

**Working conditions within French  
feminist organizations**

*Acknowledging and understanding the  
paradoxes*



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## **Abstract**

This master thesis engages with the topic of the working conditions within French feminist organizations. The aim is to acknowledge the existing poor working conditions, material and immaterial, in order to understand them through literature and my own research. The latter consists of eight in-depth interviews with people working in this field. Whether they are intern or regular employee, they provide us with knowledge of their lived experiences. Those strongly contrast with what one could expect from a field related to feminism. This thesis intends to overcome simple answers, and scrutinizes instead social, economical and historical concepts such as power relations, commitment, professionalization and feminist divergence on the topic of work. It delivers the account of a multifaceted situation, in which interpersonal relations are taken into bigger scale phenomena.

*key words:* working conditions, paradoxes, gender, feminism, women's rights, organizations, associations, professionalization, institutionnalisation, engagement, cause, neoliberalism, power.

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# Introduction

Feminism is a polymorphous ideology. Over the last decades, it went from being an ideology, to a practice. This practice got to structure social movements, carrying political, social and economical radical claims. Within the last years, following an international movement of institutionalization<sup>1</sup>: feminism became a job. Rather, it is something that can be studied, through which one can get a degree, which has a value on the labor market and can eventually materialize into a job.

Generally, feminism is the belief that women and men are equal and should be treated equally, acknowledging the fact that women are discriminated against. Likewise, Katzenstein defines feminism as “minimally the recognition that women, compared to men, are an oppressed group and that women’s problems are a result of discrimination<sup>2</sup>”. Putting this broad ideology into practice(s), many organizations have flourished in France since the 1970’s. With them, a whole new labor market emerged, combined with a growing recognition of specific academic degrees<sup>3</sup>.

For many feminists, like me, the prospect of working for a field with which they share values and political aspirations sets high expectations. However, the reality can sometimes be a bit more disconcerting. Of course one could argue that entering the labor market in a capitalist and unequal world is generally painful for many people, and concerns many fields. Nonetheless, one could also expect that organizations carrying a political agenda or doing social work would be more sensitive to their own doings. The feminist *adage* “the personal is political” could hint that special care would be made of conditions of employment within those organizations.

I was surprised to realize through research and the interviews I conducted that working for an organization carrying a feminist agenda in France was far from the ideal job<sup>4</sup> and that situations of precarization and sometimes even violence are for some workers a harsh reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Woman as theatre: United Nations Conference on Women, Beijing 1995”, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, “Comparing the feminist movements of the United States and Western Europe: An overview”, In *The women's movements of the United States and Western Europe*, edited by M. Fainsod Katzenstein and C. M. Mueller. Philadelphia: Temple University Pr, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> ANEF, *Le genre dans l’enseignement supérieur et la recherche, Livre Blanc*, Paris, La Dispute, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> See my definition of “good” working condition further.

When asking the people working in the field, why the conditions were so paradoxical to what I believe is feminism, the answer often was: the lack of funding.

How can we then understand the fact that precarious contracts concern an overwhelming majority of workers in the broad field of feminism? How to take the idea that some organizations rely heavily on interns and other precarious contracts? If money is the issue: does the end really justify the means?.

In order to answer these questions and because accountability is a feminist concept<sup>5</sup>, I decided to dive into the topic of the working conditions within the French feminist working field.

The question of the working conditions within the feminist working field has not extensively been subject to research. For Anne Guardiola, “feminist theorists did not focus much on research about social economy, opting instead for analysis of macro structures such as the market, the State and the family<sup>67</sup>”. To the best of my knowledge, only one book focused precisely on feminist organizations in the United States. *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, was published in 1995, and gathers over 488 pages informations and analysis on the development of feminism into organizations in the country. It brings together case studies on topics such as feminist goals and organizational change, emotional labour and the impact of institutionalization on those groups. Even though this book is useful in terms of concepts, it captures a reality restricted to a certain environment, which in terms of politics, modes of organizing or ideology can be very different from the French case and has to be evaluated carefully. Furthermore, when the topic of the working conditions is mentioned, it is to emphasize differences in theory between liberal and radical beliefs. It does not investigate the working conditions “in the field”.

In France, three sociologists dedicated a great part of their research to the question of gender, feminism and work in French feminist associations. Erika Flahault, Annie Dussuet and Dominique Loiseau’s account on the working conditions within the field asks the question: “is the defense of women’s rights done at the price of degraded forms of employment?<sup>8</sup>”. Their answer is yes. Their research, based on the study of the main french

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Russo, *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power*, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Across this thesis, I translated myself all the content from French to English.

<sup>7</sup> Original version: “Les théoriciennes féministes se sont peu intéressées aux recherches sur l’économie sociale, privilégiant l’analyse du marché, de l’État et de la famille.”p128 Flahault, Érika, et Anne Guardiola. « Genre et associations en Europe : le pouvoir en question », *Informations sociales*, vol. 151, no. 1, 2009, pp. 128-136.

<sup>8</sup> Flahault, Érika, Annie Dussuet, and Dominique Loiseau. « Emploi associatif, féminisme et genre », *Travail*,

feminist associations, is the only one<sup>9</sup> dealing with conditions of employment specifically. Their conclusion is that the field is characterized by its low quality jobs, often poorly paid, where part-time contracts are widespread. To this account, they provide keys of comprehension. Through a gender lens, they are able to explain that what is apparent in this field is a reflection of a larger order, in which female dominated fields, are mostly precarized. Their work is crucial to our research, but does not take into account new forms of work such as internships, nor does give voice to the workers themselves, which could allow to access the emotional aspect of the working conditions.

In the same way, the question of care is important to our topic. On a macro level, care related areas are economically undervalued. In relation to its compensation, care entails a lot of hidden labor. Understanding feminist organizations as care organizations, in Joan Tronto's understanding as structures which aim at "continuing, repairing and maintaining our world so that we may live in it as well as possible"<sup>10</sup>, is very helpful to locate the responsibility in a more power structural order.

Moreover, the process of professionalization is key to understanding the topic. Erika Flahault and Annie Dussuet provide with an understanding of how growing from an activist association towards a professional organization can provoke clashes between the newcomers and the heads of associations. Likewise, Laure Bereni's work on the constitution of a "women's cause space" which "(...) designates the whole of the women involved in collectives specialised in the defense of women's rights, in the name of women and for the cause of women, no matter the terms of their action and where it takes place"<sup>11,12</sup>, applies to the French particular case of professionalization. It grows intertwined to the institutionalization of the cause.

Researching on working conditions in the feminist field requires to cross different sociologies. Stuck between the sociology of work and the sociology of activism, we explore what working for a cause means for expectations of the employer as well as the level of commitment of the

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genre et sociétés, vol. 31, no. 1, 2014, p.104.

<sup>9</sup> To my knowledge.

<sup>10</sup> Tronto, JC & Fisher, B, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring". in E Abel & M Nelson (eds), *Circles of Care*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY, pp. 36-54, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Original version: "La catégorie d'espace de la cause des femmes est utilisée ici pour désigner l'ensemble des actrices engagées dans des collectifs spécialisés dans la lutte au nom des femmes (...) et pour la cause des femmes (transformation de rapports de genre jugés injustes), quelle que soit la définition des termes de leur lutte (...) et le site dans lequel elle se déploie.

<sup>12</sup> Bereni, Laure, « Du MLF au Mouvement pour la parité. La genèse d'une nouvelle cause dans l'espace de la cause des femmes », *Politix*, vol. n° 78, no. 2, 2007, p.107.

employees. The work of sociologists Mathieu Hély<sup>13</sup> and Maud Simonet<sup>14</sup> allows us to see that working for an association “questions the frontiers between work and private life and the links between work and engagement<sup>15</sup>”. Following Maud Simonet’s work on free-labour within the neoliberal state, it allows us to integrate new forms of work such as internships and government subsidised *service civique*<sup>16</sup> in France.

Furthermore, I want to stress the importance of emotions as valid forms of evaluating working conditions. Auréline Cardoso worked on the topic of emotional labour in a French feminist organization which deals with domestic abuse. Her work acknowledges emotional labour as central in the field. Emotions are recognized in her work as a professional skill, a fuel which gives them strength and also a source of exhaustion.

In order to tackle this topic, I have chosen to use a very extensive definition of “feminist organizations”. For Patricia Yancey Martin, a feminist organization is “pro-woman, political, and socially transformational<sup>17</sup>”. This wide definition allows us not only to focus on what the *structure* itself does to the working conditions but also to dive into what the *idea* of working for a feminist purpose produces. Therefore, within the French context, a feminist organization means any organization, association, NGO, startup and even institution which works in order to transform the situation of women. I call this field the “feminist working field”, sometimes substituted by Laure Bereni’s broad definition of the “women’s cause space<sup>18</sup>”, as they are quite similar. It is important to note that I am not trying to determine whether any of those organizations are “feminists”, but rather take what they do as a sign of their commitment for equality and confront it with reality. Moreover, I am only taking into account organizations which hire and pay people. Thus, volunteers-based organizations are excluded. However, I am integrating to my research new forms of work such as internships and *services civiques*. I concentrated my research on Parisian organizations for geographical comparability.

Concerning the working conditions, I am interested in material as well as immaterial

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<sup>13</sup> Mathieu Hély, *Le travail associatif*, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Maud Simonet, “Le monde associatif: entre travail et engagement”, in *Sociologie du travail*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Maud Simonet, “Le monde associatif: entre travail et engagement”, in *Sociologie du travail*, 2012, p.195.

<sup>16</sup> *Service civique* is a contract in between volunteering and work. It has been implemented in 2010 and is aimed at people from 16 to 25 years who want to have a professional experience which benefits the “community” and do not have any experience. It is paid around 550 euros a month and this for a minimum of 24 hours a week up to 48.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Yancey Martin, Rethinking Feminist Organizations, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Jun., 1990, p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> L’espace de la cause des femmes.



working conditions. Material conditions entail the more contractual, concrete and tangible working conditions. It includes questions such as wage, working hours, compliance with labor law etc. Immaterial conditions entail all the questions of well-being, abuse and power relations, which tend to be more related to the emotional and interpersonal aspect of work. Often, the latter is excluded from research on working conditions. As a feminist researcher, I argue it is important not to neglect it. The body and the mind are intertwined and acknowledging it breaks with a cartesian, androcentric way of hierarchizing reason over passion<sup>19</sup>, *masculine over feminine*<sup>20</sup>.

Indubitably, determining what is a “good” or a “bad” working condition is highly normative and embedded in a long history of a capitalistic way of considering work. According to Marion Lefebvre, the concept of the quality of employment varies from *who* mobilizes the concept, *what* is evaluated and in comparison to what and what is the *purpose* of the evaluation<sup>21</sup>. Rather than describing what is a bad condition, I will describe what *I* consider to be a good working condition. I argue that good working conditions entail to feel safe at work, assured to have a wage which allows one to live properly in a given society<sup>22</sup> and following its economical standards. Good working condition also means having one’s education, skills and experiences respected and recognized. Good working conditions also lie in the power or agency one has in its work. Again, I am aware that this definition is eurocentric and based on a certain idea of work as a freeing element which is both capitalist, androcentric and westernized. However, my definition only applies to my narrow topic and in its most pragmatic sense: I am interested in how the working conditions in France impact women in the field of feminist organizations at this given time.

Lastly, I use the term ‘paradoxes’ to highlight the fact that poor working conditions and feminist values seem to be contradictory. Yet, I do not use the term ‘contradiction’ as it states an absolute opposition between two concepts. By contrast, ‘paradoxes’ introduces the possibility of an explanation, the space for a previously unknown truth which is mine to seek.

Thus, my research questions are the following: Why are French feminist organizations providing its workers with poor working conditions? What are those poor conditions exactly,

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<sup>19</sup> Ramazanoglu & Holland, *Feminist methodology: challenges and choices*, 2002, p.28.

<sup>20</sup> We can trace this intellectual development from the 17th century and Descartes’ theory on dualism.

<sup>21</sup> Lefebvre Marion, “Qualité de l’emploi et hétérogénéité dans le champ des services à la personne : éléments d’analyse à partir des statistiques nationales”, Documents de travail du CLERSÉ (Working Papers), n° 4, février, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Here the French one, thus a Western society.

how do they manifest themselves? Why is there relative silence around them? What is making them persist? Does it constitute a paradox and how to solve it?

I believe my research is important as the field of feminism is getting more and more professionalized. Thus, it is necessary to take a step back and try to analyze what is going on in the French feminist working field. This is especially true in times of crisis, when the feminist organizations themselves are financially under pressure. As a feminist, I believe our organizations must be accountable of their actions, especially when those impact the mental health and economic independence of their own. As a researcher, I believe it is my task to participate to this work. Furthermore, I am adding to the research in this field the consideration of emotions into the working conditions, which has not been tackled so far. I am also including new forms of work, which constitute a hidden part of feminist labor in organizations.

In order to answer my research question, I constructed my thesis in the following manner: the first chapter tries to understand the paradoxical situation of the working conditions within feminist organizations by dissecting already available literature. The second chapter will be dedicated to questioning my assertion according to which poor working conditions within the feminist field are paradoxical. Diving into historical feminist divergence on the topic of work will allow to relativise this first assertion. The third chapter will present the methodology of my research. Finally, the fourth part will expose the findings of the latter.

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## CHAPTER ONE. Feminist Organizations: understanding a paradoxical situation

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This chapter is a first attempt at answering my research question through the knowledge that is already existing. We will dive into an overview of the working conditions within the French feminist field, focus on the work in associations, scrutinize into the professionalization of a field, analyze concepts of passion and engagement, relate our topic to care issues and finally provide an analysis of gender within feminist associations.

### **Working conditions in feminist organizations: an overview**

Many associations have been created during the 1970's, both following and being part of second-wave feminism social movements. Those associations are now recognized and subsidized by the French state. The work that those organizations do could be compared to public sector jobs since it covers the security, the equality and the fairness of living of almost half of the population. Trying to analyse the working conditions' reality in the women's rights field is not the easiest. Indeed, it is difficult to find precise data, partly due to the fact that the work in such organizations is diverse and do not fit existing professional categories<sup>23</sup>. Erika Flahault, Annie Dussuet and Dominique Loiseau however managed to gather some information as they conducted research in 2010 on over fifteen feminist non profit organizations<sup>24</sup>, and their work displays a quite disappointing situation, in regard to what one could expect from a feminist organization, fighting for professional equality.

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<sup>23</sup> Annie Dussuet et Érika Flahault, « Chiffrage de l'emploi dans les Organisations de l'Économie Sociale en France : une analyse critique », *Cahiers du Cirtes*, n° 5, pp. 279-295, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> The authors also have an extensive definition of what constitutes a feminist non profit organization: their definition entails non-profit organization which have a goal of empowering women and foster equality between women and men. As they write, "it is not about issuing a feminism's label".

