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In the quest for *equality of condition*: women's situation in Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal¹

By Eunice Macedo & Sofia Almeida Santos²

Abstract:

This article discusses the concept of *equality of condition* as a possibility of citizenship for women in diverse fields of social life: house work, labour market and social benefits, in particular. Women talks were gathered through Focus Group Discussion with a group of higher education students, in an Erasmus Intensive Programme, which involved Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal. These countries are seen in their roles as European member states with diverse positions in the European Union. We start by describing shortly the European and national legal settings for women's citizenship, and we theorize the ways Europe relates to their citizens. Going *beyond presence*, we analyse women's possibilities to *get in* and to succeed in the labour market, as well as we examine the allocations attributed to women in the domestic sphere of *care* and house work, as well as the attribution of social benefits by the states. Hence, we also explore the positive or negative impact on equality of condition of the diverse dimensions that intertwine in their lives.

Key words: equality of condition as opportunity, labour market, housework, women in Belgium, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal.

Introduction

The possibilities of equality of condition for women's citizenship in what concerns the labour market, the distribution of housework and the ways women themselves analyse this problem, are the questions underlying this article, which is based on women's talk. It focuses on recognising women's role as citizenship construction actors that are able to express, discuss and contribute to change of the social order they live in.

In order to achieve this we start by theorizing the need for a political agenda that envisages equality of condition as a right and an opportunity for women, in terms of recognition, respect and participation in the social world (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004). Secondly, we dedicate some space to share women's perspectives about the gender division of work in the family and in labour market.

In what concerns the political and social context concerning gender, it is interesting to note that in the last 30 to 35 years, gender equality in citizenship has become a concern in the European Union (EU) as well as in member states. This has given room to great diversity of policies aimed at overcoming inequalities in the organisation of labour, in politics, in family and intimacy, and so forth. Though, nowadays, citizenship gender inequalities still prevail and are

¹ This paper builds on discussion with a group of higher education young women from Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal, during an Erasmus Intensive Programme: "WASPOLSS – Tracking New European Ways in Social Policy, Legal and Social Services", at Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, in April 2008.

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socially recognized as problematic. They do assume specific and diverse nuances within various European contexts and affect women and men positioning in the labour market and other fields of everyday life. These phenomena of inequality, which frequently are naturalized, put at risk women's attainment of citizenship and limit the experience of democracy by a "people of men and women" (Amaral, 2004: 17).

Currently, gender equality is considered as one of the pillars of the EU, where the promotion of equality between men and women is seen as crucial (ibid). Gender specific policy has been based on the principle of equal opportunities in the labour market, focusing equal pay for equal work, equal treatment in employment and working conditions, and equal treatment in social security (Meier & Lombardo, 2008; Ramalho, 2004). The set of prerequisites in the Communitarian Right and the *acquis of soft law*, that constitute the communitarian right for equality still constitute a great advancement (Amaral, 2004).

Nonetheless, the concept of equal opportunities falls short of assuring women with *equality of outcome* (Meier & Lombardo, 2008), and even shorter in assuring *equality of condition* (Baker et al, 2004), as we will explore. It is within the first concern that the Amsterdam Treaty (art. 141. 4) establishes equality of outcome as a goal, allowing "member states to introduce positive actions as a compensatory or preventive measure, thus recognising the discrimination women face as a collective and the need for a strategy of reversal" (Meier & Lombardo, 2008: 482). In its turn, article 3.2, which focus gender mainstreaming, brings to light a larger concept of gender equality that implies the elimination of any kind of inequality (ibid.).

One may say that the focus on equality of outcome opened the room for political strategies, such as positive action measures and gender mainstreaming. This comes together with scholarly and political discussion around recognition, which arouse with the drive of diverse social movements, feminist in particular, ecologic, ethnic, sexual orientation, and others. So, the 'new' social policies arise in the context of difference, diversity and wide fragmentation, in articulation with the claim for cultural rights (Macedo & Fonseca, 2009). Though, as many feminists have unveiled, we need to keep in mind that, in the very recent past, women were frequently excluded from citizenship. Importantly, the so-called universalistic citizenship and its inherent rights were, effectively, attributed to the working males and *de facto* excluded women. Rights, such as earning property, unemployment allowance, and voting are examples of this.

