

THE SEARCH FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY



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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and female empowerment are important themes in modern societies, especially for countries such as Brazil, which seek to consolidate a free, just, and united society while championing anti-discrimination among all of its citizens. The project *Flores do Bom Jardim* (*Flowers of Bom Jardim*¹) in this study aimed to empower women through the promotion of capacity building courses in professional areas as well as preparatory courses to enhance access to quality university education, always approaching the theme of conflict mediation transversally as a mechanism for conflict solution. The target group of participants for the Flowers of Bom Jardim project was participants of the *Mulheres da Paz* (*Women of Peace*) project and other residents of the greater Bom Jardim area (1).

The idea to develop this project came from experience obtained through daily contact with women members of the Women for Peace project, conducted by the Universidade de Fortaleza between May 2009 and September 2010, which was intended to train over 300 women living in the Greater Bom Jardim area on Human Rights and Conflict Mediation. This program was denominated by the PRONASCI (National Public Security and Citizenship Program) "Territory of Peace." The women, once trained, indicated youth in conflict with the law in order to orient them so that those young people had the opportunity to change their lives.

The implementation of the project was undertaken in such a way as to stimulate women to pursue knowledge and increase their self-

esteems. The interest (pointed out by the training classes) in obtaining knowledge on the part of women was progressive and, with it, grew the desire to learn and transform their realities. The experience of redefining values regarding youth, security, conflict resolution through dialogue, and especially witnessing a change in the lives of others because of their actions or even words augmented these women's desire to definitively modify their lives. This experience sparked the idea of continuing the work thus far underway by developing a new project to be called Flowers of Bom Jardim so that the women could continue with a positive outlook, empowering themselves and others, and enabling improvement in areas of study or professional training. The term "flowers" refers to the women and "Garden City" is the appropriate translation for the name of the neighborhood they inhabit. In the present study, names of flowers will be ascribed to the testimonials of the women participants of the project, thereby preserving all identities.

The results obtained from the Women of Peace and Flowers of Bom Jardim projects substantiate that initiatives like these empower women, diminish gender inequality, and strongly improve the lives of participants.

1.1 The search for gender equality – considerations regarding the condition of women

The lived condition of women throughout the history of the world (2, 3) has been strongly marked by characterized as inferior to men. In many countries, women have historically received,

her way of reacting to what is ascribed to him or her (8).

The dynamics of these four elements forms roles in society, individual and generalized beliefs, values, and, in particular, power relations. When a child is born, for example, its sex determines (as a sort of destiny) what that person's future role in society and treatment will be. Such determinism is most evident in cultures such as Iraqi, Afghan, Somali, for instance; nevertheless, this determinism also exists in Western culture.

Despite the changes that have already transpired, many instances of discrimination remain. Current research undertaken in Brazil, for example (9), demonstrates that women have less financial conditions than men, receive lower wages even for the same positions, enjoy less education, and face more precarious health outcomes.

This situation evidences that, despite the many struggles for equality among genders, women still occupy a position of inferiority compared to men in many cases, given their economic, social and political statuses.

It can be said that, in certain respects, women in Brazil are still treated and perceived (and, sometimes, treat and view themselves) in the same ways as the past. This fact helps explain why domestic violence (10) and the trafficking of women (11) remain serious problems in Brazil. One national public opinion survey conducted in 2009 via telephone by the Research Institute of the Senate (Data Senado – Secretaria de Pesquisa e Opinião Pública do Senado Federal) on domestic violence revealed that among 827 women, 515 did not press charges against their aggressors using the law (n. 11,340) that would not allow them to withdraw their complaint; 60% of the women interviewed stated that they believe violence against women has increased; and 19% of all Brazilian women suffer from domestic violence at some point (12). Surveys by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime state that the number of trafficked persons in the world is 140,000 per year and, of those, 84% are women trafficked for sexual exploitation (13). In the words of Hahner (1978, p. 112), women "still bear marks on their wrists from the shackles; they do not yet occupy the place to which they are entitled as powerful agents of social progress."

Even if one considers the changes in recent years, which show Brazilian women in prominent, even national, positions, such cases of success are hardly commonplace. Given the quantity of high-

power places that women currently occupy (14, 15, 16) these exceptions represent a very small portion of the female population and demonstrate that Brazilian woman still suffers from many hardships, such as the feminization of poverty (17).

