

Other articles

Identity construction of female artisans

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ABSTRACT:

This gender analysis focuses on the lifestyle and experience of female artisans in the municipality of Nossa Senhora das Dores, 48.4 km from the capital (Aracaju), in the Agreste of Sergipe/Brazil, with a population of 20,000. Changes in forms of agricultural production, conditioned by globalisation have an impact on global/local and rural/urban contexts, and on the daily lives of the inhabitants of small municipalities in the Northeast of Brazil. Art and Crafts are informally embedded/appropriated by different segments, thus, enabling a re-elaboration of identities which, in line with modern times, tend to be negotiated, multiple and fragmented. The use of Oral History made it possible to apply the interview technique and other inter-articulated procedures in the process of recording narratives of the experiences of a group of 28 artisans working with rag dolls. By calling upon tradition, the underlying idea of belonging to a community is present, where making a doll is one of a number of female tasks distinguished from others by the type of work and techniques involved, and by the concept these female artisans have of their own work.

KEYWORDS:

Gender, Work, Handicraft/ Art and crafts, Popular culture.

INTRODUCTION

The study centres on the lifestyle and social relation patterns of the *Grupo Renovação* [Renovation Group], made up of female artisans who make rag dolls in the city of *Nossa Senhora das Dores* in the Northeast Agreste region of Sergipe/Brazil. The municipality covers an area of 482.6 km², 48.4 km from the Capital (Aracaju), with a population of 20,000 inhabitants. The history of this municipality dates back to October 4th 1606, when Pero Novais de Sampaio received permission to graze his cattle and animals. The municipality was originally called *Enforcados* [the Hanged] since it was where the gentile who lived in the municipality were hanged. According to the writer Laudelino Freire, the name was changed by a missionary who came to the community on a holy mission. The municipality kept the same administrative structure for 62 years until State Law no. 795, of October 23 1920, raised it to the category of Nossa Senhora das Dores City, detaching it from the municipalities of Capela and Divina Pastora.

Although some of the land in the current Dores municipality was donated through *sesmaria*¹ for the breeding of livestock, its initial registered economic activity was cotton cultivation. During the 1920s, 30s and 40s, beef cattle breeding and cotton cultivation were alternately the main economic activity factors in Dores. In the industrial sector, the pottery and mill traditions took prevalence and, over time, bakeries and joineries emerged. In order to reflect upon current themes dating back to the beginning of the century, one must also take the period relative to globalised economy and instantaneous communication into consideration.

Diniz (1996) points out that the debate surrounding the issue of peasantry is linked to the spread of capitalism to rural areas, the modernising technological transformations introduced into country life resulting from

large migratory fluxes to cities and to urban patterns and stimuli regarding behaviour and attitudes in rural areas. When considering issues related to women and rural development, Brumer (1996) also highlights some variation determinants— the degree and type of socio-economic development presented by the different regions — which influence the way women fit into the social division of work and social benefits, also stressing the different ways they can exist in such societies. In view of scientific and technical changes in the process of capitalist work, resulting from the so-called “technological revolution” and new ways of managing workforces where key words, such as “economic growth”, “efficiency”, “deregulation”, “free trade”, “total quality” and “centres of excellence” are widespread, one of the main objectives of this study is to underline the work of women in handicraft. These ingredients spread across the entire world and were introduced into Latin American countries— such as Brazil, where handicraft is more developed in rural areas and its producers manage, or managed, agriculture and primary work. The importance attributed to artistic value is related to educational level. In Brazil, such importance is limited except for cases when a percentage of the population has sufficient income and access to good quality education.

Changes in farming production impact the daily lives of the people in the small Northeast municipalities. Many authors have drawn attention to the complexity of the relationship between tradition and modernity, showing how, in the interstices of complex societies, gaps are opened for the upkeep of certain traditional handicraft activities, claimed by many to be doomed to disappearance (Dantas, 2006). The Nossa Senhora das Dores municipality moves between the rural and urban, presenting changes requiring an analysis of the new lifestyles of women— particularly the combination of family agriculture and business, and the metamorphoses that adopt

more of a “country” identity and the identity of the artisan woman.

