

## Gender Sensitive Adult Education: Critical Perspective

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### Abstract

This article aims to foster a reflection on the meaning of gender in adults' learning, considering gender as a social order that is entrenched in daily relations, no matter the domain of life under analyses.

As the research shows, it cannot be any longer ignored that being a man or a woman creates a different approach of the learner towards the situation of learning, mainly because formal, informal and non-formal contexts of learning tend to be congruent with a set of messages based on gender stereotypes that can be prejudicial to the individual's development. The experiences related to gender influence the way knowledge is acquired, the expectations people make about themselves, the choices of learning subjects and their self-confidence in learning. The use of gender lenses to deconstruct such learned norms should be included in the field of adult education as a way of promoting (social) subjectivity of contemporary adult learners.

Keywords: gender; adult learning; adult education; gender stereotypes; gender lenses; subjectivity of a learner

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2 Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education, University of Coimbra, Portugal. Email: vieira@fpce.uc.pt The second author of this article aims to present this work as a simple tribute to António Simões, Full Professor (already retired) of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Coimbra (FPCEUC), who was the mentor of the field of adult education in FPCEUC, the main precursor of master's and doctoral courses in the area and the first person in Portugal to do a doctoral thesis on lifelong education (educação permanente, in Portuguese), in 1979. His legacy as a person, teacher and researcher was essential for the formation of all who had the privilege to learn and develop professionally with his supervision, as it was the case of the second author.

## **Uma Educação de Pessoas Adultas Sensível ao Género: Perspetiva Crítica**

### **Resumo**

Este artigo tem como objetivo fomentar uma reflexão sobre o significado do género na educação de pessoas adultas, tendo em conta que o mesmo traduz uma ordem social arraigada nas relações do quotidiano, seja qual for o domínio da vida que se escolher como objeto de análise.

A investigação tem demonstrado que ser homem ou ser mulher tem implicações distintas na relação criada entre quem aprende e a própria situação de aprendizagem, em grande parte porque os contextos de aprendizagem formais, não formais e informais tendem a ser congruentes, no que diz respeito a uma série de mensagens baseadas em estereótipos de género que podem restringir o desenvolvimento individual. As experiências relacionadas com o género influenciam o modo como o conhecimento é adquirido, as expectativas que os/as aprendizes formam sobre si próprios/as, as suas opções de aprendizagem e a sua autoconfiança para aprender. A utilização das lentes de género para desconstruir tais normas aprendidas torna-se, por isso, imperiosa no domínio da educação de pessoas adultas, como forma de promover a subjetividade (social) dos/as aprendizes contemporâneos.

Palavras-chave: género; aprendizagem de pessoas adultas; educação de pessoas adultas; estereótipos de género; lentes de género; subjetividade do/a aprendiz

## **Una Educación de Personas Adultas Sensible al Género: Perspectiva Crítica**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo tiene el objetivo de fomentar la reflexión sobre lo que significa el género en la educación de las personas adultas, teniendo en cuenta que el género es una orden social arraigada en las relaciones cotidianas, sea cual sea el dominio de la vida que escogemos como objeto de análisis.

La investigación ya demostró que ser mujer o ser hombre tiene distintas implicaciones en la relación creada entre aprendiz y situación de aprendizaje, en gran parte porque los contextos de aprendizaje formales, no formales e informales tienden a ser congruentes con respecto a una serie de mensajes basados en estereotipos de género que pueden restringir el desarrollo individual. Las experiencias de género se conectan con el

conocimiento adquirido y las expectativas que los individuos crean sobre sí mismos, sus opciones de aprendizaje y su autoconfianza en aprender. La utilización de la óptica de género en la deconstrucción de tales normas enseñadas debería ser incluida en la educación de las personas adultas, como una forma de promover la subjetividad (social) de las y de los aprendientes contemporáneos/os.

