own coworkers, who continually made it evident

that they thought that women did not belong in this line of work. Price's investigations are broadly in line with Kanter's already classic findings (1977), which identify three phenomena in the interaction between majorities and minorities (token groups) in the workplace: visibility, polarization, and assimilation. The situation Price observes appears to explain not only why women make up a very small proportion of apprenticeship programs, but also why only a relatively small percentage of those who have been trained actually end up integrating into the workforce of site-based construction (Berik and Bilginsoy, 2006; Byrd, 1999).

An exciting piece of research is the project that Kris Paap (2006, 2008) carried out while working as a carpentry apprentice for two and a half years in the American Midwest. She finds in this area a distinctive type of white, working-class masculinity, built around physical work and risk-taking. These workers view themselves as "real men" as opposed to white-collar workers with their subordinated masculinity. In a world where there is as high a turnover and as much job insecurity as the building industry, the pressure toward productivity ("getting the job done") is a target not only for employers but also for workers. It is strange how maintaining a high rate of productivity is quite consistent with, indeed reinforced by, this type of masculinity. On the one hand it rewards workers with a sense of manhood, even though on the other it lays them open to being overworked and taking on unnecessary occupational risks. In this context, masculinity also functions as a social closure mechanism in the labor market, in response to the precariousness of employment in construction.

In her research, Paap highlights the concept of "pigness," a term taken from its use by one of the groups of coworkers she worked alongside (who described themselves as "pigs"), in a manner similar to that of the "culture of disrespect", identified but not elaborated by Byrd (1999). This label serves to empower the men at work, because through a masculinity that takes risks and makes light of injury (which the men are collectively proud of), they get a degree of license (legitimacy) to act in a racist and sexist way. They create an image of "animality" (the pig), in which they place themselves, which makes their rudeness or language "natural" and therefore unavoidable.

OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The objective of our research focuses on showing the relationship between the masculine culture in construction and the high level of danger and accidents in the sector. As we understand it, the accident rate is a consequence of and is sustained by the "low-road" model of production and of industrial relations outlined in the preceding pages. Our point of departure is that the masculine work culture, which tends to play down the extent of the physical effort and disparage those attitudes and behaviors that pay attention to occupational hazards, depends on a model of highly unregulated employment relations. It is a situation in which qualifications are not formal and the worker's contractual category is often not respected; there is

fierce competition, both among workers and between subcontractors; work is often paid by piece-rate or off the books; workers' representatives are few and far between; and, central to our argument, the pressure for speed is far greater than the interest in safety. In this context, as Paap (2006) shows, the culture of "pigness" is "functional" for the system, because it reinforces the necessary dynamic of low safety on the job. In such circumstances, women may experience strong rejection of their attempts to enter into the construction sector, since they are alien to the practices of this subculture. Their experience has less to do with any explicit rejection that they may receive on the job from their male colleagues (though there is that too) than with their feeling that they are outsiders with respect to the general cultural patterns. If so, facilitating the entry of women into these sectors may operate as a wedge to open up or do away with the subculture of *pigness*.

The general research project of which this article is a specialized element uses the biographical method and approach to work identities, conducting in-depth interviews (for a more detailed explanation of the research process, its methodology and techniques, see Ibáñez & Fernández, 2011). The sample used (see Table 1) is drawn from the group of people who took part in the "Occupational Course in Painting and Plasterboard Partitioning" offered by the Construction Labor Foundation (FLC) of Asturias (Spain) as part of the European Union Program EQUAL, "Equality creates jobs." In it, after some difficulty getting a sufficient number of students, two groups of up to 15 women were trained for 20 months (running, including placements, from October 1, 2002 to June 11, 2004) and with a

Table 1. Population and Sample

Total number of painting students (2004)	29	
Sample base (women locatable)	26	
Women located	23	
Interviews conducted	17	
Experience in the sector	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 exclusively in the gray economy • 4 in temporary employment • 3 self-employed, one of them having left construction for hospitality • 3 earning wages in the sector, 2 of these in temporary situations
Situation at the time of the interview (2010)		
Employed in any sector	6	
Employed in the construction sector	3	(2 self-employed and 1 waged)

schedule of not less than five hours daily dealing with the content and skills specific to the job of painter and working with drywall/plasterboard.