Simone de Beauvoir, one of the pioneers of feminism and the study of women, sensed the fear of macho men and women of her time (living from 1908 to 1986). She delved into the notion that being born female is not enough to make someone a woman.

Women are considered "the Other" and Simone de Beauvoir affirms that the Other does not define the One. Indeed, the Other is relegated to his or her position by the One. The Other does not transform into the One, however, because he or she subjects him/herself to the One's point of view. De Beauvoir warns women who, in some cases, can become complicit in their own submission (de Beauvoir, 1980). Thus, the representations of women historically have not sporadically placed in a secondary or subordinate position.

2. THE CREATION OF THE FLOWER PROJECT OF BOM JARDIM FROM THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE WOMEN OF PEACE

Women of Peace (18) created an opportunity to appreciate the reality of local women not only through statistical and scientific articles and books, but also from life stories as told by the women themselves. From contact through training classes and daily technical monitoring, participants identified, in many cases, suffering in the lives of women who evidenced various types of violence arising from gender inequality, thereby confirming the statistics that official agencies so often express.

During the discussions in class about gender inequality and violence, the active participation of these women was always requested. As the discussion was very rich, the varying stories that emerged during classes were, for these women, written for the first time. Via the theme "I have suffered for being a woman" a space to express the suffering that almost in its entirety was linked to the position of inferiority in relation to man emerged. The participants said:

I have suffered for being a woman, because I only served my boss to satisfy his sexual whims. I talked to him again and he sent me to have an abortion because she wanted to keep the good name of his family and his social reputation.

After I terminated the pregnancy he fired me from the firm, not wanting to risk any further problems (Azucena, Woman of Peace).

I suffered for being a woman because I gave birth to my son very early and despite having husband with me, I raised my son alone, since, for my husband, the obligation to educate, to teach how to dress, to feed, to bathe, etc. are all the tasks of a woman. The task of men is just meeting basic needs. When he gets home from work he expects everything to be ready and a loving wife ready waiting for him (Belladonna, Woman of Peace).

I fought with all my strength. But it was an unequal struggle. A man about 45 years old, strong, against a girl of 8 years old, bony and helpless. For a long time in my life, the last time I ever smiled was before going into that damned house (...). Today I am grateful because I have the opportunity to help people who suffer or have suffered these and other types of aggression. They are young adult girls. Today I cannot show them my wounds, but my scars, which prove that it is never too late to recover, it is never too late to dream, and it is never too late to be happy (Camellia, Woman of Peace).

It was disheartening to know that *real* women – apparently fragile or even not – hid their suffering and the violence that, for many, belongs only in fiction. Sadder still was the knowledge that a considerable number of these women, even before entering the Women of Peace project, had comprehended that the trying circumstances to which they were doomed were a single contingency of life because they were born female.

When I suffered sexual abuse at the hands of my stepfather and told my mother, she did not believe me at first. Then she said that I, as a woman, had to endure the stride (Chrysanthemum, Woman of Peace).

Thus began the development of increasingly participatory activities, in order to start consolidation and realization of a concept that is fundamental to understand the proper development of the project – female empowerment.

2.1 The process of equality and empowerment in *Women of Peace* – some steps

“Empoderamento” or empowerment is a word derived from English, listed in the Oxford Dictionary as a noun of the verb *to empower*: 1. To authorize, license. 2. To grant power to

(allow, enable). However, these words do not fully explain the notion of empowerment which professional study in the humanities and social sciences confers to the term since, in this case, empowerment means to advance, conquer and overcome through active participation in the process itself. One of the first (if not the very first) scholars to address this concept in Brazil was Paulo Freire (19).

Overcoming gender inequalities is presented as one of the first steps in the march toward women’s empowerment. However, equal rights, i.e., legal equality (which extends to the 1st Convention on The Rights of Women in 1848) was, for several years, the core of the feminist movement yet it failed to become fully effective in Brazil, even with the express constitutional provision “men and women have equal rights and obligations under this Constitution” (Article 5, I CF/88), and specific laws.

The daily practice of respecting this right/fundamental guarantee of equality and non-discrimination requires a change in both male and female behavior. The feminine attitude as well, protagonizing this change, is decisive for the progress and consolidation of the role of women as individuals with rights who can enjoy social transformations.

Feminine empowerment, through appreciation and female capacity building, is necessary to advance the position of women, integrating them into existing power structures in society.