Palabras clave: género; aprendizaje de personas adultas; educación de personas adultas; estereotipos de género; óptica de género; subjetividad de aprendiente

## Introduction

Cultural norms, values and attitudes that form the collective memory of people have their roots in deep social organizers that pass through generations and this process of intergenerational learning is structural to identity formation of persons and groups. Among these organizers, gender is probably the most powerful because it is largely related to general categories of masculinity and femininity, traditionally used to characterize persons according their biological sex, as male or female. Such dichotomy is abstract and tends to undermine the possible great diversity of characteristics that men and women can have and their potential expressions as human beings<sup>3</sup>. To reinforce this idea, it is possible to quote one of the most known researchers in the field of gender development, when she included the concepts of masculinity and femininity among the muddiest ideas of psychology (Spence, 1985), or when she alerted scientific community to the possible classification of individuals as sexually deviant or as suffering from some forms of psychopathology<sup>4</sup> if they didn't accept or conform to gender rules that society assigns to them (Spence, 1999). When ascribed attributes resulting from biological dichotomy of subjects are crossed over with other belongings or personal characteristics of the individual, like ethnicity, skin colour, sexual orientation, having or not a handicap, among others, the complexity of intra and inter individual differences increases exponentially and makes any task

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3 According to the clarification of Ann Oakley (1972), the term sex should be used to refer individuals in terms of their biology: male or female; the term gender traduces the socially constructed nature of attributes, roles and characteristics commonly ascribed to men and women, based on an essentialist, dichotomist and stereotyped reasoning. Following this, gender can be defined as a cultural construction of ideas of masculinity and femininity, sometimes weakly corresponding to the real potentialities of male and female persons.

4 For a discussion of the classification of individuals based on the exhibition of deviant gender norms, please see Alcaire (2015) who wrote an article with the title: *The pathologisation of sexual diversity: A critical scrutiny of the DSM*.

of external categorization very intricate and potentially unfair and inadequate. This combination of personal belongings in the same person – commonly known as *intersectionality* – may in fact give rise to dissimilar burden of prejudice suffered by the individual, conjugating sexism with racism, homophobia, ageism, and many other forms of discrimination.

Different results of quantitative and qualitative research on gender issues show that gender stereotypes have not changed much during the past decades (Best & Williams, 1993; Council of Europe, 2015; Pereira, 2012; Vieira, 2006), and gender still constitutes one of the basic categories used by people to understand and explain social world and also to evaluate themselves as learners (e.g., Endepohls-Ulpe, 2012; Saavedra, Araújo, Taveira, & Vieira, 2013) and as performers of roles as mothers, fathers, professionals, citizens, political leaders, and so on. The problem is not that men and women may do and choose, as human beings, dissimilar tasks and areas of action, but that this pattern of evaluation may cause inexistent genuine differences in people, in the structural axis of adult life, such as work *versus* family roles conciliation, the choice of professional careers, self-disclosure competences in affective relations, among many other examples.

The ways through which we understand gender as a social construct influences our daily lives and pervades the organization of educational institutions, including those involving adults as learners either in formal and non-formal contexts. What learners and teachers/facilitators of learning have experienced and believe about gender can have power over relations in educational groups (classes), pedagogical/andragogical practices, curricular choices and priorities for research and intervention, including the public policies design. As Dybbroe and Ollagnier (2003) argue, gender plays a major role in defining, constructing, and conditioning education and learning. In fact, “the ways in which adult educators [and adult learners] construct practices around gender results in a continuum of privilege and disadvantage” (Johnson-Bailey, 2005, p. 266).

In this article, following other authors (e.g., Faniko et al., 2016; Malewski, 2010; Nizińska, 2016; Ollagnier, 2014), we analyse the relation between gender and adult education gathering two different perspectives, connected with two paradigms: adult education which has a predominant focus with teaching situated in educational institutions (like academy or continuing education institutions) and learning as a reflection of teaching, as well as adult learning paradigm connected with ideas of lifelong learning, in which learning is a permanent process and occurs both inside and outside of educational institutions, in all spaces and contexts, throughout a person's lifetime. The conception of lifelong learning focuses on adult learners and different contexts of their learning processes, treating everyday life experience equally with

professional knowledge or even favouring it more, because of the importance of some competences that institutionalized contexts of education have not inscribed as goals of the curricula, but that may have a strong impact in individual's success in several domains of action.

## Interpreting the world with gender sensitiveness

Through a 'gender sensitive analyses' of reality it is possible to discover not only discrepancies between each sex predominant spheres of action, but also that gender is commonly associated with an unequal distribution of power between men and women. This vision was clearly expressed by Scott (1986), when she wrote that "gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. It might be better to say, gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (p. 1069).