The general research objectives related only to the evaluation of the training program: to know the type of work access that its students had achieved, the support they had been able to draw on, and the barriers they were facing. In the interview script (used mainly in the latter part of the interview to ensure coverage of the research's central target themes) there are no direct questions about the sector's atypical employment relations, nor about compliance with health and safety regulations at work, nor about the masculine work subculture. In other words, the basic dimensions of the relationships discussed here have arisen from secondary analysis and were in no way based on hypotheses from previous research. In this sense, without a prior agenda, the current work follows the parameters of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

ANALYSIS

Flexible Employment Relations

Continuous employment relations are not a feature of contracts in the construction sector. Contracts are for a specific job and it is assumed that there is strong competition among subcontractors, so that when workers "don't perform" (for example, because of an accident) they are fired immediately:

Interviewee: I was there six months [working for a company installing drywall]. I had an accident while traveling and they fired me. I spent five months off work, two months in a neck brace and pretty annoyed then of course. . . . The contract was until the work was finished and the boss decides when the work has finished.

This discretion in firing is also evident in hiring, which is heavily dependent on informal networks:

Interviewer: And are they happy with your work?

Interviewee: At the moment, yes, I think if they weren't happy I wouldn't still be where I am, because it is a place that works very much by word of mouth, doors close on you quickly, they'd have no problem with that. The boss arrives, throws you off the job, without turning a hair.

Probably the most remarkable feature of the type of employment relations that is practiced in the industry is its poor observance of regulations and labor standards. In the specific case of the painting trade, this lack of regulation is even more blatant, and it is common for our interviewees to have a portion of their monthly income coming from work in the informal economy. In some cases they even talk of moonlighters encroaching professionally:

Interviewer: Were you self-employed?

Interviewee: Yes. And I was working in a company but without insurance. Because the world of . . . look, the world of construction is difficult for a woman, we all know that, but the world of painting's . . . still the lowest that there is, it's the shabbiest. . . . Sometimes I've gone to any of the paint shops where there were meetings and we were . . . painter, painter let's say . . . four of us . . . the others were a butcher . . . a janitor or wherever . . . I mean everyone's a painter, everyone puts up wallpaper. . . .

In general, there is a clear gap between the rules and what is done on a day-to-day basis, which is characteristic of a highly competitive business system, in which the pressure for short-term gain is very high:

Interviewee: . . . the rules forbid a single person to unload, but as things are, the boss sees that the work, the yield is higher, so we skip the rules when they want us to. I was working on a scaffold of eight stories, yeah? and without a harness and without any security measures, well, a badly placed railing on the scaffold and what's more, well, scaffold that's put up, well, . . . so that if an ant went up it could get killed.

Interviewer: And . . .

Interviewee: So it costs the bosses.

It seems that (male) workers do not have much opportunity to protest, mainly owing to the insecurity of their employment relations (when they are hired as self-employed, turnover is very high, and, being contracted for a job, workers are largely helpless against the threat of dismissal as well). However, for better or worse, when jobs are scarce, workers can "get by" with informal networks and/or camaraderie with coworkers. In this context, the weakest link in the labor market is formed by minority groups, in our case women. Apart from struggling with these situations, women have to deal with the added factor of sexist prejudice, so that at the beginning of each work relationship they have to prove that the employer is not losing money by hiring them. Their disadvantaged situation makes them a more submissive workforce:

Interviewee: I do not know, I mean according to . . . I mean it's not for us. Look, what the law requires exactly, if there are women on the job they're meant to have a bathroom, required to have . . . only once for me.

Interviewer: And you can't ask for one?

Interviewee: If you want to leave the job, ask. They'll automatically call and say send me a guy who's worth more to me and who's less of a problem.