Belonging to a social group means sharing a particular type of behaviour. The female artisans’ discourse is of utmost importance so that the meanings of the positions they adopt are understood. Actual economic differences are heightened by symbolic distinctions in their way of producing and using assets, by attributing them meanings and transforming them into signs of distinction. The manufacture of rag dolls in the municipality is part of a popular culture which feeds the imagination of rich and poor children from one generation to another. Reflecting upon the work of women who perform artisan activities involves playing with differences, in which the rules are defined in social struggles among agents immersed in power relations. The latter may, however, change at any stage and new individuals or circumstances may invade the social scene and change the rules of the game. The female universe emerges in contrast with the male, not merely biologically, but also culturally, making it necessary to de-naturalise the sexual differences that occur on cultural and historical levels, not in biological terms, focusing on historical experiences marked by values, thinking systems and beliefs crystallized in the social imagination, etc.

The strong artisan presence in today’s society may be explained by the fact that the production of objects in a class society is diversified, not only due to the actual production mechanisms, but also to the variety of group demands, which mark their position in the social structure, through the appropriation of objects. Others see a sign of change in contemporary sensitivity through the return of handicraft, almost as an expression of rebellion against the increasing importance attributed to progress (Lody, 1995).

Over the last few years, the issue of work has been analysed at different moments which define interpersonal relations, such as the empirical categories resulting from the need to understand a complex reality. The work is regarded as an educational practice which manages man/nature and man/man relations, as a primordial source of knowledge, wealth and social well-being in relation to the progression of productive forces and their new forms of organization.

Reproductive organisation, work, culture and practices are considered to be elements of individual formation within a group, in which one defines oneself and is defined by solidarity ties, without, however, changing individual differences. Education is taken as reason (mental elaboration), learning (construction and reconstruction of elaborate knowledge), and conflict (practical exercise of knowledge); so, education is broad, multifaceted, variable and in conformity with the rational human “space” in which it can flourish. Therefore, there are different educational types and forms. On this level, the education/

socialization processes experienced by individuals are meaningful so as to justify conformist behaviour played out in social relations.

Social gender relations, as an analytical category, are understood as a process of historical and social construction with a political slant, justifying articulation between the educational field and the Sociology of Work. In other words, distinctions between female and male workers are the result of cultural constructions, the product of culture and do not stem from biological data. The cultural elements mean nothing on an individual level, meaning only exists when such elements are non-significantly contrasted. They are constructed by human beings, in the quality of an individual belonging to a social group (Canclini, 1983). Furthermore, no matter how equal he is, the man from a region has his own different customs, values and cultures. This diversity is the privileged site of culture.

On studying culture, it is, therefore, necessary to identify the time, place and social group without having to worry about “evaluating” from a political and aesthetic perspective, but being attentive to how it evolves. During the course of the study, it became clear that female artisans end up producing modified versions when they “reproduce” objects and practices that are supposedly crystallised in time and space, which makes it practically impossible not to group new meanings and connotations.

METHODOLOGY ADOPTED IN THE STUDY

The use of Oral History served to give a voice to the artisans, obtain their different versions and perceptions of the same fact and to understand that the New Memory is that which is experienced, and history is what is elaborated (Bourdieu, 1974). The study was carried out in the space/time of the Nossa Senhora das Dores municipality (Sergipe/Brazil in 2007/2), covering a broad range of sources, such as: field diary, participant observation with the group and the accomplishment of 28 interviews with the female artisans, so as to register their narratives and analyse social practices regarded as the product and conditioned effect of the structures. Selectivity and oblivion are present in the memory process of the female artisans (Lobo, 1986). Their reminiscences collaborate in the constitution of historical memory, allowing for an interpretation of the representations, values and customs of the artisan women (Freitas, 2002). The aims of the research and nature of the instruments adopted geared the study towards an analysis of the subject matter (Bardin, 1995), highlighting the fact that the constitution of the individual is a complex, multifaceted and uninterrupted process, where the participation of other individuals is highly important but does not determine one’s choices so as to individualise something that is socially shared.