Recent Portuguese studies that relate gender to the management of family life have brought to light results that are consistent with the main conclusions of research about gender stereotypes and their impact in personal life of men and women (e.g., Múrias, 2015; Ribeiro, Coelho, & Ferreira-Valente, 2015), mainly in what gender patterns of unpaid work is concerned, in which women appear as the main (serial) carers of the others, including the younger and the older members of the family. Such inequalities - that include generally less time and money available for women (e.g., ILO, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2015), and less self-autonomy for basic daily routines for men (e.g., Pimentel, 2011) - continue to contaminate undoubtedly the way men and women exercise their citizenship, their aspirations, and how they evaluate themselves as learners, practitioners, and potential participants in educational programmes for adults. European indicators from an adult education survey conducted in 2011 that involved the EU-27 countries (Eurostat, 2015) found that *lack of time due to family responsibilities* (20.9 %) was among the three most commonly cited obstacles to participation in education and training among those who wanted to participate but did not do so<sup>5</sup>. The other two mentioned obstacles were *no need of training for work* (50.0 % in the EU-27) and *conflict with work schedules* (18.0 %).

Considering the seminal ideas of authors as Knowles (1980; 1990) and Brookfield (1986), among others,

educational programs should focus on what the participants actually learn and how this learning results in changes in participants, orga-

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<sup>5</sup> The results of this study are available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Lifelong\\_learning\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Lifelong_learning_statistics) (accessed in April, 03, 2016).

nizations, and/or societal issues and norms. Program planners must have a clear understanding of why they are doing what they are doing [...]. These changes may be work-related or focused on other practical issues and problems of adult life, on organizational adaptation, and/or on alterations in societal norms and practices. (Caffarella, 1994, p. 23).

In the process of adult learning, either it occurs in formal or non-formal institutionalized contexts or resulting from informal and sometimes not previewed or unconscious experiences, being a man or a woman can mean to have different expectations towards individual's own perception of competence, can denote the appropriation of previous knowledge that may block the acquisition of new information and can signify distinct forms of apprehending reality, most of them formed through

the incidental transmission of attitudes, knowledge, and skills (with stress on attitudes) with highly diverse and culturally relative patterns for the organization of time, space, and material, and also for personal roles and relationships, such as are implicit in varying configurations of the family, household, and community. (Colleta, 1996, p. 22)<sup>6</sup>

Due to the mainstreaming research fettered by positivism - 'one size fits all' science -, with its androcentric construction of knowledge (cf., Ostrouch-Káminska & Vieira, 2015; Vaz, 2011), only in the last three decades literature and research in adult education has begun to purposely include women as participants, recognizing the fact that women's experiences are qualitatively different from those of men (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

According to Johnson-Bailey (2005), the major themes relative to gender in adult education literature, in the last years, have been focused on feminist pedagogy, the hidden curriculum, the classroom climate, women's silence, women's voices, and collaborative learning. For example, the role of informal learning, which results in tacit knowledge, according to Schugurensky (2006), for both men and women and its implications for the process of learning has not been enough explored in the adult education research agenda. This could also gain more importance if we apply the notion of *null curriculum* of Elliot Eisner (1985) to formal and non-formal contexts of adult learning "the options students [adults] are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire" (p. 107). There are many subjects/matters that are not available for adult men and adult women in educational programs, and it can be seen as a source of inequalities (Flinders, Nodding,

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<sup>6</sup> This is the Colleta's (1996) definition of informal education.

& Thornton, 1986), because what is not taught may be as significant for adult life as what is effectively taught and they are not neutral as learners and may not have the same needs and expectations.

Although educational programmes – for adults or for younger generations – must have a focus, omitting the approach of specific questions more related to men or to women in some areas of knowledge, that, one knows, prevent them of having similar opportunities of success in pursuing related careers, may be a naïve or even an apparently irresponsible attitude. Just to give an example related to tertiary education, a large European survey on the absence of women working in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM areas) in the European Union has shown that although 29 out of 1000 female graduates have a degree in computing, only 4 end up working in the professions related to information and communication technologies (European Commission, 2014).

In adult education discourse there is still not enough presence of gender questions and reflections on gender and education – like the motives for the maintenance of occupational segregation, the search by women of more flexible work arrangements due to the anticipation of conflicts between family and labour market requirements, or the reasons for the concentration of women in certain lower paid occupations (ILO, 2016) –, which is a worrisome omission considering the fact that one of the principles of the field is to raise awareness of people, fostering critical thinking and helping them to combat discriminations and to fully realize themselves. It concerns all types of adult education: informal, non-formal, and formal – with the hidden aspects of higher education.