This is to say that women and men formal equal legal status needs to come together with the "elimination of barriers to a full participation in social life and of biases to an equal valorisation" (Meier & Lombardo, 2008: 482). Hence, even though progress has been made in legal terms, there is still a lot to be done to ensure that the juridical protection of women has a positive correlation to the effective social and economic conditions many women live in (Amaral, 2004). This means that the formulation of citizenship on the basis of equality may open room for the achievement of a gender equal citizenship in the European Union, if only other social, political measures supported in a larger view of citizenship are taken into account. In the next section, we theorize some of the ways Europe and European states deal with citizenship and citizenry.

Europe, states and citizenship

Institutionalist theories of Europeanization provide an understanding of the interaction of European and national forces in the political edifice. Traditional approaches have described Europeanization as the construction, diffusion and institutionalizing of political paradigms,

embodied in rules, procedures and so forth, which lead to the building of beliefs and norms, styles and ways of acting. These are consolidated in the construction of public politics in the European Union and later on incorporated in the logics of speech, identities, political structures and public politics of the member states (Radaelli, 2003). In their turn, the new institutionalists theorize Europeanization as a complex process that takes place at several interconnected levels and that is mediated by national institutions. It concurrently recognizes both the European Union and the member states and its institutions, whose relative power and interests are negotiated (Cowles & Risse, 2001; Barroso, 2006).

Hence, the relationship between the states and their citizens does occur within a widely theorized framework of economic, political and cultural globalized conjuncture that establishes the scenery for a European citizenship, where quite conservative ideologies are at stake. This may be seen as a hegemonic market led process of ‘*Westernization*’ or ‘*Americanisation*’ that stands for the dissemination as universal of a middle class, white, cultured, male culture, which subordinates the European diversity to a Western/American culture (Santos, 2001). While this dissemination interacts and changes the nature and roles of the states it also transforms the nature and role of citizenship and of who is considered to be a citizen (Macedo, 2009). States have assumed different shapes and roles: from welfare protective states to contractual and performative states, that mediate and regulate the excesses of the market, or act as one competitive partner (Yeatman, 1993), to states that perform as one actor - among others - taking part in a system of multiple scales of governance, influence, and regulation (Barroso, 2006; Gordon & Stack, 2007). In any of these roles, the states weren’t and aren’t uniform ideological apparatus but do constitute conjunctions of interests and perspectives, which sometimes conflict. European Union – as a conjunction of states -, and each member state constitute complex settings where diverse powers interact, conflict and are negotiated.

Non-uniformity and non neutrality are also at stake when it comes to gender. Europe and member states are spaces of discursive and practical struggle within which gender policies assume a crucial role. Gender relations and the differential of power associated to it are produced and reproduced within the state and the EU: bonds and boundaries between the public and private spheres are redefined and renegotiated and some type of mediation is enacted in between the market, families, education and other institutions. It is in this role that the states, under European regulation, concurrently, try to promote gender equal opportunities while they may contribute to building women as dependent, victims or unproductive (Blackmore, 1999), whereas admitting, in some cases, women construction of moderate paths of autonomy. In the next section, we question equal opportunity and the ways it interferes with gendered positions in the labour market and the family.

Beyond presence: What “equal opportunity”?

Going beyond a “politics of presence” (Phillips: 2001), which claims for women occupation of the public space, we locate a view of citizenship that pays attention and builds on the current debate on equality of opportunity, as still centred in the labour market. As illustrated above, the nature and substance of equal opportunity has been object of contestation and questioning. For instance, Anne Phillips (2004) admits that “if a society is *seriously* committed to equalising opportunities, it will have to incorporate at least some elements of outcome equality”. Also, Phillips (2006) emphasises the value of “equal opportunity” for political theorists as it recognises that different people care for different things. As she puts it, “societies

cannot equalise simply by handing out identical parcels of goods or activities”; a concern that has been present in European and national gender policies.

