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ECONOMIC CRISIS AND UNEMPLOYMENT: CONSEQUENCES FOR GENDER EQUALITY WITHIN THE FAMILY¹

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Abstract: In this paper we present preliminary results of an ongoing study on how the economic crisis is affecting Portuguese couples' marital power dynamics. The study, conducted by questionnaire, involves couples aged between 30 and 50 years old with children. We analyse the differential impact of female and male unemployment on gender practices within couples. For this purpose, we selected couples in which one of the partners is unemployed. Of the total sample, 127 couples were found in this situation: 58 with male unemployment and 69 with female unemployment.

Results show that women still spend more hours in domestic housework and child care than their male partners even when they are the main breadwinners. Man's unemployment seems to increase woman's participation in household finances management and man's participation in domestic work. Contrariwise, female unemployment constrains women to domestic and care activities. Results are discussed considering the consequences of the crisis, in terms of unemployment and sex segregation of jobs, for gender equality within Portuguese families.

Keywords: Family, economic crisis, gender relations

Introduction

The current economic and social crisis is threatening decades of progress in gender equality, not only in developing countries but also in developed countries⁶. A crisis that started in the United States subprime mortgage market in 2007, rapidly spread to the global financial system, and became the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression⁷. From the financial sector, the crisis

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extended to the real economy resulting in decreased production and trade, cut-backs in public expenditure, namely in social sectors, and a dramatic increase in unemployment⁸.

Those consequences of the crisis inevitably result in harsh drawbacks in household standards of living. However, the impact of the changes on families' lives and on couples' relationships is relatively difficult and complex to assess. Steaming from an ongoing study on how the economic crisis is affecting Portuguese households⁹, this paper intends to analyse the differential impact of female and male unemployment on gender practices within Portuguese couples. Moreover it also intends to discuss the consequences of increased unemployment on the gender equality advancements which have been achieved by the Portuguese society during the last decades.

1. Consequences of the economic crisis on labour market

The year 2009 was the first in which poverty at a global level was not reduced since de Millennium Development Goals (MDG) were launched by the United Nations¹⁰. The consequences of the crisis in labour market were devastating, both in developed and developing countries: From 2007 to 2012, the employment-to-population ratio dropped 1.7 percentage points in the developed regions and 0.9 in the developing regions, resulting in a 67 million jobs gap¹¹.

In spite of the first signs of economic recovery that appeared in the developed economies in 2013, the global economic growth is slowing down. The 2.9 % growth rate was the lowest since 2009 and more than 1 percentage point below the average annual growth observed in the decade before the crisis¹². In this sense, the current levels of economic growth are not allowing employment creation, jeopardizing the achievement of the MDGs in what concerns full and productive employment and decent work for all¹³.

In the European Union [EU], the measures taken by countries to address the impact of the crisis (recapitalization of financial systems, bailout of household and corporate sectors, fiscal stimulus packages, etc.), made visible the structural constraints and imbalances of the Euro area, leading to an added sovereign debt crisis in countries like Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. As a result, in the second phase of the crisis, most EU governments have launched programs of fiscal consolidation, with significant cuts to their welfare systems¹⁴.

The Euro area only emerged from recession in the second quarter of 2013. With GDP levels still a long way from the levels observed before the crisis, EU registers 8.6 % of unemployment, almost 3 percentage points higher than in 2007. On the other hand, structural labour market problems are deepening, with unemployment becoming more persistent and the average unemployment duration increasing in many countries¹⁵.

2. Consequences of the crisis for gender relations and gender equality in Europe

The present crisis has been called by some journalists and commentators as a 'he-cession' instead of a recession¹⁶, since it is a crisis mainly made by men, as men are the major actors in the financial markets, and the labour market sectors mostly affected by the crisis are male dominated (manufacturing, construction and finance).