The Masculine Work Subculture and Rejection of Women

The narratives of women's experiences provide a privileged vantage point from which to observe the various dimensions of the masculine work culture in the construction industry. In part, there is the need not to appear "too feminine"

(cleavage, heels, makeup, etc.) as it generates mistrust. There is also what we have coded as the “sexist environment,” similar to Paap’s concept of *pigness* (2006). And finally, there is the view of construction as a dangerous activity, where physical strength is needed. This last dimension connects directly with the poor enforcement of the law on health and safety at work, because in the examples where these women notice the difference in strength between them and their male counterparts, these are always the situations where the regulation guidelines are not followed.

Physical appearance. Verbalizations about physical appearance refer to those situations in which presenting a feminine appearance (see, for example, below, dressing “as a proper woman”) has brought a certain rejection. The most common instances relate to work for individual clients, particularly when going to measure, or offer an estimate—with the commission already promised verbally—and the clients, mostly women, see women who appear as such:

Interviewee: Yes, yes, or for example, by getting . . . look, but actually the men aren’t the worst, the trouble is with women. . . . What do you think of that? I’ve gone to give an estimate, to measure and budget for an apartment to put . . . it was to paint, take out two texture walls and make one of them a small, it was a small plaster partition . . . and as . . . we’re going . . . if I have to go to a job I wear the proper clothes but, if I’m not, I dress as a proper woman. And as we didn’t have a job on and were going to do an estimate for this apartment, and now the woman didn’t even want us to measure. What do you think of that? Because she didn’t understand how us women . . . that we couldn’t work with plaster, that we weren’t going to be able to cope with a bit of ladder, to put in the joist, or take out the texture wall and now she didn’t want . . . “oh, you’ve come to estimate. . . . Okay, come in, come in. . . . Do you make the estimate now and then the painters come along a bit later?” “No, look madam, we are the painters, we are the ones who paint, the ones who . . .” and no. And there was another one like that lady.

It is very common not to get the job, although one woman told us of a case where her boss, a man, convinced the female client to give her a chance (he did not send her to anyone without checking first). The examples are numerous and more or less follow the same pattern. Interviewees go to give an estimate, or measure for a job already half-commissioned. The woman client knows the sex of the person who will come, or has not given it particular attention, but when she sees women dressed femininely, and especially when the work involves some kind of masonry work, the customer does not trust the interviewees’ ability:

Interviewer: And did you have any problem being a woman or anything?

Interviewee: Yes, yes, yes, I went to a house, uh . . . so, through somebody else and whatever, I went to look at the house, a living room, to put up plaster. And when the woman saw us, me and her, the partner that I work with, and the lady of the house said, “Oh, but are you the ones who are going to do it?” “Yes, of

course, yes,” But she didn’t trust us so the lady said no, and didn’t call us, didn’t call.

Interviewer: But she didn’t trust you, why?

Interviewee: Because she saw two girls and she said, “Oh goodness,” she didn’t believe . . . and she knew that we were women, it was a day when we were dressed in normal clothes because it was a day that we weren’t . . . and seeing us dressed normally, seeing us as ordinary run-of-the-mill feminine girls, she must have been expecting to get two truck drivers. . . . I don’t know what she must have been thinking because she knew that we were women, and that . . . that we’d been recommended. . . . She must have seen us arriving in heels and said, “Oh goodness, what are these two doing” [laughs]. What do I know? And I can tell you that everywhere I’ve painted, they’ve been delighted. . . .

In this case, the interviewee understood that she and her colleague had not given the right image to inspire confidence (“ordinary . . . feminine girls,” “She must have seen us arriving in heels”). On the other hand, it is worth noting the expression “she must have been expecting to get two truck drivers,” as it shows the interviewee attributing to a woman truck driver the same stereotypes that their client attributed to a woman painter. From the different examples, it appears that there is a certain golden rule: do not be overly “feminine” if you want to obtain your client’s confidence.

