

Life stories of women attending generation of labor and income workshops

Histórias de vida de mulheres frequentadoras das oficinas de geração de trabalho e renda

Historias de vida de mujeres que asisten a talleres de generación del trabajo y ingreso

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to get to know life stories of four women who take part on creation of labor and income workshops. **Method:** data collection was carried out during 2012, and included four women an active part of the Creation of Labor and Income workshops, as proposed by Rehabilitation, Work and Art, in the south of Brazil. The method chosen was oral life history. **Results:** the stories collected articulate common elements that belong to women living in poor strata - the need to stop studying in order to work and help proving for the family; marriage as way of freedom and a rite of passage into adult life; and the female role towards caring, and male role towards providing. **Final considerations:** dynamics that are ruled by moral obligations of reciprocity have guided and provided meaning to relationships established with family and society.

Descriptors: Mental health; Gender identity; Social networking.

RESUMO

Objetivo: conhecer as histórias de vida de quatro mulheres participantes de oficinas de geração, trabalho e renda. **Métodos:** a coleta de dados foi realizada no ano de 2012 e incluiu quatro mulheres que, entre 2010 e 2012, participavam ativa e diariamente das oficinas de Geração de Trabalho e Renda propostas pela Reabilitação Trabalho e Arte, no sul do Brasil. O método foi história oral de vida. **Resultados:** as histórias coletadas articulam elementos comuns pertencentes à vida das mulheres pertencentes aos grupos populares - a necessidade de parar de estudar para trabalhar e ajudar no sustento da casa; o casamento como ferramenta de libertação e rito de passagem para a vida adulta, e; o papel feminino relacionado ao cuidado e o masculino de provimento. **Considerações**

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Finais: as dinâmicas regidas por obrigações morais de reciprocidade orientaram e atribuíram significado as relações estabelecidas com a família e com a sociedade.

Descritores: Saúde mental; Identidade de gênero; Rede social.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: conocer la historia de vida de cuatro mujeres que participan de los talleres de generación del trabajo y renda. **Métodos:** los datos se recopilaron en 2012 e incluyeron cuatro mujeres que participaron de manera activa y diaria en los talleres de generación del trabajo e ingreso, en sur del Brasil. El método utilizado fue la historia oral de vida. **Resultados:** las historias recopiladas articulan elementos comunes relacionados con la vida de las mujeres pertenecientes a los grupos populares: la necesidad de dejar de estudiar para trabajar y ayudar a mantener el hogar; el matrimonio como herramienta de liberación y rito de paso a la edad adulta, y; El papel femenino relacionado con la atención y el papel masculino de la provisión. **Consideraciones finales:** la dinámica regida por obligaciones morales de reciprocidad guió y atribuyó significado a las relaciones establecidas con la familia y con la sociedad.

Descritores: Salud mental; Identidad género; Red social.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of a triple duty (giving, receiving and giving back) is brought to light by analyzing narratives of women of poor strata. Studies based on such relations attempt provide examples and meaning to living narratives, moving beyond a strictly economic reading. They let one think of positive sides of an observed sociability, so that they contemplate their "way of life as a historical phenomenon, arising from determined circumstances, both economical and political, which gives proof of the individual's creativity when acting in society".^{1:37}

In this sense, family is considered to be the concept that allows one to glimpse into different forms of living and organizing, different family deals and arrangements, which can, at a certain moment, be opposed to hegemonic models, but that equally provide meaning to belonging, to family and blood relations.²

Family is also understood as the realm where: division of labor, sex regulation, role definitions, power

relations and social construction of gender are rooted.³⁻⁴ By the same token, *traditional values* stand out as features of family dynamics of poor people, their relations being based on a code comprising loyalty, trust and mutual reciprocal obligations, with work, morality and hierarchy as background.⁵

We therefore argue that analyzing how subjects act in poor family groups be directed towards the relations of reciprocity they establish, and towards facing adverse situations that threaten the group's health, stability and reproduction. In this realm, there are no relatives (blood family or not) when it is not possible to give, receive and give back, three essential obligations that comprise this moral universe founded in reciprocity.¹⁻²

Our objective here is to get to know the life stories of four women who have taken part on labor and income workshops.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach; the use of oral life history⁶ is justified, since it does not represent only a technique or a procedure, but starts from the narratives of four women who, by evoking their memory to speak out of experience,⁷ end up reflecting on the relations they have established during life towards family and society.