First, most of the jobs offered in those associations are of “low quality” in terms of sustainability, wage and working conditions. The working contracts are “atypical”<sup>25</sup>, which means for the authors that the wages are relatively low, the contracts mostly short-termed and part-timed, and the career evolution usually very limited. In the case of part-time contracts, its prevalence in the feminist non-profit organization field is as much problematic as it is a “major form of precarisation”<sup>26</sup>, a fact many if not all feminist organizations agree on. Workers, who are overwhelmingly women, often have to combine two to three different part time jobs in order to financially survive. What is important to note here, is that the part-time contracts as well as the low wages are more generally a reality in the whole field of association. As an example, the average wage in associations and feminist associations is both 18% inferior than the same activities in the private sector<sup>27</sup>. However, in feminist associations, since the part-time contracts are much more common (45,8% in 2006<sup>28</sup>), it results into an income which is relatively lower than in the associations in general. On top of that, and related to the elements exposed above, the turnover in those feminist associations is very high which is, as the authors put quite ironically, “not really compatible with the association’s objectives of promoting women’s independence”<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, the authors point out that there is usually no labor agreement made in those associations, or if so it differs from organization to organization. This fact does not help to set clear employment rules and security.

Thus, it is not extrapolating than to say that the material working conditions in feminist associations are difficult, and although it can be explained by the fact that the field of associations in general is also suffering from the same conditions, both the fact that the feminist working field is criticizing what they tend to reproduce and that the conditions take some specificities in this area, are making it a topic worth to be scrutinized.

After having acknowledged the situation of working conditions within French feminist associations, it is important to analyze what the structure of an association in itself is doing to the quality of the jobs.

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<sup>25</sup> Érika Flahault,, Annie Dussuet, et Dominique Loiseau. « Emploi associatif, féminisme et genre », *Travail, genre et sociétés*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2014, p.105.

<sup>26</sup> Érika Flahault,, Annie Dussuet, et Dominique Loiseau. « Emploi associatif, féminisme et genre », *Travail, genre et sociétés*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2014, p.106.

<sup>27</sup> Le Gros D & Narcy M., « Différentiel de salaire entre secteur sans but lucratif et secteur privé en France » in *Solidarités collectives. Famille et solidarités*, (Tome 1), Girard, D., (dir.), Paris. L’harmattan. 215-230, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> ONESS, Observatoire National de l’Economie Sociale et Solidaire, *Atlas de l’économie sociale et solidaire en France et dans les régions*, Paris, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Original version: “peu compatible avec les objectifs de promotion de l’autonomie des femmes que ces associations revendiquent.”

## Working in an association

In order to figure out what is the impact of the association's structure on the working conditions in the feminist working field, which is mostly constituted of associations, we should dive now into its specificities. A substantial work has been done in 1990 by the University of John Hopkins and the LSE on the topic of non profit organizations in Europe. Edith Archambault<sup>30</sup> has used this work to analyse the situation in France specifically. France is in this regard a "continental or corporatist" country, where the association's field is "largely developed and partially professionalized"<sup>31</sup>. The associations are partly funded by the State, local authorities and the Social Security System. Professional associations can add to those fundings their takings. Most interestingly, within those ones, 68% of the employees are women<sup>32</sup>, and their missions cover mostly sectors such as "social action, humanitarian or caritative, social housing and health"<sup>33</sup>. Overall, there are 161000 associations employing people in France. According to Mathieu Hély, the field of organizations has met an "exceptional development", with a raise in employment of 3,6% from 1980 to 1999<sup>34</sup>. It is thus both a booming sector in terms of employments, and a precarious one. The structure of an employing association is important to our topic as it functions neither totally like an association, nor like a firm, "it is funded on a double contract: the association contract formalised by the 1901 French law and the contract of employment from the labour code"<sup>35</sup>. This fact certainly explains the 'in-between' working conditions in this field, which leads to flexible working hours, lower wages than in classic firms and public services, and as we have seen, part and short time contracts being widespread. Moreover, the different professional statuses in this field are very diverse and the frontiers between those often blurry : volunteer, intern, professional, employee. Those blurred lines are even more prevalent when the

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<sup>30</sup> Édith Archambault, "L'économie sociale en France dans une perspective européenne", XXIe colloque de l'Association pour le développement de la documentation sur l'économie sociale (Addes), November 26th, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> 84% of associations are volunteer-based.

<sup>32</sup> Flahault, Érika, et Anne Guardiola. « Genre et associations en Europe : le pouvoir en question », *Informations sociales*, vol. 151, no. 1, 2009, pp. 128-136.

<sup>33</sup> INSEE, "Neuf associations sur dix fonctionnent sans salarié", *INSEE Première*, n°1587, 2016, p.1.

<sup>34</sup> Mathieu Hély, *Le travailleur associatif : un salarié de droit privé au service de l'action publique*, PHD thesis under the direction of Serge Paugam, Sociology Department, EHESS, 2005, p9.

<sup>35</sup> Mathieu Hély, *Les métamorphoses du monde associatif*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2009.

employing association has been created by a former volunteer: in this case the ‘firm’ part and the ‘association’ part are very tightly imbricated<sup>36</sup>. Feminist employing associations often follow this model, as they usually come from a social movement.

Added to this multiplication of statuses, new ones emerge and are becoming central to the work in feminist associations. Indeed, internships and *service civique*<sup>37</sup> have prospered since the year 2000. With them, a new social inequality: for people with sufficient means, those activities are considered as ‘experiences’ and are part of a long term working project, whereas for people from a lower social background, it is an experience of under-employment and precarity that is more endured than genuinely chosen<sup>38</sup>.

This hybridity is the sign of the transformation of public action. Less state, more association fulfilling a public service duty where the employees work like in the private sector but without the security of neither private nor public service jobs<sup>39</sup>.

Having considered the implications of the association’s sector and its specificities, it is crucial to locate our topic within a historical movement of professionalization and institutionalisation in France. What does such processes do to a social movement? Can it impact working conditions?

## **Professionalization and institutionalization of a field**

Institutionalization and professionalization are two separate social processes, which often go hand in hand. Professionalization means a “process of development, differentiation and autonomization of professional activities”<sup>40,41</sup>. Professionalization does not necessarily results into the creation of a specific profession. Institutionalization instead, if it involves *de facto* the

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<sup>36</sup> Cheryl A. Hyde, “The Hybrid Nonprofit : An Examination of Feminist Social Movement Organizations” in *Journal of Community Practice*, Issue 4, p 45-67, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> *Service civique* is a contract in between volunteering and work. It has been implemented in 2010 and is aimed at people from 16 to 25 years who want to have a professional experience which benefits the “community” and do not have any experience. It is paid around 550 euros a month and this for a minimum of 24 hours a week up to 48.

<sup>38</sup> Maud Simonet, *Travail gratuit: la nouvelle exploitation?*, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Matthieu Hély, *Les métamorphoses du monde associatif*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Original version: “Processus d’émergence, de différenciation et d’autonomie d’activités professionnelles”.

<sup>41</sup> Didier Demazière, “Professionnalisations problématiques et problématiques de la professionnalisation”, *Formation emploi*, 108, 2009, p.85.

professionalization of a field, relates in our case to “the integration of the women’s cause in practices and institutions’ narratives”. It can involve the creation of specific public services dedicated to certain topics, such as professional equality or gender-based violence, or the addition of feminist claims to political discourses, in a word, what is called “State’s feminism”<sup>42</sup>. In France, this institutionalization and professionalization of feminism started during the 1970’s, after the rise of social protests, amongst them feminist groups, demanding basic human rights such as sexual rights, protection against men’s violence and professional equality<sup>43</sup>. Once those battles won, feminist groups structured themselves into increasingly professional associations. Analyzing the specifics of those processes is important since, as Soline Blanchard, Alban Jacquemart, Marie Perrin and Alice Romerio wrote:

“The institutionalization of the women’s cause is creating new needs of expertise as well as the rise of a new labor market. But the professional positions which appear then in administrations, unions, firms or in feminist organizations are often characterized by precarious employment and work conditions and by a limited autonomy; solely the ones endowing better social resources seeming to be benefiting from it”<sup>44</sup><sup>45</sup>.

The professionalization of the field must be understood as a symptom of a certain institutionalization which is correlated, counterintuitively, to neoliberal ideology which “has led to reduced state commitment to development activities and an emphasis on private-sector involvement in social arenas”<sup>46</sup>, thus involving the current celebration (in speech at least) of feminist organizations, in charge of what would be, in a welfare state, public service. The professionalization of feminism in France was at first done by joining the existing social work, which did not totally resulted into the creation of a specific profession.

The multiplication of profiles and statuses<sup>47</sup> coming from the field’s gradual professionalization can provoke tensions and lack of understanding. In the case of French

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<sup>42</sup> D. Sainsbury, *Gender, equality, and welfare states*, Cambridge University Press, xiv, 1996.

<sup>43</sup> Non exhaustive list.

<sup>44</sup> Original version: “L’institutionnalisation de la cause des femmes suscite de nouveaux besoins en expertise et l’essor d’un nouveau marché de travail. Mais les positions professionnelles qui apparaissent à cette occasion dans les administrations, syndicats, entreprises ou dans les organisations féministes se caractérisent souvent par des conditions précaires de travail et d’emploi et par une autonomie limitée, seules les plus dotées en ressources sociales semblant en tirer réellement profit”.

<sup>45</sup> Soline Blanchard, Alban Jacquemart, Marie Perrin and Alice Romerio, “La cause des femmes dans les institutions”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2018, p8.

<sup>46</sup> Lisa Markowitz, Karen W. Tice, “Paradoxes of professionalization: Parallel dilemmas in women’s organizations in the Americas”, *Gender & Society*, 2002, p947.

<sup>47</sup> Elisa Herman, “Militer en travaillant contre les violences conjugales”, *Cahiers du genre*, 2013.

organizations, in which activism and paid-work are still very much imbricated, the feminist ideals can collide indirectly with the working conditions of the employees.

Paradoxically, three of the feminist principles carried by some of the French feminist organizations can lead to such situation<sup>48</sup>. First of all, the ideological refusal of being in an expertise position. The idea behind is that every woman is their own expert, and against a patriarchal, bureaucratic and hierarchical power structure, feminists believed in a more democratic way of participating. It leads to a lack of recognition of the work required in those areas, because if “everyone is its own expert” than no one is expert at all and the employees are interchangeable. This goes against the social and economical recognition of the field. Second, usually the service or the assistance is free. It is explained by the fact that feminist organizations have for long sought to be universally accessible. This means that they have to seek for money elsewhere: subsidies from the state or local collectivities most of the time. Those require long and fastidious procedures, which do not assure financial stability. Third, most feminist organizations are guaranteeing anonymity to their public. This activity “in the shadow” does not coincide with rules imposed by state and private funders, who “need” to measure and calculate the impact of the money spent. Therefore a dilemma arises: either increasing the formalization of their activity and taking the risk to exclude already economically excluded segments of the population, or continuing like they always did, in a more informal way, but risking not to see their work recognized. For all of those examples, feminist organizations have to deal with cornelian dilemmas imposed by an androcentric economical model :

“The feminist activist experience is colliding with norms of economic activity evaluation set by public financier, which renders the professional aspect of their activities difficult to be recognized”<sup>49</sup>.

Thus, French feminist organizations have to constantly negotiate between their authentic ideals and the gradual professionalization/institutionalisation of their issues which can seem, at first glance at least, like a good news. The multiplication of statuses and profiles leads to a lack of understanding between ranges of action from old methods of activism, new rules of

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<sup>48</sup> Erika Flahault, Annie Dussuet and Dominique Loiseau, “Emploi associatif, féminisme et genre”, *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 2014, p.113-114-115.

<sup>49</sup> Original version: “L’expérience féministe militante, qui se heurtent aux normes communes d’évaluation de l’activité économique par les financeurs publics et rendent plus difficile la reconnaissance du caractère professionnel de leurs activités. »



employment and rise of “experts”<sup>50</sup>. The tension is at its heights when financial problems are added to the equation: because institutionalization is not necessarily followed by public spendings’ augmentation<sup>51</sup>. What could be regarded as “enabling once marginal feminist voices to be heard in established centers of political power”, unfortunately brings about “the persistence or creation of social hierarchies within and between women’s organizations, as well as a subversion-or more generously-a reorientation of social change agendas and strategies”<sup>52</sup>. In our case, it can produce poor immaterial and material working conditions.

Thus, the professionalization of feminist movements changes radically the way of fighting for women’s rights. What once had been activism is now work. However, is the division that clear? Can a field go from one register to another one that easily? In the next part I will dive into the meaning of engagement and passion at work and its counterintuitive consequences.

## **Passion, vocation and engagement at work**

Working for the “women’s cause” often carries a deeper meaning to those who contribute to it. On many aspects, such “field” resembles to so called creative jobs, such as art jobs in general, cultural professions, sports, politics/activism etc. Indeed, people in those fields explain the reason they came to those activities by emphasizing notions such as “passion”, “engagement” and “vocation”. The phenomenon of “passion at work” has been studied by many different sociologists of work and sociologists of activism. This narrative of “passion” in work is prevalent in the feminist working field.

Passion at work or “passionate work” has an extremely positive connotation. Nathalie Leroux and other sociologists have analyzed this notion for a journal’s special issue on passion at

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<sup>50</sup> Elisa Herman, “Militer en travaillant contre les violences conjugales”, *Cahiers du Genre*, n°55, 2013, p.71.

<sup>51</sup> Pauline Bock, “Emmanuel Macron has made gender equality his “great cause” – except when it comes to funding it”, *NewStatesman*, 29th of November 2017. [accessed 03/12/2019]  
<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/11/emmanuel-macron-has-made-gender-equality-his-great-cause-except-when-it-comes>

<sup>52</sup> Markowitz, Lisa, and Karen W. Tice. “Paradoxes of Professionalization: Parallel Dilemmas in Women's Organizations in the Americas.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2002, p.954.

work<sup>53</sup>. They have researched on what they consider being the three most emblematic work-fields linked to passion : sport, art and politics. They conducted interviews with people working in those areas in order to deepen and understand the meaning of passion in work, how it is constructed and what it creates/allows. As they found out, passion at work can cover many different notions such as “engagement, freedom, creativity and autonomy, sense of action and/or the activity in itself representing a payment”<sup>5455</sup>. Making a living from a passion breaks the common rule of work which is that one is constrained to work in order to get a payment, or as Arlette Kaplan Daniels wrote, work is understood as any activities “you have to do to get paid for them”<sup>56</sup>. In this sense, work as it is fuelled by passion is not constrained any longer ; the reason why one works is found inside themselves rather than provoked by exterior necessities. Passion at/in work is presented as “both better than work and more than work”<sup>5758</sup>. This conception of work as passion can help us understand the working conditions within the feminist working field as it follows quite the same logic. Women working for the “women’s cause” have a lot in common with people working in arts for instance. The people who work in those fields do not work there because of money, rather, they are passionate about it. For the feminist working field, they are “committed” to it, it is more than ever jobs that they feel they “cannot not do”. As Maud Simonet points out, this passion at/in work can turn against workers. Indeed, because passion job is not a “common” job, it follows different rules and can become invasive.