Sexist environment. The characteristics of the model of masculinity that these women tell us about and that we have categorized as a “sexist environment” consist of various aspects, referring to the following:

1. The use of coarse or sexist language (and with it, possibly, belittling a woman coworker because of her sex):

Interviewee: You have to hear things like I had to hear in this job where I am, from bosses sometimes, you say, “Do I have to hear that to be a macho woman?” They say, two tits get things done quicker than a hundred carts? These kinds of things are still around, or it’s difficult, no it’s . . . you get home and say, “On top of the work, I’m tired of, you have to hear certain things that don’t . . .”

2. Verbal sexual aggression. In the case that is transcribed below, as in the previous one, the comments are not directed toward those picking up on the message, so it is difficult for female workers to answer the comments directly:

Interviewee: . . . In that job everything was done in a good mood, even the bosses, who were also young people, but there was some old guy who said that women on the job are either tarts or coming for cock. That was the comment that you heard behind you as you walked by.

3. A lack of personal hygiene and the social exhibition of bodily and physiological functions in an uninhibited and perhaps confrontational manner:

Interviewee: It's a very coarse place; you may see a guy with the same tee-shirt on for the whole week that smells, that reeks, they may let out farts, or burps . . . that, that . . . like, they're pigs. I'm not saying all of them, but . . . it's a very dirty world. Then not: they leave, take a shower, all very smart, very nice and clean, but at work they are usually pretty piggish. You pass one and say, "You smell like a man, but rank man." You don't tell him he smells bad, you reek of man, but in a way that's just too much.

The testimonies of the women interviewed about their experiences of treatment from this style of masculinity suggests that it is largely a phenomenon of the older generations, so that the simple passage of time will solve it. However, what the most experienced interviewee went through is very interesting:

Interviewee: . . . Okay, I always thought it was going to be the older people who would take it worse seeing women coming into the world of construction, that's always been a man's world. And it's not true, the young men take it almost worse than the older people, which is really sad.

Interviewer: Really?

Interviewee: Yes, at least in my experience, yes. I have met older people at work, and talking to them they see it as more normal, and they're charming. But the younger guys come across more arrogant, as if you're taking their work away from them. The older ones are already well in place, so well, they see you come in and you look good, and they like seeing you, so they start "Leave the girl alone, it's better looking at her than you and your ugly face. . . ." But the younger guys take it a little worse. I've had more problems with the younger guys than with older people at sites and I always thought it would be the other way round. They take it worse: "You're not needed, this is our world and you don't come in here."

In sum, it is curious how Paap's theorization (2006) on the strategies of workers in the construction sector in the American Midwest to define their own working environment (such as mechanisms to close the sector's job market) agree with the view one of our interviewees, who found two social divides: one of social class and one of gender:

Interviewer: You've said it was a macho environment with your coworkers?

Interviewee: Yes, because it was a macho environment, because they are people brought up in a different way, so the whole environment was sexist. . . . I didn't realize that, of course, this is then plugged into the world of construction. Maybe a girl who did the same thing in an office of decorators or architects or whatever, she might not have any problem, but the thing is that here most people come from this type of environment and so the background or whatever, yes it's sexist in this way . . . well . . . eh . . . all that matters is who

gets in most strokes, maybe after that accuracy when it comes to drawing or whatever. . . . I don't know, and the way to carry things too. Right? as uh . . . showing off how much dirtier I am, how many more cusswords I use, how much more I spit. . . . Hey, the more I do that kind of thing the more I reaffirm myself. Of course for those people, anyone who has had different opportunities from them is posh, if on top of that you're from Oviedo [the regional capital], you can't imagine—even though with a real posh girl they could never discriminate against her in the way that they discriminated against me, but I understand that they've been hearing that all their life.

The training process implicit within the FLC course worked in part like the months at the police academy in Sirimarco's study (2004): as a time of internalization, of socialization into the worker subculture that these women wanted to join.

