

01/10/2024

The sticky floor: an approach from occupational mobility



A study conducted by the Institute of Labor Studies of the UAB reveals that the "sticky floor", a metaphor of Catherine W. Berheide, describes female labor immobility in low-skilled and low-wage jobs. In contrast to the "glass ceiling", this phenomenon affects the base of the occupational pyramid with invisible barriers that limit their professional mobility.

Chandler Foundation

The sticky floor is a metaphor for women's employment that it has its origins in the works of Catherine W. Berheide. In her studies on female employment in public administrations at the beginning of the 1990s, this American sociologist concluded that, in fact, what mostly identified female occupation was not the glass ceiling but the sticky floor. This finding has opened a new field of study on inequalities between women and men at work and in employment and it has led to a rethinking of gender equality policies by focusing on the bottom of the occupational pyramid (sticky floor) and not just on the top (glass ceiling).

The European Institute for Gender Equality's Glossary of Terms defines the sticky floor metaphor for denoting a discriminatory employment pattern that mainly keeps women at the lowest levels of the occupational pyramid, with low mobility and barriers to their professional improvement".



Today, however, research has broadened this vision. The links between land and horizontal occupational segregation, the lower value and recognition given to occupations considered socially as female (administrative, social health, etc.), or the quality of employment are explored. It has also highlighted how structural factors (social or ethnic background and domestic and care work socially assigned to women) or cultural factors (organizational and management cultures that often reinforce gender stereotypes) make up the substratum of the sticky floor and the profile of its protagonists.

The results of our study allow us to know this phenomenon, in terms of occupational mobility. We define sticky floor as low-skilled employment with low wages that tends to offer a pattern of occupational mobility in which immobility or downward mobility predominate. Thus, we have been able to confirm, among others, that immobility is the common denominator of women and men. However, although not all men have successful career paths, women's occupational mobility is different and always shorter. More linear and ascending than that of men, shorter and more limited than that of women, especially those who start from the lowest hierarchical level. Men have higher wages and progress more even in feminized sectors and occupations. However, we have also observed that the sticky floor of women is not homogeneous. Two profiles stand out: one linked to low-skilled employment in services such as hospitality, cleaning or care, and the most typical of administrative work.

In short, the work of Catherine W. Berheide opened an exciting field of study that, today, allows us to better understand female employment and the gender inequalities that surround it.

Pilar Carrasquer Oto

Sociological Research Centre on Everyday Life and Work
Institute for Labour Studies
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
pilar.carrasquer@uab.cat

References

Carrasquer Oto, P., & Zawadsky Martínez-Portillo, J. E. (2023). **El suelo pegajoso y la movilidad ocupacional de las mujeres y los hombres en España**. *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, 81(4), e237. <https://doi.org/10.3989/ris.2023.81.4.M22b-4>

[View low-bandwidth version](#)

