

Cultural Prejudices and Obstacles that prevent Women to Take Greater Role in Using Technology in Arts and Culture

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Abstract

Author reflects in this paper author's experience in projects in which women should have a better access and free use of modern technology in their artistic and cultural work . Author especially emphasize harsh prejudices and practises that some women faced in schools, theatre, various visual and performing arts. It is shown in this text that women are due to cultural and other prejudices oppressed and prevented if not being encouraged to have equal access and use of modern technology in arts, university, schools and other environments. However, women are according to author's experience preferred by men to conduct administrative and "taking care" tasks. From the author's point of view such division is reflection of traditional divisions of labor in patriarchal family that are still predominant in many environments causing harm to our societies, education, science, arts and culture. Cases described in this text are cases from author's experience and explanations do not tend to be grounded in any psychological, sociological or aesthetic theory. Author, intentionally, does not write about positive experience since they of ten serve as a reason why we should take less seriously into consideration negative experiences.

Introduction:

Technology, natural sciences and computer sciences have been in many ways traditionally depicted and understood as fields of work and interest that predominantly belong to men. Consequently, men are more promoted, better paid, more present in schools and indeed, men are occupying more jobs concerned with natural sciences, technology and computer sciences. It is often the case that teachers and scholars do pay more attention to men, since they see it as a natural routine instead of paying equal attention to women also. Women are very small minority in many of those professions and especially when access to funds that lead to innovation is concerned.

In some still sporadic cases such as communities of free software developers complained that there are only few women involved in the software development. They succeeded to find additional funds to encourage women to participate at free software developer's events. There are mailing lists dedicated to women in using for example Debian GNU/Linux. Efforts done by organizations such as Women's Information Technology Transfer (WITT) and Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology are precious, but additional work by men and women is needed to be done. Although, these attempts do have impact we have to be aware of gender gap related to access and use of technology and participation of women in the development of free software including software that applies to arts and culture authoring, management, broadcast, storage and preservation. Still, there are many cases when women are prevented from equal access to modern technology. In one high school in Serbia a woman that was professor recommended to headmaster that she is willing to administer GNU/Linux server at the school but headmaster refused by explaining that: "Women cannot administer computer servers." Since I am involved in the last 15 years in arts and culture I witnessed many times various forms of the developments in which women have been deprived from learning about and using the modern technology in arts and culture. Even worse, conditions for keeping the career forced them to develop other forms of behavior that are very detrimental to themselves, other women and men and culture and arts too.

Withdrawal, shame, guilt and self-blame

Some women that work with modern technology did not have capacities and opportunities to be encouraged to learn how to acquire skills in managing various software and hardware. In addition, any learning difficulty was followed by the shame and guilt imposed by those who taught them. In many artistic projects I participated in, there were cases where lack of skills was not recognized as technical failure. Women participating in the project were preventive in self-destructive way. Withdrawal, shame and guilt were behind their decision to “simplify” things. That decision making process was so fast and strong that it was not possible immediately to realize what was going on. In discussions after some performances I realized that such a decision making was an unfortunate act that was attempt to release her from horrible feelings of withdrawal, shame, guilt and self-blame that may follow any even small technical failure. I have had once cooperation with one woman who was educated in arts and she was supposed to be responsible for the light design in one small theatre. She was very kind and gentle person with obvious talent, but the way from idea to her expression was very very fragile with long interruptions and pauses. I realized later on that she was checking all cables, connectors, several times, she was reading the basic textbooks on electricity, asking me the very basic questions on connecting lights with plugs and wall outlets. She was very suspicious on herself, I realized. Once after rehearsal, I met her sitting and crying behind the theatre. After my question about reason why she cries she answered that she feels horrible now in the case that some technical failure or her mistake will happen. When I emphasized that it is not necessary to cry and that there is no reason to be sad in advance. She answered: “You are good man, but you are man and you do not understand how it horrible looks like when you are close to your goal and you feel that it must not slip from your hands, since it will slip away forever. If something bad will happen I will never go to theatre back again.” She mastered that performance very well, but I do not see her in theatre any more. Obviously, some of those hard feelings are unbearable and women often seek for easier jobs in which they should be released from such feelings although those jobs may be less creative.