Risky and physically demanding work. Anthropology has shown us that many of the initiation rites of masculinity in preindustrial societies involve facing physical risks (see, for example, Jociles, 2001). Of course, the construction of masculinity and its normative content vary hugely according to culture, class, and/or period, but it seems safe to accept that physical risk-taking is more associated with masculinity than with femininity. In the same vein, it is clear that in some workplaces there is a "cult of manhood" that is manifested in demonstrations of physical strength, hiding fear and suffering, denial of risk, and overall disregard for sense about health. For all these reasons, in these environments asking for more safety is not favorably regarded. Women have to adapt to this work culture, this day-to-day practice. And it is something that they face daily because there is no single test at the beginning that proves once and for all that a person has the physical and technical capacity to carry out the work; women (and men themselves) have to demonstrate every day that they share these values.

The view that construction work is physically risky appears with some frequency in the interviews. However, in many cases it is not an idea that interviewees are defending: they are only repeating the social image that has been mentioned to them:

Interviewee: In fact, a while back I was in the hospital here [Oviedo]. We were putting cornices up, cleaning up all the cornices in the hospital, maternity . . . not the residence . . . and in the lift and . . . well, coming down, the nurses and people congratulate you: "Girl, you're really brave, you are, how you get up there, because a woman . . . man." . . . We women see it as even stranger sometimes than the men do, but they don't accept you, not at all.

For only one of our interviewees did the "outside" perception of danger have important consequences, since it was one of the reasons that led her to leave the profession:

Interviewee: . . . My mother said, "Why are you now hanging on a scaffold, with a little baby, because if something happens, because I don't know what,

because I don't know why," and then it seems to discourage you even more. . . .

In this case, together with the temporary nature of the contracts, low wages, and long working hours, came pressure from her own mother reminding her of the image of being a mother (and therefore a responsible caregiver), someone who should not risk her physical health, as a baby depends on her.

Physical strength is one of the elements on which construction jobs are construed as "masculine jobs." Even more importantly, in the dominant ideology, it is commonly understood that the major barrier to women's access to these professions is the need for physical strength, which comes to be considered as more important than technical ability. Traditionally, there has, however, been little emphasis in these trades on learning how to use one's strength effectively, or on the potential health problems arising from the inappropriate use of physical effort. (In the FLC course, this had its own module.) Rather, an essential element that lies behind the importance placed on physical strength is the relationship of physical activities with a way of seeing (and building) virility. In this context, these jobs are accompanied by physical gestures that shape masculine identity, as they are gendered, socially constructed, and express to the other my "being in the world," my physical and social stance (Alemany, 2003).

The factor of physical strength is generally understood as a personal limitation that forces a kind of professional selection. It also appears in the interviews when they come to comparisons between male and female capabilities. But, of especial interest for the purpose of this article, in the context of work, the consideration comes mainly in terms of moving material, such as unloading a truck or carrying material to the site, where the men save trips by carrying more weight:

Interviewer: Any physical limitations?

Interviewee: I think so, however much they want it, there are loads, they're so . . . and it ain't . . . so in the end you do it the same as a man but the truth is that it takes you longer, not the painting itself, but it does if you have to get up a scaffold, if you get to that. There'll be women who do it as fast as a man but not most. These limitations, you do notice them when you start working at a firm, less and less, but they're still there.

Interviewer: So, do you think that what stops a woman working in the sector is the physical conditions?

Interviewee: No, because I have friends who are working, but I know that in many places, in many companies they do look at that. So, for example, I nowadays . . . before maybe I could, but nowadays two cans of paint, to carry them up to a third floor, I have to take them up one by one, a man will take them up for you in pairs, and it shouldn't matter, but you have the time you save and I know that employers look at that too. . . .

This is a problem that it seems would not arise if health and safety at work regulations were observed. And the examples from interviewees express this constantly:

Interviewee: It's not that they do more work than I do; they're stronger than me. I'll give you an example: when we unload a truckload of drywall, mmm, the regulations say that for safety no one can ever offload a sheet on their own, not for anything. I was unloading the truck and offloaded a sheet, my coworkers two at a time, their strength was obviously greater than mine. I'm talking about a sheet that measures one twenty by two meters [$4' \times 6'6''$], and a normal sheet is two centimeters thick [$\frac{3}{4}''$], I don't know how much they weigh exactly . . . what . . . 20 . . . 24 . . . 30 kilos [44–55–66 lbs]? easily, so I know how to position them and I can unload them, but they unload them two by two, but the rules prohibit a single person from unloading, but as it's done, the boss sees that the work, the yield is higher, because we skip the rules where they want. I was working on a scaffold of eight stories up, right?