## **Gender and adult education: a case of (non-)formal education**

Assuming that adult education is a largely fragmented field, and that its modalities and contexts may differ a little across countries, according to public policies and priorities established at a national level, Ollagnier (2003) mentioned that the gender approach is one way “to question the gap between the traditional conception of higher education and the reality of the needs and the constraints which adults have to face when getting involved in a lifelong learning process” (p. 99).

Studies have shown, in fact, that the aims, motives and expectations of men and women in adult training are not similar (ILO, 2016; McGivney, 2004). It appears that men more than women hope to get a promotion or a raise through training whereas women have more personal expectations. These gender differences in expectations linked to the expectations of social position raise the question of training content and

form specific to higher education, but can also be questioned in reference to other adult education contexts (non-formal and informal ones).

Although it is widely thought that gender discrimination in the sphere of higher and continuing education is much lower than at school, it can be still observed its subtle forms that exclude or discredit individuals solely because of gender (Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003; Felicio & Pieniadz, 1999; Ostrouch-Kamińska, Fontanini, & Gaynard 2012). Renzetti and Curran (2003) quote examples of everyday, subtle forms of discrimination against female students and graduates, called micro-injustice, mainly in the behaviour of academic teachers: male students are more often encouraged to answer questions than their female colleagues, they are less interrupted and they are taken more seriously. These kind of “micromachismos” (Bonino, 1991) may reduce females’ academic commitment and may affect their subsequent decisions about an eventual choice of academic career. The frequency of such actions increases with the level of study and specializations traditionally dominated by men (Bonino, 1991), such as the aforementioned STEM (*Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics*) areas.

It is a fact that today women predominate among adult learners at continuing education institutions, university students and graduates. They are also more and more present in academic structures. However, the feminization of the academic world, visible in the increasing number of women – scientists, researchers and academic teachers –, does not change the androcentrism of academic structures (European Commission, 2015; Report of European Commission, 2003). Women predominate on low positions in academic hierarchy, and in the fields that often reflect social roles of women, and are less funded (Bradley, 2000). The number of women decreases in the fields culturally considered as men’s, as well as on higher levels of scientific careers. In the authorities of universities women are very rare (European Commission, 2015<sup>7</sup>; Report of European Commission, 2003; Vaz, 2011). Even in the extremely female-dominated faculties of humanities and social sciences head roles usually are taken by men, including the coordination of projects that have financial support from public entities (like *Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology*) (Amâncio, 2011). In a report on women’s situation in academia and science it is possible to read: “despite the fact that women’s participations among university staff is similar to their presence as researchers, men are three times more likely to reach senior academic positions than women”<sup>8</sup>.

7 Data from the European Publication *She Figures 2015: Gender in Research and Innovation. –Statics and Indicators*. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/research/swafs/pdf/pub\\_gender\\_equality/she\\_figures\\_2015-leaflet-web.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/swafs/pdf/pub_gender_equality/she_figures_2015-leaflet-web.pdf) (accessed in April, 3, 2016).

8 *Waste of talents: Turning private struggles into a public issue – Women and Science in the Enwise countries* (2003, p. 7).



Above, the mentioned examples show that gender perspective in higher education as one formal type of adult education is easy to develop with formal recognition. More complex and difficult to grasp, there are other adult educational practices in different contexts which are hidden in the process of learning and getting socialized through education, practices which have their gender specificities.

### **Adult men and women as learners: gender lenses and learning challenges**

The idiosyncrasies of adults as learners lead Knowles (1990) to identify his now very well-known six assumptions about adult learning: (1) need to know; (2) self-concept; (3) prior experience; (4) readiness to learn; (5) learning orientation; and (6) motivation to learn. In all of them more emphasis should be put in the process of learning rather than in the content being learned. Other authors, as Cafarella (1994), respect these principles and developed them to help educators, trainers and staff developers to plan programs for adult learners, but it is necessary to insist that 'gender blind strategies', where men and women are treated the same, following their equivalence in other categories like school level, professional category, or even salary, may contribute to maintain learned or factual sources of inequalities that can have effects in their attitudes towards learning opportunities. As it happens with teachers of younger generations, adult educators should be wary of prescribing any standardized approach to facilitating learning (Brookfield, 1986). This does not mean that we defend coercive gender-differentiated strategies in adult learning, or the need to treat always men and women differently as learners. Nevertheless, the educator or the facilitator of learning should not ignore the potential effects of gender as a social category that are entrenched in how individuals evaluate themselves including their expectations of success as learners and the meaningfulness of possible subject matters to learn.