In my experience, it was often noticeable that there is great frustration, and feeling of embarrassment, guilt and self-blame related with situations when women have had to be confronted with potential failure. One woman that completed faculty of mathematics was supposed to be webmistress of the site of one NGO concerned with women that suffer from domestic violence. Since she did not have an opportunity at her faculty to be encouraged properly to work on computers which is strange for faculty of mathematics, she handled her feeling of guilt for not being familiar with computers by repetitive saying: “I am professor of math who easily forget things, you know, therefore I look bad in handling computers, but I will handle that somehow, I know that.” It is obvious that such an issue is very painful for her and that even she does not expect understanding and establishment of safe communication channels through which she can get confidence and learn what was not allowed to her. Such barriers of silence, withdrawal, imposed guilt and even self-blame are signs of a sort of “silent torture” that is present in our gender relationships. However, the women suffer the most, but all we are losers due to such unjust relationships and practises.

Dependency on oppressive man and victimhood

Sometimes men and social environment in general are oppressive in a sophisticated manner that they do not harm overtly in terms of outbursts of anger, obvious behavior or physical threat or any other open expression of any feelings. Oppression is sometimes a combination of charm, precise control, setting up of woman for failure and slow but deep punishment and pathogen correction that actually make women feel continuously guilty and “willing to be cautioned, blamed for failure and corrected”. I witnessed that in such situations women I worked with usually were getting attracted by such a colleague and while in struggle with him over control of the project, his undermining activities, blackmail she delegated her genuine interests and activities in modern technology to men that are from her point of view benevolent. The most confident man of them was always consulted for correcting her in handling the struggle with a colleague who was doing efforts in creating an environment in which she will be considered as failed and he will then show her the correct way and force her to accept it. I found those splitting of herself very painful and detrimental for her and whole team leaving the art-

piece somehow unfinished, yet with genuine artistic values. However, further management of those art-pieces was problematic since she somehow happen to be victim and her art-piece was not performed often enough due to mistreatment by theatre managements. Such an systematic oppression multiplied and/or repeated on various levels of work are additionally detrimental. One woman called that mechanism and process a “systematic mayhem”.

Miscommunication with technical staff – A missing How-To

Women in arts that work with modern technology implemented in various visual arts often do have great misunderstanding with technicians and other staff that is concerned with realization of the projects. Often technical staff is confused that women can order them what to do because that sounds very contradictory to them. I witnessed in many cases that they say: “Women do not have anything to do with screwdrivers, hammers, soldering tools... Tools are toys for men, but for women, that is out of logic...” Indeed, in modern technology many projects depend on very precise technical realization, accurate information and discipline in respecting the construction and electrical work rules and guidelines.

But, if there is miscommunication in the process of the project realization technical failures may cause injury, failure of the project, a lack of aesthetic value and even sometimes big material damage to the equipment. In my experience and experience of some my male and female colleagues such communication barriers often produce conflicts, misunderstandings and project failures that are assigned to female authors of the project. It is even more unfortunate, that it is very rare that someone during the evaluation process analyzed causes of failures including cultural prejudices and misconceptions that lead to failures. That routine overlooking of cultural aspects to communication that is so essential in the realization of the projects that use modern technology is very serious problem and it helps discrimination based on gender. That fact says how that “silent torture” is actually strong and systematic despite its “silent character”. Women in such cases are being labelled as unsuccessful and sometimes even more, women develop defence systems by which they compete in aggression and other forms of discriminatory behavior with men thus, contributing actively to further practise of behavioral patterns that are harmful to our societies.

Sometimes, there are no misunderstandings not because of successful communication. There are not misunderstandings because there is no communication on use of modern technology in arts at all. In some theatre performances where I worked I have noticed that women avoid direct use and management of modern electronic devices since they are not skilled to use them. But, even what I found more embarrassing is that in many cases they do not use them because they are afraid of asking their colleagues how to use them since potential blame and even worse self-blame in advance prevent them from using it. However, life in such an atmosphere must be aggravated with horribly hard feelings and artistically it gives less artistic outcomes since many potentials for artistic expression have been cut off in advance thus “preventing” misunderstandings, miscommunication and possibly failure. Obviously an established routine of avoiding of involvement of women in many educational and training processes cause damage to our societies, culture and arts.