Therefore, it is an important source for the understanding of their personal history, as inserted in social life.⁸ By giving women their voice, the author came to know their past (remote past) and present reality (at the moment of information gathering), according to their points of view; besides, they were given a space to speak and to listen to their own voices.⁷

The author chose four women when she took part of workshops on labor and income that were taught at Rehabilitation Work and Art (RETRATE is the Portuguese acronym). They were selected by one of the researchers, who identified the women who daily took part of the sewing and craft workshop and who represented RETRATE in meetings at INTECCOP (Technological Incubator of Popular Coops, in Portuguese) Pelotas and at craftsmanship fairs spread in the city of Pelotas, RS, Brazil. According to a study based on everyday life sociology, the interviewees considered RETRATE a second home.⁹

Interviews were carried out at their homes and went on for around four hours. In order to guarantee that a scientific and ethical method was

used, the research goals were discussed along the interviews, which were scheduled beforehand, based on the days and time they had available, and the Term of Free Informed Consent was presented so that the users could read it, then sign it.

After transcribing the interviews, the researcher returned to the interviewees, read the new document, and requested a new authorization for their speech to be published. The users' names have not been made public, as previously agreed. In the interviews, they were called using the names of Greek Goddesses: Hera, Athena, Artemis, Hestia.

Content analysis was carried out along the whole process of research, that is, from transcription to final interpretation. To do that, Minayo's operative proposal was used, in three steps: pre-analysis, material exploration, obtained results treatment and interpretation.¹⁰

The project was approved by the Odontology College Ethics Committee at Universidade Federal de Pelotas (Act #02/2012, February 08th, 2012), following Resolution #196, October 10th 1996 of the National Health Committee.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and discussion are presented based on four thematic frames. Relationships established during childhood and adolescence; Relationships established during marriage; Motherhood; Relationships established at work.

Relationships established in childhood and adolescence

When it comes to the interviewees' childhood, it stands out that, in order to provide for the family, their parents needed to work hard (whether in rural or urban environments), but the children had struggle themselves, many times interrupting their studies in order to live with adult concerns and to help providing for the family.

Except for Artemis, who did not have to work during childhood (and who only stopped studying because her mother told her to choose between studying or having a relationship), the other three had to give up school to help support their families.¹¹ Thus, one can adequately emphasize it was the reciprocal performance of their obligation that gave meaning to their relationships.

[...]. We came to Don Joaquim (neighborhood), and there I worked as an assistant bricklayer along with my father. How old was I? 8 or 10, and I worked with my father until I was 15. [...] My father and my mother lived well because we had a cow - we could milk it -, we had pig, horse. We were poor, yes, [...] but we had these things [...] to survive. Mom used to grow a lot of greens [...] we had a little of everything to survive - six siblings plus mom and dad - [...]. At the time, life was much harder than now, for sure. (Hera)

I started working at 14, my mom used to sew too; she was a farmer, but a seamstress too. I

was 6, 7 years old, but would go to the machine [...] From there I went on. At 14 I was already sewing, and then started working." (Athena)

Work took the fore at the socialization process for these women, so they had to leave school in second place, and it influenced directly the fact that neither of them finished Elementary School. However, except for Athena, who said she regretted stop studying, and emphasizing the courses she took in adult life for improving skills in sewing, the others did not share the same regret.