Phillips also helps theorize people as “responsible agents, accountable at least to some extent for the choices they make and the things that they do” (Phillips, 2006: 1). Thus, as she sees it “we may have to choose between an unsatisfactory minimum that fails to deliver even what is now conventionally regarded as equality of opportunity, or an approach that more decisively breaks with the opportunity paradigm” (Phillips, 2006: 22).

In turn, Baker, Lynch, Cantilon and Walsh (2004) argue that the distinction between the liberal idea of equality of opportunity and the idea of ‘equality of outcome’ can be misleading and they propose “equality of condition” a concept centred on the possibility to choose the own pathways, “among alternatives of similar worth” (2004: 33), which opens room to women autonomy in the definition of their lives (Araújo & Fonseca, 2007). *Baker et al.* make resource to this idea in the attempt to transcend the liberal idea of equal opportunity, which is focused in the right to compete and that is centred in even-handedness struggle for advantage. Their broader proposal of “equality of condition”, aimed at “enabling and empowering people to exercise what might be called real choices among real options” (ibid: 34), reveals of particular interest to our analysis. As referred by the authors and we summarize, equality of condition³ includes a set of interconnected dimensions, which we intertwine with women’s diverse spaces for citizenship enactment.

1. Respect and recognition – addressing the opportunity to “live one’s life without the burden of contempt and enmity from the dominant culture”;
2. Resources – referring the opportunity to have “a range of resource-dependent options that is of roughly the same value as those of others”, in order to put in perspective financial, cultural social and educational redistributive policies;
3. Love, care and solidarity – envisaging the opportunity of access to “ample scope for forming valuable human attachments”;
4. Power – tackling people opportunity “to influence the decisions that affect their lives”;
5. Working and learning –focusing the opportunity for a “real choice among occupations that they find satisfying or fulfilling” (Baker et al, 2004).

These dimensions can be matched up with “recognition, redistribution, power and care” as theorized by Lynch & Lodge (2002), and rearticulated by Fonseca (2006) in her work about the voices of young women. As referred above, it is important to emphasise that redistribution policies – aimed at the redistribution of goods – that allow the access to services, education and social security are not enough, on its own, to promote equality of condition in citizenship. That is why feminist claims for the “recognition and participation” (Fraser, 1997) of female and male citizens gains particular meaning.

Therefore, this article locates citizenship in terms of equality of condition as an opportunity; a mode of gender equality, which includes equality of outcome, and recognition; informed choice and autonomy in the decision-making process (Phillips, 2006). This implies women access and possibility of success in all fields of social life, aimed at genuine interdependence, as a primordial prerequisite of autonomy and substantive citizenship (Lister,

³ In her Master’s dissertation, Sofia Almeida Santos (2009), also theorizes equality of condition as the conceptual framework for education, social and cultural implementation with ethnic, social and cultural communities.

1999). It seems that the opportunity for equality of condition could be shaped within the labour market and the social security system as well as in other fields of human lives. Though, equal opportunity, as it is, may constraint the legal framework of gender equality and, therefore, may limit women's citizenship.

In order to understand women current situation and opportunities of citizenship in terms of equality of condition, in the next section, we move to analyse women views about women participation in housework, in the labour market and the policies that have been produced

Women allocations in Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal: women have a say⁴

Data was collected through Focus Group Discussion with women from Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Women shared their knowledge and experiences, building new and richer views about their own realities and the realities of others. Therefore, group discussions promoted awareness (Macedo, 2009) and allowed the construction of transnational "knowledge". This method is supported on a feminist methodological-epistemological tradition that assumes 'voice' as a citizenship legitimating tool, which helps to overcome women oppression; an oppression embodied in the silencing of their voices, their knowledge(s), experiences, history and ways to understand the world (Arnot, 2006).

