

Gender Studies in Portugal
The case of the University of Coimbra¹⁶¹

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Women's Studies in Portuguese Institutions of Higher Education:
A brief Survey from the 1970s to the Present

Gender studies are a relatively recent phenomenon in Portugal. They began in the late 1970s, in the aftermath of the political breakthrough originated by the "Revolução dos Cravos" of 25 April 1974.

The enthusiastic climate of that period facilitated the development of gender studies while encouraging a number of measures (both governmental and nongovernmental) leading to the promotion of equal opportunities between men and women. Prominent among such measures was the creation, in 1977, of the Comissão para a Condição Feminina (presently Comissão para a Igualdade e Direitos das Mulheres - CIDM) (COVA, 1998). This governmental organization, which at the time was part of the Ministry of Employment, contributed significantly to the advancement of women's studies in general, either by sponsoring the publishing of books and the organization of meetings, seminars and conferences, or by supporting several efforts and measures aimed at making equal democracy a viable project.

This process was also fomented by Portugal's joining the European Economic Community in 1986, as well as by Portugal's ratification of a number of international deliberations pertaining to the question of equal opportunities between men and women in terms of education (PINTO, 2000). Such political commitment was accompanied by changes in the social fabric, namely the massive access to higher education on the part of women. This fact was but the strengthening of a tendency that dates back to the 1960s (BARRETO, 1996), which in turn was a major incentive to research on the questions of gender and of equality-related public policies. In Portugal, as opposed to other European countries (ARNESEN, 2000), these studies are not directly linked with feminist groups. The reason lies in the lack of important, socially resonant women's movements, (SANTOS, 1995), which is not to say that many organisations and associations were not created in this area.

Such sporadic initiatives, typical of the 1970s, were followed, in the 1980s, by a certain systematisation of the studies and activities carried out in the area, mainly in the human and social sciences. This was partly the result of a more coordination between universities, top government departments, and national structures for the promotion of equality. The curricula start including some of their themes, and universities see them as more and more important, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As a consequence of this wave of research, new books - especially of an empirical nature - are published on the topic, seminars and meetings are organized, while there is a proliferation of periodicals with special issues devoted to women's studies.

From the wide variety of significant events that occurred in this area of studies, special mention should be made of the organisation, in 1985, of two major interdisciplinary meetings held in Lisbon and Coimbra: one of them was organised by

¹⁶¹¹ I wish to thank Virginia Ferreira, Teresa Tavares, Elísio Estanque and António Casimiro Ferreira, teachers at the University of Coimbra all of them, for their generous sharing of information.

the Institute of Social Sciences under the general title *Women in Portugal*; and the other, organized by the University of Coimbra's Institute of Economic and Social History, was titled *The Woman in Portuguese society: historical survey and present prospects*. But the CIDM was no less active in this respect: it promoted a series of seminars and meetings and released information on women's issues - mainly through the publication of the *Cadernos Comissão Feminina*. It also instituted a prize (the Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos Woman-Research Award) aimed at distinguishing the best scholarly work of the year in this area.

The institutionalization of *Women's Studies* as a specific field of knowledge in the context of higher education came only in the 1990s, albeit with some restrictions. The Open University (Lisbon) had a pioneering role in that process, as it launched the first *Master's degree in Women's Studies*, an interdisciplinary graduate program with an emphasis in history, literature and sociology. To this day the program, which confers the degree of "mestre", has been offered on a regular basis, its recipients being, for the most part, white graduate women in their thirties or older, usually working as high school teachers. As to the reasons for obtaining this degree, they are twofold: career promotion, and the impact on teaching practices, given its potential to serve as a stimulus and a means of awareness for issues hitherto left unnoticed.

No other institutions of higher education provide degrees in this area at present, be it at graduate or post-graduate levels. The reason for this lies in the rigidity of the university system, which is usually not very receptive to curricular changes and new topics for discussion, as well as in the late institutionalization of the social sciences in Portugal. In spite of these limitations, both the teaching and the research in the field of *Women's Studies* have had a visible upsurge in Portuguese universities. These developments have occurred in many forms and shapes: through optional courses, seminars (again, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels), the use of theoretical and thematic approaches of a feminist nature in the teaching of curricula courses, and the setting up of research centers that try to manage their respective budgets as best they can in order to carry on with their publications, organize events, finance research projects, or get subsidies from external sources (NIZZA DA SILVA, 1999).

