

Everything To Everyone: The Journey of Becoming a Woman

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how female secondary school teachers in the UK experience and interpret their transition from girl to woman, with particular attention on the emotional labour and ‘double shift’ that shape their lives. While academic discussions of womanhood often emphasise cultural meanings and symbolic milestones, this study instead foregrounds how participants navigate competing demands across their professional and personal lives. Teaching, a historically feminised profession associated with care and nurturing, frequently extends expectations placed on women to provide emotional support not only to their families but also to students and colleagues. Drawing on narrative interviews with eight teachers, coded through inductive thematic analysis, the findings reveal a dominant theme of needing to be “everything to everyone.” Participants described routinely prioritising others’ needs over their own, managing responsibilities at work while simultaneously carrying the primary burden of domestic and emotional labour at home. This produces a persistent sense of being stretched across roles, accompanied by guilt and self-surveillance when expectations conflict. Rather than marking womanhood through singular events, participants associated becoming a woman with developing resilience while managing these overlapping responsibilities. Although teaching did not fundamentally alter participants’ views on womanhood, their professional role intensified experiences of emotional labour and work–family conflict. The study demonstrates how contemporary womanhood for these teachers is less defined by symbolic transitions and more by the ongoing negotiation of emotional and practical demands across multiple domains of life.

Keywords: double shift; teachers; womanhood; responsibilities; emotional labour