In fact, in Europe male employment dropped to 1997 levels while female employment registered only a slight decrease. Whereas before the crisis female unemployment rate was much higher than male unemployment rate, many more men than women have lost their jobs as a consequence of the crisis due to labour market sex segregation, thus resulting in a convergence of male and female unemployment rates. In the fourth quarter of 2012, the male and female unemployment rates in Europe reached 10.6% and 10.8%, respectively, corresponding to almost 26 million of unemployed¹⁷. As a result, if we consider employment rate instead of hours worked, almost half of the labour force is female¹⁸.

However, if in a first moment, jobs' reduction in construction and manufacturing mostly attained men, thus creating the conditions for greater equality between men and women in the labour market, the ongoing staffing freezes and suppression of public and social sector jobs may produce the opposite effect. In fact, although women frequently work in sectors protected from business cycle fluctuations (public administration, health, education and the social sector), those are precisely the sectors being more affected by fiscal consolidation measures, thus reducing the prospects of a rapid recovery for female employment¹⁹.

The projections of the International Labour Organization show that women are expected to benefit less than men from the timid recovery over the medium term: female unemployment rates will only gradually decline to 8.2 % in 2018, whereas men are projected to reduce to 7.6 %²⁰. As a result, the crisis threatens to undermine years of progress towards labour market and gender equality MDGs and Europe 2020 Strategy target of 75% female employment rate²¹.

Previous crisis showed the devastating impacts of men's unemployment, such as destructive behaviour, suicide and violence against women²². But unlike past crises, nowadays more households depend on two incomes to make ends meet, so that a woman losing her job has a significant impact on household incomes. Moreover, a job loss among men in dual earner households generates female breadwinners²³. We may therefore expect the effects of the crisis to have major impacts not only in the economy and in society as a whole but also on relations between men and women within the family. Those impacts should depend on the existing level of gender equality.

3. Situation of women and men in Portugal

The Portuguese society has undergone profound and rapid changes for the last four decades. In the 1960s Portugal had a rural, poor and illiterate society, strongly marked by gender differentiation²⁴. According to the ideological prerogative of the *Estado Novo*²⁵, men were responsible for sustaining and protecting the family while women should stay at home taking care of the children and doing the house chores: “the paid work of a married women, and in general, even of an unmarried one, should not be encouraged; there never was a good housewife who did not have enough to do”²⁶. Thus, it is not surprising that only 13.1% of women were to be found officially in the labour marketplace, even though the majority of them performed essential tasks to the survival of the family, especially in agriculture²⁷.

The 1960s initiated a rapid process of economic development and social transformation for which the mass entry of women into the labour market gave a decisive contribution²⁸. As a result of the conjugation of the colonial war, migration flows and rural exodus, many women assumed the provision of their families; the opening of the country to foreign investment with the installation of companies in sectors dominated by female labour (textiles, clothing, footwear and electronics) led to an increase to 51% of female employment in manufacturing; lately the explosion of the tertiary sector became one of the major employers of women²⁹.

This process was intensified by the democratic revolution of 1974 and the consequent major shift in the legislative field,³⁰ with the incorporation of the principle of equality between men and women as a fundamental principle of the Portuguese Republic Constitution. In fact, the 1974 democratic revolution may be conceptualized as the critical juncture in the development of a new gender contract in Portugal³¹.

For the past four decades Portuguese society has accompanied the evolution verified in other western countries in what concerns the decline of birth and marriage rates, the raise of divorce, cohabitation and birth of children outside marriage³² and has even surpassed most European countries in what concerns the participation of women in the labour market. From a negligible participation, Portuguese women do currently show one of the highest full time employment rates in Europe³³.

However, the high female activity rate hides an uneven distribution of men and women in professional activities, hierarchical level, status in employment, working time and wages³⁴. Moreover, women’s entry in the labour market did not change significantly the division of work in the family. Instead, it gave rise to what is called the “double workload”, as the time devoted to housework and care for family members is added to the time of paid work³⁵. Although it

is possible to identify a slight movement of entrance of men in the universe of domestic and parental work and a wide adherence to the ideals of gender equality³⁶, Portugal continues to be characterized by the differentiation of roles of men and women within the family and by the asymmetry in the division of household tasks³⁷.