Through what is both *said* and *unsaid*, our aim is to reconstruct the histories of these women through the *micro*, or rather, their handicraft work with rag dolls — and to equate a *macro* representation (safeguarding the necessary proportions) of the collected representations —, giving a result that points to their ways of working, as well as the profile of the women under study. One understands that the dormant truths may re-emerge from a forgotten memory, giving new meaning to the past/present, in an attempt to synthesise, integrate and re-connect. It becomes clear *when* and *how* personal memories merge with the collective memory of the female artisans, which, with their singularities and differences, are not just individual memories but also a portrayal of the so-called official, ritualised and institutionalised memory of daily life through their own histories.

For instance, Le Goff takes the concept of memory as it is presented in Human Sciences (fundamentally in History and Anthropology) to be:

the property of preserving specific information, referring us initially to a set of psychic functions, thanks to which man can update past impressions or information, or those he represents as being past (...) Man's memory process causes the ordering of traces to intervene as well as a re-interpretation of such traces (Le Goff, 1996, p. 423).

In the Northeast region of Brazil, the State of Sergipe, particularly N. S. das Dores, belongs to a context of peripheral development. Social relations are structured around tutelage, favour and discipline, which reproduce themselves and are disseminated by means of a variety of mechanisms which may be observed through their logic, the interaction dynamics among all the groups, particularly among those in an industrial organisation, since the factory and what people construct through their experiences reflect such changes in society, thus re-affirming a political approach to life.

Given the cultural heritage, the geographical and space and time to which the individual belongs generates structures that condition particular approaches to life. The female artisans are both individual and collective subjects/actors, while simultaneously producers and products of the social relations reflected in the overall value system and in the rules for social behaviour (Cruz, 2005). The inclusion of women in civil society as members of a gender and also as individuals means they are included as members of a sex, as women. This implies that “the body, sex and sexual difference are inseparable from civil subordination” (Pateman, 1993, p. 329).

It is crucial, from both an analytical and political perspective, not to forget that patriarchy is both historically and culturally rooted in the family structure and in the socio-biological reproduction of the species. Through the classical sociology of Weber (1964, p. 184),

one comes to grips with the fact that the origins of female domination in work are thought to have been founded on the archaic form of patriarchal domination seen within current family relations, as in the feudal system, confronting other forms of domination observed in society. According to Castells,

Patriarchism is one of the structures on which all contemporary societies are based. It is characterised by the institutionally imposed authority of the man over his wife and children in the family environment. In order for such authority to be exercised, patriarchy must permeate the entire organisation of society, from production and consumption to politics, legislation and culture. Interpersonal relations and, consequently, personality are marked by domination and violence which stem from culture and patriarchal institutions (Castells, 1999, p. 169).

It is clear that the movement of women to the public work sphere is an integral part of the democratisation process of social life which makes it possible to cover the interests of the workers. In most regions around the world, the female workforce rate has increased, in both periods of prosperity and recession, while male participation has fallen in most regions. Women continue to be economically active, even while they are carrying and taking care of their children.

Female work was one of the first themes used by feminists to mark their presence in university life in the late 1960s. Under the Marxist influence, the intention was to examine industrial and technological developments in order to explain the participation of women in the labour market, by taking their working conditions into consideration. On this level, the debate surrounding “domestic work” and the participation of women in the labour market enabled the establishment of relations among families, work and politics through a gender relations perspective. The study of women, their participation in society, etc, became more widely known and opened new spaces after the incorporation of gender as an analytical category, thus, highlighting the differences and conception of the historical, social and cultural reality.