According to Nelly Stromquist (20), there are five stages of empowerment: 1) building a positive self-image and confidence; 2) developing the ability to think critically; 3) the construction of group cohesion; 4) the promotion of decision-making; and 5) action.

The phases of empowerment have been implemented and the results were clearly visible over the duration of the Women of Peace project. The continuous improvement of the relationship between the multidisciplinary team and the women, and among the women themselves catalyzed construction of a positive self-images and confidence.

After I completed this course, I felt stronger, had assurance in my voice, in the words. I can already solve problems with other people successfully (Iris, Woman of Peace).

I spent most of my childhood being abused... If it were today, as I know about human rights,

things would certainly be different (Orchid - Women's Peace).

Developing critical thinking skills was a skill that was honed and mentioned in each meeting and in-class training (21).

Through this course, I have changed my ways and I believe in myself. I believe I can make a difference.... I cannot sit still, insensitive and indifferent, cannot fail. I learned to believe. (Camellia - Woman of Peace).

The daily activities contributed to the development of group cohesion building. It behooves all to consider the attitudes of women at the beginning of the project: in the first weeks of training, some women, for example, manifested anxiety that the class would not finish early enough for them to pick up their children at school or in time to complete the household chores.

With the continuous contact with staff, the women had the perception that they were learning and discussing issues never before raised and worked "to find" time. Not infrequently, the teachers received requests to go beyond the scheduled time, since the thirst for knowledge grew every day.

The reframing of experiences was an important point for both the construction of a positive self-image and confidence as to promote decision-making. The suffering throughout their lives, for example, had become understood as "something about which we could not speak." This was because the women used at least two perspectives to understand their positions: "contingencies of life of women" and thus "silent acceptance" was essential or, should the women recognize the situations as unjust, they – due to inertia – reacted with shame.

During the course, the women began a process of speech communication and exchange of experiences that allowed them to expose these situations. The moments of violence faced by each woman were discussed, debated and evaluated. Once spoken, a process of reframing those experiences commenced. The women, victims of violence, became protagonists of a new story: the prevention of violence against women or any of their colleagues. Because they had experienced their own tragedies, the participants started to feel that they must prevent other women from bearing similar situations.

This process has enabled many women to overcome their previous negative feelings, which thus caused changes in their attitudes. These

flowers began to be proud to present and discuss this achievement and the desire to help women and teens who go through the same situations (domestic violence, sexual violence, submission to employers for fear of losing their jobs, etc.).

What was once unspeakable now "spoke for itself," and so the women impeded the same things happening to their classmates and other acquaintances.

Once I overcame all the abuse and suffering, I went through, today I have the opportunity to help women who suffer or have suffered these and other types of aggression (Camellia, Woman of Peace).

The prospect of action, the fifth dimension of empowerment, is clearly visible. The enhancement of the shares of women in the construction of "self-empowerment" and *action* permitted a strong shift in attitudes. It is noteworthy that, at the beginning of the course, the researchers found that women had no aspirations based on the testimonies the participants provided; they claimed that dreams were useless and superfluous, given the supposed impossibility of accomplishing them.

There was a time in my life when I stopped dreaming. It was a low time. But this time in now far behind (Camellia, Woman of Peace).

With the knowledge gained (about various topics, such as Women's Rights, Human Rights, Leadership, Labor and Family), as well as training in Conflict Mediation, the Women of Peace nurtured a sense of empowerment, believing that dreams are indeed possible when the dreamer consolidates the ability to think critically and act.

I learned that not everything needs to go to the courts. Some things can be in agreements between the parties where no one loses. Both gain (Hydrangea, Woman of Peace).

Conflict Mediation was very important because now I have a notion of how to deal with conflict and reduce violence (Dahlia, Woman of Peace).

Many of the participants have gone on to cultivate those aspirations: dreams to attend college or to find their niches in the labor market. They were once financially dependent on their husbands but longing for better living conditions out from under the masculine financial autonomy.

It was found, therefore, that as the women acquired more knowledge they adhered more closely to all standards of empowerment, including: well-being, access to resources, awareness, participation, and control. After

of the woman, brings out a new meaning of power and gender equality. The Flowers of Bom Jardim has the ability to be a tool for aiding the construction of this new concept for women living in a neighborhood mired by exclusion and violence. Project activities result in the creation of mechanisms and actions for equal partnerships between men and women, reducing the feeling of gender inequality, assuming a democratic bias in the current system of rights, since women can develop vocational technical skills, entering job markets and leadership positions in their communities.