[...] I never liked studying. Never, ever. Dropping school was not an option. Kind of, at school, I wanted to have a relationship, so my mother told me to choose: Either you have a relationship or you study. And, since I liked my husband, I left school. Then I could not study. (Artemis)

I think that, regretting to drop school, I didn't regret. I don't know whether I have regretted or not, because I was a different person back then, at school I was quiet, so I did everything: copied, did the exercises.[...] I don't know whether I was a little weak in the head, don't know if I needed some vitamin, don't know. Because I know that as I left the classroom, I didn't know anything [...]. (Héstia)

Since back when the interviewees were young, consumerism and consumption were not so intense as today, toys were predominantly made at home, by themselves or their family.

This situation at once instigated creativity and gave children more freedom for playing, but it also nourished dreams, some of them kept alive until today.

[...] we never had dolls, when we were young. And yes, this is quite striking. Because I have all these dolls! [Referred to the several dolls that were on the bed]. Because of that, I [...] spent hours on end playing there [playing with corncob dolls], then mom called for lunch and I didn't even care to listen. (Hera)

When it comes to their adolescence, little is said. Maybe this is due to the fact that, in spite of being considered a complicated phase (when a woman starts taking care of herself and, above all, her sexuality), it does not significantly cut bonds with childhood insofar as the girl, in order to fulfill her moral duties, works from a very young age and has responsibilities towards her house and her family.^{4-5,12}

This statement is confirmed by Artemis, who was the only one to expose her behavior during adolescence, whereas the others did not touch on the subject, not even during informal conversation along the workshops.

[...] my husband, who, when we dated, I was 12. We would hide, because if my mother caught us, she would beat me with a piece of wood; horrible! Then he left to Porto Alegre and I would no longer have from him because of another girl, because I was very jealous, I have always been. Then

I broke up with him, but he would send me letters [...] then he went back there and we would go to a party, we wanted to make out and asked his friends to tell me he would take me home. But I said 'no'. I had gone to the party alone, so I would go back alone. But there was always this guy who would take me to dance, when he saw my husband would take me to dance, he'd run and get to me first, until one day my husband managed to get first and, then we got together. He said he'd come and talk to mom on January 1st, 1970 [...]; I was 14 back then [...]. (Artemis)

Family-value is the basic element to determine social identity in a family.^{5,13-14} Moral obligation and reciprocity, taken as essential for the continuation of social bonds in poor families, are observed in how roles are defined, in power relations and on how gender is socially constructed.³

Even though these universes end up being led by distinctive moral rules, women in these groups are still symbolically associated to the domestic realm, whereas men are associated to the outside realm. Such principles are taken as basic references in building female social identity.¹²⁻¹³

When it comes specifically to the relation established between parents and children, it stands out that, among family relations, this is the one with the strongest bond and the most significant moral obligations, whose basic premise is the ideal value of respect towards age.^{5,13} From the parents' point of view, even though

children are the real reason that provides meaning to marriage, so that family goes on, their offspring are bound to return it with moral commitment, whether helping their parents whenever necessary, or by being good children (that is, honest and hardworking).

Therefore, in poor family groups, children end up losing perks early, more or less about six or seven years of age, when they are able to help on house chores.^{5,15}

Relations established in marriage

Marriage,¹⁵ conceived by the interviewees as a means to constitute their own family, is the axis that organizes all perceptions. It is configured as a space of relative *freedom*, insofar as it becomes the most plausible alternative to avoid hard strenuous situations that children undergo during infancy and adolescence.⁵

However, the belief in a happy marriage fails, and usually is undone, when husbands no longer play their social role, namely to put food on the table and to make a family be united, and their members be respected.^{12,16}

Hera's story is quite telling in this regard, since her husband would disrespect family morals by not being at home either day or night (without accounting for it), or would spend all the money he got in parties and beverages; so it fell upon her to take over the role of mother and father at once.

