

Women in Portugal

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Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

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1. WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AND POLITICAL CHANGE

I don't know how many times I have heard the question: "how do you explain that in a country like Portugal there has been a woman Prime Minister?".

Usually I react in a great outburst of indignation - women in Portugal are not like the image which has been portrayed of them! If statistics say that the percentage of women in "active population" are only 28% what is wrong are statistics and the concept of being active!

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What about, for instance, the 32% of rural population where more than half are women, aren't they working? What about the activities carried by so many women and which are (or have been until recently) totally unpaid? And what about the women writers who represent, in the last 30 years, a most astounding cultural phenomenon in this country, as most of them are in the forefront^{of} literature and portray, in a very perceptive way, the deep movements which agitate, beneath the surface, our society?

And what about the women in technical professions who represent the highest percentage in the western countries? (In my own field, chemical engineering, we have moved from 20% of women

when I graduated a quarter of a century ago to more than 50% this year).

Of course, I could also argue the case by [?]stating the enormous leap made in the law since April 74. The Portuguese Constitution is a unique example of the integration of the principle of equality in the basic text of a country. The amount of new laws set up in the last years have changed drastically the identity of women, her image and her status in society. (1)

Statistics and laws would certainly reassure certain souls. But the link and I am asked about - Women's situation versus (and?) a woman Prime Minister - belongs to another realm. The only satisfying explanation I can give lies elsewhere. In 1979, the appointment of a woman Prime Minister has been the object of a very strong reaction in the country. Many spoke of a new hope, a "fresh breeze", another style and concept of politics. They were very many to express their support and solidarity. But many others rejected it in the most violent way (I will never forget the undisguised loss of control of most members of the conservative parties when in the Parliament, I denounced the lies they had used to attack the program of my government ! It went so far that some of the house-desks cracked under their fury !)

(1) cf Annexe with excerpts form the Portuguese Constitution, significant aspects of family law and Portuguese law applying ILO Convention nº 100.

Enthusiasm and rage were not connected, in the first place, with the personality of the Prime Minister (I think). They were rather, the response to what was obviously still a revolutionary act, belonging to the "new tradition" of the 25th April process.

Through the appointment of a woman Prime Minister it was clearly shown that such a tradition is not a male heritage. It is one of the few situations when men and women transcended their conflictual relationship and worked together in full equality towards a new future. Seen from that perspective the fact of a woman as Prime Minister was in total logic with the participation of women in the revolution on equal foot with men.

How did we come there ? Let me say briefly the path we covered in the past years.

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Before the political change that occurred in Portugal in 74 the situation of women was deeply affected by the society without horizon we lived in. War in Africa drained us of money and dignity, of hope and people. Already at that time unrest among women started to take its own forms, though denouncing the effect of war on women's lives - the uncertainty about their family, the loneliness of those women left by the men in Africa or in Europe to run away from the war, the weight of so many burdens on their shoulders, the very fact of being dependent from them.

In the early 70's women journalists (who had acquired a high status in their profession) started in several newspapers series of reportages about women's lives and concerns. They denounced sexual discrimination but never failed to put it into the wider context of injustice in Portuguese society. It was during that period (in 1972) that the "New Portuguese Letters" appeared for a short moment in the bookshops. They were of paramount significance for Portugal. They were, in fact, the first public act denouncing the global system of oppression and which would converge in the movement that had its climax on the 25th April. Rebellion against the political status quo took, in my country, the form of a liberation cry from women and about women:

"... We will make our way back to the root
 Of our own anguish, all by ourselves, until we can say
 "Our sons are sons, they are people and not
 Phaluses of our males". We will call children
 Children; women women and men
 Men. We will call upon a poet to govern
 The City."

(New Portuguese Letters, p.70)

This is why when the military coup of 25 April 74 bursted out people's power became, to a large extent, women's power. Women were active in claiming fundamental rights for workers, in asking for better living and housing conditions, in shaping action committees at the neighbourhood level, in denouncing the frauds

the capital-owners from Portugal and abroad were ready to make in order "to save" their profits.

Reciprocally, women themselves made of their specific struggle a point the whole society was concerned with - family law changed drastically, different forms of child-care centers and old-age day-homes were created to alleviate women's tasks, motherhood was assumed to have a social function and thus to be part of the responsibility of the whole community, measures to reach equal work were taken in all fields.

For almost two years, women and men were side by side in the struggle of the many fronts in which a more just society had to be shaped. We can say that in Portugal women's struggle has been part and parcel of the whole process of changing society. It organized itself, changed modes, patterns, scope, intensity, according to the events and moods of the revolution.

What this experience tells us is that there is no theoretical question about priorities - women's struggle and the global process in society are two sides of the same front. For the women's movement to emerge and to make a significant contribution there must be some signs of a breakthrough in society- otherwise women's movement seems to stand for some kind of odd side-line goals, and its ideas are easily taken up and mollified by the establishment.

Likewise, for the political process to go beyond the mere game of the superstructures, the women's movement is necessary as a link to the reality, to the new needs of ^{the} society in the process of creating itself.