3. CONCLUSION

The empowerment of these women has given them an understanding of their subordinated conditions bringing about the necessity to make new choices, even if the options for those choices run counter to the deep-rooted expectations of a predominately *machista* society.

The experience taken from living with women accounted for impressive progress. Teachers not only taught and passed on knowledge to women, but they also learned many lessons from the rich

experiences of those women on a myriad of topics. In addition, if questioned about who in fact were the teachers, it was the Women of Peace who assumed the role of the true master in each team in which they participated.

The Flower Project of Bom Jardim, more than promoted knowledge through technical courses and learning; the endeavor aimed to enhance progress in the lives of women who might, by entering the labor market in a qualified manner, cease to submit or be subordinate in relation to men and, thereby, effectively exercise their roles of citizens as free and independent people.

After the execution of the Flower Project of Bom Jardim, we continued the exchange of knowledge and experiences among women, which uplifted the women to competitive levels in the job market as well as provided them the opportunity to grow even more.

The work done from the project transformed the *Jardim*, Garden City. The program opened possibilities for women (the flowers), which bloomed into a new lives, full of expectations, hopes and dreams... worthy and realistic dreams.

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NOTES

1. Bom Jardim is a neighborhood in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil. The neighborhood is governed by the Executive Secretary of Regional V (SER V) who also administrates 12 nearby neighborhoods which encompass some 570,000 inhabitants, of which some 180,000 reside in Greater Bom Jardim. This area is situated in the periphery of Fortaleza in terms of location and classification. It is composed of Granja Lisboa, Granja Portugal, Canindezinho, Siqueira and Bom Jardim, as well as tens of other sub-communities. Bom Jardim possesses alarmingly elevated rates of crime and insecurity. The Greater Bom Jardim area is a neighborhood that is sensitive, vulnerable, and prone to conflicts and uprisings, which all occur in proportion to its population density and geographic expansion. For these reasons, Bom Jardim was considered for the development of the Women of Peace project.
2. For subjects relating to the inferior conditions imposed upon women, see: SAFFIOTI, Heleieth. *Gênero, Patriarcado, Violência*. OLIVEIRA, Rosiska Darcy de. *Elogio da Diferença*. QUEIROZ, Fernanda Marques de. *Não se rima amor e dor: cenas cotidianas de violência contra a mulher*. STEVENS, Cristina (Org.). *Maternidade e Feminismo – Diálogos Interdisciplinares*. RAGO, Margareth. *Do Cabaré ao Lar*. RAGO, Margareth. *Os Prazeres da Noite – Prostituição e Códigos da Sexualidade Feminina em São Paulo (1890-1930)*.
3. National Research by Domicile Sample (PNAD), in 2008 the economist André Urani, co-founder of the Instituto de Estudos do Trabalho e Sociedade (IETS), developed a comparative analysis about the evolution of life conditions between 1993 and 2008 in the ten principle metropolitan regions of the country, reaching the conclusion that poverty among women is much more evident. <http://blog.controversia.com.br/2010/01/30/a-extrema-pobreza-feminina/> Accessed on: 6 March 2011.
4. The dialogue between Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf in 1920 gave rise to writings entitled “The Intellectual Status of Women.” In this work, Bennett exclaims: “Can anyone cite the name of a woman recognized worth in the field of philosophy, or the name of a woman who has made any scientific discovery of worth, or reached any generally important theory? Even though it may be true that some small percentage of women are as intelligent as men, the intellect is a masculine speciality.” Still, regarding gender inequality and the lack of liberty for women, read *Direito das Mulheres e Injustiça dos Homens* by Nísia Floresta (written in a time when a vast majority of women lived enshrouded in preconceptions – 1832). Read as well: Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the rights of woman*. London, 1919; the collection of articles *Desigualdade de Gênero no Brasil: Novas Ideias e Práticas Antigas*, 2010; *Igualdade de Gênero e Raça no Trabalho: Avanços e desafios* from the International Work Organization; the article “They took me and they told me nothing – Female genital mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan” from Human Rights Watch, 2010.
5. On the “preference” for male sons see: Forna, Aminatta. *Mãe de todos os mitos: como a sociedade modela e reprime as mães*; Dalla, Eduardo. *Negligência Familiar, o que eu aprendo eu ensino* <http://www.webartigos.com/articles/43213/1/Negligencia-Familiar-o-que-eu-aprendo-eu-ensino/pagina1.html>; “Em uma sociedade onde o gênero é tudo, meninas se transformam em meninos,” *Veja* (for the *New York Times*), 2011. <http://veja.abril.com.br/noticia/internacional/quando-o-genero-e-tudo-meninas-serao-meninos-no-afeganistao/imprimir>.
6. On the second wave of the feminist movement, provided are some insightful studies: Whelehan, Imelda. *Modern feminist thought: from the second wave to “post-feminism.”* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995. Hanisch. *New Intro to “The Personal is Political” – Second Wave and Beyond. The Personal Is Political*.
7. For deeper study, see: Echols, Alice. *Daring to be bad: radical feminism in America, 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989; Price, Janet. *Feminist theory and the body: a reader*. New York: Routledge, 1999; Butler, Judith. “Feminism in Any Other Name,” *Differences* 6 (March 1992): 30; Messer-Davidow, Ellen. *Disciplining feminism: from social activism to academic discourse*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002.
8. Regarding elements of gender, read: Scott, Joan. *Gênero: Uma Categoria Útil para a Análise*

