

## THE EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN WORKING FOR WOMEN IN RIO DE JANEIRO

This work describes how different forms of education (formal, non-formal and informal) have helped to form the professional interests of women working with gender issues and engaged in changing the lives of other women. While formal education did not bring gender awareness to these women, it has played an important role in leading them to attain positions of power, which assist them in working for social change. Interestingly, for these women, non-formal and, particularly, informal education have been factors promoting their gender consciousness and in turn, modeling their work pursuits.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty women who work for women in governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro. Their backgrounds were assessed in terms of work, education and history of gender awareness. The women were selected based on their organizations' work in promoting women's citizenship. It is important to mention that, in Brazil, women engaged in the feminist movement consider health to be the area in which women have made the most marked advances in terms of public policy and numbers of projects. Thus, most of the organizations in this research have projects dealing with women's health. Women interviewed who were not working on projects primarily related to women's health were mainly dealing with women's issues, such as income generation, protection of violence, legislation changes and gender images in the media.

In this study, the educational concepts employed are those delineated by Coombs (1985) who stated that, since the 1970s, education is no longer viewed simply as equivalent to schooling. According to Coombs, education began to be perceived in three separate forms: formal, non-formal and informal. Education

is considered formal when it is long-term, sequential, degree-oriented and taking place at schools or universities. Formal education is conducted by a staff of professionals who know how to teach but not necessarily how to do what they are teaching. Education is considered non-formal when it is short-term, non-degree oriented, and flexible and when its primary objective is clearly stated as the learning of certain skills. Continuing professional education can be considered non-formal education if it focuses on limited, specific and practical types of knowledge. Non-formal education is conducted by professionals who know how to do what they teach, and it takes place in institutions of various kinds including schools and universities. Informal education refers to learning in the process of living, and it can happen anywhere.

It is important to mention that these forms of education are valued in different ways. Formal education has traditionally, albeit not always, been linked to more status, privilege and power than the other two forms. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that in the course of individual and societal development, these educational forms interact and fuse. Advances of the last decades in worldwide communication media and computer literacy have enhanced the importance of non-formal and informal education in the lives of individuals. For instance, in some countries, children's exposure to television is greater than to formal schooling (Greenfield 1984).

This study also works with the concept of gender awareness, which is defined as the consciousness that, in societies, women hold an inferior social position compared to men. This inferiority is not created by biological differences but rather by unequal social arrangements which unfold into fewer opportunities and social and economic resources for women, and into less freedom for women to choose their destinies and to exert political influence.

### **Formal Education Lacking Courses on Gender Issues**

One common finding among the women interviewed, was that, in whatever field or level studied, their formal education in Brazil did not include courses on gender issues, even among the women who were in their twenties and thirties. The three women who had studied gender issues during their formal graduate education had studied these issues abroad. It is important to emphasize that the absence of courses on gender issues available to these women does not imply that there is no research taking place on gender issues in Brazil. According to Costa (1994), the good quality of research on gender issues in Brazil is not integrated with formal educational schooling programs.

The work pursuits and positions of the interviewees were often related to previous field of study and job market options. Of the 20 women interviewed, 15 work for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and 10 work for public health clinics. While most women working for NGOs hold university degrees in the social sciences, the majority of those working for governmental organizations hold degrees in health. Thus, the women who studied health sciences usually held

governmental jobs at public health clinics, and the women who studied social sciences frequently held positions in NGOs.

Of the 20 women interviewed, 3 had completed high school, 17 had bachelor's degrees with concentration in either the social or health sciences. While bachelor's degrees gave these women access to their field of work without additional formal studies<sup>1</sup>, graduate work offered more power to the professional in certain workplaces. Among the 17 women who had bachelor's degrees, 6 also had graduate degrees, 4 had earned their Master's in Social Services, Sociology, Population Studies and Medical Sociology and 2 had completed a Ph.D. in Sociology.

For research purposes, subjective values were assigned to the professions in relation to the place of work in order to determine the power of each position. For the three women whose highest formal education attainment was the high school degree, their positions conferred upon them the least workplace power compared to the other women. Even though they coordinated programs for women, they were positioned at the bottom level of their institution's hierarchy and were not included in some decision-making meetings. In this case, not having a bachelor's degree appears to have had a limiting effect upon work pursuits.

In regard to the relationship between degrees held and positions occupied in the workplace, a number of patterns were observed in the interviews. At public health clinics, statements reflected the fact that bachelor's degrees in health conferred more power upon the professional than did equivalent degrees in the social sciences. Further, the interviewees unanimously agreed that a physician has more power than any other health professional, regardless of any other graduate training. In turn, it was expected that the physicians' actions would have more impact on the client population of women than would the actions of any other professional. For instance, a physician said:

If I as a physician having more power cannot make women return to this clinic for health education, we cannot expect other kinds of professionals, even with the highest competency and graduate training, to convince them.