As a result of these combined efforts, gender research has made a lot of progress over the last decade. This has been especially true in such areas as research on education, social psychology, literature, linguistics and history, where we have witnessed a significant number of projects, joint actions (sometimes in partnership), and published (mostly master's) theses. In the context of higher education, reference should also be made to the emergence of a number of associations for the expansion of *Women's Studies*. These organisations were either of an interdisciplinary or specialized nature (as in the case of the *Portuguese Association for Women's Studies* - APEM - and the *Portuguese Association for Historical Research on Women* - APIHM -, respectively), and were further complemented by the launching of specialised periodicals (as in the case of *Ex æquo*, APEM's annual publication, and of *Rostos de Eva*, with its historic bent). Given the impracticality of enumerating every single initiative that took place nationwide, I will limit myself to offering the general outlines of the research on women and on equality policies recently generated at the University of Coimbra, one of Europe's oldest and most traditional universities.

Gender Studies at the University of Coimbra

In the course of the last twenty years the University of Coimbra underwent significant structural changes, namely with respect to the growing female representation in the faculty and the student body as well as in school management itself. Since the academic year 1987-1988, the number of female students has systematically superseded that of male students, although the former are still the majority in traditionally feminized areas (Letters, Pharmacy, Psychology and Education Studies). As far as teachers are

concerned, female participation amounts to 39.1% (according to 1998-1999 data), even if two thirds of the female teachers are confined to the lower echelons of the university career (VAQUINHAS). As far as leadership positions are concerned, however (the presidencies of the Directive Board, Scientific and Pedagogic Councils, and the Representatives' Assembly), female representation is as low as 20%.¹⁶²

It is in this changing context that gender research and teaching have evolved, alongside a series of initiatives that comprise, aside from the abovementioned Meeting, organized in March 1985 by the History department, the following events: the *3rd European Feminist Research Conference*, titled *Shifting bonds, Shifting bounds: women, mobility, and citizenship in Europe*, held in July 1997 under the auspices of the the Center for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra's School of Economy; and a panel devoted to the theme *Woman's role in Mathematics*, held in May 2000.

As far as teaching is concerned, one can detect the development of a variety of projects and topics in Women's Studies proper, or somehow based on feminist theories and methodologies, especially in the area of the human and social sciences. Special emphasis should be given, however, to the creation, in the academic year 1996-1997, of an optional course offered by the Anglo-American Studies Department of the University of Coimbra under the name *Introduction to Feminist Studies*. With a modular structure, this was a "free" course that was open to all the students attending the University of Coimbra. In terms of the courses offered within the History department, I myself have taught a seminar called *Women in the contemporary World: a comparative History*. In fact, I have been teaching this particular seminar on a regular basis since 1995, in the context of the Master's program in Contemporary Economic and Social History. The theoretical approaches of European and North-American feminist thinking - as well as their impact on the problematization and redefinition of social themes - have been pursued in other areas of knowledge as well. Virginia Ferreira, a sociologist at CES, explores these approaches in the courses she teaches, where she also analyses such themes as gender inequality and the feminisation of the labour market, among others.

Gender issues are usually only broached upon as far as undergraduate and optional courses are concerned, but they tend to receive a stronger emphasis in undergraduate seminars, which is the case of all the curricula anyway. In the health sciences, an ever greater attention is given to the gender factor, particularly in the case of women as unremunerated health care providers.

The research thus produced has led to a considerable amount of publishing, be it in the shape of specialised works or the pages of a growing number of university journals that have devoted particular issues to the problem of gender (e.g. *Confluências*, *Le temps de la femme: l'imaginaire, l'idéologique*, 1995, *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* no. 34, Feb. 1992 and no. 50, Feb. 1998, under the titles *Women, family and social transformation and Women, mobility and citizenship*; etc.).

With reference to research, one should again stress the importance of the Center for Social Studies (CES), where this field of knowledge has met with unfailing support in a programmed, consistent way. At present there are a number of projects the results of which are due to be published in the near future. See, for instance, António Casimiro Ferreira's project, titled "*The sex of labor justice: gender, discrimination and access to the law in Portugal*", which attempts to unveil the face of *discrimination* in labor courts and labor justice. See also the work done by Elísio Estanque, which, although not of an intrinsically feminist nature, has nevertheless dealt with such questions as gender

¹⁶²² These percentages were obtained from data provided by the Dean's Office (Reitoria) of the University of Coimbra. They refer to the academic year 1998-1999 and to the following faculties (schools) in particular: Sports Science and Physical Education; Law; Economy; Medicine; Pharmacy; Letters; Psychology and Education Studies. In other words, the figures quoted here do not apply to the Faculty of Science and Technology.

discrimination in the industry sector or the impact of recent feminization (at the university of Coimbra) upon students' practices and expectations as well as on the job market itself. As part of another project supported by CES, two scholars from outside universities are about to complete a *Terminological dictionary of feminist concepts, theory and criticism*.

To conclude

Research and teaching in the area of Women's Studies at the University of Coimbra have both been mainly the result of individual endeavors. But such efforts ought to assume a more institutionalised and collective character, because this area of knowledge raises new, stimulating questions, while broadening our understanding of the world and of social phenomena.

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