Women identified countries' similitude(s) and difference(s), taking into account their histories and current positioning within Europe, their modes of development and productive capacity. Belgium and the Netherlands, as central countries, have highly advanced technologies and have the capacity to produce complex goods; they occupy preponderant hegemonic positions in what concerns market relations and political and cultural power. In their turn, Lithuania and Portugal are (semi)peripheral countries, a designation that refers to their localization in terms of power by reference to other countries in the "world capitalist system" (Wallerstein, 1990). They have an intermediate level of development, and go through particular exogenous and endogenous tensions (Braidotti, 1998) and they are highly permeable to the globalization phenomenon (Santos, 2001), currently shaped by the worldwide economic crisis.

Significant differences in the development of the countries' civilization, the accumulation of capital and the uneven distribution of work and opportunities were also recognized. This socio-political setting, necessarily, affects women experience of the labour market, as we move to explore.

Much has been, and needs to be, said about the interplay of worldwide economies in the changes that occur in the labour market, the ideological-political approaches to work as a tool for women individual and collective emancipation, and the structural amends which need to be introduced in the relation of the states with citizens, women in particular, to promote democratic change.

This point builds on women's emancipatory talk about women's situation in the labour market and in private life, matched up with official statistical data. According to the theoretical-methodological view that supports women voice in this research, we make the assertion that all matters are women matters. This means that the improvement of existing democracies needs and depends on the participation of all citizens, women and men, and on their engagement and participation in all matters affecting everybody's lives.

⁴ Our thanks to Mariska Deckers, Plantijnhogeschool; Sheila de Wit, Inholland University; and Raimonda Ažubalytė, Mykolas Romeris University, who provided very pertinent data for discussion.

Countries' recent histories, current positions in Europe, laws and practices were subject to discussion. This allowed the group to build a wide reaching awareness about countries similarities and differences, challenges and opportunities for change. Interestingly, historical resemblances were found in between Belgium and the Netherlands, on the one side, and Lithuania and Portugal, on the other. On the one hand, Belgium and the Netherlands were at the origins of the European Economic Community (EEC), in 1957, and participated in the construction of its political assumptions and terms of action; they also had a long lasting opportunity to solidify their position as member states. Both Portugal and Lithuania underwent a long period of totalitarian regimes, fascist in the first case and so-called socialist in the second.⁵

These countries became members of the EU at different times: Portugal, in 1985, and Lithuania, in 2004; both in quite fragile positions and making significant effort to comply with the community.

Together with the view of gender inequalities as a social problem--which led to the production of gender equality policies within a European framework--as we referred, real changes in peoples' lives need to be fostered in the four countries. Data showed that gender equality concerns have been present in the four countries at different times. In the Netherlands since 1986, for example, women and men have been entitled to similar social security benefits, such as the same retirement pensions (Cattrysse, 2004). Belgium also invested in gender equality through legal measures but inequalities still prevail, for instance, in unemployment funds and in retirement pensions, due to women precarious professional pathways, which stand on individual capacity to conciliate part time work and housework. Portugal legislated gender equality of opportunities in work and employment just in 1979 (Decree-Law 392/79, 20th September) after the revolution that installed democracy, but gender division and veiled inequalities still prevail (see CIG, 2007). Even though--and because--gender inequalities still prevail, the Portuguese public politics have kept the compromise to promote gender equality in all national, international and European instances, as expressed in the *IV Plano Nacional para a Igualdade de Género, Cidadania e não Discriminação* (IV National Plan towards Gender Equality, Citizenship and non-Discrimination) (2011-2013) and the *Estratégia para a Igualdade entre Homens e Mulheres* (Strategy towards Equality between Men and Women) (2010-2015). Lithuania, in its turn, legislated equality for all, including women, in 1988 after the Soviet crash, and was considered to be the country with the greatest degree of progress in the field of "sexual" (sic) equality, in 2007 (Saukienė, 2008) in legal terms. Though, 'life' changes need to occur in this country as well.

Beyond the *double burden*: Opportunities for women recognition and respect in family work.