The emergence of the theme in the 1970s was based on the assumption that the woman would be reintegrated in history and females would be given back their history; hence, female labour was prioritised. Profound changes occurred in the theoretical and methodological approaches between the 1980s and 1990s, not only in terms of the issues raised by feminism, but also those related to psychoanalysis, to New Historicism, etc. Greater importance was given to writing a history about women, in which they became the subjects of the history and the object of study. Rachel Soihet (1998) points out the difficulties involved in bibliographical orientation during the 1980s when a number of female historians set out to

de-mystify female submission and passiveness. Clearly, the question of women in formal politics should be addressed and the demonstrations in which they used their bodies as weapons, their cries, the clanging of saucepans to represent the rowdiness of the crowds should not be ignored (Scott, 1990).

EXPERIENCES OF THE FEMALE ARTISANS

Understanding of the domestic world implies learning how the family leads production to consumption. In all societies, the family is usually the smallest of units organised for production and consumption, with a tendency towards being autonomous, as far as the normal needs of its members are concerned. The work involved in satisfying these needs is distributed among its members so that the activities of each one enhance the activities of other family members. The family forms a group within which biological reproduction and basic socialisation takes place; by means of parenthood, it establishes a link between the past and the present, and, more importantly, between the present and the future. Present life determines the dynamism and continuity of family customs and values. This process is simultaneously characterised by creation of an immediate survival strategy and a future project.

The exclusion of public spaces is viewed as a more noticeable indicator of female discrimination. For instance, women encounter experience by participating in political sites, with an intensification of their individual quality. They learn how to speak and to raise new questions regarding their individual and fragmented experiences (Durham, 1984). A political and social imagination, previously constructed to define the political sphere as being predominantly male has been brought to light. The study of the modalities, through which women mark their presence in public spaces is, indeed, an indication of their higher participation level and the weakening of patriarchy (Castells, 1999). Previously, public and private domains and male and female tasks were distinctly defined. The woman's place was the private sphere, within the family and domestic environment; the public sphere, power, work outside the home were sites regarded as being male-dominated. The actual arguments of these female artisans in this study draw attention to the construction of the meaning given to the behaviour of each sex; such meaning becomes consensual in the communication of different groups and social segments, and is present in individuals and the sites in which they interact.

In the vast field of Brazilian Art and Crafts, regarded nowadays as one of the most dynamic sectors in the country's economy, and also partly responsible for the production of a sense of belonging in an increasingly globalised world, these rag doll artisan workers are as

much a part of modernity as they are of tradition, which does not mean they become closed in on themselves. When referring to tradition, there is an underlying idea of belonging to a community in which making a doll is a task, among others in the female world, in which these female artisans are distinguished by means of their way of working, the techniques employed and their awareness of their job. This task is the material and symbolic frame of reference of the rag doll makers which sets them apart from other female artisans and gives them a specific meaning (Dantas, 2006).

The handicraft activity is made up of *tacit* female *knowledge* which hands down popular tasks, informally passing them on through a number of communication channels. These tasks are then appropriated by different segments, going on to become present day activities which are reproduced in the dialogue with contemporaneity, as a site for recreating identities that are in keeping with modern times and which tend to be negotiated, multiple and fragmented (Hall, 1999). Emphasis on qualification as a social construction process may be explored conceptually, according to Wood, so as to unveil this extremely interesting field of the so-called social or *tacit* qualifications (Wood, 1984). Although crucial to the acquisition and development of qualified tasks, this type of knowledge is always learned through subjective experience, making it very difficult (impossible even) to pass it on through explicit and formalised language.

Addressing the issue of female social skills helps shed light upon some aspects of the educational field, whereby the awareness of scholars is developed according to the knowledge of collective skill construction processes and gender qualities. Thus, it is possible to question the *ideologies* as discourses which set out to prevent the emergence of practical change theorisations, whereby the tendency for a loss of the emancipative potential of women may be observed, and not only cultural but also socialization processes stand out in both these vital spheres. Such processes strengthen the patriarchal system and structure differentiated identities on the basis of gender.

