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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<sup>†</sup> 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

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<sup>†</sup> Nós means *Us* in English language

thus vital to continue the work of deconstructing stereotypes and promoting equality values. It seems to us particularly relevant to introduce these issues in daily discourses by incorporating them in education, both formal and informal.

In 2011 University of Beira Interior was the first Portuguese university to create a gender equality plan - UBIgual - and presently has a resident gender equality commission that seeks to improve gender mainstreaming in the institution. The importance of talking about the same is already proven (CITE, s/d) and this way we can try a 'naturalization' of gender equality theme to serve as a counter to the secular tradition of naturalization of different gender roles. It is in this framework of preoccupations that the research about the Empowerment labs appears. It seemed to us an innovative initiative with great potential to result because it is a small but in deep scope and can be replicated in different contexts. The labs aim to improve empowerment, resilience and transformation of direct participants and to raise gender equality awareness in the general population.

The action invites the concept of empowerment (Sadan, 2004) to support the transition process from a state of powerlessness in the current social climate to a state in which the women involved get more control over their life, future and the environment in which they need to fit at a personal, social and professional.

Each lab is composed by three conceptual chorus: Theater, Gender Equality and Employability and aims to establish itself as a place of creation, training and change, where artistic expression and creativity emerge as tools to promote meaningful relationships (within the self and with others) and opportunities for participation and empowerment (Johnston, 2005). The driving idea of the laboratory is to establish a dialogistic relationship (Freire, 1972) among the components of the laboratory:

- interventional component with a focus on the problem of women unemployment and gender equality promotion
- pedagogical component based on a collaborative methodology that focuses on awareness, appreciation and personal/collective transformation of participants.
- artistic component where theater comes as globalizing area contaminated by other artistic fields, including arts and movement.

Gender equality works as a unifying theme, focusing specially on the field of Labor and Employment in order to address employability obstacles for women through a strategy based on theatrical practice while developing critical thinking skills. The specific objectives of the laboratory are: (i) to bring the participants aesthetic sensibility and expressive and creative abilities; (ii) to develop skills applicable to their professional and social life and amplify awareness of their value as professionals, citizens and women; (iii) to share this process with the community and therefore promote gender equality.

But how to articulate theater, gender equality and employability enhancing an artistic process that catalyzes the change?

## **2. Methodology in a double perspective**

### *2.1. Empowerment Labs Methodology.*

The model of intervention proposed for the Empowerment labs project is rooted in methodologies like the Theatre of the Oppressed. The Theatre of the Oppressed was created in the 60s of last century by Boal (1975) who want to use theater as a political, social, ethical and aesthetic work tool. This artistic proposal aimed to contribute to social change and dialogue with other areas in a broader social and political work and to be a strategy of emancipation for the people involved. Based on this perspective and also in the dialogue pedagogic concept (Freire, 1972) the Nós project developed an approach called collective creation process in which the participants have a major role into the process

compared with the Theater of the Oppressed. This artistic perspective is very close to the sociologic participative methodology.

In this article we will analyze just the first empowerment lab targeted to young university students (from now on called lab1) since the second laboratory is still in course.

The lab1 sessions lasted four months, once a week for a period of two hours and thirty minutes. The laboratory began with a presentation session followed by two sessions of gender equality awareness led by a sociologist and a psychologist in December 2013. The theater workshop monitor attended these sessions and then researched theoretical and practical frameworks to guide the artistic processes of group involvement; gender equality focusing on labor issues; empowerment and feminist theory. The theatre monitor together with the sociologist revised the syllabus outlined for theater workshop, considering the first contacts with the group of participants and the gender equality sessions. The theatre workshop started in December, after the second Gender Equality session. In February 2014, happened a third session of gender equality directed by the sociologist. Then in April the lab1 ended with the development of a final performance exercise. This moment wanted to transmit the contents of the Empowerment Lab (in its different components) in a simple way, appropriate to the process experienced by the group but not forgetting the artistic concerns.

During all the lab1 team meetings were held – with the presence of the theater monitor, the psychologist and the sociologist - to define syllabus and build a common framework and language between the different training components of the laboratory.