Research in adult education field, considering it in a broad sense and including both formal, informal, and non-formal opportunities of learning, has shown that men and women learned experiences related to gender may create dissimilar interests and perceptions of security and competence in the learning environment - cf., Ollagnier (2008; 2014), for the case of women's learning; cf., West (2008) and Golding (2015), for the case of men's learning - which could not be ignored when it comes to understand their involvement in learning.

To contribute to a deeper analysis of the aforementioned six principles of adult learning, we propose the use of Sandra Bem's 'gender lenses' (Bem, 1993), reinforcing the core objective of this article, and trying to illustrate our

assertions with evidence from research. Clearly this is not an attempt to propose a new model of analysis of adult education, but a tentative call of attention to some hidden, subtle and pervasive factors that may be taken into consideration, related to gender and its intersectionalities, which remind us that we may have many different men and many different women as learners, with their individual specificities and needs also because they were socialized as males and females, having apprehended stereotyped messages about their own potentialities and interests as human beings.

The needs of adults related to learning contents are clearly connected to the roles they perform in everyday life. Research has shown that traditional division of gender roles tend to be observed mainly inside the home, being the women more responsible for domestic and child care work than their male partners (Pimentel, 2011; Ribeiro et al., 2015) and also in labour market the horizontal and vertical segregation continues to be a reality, being women underrepresented in some areas of study and professions and men in others<sup>9</sup>. This affects not only their necessities in terms of exploring learning fields, but also his/her self-concept as learners. The availability of models performing different roles and tasks in several domains are clearly important to foster girls and boys, but also adult men and women to evaluate themselves as potentially successful in specific learning experiences (ILO, 2016; Nunes, 2009; Saavedra et al., 2011).

The role of the learners' experiences is also very important when it comes to choose between different possibilities of learning and to be prone to learn, including the time available to it. Women and men probably will choose subjects of learning that they know are socially more accepted for them based on learned gender norms (Saavedra et al, 2013), avoiding to do cross-choices with the fear of being rejected or not well accepted as performers. The orientation to learn and the drives for motivation may differ in men and women due to the fact that social recognition and visibility in public and private spheres of action tend to reveal some differences between the two sexes in adult life (Ollagnier, 2008; Vieira, 2006), including the salaries received, the problems resulting from work *versus* family conciliation, the burden of 'glass ceilings' in professional progression, the (un)importance ascribed to unpaid work, just to quote some examples. These factors and others should not be omitted in planning, and trying to involve adult men and women as learners in adult education, mainly because some invisible barriers (e.g., internalized ste-

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<sup>9</sup> Please see the report published in 2013: *Addressing gender balance: Reaping the gender dividend in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)*. Available at: <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Employers%20and%20Service%20Providers/STEM-Report-Addressing-gender-balance-in-STEM.pdf>

reotypes; learned social norms; burden of conciliation of tasks; requirements of professional progression at work) hinder women but also men in choosing fields of study, areas of enrolment in continuing education, and the option to attain, or not, training opportunities.

A recent report from *International Labour Organization* (ILO, 2016) mentioned that “advances in gender parity in education have not helped reduce sectorial and occupational segregation” (p. 42). This calls our attention to the need for affirmative action policies, with the conviction that such measures should be correctly framed and presented (Faniko et al., 2016), based on the awareness of the current pervasive forms of segregation that may affect differentially men and women, depending on the specific domains of professional activities, or familial, social and political spheres under analyses.

## **Towards (social) subjectivity of women and men in adult education**

Ideas of education proposed by scientists do not function in a vacuum (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Meighan, 1986). They always refer to superior rules of social life. In an educational offer, especially the one proposed by progressionists, there is concern for the widely understood well-being of an individual. In education, it is reflected in calls for treating learners as subjects, stimulation and optimisation of development, taking advantage of possibilities, wide individualisation in education. According to Doll (1993), the demands mentioned above are more quickly accepted and widespread in societies that have some democratic traditions, and in reference to the levels of education – in education of adults, due to the specificity of the learning subject.

