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Isabelle joined the Institute for Intersectionality Studies at University of Alberta from January to April of 2024. In her article titled Popular Education and women's rights: the case of *Promotoras Legais Populares* (PLP) in Brazil, Isabelle explores the results and challenges of the women's popular legal education project *Promotoras Legais Populares* (PLP) in Sertãozinho, São Paulo.

Isabelle's article shares her personal experience and her journey as a researcher on women legal activists in Brazil, particularly with the *Promotoras Legais Populares* (PLP).

## **Popular Education and women's rights: the case of *Promotoras Legais Populares* (PLP) in Brazil**

**By Isabelle Fernanda dos Santos**

The Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1989, adopted after the re-democratization of the country following the end of the military dictatorship, includes for the first time women's rights such as political participation, maternity protection, prohibition of discrimination and guarantee of equality before the law. However, as of 2024, their implementation has faced—and continues facing—political and technical challenges.

Women usually face the additional burden to hire legal assistance in order to guarantee some of these rights. However, impoverished women, who are usually the most affected by such barriers, cannot afford those services, which leave them in an increasing state of vulnerability. Facing this reality, in 1995 feminist activist Maria Amélia de Almeida Teles created a women's legal education group called *Promotoras Legais Populares* (PLPs) to help women access and fight for their rights. Teles' activism emerged in times of dictatorship, when she founded the São Paulo Women's Union in 1985. It was with this union that Teles organized the first PLP course (Fonseca, 2019).

PLP is inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, a seminal author in popular education practices. According to Freire (2013), achieving structural change requires liberatory action and emancipatory practice, which cannot be achieved individually, but collectively. This practice of emancipatory and liberating education is what Freire (2013) calls the "Pedagogy

of the Oppressed". Pedagogy of the Oppressed is forged together with the historically marginalized, and it aims to generate a reflection about oppression in order to transform it by the subject in the receiving end of oppression, into a space of liberation. Thanks to Teles (2007) work, this project has spread across Brazil, acquiring new versions and new forms of structuring. In 1999, the NGO *Geledés - Instituto da Mulher Negra* held its version of the program, which focused on the reality of black women, placing race as a central marker for understanding access and achievement of rights in Brazilian society.

PLP consisted in forming groups of women, and each group constituted itself based on the particular characteristics of its participants and their social reality. This way of organizing was inspired by the idea that individual knowledge is constructed and reconstructed based on our own living reality and its contradictions (Freire, 2011). Women group conscience allows participants to collectively find ways to resist and to transform reality. As hooks (2013) states, valid knowledge cannot come only from academic knowledge, as there is knowledge and experience beyond academia, which is why it is important to theorize about one's own experiences and perceptions.

The PLP groups are made up of women of different races/ethnicities, social classes, sexualities, ages, and regions of the country, who have interest in learning about their rights and to get involved in activism. These women find in the PLPs not only legal advice, but also solidarity, emotional support, and training to deal with social inequalities (Fonseca, 2019). Different actors such as NGOs and university advisors are involved in helping to form the groups. However, the low financial investment for these groups to fully function causes them to face structural barriers such as scarce resources and poor infrastructure.

My journey with the Legal Promoters in Sertãozinho, São Paulo began in 2023, shortly after they started to session in person. They had started to gather two years before, since 2021, but all their meetings to that point had happened online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their first in-person session, they gathered women students and teachers from the Federal Institute of São Paulo in Sertãozinho (IFSP). Sertãozinho is a city with a conservative political stance and few social movements. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the achievements of the trade union and housing movements were gradually weakened by the economic crisis and the advance of conservative ideals in politics. The best organized women's movement in the city was the movement conformed by the wives of metal workers unions' members. They were responsible for organizing events in the city aimed at women's welfare and leisure. The PLP's course was intended not only as a training space, but also as a way to revive and structure a more inclusive women's movement.

The PLP's group classes were held for eight months in the campus auditorium on Wednesdays from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. so that working women could have access to classes after work. Despite the attempts at inclusiveness, I noted that the group was mostly white, made up of women with higher education. Middle class, black women, and women with low levels of education also participated in the group, but in fewer numbers. The distance from IFSP Sertãozinho, which makes the campus difficult to access, could explain the lack of more working-class women and diversity in the group. Some of the working-class women who

attended the meetings were cleaning staff at the institute. It made me wonder about how everyday obstacles that make accessibility difficult may directly impact women's education spaces. Also, as the meetings progressed, some of the women dropped out. Some hypotheses that may have led to this are: the course duration included (the PLP course lasted about 12 months), the women's difficulty in balancing their work, care, and education schedules; fatigue caused by the double workload of the participants; or because they felt unmotivated, or that their desires and needs for knowledge about their rights were not being met. Finally, the meetings addressed multiple topics, including sensitive issues such as abortion. In a highly religious and conservative society such as Brazil, I find it necessary for feminist popular education initiatives to formulate strategies that address disagreement and promote freedom of thought and mutual respect. For that purpose, I think we need to be strategic, not about not asking the question, but about how to ask the question, taking into account the set of privileges and marginalizations faced by all participants.

In spite of the challenges faced, the group completed the course successfully and some participants were elected to the municipal council for women's rights. For me, the meetings taught me important lessons through reflecting on a question: "How do we deal with and guide dialogue with women who think differently?". Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable when proposing feminist popular education, especially with a group of women with radically different backgrounds and beliefs. I argue that an important starting point is to direct resources of conflict transformation that promote inclusion, diversity and empathy. I believe that ignoring the contradictions between women in the movement hinders debate and dialogue between multiple actors and is detrimental to the construction of a broader and more inclusive feminism. These experiences are useful for those who work on feminist popular education, as we need to be aware that women's experiences are not unique and uniform, and that it is necessary to deconstruct internalized prejudices that are reproduced in everyday life (hooks, 2020).

This doesn't mean tolerating prejudiced or hateful speech, but calling it out when it happens, educating (individually or collectively) so as not to reproduce it, and understanding that we are susceptible to reproducing this violence with each other, thus being open to dialogue and change. As we approach others and recognize them as subjects, we must develop empathy and dialogue, revisiting and deconstructing internalized prejudices that distance us and can hurt the other with our words (hooks, 2020).

## References

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