Accumulated feelings of despair and embarrassment

Someone may think that men are really masters of technology, but this may be easily questioned even without need to enter discussions about global politics and use of modern technology in global warfare.

I know many cases when women gave up from using directly modern technology electronic devices in their performances and letting the men to use them instead. However, in my experience men made some very basic mistakes often. For example, one man wanting to help a feminist NGO registered their Internet domain name in the .com group of Internet domain names although that NGO is non-profit. Or, in many cases men were doing video work artistically much weaker than the rest of performance done by author woman. Men in that project did possess skills but those skills were only skills with much weaker talent than her's. Tragically enough she gave up from her direct participation in the part of the project with video work due to inability to realize her expression. Sometimes the fight with envy of men who are responsible for the realization is very painful that some female artists

become to fear from expression. In some discussion that I have had with female artists I concluded that fear from expression is being accumulated in the course of time of giving up from one opportunity to another and that a feelings of disgrace were associated with memories on those projects. Often, longer breaks and pauses are needed for recovery after such experiences. Older women artists develop some skills in handling various gender related issues, but accumulated feelings of despair and embarrassment in the best case motivate them to encourage younger women to use modern technology in their artistic projects. Accumulated feelings of despair and embarrassment cause more often presence of those women in other artistic, educational activities that are not related with potentially embarrassing memories and experience. Such effects I found the most irrecoverable since they are already highly rationalized and shaped in forms of various professional careers and usually it is not possible to discuss them properly since bad feelings have been already deeply inhibited and boxed in rationalized forms of explanation, if there is any explanation at all.

Leading the cultural association and artistic project

Despite many difficulties and obstacles some women succeed to come to leading positions in various festivals, theatres, cultural organizations, NGOs that are dedicated to equality in using modern technology. Often they bring a major advancement in institutions and organizations they lead. On the other side they are often in between major pressures from the dominant male culture and way of work. But, it is warning that the price of being a leading person or organization is that they accept some oppressive methods of work. When woman leading one cultural organization asked me what I can recommend for publishing I recommended translation of the book about women in electronic music. She refused with: "Nah, now everyone translates books on women. We have to do something that is really new." Her lack of sensitivity emphasize that her leading role is much more important than the content she offers. Thus, she is inclined towards male models of work, she must do "a breakthrough" on the market and in publicity.

In my career, I have had great privilege to work with one actress who invited me to work with her on performance about one Russian female poet and her life during the early twenties in 20th century. Woman who was at the time director of that small theatre asked her to make performance with political emphasis and descriptions of police knocking on her doors etc. My female colleague refused that with explanation that it is very important for her to focus her work on feelings that Russian female poet have had at the time and to study how she as a woman, mother, wife, sister and poet struggles with highly difficult and hard political situation taking place in Russia at the time. After that explanation support to our performance was minimal and the fact that 11 years old girl played in the performance the first electronic music instrument called Theremin was not emphasized. My male and female colleagues told me a lot of such cases and I wrote here just two, but all of them show that it is necessary to reconsider terms such as "efficiency", "breakthrough", "political priority", "donor's request" etc.

Conclusion remarks:

Various forms of gender discrimination in arts and culture still exist and they take sometimes very sophisticated forms. Some of them are very silent and caused by systematic exploits and oppression in arts and culture where it is hard to measure it in quantities since it is deeply rooted in the process of creation of arts and culture which is not measurable as the process of economic or industrial manufacture. A study of various case studies is important in order to identify discrimination practises and establish policies that will improve the current situation in a great deal.

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I am very grateful to all artists that I worked with and who showed extraordinary patience in working in difficult and complex situations aggravated with prejudice and mistreatment committed by men and women. I am especially grateful to all women who succeeded to fight with prejudices that were pushing them aside of their way of producing art pieces. With the deepest respect I am grateful to those women who did not find a way out of highly embarrassing and painful experience and gave up. My article is dedicated to them as my friendly contribution to reflection on their painful memories with hope that there will be no more gave ups.