

## Labour market and gender

**Domingos Afonso Braga**  
**Assistant Professor of the Department**  
**of Sociology, University of Évora**

In spite of some concrete specific situations, one of the characteristics common to all the European countries and to the Western world in general has to do with the increasing participation of women in the labour market, mainly since the last quarter of last century<sup>1</sup>. The rising feminization of labour market is connected with the huge development of the service sector economy, which includes many activities usually labelled as 'feminine' because they demand a set of competences of emotional and relational or expressive nature. As an example, we can quote a whole set of activities integrated into education, health and social action services, linked to looking after and taking care specially directed to children and elderly people.

This question of the rising feminine participation in the labour market leads to a clearly dualistic vision: on the one hand, it allows, by means of a greater economic independence, a better situation of equality between genders, underpinned by the integration of the feminine labour force into the remunerated labour market; and, on the other hand, it stresses a phenomenon of differentiation and of sexual segregation due

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the report "Tendências mundiais do emprego das mulheres", published by the International Labour Organization in 2008

to women's predominance in precarious activities, badly paid and with much less opportunities of professional development than men.

In order to further explain this rising participation of women in the labour market, we have to say that, especially in the territories with low demographic density, it is also the result of evident increasing needs for a vast set of personal services that answer to the new forms of social and family organization (e.g. proximity services), forms that demand new ways of satisfying the needs felt by the population. Notwithstanding, the astounding volume of employment of women in the labour market is connected, in general terms, with their integration into traditional sectors (e.g. commerce, accommodation and catering), where, exception made to the education and health sectors, the modalities of employment of women are characterized by low wages, few opportunities for professional development and a weak or non-existent welfare protection. This means that, when compared to men and even though women have higher levels of education than them (e.g. the rate of female graduate students in higher education was 65.9 in 2004)<sup>2</sup>, feminine employment is much weaker as far as the quality of working conditions and labour relations are concerned.

If we take into consideration that entrepreneurship is characterized by a set of behaviours and habits that can be acquired,

---

<sup>2</sup> According to information of the Third National Plan for Equality, Citizenship and Gender, 2007-2010.

learned and reinforced in the individuals in order to enable them to manage and to take profit from the business opportunities or from the creation of value of the product or the service markets, the general framework of women's participation in the labour market is not the most favourable for feminine entrepreneurship.

The different approaches to the theme of entrepreneurship have led to a distinction between what happens out of necessity and what is oriented towards profiting from certain business opportunities which are considered strategic and with high level of innovation. Hence, whereas the former is mainly associated to a situation of rupture or of discontinuity that rushes the individual to begin a business because there are no more labour options or because of the dissatisfaction before the existing conditions, the latter, the entrepreneurship of opportunity, is mostly connected with the detection of certain potentialities of business that aggregate value to a certain product or service.

Women's particular situation in labour market has caused feminine entrepreneurship to be more marked by necessity (as a result of their fragility of working conditions and labour relations) rather than by the opportune and sustained detection of ideas that enhance the creation of new, valuable and innovative entrepreneurs. Relating to this issue, some authors speak of a more empirical path for the entrepreneurship that results from necessity, a path characterized by minor resources in terms of qualification and business management and by low

operational and technological sophistication of the companies created. They also speak of a technical path of access to business activity allied to opportunity entrepreneurship, a path that demands higher levels of qualification that facilitate the detection of opportunities and the clear distinction between the idea and the business opportunity.

Entrepreneurship out of necessity, which is often caused by rupture situations, dissatisfaction and frustration before a previous unwanted situation, is frequently more related to personal searches and motivations than to professional ones. This aspect stresses some weaknesses of the economic and relational know-how of the individual that accedes to entrepreneurial function out of necessity rather than opportunity. Therefore, there is a greater difficulty regarding the demands of innovation and originality of the entrepreneurial initiatives, granting thus tradition and routine more weight in the created enterprises.

One of the studies (Portela *et. al.*, 2008) about the phenomenon of 'Micro entrepreneurship in Portugal' points exactly to the inequality between men and women in the access to the business world, from which stands out the fact that the latter start off more often from situations of greater social vulnerability than the former and that women lack a set of initial resources to begin their businesses.

To reinforce the referred inequalities there is also a set of prejudices and stereotypes that put into question the capacity of women in

the fields of management and business, leading to a whole set of discriminating practices, namely in the “uneven access to institutional resources (e.g. finance institutions, public support services, control agencies and licensing of activities, and qualification courses), to the market agents (suppliers and clients) and to the professional organizations or representatives of interests” (Portela, *et.al.* 2008:43).

Following this line of argument, the implementation of social processes that help to overcome social and symbolic barriers and to develop support structures to feminine entrepreneurship is extremely important, so that the current uneven and unequal situations between genders can be surpassed.

The creation of a Women Resources and Support Centre (WRC) in Alentejo will most definitely be a way of overcoming the weaknesses and the difficulties of women in accessing entrepreneurial activity, and of stimulating enlarged forms of institutional articulation between the different actors of the region with the objective of increasing feminine entrepreneurship and women’s wider participation in sectors of greater technological and innovation potential.

## References

Ferrão, João (1992), *Serviços e Inovação. Novos Caminhos para o Desenvolvimento Regional*, Oeiras, Celta Editora.

Kovács, Ilona (org.), (2005), *Flexibilidade do Emprego. Riscos e Oportunidades*, Oeiras, Celta Editora.

Nogueira, Cláudia (2009), *Mulheres com Negócios. Contributos para uma avaliação do potencial emancipatório do empreendedorismo feminino*, Coimbra, Dissertação de Mestrado em Sociologia, Universidade de Coimbra.

Portela *et. al.*, (2008), *Microempreendedorismo em Portugal: experiências e perspectivas*, Lisboa, INSCOOP.