

Women schoolteachers' health, gender issues, and work in elementary education

A saúde das professoras, os contornos de gênero e o trabalho no Ensino Fundamental

La salud de las profesoras, los contornos de género y el trabajo en la Enseñanza Fundamental

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Despite progress in the production of knowledge concerning the visibility of the sexual division of labor ¹, its understanding as a crosscutting issue in studies on the worlds of work and specifically in the field of Public Health ² is still not sufficiently consolidated. This paper reflects on how the perspective of social gender relations and the sexual division of labor can contribute to more pertinent studies on the work and health of teachers in elementary schools, most of whom are women ^{3,4,5,6}.

The concept of social gender relations allows analyzing the power relations between the sexes, highlighting that the persistently unequal and hierarchical division of labor between men and women is a problem requiring serious attention in order to achieve changes ^{1,2,3}. In addition, as emphasized by Kergoat ⁷, relations between the sexes and relations between classes should not be hierarchically determined, assigning greater importance to one over the other. Such relations not only coexist, they are coextensive, that is, they are mutually produced and reproduced. Both of them produce the structures and are present in both spheres of activity, i.e., domestic and professional. It would thus be a mistake to ignore the issue of work and class relations in studies dealing with family life (for example, studies on domestic violence), or to ignore the problem of women's oppression in research on the world of production. The issue of consubstantiality in social relations sheds light on another important aspect, the dynamic intersection of social relations as a whole, since each leaves a mark on the others ⁷.

Historically, among the possible alternatives for given class segments of women, participation in the formal work market occurs mainly in professions that bear similarities to the domestic sphere. Such is the case of activities involving "care" and responsibilities with the home and family, which favor the concentration of women in certain types of work, such as teaching ³.

Feminization of teaching

Given Brazil's growing need to expand its school system, resulting from the country's urbanization and industrialization, in the early 20th century men gradually left elementary teaching, which came to be seen as "women's work" ^{3,6}. However, the feminization of teaching is due not only to women's steady mass presence, but also to the fact that it is associated with a certain way (seen as essentially

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feminine), of perceiving and practicing the work of teaching, thereby consolidating a given way of performing the work^{3,6}.

Becoming a schoolteacher, especially in elementary schools, more than a professional choice, is perceived socially as a possibility women generally encounter to practice certain skills and competencies not acquired only in formal establishments, and thus not seen as qualifications, but as inherent qualities of women, who are purported to be naturally dedicated, attentive, patient, affectionate, and abnegated, attributes that are considered important in the act of educating children^{3,6}. This shows that the coextensive consubstantiality of social relations materializes in the symbolic and economic disqualification of the work performed by women⁷.

This underscores the deterioration of teaching salaries in Brazil, leading to increasingly precarious living conditions for women schoolteachers. Although teaching was initially occupied by middle-class women (after men gradually left it), the profession underwent profound changes in terms of class origins, and it was thus later occupied mainly by working-class women^{3,6}.

Teaching work and schoolteachers' health

A series of intervention-studies conducted by the current authors (from 1999 to 2017) analyzed the relations between work in teaching and schoolteachers' health in the public school system in the state of Rio de Janeiro and in the city of João Pessoa, Paraíba State, from the perspective of social gender relations and activity theory^{8,9}. To understand and transform the teachers' work, life, and health, the premise was that the construction of knowledge on this activity and its relationship with health should result from experimentation developed jointly by professional researchers and the teachers themselves, since they have the hands-on experience of teaching^{6,10,11,12}. Thus, the concepts of gender relations and sexual division of labor were tools that dynamized this collaborative work, mobilized in debates and reflections on the increasingly precarious conditions in teaching, partly a result of the value assigned to women's teaching activities. Such instrumental concepts also allowed a critical analysis of the schoolteachers' health-disease process, an analysis by which this process was no longer taken for granted^{3,10,12}.

Likewise, from the perspective of activity theory^{8,9}, it was possible to identify that these women workers engendered a substantial process of daily reinvention in the face of the limits and impositions of ever-present prescribed rules, variabilities, and chance events. Under these conflicting forces, a set of events develops that shapes life at work – an unrelenting struggle to deal with the stress and strain from the work itself, to avoid illness and pursue a minimum of psychosomatic equilibrium (always unstable).

The studies in the city of João Pessoa^{6,12} focused not only on the possible illness processes, but also on the schoolteachers' experiences with pleasure and psychological distress, besides the ways by which they build and rebuild the meaning of (and in) work under such adverse conditions. Their experience with illness relates primarily to problems with their voice and eyesight, besides allergies, back pain, and varicose veins. Psychosomatic complaints also appear, expressed as digestive and sleep disorders and headaches. Given the various situations of embarrassment, the schoolteachers identify various signs of psychological distress, expressed as despondency, fatigue, frustration, depression, impotence, manifestations of helplessness, irritability, anguish, and even a "feeling of insanity". Such distress has been associated with factors like conflicting hierarchical relations, long and poorly structured work hours (added to their invisible domestic work), difficulty in operating what they have discovered is a golden rule of the trade – "control over the class", discomfort from classroom heat and noise (in synergy with problems with unruly students), deteriorating wages, contamination of family relations, and especially the steady devaluation and lack of social recognition for their work. The greatest source of pleasure is the relationship they develop with their students.

The studies in the state of Rio de Janeiro^{10,11} focus their analysis on factors that contribute to the work overload. Importantly, the work actually done by schoolteachers extends well beyond their workday. According to the rules, the schoolteachers have to meet a certain number of hours per week in the classroom, plus another stretch reserved for preparing classes and other activities. However, due to the precarious conditions – like large classes (which means excessive teaching work,

proportional to the amount of exercises and tests they have to correct and the resulting lack of time for adequate individual attention to students), poor working conditions (noise, shortage of teaching supplies and resources...), urban violence and serious public security problems increasingly invading the schools' walls, etc. –, teachers end up occupying their leisure time with these activities, thus invading their domestic lives, with greater implications for women schoolteachers, who are the ones that traditionally take on the work done in the home ¹¹. Adopting a perspective of cross-application of research methods, the studies also analyzed official data on sick leave and “work rehabilitation”. There was a relevant increase in sick leave rates due to psychological disorders and voice problems, evidencing changes in work conditions and organization that made teaching more harmful over the years studied ¹⁰.

As discussed above, these intervention studies evidenced processes of devaluation of teaching work marked by social gender and class relations, producing dynamics of illness and psychological distress in the women schoolteachers. Likewise, as in other studies ^{4,5,13}, the research did not point to just a single harmful factor in the health-disease process in these women workers, but to a complex and synergistic set of factors, even more harmful, although scarcely visible.

The studies also showed that gender relations produced different ways of constructing meaning in and about the work, due to the distinct ways that men and women conceived their work in the school. For women, constructing this meaning was intensely permeated by affectivity, with the profession and motherhood echoing each other. The women assume the variabilities – and precarious conditions – of the daily routine as an integral and even fundamental part of their work, indicating a great willingness to cope with the predictable and the unpredictable, particularly in relation to the affective nature of care and attention. However, while they build meaning on the basis of affective aspects, their dedication leads paradoxically to work overload and physical and psychological strain in these women workers.

Finally, the contribution by the perspective of social gender relations to studies on schoolteachers' work and health is not limited to the possibility of better describing the problems encountered (which is quite relevant in itself), but it also provides a comprehensive qualitative analysis of its various aspects. In this sense, the social gender relations perspective involves questioning the prevailing ways of life and power relations and can thus help leverage changes in the working conditions in schools and strengthen the emancipation of women schoolteachers.

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All the authors contributed equally to all stages of the article.

Additional informations

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