If the women's struggle found in the revolution its reinforcement it is equally true that it found also in it its limitations. The limitation is clear in the fact the women's issues were taken by the right as dangerous, evil political stands. Therefore they could never be discusses on their own. The limitation shows up too in the fact that the general enthousiasm of the revolution covered up the deep layers of subtle forms of discrimination against women. As time went by and society entered the post-revolutionary period, women discovered that, beyond the structural and legal changes, there are attitudes, concepts, values which are not so easily wiped out. Old attitudes are coming up and shaping behaviour at all levels.

The greatest limitation is clearly seen in the question that is alive today in the women's movement: when ^{the} political evolution comes to dead lock, when the so-called democratic institutions get stifled if not corrupt and against the interests of the people, is women's struggle possible? Doesn't it become an isolated effort recreating the pattern of earlier feminisms? Or does it carry in itself such a potential that, together with other social forces, it may evoke a new turn in the social and political picture?

2. Sex and politics

When I was thinking about this article, I met separately with several groups of adult women and young women in their late teens. I put before them the question: "what is the worst obstacle for women?" Adult women gave a unanimous answer: the scheme of violence built around sexual life. Young women felt, on the contrary, that they have no specific obstacle!

How to put together these two contradictory reactions? What do they mean?

It is a fact that the period since April 74 brought with it all kinds of freedom. The permissiveness of society is total in the sexual field. But today adult women are challenging the values underlying that permissiveness. They are convinced that this is creating in the younger generations the conviction that the end of the all taboos can be equated with full dignity for women, while their experience, as adult women, shows, that the old forms of sexual repression and abuse took hold of their lives, as soon as the revolution has ceased to polarize the energies of the masses. Women say that they are seen and dealt with primarily as objects of the sexual life of men, that violence is exercised upon them, that they are asked to live and to behave according to men's modes and desires. They say that even when there is full equality between man and woman, the demands of sex according to the man's rule put them as slaves - a feeling that cuts across social classes as well as distinction between urban and rural women. Portuguese women

consider that what is at stake is the introjection of a model imposed on women under the umbrella of "sexual liberation". They say that such a model is shaped by the competitive style of society, is charged with individualistic overtones where the satisfaction of the "ego" is used to make the whole machinery of society to run smoothly. (If you are too busy with yourself, you never get deeply and actively concerned with society around you - you relativize it, you see it in a mist, you imagine that you can "save" yourself alone, you become alienated through the very instrument that should help you to be free...)

For them such widespread slogans like "women are owners of their own bodies" are an ambiguous cry of freedom as they convey the concept of a society geared by "ownership of property" as supreme value and sign of status.

From their experience Portuguese women resent very strongly the path of sexual liberation which has been prevailing. It is a path where they feel the oppression by the masculine mode of living out sexuality as well as the oppression by a set of values coming from alien and dominant cultures. As they want to reinforce the cultural identity of the people to which they belong, they cannot accept now a path of sexual liberation through which foreign domination is imposed upon life-styles and choices.

What are women asking, then? First of all, in a sudden transition like the one which took place in Portugal they plead for crystal-clear lucidity when sexual questions are analysed. For them sex

and revolution have to be seen together in the sense that the most personal experience is interwoven with the values, aspirations and failures of the collective experience. In Portugal, sex has become for many the ultimate revolution, the other side of politics, in a strange mixture of "peace-after-the-battle" and of "search-of-a-beyond-all-battles". Most of all, sex has become the last bastion of the powerless revolutionaries as well as the victory shout of the professional politicians. For the former, sex is what can be done when nothing else can. For the latter, sex is the exaltation, the paroxysm of politics. In such a situation women are not only victims and objects but are trapped also as subjects, taken up in the same tide and repeating what men have always done.

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Secondly, they are claiming for a broader understanding of sexuality. They are very much aware of the sexual overtones of all human activity. They don't deny sexuality but are convinced that their own sexuality didn't have any chance to be expressed so far. They claim for the possibility to express a whole gamut of feelings, sensations, affectivity, tenderness which are part and parcel of their own sexuality. Even when they are called as "fusional" because in them "to think of a flower is to see it and to smell its perfume", they persist in exploring this path. They are convinced that a less cartesian and rationalistic approach to societal questions goes together with rediscovery of a much broader expression of sexuality. For them, sexuality equated with genitality and integrated

in the consumerism of the producer-owner-buyer is to be fought against as the fatal cycle of the society led by the paradigm of progress and by the linear form of reasoning. For them, the shaping of a new society is interwoven with the living out and the articulation of a new mode of expression women's sexuality.

This awareness and experience is the greatest strength women possess already in Portugal. They know that they are-and can become even more-a real force in Portuguese society. That the concrete evolution of women in this country has a lot to do with women elsewhere. I deeply believe that women can be operative in changing society. I feel that what we have to say to each other is the encouragement to be true to ourselves: "Now that we are equal let us dare to be different !".

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Helder Pinto Silgo". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a horizontal line.