Histórica. Translated by SOS CORPO. Recife, Pernambuco, 1989.

9. See Note 4 above.
10. Research carried out by the Avon Institute and Ibope shows that domestic violence tops a ranking of fears Brazilians carry at 56%, worrying more than AIDS and breast cancer. Source: www.institutoavon.org.br/2010. Accessed on: 18 March 2011.
11. "Smuggling immigrants and human trafficking for prostitution and slave labor have become two of the fastest growing worldwide problems in recent years. The Global Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings will enable countries of origin, transit and destination for these phenomena to develop joint strategies and practical action against the trade in human beings." From the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Human trafficking in Brazil*. Available at <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crime_prevention.html>. Accessed on: 18 March 2011.
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14. Brazilian women now account for only 12.5% of people working in the technology market. "All about digital marketing." March 18, 2011. Available at: <http://tudosobremarketingdigital.wordpress.com/2011/03/18/mulheres-sao-minoria-no-mercado-brasileiro-de-tecnologia/>. Accessed on: 28 March 2011.
15. According to data from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), women make up more than 51% of the Brazilian electorate. However, the right to be voted on is not yet fully exercised, as shown by the figures of women candidates presented by political parties in the 2010 elections. Only 22.4% of all applications for candidacy were for women. Last updated on October 1, 2010. Available at: www.tse.gov.br. Accessed on: 28 March 2011.
16. A survey conducted by IBGE reveals that women act as head of household in 34.9% of Brazilian homes, but they occupy only 47.2% of senior positions in the labor market, compared to 68.6% of men (2008). Data taken from *The Globe Journal*, 09 October 2009. Available at: <http://oglobo.globo.com/pais/mat/2009/10/08/ibge-34-9-das-mulheres-sao-chefes-de-familia-767959955.asp>. Accessed on: 28 March 2011.
17. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), in an interesting article on its website, defines the feminization of poverty and asserts that women are the majority among the poor and their income does not accompany the men. Source: http://www.pnud.org.br/pobreza_desigualdade/reportagens/index.php?id01=3020&lay=pde. Accessed on: 18 March 2011.
18. Established in April 2009, the Women of Peace project was implemented by the National Public Security and Citizenship Program (PRONASCI) as a mechanism for empowering women and community leaders mostly aimed at promoting values such as ethics and citizenship in order to transform them into peer agents of acquired knowledge. This project was elaborated by the Ministry of Justice and conducted by the Universidade de Fortaleza but it still had the support of *Fundação Cearense de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* in the form of six (6) scholarships for technical support. In all, 300 women were selected as participants of this initiative, all residents in areas of social vulnerability. They had a responsibility to participate in the classes of training course, 400 in-class hours, developed by the Universidade de Fortaleza. As well, the women indicated and accompanied other young (between 15 and 24 years) residents of the Bom Jardim region to participate in other projects developed by PRONASCI. The Universidade de Fortaleza selected and taught the course in addition to hiring the multidisciplinary technical team to monitor the work of Women of Peace. The project ended in September 2010. The Universidade de Fortaleza conducted the course and the activities, basing the overarching themes as on gender, human rights and conflict mediation in order to reach the fundamental objective: recover the dignity lost or hidden