It colonizes time and domestic sphere, overflows onto family life, the “free time” as “non-work”, leads to compromises, dilemmas and ruptures. If passion makes one forget about work’s constraints, and can appear as emancipatory, (...) its ability to dissolve frontiers can also be a source of suffering and alienation.<sup>5960</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nathalie Leroux, Marc Loriol *et al*, *Le travail passionné*, Clinique du travail, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Maud Simonet, “La passion au travail, une ambivalence à ne pas dépasser”, in Nathalie le Roux et at, *Le travail passionné*, ERES, Clinique du travail, 2015, p.311.

<sup>55</sup> Original version: “l’engagement, la liberté, la créativité et l’autonomie, le sens de l’action et/ou l’exercice de l’activité comme porteur de sa propre rétribution”.

<sup>56</sup> Arlene Kaplan Daniels, “Invisible Work”, in *Social Problems*, Vol. 34, No. 5, 1987, p 403.

<sup>57</sup> Original version: “mieux que le travail et plus que le travail”.

<sup>58</sup> Maud Simonet, “La passion au travail, une ambivalence à ne pas dépasser”, in Nathalie le Roux et at, *Le travail passionné*, ERES, Clinique du travail, 2015, p311.

<sup>59</sup> Maud Simonet, “La passion au travail, une ambivalence à ne pas dépasser”, in Nathalie le Roux et at, *Le travail passionné*, ERES, Clinique du travail, 2015, p311.

<sup>60</sup> Original version: “Il colonise le temps et l’espace de la sphère domestique, déborde sur la vie familiale, le “temps libre” du “non-travail”, conduit à des arbitrages, des dilemmes, des ruptures. Si la passion fait quelquefois oublier les contraintes du travail et peut apparaître à ce titre comme facteur d’émancipation du travailleur, (...) sa capacité à dissoudre les frontières peut également être source de souffrance et d’aliénation”.

As for women working for the women's cause, halfway in between work of passion as a political engagement and work as a mean of financial survival, their rights as workers are shadowed by the same reason that justifies their existence. If one is so passionate about its work, if one cares that much about "the cause", then why would they even demand anything? Passion, vocation and engagement in work follow the same logic, they are seen as sufficient to be contented. Moreover, demanding working conditions' improvements, as we can see in other "common" jobs, means "taking the risk to jeopardize publicly but also personally the passionate reason behind one's engagement". In my opinion, the word 'passion' can be translated into "sincerity". It reminds us of the work that has been done by feminists scholars on love and family, and to what extent such highly positive notions make it difficult to see the amount of invisible work that they entail. If one is sincere in their love, they cannot have any domestic demands, likewise, if one is sincere in their feminist engagement, they cannot have any demands either. Passion and engagement are, just like love, hiding and underestimating a big part of labour, making it hard for both the organizations and the workers to see the constraints<sup>61</sup>. In that sense, working for the women's cause is part of what Eliot Freidson, a sociologist of professions, calls "vocational jobs". Such jobs are characterized by the fact that the wage in itself is considered as of secondary importance, and exceeding working hours is of no importance as it is done in the name of "the art".<sup>62</sup> Added to that, this "passion at work" has been analyzed as not only socially constructed but also strengthened and even highly valorized in the arts. To some extent, we could spot here an injunction to which workers have to conform. In the case of the feminist working field, the engagement, passionate narrative is also prevalent, which has a clear downside. Valorizing engagement to enter a professional field, renders critiques about this same professional field very difficult. It is taking the risk to be seen as "insincere".

Depassioning the passionate discourse that we can find in the feminist working field is therefore necessary to acknowledge the work that lies behind such a strong engagement. Additionally, it allows us to spot what can be considered as poor working conditions, and the amount of alienation that is hidden under the glowy blanket of passion and political engagement. Such sociological work is even more important as neoliberal societies are taking

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<sup>61</sup> John Krinsky and Maud Simonet, *Who cleans the park? Public work and urban governance in New York City*, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Freidson Eliot, Chamboredon Jean-Claude, Menger Pierre-Michel, "Les professions artistiques comme défi à l'analyse sociologique", in *Revue française de sociologie*, 1986.

over this “passion at/in work” narrative, in order to design a labor market in which not only people are forced to work in order to survive, but also have the urge to “love” it<sup>63</sup>.

Moreover, this sociological work on passion helps us questioning the role of our institutions in the valorization of this prerequisite of “passion”, which not only diffuse it but also financially sanction it. For instance, nowadays in France the budget of feminist organizations has been reduced, which could thus result into an enhancement and strengthening of an already existing “mantra” of engagement, passion. In one sentence : giving yourself to the cause.

After having analyzed how engagement and passion at work can lead to difficult yet normalized working conditions, I will engage with the question of the gender as a social pervasive structure and its impact on the working conditions within the feminist field.

## **Gender<sup>64</sup> does not cease to perform before feminist organizations’ doors**

Annie Dusset, Erika Flahaut and Dominique Loiseau studied the impact of gender as a social structure within feminists organizations<sup>65</sup>. As they point out, those organizations are not immune to it: it has an impact on both the way they work and organize themselves<sup>66</sup>. Of course, such statement could be made of any type of associations or structures. However, it is interesting to analyze the pervasiveness of gender as a social structure in areas where most of the people are supposedly aware of and actively fighting against such structure. As the authors write, gender “determines, as in other militant associations, and in articulation with other social structures, the power relations, the organization of labor and the functioning”<sup>67</sup>. They found out that existed in those areas a kind of “paradox of militant action”<sup>68</sup>. Even though the

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel Mercure et Marie-Pierre Bourdage-Sylvain, *Travail et Subjectivité. Perspectives critiques*, Québec, PUL, Hermann, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Gender as a social structure.

<sup>65</sup> Through the three main umbrella groups of organizations.

<sup>66</sup> Annie Dusset, Erika Flahaut and Dominique Loiseau, « Le genre est-il soluble dans les associations féministes ? », *Cahiers du Genre*, 2013, p6.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p.9.

organizations they have been studying affirm and promote on one side an alternative economic model, displaying humanist, democratic values, they still provide, on another side, poor quality jobs. Their first attempt at understanding this paradox was to notice that first of all: most of the employees are women. In most, if not all the fields where women are concentrated, that is care, education and social work, working conditions are difficult and the wage quite low. That is partly explained by the fact that the skills women need to work in those fields are naturalized: they would already possess them “by nature”. This androcentric underestimation of women’s work leads to an economic devaluation. This macro-situation does not spare feminist organizations:

“Since the workers are mostly women, the low incomes, linked to the predominance of part time contracts and the non-recognition of qualification, does not appear as a precarization of the employment, but rather like the simple result of the consistency of the jobs offered with the women’s workforce characteristics”<sup>69</sup>.

Thus, the working conditions we displayed could be considered as “making sense”, in regard to a work which is generally underestimated. Feminist organizations in this scheme are therefore both victims and guilty of their own biases and to a system’s power which operates beyond them. Likewise, the issue of part time jobs is emblematic to what gender as a social structure does, even to people well aware of its effects. Indeed, some feminist organizations that Erika Flahault and Annie Dussuet interviewed, claim that part time is preferred by the women themselves<sup>70</sup>. This exposes a tricky situation, in which feminist organizations both provide women with part time jobs because they reckon it is what is going to be privileged by them, but also women are only taking those offers because it is mainly what feminist organizations offer. On top of that, gender roles have here a huge impact. First of all, women who prefer part time jobs mobilize quality of life for themselves and their family when asked about their choice. However, the fact to choose part time jobs is a construction which fits into the gender division of labour. As domestic chores are still mainly done by women, it is considered that they have and should work less. As Margaret Maruani writes “part time work has been entirely constructed as the ideal form of employment for women”<sup>71</sup><sup>72</sup>. Interestingly,

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<sup>69</sup> Annie Dussuet, Erika Flahault and Dominique Loiseau, « Le genre est-il soluble dans les associations féministes ? », *Cahiers du Genre*, 2013, p.9.

<sup>70</sup> Annie Dussuet, Erika Flahault, “Des emplois soutenables dans les associations ? la part du genre”, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, *Cahiers du Cirtes*, 2012, p172.

<sup>71</sup> Margaret Maruani, “Activité, précarité, chômage : toujours plus ?”, *Revue de l’OFCE*, n°90, 2004, p111.

part time jobs spreaded in France around 1980's, as employment crisis arose. Its development was an answer to employers' worries as it increased the flexibility of their employees. Thus, "female active population played a role of an adjustment variable"<sup>73</sup>. Feminist organizations are not entirely culprits of a much bigger scale phenomena in which state and neoliberalism play a great role. However, it is true to say that the non-profit's field has constructed its sustainability at women's expenses<sup>74</sup>, which interestingly still does not create tension<sup>75</sup>.

The failure to respect working hours is also a good example of how the fact that women's temporality is characterized by a "permanent disponibility" in the domestic sphere turns out to impact likewise their working life<sup>76</sup>. What is troubling here, is that feminists associations could be seen as protected from the impact of social structures such as gender. Undoubtedly, they have a largely better understanding of its repercussion in our societies, proof being that they all use it as both a way to analyze situations, as well as to act against them. Interestingly, this understanding and this use of gender as both a tool of analysis and action does not seem to completely apply to inner conditions of functioning, and it is partly explained by the current division of labour.

In the next part, I will explore care as a work-field, and try to find answers through this analysis on the working conditions within the women's cause space.

## **Who cares? The impact of care on the working conditions in feminist organizations**

Who cares in our society? It is interesting to take a closer look at the question of care when it comes to working conditions in feminist organizations. Care, as a subject of analysis takes many forms. It has been extensively studied by feminist scholars as it is a capital element of

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<sup>72</sup> Original version: "Le travail à temps partiel a été construit de toutes pièces comme la forme d'emploi idéale pour les femmes."

<sup>73</sup> Original version: "La population active féminine à temps partiel joue le rôle d'une variable d'ajustement."

<sup>74</sup> Annie Dussuet, Erika Flahault, "Des emplois soutenables dans les associations ? la part du genre", Presses Universitaires de Louvain, *Cahiers du Cirtes*, 2012, p172.

<sup>75</sup> Part of the answer is found in the part on passion.

<sup>76</sup> Danielle Chabaud Rychter, Dominique Fougeyrollas-Schwebel and Françoise Sonthonnax, *Espace et temps du travail domestique*, 1985.

the patriarchal division between un/paid labor and the general invisibilisation of women's labor in the domestic sphere. In the case of paid labor, care remains an element of sexual division of labour: care jobs are women dominated fields, which are socially devalued. Care is also a revealing element when it comes to understanding the relationship between neoliberalism, globalization and racism. Indeed, in western globalized societies, neoliberalism replacing welfare state, we witness a racialization of care, added to a "global heart transplant" provoked by a global care chain: women from third-world countries leaving their home to care for well-off families' children<sup>77</sup>. Thus, who assigns care to whom tells a lot about power relations in one's society.

Employees within feminist organizations are doing care jobs: they take care of women in our society. This "care" takes two ways. It can be directly taking care of women, providing them with help, in the case of women's shelter for instance. On a more macro level, employees in feminist organizations are also taking care of women: they are protecting them, attempting to resolve the issues that they will or might face in our society. Both of those ways can partly explain working conditions in feminist organizations.

First, for feminist organization doing social work, care is central. In this case, care means being careful to concrete needs which are always linked to specific circumstances. It is a constant changing situation which requires emotional labour<sup>78</sup>. Since the care is linked to exterior circumstances, women have to adjust their working hours, which can lead to untypical extra hours<sup>79</sup>. Care work in itself entails a lot of hidden labor<sup>80</sup>, which explains the low social recognition of it, and can cover the reality of working conditions in many feminist organizations. It is however not the only explanation. Paula England, an american sociologist analyzed the low economical value of care jobs. She found out that people in need of care are the ones who are already in difficult economic situation. Therefore, she claims that their "low value" to the economic system sorts of redounds on those who take care of them. Secondly, on top of care jobs being considered as "feminine" and then undervalued, Paula England

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<sup>77</sup> Arlie Hochschild, "Love and gold", in A.R. Hochschild & B. Ehrenreich, *Global women: Nannies, maids and sex workers in the new economy*, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Auréline Cardoso, "C'est comme si on avait de la colère pour elles. Féminisme et émotions dans le travail d'accompagnement des femmes victimes de violences conjugales", *Terrains et travaux*, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Marc Bessin et Corinne Gaudart, "Les temps sexués de l'activité : la temporalité au principe du genre ?", *Temporalités*, 2009, p.6.

<sup>80</sup> Hidden labor because of an androcentric definition of labor.

reckons care work is seen as a maternal job. This argument echoes our part on passion: if care jobs resembles maternity, which is free because ruled by love, why would it be well-paid?

“Care workers are implicitly expected to prove their proper motivation by accepting a wage penalty. The dichotomy-producing tendencies in Western thought also encourage the notion that one works for love or money, not both”<sup>81</sup>

This brings us to the second meaning of care. Who, as macro agent, is taking care of society? Who, as Joan Tronto writes, is in charge of “continuing, repairing and maintaining our world so that we may live in it as well as possible”<sup>82</sup>? In our capitalist societies, the people in charge of care, women and people of color, repair what this same capitalism does. Indeed, the social economy which is highly feminized and racialized is somehow cleaning up the mess of the other “valued” economy, which is mainly *white* and *masculine*. Poor working conditions in feminist organizations are reflecting this macro situation which functions as a perverse circle. This essential care labor is also increasingly deprived of financial means by this *masculine* economy: subsidies per projects are replacing structural fundings, which renders “uncertain the employment’s sustainability by fragilizing the budget balance”<sup>8384</sup>. This circle is perverse as it instilled the necessity of working always more, combined with an already existing mantra of self-sacrifice.

From a structural level, the poor working conditions in feminist organizations, and in care related areas in general, are reflecting an androcentric capitalistic system which is almost directly instigating troubles within the field which is supposed to clean the ones it causes. Having this reality in mind is important not to judge unfairly a situation which is caught in large-scale power relations.

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<sup>81</sup> Paula England, Michelle Budig, Nancy Folbre, “Wages of virtue: the relative pay of care work”, *Social Problems*, 2002, p457.

<sup>82</sup> Tronto, JC & Fisher, B, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring”. in E Abel & M Nelson (eds), *Circles of Care*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY, pp. 36-54, 1990.

<sup>83</sup> Erika Flahault, Annie Dussuet et Dominique Loiseau, “Emploi associatif, féminisme et genre”, *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 2014, p116.

<sup>84</sup> Original version: “rendent plus incertaine la pérennisation des emplois en fragilisant les équilibres budgétaires”.



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## **CHAPTER TWO. Was feminism always against exploitation? First and second-wave divergence on the topic of work**

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In the next part, we will dive into feminism's history to explore bourgeois and Marxist feminists' divisions on the question of labour. In the second part, we will analyze contemporary critiques that have been made on what second wave radical feminism has become, and especially on its lack of class and economical consideration. Those critiques lead us to reformulating our main question: is it that paradoxical to find feminist structures unaware of the precarious conditions they offer to their employees?

