Managing hypersexuality in British engineering: conceptualising women’s micro adjustments and exploring their career consequences

Abstract

Social theorists have argued that the body, in religion, law and medicine, is a sexualised body and an erotic site constructed and shaped through language and meanings (Cregan, 2006: 61). The ‘normal’ organizational body, however, possesses neither sexuality nor a gender (Acker, 2003). Although apparently gender-less, researchers maintain that this body is implicitly masculine (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; McDowell, 1997). It is thus the female body alone that is seen as introducing the burden of gender and sexuality into the workplace. From a career point of view, excessive sexuality associated with female bodies (see Barker and Duschinsky, 2012; Watts, 2010), is deeply problematic because it conflicts with notions of technical competence (Gutek, 2013; Gallos, 1989) and makes it difficult for female workers to build relationships with colleagues – both of which are crucial to career building (King, 2004a). Research has shown how female bodies are associated with inappropriate sexuality, danger, volatility and disruption to the normal operation of the organisation (Acker, 1990; Kenny and Bell, 2011; Sheppard, 1989). However we have limited understanding of how women manage such hypersexualisation (Barker and Duschinsky, 2012) or of its implications for careers. Reporting on a study of the career experiences of women engineers in the UK, this paper addresses these limitations. Our study is based on petroleum, mechanical and automotive engineering. These are interesting sectors in which to examine women’s career experiences because they continue to be significantly male dominated and highly masculine, in contrast to more feminised branches of engineering such as civil and chemical engineering (Engineering UK, 2014). Our findings highlight a variety of micro political adjustments women make which coalesce into three broad approaches. We discuss the career implications of each, and highlight their potential for both change and continuity in the prevailing gender order. We draw on our findings to develop a theory of ‘respectable femininity’. We argue that respectable femininity is the dominant form of hegemonic femininity in contemporary male dominated work settings, and that this maintains the prevailing gender order through women engaging in self-regulation and intra-gender policing that significantly compromises career building activity. We provide insights into an implicit but powerful ideological barrier which potentially constrains women’s career progression. We highlight the implications of our findings for those charged with managing women’s careers in engineering and more widely.

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