The use of the gender perspective in the analysis of female skills makes it possible to ascertain, for instance, that the skills acquired by the female artisans in the domestic sphere are later appropriated by the same society in its capitalist dimension, thus, paving the way for an increase in productivity and the creation of surplus goods.. In short, capitalism takes advantage of the differences and naturalises them. Nowadays, it is believed that the informal qualities presented by the women may be re-valued as female credentials in the world of labour, which would provide them with more opportunities, and greater acknowledgement of their qualifications and skills. This is based on the idea that women take social qualifications/ competencies/ skills/qualities acquired in

reproduction spheres with them to their work which, in conjunction with their formal knowledge, make up the much sought after worker flexibility.

The rag doll makers/female artisans bring with them the details of domestic “art” which they learned with their grandmothers, mothers and through close female contact. Brazilian women have contributed towards spreading and enriching the culture and its customs since the early stages of colonisation, developing specifically female manual activities in the primary socialisation process within the domestic setting. On this level, the singularity of each culture is illustrated by its ability to make itself perpetual and survive the extinction of any or all of those who took part in it, during any historical period. This ability stems from its dominant role in forming the personalities of the new individuals, who, due to the fact that they were born into a given society, are subject to the influences of a particular culture.

In 1997, Councillor Valdete Garcia, from Nossa Senhora das Dores, invited Terezinha Barbosa dos Santos, the local community teacher to set up the *Grupo Renovação*, with a view to rescuing and strengthening the traditions and conquests that characterise the identity of the popular culture of Nossa Senhora das Dores. The group members *are mainly old ladies* who perform manufacturing activities related to the making of dolls, benches, crewel embroidery, crochet, cross stitch, painting, puckering and cushion embroidery among other handicraft products. During their training process, the ladies in the group *were forced to confront cultural barriers*, or types of internal resistance. For example, the female artisans found it hard to acknowledge the handicraft activity as a useful value to be transformed into an exchangeable market value. This occurs as rules and classifications are internalised which create and cement ideas and images related to the triviality of their artisan work, traditionally carried out within a private family setting. In other words, the failure to acknowledge the qualities required of them (skill, attention to detail, speed, etc.) seems to be socially legitimate as these qualities are judged as being innate, and not acquired, as facts of nature and not of culture.

In the speeches of the female artisans, the issue of education emerges, *the variety of processes that educate women*, which often frequently contributes to the fact that they regard themselves as being uneducated.

It was hard to convince the participants/ladies in the *Grupo Renovação*, that they were capable of producing quality handicrafts, of using their knowledge for commercialization purposes so as to consolidate their historical roots of rag doll making in the municipality of Nossa Senhora das Dores. This activity had always been restricted to their mothers and grandmothers who made the dolls for the children in their families and for some wealthy children.

Within the walls of their home and in the midst of their families, it was traditionally easier for women to develop their manual skills in handicrafts. The woman was expected to be constantly confined to domestic service, with no autonomy, the basis of emancipation, and regarded as an object or property. Men had the public sphere, the street, a workplace outside the home. It is in relation to the latter that feminist and gender studies try to give visibility to the woman as an object of history, de-naturalising her. The concept of gender is constructed through difference, through tension and debates and in the different visions of its interpreters. According to Orlandi “discourses are sites for founding historical identity: temporal memory is presented as institutional and legitimate” (Orlandi, 1993, p. 13).

The fact that the *Grupo Renovação* does not have a space of its own makes it difficult to strengthen tradition, the identity construction of female workers, with a view to becoming part of the world of production, so as to divulge and commercialize the group’s products. According to one of the artisans “the difficulties were overcome with the passing of time and the experience and social importance of the group was consolidated”. The group currently uses the large, open space of the Clube Doreense for the accomplishment of its activities.

After visiting the group of female artisans, the famous artist, Hortência Barreto, became a source of encouragement to the group and an avid consumer of their products. At a later date, February 23 2002, in an interview for the *Jornal da Cidade de Aracaju* [City of Aracaju Newspaper], she spoke out about the importance of the doll makers, referring to the type of material used, their technique and bringing the theme of the dolls to her canvases and exhibitions in Brazil and abroad.