This interviewee's account is indeed peppered with examples where the problem is that the rules are not observed, favoring men's risky short cuts:

Interviewee: So, between a girl and a guy, because they prefer guys, and what's more it's obvious. . . . Let's see . . . when I did the Foundation's course, it was a very complete course and we learned a bit of everything, and I'm telling you that when you do a . . . that when you do a . . . the entrance tests to work for the local authority, one of the last tests that we had to do was put up a scaffold, and I'm telling you I put up a scaffold first and I was faster than any of the guys. I'm able to put up a half-scaffold, two and a half meters, in . . . under a minute and I'm telling you that most of the guys don't know. Well, it ain't that I'm just telling you I know how to put up a scaffold; any person who'd walked on it would know, whatever, but it's that everything is done for a reason, so when you start to set up a scaffold you put the cross-brace up in a certain way and not another. Well, there were a lot of people who hooked it up like that and got higher scores, and it's not legal, and, I mean, I'm qualified in work-risk prevention too, you can't give good marks to a person who . . . who puts up a scaffold putting the lower brace in first and then the upper brace, because the rules forbid that.

In the construction sector, the pressure for productivity that goes with jobs that have high turnover and job insecurity perfectly suits the kind of majority masculinity, as workers even positively prize having a casual attitude toward safety at work:

Interviewer: And you spoke before about the physical conditions. Do you not think that they are important?

Interviewee: But what are they going to tell me, if everything goes up in lifts? Who are they kidding? Theoretically you can't take up more than 25 kg [55 lbs], and with 25 kg I can do it, anyone can. Then if they get onto a job and they start doing stupid things it's up to them. . . . Now I've seen a guy with two

sacks like this [gesture indicating size] and not coming through the door . . . and the guy banged his head coming in from the side. . . . So who cares if you have strength if you're there half stuck, if you can't. . . . Well, what do I know?

This culture seems very widespread, and in the selection tests for government institutions (local employment plans and relief contracts) it seems that the criterion of the candidate's physical strength is a factor that is taken into account, although it is unclear whether this is really one of the abilities needed for the task:

Interviewee: They had higher scores because they were stronger when it came to, well, in the tests there were stupid things, there were points for nailing and taking nails out and they're stronger so they get more points and that's what's taken into account, it's very hard. The local council, if you do a test for . . . for the . . . for a cleaning job . . . a fixed-term job . . . a relief contract for cleaning or gardening, yes, because there are precedents . . . but in building or things like that, much harder.

CONCLUSIONS

The construction industry in Spain has followed a lower-level pattern of development (the "low-road model"), in which workers have little bargaining power over conditions in the workplace. In an environment of strong competition among workers—especially hard in the field of painting because of the large number of unqualified moonlighters, high turnover, and job insecurity—health considerations are put to one side. This competition between workers is reinforced by the strong competition among subcontractors, which exerts strong pressure on workers for productivity and performance in companies with little technological modernization. The minimal level of government control over working conditions does not help, and there is not really any target to control accident rates, and little account is taken of physical exertion. These conditions not only make it difficult for workers to object to taking on hard working conditions, involving great physical effort, but they also perfectly suit the type of majority masculinity that emphasizes physical readiness and minimizes risks to health.

In this context, male workers share and pass on a masculine work culture that gives positive value to strength and exertion. We found support for the thesis that understands this male working subculture as consisting of a complex framework within which they present themselves physically and in language, and where they use physical strength to delimit the labor market as exclusively for men, excluding women. In contexts of strong competition for jobs, the masculine work culture functions in two ways: it makes more bearable the physical risks that come from the cyclical nature of the work, against which workers are largely powerless, and it helps to construct a masculinity that is positively valued. As a side effect, it also functions as a mechanism for the social exclusion of an entire social group, that of women, who have great difficulties integrating themselves.