'Double burden' is an expression frequently used in gender studies to describe women's accumulation of paid public work and unpaid private care and house work. Other scholars allege that this cumulative burden overcomes the double task. As they see it, and we subscribe, the

⁵ Portugal went through a very long period of 48 years of dictatorship—a totalitarian and oppressive fascist regime, which lasted up until the Carnation Revolution of the 25th April 1974. The Portuguese revolution is called such due to the total absence of violence even though it was performed by the army with open support from the population. In its turn, Lithuania went through 50 years of Soviet Occupation (1940-1990), a period when it was subjected to an authoritarian, so-called socialist, state capitalist one party regime, which resulted in strong economic and citizenship recession that put at risk people's social rights.

management of the family, and all the relational work and engagement it implies, together with house work, and all the physical and managerial work it implies, largely overcomes the weight of the professional more distanced public work (Oliveira, 2006; 2009). This discussion must shift away from *conciliation* – that deals with the problem on an individual basis - to place it as one of the greatest challenges faced by women, men and democracy.

When it came to discuss gender divisions of the domestic work of care, in Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal, women were evidenced as always present in the spaces of care in all countries. This includes the *responsibility* and the *making of* house work, the work of care for the elderly, the ill, people with disabilities and children. Only in the Netherlands the work of care for the elderly has been largely assumed by the state and private institutions, but this situation is due to change owing to economic recession. In the private sphere, the ill are exclusively cared for by women, except in Belgium where this task is shared with men. Both in Belgium and in Portugal, women are responsible for the elderly, at home, but there are state sheltering institutions, as well as private/paid institutions in Portugal. The work of care for people with disabilities, within the family is also predominantly female. In a promising note, illustrating men growing openness to the emotional world – that shapes the new forms of masculinity--the work of care for the children is the only task described as increasingly shared between women and men in the four countries. Some of the domestic tasks are shared by women and men in all countries but Lithuania. Though, the management of family life, seen as unproductive, in articulation with the productive work still remains on women shoulders. As a result, in positive correlation to women's much larger attribution of responsibilities in the domestic sphere, they spend more time than men in house work, in all countries, as in the Netherlands and in Belgium one can observe the prevalence of a “work culture” that views women part time work as the best opportunity for them to manage the so-called double burden of public and private work, as we develop below. Hence, the use of time also rose as an important matter to be discussed and data was collected. Time management - decisions about how to spend time - is one of the greatest challenges women have to confront and it constitutes a limit to their citizenship (Oliveira, 2006, 2009; Lister, 1999).

One might think that women's greater role within the family might assure them greater opportunity to develop “valuable human attachments”. Though, the nature of their role puts this into question. Studies have proven that the dimension of sociability with children may be diminished by the pressure to discipline and educate, supervise homework and so forth, whereas men take more profit of the playful sociability(ies). The implicitly and explicitly, attribution to women of time and energy consuming home tasks also limits their possibility to “chose among occupations”, jeopardizing another pertinent dimension of *equality of condition*.

Concurrently, in all countries, whereas women are seen as personally responsible for the tasks they are attributed, men participation - when it occurs - is subsidiary to women or to substitute them in their absence. Therefore, female work within the private domestic space also survives in a position of invisibility in terms of social recognition - one of the dimensions inherent to citizenship *equality of condition*.

Social benefits as an opportunity to improve women power and resources

Social benefits attributed to women in the diverse areas that are covered by states' security systems also need and were object of deep analysis. Though, in this article they are lightly approached. Several topics were discussed: health and education; support to single

mothers and to maternity, support to the elderly and people with disabilities; unemployment fund and retirement pensions, National Retirement Programmes and Training and Qualification.

In the quest for *equality of condition* in citizenship, this right to social benefits might constitute a form of social recognition of women almost invisible domestic work, with women empowerment as result.