4. Present study

Several studies show that economic dependence affects power relations within couples, putting at a disadvantage the partner with smaller resources³⁸. In dual earner households the unemployment of one partner may create / aggravate an asymmetry of monetary and material resources between the partners and consequently aggravate power imbalances. Since time is "the ultimate scarce resource"³⁹, it is expected that the situation of unemployment of one partner may produce changes in the time partners devote to domestic and parental work and on participation in household chores.

Steaming from an ongoing study on how the economic crisis is affecting Portuguese families⁴⁰, this paper intends to analyse the differential impact of female and male unemployment on gender practices within Portuguese couples. Moreover, considering unemployment relation to sex segregation in the labour market, it also intends to discuss the consequences of the crisis on marital balance of power and gender equality advancements in the Portuguese society.

Several extant studies showed that there has been no major changes in family organization, with most of the burden with domestic and care work still being borne by women, despite the massive presence of women in the labour market and the modern ideals of equality between men and women⁴¹. As such, we expect that Portuguese women continue to spend more time in domestic work and child care than their male partners and that the division of the household chores continues to occur according to traditional gender roles.

Several authors attempted to explain the imbalance of the division of family work. The time availability hypothesis assumes that the person with more available time performs more familiar tasks while the relative resources hypothesis postulates that the partner with more resources uses its power to perform less housework⁴². In accordance with these assumptions and the results found by Afonso, R. and Poeschl, G. (2006), we expect the unemployed partner to be more involved in domestic and parental work and less participative in decisional chores. We also expect this trend to be particularly striking in case of female unemployment since in such a case unemployment disadvantages cumulates with those coming from traditional gender roles.

Method

To fulfil the study purposes a questionnaire was applied nationwide to a sample of about 1000 households composed of one married or cohabiting heterosexual couple, in working age (at least one spouse between 30 and 50 years old) and living with dependent children (either younger than 18 years old or economically dependent).

1. Participants

To analyse the differential impact of female and male unemployment on gender practices within couples, we selected only the couples in which one of the partners (and not both) was unemployed. We also excluded couples in which one partner was unemployed and the other was retired, domestic or in other professional situation.

From the preliminary sample composed by 943 households, only 127 couples (13.47 %) fulfilled the inclusion/exclusion criteria. In 58 households the unemployment was masculine and in 69 feminine. The household respondent was the woman in most families (65.4%).

Partner's age ranged between 22 and 57 years old (Men: $M = 41.65$, $SD = 7.20$; Women: $M = 39.56$, $SD = 6.51$). Most couples were married (73.2%), and only a small group cohabited, either with legal recognition (10.2%) or not (16.5%). The time of cohabitation varied between 2 and 30 years ($M = 12.58$, $SD = 7.88$), 4 persons did not answer this question. Most couples cohabited with one child (55.1%) or two (37%) and only 8.7% belonged to extended or composite families.

More than half of the households had a monthly net income between 701€ and 1400€ (59.8%), 18.9% had an income lower than 700€ and the rest higher than 1401€.

2. Instrument and procedure

The survey's questionnaire was composed of 54 closed or semi-closed questions (for a full description of the instrument see Coelho, L. et al., 2014). For the purposes of this study we considered three questions related to the *Division of Housework*. These questions dealt with: a) daily time devoted, on weekdays and on weekends, by the man and the woman, to domestic work (cleaning the house, washing the car, cooking, doing minor repairs, etc.); b) time devoted per day, on weekdays and on weekends, to child care (playing, giving bathe, helping with the homework, talking, etc.); and, c) the division of work (mostly the women; equal; mostly the man; mostly other family member; mostly other person) on several household chores (laundry, minor repairs, caring for the sick, washing the car, grocery shopping, paying the bills, cooking, dealing with

taxes, housecleaning, managing accounts, taking children to school, dealing with loans and/or savings). We also considered socio-demographic information about sex of the household respondent, partners' age and professional status, couples' marital situation and cohabitation time, household cohabiting members and monthly net income.