In contrast to the above, stand statements by professionals working for NGOs. These professionals agreed that the more advanced the university degree, the more credibility and power it conferred. They thought graduate degrees and training after undergraduate social or medical studies were very desirable. Still, these professionals seemed to place equal value on medical and social interventions. In fact, they were inclined to give statements reflecting that their work pursuits in assisting other women attempted to integrate the two frameworks of thought and actions derived from the health and social sciences. For example, in one NGO, the professionals identified the need for undergraduate medical students to take introductory courses on social issues.

## Non-Formal Education as a Potential Source of Gender Awareness

Non-formal education on gender issues seems an area with the potential to shape the work interests of the interviewees, most of whom expressed a desire to pursue this type of learning. On one hand, all women from NGOs stated that they had not taken any specific non-formal courses related to gender issues. However, a few explained that participating in seminars with other women had offered them some gender consciousness. It is important to stress that the gender awareness gained through participation at seminars is not related to the specific, planned contents but to those unintended effects of being grouped together and engaging in formal and informal conversations. For instance, an anthropologist working for an NGO said: "When we got together at seminars in Brazil, we gained gender awareness by discussing ourselves. Otherwise, we would not discuss our common problems." A professor of Sociology working for an NGO asserted: "I learned gender issues through my interactions with women, living in societies with feminist ideas. These interactions gave me confidence and ideas to pursue work on gender-related issues."

On the other hand, all women working for governmental organizations took courses on gender issues after having become involved in work related to women's health. The Municipality of Rio de Janeiro promoted these courses, helping women to increase their gender awareness. However, these courses were not the point of departure for the development of gender awareness. Below are some of their statements.

A nurse of a public health clinic said:

Even though I took a Master's degree, I never took any courses on gender issues and I always dealt with these issues at work. Only recently did I take short courses on gender issues offered by an NGO at a University. They were very helpful, but not only would I have liked more courses like the one I took, I would also have liked to take them before I started to work with women.

A social worker from a public health clinic stated:

I took a two-week gender course in 1990, which was offered at another public health clinic by an NGO. Of course due to the limited duration of the course, I had to learn to deal on my own with the issues women bring here. Now the Municipality is offering courses but enrollment preference is given to physicians. This year, I applied, but at the last minute they cancelled my participation and only allowed the physician to take part.

Some work places offered more learning opportunities than others. A public health clinic worked closely with a School of Public Health, thus providing its staff with many educational opportunities. A health educator from this public health clinic affirmed: "After I started working here, I took so many courses on women's issues that I cannot even remember how many."

## Informal Education as the Main Source of Gender Awareness

The women's gender awareness was propelled by their work, political activism, and personal and travel experiences. Most of the women (7 out of 10) working in non-governmental organizations related their gender awareness to work, political, personal, and travel experiences. And most women (8 out of 10) working in governmental organizations developed their gender awareness at work-related events.

The development of gender awareness outside the realm of school is reflected in the following statements. A professor of Sociology working for an NGO asserted:

I started asking rural women about work issues during the 1970s before anybody did. Until then, only rural men were ever asked about work issues. Everything I learned about gender issues, I learned through my work.

A physician working for the government explained,

I have been working for the feminist movement since the 1970s. I do not exclude the importance of either my medical or my Master's degree in Medical Sociology in leading me to my job in the public sector, which is influential to my work on gender issues. Yet, I did not learn these issues formally, but rather during my practice in the feminist movement.

A woman with a bachelor's degree in the social sciences, working for an NGO said:

I have been working in this area now for 10 years. I started to work in the area of gender and environmental issues by chance. I like everything that is new, emerging. Then, I started to devote myself to training women about these issues but I feel what I learned was due to informal circumstances such as my participation in international seminars where I had the opportunity to share rooms, and spend hours talking with other women.

The development of gender awareness in work activities is well expressed in the words of a physician working for the government. She said, "I only had a one week workshop on gender issues. Then I was assigned to coordinate a group of professionals working on women's health". This physician is a pediatrician and because public health clinics combine women's and children's health, she was entitled to coordinate both.

A psychologist working for an NGO reveals how political activism and travel experience led her to develop gender awareness:

My sister was in Europe more than two decades ago. When she was telling me about feminist ideas in those days, I was very

antagonistic towards them. Yet, I was fighting for democracy here. Then, eventually while visiting my sister, I understood that to fight for democracy includes struggling for women's rights and I began to work on gender issues. I never took a course on these issues, but on several others that were more in fashion.

## Recommendations

This study reveals how the intersection of three forms of education have been essential for women working for women in Rio de Janeiro. While the women interviewed had not developed gender awareness through their formal school, they were nevertheless able to overcome this gap through other educational experiences, learning from different sources, and becoming actively involved in changing the lives of other women. While their formal degrees have allowed them to fill their professional positions, it is their non-formal and informal experiences that have molded their job activities.