It became clear that social benefits vary widely in between the central countries and the (semi)peripheral countries. In Belgium and the Netherlands, except for the unemployment fund, described as low-average, social benefits were described by women in the group as *good, quite good or average*. In Lithuania and Portugal they were mainly placed in between average and low, except for maternity leave in Lithuania⁶ and Education in Portugal⁷, which were seen as good. Statistical data confirmed women views about these matters,

Equal Opportunity for women working: access and progression career in the labour market

Women's discussion included women access to employment, career progression and the qualifications required. The women present in the group were aware that women were very lately allowed to participate in the labour market and, most frequently, in the absence of men. As an example, single women entered the labour market, in the 50s, in the Netherlands and Belgium, in Portugal, till the mid 70s, and in Lithuania till the 80s, in socially 'acceptable' jobs, the ones seen as prolonging *mother care* in the family. Currently, women still seem to be positioned as *different and unequal*, even though some positive changes must be recognized.

Discussion of women's access to employment, career progression and the qualifications was focused around what we described as "Top", "Medium" and "Low Profile" jobs. This classification consists of an aggregation into larger 'series' of the specific *Professional Categories* of the *Portuguese National Classification of Professions*⁸, and is inspired in Grácio and Miranda (1977), whose level of detail is adequate for our purposes. In our proposal, each series aggregates professions that imply similar levels of training, wages and social status/recognition, as well as similar levels of decision-making and authority over others. "Top Profile Jobs" include members of boards of directions of firms and institutions, intellectual and

⁶ In Lithuania, women are entitled to 2 years of maternity leave (Law X-1400, 20 December 2007), in the 1st year they receive their total salary, and then it decreases to 85%. The paternity leave lasts for 1 month with a full salary (MSSL, 2010). In the Portuguese Constitution (art.68) only in 1999 (Law 142/99, 31 August) the maternity leave was increased to 120 days. During this period mothers are entitled to receive their total salary. Recently, in 2009, aiming to reinforce equal gender equality in couples, it increased men's paternity leave from 5 to 10 compulsory days and ten non-compulsory days in the first month during the parental subsidy. In the Netherlands, women are entitled to 16 weeks of maternity leave, 6 before and 10 after birth, keeping the same wage, whereas in Belgium they are only entitled to 15 weeks of maternity leave. They receive 82% of their total wage in the first four weeks, and this is reduced to 75% from then on (Missoc, 2006). Paternity leave is extremely limited in these countries, 3 compulsory days for Belgian fathers and 2 days for Dutch fathers, fully paid.

⁷ In Portugal, particularly in the last decade, state investment in free adult training through Centres for Second Opportunities, which recognize, validate and certify workers' qualification and professional improvement (according to Dispatch n. 11, 203/2007) See http://www.cenfim.pt/opportunidades_main_en.htm for detailed information. "CENFIM integrates the network of the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences Centres (CRVCC) accredited by the National Accreditation System of the Directorate General for Vocational Training (DGFV), Ministry of Education."

⁸ *Classificação Nacional de Profissões*, of IEFP (Instituto de Emprego e Formação Profissional - CNP) (National Professional Classification of the Institute for Employment and Professional Training)

scientific professions ... which imply high qualifications, high salaries and high social recognition and authority, and decision-making power; the series “Low Profile” includes housekeepers, rural workers, ‘craftsmen’, construction workers, and professions of the same kind, which imply low qualifications, low salaries, low social recognition, no authority over others (and hardly on one self) and no decision-making power. Finally, the series “Medium Profile” includes the professions in average positions at the diverse dimensions, namely technicians, officers, administrative staff, sellers and so forth.

Women concluded that women’s access to top profile jobs is very limited in the four countries, and more significantly in the central countries it increases as the professional level decreases, in terms of status, responsibilities and wages. These views correlate positively to women high level of unemployment in the four countries, in a context of generalized economic crisis. In 2010, these percentages were extremely high: 8.6% in Belgium, 14.5%, in Lithuania, 4.5% in the Netherlands, and 12.1% in Portugal. This follows the generalized unemployment increasing tendency, going above men’s high taxes in Belgium (8.2%), in The Netherlands (4.4%) and in Portugal (10%), but clearly below in Lithuania where male unemployment has reach the 21.2%. (Eurostat, 2010a).