GRUPO RENOVAÇÃO PARTICIPANTS

The group has 97 female artisans from a wide range of backgrounds: retired citizens, rural workers, housekeepers, housewives, nannies, among others. By rule, the handicraft activity covers work on the scrubland, the plantation at the back of their houses or on the lands of farmers in the region. The group members are also involved in other activities, such as dance, theatre, needlework, embroidery, leisure trips, seminars, capacity development courses and discussions on the organisation and future of the group.

Among these participants, eleven are pensioners, or old people/widows responsible for the family income (heads of the family). While the artisan universe in the region is primarily female, old age is currently also female. In Brazil, the Demographic Census of 1991 showed that the country has shifted from being a “young country” to a mature one and is now on the road to becoming

an old one; the shape of our age pyramid is undergoing a transformation process where its base narrows down and its middle and peak open out, particularly on the female side. There is a higher proportion of women over the age of 60 than of men, resulting from longer life expectancy at birth which allows women to outlive their male contemporaries.

Generations, as social classes, do not exist in isolation, but rather in mutual reference, in contrast or even in opposition with each other. A generation is, or becomes, that which power relations permit in human relationships. One should bear in mind that within any generation or age group representations, identities and social situations are constructed which conflict with other social groups and categories (Britto da Motta, 1999). At the same time, these relations are developed in articulation with identity conditions defined by other relational categories, mainly gender, social class and ethnicity.

The Catholic faith is an important reference among the female artisans who work under the protection of the saints to which they are devoted. They shift from practising their art and passing on their knowledge to building bridges between modernity and tradition, thus, ensuring perpetuation of their culture by means of popular art. Marriage is believed to “be for life”, in other words, the perception of marriage fits into the ideals of the catholic tradition and of the traditional country family. On this level, the marital issue is more widespread in scientific discussions and also takes on new dimensions as in its connection with the construction of gender inequalities.

The struggle for survival and dealing with basic needs have taken priority over formal education for these female artisans. Among these women, seven were illiterate, although they had expectations in terms of acquiring knowledge: “we really want to learn how to read and write”; a further twenty had completed primary education while three had not completed this educational level.

It is a known fact that schooling is a key factor in group organisation and in the construction of professional trajectories. As far as traditions are concerned, trajectories, biographies and social norms reflect unequal power relations and prevent these women from gaining access to the public space of society. There are cultural restrictions which often prevent women from finishing their primary education. One of the underlying motives of the differences in access to decent work for men and women is that the latter have not had the same opportunities in permanent education. Unfortunately, primary education does not always lead to the best employment opportunities. However, it is important that the female artisans continue to obtain qualifications to back up the knowledge they acquired in their youth. UNESCO has traditionally defined literacy as “the ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement related to one’s daily life” (UNESCO, 2006²).

The average monthly earnings of the group of female artisans is very low, and varies in accordance with the quality of their individual work; nevertheless, this income is fundamental to the overall budget, often only enough to cover the cost of medication (R\$ 300,00 to R\$ 25,00)³. This is due to the fact that they sell their products separately. An increasing number of these women work in the unofficial agricultural sector as stall vendors in local markets, which means they have two jobs in order to make a living. The female artisans live in the periphery of the municipality in houses (self-owned or rented), built of a mixture of clay and wood known as *taipa*, with no sewerage system. Difficulties in being granted Social Security benefits are common to them all. One of the goals of the group members is to gain access to health care so as to improve their quality of life and challenge age and generation stereotypes (Bosi, 1979).

The development of skills to support and empower the women (especially those who live in more remote areas) can be reinforced by installing basic infra-structures in order to develop capacity building policies and programmes. The female artisans are excluded from access to the different technologies and their control. It is understood that capacity building to make use of technologies is a political question and includes not only a change in power relations, but also a redefinition of the technologies that reflect the needs, interests and aspirations of men and women. Where the fight for equality is more severe, for instance in ICT — Information and Communication Technologies — they can be adopted as tools for social transformation and gender equality. New technologies, per se, offer unprecedented possibilities for interaction, such as efficiency in data storage and recovery. The fact that female artisans can have direct access to global markets through commercial initiatives via the Internet, by using the world wide web to support their activities with information on markets and production, should be taken into consideration.