I got married at 23, and raised my kids with great sacrifice, because it was like this, my husband didn't

care at all what was left for the kids, whether there was anything to eat or drink; if he ate, the others didn't need to[...].He did work, but would come and go out on Fridays: Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday and he would get home on Tuesday without anything in his pocket. (Hera)

From that, we infer that the very association of man and the street world may come to compromise the complementarity that should be invested in his domestic role.¹³ Somehow, it can be said that when men are *expelled* from home, in order to fulfill his social role, he will end up constituting "a network of parallel and mono-sexual social relations that will reinforce ethical differentiation",^{13:235} and that may even assume an aggressive and thug-like facet. Thus, maybe there is a great deal of tension, of conflicts and disturbance between men and women, based on the dynamics of such differentiation of gender and moral obligations.

Besides, it is interesting to note that sexuality itself appears as a dimension that is restricted to the projection of what family means, which is legitimate only to the extent that it subscribes to a double moral and sexual code, which is embedded in the logic of a complementary and reciprocal relation between man and woman.¹⁷ That is, it is the woman who "gives her body to man, who is the mediator between her and the social world, in retribution for: the guarantee of material survival and the respectability of a family environment, placing her in society and granting her identity".⁵

An indicative that sexuality is shaken when couple reciprocity is broken ¹⁸ can be seen in Athens' statement. Even though she praises the way her current husband treats her and her family now, she still mentions her lack of trust, the grief she felt for his past deeds, his jealousy, assaults and overall violence.

When she remarks that they do not get split in bed, she is not referring strictly to their sex life (since it is interrupted when there is conflict), but to the space where husband and wife relations are established. Therefore, apparently, when Artemis' husband not only cheats but no longer fulfills his family duties, they will split their bed and, thus, marriage will end.

Sure, before my son's death, I already had had depression, 'cause my husband had a woman and, when I found out, I got depressed too. It was in 2000, 2002 [...] But when I found out, he left her for good, right?! With my husband, it changed it all [...] we live well now, as husband and wife and everything, but I'll argue about anything, 'cause I'm really mistrustful, so if he gets home late I'll talk and everything. Because, once it happens, we get that thing [...] I don't trust him the same as before. But not once did we split bed. I found out because I listened to some rumors, right?! [...] but when I found out it was over, at once. There was a shed, with a hammock, and one day I slapped him hard and he didn't say anything [...] he got really quiet, then I went to my bedroom, took

a knife, put under my pillow. [...] then he saw me and lied down in the bedroom with the kids. He would make a move in bed and I would move too, sure you never know what can happen. Then he went to the hammock and couldn't sleep. He went to the bedroom and we talked no end. Sure, he stayed in bed, but like...I didn't want to have anything to do with him. But we never split, not even in bed we split, we argue and everything, but he won't leave the bed. (Artemis)

The importance of being a providing male - for shelter, sustenance and respect,^{5,13} justifies, most of the times, the option for keeping marriage for years. Take Athena's case, for instance; her marriage was undone only when she finally realized there was no more sense in keeping investing in the institution, which was so fragile both socially and morally.

I got married at 19 and got my first daughter when I was 20. At first it was all good, until my second son was born. All trouble started when my second son was born [...] 'cause the boy is really blonde, real white, then he went into the hospital and said it was not his son. That was a big trauma, 'cause he told me: This is not my son, he is white, something like that. But both sides in his family are German, I'm German from both sides in my family, how come the kid would not be born white? Just because the girl was darker, she's in fact

as blonde as I am, but the kid is whiter [...]. And the youngest has darker hair too, he's not so blonde [...] So there it started that thing [...] it went on and on [...] then when he retired and stayed home all the time, we would argue all the time. I think that, when he worked and we didn't see each other very much, things would work out, we didn't have so much time for fighting, right!? But when he retired, we would argue all the time. We were married for 33 years. (Athena)

In this particular context, it is noteworthy that opting for separation did not change how much the husband was important for domestic unity.¹⁹ ²³Hera and Athena, for instance, see their current family arrangement as provisional, for, when they go out to dance, their main goal is to find someone who can share home responsibilities and take them as partners.

