

The Invisibles: *The cleaning sector and the labour status of the second generation of African women in Portugal*

Abstract:

Key words: cleaning sector, low wages, cycle of poverty, second generation, African women.

“I am Fatima, I am Portuguese, but my parents were born in Angola, I am 34 years old, single mother of 3 children aged, 3, 6 and 8. I am a cleaning lady, I wake up at 5:00 am to cook lunch for my kids, dress them and prepare them to school. I take them with me on the bus every day at 6:30. I go to bed around 00:00 pm. I earn 500,00 € a month, I work 12 h / day and my boss is not paying me the extra-hours...”

This extract reflects the daily life of many Portuguese- African women working in the cleaning sector in Portugal. I have chosen this example, because these cases are quite frequent in Portuguese labour courts and paradigmatic of these women’s working and economic status.

My experience, as a labour judge, tells me that law in books and law in action are two different realities.. In fact, labour markets are dynamic realities that depend more on the political, social and economic features of the country rather than on the existing legislative frameworks.

The status of women in a given labour market is results from different convergent factors; the strength and weakness of the economic infrastructure, social and cultural stereo types, educational background, existing legal framework and the “answers” provided by the judiciary.

Almost forty four years after the independency of the Portuguese African colonies and the first big waves of African immigration into the former metropole the integration of these communities is still challenging,in many ways.

These women represent a second generation of immigrant workers from the former African colonies who were already born in Portugal. My experience tells me they are still victims of their poor educational background and low socio-economic status. In general, they abandon school at a very early age, even without completing it fully, they may become pregnant in adolescence and, therefore, they are thrown into the labor market without qualifications or perspectives of a future evolution.

Somehow, they find themselves perpetuating an infinite cycle of poor salaries and bad working conditions. Sometimes, they have two or more jobs, wake up quite early in the morning and finish their activities quite late in the evening. And, even when the law establishes a maximum of 8 hours of work/ per day, they often perform 12 to 16 hours of continuous work in order to complement their poor income, without getting paid these extra-hours as legally required.

African women are the majority of the work force in the cleaning and domestic sectors because these sectors are not, at all, appealing to native Portuguese or other immigrants. However, some researchers have also pointed out that during the early years of the XXI century these African immigrants have faced the competition of other foreigners like the Brazilians and Ukrainians.

The cleaning sector is a professional and social cluster, with stigma associated and in which the chances of getting a promotion, developing personal skills or earning more are non-existent.

According to a recent study (see Pereira, 2013), the main features of the cleaning and domestic sectors in Portugal that make them largely unappealing for native Portuguese are the following ones:

- Low wage levels (between 2.41 and 2.45 € per hour)
- The prevalence of part-time jobs and unconventional schedules (between 6 am and 9 pm)
- Low social status
- Low skilled nature of the job
- Limited or non-existent opportunities for promotion.

Nonetheless, the activity is predominantly formal (most women are hired on a contract or permanent basis) and stable (since the sector is regulated by Collective Agreements) that limit the employers discretionary practices. The judiciary intervenes to decide claims based on the breach of these Collective Agreements regarding benefits and entitlements, work schedules and changing of workplaces.

It is quite frequent that the employers move the workers around different places without consulting them or taking in consideration the rules and regulations that are “family—friendly” which are contained in these Collective Agreements. In most cases, these workers are represented by the Union’s lawyer because they cannot afford paying private counsel.

Despite the legal protection afforded to female workers in this sector, this is not sufficient to improve their living conditions. As wages continue to be very low, these women cannot evolve professionally or personally, nor their children can.

This particular case exemplifies how collective bargaining, despite “ its good intentions”, promotes a normative status quo of low wages and immobility.

Another important factor that explains the lack of social mobility in this community is the fact these families live in *guetos*, poor neighbourhoods that were built during the 80 and 90’s in the outskirts of big cities like Lisbon, Almada and Setubal just to mention a few examples.

In these *guetos* most people are born, live and die without having a real chance of getting out of there and improving their living conditions. In fact, children attend school there, they play in the streets or spend their free time in institutions supported by charities.

Their reality is the one of the ghetto, they remain isolated from the rest of society and somehow marginalized. Most of these children are raised by single mothers and they abandon school at a very early age which prevents them from having access to better jobs and complete their education at a higher level.

Moreover, the fact that their mothers (and fathers) earn low wages and have a poor educational background prevents them from helping their kids at school in two ways: first, low wages don't allow them to pay for any educational support their children may need and also, their own limitations prevent them from helping their upbringing. As a consequence, school attendance and its demands also become elements of social discrimination.

Indeed, some researchers have pointed out that some of these youngsters risk having a lower social and employment status than his parents in a phenomena called "downward assimilation" (Portes, 2007, Waldinger e Feliciano, 2004).

Many of them find work in the building sector and girls in the cleaning sector as their mothers and grand mothers. Most of these girls also get pregnant at a very early age which increases the risk of social exclusion.

According to UNICEF, educating women is an essential tool to promote their advance and social mobility : "That women might have the chance of a healthier and happier life should be reason enough for promoting girls' education. However, there are also important benefits for society as a whole. An educated woman has the skills, information and self-confidence that she needs to be a better parent, worker and citizen.

An educated woman is, for example, likely to marry at a later age and have fewer children. Cross-country studies show that an extra year of schooling for girls reduces fertility rates by 5 to 10 per cent. And the children of an educated mother are more likely to survive. In India, for example, the infant mortality rate of babies whose mothers have received primary education is half that of children whose mothers are illiterate.

An educated woman will also be more productive at work -- and better paid. Indeed, the dividend for educational investment is often higher for women than men. Studies from a number of countries suggest that an extra year of schooling will increase a woman's future earnings by about 15 per cent, compared with 11 per cent for a man."¹

I strongly believe in social commitment. I believe that educated women bare a responsibility in their hands: they need to stand up and speak for those who have no voice, nor the means to reach out to the public and political sphere.

We may well start by looking into our own country and a take a closer look into the sociological research and the available data that allow us to look deeper into that phenomena

¹ See, www.unicef.org.

and start realising that labour law has its limits and a broader and systemic approach is needed.

Author:

Teresa Maria da Silva Bravo, PHD, Judge of the United Nations Dispute Tribunal in Geneva, former Labour Judge in Lisbon.