The women interviewed in the health and social professions did not take formal education courses on gender issues in Brazil. Social science professionals considered seminars discussions with other women as significant non-formal educational experiences. Health professionals learned on the job to value non-formal educational opportunities on women's health issues. These non-formal education experiences developed the interviewees' work interests and were identified by most as in demand. For those whose workplaces do not promote gender awareness, opportunities for discussions and courses on gender issues could be created.

In regard to informal education, women who had only studied the health sciences connected their gender awareness to work-related, casual circumstances. The women professionals with degrees in the social sciences often associated their gender consciousness with accidental events linked not only through work, but also through personal and political experiences.

While the number of women interviewed for this study is small, it is revealing that gender courses have not been a part of Brazilian formal education for even the most highly educated women. It would be desirable to conduct a larger study at the undergraduate level in order to verify whether and in which context Brazilian universities are addressing gender issues. Still, since this study showed that non-formal and, particularly, informal education promoted gender awareness, it may be worthwhile to invest more in the promotion of gender awareness through sources other than formal education which are accessible to many, such as television programs. In creating such endeavours, it is important to emphasize two aspects. First, the poor adult Brazilian, with little or no access to schooling, has had few opportunities to be in learning groups with others, informal or otherwise. Thus, it is necessary to take advantage of the few social spaces where adults do meet that can be transformed into sites for the purposes of non-formal and informal learning. Second, the debate on gender issues has

been often limited in duration and content. Non-formal educational projects in public health clinics that discuss gender issues may last only one hour and television programs may discuss sexual relations only in regard to issues such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic and teenage pregnancy. Thus, the debate on gender issues can start as a negotiation of sexual relations, but should be broader than that. It is important to bring attention to all human rights issues. Social relations depend on how these rights are interwoven with race, gender and class reflecting institutional hierarchies at family, school, church, government, health clinics, and so on. Only then will the awareness about any social difference cease to be accidental for many, allowing social relations to be envisioned and practised in new ways.

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## Notes

1. It is important to note that in Brazil, undergraduate studies are very specialized, entitling a person to become a professional after completion. Further training is therefore not required before working legally in a profession.

## References

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## Historial de educación de mujeres que trabajan para otras mujeres en Río de Janeiro

### Isabela Cabral Félix de Sousa

Este artículo describe cómo las diferentes formas de educación (formal, no formal e informal) ayudaron a las mujeres a moldear su trabajo en cuanto a cuestiones de diferencias entre los sexos, teniendo por objetivo el mejoramiento del nivel social de otras mujeres. A fin de ahondar en el tema, se realizaron entrevistas a veinte mujeres responsables de proyectos gubernamentales y no gubernamentales de Río de Janeiro, dirigidos a la mujer. Se evaluaron sus respectivos historiales educativos.

teniendo en cuenta historias laborales y de la conciencia de los problemas mujeres/hombres. Los resultados indican que aunque la educación formal no desarrolló una conciencia de estos problemas en ellas, sí cumplió un importante papel al permitirles alcanzar las posiciones de poder necesarias para realizar cambios sociales. Lo importante es que para ellas tanto la educación formal como la no formal han sido elementos fundamentales para intensificar la conciencia de los problemas entre hombres y mujeres y a la vez determinar sus búsquedas de trabajo. Se sugiere incorporar materias que traten de derechos humanos y diferencias entre los sexos al plan de estudio de universidades, escuelas y locales de encuentro de hombres y mujeres de bajo poder adquisitivo.

## **Les antécédents d'éducation des intervenantes qui travaillent pour les femmes à Rio de Janeiro**

**Isabela Cabral Félix de Sousa**

Cet article décrit comment diverses formes d'éducation (formelle, non formelle et informelle) ont façonné le travail des femmes qui s'occupent des questions associées au sort des femmes et qui cherchent à améliorer la condition sociale d'autres femmes. Des entrevues approfondies ont été effectuées auprès de 20 femmes travaillant pour des projets gouvernementaux et non gouvernementaux à l'intention des femmes dans la municipalité de Rio de Janeiro. Leurs antécédents ont été évalués sur le plan du travail, de l'éducation et de la sensibilisation à la cause des femmes. On leur a également demandé de partager leurs opinions sur l'histoire et l'avenir des projets à l'intention des femmes afin de mieux déterminer ce qu'elles attendent de ces projets et de les placer dans des rôles d'intervenantes sociales. Les résultats indiquent que, bien que l'éducation formelle n'ait pas sensibilisé ces femmes à la cause des femmes en général, elle a joué un rôle important en les aidant à atteindre des positions de pouvoir nécessaires pour favoriser le changement social. Fait intéressant, pour ces femmes l'éducation non formelle ainsi que l'éducation informelle ont été les éléments cruciaux qui les ont sensibilisées aux différences entre les hommes et les femmes et, en conséquence, ont influé sur le genre de travail qu'elles ont entrepris. L'article suggère d'incorporer les questions relatives aux droits humains et à la condition féminine aux programmes d'études de nos universités, écoles et lieux de rencontre où se retrouvent les hommes et les femmes pauvres.