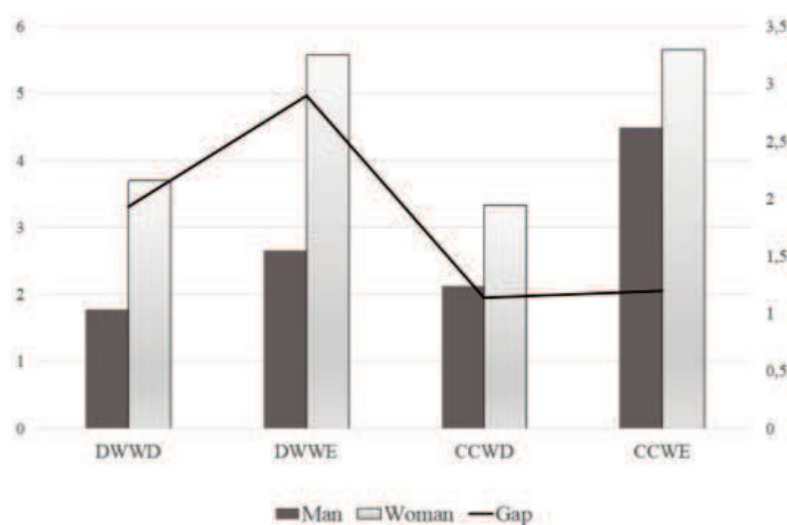
In order to guarantee the representativeness of the sample and to achieve a broad range of participants all over the country, data was collected using both an online survey tool – *LimeSurvey*, and traditional paper-and-pencil techniques. The survey was conducted from March to June 2014 and participation required approximately 20 min.

Results and Discussion

1. Hours devoted to domestic work and child care

In order to analyse couples' gender practices we first analysed differences between the partners on time devoted to domestic and parental work. For that purpose we did not consider answers referring more than 18 hours per day. We then computed four variables on the differential of hours devoted by the partners (woman's hours less man's hours) to: domestic work on weekdays (DWWD); domestic work on weekends (DWWE); child care on weekdays (CCWD) and child care on weekends (CCWE). Figure 1 shows the average number of hours devoted by male and female partners to each task and the average hour gap, separately for week and weekend days.

Figure 1.
Domestic work and child care hours in Portuguese couples (left) and hour gender gap (right).



Note: DW – domestic work; CC – child care; WD – weekdays; WE – weekends.

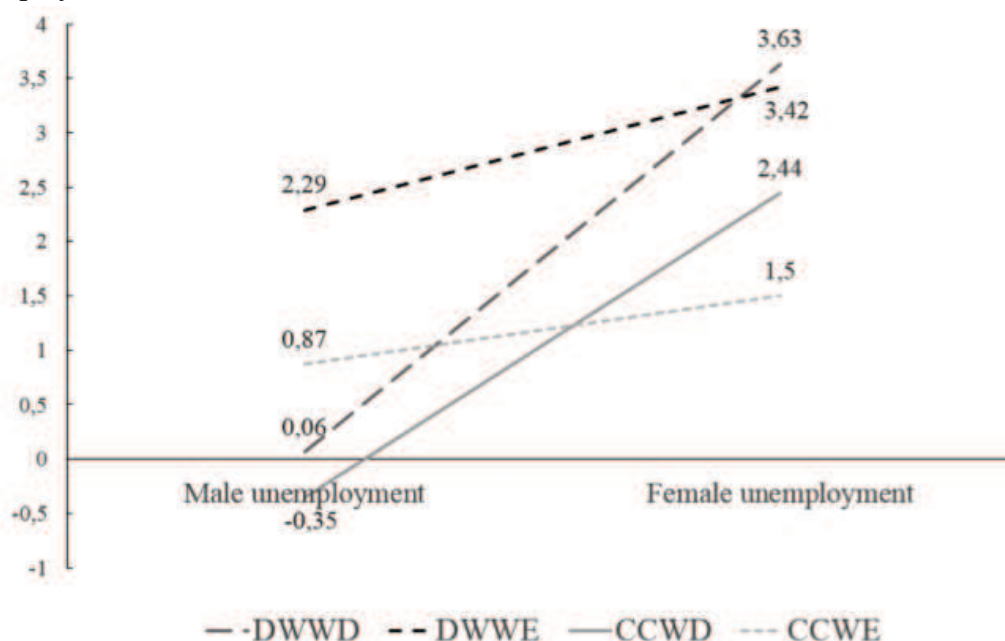
Results show that, in spite of women's achievements in economic autonomy and empowerment during the last years, Portuguese women still spend more hours in domestic work and child care than their male partners. This is in accordance to extant results of several studies showing that the patterns of time allocation by women and men in unpaid work (domestic and care work) are marked by a profound asymmetry penalizing women⁴³.