### **First wave feminism & the enemy sisters. Historical dive into the division between bourgeois feminists and socialists feminists.**

Hal Draper and Anne G Lipow worked on the topic of the class issue and the divisions around it between feminists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. As they point out, Marxists women and bourgeois feminists were on two different missions. For the Marxists, the fight was double. First, they had to focus on the direct enemy, capitalism, as well as against the reformers of the socialist alternative. Second, they had to combat anti-feminism as well as “sex oppression of the established powers and institutions”<sup>85</sup>. Alongside, what the authors call the “women’s rightsers” and what we can call “bourgeois feminists”, were focused on acquiring equal juridical rights. The difference between those two parts of feminism lies in the

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<sup>85</sup> H. Draper, A.G. Lipow, “Marxist women versus bourgeois feminism” in *Socialist Register*, 1976, p.180.

un/radical questioning of the existing social orders. More precisely, the women's issue was to bourgeois feminists only a women's issue: they would not consider it to be part of other basic social issues. They made it a separate question, with several circumscribed battles to be won, mostly on the juridical side.<sup>86</sup>

For August Bebel, this represents the "right-left split on feminism", which happened at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Marxist theorists, the *integration* of the women's question is a key concept. The women's issue is an integral part of the social and class issue, none existing without either of those two.

This assertion does not stand to criticize one fringe of feminism rather than the other, but is useful to show that feminist positions on workers rights have always been question for debate. In this late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marxist women demanded two main things. First, they wanted access to the labor market. Second, they wanted legislative gains in order to protect those same new workers. Surprisingly, this second demand generated controversy amongst feminists. At the core of the disagreement, a class issue, as "the hard core of the bourgeois feminist movements has typically been the career women elements, business and professional strivers above all"<sup>87</sup> the legislative changes and protections that working women would demand are irrelevant to upper echelon women, in the way that it does not profit them. What is at stake here, is clearly the differentiated needs of upper class women and working women. More than that, what is a question of protection and dignity for working women can result into a loss of privileges for bourgeois feminists. At this time in history, bourgeois feminists blocked bills which could protect specifically women workers on the grounds that it would be "a form of sex discrimination"<sup>88</sup>. Such apparently surprising position is both explained by privileges and the women's rightsters' desire not to let the legitimacy of their demands be conflated with what they disregard as "class issues". As the authors wrote, dissociating themselves from the Marxist women was a way to "demonstrate their social purity"<sup>89</sup>.

Hence, the authors believe that if bourgeois feminists could carry demands that would ameliorate the condition of all women, juridical rights would yet not eradicate sexism and misogyny from the society. Moreover, Marxist women believed that sexism is imbricate in, and worsened by, economic dependence. Of course, bourgeois women do not see the

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<sup>86</sup> H.Draper, A.G. Lipow, "Marxist women versus bourgeois feminism" in *Socialist Register*, 1976, p.181.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.185.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p.185.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p.185.

necessity of such transformations, as they barely suffer from it. As Rosa Luxemburg puts it quite harshly “the women of the possessing classes will always be rabid supporters of the exploitation and oppression of workingpeople, from which they receive at second hand the wherewithal for their socially useless existence”<sup>90</sup>.

According to Marxist feminists, the bourgeois feminists fail in their attempt to be advocating for the women’s issue. They can only advocate for *their* women’s issue. As the authors write: “there is a women’s question for the women of the proletariat, of the middle bourgeoisie, of the intelligentsia, and of the upper ten thousand; it takes various forms depending on the class situation of these strata”<sup>91</sup>

Tensions between Marxists women and bourgeois feminists are crystallised around the latter hostility towards protective laws for working women. Louise Kautsky<sup>92</sup> reports divisions during feminists attack in Massachusetts against a bill which aimed at reducing working hours for women. The bourgeois feminists of this state were against this bill, claiming that it would lead to a situation in which firms would avoid hiring women. Moreover, they reckoned that women should be able to decide individually on the hours they wanted to work. For them, the principle issue was the right to vote. On the other hand, for Marxists women, reducing the working hours represented a huge improvement for women workers, limiting their daily working hours to 12. If men were to work longer hours, which could appear as discrimination, Marxists women believed that since women were majoritarian in factories, the fact that their hours were reduced would logically link to a reduction on men’s hours as well.

This example is another evidence that feminism was never ideologically monolithic on the topic of labour.

If Marxists women are quite harsh towards bourgeois feminists, they do not entirely disagree with many of their claims. Rather, they point out women’s righsters bias and elitism, arguing that their demands are only beneficial to upper class, highly educated women. As Eleanor Marx writes: “If every demand raised by these women were granted today, we, workingwomen would still be just where we were before. Women workers would still work infamously long hours, for infamously low wages, under infamously unhealthful conditions”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p.214.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p.193.

<sup>92</sup> Louise Kautsky, “The Women's-Rightsers and Reduction of the Working-Day for Women”.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 224

How can there be a feminism which does not free every women and yet strongly affirms the universal necessity of its agenda? That is the question Marxists women were asking at this time in history. At this point, the question of the emancipation of labour was not solely an issue. It was the issue, around which matrix issues such as sexism and patriarchy are wound around. None of each exist without the other.

What shows this historical digression is that considering that feminism was always fighting for workers rights and for better working conditions is an illusion. If some carried this agenda within the first wave, they were Marxist feminists. Thus, poor working conditions in the field of the women's cause are not, on the theoretical level, completely in contradiction with feminism as a multifaceted ideology. In the second part, I will dive into second wave feminism and its radical vision on work. More specifically, I will give space to critiques claiming that those radical ideas have disappeared with the emergence of neoliberalism.

## **What happened to the second-wave ideals? Neoliberalism and feminism: an unhappy marriage**

Second-wave feminism in France was anchored in social, political and economical revolutionary movement(s).

The new feminists found critical instruments to use against the sexist domination of culture, society, production, politics, and the family within this radical challenge to existing society and among the attempts to try out different social and sexual relationships<sup>94</sup>.

Amongst those issues, this insurrectionary movement tackled the question of labor and exploitation. Theresia Sauter-Bailliet in her article "The feminist movement in France" recounts the main topics which constructed second-wave feminism ideology. As she writes:

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<sup>94</sup> Cinzia Arruzza, *Dangerous Liaisons*, 2015, p50.

“The emancipation of women is contingent upon solving the question of child-raising and integrating women into the workforce, not only into those jobs where they have always been: at the lowest level, but into those professions to which they have had little if any access: the well paid, prestigious ones that carry responsibility and set the course of the future.”<sup>95</sup>

Second wave feminists desired change in order to enable women to access white-men-dominated fields, as well as to enhance the current conditions of female employment. In those days, “two thirds of those earning minimum wages are women”<sup>96</sup>. Moreover, second wave feminism was tackling labor in a renewed broad definition: it included a deep reflection on paid and unpaid labor, and highlighted how beneficial was care to capitalist and patriarchal society. However, and according to Nancy Fraser, feminism has compromised its initial second wave ideals within the years. She calls the history of second wave feminism “a drama in three acts”<sup>97</sup>. In her view, second wave feminism was at first a movement for women’s liberation which was part of a coalition with other radical, leftist movements. Those movements were insurrectionary. After the war, at the same time that welfare states emerged, capitalism arose to its apogee. New leftist movements, such as second wave feminism, rose in revolt against these “core features of capitalist modernity that social democracy had theretofore naturalized: materialism, consumerism, and the achievement ethic: bureaucracy, corporate culture, social control, sexual repression, sexism and heteronormativity.”<sup>98</sup> This very specific system was accused of androcentrism and therefore creator of exclusion.

Thus, feminists, and the “new left” in general, fought against gender injustice, technicized politics, politicizing issues which were considered “personal”, challenging male domination in “state organized capitalist societies in the post war era”<sup>99</sup>. They did not demand reform, but rather a complete reshaping of a society which creates and functions on gender and racial exclusions. The critic of male domination was a joined critic of both the state and capitalism.

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<sup>95</sup> Theresia Sauter-Bailliet, “The feminist movement in France”, in *Women's Studies Int. Quart.*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1981, 419.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History: An Introduction”, FMSH-WP-2012-17, 2012, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History: An Introduction”, FMSH-WP-2012-17, 2012, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History: An Introduction”, FMSH-WP-2012-17, 2012, 4.

Nevertheless, this movement, because of its ideological ambivalence, has taken years after years a slow path into neoliberalism, emphasizing on individual choices and “meritocratic advancement”. This ambivalence shows in the desire to enter “the well paid, prestigious (professions) that carry responsibility and set the course of the future”. Entering those areas could mean reshaping the labor market and the way it exploits women’s work, or solely supporting women in order to enter high-value jobs, and “break the glass ceiling” without questioning the glass neither the ceiling. Nancy Fraser believes the latter option took over the first. For example, she states that the feminist critique of the male breadwinner type of family now serves to “legitimate flexible capitalism”. Indeed, she argues that “invoking the feminist critique of the family wage” now justifies exploitation and “harnesses the dream of women's emancipation to the engine of capital accumulation.”<sup>100</sup>

Secondly, feminism has gotten into a “new political imaginary that foregrounded difference”<sup>101</sup>. It is a cultural turn, that is to say that the main initial concerns of redistribution were substituted for concerns of recognition. At the same time that neoliberalism rose, which should have been a major concern for feminists, economical issues were diluted into the vase of cultural politics. The latter valorized “cultural differences rather than promoting economic equality”. In Nancy Fraser’s opinion, “second wave feminism has unwittingly supplied a key ingredient of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the ‘new spirit of capitalism’”. She is situating this turn around the 1980’s, as free market and neoliberalism thrived. This time was also a moment of globalization, which diminished the legitimacy of the state. Without the state, “feminists movements that had earlier taken the welfare state as their point of departure, seeking to extend its egalitarian ethos from class to gender, now found the ground cut out from under their feet”.<sup>102</sup> Feminism, by focusing uniquely on “gender identity” issues has forgotten social issues, to the benefit of neoliberalism. Indeed, Fraser writes: “In effect, we absolutised the critique of cultural sexism at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Nancy Fraser, « How Feminism became Capitalism’s Handmaiden – and how to reclaim it », *The Guardian*, Monday 14 October 2013, accessed 03/12/2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal>

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>103</sup> Nancy Fraser, « How Feminism became Capitalism’s Handmaiden – and how to reclaim it », *The Guardian*, Monday 14 October 2013.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal>

Thirdly, Nancy Fraser points out the fact that the feminist critique of the welfare state's paternalism has turned to converge with neoliberalism ideals. This critic has been used to support state's withdrawal, which is embedded into a neoliberal agenda and engenders less public spending for the "women's cause". This third point resonates even more with our topic. Nancy Fraser criticizes here the "recent cynical embrace of NGOs", which is a contradiction to how feminists issues should be handled. The women's cause should be financed by the state.

Thus, feminism did not only forget its initial claims, but provided, by distorting those, new tools to expand and justify neoliberalism. This renouncement gives us an explanation to why the feminist working field has become a precarious environment.

It is not as simple as to say that poor working conditions in the feminist working field are completely paradoxical to feminism. Indeed, feminism always had divisions. Nowadays, a section of feminism is criticized for having forgotten radical ideals from second wave movements. Feminist organizations are, within this frame, a product of the neoliberal state. The apparent "good news" of the professionalization of feminism, which could signify a growing interest and recognition of women's issues, is also the sign of the neoliberalisation of the state. Public services, in which feminist issues should be included, are slowly being replaced by organizations subsidized by the State. This is done with the goal of reducing public spendings. Thus, state's subsidies are insufficient and shape associations in such a way which can hardly allow anything else but poor working conditions.

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## CHAPTER THREE. Methodology of the research

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In this chapter I am going to dive into the methodology of my research on the working conditions within feminist organizations. I constructed my analysis through in depth interviews in order to shine a light on some women's experiences in this field.

### Epistemology

As Nina Lykke stated, the difference between epistemology and methodology is: “the former deals with *criteria* for what constitutes scientific and scholarly knowledge, while the latter focuses on *rules, principles* and *procedures* for the production of knowledge”<sup>104</sup>. In terms of epistemology, my thesis is a mix between different strands of feminist research. My aim is to allow women from the feminist field to share their experiences, to give them a voice on the topic of working conditions. In that way, my work is embedded in feminist empiricism. Introduced by Sandra Harding in 1986<sup>105</sup>, this way of doing feminist research focuses on “making women visible in terms of their experiences and perspectives, their contributions to society and culture, and their social, cultural and bodily conditions of life<sup>106</sup>”. Of course, I am well aware that I cannot make any general statement about working conditions within feminist

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<sup>104</sup> Nina Lykke, “Methodologies, methods and ethics”, *Feminist Studies A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*, 2010, p144.

<sup>105</sup> Sandra Harding, *The science question in feminism*, 1986.

<sup>106</sup> Nina Lykke, “Methodologies, methods and ethics”, *Feminist Studies A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*, 2010, p128.



organizations. Moreover, I am not making any general statement about women in feminist organizations as I only talked to *some* women. Indeed, the very fact that *I* am conducting the research influences *de facto* the scope of the research. In that way, my thesis is influenced by feminist standpoint theory.

“Standpoint feminist methodologies are grounded in a critical realism, that is, in an ontological assumption that there is a real world ‘out there’, which can be analyzed as an entity separate from the researcher and from language and discourse”<sup>107</sup>.

I believe that there is a real world ‘out there’, the feminist working field, which is providing its employees poor working conditions. However, I am not defining this world out there as *the* world once and for all, but rather like *a* world. As a researcher influenced by standpoint theory and the Hardings’ concept of strong objectivity<sup>108</sup>, I reckon my work is not only produced by me but through me. Indeed, in standpoint theory the researcher is “seen as one who takes sides and intervenes in reality through a point of departure in her or his standpoint and its power-critical perspective”<sup>109</sup>. The work I produced is therefore only “objective” as long as it displays a rigorous logic of discovery. Even then, the knowledge I am producing will always be situated<sup>110</sup>, as “knowledge and truth are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued and relational”<sup>111</sup>. Feminist objectivity therefore entails displaying as many details about the construction of my thesis as I can: how and why I came about this topic, who I am and who are my interviewees. As much as I know that the idea of “working conditions” is deeply rooted in my normative understanding of “good” or “bad”, which is itself embedded within a western understanding of labor and capital, I believe through standpoint theory I can reach “an understanding of reality that is both politically grounded and objective”.<sup>112</sup> As a feminist researcher, my main aim in this thesis was to listen to the experiences of the others as “legitimate knowledge”<sup>113</sup>. Moreover, I intended to construct my research with those women.

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<sup>107</sup> Nina Lykke, “Methodologies, methods and ethics”, *Feminist Studies A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*, 2010, p147.

<sup>108</sup> Strong objectivity lies in the disbelief that neutral objectivity exists. Thus, strong objectivity is found through acknowledging one’s positionality within the research.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The science question in feminism*, 1988.

<sup>111</sup> Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “Exploring, Interrogating and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology and Method”, *Handbook of Feminist Research*, 2012, p9.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p4.

They are both subjects and producers of knowledge, just like I am. Thus, I have to present myself.

## **Positioning and difficulties**

As I have just explained, positioning is central to feminist research. Thus, I will introduce myself in order to provide as many details on the context of discovery as I can, in order to produce the most objective and situated knowledge possible.

