

The São Toméan female association in Lisbon: the perception of gender in a migratory context¹

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In this communication, we propose a preliminary approach of efforts to build women's associations in Portugal Sao Tome and its implications in shaping gender relations.

This associative movement of women São Tomé is traced by reference to the common origin and the stories of difficulties experienced in Lisbon. Such movement of voluntary mutual help gives meaning to the word *community*, while bond between individuals with a common origin in a distant land. But this associative movement will also have consequences on the modeling of roles and social trajectories.

The paths of immigrants are made of adjustments to the daily difficulties of their social integration. But are also built based on a consideration of the possibilities of return to their homeland by comparison with the possibilities in the country where they live. However, this comparison is not limited to economic criteria. For some women, the idealization of the homeland conflicts with the perception (not always verbalized) of the disadvantages of the return to homeland, according to the criteria of gender relations. This weighs on the decision of women to not return to the archipelago and to continue living in Lisbon, or elsewhere, where conditions of life, rather difficult, seem less uncertain with regard to the longevity of the projects of family life.

This communication tries to identify the opportunities that women have in the associations for mutual help and for the modeling of gender relations between São Toméans, perhaps less difficult in Lisbon than in São Tomé and Príncipe.

The situation of the São Toméan community and the *Men Non*

¹ Draft version for oral presentation.

Aside from the small economic gains, for São Toméans women, living abroad is an opportunity for the reformulation of gender relations. The question is whether such reformulation affects beliefs or is just to suit the abovementioned relations context. If so, they should be reverted in case of a hypothetical return to their homeland. This will depend on political conditions in the archipelago, but also the route in the Diaspora.

The emigration of São Toméans is recent, dating, in significant terms, from the post-independence. Emigration was not a cultural fact in São Tomé, but at a certain step, emigration has established itself as a horizon of personal fulfillment or as a necessity of life. Indeed, independence and one-party rule led São Toméans individuals with a worldview opposed to the politicians to emigrate.

More recently, a new generation of immigrants is in part product of the academic path. The figure of São Toméans in Portugal, whose number includes second-generation citizens, has increased markedly in recent decades.

São Toméans in Portugal

1986	1563
1987	1625
1988	1730
1989	1873
1990	2034
1991	2007
1996	4092
1998	4338
2001	8009
2004	10483
2006	20000

After years of high growth, it is possible to watch the slowdown in the inflow of São Toméans, which does not prevent that their numbers continue to increase owing to their legalization or the natural growth of their *nationals*.

In ACOSP, the most representative association of São Toméans in Portugal, women's participation was limited. Hence, this motivated some of women to form an association.

The *Men Non* supports people in distress and apparently unable to interact with institutions alone. Focused on the feminine universe, the Men Non want to humanize the experience of migration and mitigate the deprivation.

In Portugal, a common origin seems to accentuate the kinship of the São Toméans. However, this does not match with the shrinkage of trust and solidarity within immigrant communities. Thus, we must ask whether we are not unduly emphasizing the feminine associations Sao Tome and its ability to solidarity. This valuation is equivalent to assuming an act in defiance of both the individualism prevailing in the host society or in homeland, where entropy is marked by the social deregulation and competition for the enrichment. Aside from that, it is likely that the initial impetus of the actions of *Men Non* emphasizes the solidarity facet. The future may bring issues related to its functioning and decision-making processes.

The founding partners of *Men Non* were 22 women. The presentation of the *Men Non* occurred September of 2010. It consisted of recreational and cultural activities, for example, lectures on topics such as domestic violence or the policy of gender equality.

Currently, the Men Non is composed by 62 people, men and women, São Toméans and friends of São Tomé and Príncipe. Of the 62 members, 40 are women. Some men are husbands or family members of associates. Men Non's leadership seems to believe that all women are partners in power. This idea is equivalent to making the association's the flagship of migrant women of São Tomé in Portugal.

The construction of citizenship: the obstacles of illegality and informality

The difficulties of immigrants relate to access to full citizenship, that is, the enjoyment of economic and social rights. The *Men Non* aims to help resolve the issue of illegality and to bring the fellow citizens to access to services and social supports. *Men Non* have greater difficulty in projecting solidarity for integration in the formal labor market.