However this study focuses on a particular type of households, those with one unemployed partner. As such, time available for unpaid work is higher than in households where both partners are full time employed.

Independent sample t-tests on the hour's gap were performed to analyse the differential impact of female and male unemployment on the time devoted to domestic and parental work. Results in Figure 2 show significant differences on weekdays depending on who is unemployed, both in domestic chores ($t(118) = 6.61, p < .001$) and in child care ($t(116) = 5.74, p < .001$).

Figure 2

Average gap in couples' domestic work and child care hours, according to partner's unemployment.



Note: DW – domestic work; CC – child care; WD – weekdays; WE – weekends.

When the male partner is unemployed the time devoted by both partners was about the same, either in domestic work ($M = 0.06, SD = 3.27$) and in child care ($M = -0.35, SD = 2.25$). Contrariwise, in households with an unemployed woman, the gap was more than 3 hours in domestic work ($M = 3.63, SD = 2.63$) and more than 2 hours in child care ($M = 2.44, SD = 2.93$). These results suggest that male unemployment tends to reduce gender inequalities, by leading to a

closeness of the time devoted by partners both to domestic and parental work. Still, results regarding the hour gap in the weekends show that women devote more time than men to unpaid work, even when they are employed and are the household's main breadwinners. In fact, there were no significant differences in the hour's gap during weekends, either in domestic work ($M_{female} = 3.42, SD = 3.24; M_{male} = 2.29, SD = 3.52; t(117) = 1.82, ns$), or child care ($M_{female} = 1.50, SD = 3.56; M_{male} = 0.87, SD = 2.86; t(111) = 1.03, ns$). The fact that the hour's gap is lower in what concerns child care is consistent with studies showing the emergence of new models of masculinity, with active paternity, in the Portuguese society⁴⁴.

2. Household work division

Table 1 shows the results of the chi-square tests performed to examine if partners' participation in household chores is (in)dependent from partners' unemployment. For this purpose household tasks performed mostly by a third person were treated as "equal sharing". In case that less than 80% of cells have expected counts lower than 5, we run the Monte Carlo simulation⁴⁵.

Participation showed to be independent from partners' unemployment in tasks such as: doing the laundry, caring for the sick, making small repairs, washing the car, dealing with taxes and taking children to school. However, the performance of those chores was clearly gendered: doing the laundry and taking care of the sick were almost exclusively done by women, while making small repairs and washing the car were performed mainly by men.

On the contrary, the relation between partners' unemployment and participation in grocery shopping, paying the bills, cooking, housecleaning, managing accounts and dealing with loans and/or savings was significant. As expected, the unemployed partner was less participative in financial tasks (paying the bills, managing accounts and dealing with loans and/or savings) than the employed partner, regardless of whether the unemployed partner was the man or the woman.

In spite of a very low participation of men in the traditionally female tasks of cooking and housecleaning, and even in the task of grocery shopping, participation seemed to be slightly higher when men were unemployed. This result is consistent with Wall et al. (2010), who identified unemployment as an enabling event of greater male participation in home life and parenting. On the contrary, male participation was almost absent when the female partner was unemployed. Male unemployment seems to reduce the female burden in cooking and cleaning in some households. Contrariwise, female unemployment corresponds to a greater asymmetry. However this trend was not found in grocery shopping.

Table 1.
Partners' participation in household chores according to partners' unemployment: frequencies and chi-square values.