I am a twenty four years old French white woman. I am coming from a middle-class family and I hold a master's degree in politics and in gender studies. I define myself as a feminist and my political affiliations lie on the very left wing. I am both an insider and an outsider to my master thesis' topic. Insider, as I have witnessed what is, from my point of view, poor working conditions within the feminist working field at the occasion of two different internships. Insider again, as I have witnessed friends of mine suffering from working conditions which I would have never thought could exist within a feminist working field. Outsider, as I am currently still a student, and in the case of my master thesis, a researcher. I did not take those two identities as a burden but rather as chance. As Trinh<sup>114</sup> points out "becoming both/and - insider and outsider" allows to take a "multitude of different standpoints and negotiating these identities simultaneously". Behind this topic, lies a will to denunciate a situation which is, in my opinion, silenced. As a researcher, I do not want to denunciate, but rather to understand, question and analyze *a* reality that I could paint thanks to the interviews I made.

In regard to this thesis, I had to overcome many ethical difficulties which, in many ways, made me feel like one of my interviewees. First of all, I constantly navigated between feelings of betrayal and feelings of doubt. Was I reproducing an androcentric vision of work and working conditions which would lead me to betray a cause I believe in? Why did I want to explore specifically the paradoxes of feminism when alt-right and masculinists are, on an everyday basis, trying to tear to pieces this ideology? Wasn't it counterproductive? Were my own critics towards working conditions within the feminist working field a product of my

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<sup>114</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the moon waxes red*, 1991.

internalized misogyny? Was I reinforcing gender stereotypes by focusing on women who act wrongly towards their employees? I lost myself many times trying to deconstruct my own topic and it made me fear that it would not be deconstructed *enough* and too normative. More importantly, I felt like a traitor to my own cause. Those feelings, which were at first a burden, turned into a fuel. If it was that disturbing for me to write on this topic, this also made it a great reason to research on it. Secondly, I resolved this internal conflict by focusing on the women I interviewed. The purpose of this thesis is to give them a voice.

## **Method: feminist in-depth interviews**

In order to write this thesis, I decided to produce knowledge through in depth interviews. My work does not aim at being representative, therefore is not quantitative but qualitative. In that matter, interviews provide with qualitative knowledge which feminist research have at heart to convey. Indeed, Shulamit Reinharz (1992) explains how interviewing is a way feminist researchers have attempted to access women's hidden knowledge:

“Interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women”<sup>115</sup>.

Furthermore, forasmuch as work is a place of power in Western societies, I felt in-depth interviews were a much more safe, as well as interesting way to gather information and to produce knowledge with the people I interviewed. Making them objects and producers of the thesis. As a qualitative research requires, I built a small sample of eight people who all worked or are working within the Paris area. I did both phone interviews and live-interviews. The phone-interview option was preferred when people were not living in Paris anymore, were too busy to meet up or preferred phone-interview for privacy reasons. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to two hours. They were closer to unstructured interviews than to semi-structured as I had some quite wide main questions that I wanted to ask but

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<sup>115</sup> Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist methods in social research*, 1992, p19.

neither the order nor the content of the interviews mattered that much. The unstructured aspect of my interviewing was important to state as I wanted each interviewee to feel comfortable and have the feeling that I was interested in their particular experiences. To summarize, I usually started the interviews by detailing my project, how and why I came about this topic. I would offer them anonymity if they desired, which they almost all did. Then, I would start by asking them about their experiences within the field. Interestingly, from this point, my questions' guide was most of the time not useful anymore as the women would answer each of those themselves. My main questions were 1/whether they could talk about it with someone and how it was received, 2/what were they expecting when they started working in the feminist field, 3/whether they think their bad experiences is "bad luck" or symptomatic of a more widespread situation, 4/why do they think such contradictions exist and 5/why do they reckon no one is speaking up about those problems.

I made sure that my tone was casual but also rigorous as trust was central in the fact that they accepted interviews. We could go as far as to say that they could risk their jobs and careers if their interviews were to be discovered. If at first I tried to keep some distance, I realized quite quickly that it was not the best way to gather information as much as it felt wrong to me. As Stephanie Riger wrote, "traditional research methods, as indeed american culture, emphasize objectivity, efficiency, separateness and distance (...) let us consider as well connection and empathy as modes of knowing, and embrace them in our criteria and in our work"<sup>116</sup>. Therefore, I remained open and honest about my own position, assuring them that I was "on their side" and believing them. From there, we could talk to each other like equals, embracing the fact to get lost in the conversation with each other. Thus, those interviews were both a way to gather information and to construct knowledge together, overtaking the classic boundaries that marks "who can be a knower and what can be known"<sup>117</sup>. It resulted into dense, rich and surprising conversations which provided me with insights that I would have never gotten any other way.

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<sup>116</sup> Stephanie Riger, "Ways of knowing and community organizational research" invited address, Conference on Researching Community Psychology: integrating theories and methodologies, Chicago, September 1988.

<sup>117</sup> Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, "Exploring, Interrogating and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology and Method", *Handbook of Feminist Research*, 2012, p3.

## Sample

I interviewed eight people for this thesis, amongst them seven cis-women and one man. In order to build a sample, I used different methods. First of all, as I have many friends working in the feminist field in Paris, I could contact the ones I knew have had difficult working experiences directly. To each of them, I presented my master thesis' topic, and asked them whether they would be interested in testifying. In that regard, two of my interviewees are close friends of mine. Two other women reached out to me through a snowball effect : friends or friends of friends who had heard about the topic and were interested in testifying. Secondly, I tried to go over my friends' circle and directly posted on a facebook page<sup>118</sup> which aims at sharing and displaying employment offers, either regular jobs, internships or *service civique* in the feminist working field. This page gathers 1272 members and was created in 2015. In my post, I said that I was writing on the paradoxes which can exist in the feminist working field, in Paris, between the values and the working conditions that are offered. I then offered to contact me via email or directly via facebook<sup>119</sup>. I received over all seven messages, which led to three interviews. I contacted the last interviewee myself because he has a quite specific profile. He is in charge of the association's part of a french union. I heard last spring that this union organized a campaign calling out on bad working conditions in feminist organizations. Unsurprisingly, most of the interviewee were sociologically close to me. Seven of them are white and seven are cis-women. They are in between twenty-four to thirty years old as well as all highly-educated (each of them holds a degree). Furthermore, all of them are convinced feminists and all have either a degree in gender/women's studies or extensive knowledge on those issues. It is important to note that none of the people I interviewed are social workers. I do not think that this is enough to state that bad working conditions in feminist organizations do not impact social workers. Rather, I would say that my sample

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<sup>118</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/888173764575877/>

<sup>119</sup> **Full version in English:** "I am writing on the paradoxes which can exist in the feminist working field (in Paris) nowadays, between the displayed values and the working conditions offered. I am looking for people who could/would like to testify of such quite "contradictory" conditions. If it speaks to one of you, contact me via private message or at \*\*\*\*\*@live.fr"

**Original version:** "J'écris sur les paradoxes qui peuvent exister dans le milieu du travail féministe (à Paris) à l'heure actuelle, entre les valeurs affichées et les conditions de travail proposées. Je recherche des personnes pouvant/souhaitant témoigner de telles conditions quelque peu "contradictoires". Si cela parle à l'un.e d'entre vous, contactez moi en mp ou à \*\*\*\*\*@live.fr"

reflects my social and educational status and it has been constructed through channels which reproduce the same pattern. I could also speculate that social workers in feminist organizations tend to be more economically and socially constrained which can make increase the difficulty for them to speak and/or to be heard<sup>120</sup>. Thus, once again, my work does not aim at constructing a generality.

Lastly, I would like to add that for each of my interviews, and even from the reactions I got in my surroundings and on social media, my topic was very well received. Moreover, I felt that people were really 'happy' to share with me their experiences, which sounded sometimes like they previously did not have a space to do so, and/or still had questions to be answered. Over all, it made me feel like this topic was necessary, and that it created a space for some people to speak up. This fact needs to be tampered by adding that most of them did not want neither their organization nor their names to be displayed. This already hints that some strong power relations are in action. That it is not solely about creating a space, but a safe one.

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<sup>120</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?", Laura Chrisman, Patrick Williams, *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader*, p66-111, 1993

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## **CHAPTER FOUR. Findings and analysis**

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In this part I am going to analyze the description of bad working conditions made by the workers I interviewed. I separated the description of working conditions between two categories: material and immaterial. This dichotomy does not induce any hierarchy, I consider both as being equally important and intertwined to my research. Concerning my interviewees<sup>121</sup>, I am not able to describe precisely parts of their curriculum as most of them required anonymity<sup>122</sup>.

### **Description of poor im/material working conditions**

#### *Material conditions*

First of all, what both stroke me and confirmed my personal experience, is that all of the people I interviewed seem to think that the situation is global. For Florian, the unionist I met, “the problem does not come from one feminist association, (...) it is something structural,

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<sup>121</sup> See appendix 1 for a precise introduction on them and their background.

<sup>122</sup> Anonymity for themselves and the organizations they worked for. All names have been changed.

which echoes everywhere”<sup>123</sup>. Similarly, when asked whether the bad experiences she had were related to bad luck, Laure answered “No, I would not say that I was not lucky, I would say that it is everywhere the same. Really, right now, it is everywhere the same (...)”<sup>124</sup>.” Florian summarizes the situation he witnessed as follows:

“I worked four years in an association fighting against domestic violence which clearly claimed to be feminist. It is from this point that I joined a union because there were things that I strongly disliked in the way my colleagues were treated, and particularly my female colleagues, not because I play the super heroine, just because it annoyed me this “we use fine words, we are fighting against women’s precarity”. Then they hire women part-time, in precarious contracts and poorly paid, even more when it’s women who are telephone counsellors. So basically my colleagues counsellors, they were paid less than me, a man, cisgender, white, with all the attributes and privileges of masculinity. I was better paid than the ones who are in charge of receiving the phone calls. It is a very particular jobs where you have women calling everyday to tell you the hell they’re going through on a daily basis, I think the minimum is to provide them with a safe workplace<sup>125</sup>”.

The situation he is describing echoes with the work of Erika Flahault, Annie Dussuet and Dominique Loiseau<sup>126</sup>. Part time contracts and overall low wages seem to be widespread. Interestingly and as the authors pointed out, feminist organizations are not immune to gender as a social dynamic. In this case, Florian, as a white man earns more than his colleagues social workers. The gender division of labour<sup>127</sup> is prevalent even in feminist organizations.

The question of the working hours is also crucial: most of the interviewee referred to it. For Sonia who interned in a national institution, “there was just clearly a working time problem. I

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<sup>123</sup> Original version: “Le problème c’est pas une association féministe, le problème qu’on rencontre c’est quelque chose de structurel, qui faisait écho partout”.

<sup>124</sup> Original version: “Laure : Non je dirais pas que j’ai pas eu de chance, je dirais que c’est partout pareil. Vraiment à l’heure actuelle c’est partout pareil (...)”

<sup>125</sup> Original version: “J’ai travaillé 4 ans dans une association de lutte contre les violences conjugales qui revendiquait clairement une approche féministe. C’est à partir de ce moment-là que j’ai commencé à me syndiquer parce qu’il y avait des choses qui déplaçaient fortement dans la façon de traiter mes collègues et notamment mes collègues femmes, pas parce que je joue au super héros hein, juste parce que ça m’énervait le côté « on a des belles paroles, on lutte contre la précarité des femmes », mais on embauche des femmes à temps partiel, en contrats précaires et mal payés, qui plus est des femmes qui font de l’écoute pour les violences conjugales. Donc en fait les collègues écoutantes étaient moins bien payés que moi, par ailleurs homme, cisgenre, blanc, avec tous les attributs et privilèges de la masculinité, et j’étais mieux payé qu’elles qui faisaient de l’écoute violence par téléphone, qui est un métier très particulier où vous avez des femmes qui vous racontent tous les jours l’enfer qu’elles vivent au quotidien, je trouve que le minimum c’est de leur donner un cadre de travail sécurisant.”

<sup>126</sup> Flahault, Érika, Annie Dussuet, and Dominique Loiseau. « Emploi associatif, féminisme et genre », *Travail, genre et sociétés*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Ferguson, Lucy. "Gender, Work, and the Sexual Division of Labor." *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*. : Oxford University Press, August 01, 2013.



felt it less because I was interning, therefore the supervisors tried to limit my working hours. However, they work 40 to 60 hours per week.”<sup>128</sup>. What is interesting here, is that those extra hours are not conscientised as “extra”. Rather, “they work on the basis that it is like that”.

For Julie who was doing a *service civique*, the contractual working hours were not respected: “Throughout the 8 months, I was doing 30 to 35 hours per week instead of 24. I was obliged to stay for late night meetings, after 6 pm and sometimes after 8 pm, without being warned in advance<sup>129</sup>”. Moreover, the days off she was entitled to have were denied to her because she did not finish a project. According to her, the reason was that they did not want to hire her for longer like a “normal” employee, which would have required to pay her.

Those *service civique* are in that way quite problematic, and the fact that they are widespread in the field worrying. Indeed, because they require almost no financial expenses for the organizations, it is an easy way to “hire” people who would have had the profile to get a regular contract but for a reduced price. In the “spirit” of *service civique*, selection should only be based upon “motivation”. This effectively means that it is forbidden to select on the base of education or experiences: it not a job, it is a volunteering. Julie is well-aware of it: “it is a contract which has been created for young people without a degree, so that they can have a professional experience or in order to discover a professional field”<sup>130</sup>. In reality though, getting a *service civique* is getting almost as competitive as getting a regular job. Feminist organizations are also participating in this precarisation of labour. For Julie:

“Nowadays, it concerns over-qualified labor. I studied six years after high school, and it does not cost them anything because the organization which employs you is spending around 100 euros. So that’s a good way to get efficient people who cost you nothing, it’s heavy precarisation. The other *service civique* they got studied five years after high school, the other intern was around 30 years old and had two masters degree.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Original version : “(...) Y’avait juste clairement un problème de temps de travail. Je l’ai moins ressenti parce que j’étais en apprentissage, du coup les responsables essayaient de limiter mes horaires. Par contre, elles, font entre 40 et 60 heures par semaine. Mais c’est un truc qui n’est pas vraiment pensé, elles partent du principe que c’est comme ça.”

<sup>129</sup> Original version : “Tout au long de mes 8 mois je faisais plus du 30/35H que du 24. J’étais obligée d’assister à des réunions tard le soir, après 18h, et certaines vers 20h, sans être prévenue à l’avance.

<sup>130</sup> Original version: “C’est un contrat qui a été créé pour les jeunes sans diplôme, pour qu’ils puissent avoir une expérience professionnelle ou qu’ils découvrent un milieu professionnel (...).”

<sup>131</sup> Original version: “Julie: Aujourd’hui c’est beaucoup de la main d’œuvre sur qualifiée, moi j’ai un bac +6, qui ne coûte rien puisque l’organisme qui t’emploie dépense en soi 100 euros. Donc c’est un bon moyen d’avoir des gens efficaces qui ne coûtent rien, donc c’est de la précarisation ‘plus, plus, plus’. L’autre service civique était en bac +5, l’autre stagiaire avait une 30aine d’années et avait deux masters, qu’ils ont pris en stage.”