Motherhood

When it comes to motherhood, one sees a gap between representation and reality, since it is constituted as a central feature that grants meaning to both marriage and the interviewees' construction of social identity; a reciprocal and friendly relationship does not always prevail between parents and children.²⁰

However, to understand the place of children in poor families, one needs to distinguish between those families that have worked out the development stages (as in the case of Hestia), and those that went astray.^{5,21}

Hera's statement is an example of a case of family instability, and of divorce:

I was married for seven years, but after seven years I couldn't stand it anymore, he was a womanizer - would go out for walking around, go to dance parties[...] sometimes the kids were sick and I didn't know what I was going to do[...]. After I put them in the Institute, I was a little relieved, for at least I knew that there they would be taken care of[...]. When the oldest one left the Junior Institute, we got another dilemma too [...]. I had such a hard time! The oldest went on with me all along; he would go anywhere I'd go. Me with a bag full of clothes on the back, him with another bag full of clothes on his back, we looked like two hobos on the street. We slept on the street so many times, him and me. I went through a lot of trouble, a lot of trouble. [...] Then my father gave us this little house to live in. One such a drama [...]. At the time the youngest was still at the Institute [...] but then later, when he got into this religion, which is evangelical, he got it. The oldest does not understand it, though, until today [...], no way he understands it, so...there's nothing I can do. (Hera)

Specifically about Hera's decision of leaving her children at an Institute for minors, it is explained by it being related, somehow, to how children circulate in poor groups, that is, that they are delivered to different

caretakers.^{19,22} The author thinks that when this deal is made between the mother that gives birth to the child and the mother that takes care of him/her, it goes without saying that it is temporary, and that sooner or later the birth mother will come back to fetch her child, so it is clear for the child that there are two different references: the mother who had them and the “*mother who raised them*”. The author highlights that many situations of crises are responsible for taking the children back and forth in poorer strata.¹⁹ In the case of Hera, adverse conditions, which comprised all of her social environment, have informed her decision of taking their children to the Children Institution.

Athena provides another example of mother and children relations that get fragile due to separations:

The two youngest are closer, 'cause my girl, when we split, she spent some good time mad at me, she would not get along with me. I think we spent a year, more than a year like, she didn't talk to me, or she would argue all the time, stuff like that. Now, it's been a year we're getting along again but she's like, once in a while she jokes around; yesterday she opened the door and said: Where're you going, mom? I'm going to the party. Then she went and said: it doesn't look like that, yesterday you were dying and now you go to the party; but if you die, don't need to warn me, 'cause I won't go to your funeral. (Athena)

Unlike the other interviewees, Artemis was the only one to point out that her relation to her children became more fragile since her last pregnancy. She tells she did everything she could to have an abortion, but, since it was not successful, she got depressed and avoid her child for a long time.

Then, when my daughter was six, I got pregnant of the youngest. But I felt so sick this time, as well as from the second one; I also had a rough time because I had internal bleeding, I almost died too, so I didn't want to have children anymore. Then I got pregnant of [fifth child], and I could not accept I was pregnant. I did everything, everything you can imagine, to have an abortion, everything. [...]. From that day on I cried day and night [...] and didn't eat, did everything to have a miscarriage [...] Then he came with eight months, C-section, 'cause then I wanted to do a ligature. Then I did it but I had him before time was due, and I never accepted him [...] Then [when he was a grown up] I asked his forgiveness [...] My son, please forgive everything your mother did to you, but mother didn't know what she was doing; mother understands you, and adore you. He didn't say a word, just smiled. Then ten days later [...] he passed away [...]. He had an accident there in prison, had an accident, with his own gun, and accident with his own gun and passed away [...] I feel guilty 'cause I didn't want him, then I

lost him, right?! Even though I knew deep down there I was not to blame, 'cause I don't have the power to kill anybody, but I feel guilty all the same. (Artemis)

About this transcription, it is worth mentioning the guilt Artemis feels is not related only to the death of her son, years after her attempt to miscarriage, but also to all which is legally and morally imposed on by society and church. The woman who has an abortion in Brazil, or who tries to do it, is considered to be a selfish, criminal, insensitive sinner, among other negative attributes. However, the psychological, emotional factors, and specially social circumstances, that are involved in such matters usually are not appraised.