	Male Unemployment			Female Unemployment			χ^2
	More often the woman	Equal number	More often the man	More often the woman	Equal number	More often the man	
Doing the laundry	50	4	3	61	5	3	.06
Making small repairs	6	5	45	7	12	50	1.89
Caring for the sick	20	12	2	33	10	1	2.46
Washing the car	3	6	40	10	11	42	3.60
Grocery shopping	28	18	12	34	30	4	6.83*
Paying the bills	31	12	13	24	13	29	6.25*
Cooking	34	14	10	55	11	3	8.19 *
Dealing with taxes	28	11	18	22	15	29	3.27
Housecleaning	35	19	4	57	11	0	10.67**
Managing the accounts	27	22	6	18	23	25	12.57**
Taking children to school	20	15	16	29	16	8	4.32
Dealing with loans and/or savings	30	14	11	12	20	29	16.61***

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Results are therefore in line with our expectations and with previous studies showing that the unemployed partner is less participative in household chores that relate to dimensions of family decision, like managing the accounts, paying the bills and dealing with loans and/or savings⁴⁶, and more participative in housework⁴⁷. Also in accordance with our expectations, this pattern is more detectable in case of female unemployment.

Overall, our findings are consistent with results of previous studies showing that there have been no major changes in family organization, in spite of the massive entrance of women in the labour market and of the wide spreading of modern ideals of equality between men and women⁴⁸. Most of the burden with domestic and care work continues to be borne by women, even when they work full time and are the main family breadwinners. These results suggest there were no major developments in this area in recent years, since the proportion of time devoted by men and women are not substantially different from the results obtained in 1999 in the only survey held in Portugal (to date) on the use of time⁴⁹. According to that study the average difference between the time devoted to professional work by men and women was only about an hour a day. In contrast, women spent three more hours a day in unpaid work (household and family care work) than men. In this domain (time) Portugal distances itself from the European average, reporting a lower value in the Gender Equality Index: 22.4 in comparison with 38.8, where 1 stands for absolute gender inequality and 100 for full gender equality⁵⁰. This is especially impor-

tant given the high participation of Portuguese women in the labour market.

Furthermore, not only the time spent by women and men is very asymmetric but the participation in the various activities and tasks is also strongly gendered. Our results seem to confirm the results from Perista, H. (2002), showing that the division of the household chores continues to be in accordance with traditional gender roles: women assume the majority of the housework, especially more routine and demanding tasks in terms of time and those confined to the interior of the house (laundry, cooking, regular house cleaning, and caring for the sick). Men's participation only excels in household repairs and taking care of the car.

Results support, albeit partially, the explanations of time imbalance based on the assumption of the time availability and relative resources⁵¹. In fact, for unemployed women, more time availability to unpaid work and less monetary resources correspond to higher participation than their male partner in housework and child care. However, for unemployed men more time availability and less monetary resources correspond only to similarity in weekdays while imbalance keeps on during weekends.

These results seem to meet the explanations proposed by Afonso, M. and Poeschl, G. (2006). During weekdays unemployed men's participation seems to be due to the need to be active and maintain self-esteem, while during weekends they need to take profit of free time for leisure activities. On the contrary, unemployed women should assume the entire family tasks, all the time, not being allowed to enjoy free time. Results suggest therefore that gender ideology plays also an important role for imbalance of participation in family work⁵².

On the other hand, results regarding the division of household chores seem to support the conclusion that economic dependence affects the balance of power in couples⁵³ since the unemployed partner has a smaller participation in the financial household chores, regardless of whether it is the man or the woman.

Study Limitations

The present study has several shortcomings. First, to fully understand the differential impact of female and male unemployment on gender practices within couples it would be necessary to compare these households with households where both partners are employed and/or unemployed. Another weakness is that the information about the actual share of performed housework comes only from one of the partners. This is especially important since the information concerning the unemployed partner comes mostly from the one who is employed ($\chi^2(1) = 11.59, p < .001$).

Conclusions

Regardless of study limitations, our findings support extant literature which has been alerting for the perverse consequences the crisis might bring for equality between women and men⁵⁴.