Those new contracts, if they were maybe created in good faith at first, are turning against its target: the young people. Moreover, they tend to replace secure and “fairly” paid employment. As Maud Simonet wrote in her last book on the new forms of free labor<sup>132</sup>: “associations, public services and firms are now living off those new forms of unpaid labor, they are an integral part of the contemporary labor market.<sup>133</sup>”<sup>134</sup> Feminist organizations are not immune to this development.

Julie: (...) In this organization there are 8 employees working full time, now 9, and there are constantly 2 interns and 2 *services civiques*. Those are renewed all the time.

Me: Okay, so that is a normal way of operating?

Julie: Yes, the normal way of operating is to operate with precarious contracts<sup>135</sup>.

Andréa, who was looking for a job in the field came to the same conclusion. She could only find internships and *service civique*. As she states “I think at some point, when you studied for 7 years, you are expecting a little better than an internship or a *service civique*”<sup>136</sup>. She also mentions the fact that those forms of work, who were at first targeted at inexperienced young people are becoming inaccessible to them. The feminist labor market is therefore narrowing.

“In terms of the skills they required, it was real job descriptions, for regular workers. Those organizations circulate the exact same adds like twice, three times, four times a year. Then you tell yourself, those people need someone, they don’t need to train young people, they actually need an employee, rather a female employee, because this field is female-dominated.<sup>137</sup>”

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<sup>132</sup> Maud Simonet, *Travail gratuit: la nouvelle exploitation ?*, 2018.

<sup>133</sup> Original version “toutes ces formes de travail non rémunéré font vivre des associations, des services publics et des entreprises, elles font partie intégrante du fonctionnement du marché du travail actuel.”

<sup>134</sup> Maud Simonet, “Le travail gratuit est l’un des visages du néolibéralisme”, *Alternatives Economiques*, 18th of December 2018.

<https://www.alternatives-economiques.fr/maud-simonet-travail-gratuit-lun-visages-neoliberalisme/00087462>

<sup>135</sup> Original version : Julie: (...) Dans cette organisation y’a 8 salarié.e.s à temps complet, maintenant 9, et y’a constamment deux stagiaires et deux services civiques. Qui sont renouvelés à chaque fois.

Me : d’accord, donc c’est un fonctionnement normal ?

Julie : c’est ça, le fonctionnement normal c’est de fonctionner avec les contrats précaires.

<sup>136</sup> Original version: “Je pense qu’au bout d’un moment, quand on a un bac+7, on s’attend à un peu mieux qu’à un stage ou un service civique”.

<sup>137</sup> Original version: “Au niveau des compétences qui étaient demandées, c’était des vraies fiches de poste, pour des employés réguliers en fait, surtout que c’était des structures qui deux fois par an, trois fois par an, voire quatre fois par an diffusent les mêmes annonces au mot près et là tu te dis, les gens ils ont besoin de quelqu’un, ils ont pas besoin de former des jeunes, ils ont besoin d’un employé en fait, ou d’une employée plutôt, parce que c’est surtout des secteurs féminisés”.

Not only it is narrowing, at least a part of the feminist working field is becoming elitist. Only young people from a high social background, guaranteed of parental support, can accept those offers. Moreover, those experiences are becoming a necessity to find a regular job eventually. It creates a social and economical selection. In this context, one can start asking themselves whether those feminist organizations are aware of the conditions they provide their workers with. Furthermore, are they aware that they contribute to rendering the field highly unequal and discriminatory?

The lack of money as an explanation is a *leitmotiv* in the interviews. For Florian, “we know that there is not enough money”<sup>138</sup> and Julie states that “money is the biggest argument”<sup>139</sup>. Those arguments, without being rejected, can reasonably be put in doubt. Indeed, the interviewees told me about situations which sometimes exceed what the lack of money might be forcing an organization to do. When asked about the working conditions, Laure uses what sounds like an archetypical worker for her: “Single mother, one child, payed next to nothing, working very far from her home”<sup>140</sup>. This description concerns mostly feminist organization doing social work but questions the “feminism” of the organization. In some cases, people in feminist organizations seem to be in complete denial of the poor conditions they offer. Andréa volunteered in an association for some time while she was looking for a job. At some point, the people in charge offered her a *service civique*. She could not afford it, as she tells “I was in Paris, let’s say it was payed 650 euros something like that, it couldn’t even cover my rent (...) it was just not possible”<sup>141</sup>. She tells:

A: (...)When I told them they were a bit surprised and a little abashed to say the least. They were having a hard time... well they understood my refusal because I needed money but in the same time they offered me alternative solutions which were a bit insane I found.

Me : What were their “insane” offers?

A: Well they told me I could find a job next to it... we made some calculations together trying to check with my budget, my personal expenses, plus the hobbies expenses, all that per month, how much it would do, and how much would I have needed to earn in addition but it was not possible. I would have worked 28 hours a week,

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<sup>138</sup>Original version: “on sait que y’a pas beaucoup d’argent.”

<sup>139</sup> Original version: “argument financier c’était leur plus gros argument.”

<sup>140</sup> Original version: “mère célibataire, un gamin, payée une misère, travaillant hyper loin de son domicile.”

<sup>141</sup> Original version: “J’étais à Paris et que, disons que c’était payé 650 quelque chose, et ça couvrait même pas mon loyer (...) c’était juste pas possible.”

plus 10/15 hours to catch up with the money that I wouldn't have won, so in the end I would work full time and even more, and I would have had my master next to it, no it was not possible<sup>142</sup>.

It seems here that the people in charge lost touch with reality. It seems to me that it almost resembles cognitive dissonance<sup>143</sup>, a psychological discomfort triggered by an intense inner contradiction. It is dealt with finding a justification resolving the inner contradiction. In this case, the element relieving the tension of the contradiction being the fact that they try hard to find a way for Andréa to survive with the *service civique* they offer. The rhetoric of the lack of money can also play a tension releaser.

### *Immaterial working conditions*

The immaterial working conditions, when they are bad, were often very difficult for the interviewee to tell. As Sarah puts:

“It is not easy to explain it like that, because when you're living it, it's really hard, but then when you try to tell it again and explain things... it seems quite impalpable, not really real(...) a little bit like if we were ashamed? Like if we could be wrong in the end?”

Those bad experiences are connected to the register of interpersonal differences, emotions and feelings. Because these are supposedly inherently personal, they are hardly considered as of importance. In our western societies where the mind and the body are separated and hierarchized, material conditions could be tied to masculine traits, reliable and countable, and immaterial conditions, feelings and emotions coded as feminine, seeming inconsistent and elusive. Considering immaterial conditions is therefore a feminist act. Many situation of hierarchical violence were reported to me, more than I would have expected.

For instance, Julie was bullied by her boss during her service civique:

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<sup>142</sup> Original version: A: “(...)Quand je leur ai dit ça elles étaient un peu surprises et un peu penaudes pour tout dire. Elles avaient du mal... enfin elles comprenaient que je refuse par besoin d'argent mais en même temps elles me proposaient des solutions alternatives qui étaient un peu insensées j'ai trouvé.

Me : C'était quoi leurs propositions insensées ?

A : Bah elles me disaient que je pouvais trouver un travail à côté, que je... « tu peux essayer de trouver un travail à côté », on avait fait des calculs hyper savants toutes les deux en essayant de voir avec mon budget, enfin mes dépenses incompressibles plus les loisirs tout ça par mois, combien ça ferait, et qu'est-ce qu'il me faudrait gagner en plus par mois m'enfin c'était pas possible. J'aurais travaillé 28h par semaine, plus 10/15 heures pour rattraper l'argent que j'avais pas gagné, donc au final j'aurais travaillé à temps plein plus ou voire plus, et en plus j'aurais fait mon master enfin c'était pas possible quoi.

<sup>143</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 1957.

“She was rude to me, she never said hello, she was telling me little things, which can seem not really feminist like “oh well, you gained a little weight”, or “your shoes are very shiny, people might look at you weirdly in the street”, or “please take off your bracelets because the ‘cling cling’ is annoying me”, stuff you wouldn’t expect to hear on your physical appearance. And constant depreciation. She used threats a lot, with me, with everyone.<sup>144</sup>”

Fanny suffered as well from the attitude of her boss:

“Me: Was it tensed because of the president of the association?

Fanny: Yes, she is a very tyrannical person, very nervous, very curt with people in general, with the people we’d receive or the volunteers<sup>145</sup>.

Sarah suffered from a manipulative and tyrannical boss as well. She recalls the moment she started realizing that her boss was not as nice as she might have appeared to her at first:

“So I turned to the assistant and told her “I think that there is a little problem, since some time Caroline is being rude to me, I don’t feel good” (...) Then she called all the colleagues, meeting in the office (...) I told them that Caroline is rude to me and that’s the moment where I see the dark side of it. It’s been years that they all suffer from abusive behaviours from Caroline. Caroline always has a punchbag, they all have been mistreated by her.<sup>146</sup>”

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<sup>144</sup> Original version: “ensuite elle parlait mal, elle disait pas bonjour, elle me faisait des petites réflexions qui peuvent paraître pas féministe du style « oh beh tiens t’as pas un peu grossi », ou alors « tes chaussures brillent un peu beaucoup, on doit te regarder bizarrement dans la rue », ou «s’il te plaît enlève tes bracelets parce que là le ‘cling cling’ ça me saoule », des choses qu’on s’attendrait pas, en arrivant bosser dans une asso féministe, à entendre, sur son physique, sur son apparence. Et puis la dévalorisation constante. Elle fonctionnait beaucoup sur le mode de la menace, avec moi, avec tout le monde.”

<sup>145</sup> Original version: Me : C’était tendu par rapport à la présidente de l’association ?

Fanny : oui, c’est quelqu’un de très tyrannique, de très nerveuse, de très sèche avec les personnes en général, que ce soit le public accueilli ou les bénévoles stagiaires. J’ai pas trop trouvé ma place.

<sup>146</sup> Original version: S : (...) Je me suis tournée vers l’assistante de direction, et je lui ai dit "je crois qu’il y a un petit soucis, depuis quelques temps Caroline me parle mal, je me sens pas bien". Elle m’a regardé avec des yeux immenses, presque plein de larme quoi, genre le regard de la traumatisée et qui me dit "ah, oui...". J’avais toujours senti qu’elle agissait un peu comme un animal craintif au travail, qu’elle se sentait pas bien. Elle était comme un enfant apeuré, un animal battu. J’avais pas trop calculé, et là je vois que ça lui parle ce que je lui dis. Là elle appelle toutes les collègues, réunion dans le bureau, les boss n’étaient pas là. Donc je leur dis que Caroline me parle mal, que je me sens pas bien. Là je vois l’envers du décor. Ca fait plusieurs années que elles souffrent des comportements abusifs de Caroline, que Caroline a toujours un souffre-douleur, qu’elles ont toutes été maltraité par elle. Alors c’est pas de la maltraitance non plus... ça restait des remarques, un smiley, une manière d’être, enfin y’a pire dans le milieu du travail.

Manipulation, depreciation and tyrannical behaviours were a reality for most of the interviewees<sup>147</sup>. Those attitudes coming from their boss were hard to live with, not only because of the violence it constitutes, but also because they did not see it coming. As Sarah puts it: “We have the feeling that we are protected from male chauvinism, therefore we have the impression that we are protected from violence and domination (...). So it’s a shock.”<sup>148</sup>

Even more shocking is when the working conditions impact other people than them on topic which has a moral and ethical feminist signification to them. For instance, Fanny got to know that a former employee in her association was sexually assaulted when she was at work one evening alone: “It was hidden by the association. It hasn’t been tackled at all, they said that well, she was maybe a little too young to be sent on the field anyway.”<sup>149</sup>

To understand those situations, they use their feminist knowledge to comprehend such apparent contradictory situations. Three of them mentioned their bosses’ use of the “abuse cycle”, which is usually used to spot and understand domestic abuse. Those working conditions leave marks. For Fanny: “we were in a difficult position, we were on sick leave very often, we were tired, in my case I suffered from anxiety before and it all came back at this point”<sup>150</sup>, one morning, “I waited for the bus and I couldn’t get in, I was paralyzed<sup>151</sup>”. It also impacts their body and their self-esteem. Sarah felt “like a big shit”<sup>152</sup>, she even puts her back out: “I was so tensed, I always had a knot in my stomach before going to work (...) I was scared, I wasn’t feeling good, I was stressed<sup>153</sup>”. Besides the abusive aspect of work relations, the content of the job itself can be sometimes extremely exhausting. For Andréa:

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<sup>147</sup> For Sonia, Julie, Fanny, Flora, Laure and Sarah.

<sup>148</sup> Original version: Sarah: “On a l'impression qu'on est protégé du machisme, on a l'impression que donc on est protégé de la violence et de la domination(...). Du coup on tombe de haut.”

<sup>149</sup> Original version: Fanny: “En fait ça avait été mis sous le tapis par l'asso quoi. Ça n'avait pas du tout été pris en compte, elles avaient dit que bon en même temps elle était peut être un peu trop jeune pour être envoyée sur le terrain.”

<sup>150</sup> Original version: “Nous on était dans un climat difficile, on commençait à enchaîner les arrêts maladie, on était fatiguées, moi j'avais des problèmes de crise d'angoisse avant d'arriver qui ont ressurgi à ce moment-là de plein fouet.”

<sup>151</sup> Original version: “Un matin je suis partie de chez moi, j'ai attendu mon bus, et j'ai pas pu monter dedans, j'étais tétanisée et je suis rentrée chez moi.”

<sup>152</sup> Original version: “S : (...) L'impression d'être nulle, une grosse merde.”

<sup>153</sup> Original version: “S : (...) Moi je me suis bloquée le dos, j'étais tellement tendue, j'avais la boule au ventre avant d'aller au travail, je pouvais tellement pu croiser Caroline, l'idée même de devoir travailler avec elle ça me faisait froid dans le dos. J'avais peur, j'étais pas bien, j'étais stressée.”

“You wear yourself out quite quickly (...), when you work on violence and that you listen 24 hours a day to women’s testimonies, (...) well it’s soon exhausting. (...) We talk a lot about self care, but we don’t talk enough about material self care, for the people who work in those fields<sup>154</sup>”.

Material and immaterial conditions are intertwined. They trigger or reinforce one another. Following what the interviewees told me, we could argue that the working conditions do not seem to be considered as an important matter. Moreover, many of them mentioned, amongst others, the lack of self-analysis of their bosses. How are such situations rendered possible within a feminist field?

After having described the situations that can arise from working in the field, I am going to analyze those discourses in order to understand why.

## **‘The good cause’**

Working for a cause responds partly to our research question. In two ways, it renders possible the bad working conditions we acknowledged in the last part, and participates to the creation and persistence of those. First of all, the idea of working for “the cause” is used as leverage upon the workers. For Sonia:

“I think many startups and associations are getting away with it<sup>155</sup> because they play the card of “that’s for the cause”, “we chose to work here to make the world a better place and well, we have less money but we’re happy”<sup>156</sup>”.