The discrepancy among central and semi-peripheral countries is also due to the fact that many women in Belgium and the Netherlands work part time, a situation that is socially represented as a social benefit for women but that requests for deeper analysis. In fact, in 2010, 41% Belgium women and 76.5% Dutch women worked part-time, against 8.4% in Lithuania and 13.8% in Portugal (Eurostat, 2010b).

Interestingly, female part time work was perceived as a positive option for women that would help them deal with the *double burden*. This idea was deconstructed within a view of equality of condition. Women reviewed their views to conclude that the apparent benefit of *part time* inhibits women career construction, mitigates their emancipation and free choice, their economic independency and their sense of professional fulfilment. Therefore, it constrains women’s citizenship, and it helps legitimate gender relations of domination-subordination⁹.

As Casaca (2005) puts it, women’s part time work represents a form of sub-employment that emphasizes the logic of gender segregation and that may result in invisible impoverishment. Besides that, part time work does not provide women with resources for their economic independency maintaining women in subordinate positions in the case of nuclear families, where the men full time workers are still seen as the bread winners who, better or worse, assume their role as providers. It is this tension between domination-subordination that leads to our second motive of concern –women’s career progression.

Debate about women’s career progression in the four countries also brought about very interesting data. Women possibility to attain top profile jobs, implying leadership, power and decision-making was seen as very limited in the four countries but career opportunities were seen as diverse. Whereas in Belgium and in Lithuania there is a tendency for better opportunities as the job level decreases; in the Netherlands and in Portugal the possibilities to progress in careers are weak at the top and low levels. They are significantly larger in the Netherlands, when focusing the medium profile jobs. The constraints to access, and succeed, at the top of professional hierarchies constitutes another disconcerting reality.

⁹ In methodological terms, this also shows how group discussion that builds on people voices, their history, experiences and life perspectives, may constitute a form of social awareness as it helps each individual to move beyond her own view of reality to construct an enlarged perspective.

In Lithuania, women are more frequently employed in the public sector whereas men occupy the private sector. Similar situation occurs in Portugal, where women go through the same difficulties not only in terms of horizontal segregation but also in terms of vertical segregation. That means the discrimination of women who develop the same functions as men and the discrimination of women within diverse positions in the hierarchies of power, respectively. As a result, women tend to keep the lowest positions in job rankings and very rarely are given access to the highest positions in job hierarchies. Women are pushed into the margins, to keep the lowest positions in job rankings and hardly ever are given access to the highest positions in job hierarchies. Also in this case, women views are reinforced by statistical data¹⁰.

Wage differences also emerge as an indicator of gender discrimination together with the features referred above. Even though equal pay for equal work has been legislated in the EU, women receive smaller wages than men in the four countries even when they have the same jobs and they have greater qualifications. Eurostat studies (2008a) show that women wages for the same work in the Netherlands are 19.6% lower than men's and in Belgium it corresponds to less 9%. In Portugal, even when women work full time, their wages are 9.2% lower than men's. Currently in spite of the change in the Lithuanian public sector, where there is an attempt to equalize women and men wages, in the private sector men still receive more, though the wage gap still rests on 21.6% (Eurostat, 2008a). This means that another dimension of women *equality of condition* is not being respected in the labour market. Women are not guaranteed access to the same resources and, as a consequence, their positioning shifts them away from a variety of resource-dependent opportunities that are approximate to the ones of men (Baker et al., 2004).

Finally, female and male qualification and its impact in their allocations in the labour market was another matter of concern. Currently, we are faced with women greater access and success at all educational levels, higher education in particular (Araújo, 2006, 2009; Macedo & Costa, 2006), though, this contradicts the dominance of female unemployment and of vertical segregation in the labour market in the four countries. This question was widely discussed in the discussion group as a problem of social (in)justice. As a matter of fact, in the four countries most degree diplomas are attributed to women: 60% in Lithuania, 53% in Portugal, 51.6% in The Netherlands, and 55% in Belgium (Eurostat, 2008b). Though, even with greater qualifications the social order makes them more vulnerable to the risks of unemployment and labour precariousness (Casaca, 2005).