Although, at first sight, the current crisis seemed to be leading to a re-balancing of power between men and women, as reduction of jobs in male dominated sectors created female breadwinners, our results suggest that those changes may not be sound in what concerns intra-family gender relations. Moreover, since austerity cuts are suppressing public and social sector jobs, leading to a reprivatization of care and to a shift towards more 'familialist' welfare systems⁵⁵, the crisis may even be deepening gender inequalities. In fact, our results indicate that female unemployment may lead to a return to the traditional gender roles, thus compromising the advancements achieved on labour market and gender equality MDGs. In that sense, since public policies are not gender-neutral, it is important to evaluate gender impacts of policy measures and to reinforce gender equality programmes⁵⁶.

Notes

⁶ Maier, F. (2011); United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] (2009).

⁷ Soros, G. (2008).

⁸ Maier, F. (2011); United Nations [UN] (2013); UNDP (2009).

⁹ Coelho, L. et al. (2014).

¹⁰ Salazar-Xirinachs, J. (2009).

¹¹ UN (2013).

¹² International Labour Office [ILO] (2014).

¹³ UN (2013).

¹⁴ Primo Braga, C. and Vincelette, G. (eds.) (2010).

¹⁵ ILO (2014).

¹⁶ Maier, F. (2011).

¹⁷ European Commission (2013).

¹⁸ Maier, F. (2011).

¹⁹ European Commission (2013); Maier, F. (2011).

²⁰ ILO (2014).

²¹ European Women's Lobby [EWL] (2012); UN (2013).

²² UNDP (2009).

²³ Maier, F. (2011).

²⁴ Wall, K., Aboim, S. and Cunha, V. (org.) (2010).

²⁵ Name given to the right wing authoritarian political regime that prevailed in Portugal from 1926 to 1974.

²⁶ Salazar (1977), cit. in Ribeiro, R. (2005), p. 58.

²⁷ Wall et al. (org.) (2010).

²⁸ Coelho, L. and Ferreira-Valente, A. (2014); Wall, et al. (org.) (2010).

²⁹ Ribeiro, R. (2005).

³⁰ Amâncio, L. (2007).

³¹ Coelho, L. and Ferreira-Valente, A. (2014).

³² Amâncio, L. (2007).

³³ Coelho, L. (2010); Coelho, L. and Ferreira-Valente, A. (2014); Múrias, C. and Ribeiro, R. (2011); Wall, et al. (org.) (2010).

³⁴ cf. Múrias, C. & Ribeiro, R. (2011).

³⁵ Amâncio, L. (2007); Wall, et al. (org.) (2010).

³⁶ Perista, H. (2002); Wall, et al. (org.) (2010).

³⁷ Amâncio, L. (2007); Perista, H. (2010); Poeschl, G. (2000).

³⁸ e.g. Coelho, L. et al. (2014); Vogler, C. and Pahl, J. (1994).

³⁹ Bryson, V. (2007) cit. in Perista, H. (2010), p. 59.

⁴⁰ Coelho, L. et al. (2014).

⁴¹ Perista, H. (2002, 2010); Poeschl, G. (2000); Wall, et al. (org.) (2010).

⁴² cf. Mikula, G. (1998).

- ⁴³ European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE] (2013b); Perista, H. (2002, 2010).
⁴⁴ Wall, et al. (org.) (2010).
⁴⁵ Marôco, J. (2014).
⁴⁶ Afonso, R. and Poeschl, G. (2006).
⁴⁷ Afonso, R. and Poeschl, G. (2006); Wall et al. (org.) (2010).
⁴⁸ EIGE (2013b); European Commission (2014); Perista, H. (2002, 2010); Poeschl, G. (2000).
⁴⁹ Perista, H. (2002).
⁵⁰ EIGE (2013a).
⁵¹ Mikula, G. (1998).
⁵² Mikula, G. (1998).
⁵³ Coelho, L. et al. (2014); Vogler, C. and Pahl, J. (1994).
⁵⁴ European Commission (2013, 2014); Maier, F. (2011); UNDP (2009).
⁵⁵ EWL (2012).
⁵⁶ European Commission (2013, 2014); EWL (20012); Maier, F. (2011), UNDP (2009).

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