## *2.2. Methodology of the Research*

The research approach chosen to study the empowerment labs is the research-action methodology. Two characteristics are associated with this methodology that combines research with social intervention (Monteiro, 1995): on one hand, is a process that aims to fulfill three articulated objectives, namely, the production of new knowledge through research procedures, the modification of social reality as a result of innovative practices and the promotion of "social learning" through the involvement of different stakeholders in dynamic skills training; on the other hand, research-action approach reflects a collective process that involves as subjects of investigation and intervention both the researchers and the social groups. This last feature implies the need of rethinking the research activity and the relationship between the researcher and the object of study.

In this research, because the researcher was at the same time part of the project team the research-action seemed the more suitable approach. A more contemplative methodological approach would waste the "inside" view that participation in the project allowed us. As a member of the project team the researcher has participated in all decision-making and planning meetings and followed up very closely the work; as facilitator of Gender Equality sessions, the researcher has organized and streamlined up two sessions with the participants generating a relationship with the

group. Additionally was invited at the end of the lab to be present and collaborate in the shaping the performance exercise. Throughout the lab has followed up the project blog.

The materials analyzed in this research are the blog of the project, session reports, photographs of the sessions, the lab1 video (all sessions and the final performance exercise), the diary of the sessions conducted by the researcher, a self-assessment survey and two interviews with participants.

In next point we present and discuss the course of the laboratory, the data collected and the more important notations that came out.

### **3- The course of the laboratory**

The lab1 ran from December 2013 to April 2014 in 14 thematic and theatrical sessions with more 4 additional sessions of preparation of the final exercise. The 12 participants in the laboratory ranged between 20 and 29 years old and all were students of University of Beira Interior but from different faculties and education areas.

During the process four participants left, two because they found a job, one without justification and another for health reasons. The group that stayed until the end was a group of 8 participants, heterogeneous in what concerns education areas (Psychology ,Sociology, Communication, Design Fashion and Pharmaceutical Sciences) and social profiles (it put together people with high social participation level with people who are just studying).

#### *3.1. A Short Balance of the Process*

The three components of the lab1 are going to be analyzed together because despite having existed sessions devoted entirely to each of the components, a major objective of the project was precisely the junction of the three areas in the empowerment process.

The articulation between the three components was fully achieved in the team opinion. Of great importance was the presence of the different monitors in each other sessions. Specifically, the monitor of first and third sessions of gender equality attended the first presentation session and four sessions of theatre workshop and the teacher monitor was present in all thematic sessions. The monitor of the second session of gender equality followed the project through virtual meetings.

The team good communication and empathic environment was a facilitator of the lab1 dynamic.

Even so, the team felt that there were sessions with greater success than others. Specifically in a session about gender violence and hate language the participants didn't identify themselves with the session. But interestingly, elements of this session were later recovered spontaneously by them to the final exercise to the scene of harassment in the workplace, suggesting that reflection on this theme seems to have settled in the group over time.

The employability was a less obvious component of the laboratory than the gender equality because it was subject of a more diffuse treatment by the team. We tried to get a look at the issue through individual identity and gender by giving back the issue to the participants. It was introduced the challenge of trying to understand the extent to which gender and employability intersect and women employment is socially constructed as a specific area where gender discrimination is reproduced. The participants strongly challenged gender inequalities in the labor market and built interesting performances of contestation and alternative proposal to the status quo. They valued a more inclusive and creative personal resume and the soft skills of both men and women.

A relevant finding of the process is the lack of participation in the blog, especially by the participants but also the design team, with the exception of the theater monitor.

#### *3.2. Dynamic Versus Inconstancy*

A very interesting dynamic of small group was created among participants with strong mechanisms of cohesion and solidarity. But at the same time an element that really stood out in the process was the frequent absence of several participants, far above the limit initially established with them. With exception of a participant who never missed, all

other far exceeded the limit of session missing. This was the biggest obstacle detected by the lab1 team, having been analyzed the problem in the meetings but we weren't able to timely outline a strategy to overcome this problem.

### *3.3 Participant's Words: Self – assessment survey, interviews and comments.*

The self-assessment survey was applied in January 2014 with the main objective of helping to plan the rest of lab1. It covered the assessment of previous knowledge and skills in the three components and a second part about the lab first impressions.