To sum up, statistical and dialogical data seems to show that gender stereotypes still prevail in the four countries that were studied. The discussion of women access, progress and qualifications also brings to light their fragile position when it comes to *equality of condition* in working and learning. The subordination to a prevailing male culture not only diminishes women possibility to voice out their culture(s), as their smaller access to positions of power, resources, and resource related goods, mitigates their possibility to influence decisions and make real occupational choices. The inadequate attribution of social benefits to women also shows women lack of social recognition and respect. Therefore, a long pathway still needs to be stride so that *equality of condition* shifts from a claim to a reality.

¹⁰ For instance, in Portugal, the percentage of women in the Portuguese Parliament is only of 30%, even though the law of Parity in Portugal establishes a female compulsory quota of 33% in the Assembly of the Republic (Silva, 2010). In the European Parliament women represent 31% (European Parliament, 2009). Even though, Law 2/2003, 22 August, defines that "political parties must assure women and men direct, active and balanced participation in the political activity as well as guarantee the non discrimination according to sex (sic)" (CIG, 2007:117)

To conclude

This article analyzes some crucial features inherent to *equality of condition* on the basis of women's discussion about women allocation in the labour market and in the domestic sphere, in four EU member states: Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal. Through qualitative research, we gathered and crisscrossed women voices and subjectivities, as privileged informants. Discursive narratives were triangulated with some statistical data, which mainly reinforced women's words. Dialogical and statistical data illustrates the prevalence of *inequality of condition* in these four countries. Stereotypes, together with social and institutional generalized resistance to change, lead women to develop more traditional pathways and constitute an obstacle to *equality of condition*.

Our analysis shows that positive changes have occurred in the different countries in close connection to their diverse positions in the EU and to their histories. These changes are more prominent in the two central countries (Belgium and the Netherlands), even though certain modes of labour discrimination prevail under the cover of social benefits—this is the case of part time work. In Portugal and Lithuania, as (semi)peripheral countries that are subjected to greater instability, longer pathways need to be treading in search for equality of condition between women and men, even though the social policies promoted in both countries represent a step forward. Hence this route is endangered by the global volatilization of the labour market.

Our data also showed that women's allocation to—and attribution of—responsibility for the private space of care and house work is still socially legitimated. Though, their role as workers and supervisors may be in conflict with a sense of emotional fulfilment. This occurs even though change can be observed in this structure as well as in the diverse constructions of femininity and masculinity that interrelate and carve up the life world.

In what concerns women's access and progression in the labour market, data brings to light that the gendered occupation of work sectors is still shaped by horizontal and vertical segregation even though the frontiers among sectors have diluted. This means, that traditionally so-called female sectors tend to be occupied by great number of men, but some women have also managed to enter the traditional male sectors.

Within this move one can still observe the prevalence of a male *ideology*, figured by ideas of competitiveness and management, which underlie the pillar of efficacy of the 'old' patriarchal states where women are still seen as foreigners. Women have to carve the frequently unfertile soil of paid work and of public recognition. Therefore, there is the risk that women develop strategic relations with the labour market, that shift away from effective possibilities of choice, autonomy and empowerment, and that are lead to the skilful management of the over load of tasks they are attributed.

The EU and national efforts to legislate gender equality should be emphasized, though women's inclusion through social policies as well as through the design and enhancement of institutions directly aimed at women or families seem to take women diverse voices into account as well. If *equality of condition* is to be implemented, the ideas of respect and recognition, access to resources as well as to love, care and solidarity, and the power to influence and make decisions, need to be matched up with the opportunity to work and learn, while choosing among fulfilling and satisfying occupations. Therefore, an effective *equality of condition* will need to be fashioned not only by legislation and the concerns with redistribution that shape a world bent to the requisites of the economy, but by a view of social justice which includes the reorganization of all fields of human life; and the reconfiguration of the state and of the way it deals with its citizens. This implies change in the deepest nature of its culture.

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