The feminist cause argument can also be used maliciously when workers start questioning their working conditions. When Sonia’s boss would hear about complaints on the working hours, she would use it:

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<sup>154</sup> Original version: “Quand on travaille sur les violences et qu’on écoute H24 des témoignages de femmes victimes de violences, (...) bah du coup c’est vite épuisant. Donc y’a aussi ça qui est un peu problématique c’est que on prend pas vraiment... on parle beaucoup de « self care » depuis quelques années, mais on parle pas assez du self care matériel, pour les personnes qui travaillent dans ces milieux-là.”

<sup>155</sup> “It” being the bad working conditions.

<sup>156</sup> Original version: S : (...) Y’avait aussi quelque chose de psychologique comme « okay je suis en train de me démener comme une dingue, pour ça qui arrive à la fin du mois sur mon compte en banque ». Je pense que y’a beaucoup de start ups et d’assos qui s’en sortent comme ça, en faisant jouer le « c’est pour la cause », « nous on a choisi de travailler pour que le monde soit plus beau etc et voilà on a moins d’argent mais on est content ».

“She ended up telling us “yes well we are not an organization which counts everything, we don’t do it for that”. At some point it became her main argument: “in here, we don’t do it for that<sup>157</sup>”.

This argument is very convenient as it confronts the people to the truthfulness of their engagement. If they complain, it instantly impacts their sincerity. Although they are most of the time aware of the duplicity of this argument, the people I interviewed are still feeling disempowered by it. For Sonia, “As soon as you say that you are working for the cause, you have the impression that all your demands on the working conditions are not legitimate<sup>158</sup>”. Others like Andréa are staying on their guards when it comes to it:

“There is also this thing: I do that because it’s a passion, well an engagement and I am very enthusiastic about it and all, and therefore I think that sometimes they easily forget that it is not because it is a personal engagement that I’m gonna let myself be exploited.<sup>159</sup>”

This idea of a “cause” which would justify to work under poor conditions directly echoes our part on passion in the first chapter. Engagement at work is at the same time the ideal way to work but also the worst. Since the worker is necessarily fulfilled by their work, it creates a dichotomy which “encourages the notion that one works for love or money, not both<sup>160</sup>”. In our interviews, we can see that the people are embedded in those ideals and turning it against them represents a strong manipulative tool. Sarah points it out very accurately:

““I am ready to accept working conditions which are worse than elsewhere, I am ready to work more, to earn less, to work in a small and dark office, doing things which are really not easy”. So that’s that, “I am ready to do all of this because it is a cause that is greater than me”, and well, that’s really beautiful, but it is in these settings that you find a great fragility of the workers. You are ready to accept things that you shouldn’t accept<sup>161</sup>.”

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<sup>157</sup> Original version: elle avait fini par nous dire « oui fin c’est bon on est pas vraiment dans une structure où on compte, parce qu’on fait pas ça pour ça ». Au bout d’un moment c’était devenu son argumentaire « ici on fait pas ça pour ça ».

<sup>158</sup> Original version: S : (...) Dès que tu dis que ton travail c’est pour la cause, t’as l’impression que toutes les revendications que tu peux faire sur tes conditions de travail elles sont pas légitimes.

<sup>159</sup> Original version: A : (...) Y’a aussi ce truc de je fais ça par passion, enfin par engagement, et je suis hyper enthousiaste et tout et du coup j’pense qu’elles oublient facilement qu’en fait c’est pas parce que c’est un engagement personnel que j’vais me laisser exploiter quoi.

<sup>160</sup> Paula England, Michelle Budig, Nancy Folbre, “Wages of virtue: the relative pay of care work”, *Social Problems*, 2002, p457.

<sup>161</sup> Original version: Sarah: "je suis prêt à accepter des conditions de travail qui sont moins bien que d'autres, j’suis prêt à travailler plus, à gagner moins, bosser dans un petit bureau obscure, faire des choses qui sont vraiment pas faciles". Donc voilà, "je suis prêt à tout ça parce que c'est une cause qui me dépasse", et bon c'est hyper beau hein, mais du coup c'est dans ces cadres-là que y'a une grande fragilité des gens qui bossent. Tu es



It is very difficult for workers to navigate between those feelings of engagement, activism and what could resemble self-care. Accepting bad working conditions is in a way letting yourself down, as the cause is more important. With engagement comes sacrifice. This idea becomes evident throughout the interviews and resonates with the work of the french philosopher Geoffroy de Lagasnerie and his work on revolt. In *L'art de la révolte*<sup>162</sup>, he is putting into question radical movement's fascination for repression and sacrifice. For him, "we need to beware of prescribed forms of courage, which lead to endangering us, and find a way to make the dominants and institutions suffer instead."<sup>163</sup><sup>164</sup>

This "sacrificial" feminism also impacts the way feminist workers consider money. For Andréa: "the fact to earn money in this, it's a little taboo in the field, because first of all "money is bad"<sup>165</sup>. This reflects a complex situation in which the workers are somehow stuck between their economic needs and their social rewards. Once again, it is either one or the other. Sacrificing financial stability is only possible because the social reward exists. In that way, the feminist working field is very similar to the fashion one for Andréa. It is also a very appealing field which hides a lot of exploitation. She says:

"I identified a lot to that, even if I don't work in the same field. They lure us with the promise of, well not of luxury but of changing society, transforming our activism into something that we can live off. Since you can't tell yourself "I'm gonna be rich thanks to that", well you find another form of recognition, a social recognition, a political one."<sup>166</sup>

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prêt à accepter des choses que tu devrais pas accepter. Dans la culture c'est très fort, les gens sont exploités, y'a beaucoup de violence, les gens sont... y'a beaucoup de souffrance au travail.

<sup>162</sup> Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *L'art de la révolte*, 2015.

<sup>163</sup> Original version: "Nous devons nous méfier des formes prescrites du courage qui nous conduisent à nous mettre en danger, pour trouver plutôt des moyens de faire souffrir les dominants et les institutions."

<sup>164</sup> Pierre Bussière, "Geoffroy de Lagasnerie : « Il faut assumer le chaos dans lequel nous vivons »", *Le Nouveau Magazine Littéraire*, 27th of September 2018, <https://www.nouveau-magazine-litteraire.com/idees/geoffroy-de-lagasnerie-il-faut-assumer-le-chaos-dans-lequel-nous-vivons>

<sup>165</sup> Original version: "le fait de gagner de l'argent sur ça c'est un peu tabou dans le milieu parce que déjà « l'argent c'est mal »

<sup>166</sup> Original version: A : (...) Je me suis vachement identifiée à ça, même si je bosse pas du tout dans le même milieu. En fait on nous fait miroiter ça aussi un peu, enfin c'est pas du rêve de luxe, c'est du rêve de changer la société, de transformer son militantisme en quelque chose qui nous fasse vivre. Vu que quand tu t'investis dans ce genre de secteur tu te dis pas « je vais devenir riche grâce à ça » bah tu trouves une autre forme de reconnaissance, une reconnaissance sociale, une reconnaissance politique,

This form of sacrificial politics is joined with a sense of loyalty. For instance, when Florian set up the campaign against bad working conditions in feminist organizations, he did not make it public and did not contact the press. For him:

“We are really in a tricky situation because we have to condemn something that is absolutely unacceptable, but at the same time we can’t go too far in the denunciation not to harm those feminist organizations (...) We didn’t want to be accused of anti feminism, which absolutely untrue<sup>167</sup>.

This loyalty is present even in the discourse of people who have been abused, like Sarah:

“What I’m feeling is that I don’t want to take her down, because even if she is a really bad boss, in spite of everything, she is a feminist figure and there are few feminist figures in France right now so... I don’t want to attack her, as a feminist figure, because if we demolish her, I don’t know.<sup>168</sup>”

The narrative of the “cause” minimizes individual experiences. In a sense, it almost delegitimizes them through its inner urge to replace them within “the big picture”. It is an unfair fight setting in which the big picture naturally always wins. What is interesting here is that the cause concept creates a kind of ecosystem of values and duties which regulates itself. It shows through Sonia’s answer to my question:

Me: and it is known that some feminist bosses are being abusive towards their employees?

S: In the *milieu* of course, clearly, it’s a bit sad. But this goes with any cause you work for actually, women’s rights or elsewhere. This thing of: you don’t want to discredit the cause, so you are not going to give the name of the women who... because they are well-known, because they are experts on their topic, because they do things even so, because “they are not that terrible”, so you don’t say the names. But like in other *milieux*, it is known<sup>169</sup>.

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<sup>167</sup> Original version: on est vraiment sur une ligne de crête parce qu’il faut dénoncer quelque chose qui est absolument anormal et en même temps on peut pas aller trop loin dans la dénonciation pour ne pas non plus faire du tort à des associations féministes dont on partage l’objet social. On avait pas envie d’être accusé d’être anti féministe ce qui est absolument faux, et de nuire à des situations qui n’ont déjà pas de moyens.

<sup>168</sup> Original version: S : (...) En plus ce que je ressens, c’est que j’ai pas envie de la descendre, parce que même si c’est une super mauvaise boss, malgré tout c’est une figure féministe, y’a peu de figures féministes en France donc... j’ai pas envie de l’attaquer, en tant que figure féministe, parce que si on la démolit, jsais pas.

<sup>169</sup> Original version: Me : et ça c’est su ?

Sonia : dans le milieu bien sûr, clairement, c’est un peu triste. Mais là c’est valable dès que tu travailles pour une cause en fait, dans les droits des femmes ou ailleurs. Ce truc du tu veux pas décrédibiliser la cause donc tu veux pas donner les noms des meufs qui... parce qu’elles sont reconnues, parce que c’est des expertes sur leur sujet, parce qu’elles font des choses quand même, parce qu’elles sont pas si terribles quand même, du coup tu dis pas les noms. Mais comme dans d’autres milieux, ça se sait.

The cause, if it provides workers with a sense of sacrifice, performs even more effectively if it is accompanied with other dynamics such as power.

## **The octopuses: power relations within the feminist working field**

In this part, we are going to discuss the power relations in place within the feminist working field. How does it prevent women workers from speaking up about their experiences? How is the field constructed to allow such power pressures? First of all, interviewees told me about direct pressure, if not leverage that their bosses put on them and on their “career”. Julie recalls the day she tried to tell her boss that she was not feeling really good about their relationship:

“She made me understand that she co-funded a very important organization in France, therefore she had a very big network and if I wanted to work in there well I shouldn’t get in her way. So when you’re 24 years old, it’s your first professional experience and you’d like to work in the field, well you keep your mouth shut and that’s it.”<sup>170</sup>

Direct consequence of the professionalization of the field: jobs arise. With those, the pressure of having one, which is in Julie’s case used to scare her. Moreover, if there are jobs in the field, those are getting very rare, especially with the multiplication of masters in gender and women’s studies. The supply is high but not the demand. If one really wants to work in the field, using the “network” pressure is very effective. Laure sums up this idea:

“You know \*\*\*\*\*, she hesitated to apply at my old organization<sup>171</sup>. I couldn’t even tell her “don’t go there” because there is really no work and I was telling myself... well that said I don’t regret working there, or I don’t regret having worked anywhere, because otherwise what would it have been? It would have been nothing.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Original version: “Et elle m’avait fait comprendre qu’elle avait cofondé une asso super importante en France, et que du coup elle avait un très gros réseau et que si je voulais bosser là-dedans et bien il valait mieux pas que je me la mette en travers de la route. Donc quand on a 24 ans, que c’est notre première expérience professionnelle et qu’on aimerait bien bosser dans ce milieu-là, en sachant à quel point c’est compliqué de trouver un emploi stable dans ce milieu, et bien on ferme sa bouche et voilà.”

<sup>171</sup> In which Laure has had bad experiences.

<sup>172</sup> Original version: Laure : (...) Tu sais \*\*\*\* elle avait hésité à postuler à mon ancienne association, et en même temps je pouvais même pas lui dire « vas-y pas » parce que y’a tellement pas de travail que moi je me dis... fin’ en même temps je regrette pas d’y avoir travaillé quoi, ou je regrette pas d’avoir travaillé nulle part parce que sinon c’était quoi, rien d’autre quoi.

The pressure is even stronger when the woman in question is powerful. As Sarah said:

“Speaking to her directly, well she is not gonna put herself into question, and speaking publicly it’s difficult. She gets so much media attention, she knows so many journalists, you don’t know the effect it’s gonna have. It’s not going to turn against her<sup>173</sup>.”

The fact to be well-known gives them power and immunity. The interviewees recognize in this strategy the very similar one of the abuser in the abuse cycle: “we realized that the phenomenon of control we’ve been taught, they were using it on us<sup>174</sup>”.

This situation is reinforced by the fact that power in this field belongs to a few. It is for Julie “a *milieu* composed of egos and ego conflicts<sup>175</sup>”. For Lisa Markowitz and Karen W. Tice who worked on the paradoxes of professionalization in women’s organizations in the Americas, women’s organizations often clash in ways that “mimic power inequalities in the larger order<sup>176</sup>”. Likewise, Sandra Morgen pointed out that “hegemonic power relations are replicated in work cultures of women’s organizations<sup>177</sup>”. This is certainly reinforced if not created through the monopolization of power in the field. For Julie “those are women who could get to a certain position, through experience, and once they are up there, they want more than anything to keep it. So there is no sorority or solidarity anymore”. Laure gives the same description:

“It’s always the same women you find everywhere. The president of the association I worked for back then was part of the board of the FNSF<sup>178</sup>. It’s the same women you find in every organization.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Original version: Parce que un, parler en face, elle va pas se remettre en cause et parler publiquement c'est difficile parce qu'elle est tellement médiatisée, elle connaît tellement de journalistes, qu'on sait que ça va pas avoir l'effet médiatique voulu. Ca va pas se retourner contre elle.

<sup>174</sup> Original version: Fanny: “on s’est rendu compte que le phénomène d’emprise qu’elles nous avaient enseigné elles l’exerçaient sur nous

<sup>175</sup> Original version: Julie: c’est un milieu surtout composé d’égos et de lutte d’égos.

<sup>176</sup> Markowitz, Lisa, and Karen W. Tice. “Paradoxes of Professionalization: Parallel Dilemmas in Women's Organizations in the Americas.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2002, p950.

<sup>177</sup> Sandra Morgen, “It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times”: Emotional Discourse in the Work Cultures of Feminist Health Clinics, in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the new women’s movement*, 1995

<sup>178</sup> Fédération Nationale Solidarité Femmes. It is a national federation which gathers many associations amongst France.

<sup>179</sup> Original version: Laure: En fait c’est toujours les mêmes femmes qu’on retrouve partout, la présidente de mon association de l’époque elle était au conseil d’administration de la FNSF. En fait c’est les mêmes femmes que tu retrouves dans toutes les structures.

