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Empowerment labs: Gender equality, Employability and Theatre catalyzing social change

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Abstract

The rising unemployment in Europe is deepening the situations of inequality, injustice and employment discrimination against women (Casaca, 2010). The situation of young women and women of low educational attainment is particularly severe because in these groups the unemployment is higher.

In this context, the project developed by Quarta Parede in collaboration with the University of Beira Interior, under the Program Active Citizenship Program funded by EEA Grants aims to address the phenomena of women unemployment by encouraging critical reflection and social change through artistic intervention.

This paper presents the research conducted under the first Empowerment lab, which seeks to understand if they achieved the objectives proposed and what are the perspectives of the women involved. The main conclusion is that the participants gain analytical skills and awareness raising capacity in what concerns gender issues and that has empowered them to a more enlightened citizenship but the capacity of commitment is a gap and this necessary affects their employability profile.

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1. Introduction

Due to being one of the priority areas of action of European Union, social intervention on Gender Equality has intensified in the recent years in Portugal but the current Portuguese economic and social conditions are particularly

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adverse to this kind of work. The context of crisis has consolidated old situations of social inequality because the fight for equal rights and citizenship tends to be devalued. In this scenario women are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion (Casaca, 2010).

The project Nós[†] is developed by Quarta Parede (an artistic and education NGO) in collaboration with the University of Beira Interior. The project is funded by Active Citizenship Program from EEA Grants, coordinated by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. It aims to address the problem of women unemployment and discrimination by encouraging critical reflection and social change through artistic intervention. The Empowerment Labs are the main element of the project and they consist in non-formal education programs targeted to two different groups of women: unemployed and university students looking for their first job.

This article presents an exploratory sociological research of the Empowerment labs that seeks to understand if the project achieved its goals and what are the perspectives of the women involved.

1.1. Gender (in)equality in Portugal

Gender inequalities are generally defined as the differences in status and power that women and men have in groups, communities and societies (Oakley, 1972). Despite the important major changes that occurred in the past half century in Western countries, gender inequalities are still very present.

Specifically in Portugal, XX century late decades were shaped by a sudden and quick feminization of the workforce (Viegas and Costa, 1998). Still a more detailed analysis shows that the this increase of women participation in labor market and the simultaneous increase of women education level has not led to a situation of real social equality between Portuguese men and women because in the private sphere the tasks division is still very traditional. At the same time, in labor market, horizontal and vertical segregation remains very strong (Monteiro in Ferreira, 2011). In the late 80's the entrance of Portugal into the European Union boosted many intervention initiatives in Gender Equality, including the development of organizational gender equality plans, awareness raising actions to publics so diverse as children, youth, active adults and elderly people. Several laws were created to the message equal working conditions for men and women like the equal payment for equal work. Public sector already apply this laws but in the private sector that doesn't happen. Most of these initiatives were undertaken in the framework of EU policies, namely the axis 7 of the Operational Plan for Human Potential (Monteiro, 2013).

But despite all these initiatives the repercussions and impacts of legal measures and interventions undertaken do not meet expectations. "Formal equality" is still quite distinct of "real equality" (Monteiro in Ferreira, 2011: 33).

In face to this is impossible not to ask: why? Why equality is not happening? (Jackson, s/d). Why is the wage gender gap still remarkable in the private sector so more notorious as higher is the income? Why are the values of violence against women maintaining or increasing? (SOCINOVA/CESNOVA/FCSH, 2008).

1.2. Ubi and the Empowerment Labs

Any doubt that the world is still deeply unequal. But social change can happen every day if there is continuous effort. This is a matter of small conquers (Sales Oliveira, C. and Villas-Boas, S., 2011) Continuity in time is also one of the distinguishing characteristics of successful social intervention strategies, along with the mainstreaming and incorporation of gender concerns in planning activities (Lindberg, M., Lindgren, M., and Packendorff, J., 2013). It is

[†] *Nós* means *Us* in English language

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