We have seen that the authorities' efforts to introduce women into the construction trades through training come up against the reality that training is not the usual route of entry into the labor market for manual trades in building, which is what we would expect from the aspects of the development model and the sector's employment relations that we have mentioned. With their educational credentials, the women trained on these courses still need to make great efforts to integrate into male-dominated sectors. On the one hand, they are faced with the pervasive ethos of the masculine subculture at work that makes them feel they are outsiders in the place. On the other hand, they have to prove themselves capable, and confront sexist prejudices that are part of the landscape. This means that it is not only by demonstrating their skills and comparing them with those of their male partners that they can get "respect." In addition, they have to face the gaze of those on site, who do not consider them as individuals but as representatives of their whole sex. In consequence, women's ability to make demands about working conditions is very limited. In this context, for workers' training to have any impact on gender segregation and on health and safety at work, it is necessary for public policies aimed at professionalizing the sector to be combined with other changes in the labor market and in employment relations within the workplace. More holistic measures appear to be needed, requiring workers to be on contract and for institutions and relevant organizations to follow up on policies—such steps have been proved to be among the most successful (Price, 2002).

Such subcultures are certainly also present in other labor markets. Are these male work subcultures in decline, as is increasingly stated by women who are opening the breach with their jobs? Do they predominate only in the manual trades? In answer to the first question, it seems that lack of regulation or "structural insecurity" is a context that is nearly universal in manual jobs, where both men and women are forced to compete. It seems that the first consideration is the risk of losing one's job and, in response to this, the male worker subculture acts to facilitate behaviors that are functional in the work context itself. This analysis of the causal link between structural insecurity and male subculture is supported by the comment of one interviewee, when she said that, to her surprise, she had found more sexist rejection from younger male coworkers than from older ones, attributing it to this group's more unstable employment position. In answer to the second question: the manual trades have the distinction of retaining the aura of physical effort, typical of the "masculine." But in other labor markets the idea of masculinity may be present in other forms, such as availability for extended hours, etc., which are part of the image of the head of a household, responsible for the family income but not for care (the "breadwinner"), and this also acts as a barrier to the professional development of women. This concept of "the masculine" brings us to the need for a significant cultural and organizational change. It is only logical to think that the feminist revolution and women's arrival in the workforce and in the full range of jobs must entail both a change in society as a whole and also a change in each sector of the economy or area of work that is part of the process.

This means that there must be a change in the model by which work is organized and according to which men behave in the workplace.

The argument about whether the lack of a “culture of safety” explains Spain’s high accident rates has been one of the most debated questions in the professional world of health and safety over the last decade. The existence of a male subculture in construction’s manual sector here could be viewed as supporting this thesis. However, we have seen that this culture is not an autonomous outcome, but rather that it arises from the industry’s development model and, therefore, can scarcely be fought through interventions focused exclusively at a “cultural” level. Facilitating women’s entry into these sectors through policies of affirmative action may operate as a wedge to open up the subculture of *pigness*—just as long as the women do not end up imitating the masculine culture, a phenomenon about which Reinholdt and Alexanderson (2009) have warned.

However, government policies must also be aimed at modifying other aspects of the sector. If there is any great difference between women’s work as painters and men’s, then it appears to be, as we have seen in the research here, in men’s greater capacity for physical effort and greater willingness to risk their safety. The solution therefore seems to be in our own hands: promoting high-road models of production to expand higher-quality jobs. One of the most important elements is a good system of training and apprenticeship, with training provided prior to employment as well as during workers’ careers (Swanstrom, 2009). Furthermore, it means that commitment by government agencies to safety and health at work must be far clearer and more monolithic. Policies to promote training and to promote health and safety at work could then function as a wedge so that equal opportunity policies do not run up against antagonistic industrial realities.

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