She adds: “They evok octopuses to me: they are like everywhere so you can’t do anything, you’re stuck.<sup>180</sup>” This apparent will to rule, decide and possess everything shows through the inner structure of the organization. Fanny describes her former organization’s way of working: “the president wants to have full power over the association, on the projects, the decisions, in all the details. It’s her baby, she has to control everything.<sup>181</sup>”

Naturally, it is very difficult for a worker to get any power in this case. If the working conditions turn out to be bad, workers have no leverage as they face an organization which lies in the hand of one person. Furthermore, it is also difficult to call in the services of a union. As Fanny says quite bitterly, the unions’ androcentrism is preventing them from getting interested in the association’s field “which employs maybe 80% of women<sup>182</sup>”. Whether that is true or not, remains the fact that the working conditions, material or immaterial, are not playing in the workers favor: “The physical and moral exhaustion linked to those working conditions is killing those people and doesn’t give them any flexibility. I think that’s the goal actually<sup>183</sup>”.

## **Working in an association: blurred lines and anti democratic structure**

The situation of having one person holding all the power is very commonly found in the association sector. Its chaotic form of organization somehow allows bad working experiences to thrive. Not really a firm, neither a volunteer association, the distinction between work and activism is very fine in this field. As we have seen in the first chapter, it is also a sphere where work can invade private life. When Laure’s firm had to move between one place to another, she recalls that all the boxes were stored at her place. “We were doing telework I remember,

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<sup>180</sup> Original version: ”elles m’évoquent un peu des pieuvres toutes ces femmes-là, elles sont genre partout, donc tu peux rien faire t’es coincée.

<sup>181</sup> Original version: c’est que la présidente a une volonté de tout pouvoir sur l’association, sur les projets, les décisions, dans le moindre détail. C’est son bébé, il faut qu’elle gère tout.

<sup>182</sup> Original version: Fanny: le travail associatif qui doit employer 80% de meufs, peut être que ça intéresse pas grand monde dans les luttes sociales

<sup>183</sup> Original version: Fanny: l’épuisement physique et moral lié à ces conditions de travail qui abat les gens et ne leur laisse aucune marge de manœuvre, et je pense que c’est le but en fait.

we worked at my place as well. We moved ourselves.”<sup>184</sup> This is a very telling example. In this case, work is literally invading her private space.

It gets even trickier when work is in itself private, meaning that in many interviews it felt that the associations meant more than just workplaces to our interviewees’ bosses. The term “baby” was used many times to describe the intimate link some boss could have with their organization. Sonia: “it’s her baby, it’s her project (...) she created it, it’s something that is attached to her, to her image.”<sup>185</sup>. This emotional connection to the organization redounds on the workers who are excluded of the decisions but at the same time ought to invest themselves fully.

Moreover, the growing professionalization of the field seems to directly impact the relationship between the volunteers, the workers and the organization’s creator.

Fanny: We would never know when there was a board meeting, the volunteers would tell us.

Me : The volunteers were part of the board?

Fanny: Yes, we realized at some point that almost all the volunteers were part of the board.

In this example we can see that the associations still show signs of an activist past. The workers have a hard time finding where they stand in this configuration. Likewise, the head of those organizations seem to have a hard time letting go of power to the workers, which they seem to consider like ameliorated version of activists. As Sarah points out about her former boss “her type is activism, she didn’t dream to be at the head of a firm. (...) So for the ideas and the convictions it’s good, but it’s not enough to structure a firm”<sup>186</sup>.

## **The influence of French feminist universalism**

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<sup>184</sup> Original version: L : (...) on a dû déménager. Les cartons ont atterri chez moi d’ailleurs, mais bon, ça c’est le milieu associatif dans l’entreprise quoi. On faisait plus ou moins du télétravail, on travaillait chez moi aussi. On a fait le déménagement nous-mêmes.

<sup>185</sup> Original version: Sonia: C’est son bébé, c’est son projet, (...) c’est elle qui l’a créé, c’est un truc rattaché à elle, à son image à elle.

<sup>186</sup> Original version: S : (...) Elle son type c'est le militantisme. Elle rêvait pas d'être à la tête d'une entreprise. Je pense que c'est problématique parce qu'il vaut peut-être bosser avec quelqu'un qui rêvait d'être chef d'entreprise et d'être un bon chef d'entreprise, et du coup-là le côté vocation va avoir tendance à faire que y'a pas beaucoup de professionnalisme, parce que c'est trop pour les idées, pour les convictions, mais pas assez pour la structure d'une entreprise.

From all the interviews I had, I wondered many times how a feminist organization could not see how, from my point of view, anti feminist their actions were. Was it denial? A sort of cognitive dissonance? I found part of the answer in the description the interviewees made of their bosses. Most of them fit a certain “type” of feminism, which is universalism.

French universalism is a central concept which goes back to the French *Révolution*. It is built on a double abstraction: of the nation and of the individual. Opposed in theory to the American system, French political representation is not constructed through particular groups with particular interests representing a multiple faced nation, each representant embodies the nation as an abstract and coherent entity. Political individuals, citizens, are understood to be “abstracted from their social attributes<sup>187</sup>”. A part of French feminism was constructed within this frame and therefore sees the female subject as a one and coherent entity. Universalism is a great promise but a bitter lie. As with every creation, it is embedded in the characteristics of its creator. Thus, universalism has more to do with androcentrism, white-privilege, and eurocentrism than with truly a representation of all. Similarly, French feminist universalism is lashed for being white, bourgeois, eurocentric and unable to recognize power structures and thus essentialist and racist.

Within the interviews, I recognized this feminism and I reckon the latter explains parts of the behaviours I have been told of. For instance, the lack of reflection on one’s privileges or a certain inability to cross feminism and questions of class and of racism. This point of view is confirmed by some of the interviewees. Fanny says that she knew very well that her association was part of “a very white, quite bourgeois, anti-veil, islamophobic feminism<sup>188</sup>” and when asked about her boss she points out: “For me she is someone who never questioned for herself power structures and domination (...). She never questioned the fact to hire women, and especially young women.<sup>189</sup>” This blindness, resulting of privileges, could lead to situations of abuse. For Sarah, her bosses were abusive towards her because they already are in a position of power:

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<sup>187</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “French Universalism in the Nineties”, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Volume 15, Number 2, Summer 2004, p34.

<sup>188</sup> Original version: “Fanny : Je savais très bien que le féminisme de la fédération nationale solidarité femmes c’était un féminisme très blanc, assez bourgeois, anti voile, voir même islamophobe.”

<sup>189</sup> Original version: “Pour moi c’est quelqu’un qui, malgré tout ça, ne se pose jamais la question des structures et des rapports de domination, en interne comme en externe. Elle s’est jamais questionnée sur le fait d’employer des femmes, et principalement des jeunes femmes.”

“They are dominants also because they are women who... well they both have a bourgeois background (...). It’s the kind of women, they set up a meeting, in the end there are cups on the table, they are not going to think of collecting them. (...) For them there is only equality between women and men, there is no classism or racism and all that.<sup>190</sup>”

This way of thinking can make them feel like they are immune to producing violence themselves. However, some are indeed producing violence. A friend of Andréa stopped working in feminist associations because she was exhausted by racist attitudes towards her:

“She always got remarks on her personal life, her choices, the fact that she was muslim etc... so she quit.<sup>191</sup>”

This racism was mentioned more than once. Similarly, Laure told about her boss in a women’s shelter:

“I’m sure that for her, the women who are victims of violence they are not like ‘any women’. (...) I’m sure they have a very stereotypical discourse.<sup>192</sup>”

This universalism, unaware of power structures, has an impact on the workers. It is a vector of precarization as well as a direct violence when it is expressed through racism.

## **The bigger picture: the impact of neoliberal policies on the working conditions**

Of all the reasons which were mentioned by the interviewees to explain the bad working conditions in the field of women’s rights, one was ubiquitous: money and the State. Indeed,

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<sup>190</sup> Original version: Sarah : En fait elles sont dominantes aussi parce qu'elles sont, ce sont des femmes qui... elles sont issues toutes les deux d'un milieu bourgeois, genre l'autre boss toute sa famille vit dans le 16eme, c'est vraiment la bobo hyper friquée. C'est le genre de femmes, tu vois elles organisent une réunion, y'a des gobelets à la fin, elles vont pas penser à les ramasser. C'est des petites choses, et là c'est pas pour rien qu'elle a milité à Osez le féminisme qui est pas très intersectionnel, c'est que la question des rapports de domination, pour elle y'a que égalité femmes-hommes, et y'a pas tout ce qui est classisme, racisme et tout ça.

<sup>191</sup> Original version: Andréa: remarques sur sa vie personnelle, sur ses choix, sur le fait qu'elle était musulmane etc... Du coup elle a démissionné.

<sup>192</sup> Original version: Laure : (...) D'ailleurs je suis sûre que pour elles les femmes qui sont victimes de violences c'est pas n'importe quelles femmes. Tant mieux qu'elles ne s'occupent pas de l'accueil des femmes, parce que je suis sûre qu'elles avaient un discours stéréotypé sur les victimes de violence.



feminist organizations suffer from chronic underfunding. Organizations' structural fundings are slowly replaced by call for tenders. It is fundings on a drip which is the sign of state's neoliberalism. Thus, feminist organizations have no vision or ability to secure employments. This financial insecurity forces them to choose between the cause and the responsibility that comes with it, and their own workers:

Florian: One of the recurrent problem in the association's field is that the association has to run. We are facing in my case (...) victims of domestic abuse who are constantly calling us, constantly wanting to see us and to whom we unfortunately give an insufficient answer or no answer at all. So they think it's better to hire interns or *service civique*, paying people peanuts so that the organization runs and it provides women with a service. This goes before working conditions<sup>193</sup>.

Andréa told me the same thing "There is also this idea that we can't get money for projects or actions, so if we put it in people's wages[...]"<sup>194</sup>. Public policies have a huge impact on how the association organize themselves. In the case of the criticized *service civique*, what is to be expected from organizations when the State is cutting public spendings but subsidizes those new contracts<sup>195</sup>? For most of them, they take what is there to take. The concept of sacrifice we mentioned above takes here a whole new dimension. It is a forced sacrifice, due to public policies which do not leave associations with much of a choice. It leads to be constantly in a situation of emergency: "we don't have the means to take some distance and tell ourselves "careful, this project is underfinanced, am I building it or not?"<sup>196</sup>.

In this situation, workers can hardly be anything but overworked. If the budgets are low, the responsibilities of those organizations are heavy. Thus, a few people are doing a job which would require many more. Sonia takes the telling example of the higher institution for equality between women and men in France: "they are five people, it's unbelievable, it is an institution which works on almost every topic and they are five!"<sup>197</sup>. It is needless to say that

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<sup>193</sup> Original version: F : un des problèmes récurrents dans le domaine associatif c'est qu'il faut que l'association elle tourne, parce qu'on est face à des bénéficiaires, je vais prendre mon cas, face à des victimes de violences conjugales qui ne cessent d'appeler, qui ne cessent de vouloir nous voir, pour qui on a malheureusement souvent une réponse qui est insuffisante ou pas de réponse du tout. Du coup elles se disent qu'il vaut mieux embaucher des stagiaires ou des volontaires en service civique, payer des gens au lance-pierre comme ça la structure tourne et ça permet aux femmes victimes d'avoir un accueil. Ca, ça passe avant les conditions de travail des salariées.

<sup>194</sup> Original version: A : (...) Aussi y'a l'idée que déjà quand on arrive pas à avoir de l'argent pour des projets ou des actions militantes, alors si en plus on les met dans les salaires des gens...

<sup>195</sup> Maud Simonet, *Le travail bénévole: engagement citoyen ou travail gratuit?*, 2010.

<sup>196</sup> Original version: Florian: un sous financement fait qu'on ne se donne plus les moyens d'avoir ce recul sur nous même, de se dire attention ce projet est sous financé, est ce que je le monte quand même ?

<sup>197</sup> Original version: Sonia: (...) Enfin le HCE c'est 5 personnes quoi, c'est un délire, c'est une institution qui

in those cases, the question of working conditions gets buried into work. Furthermore, the loyalty to the cause is reinforced by the state's action as well. Laure mentions a time where some colleagues of hers talked about the working conditions problems in her organization to a regional representative:

“She told them that she had lowered this association's subsidies because she knew it didn't go well; but you have women who are taken care of by those organizations! So wouldn't denunciate them rather be counterproductive?”<sup>198</sup>

Lastly, this underfunding creates competition between the organizations. Sonia sums it up “fundings per project creates competition, especially when the subsidies are shrinking, so they have to fight<sup>199</sup>”. In this pressuring context, we could even argue that some of the abuse the interviewees mentioned are triggered by a stressful, competitive and exhausting labor. On that matter, Sarah who is now working for a very powerful man confessed which constitutes for her a sad truth: “Now in my work, I told you there is domination as well, but I feel respected, I feel good. The guy I'm working with has money, he doesn't have any discomfort actually. That's much easier to be nice (...) when you feel good<sup>200</sup>.”

Thus, working conditions are taken into bigger scale phenomena, which structure and influence from the material to the most interpersonal relations.

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travaille sur presque tous les sujets de l'égalité femmes hommes, et elles sont 5.

<sup>198</sup> Original version: Laure: D'anciennes collègues à Paroles de femmes ont rencontré la déléguée régionale aux droits des femmes qui avait entendu que ça se passait pas très bien à Paroles de femmes, et qui leur a plus ou moins dit qu'elles avaient baissé les subventions à Paroles de femmes parce que ça se passait pas bien mais en même temps t'as des femmes qui sont suivies par ces assos là. Du coup est ce que dénoncer ce serait pas plutôt contre-productif.

<sup>199</sup> Original version: Et là on en revient au financement par projet, qui crée de la compétition, surtout quand les subventions se réduisent, donc elles doivent se battre.

<sup>200</sup> Original version: S : (...) Moi là je vois dans mon boulot, je te disais que y'avait aussi de la domination, mais moi je me sens respectée, je me sens bien. Le mec avec qui je bosse il a de la tune, il a pas d'inconfort en fait, du coup c'est beaucoup plus facile d'être sympa avec ses collaborateurs quand toi t'es bien.

## Conclusion

To our research question “why are French feminist organizations providing its workers with poor working conditions?” one cannot give one strict and simple answer. Many elements are important to be taken into account in order to understand a conflicted and multilayered situation. The professionalization of the field, combined with an inbetween status of associations are leading to difficult situations. Likewise, the question of passion and engagement in place in those worlds can lead to sacrifice and exploitation. On a bigger scale, gender as a social structure remains pervasive even in feminists organizations. Similarly, considering feminist work as care job gives us a macro understanding of the role of capitalism and patriarchy in the low recognition of society’s healers.

Those clarifications have to be put into theoretical perspective, through which one can comprehend the fact that feminism is multiple, and its position on work and labour as well. Poor working conditions might not be directly linked to it but a growing neoliberal feminism surely could be its vector.

Lastly, the interviews cleared the performative aspects of “the cause” concept, shone a light on power relations, abuse and violence in the field. It also allowed us to link some of the situations to French feminist universalism which is harmful because neglecting power structures and rendering blind to the ones it creates. Finally, our account on neoliberalism allows us to see that as feminist workers, we are pushed by certain policies into acting a certain way. This pressure is taking us into a perverse circle, against which we should rebel ourselves. This is why feminist organizations need to be accountable, in order to politicize what seems so far to be turned against our own.

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## APPENDIXES<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> See separate document.