The transition from an unpaid auxiliary family worker or a self-employed worker with a low income to salary-based employment is crucial for the freedom and self determination of women. Inequalities in the labour market have a much harsher effect on women and they present more difficulties than men in overcoming poverty (Castel, 1999). Therefore, different civil society groups and international organizations, among which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is included, become involved in affairs related to the democratization of work, cultural diversity, law and citizenship.

The poverty phenomenon has multiple dimensions. Nowadays, female artisans who live in poverty recall experiences of the municipality’s prosperity. The double shift day’s work carried out by these women is a milestone in a society where the woman has made space for herself

in the market, but has still not yet managed to free herself from chauvinism, according to which the washing, ironing and cooking are her responsibility alone. This double shift day's work makes it difficult for the women to perfect their skills in new production techniques and in increasing the quantity and quality of the products. The artisan activity reproduces the predominant values of the regional culture where "passiveness" characterises the attitude towards the legally constituted powers, as well as submission processes towards the power of the man in the family setting. The sexual differences may be observed as cultural, linguistic and historical constructions imbued in power relations.

The artisan group has become a part of these women's lives and gives them the opportunity to socialize and take leisure:

I had nothing to do and I only watched the soap all afternoon. I enjoy myself here with the group, I can dance, chat, go for a walk, embroider. I'm not here just for the fun though.

The group meetings are usually fun and give us some emotional support and even "personal support. Oh!, I was very lonely, I live alone and I've got my friends here... "

Handicraft work is regarded as a supplementary activity through which oral narratives, forms of sociability, cooperation and solidarity are developed in relation to daily experiences: the female artisans cry, laugh, dance and look upon the group as their "second family/home". In the everyday life of the group the female artisans also have to face conflicts which make the learning of the experience, practical knowledge and the transmission of technical handicraft knowledge far more difficult. Competition emerges in the social division of work among the activities of the more qualified artisan workers, in the consumer demand for their production of better quality products. The social division of work is, in itself, a contradictory issue. On the one hand the woman puts her social links at stake while at the same time her actions

symbolise stabilization in the transition towards the creation of a new social order.

The female artisans worry about the transmission of patterns, values, customs and in keeping tradition alive for the new generations who experience the impacts of modernity: "nowadays the young girls are not interested in learning how to embroider, sew or even listen to our stories. When we die who will make the dolls?" There is a possibility of changing traditional visions, which means standing up to the multiple barriers against full participation, expressing their autonomy and incorporating their alterity as a fundamental value; thus, the alienated dimension of citizenship can be recovered.

CONCLUSIVE SUMMARY

In a universe in which the importance of decent work is viewed in the productive world as the only sustainable way of getting out of poverty, an analysis of the role played by women in the labour market is absolutely essential. For the female artisans, "a time for work" and "a time for living" are interconnected to their actual subsistence. Modernity has imposed the need for plurality in the distribution of duties and rights.

Tradition and modernity are layered upon each other, producing contradictions, bringing about transformations that help forge new identities, thus merging the artisan and country woman.

It was considered important to obtain the history, characteristics, lifestyles and social relations of the female artisans belonging to the *Grupo Renovação*. The knowledge of their experiences sheds light upon processes that may be developed so that they can become more competitive workers, eager for new demands in terms of merchant-related tasks.

It is clear that the progress and existence of full, productive and decent employment, the new target of the Millennium Development Goals, will only be possible if the specific needs of women in the labour market are taken into account.

ENDNOTES

1. Land donated by the Portuguese Government for farming purposes.
2. Retrieved from http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13136&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (September 2006).
3. 1 Brazilian Real = 0.576701 U.S. dollars.

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