In the first part the group divided between those who considered themselves already in possession of a good standard of knowledge and skills about gender equality, employability and dramatic expression and creativity as well as soft skills (communication, time management and planning) and another group of participants who claim to have insufficient knowledge and skills in some of these areas (five cases in the first group and seven participants in the second).

All mentioned that lab1 was allowing them to increase self-confidence and critical skills and to explore their "self" in new dimensions. The open question about what brought them lab1 in terms of self-confidence and resilience has gathered some testimonies about the opening mind caused by the employed methodology "this is such a loose and fun way to expose myself and to discuss key questions!" ("Claire", one participant).

The evaluation of the lab development was marked by the prevalence of positive references. Two people said that there was an insufficient development of skills applicable to professional life but in the next question about the lab1 contributions to personal and academic life they referred the development of critical capacity stating that this will be an asset in the labor market.

There is a certain unanimity in the opinions about contributions from lab1 to their personal and academic life: increased spontaneity, communication skills and body language and even the critical capacity and sensitivity to social context.

### *3.4. Public and Private: impacts Perceived.*

During the lab1 the participants shared some comments and impressions about the changes brought to their lives. Two participants reported that colleagues and friends often made jokes about the lab referring to it as "that women thing" ("Brigitte", one participant); another participant experienced obstacles to participating in the final exercise by her parents who had doubts about what the lab and its purposes. When asked about the experience of doing the lab most participants said it brought a new perspective to their lives and it represented a time and space marked by difference, the unexpected and meaningful interaction. When preparing the final presentation the group agreed this symbolize an opportunity to "show how important and accurate the lab is" (group statement).

### *3.5. The Apotheosis: The Performance exercise or the impacts seen.*

The content and structure of the final exercise was the result of the discussion and agreement of the participants. The theater monitor gave suggestions and supervised the creative process. The researcher was present and gave some suggestions and comments. The final product was a combination of research, reflection and performance. The main objective was to share the empowerment lab process and to raise awareness about the gendered employment discrimination. Despite all the 8 participants planned the exercise only 6 were present in the public presentation.

The presentation begun with a shoes exhibit and a explanatory opening speech said while the rest perform a group choreography caricaturizing gender stereotypes. Then five scenic perspectives are presented with the involvement of all participants: 1) family and gender; 2) inequalities in recruitment; 3) harassment in the workplace; 4) the role of media in the reproduction of inequalities and 5) the wage gender gap. Afterwards a debate with the audience was carried out. Several issues were discussed including the impact on the participants.

The spectacle was attended by 60 people. At the end the participants were very excited and proud: it was undoubtedly a milestone for them.

## **4. A reflection on the process undertaken**

Social change can come from outside – traditionally this is the approach of social policy - or can be built from within, with the social actors. For the success of this second approach is vital to involve and motivate the social actors.

In lab1 all the necessary steps were given. The methodology employed strongly linked concepts and objectives and embodied their operationalization. The final presentation was an important challenge that allowed the materialization of the inner change into something sharable by to group, raising awareness and thereby spreading the message of their own learning.

But despite the strong and beautiful outputs achieved there were problems in the lab1. The inconstancy was a constant that raised barriers to the widening of the project. Only 6 participants accomplished the full educational cycle and experienced the whole process. This does not invalidate the value of the social intervention achieved still it raises relevant questions to the project mobilizing capacity. We also considered that the incapacity of commitment is a gap of these participants and this will necessary affect their employability profile because it is an important and valued skill in the labor market.

At the individual scale objectives were undoubtedly achieved. In the short term there was impact on the lives of these young women. But it would be important to follow up in order to check the consistency of the changes in the medium and long term. We also consider that the project had collective impact since the presence in performance exercise was quite reasonable and there are already two invitations to extraordinary presentations. In a Pharmaceutical Sciences Congress, by initiative of one participant and another presentation in an Arts and Music festival by invitation of a local arts organization. The willing of one of the participants to do the presentation in the context of her academic peers reveals a desire/need to share this message with other agent; the other presentation by invitation shows that the mouth-to-mouth dissemination worked in this project and that Empowerment labs are being commented and discussed by cultural agents in the city which is quite positive.

Moreover the team believes it would have been important to invest more in the communication in order to achieve awareness of the broader theme. This concern is already being taken into account in structuring the second laboratory.

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