From the standpoint of unlawful condition and economic and social inclusion, the variable gender weighs? It's hard to say because illegality is not looming as a problem. There are few illegal São Toméans, among other reasons, due to the processes of legalization of immigrants in Portugal. Interestingly, the process of regularization of residence gives rise to minor discomforts denoting a gender perception resistant to change. A São Toméan man told that he wanted to have right to residence permits for himself and not from the woman or child, meanwhile already legalized.

The most worrisome issue is the informality of the work, the consequence of which the remuneration is disadvantageous. Informality is coupled with precariously: most of the work is precarious, about 80%, for men as well as for women.

At the same time, despite the presumption that the employment of migrants is the first to suffer from economic depression, the unemployment rate among São Toméans women is low, perhaps 1%. Obviously, this is due to them being willing to perform any work in return for low pay. Most women work, even if for short periods and in daily activities such as cleaning services. We are told it is easier for women than men to find work.

Women are playing an indispensable role in family and society. This importance conflicts with their apparent inferiority. However, the precautions of *Men Non* are evident before the prevalence of masculine "superiority". Or, one wonders, this objective is on the agenda of the *Men Non* but is designed as deferred in time, gradually and inevitably resulting from the empowerment of women?

An underlying goal: reshape gender relations

The common origin was established as the starting point for mutual help, but also driving social change. The pretext of common origin allows women to

break through the walls of the house and build a core of sociability that may be a minimal help, but crucial, to reshape the gender relations, as already required by the mutations inherent to the migratory process.

In any case, the inertia of the cultural patterns of homeland can not be ignored. The distance will not eliminate this inertia. But, along with the changing social, the distance helps to diminish the constraints of male “superiority”. And yet, *Men Non* spells out in conservative designs. For example, female leaders do not say that there are against men or they are feminists.

Despite the conservative discourse, the *Men Non* tends to remake gender relations within the São Toméan community (incidentally, their site speaks of a “path towards gender equality”). It would be said, *prima facie*, that the riddle of gender as a factor of association of São Toméan women would only replicate the cleavage and therefore the asymmetry of the micro-power in gender relations. However, the role of women in the daily fight against the difficulties shall strengthen its position on family ties. In other words, as much as possible, the female associations will tend to build up against the various forms of male dominance or female subordinate.

This is the beginning of a journey full with difficulties. For example, the effects of economic crisis and unemployment are reflected in a crescendo of domestic violence that befalls women.

What for is the evocation of the common origin and cultural identity?

As a result of migration experiences reformulation of the projects of life that become open. Thus, if the homeland appears to be a factor of affinity and solidarity, in practice, life is departing women living standards in homeland, particularly with regard to gender relations.

The return will not be part of the aspirations of most immigrants, despite the possibility of a significant number reiterate the desire. In order to understand the shaping of gender relations, we must ask ourselves: to what extent repeated intention to return one day to homeland and the practical options to not return are relevant to modeling of gender relations in a medium and long term?

We must consider the impact of migration experience and, in particular, associative (for which some men seem to nourish distrust) on perceptions of the dichotomies of classification, namely, dominant and subordinate, man and woman. Also, we should consider less verbalization and emphasize the action, which, along with the results from the political, economic and social development, can help a new balance in gender relations.

The evocation of a common origin or cultural identity seems to be a factor of validation of the activity and purposes of the Men Non. We have to combine to seemingly divergent vectors, namely, solidarity with members (especially women) of the community's homeland, on one hand, and growing distance in relation to patterns of gender relations in homeland, by another. These two vectors appear to support the association, which will aim to move away replicas of gender asymmetries in homeland.

Moreover, despite the enormous difficulties in Portugal, women seem little inclined to return, especially when still relatively young or in early life.

The argument put forward for the choice of a life outside distances itself from economic motivations or similar: the expectation of the breakdown of the family emerges as a disincentive to return to their homeland. Significantly, this choice is voiced by different women, for whom political activity and civic obligations is part of an attitude of a modern women, independent, with initiative and willing to model, as much as possible, gender relations.