In this sense, there was no evidence that Artemis was under risk of dying during her second pregnancy, or that on her fourth delivery her husband ignored her for nine months, being totally against the idea of them having another child. The worst happened when she was pregnant for the fifth time. Abortion was not fully accomplished, but she blames herself for trying to kill her son.

Relations towards labor

Family vulnerability can be seen when it is centered on the father/providing figure, and on how women relate to labor market, which is also linked to provide for the family.²³ Lower education in women and their relation to household space, ends up determining, in most cases a low paying occupation that works as an extension of house chores, for

instance: maid, cleaning person, seamstress.

Also, one sees that the public space eventually disrupts women and leads to emotional breakdowns.¹³ Since women are associated to a more sensitive and emotional constitution, their unemployment (and consequent shortage of money), work relations and pregnancy-related issues reinforce the illegitimacy surrounding female work.

While I was married, I'd first do flowers, up until two, three o'clock in the morning to sell them [...] so that we could eat the other day. And I'd take my kids along with me. But it got to a point where I say, no, I can't keep it that way, I say, I'll find some house to clean. So, I took and said, like, I'll put my kids into an Institution, during the day, and I'll work in cleaning; and after that I'll fetch them at the end of the afternoon. And that's what I did. Then one day Father João, who worked there, said this to me: Maybe you leave the kids here all week and work, and you take them on the weekends? [...] I left there weeping, because [...] this thing of being away from your kids is mean [...] But I say: [...] it's okay, and I did it. After my kids were at the Institution, I lived in Santa Vitória, because I prepared food for the workers [...]. I went to Santa Vitória when I was young, thirty-something years old. I was separated from my husband and was invited to go there [...] from there I came north...from farm to farm...up north, more and

more, until I got to Pelotas.
(Hera)

When I got married, I stopped for a while, I used to sew a little [...] because we worked with dairy [...] and had a large peach orchard too, and during harvest, we had to put a lot of people to work and catch peaches. So, during that peach catching season [...] it was a time I was not able to get anything to sew, so I kind of left it aside [...]. Then, after I was married, we still lived six years in the countryside, then moved here. And so, when I moved to this place I worked straight in sewing. Worked on it for a long time at home, and sewed for clients. They'd bring everything cut down and I'd only close, and worked bespoke at home. I'd sew bride dresses, I'd embroider, stuff like that [...]. We got here with nothing, we bought this piece of land and it was a cabin, and not a very good one, you know. Then what was I supposed to do? Work, work, and work [...]. (Atena)

According to this report, one can see what marriage means as a ground for these women, who find themselves barely included and in unfavored social conditions, thus reinforcing the reciprocity code that is always present. Sexual division of labor in the family, established by marriage, results in a way of life. Therefore, in the face of all material struggle, the need of mutual dependency is stressed and settled with gender and age division.²

FINAL REMARKS

Even though one must use caution to accept all that has been said, *literally*, since the very logic in the narratives works against that, it is possible to observe the hierarchical relational structures between groups of the lower strata, in which women are associated to the domestic world as men are to the outside world and the moral obligations of reciprocity that govern family dynamics of the women interviewed.

In this sense, this research made it possible to acknowledge the excessive concern towards parents, children, or husband, as the principle through which these women provide meaning to their social world, thus guiding and make meaningful relations inside and outside their homes. One of the most important restraints in this study is the impossibility to generalize, due to the small numbers of women interviewed.

Finally, reciprocity relations are evidenced by these women, going through gender and class relations. One can see an imbalance in this triple obligation (providing, receiving, giving back), for even though they took part in the workshops because they needed to increase their income (providing), as they went through different stages in life, here represented in the themes, they have received less and less and have given back more and more.

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