In education, subjectivity means that human beings are ‘somebodies’, that have a given identity, possess more or less distinct ‘individuality’, which makes them different from other people and their actions depend largely on themselves. Subjectivity is considered to be an ability typical only of humans and refers to being aware of the fact that individuals undergo changes and that they have influence on these changes thanks to their own, more or less autonomous activities (Pietrasziński, 1987). We can also talk about subjectivity when a human being’s activity is conscious, has been initiated and is continued according to one’s own values and standards. Thus, in education, the subjects are human beings who have a sense of their own distinctiveness from other people and the world, who get to know this world and have an influence on it, who decide about their behaviour, themselves and are responsible

for their own decisions and for following moral and legal standards set up by the society (Górnikowska-Zwolak, 2006).

It is not possible to build and develop a modern society, which requires creating modern individuals, without ensuring conditions facilitating the development of social subjectivity of individuals. A modern person is an aware and engaged citizen who has a sense of one's own self-efficacy, is independent of traditional sources of pressure, especially in making basic decision concerning private matters; this is a reflective and active person, independent in life and feelings, willing to cooperate (Beck, 1992). The basic task of education in a democratic society is creating such individuals.

Although education and socialisation of boys aims at the ideal of a modern man, education of girls and women as students, (both in formal and non-formal types of education), is still too little oriented at work and success, achievements, rivalry and discovering new solutions. Their subjective competitiveness is not developed. They are not taught how to get better qualifications and follow their dreams even if they do not fit traditional norms. In private sphere there is subjective competition between women and they have been prepared for it for ages. Generation after generation they are taught, e.g., the roles of being the object of desire because they compete for objects, appearance, youth, attractiveness among others. Competition for objects does not require public activity. It takes place in private, in a small family environment and at most – in a small group of friends (Górnikowska-Zwolak, 2006).

Many adult women cannot independently decide about their lives, they do not get the status of subjects. Most of them do not have the sense of destiny, learn how not to trust themselves, their feelings, emotions and needs, and build negative images of themselves (Hite, 1995). The main consequence of low self-esteem is limited activity, avoiding more difficult tasks and achieving less than one could. A clear boundary between what is feminine and masculine, hidden in symbolic and structural violence of various institutions of formal education, generate adaptation behaviours and do not encourage to going beyond or changing the traditional of gender order. Adaptation to existing social roles becomes a process of imposing students such models, symbols and signs together with their meanings and interpretation, which strengthen the stereotypical division of statuses and roles (Osler, 2006). Adult education, in all its forms and modalities, cannot ignore such negative effects on individuals, and may create opportunities for a change in persons and groups/communities, and for helping to construct a better society with more attentive, critical and reflexive citizens in all dimensions of citizenship (intimate relations, interpersonal relations, intercultural relations, and so on).

Many researchers claim that education, especially critical one, is one of the most effective ways of improving one's self-esteem and, thanks to creating social awareness,

it may generate changes (Kwieciński, 2007; McLaren, 2014). According to Radziewicz-Winnicki (1999), education (critical) is a desirable and optimal emancipation strategy as a means of improving abilities and individual's possibilities to react to the complex impact of stimuli from the environment as well as a way to maintain and protect the reflective world life. The task of adult educators who have a critical approach to teaching is to stop transmitting stereotypical divisions of gender statuses and roles through transformation of the content of the awareness of the adults. Malewski (2010) argues that the subject of education activities of such education of adults will be the structure of "I" in the world of life, and the basic didactic material will be the knowledge of the world of life coded in the life experience (Malewski, 2010, p. 37). Analysing their life in the context of material and economic factors, socialisation and cultural impacts, adults should discover relations between the definition of their own identities and the influence of social structures as well as they should notice their colonisation impact on the contents constituting their self-awareness. Malewski underlines that identifying social sources of human objectification, revealing identity mechanisms that naturalise and legalise objectification constitute the condition of disagreement to the existing world. It is also a set of awareness-related presumptions that should encourage people to create better worlds of life and to look for individual programmes which will allow achieving them.

Critical education of adults – including also gender issues but not confined to them – becomes an education game aiming at a more conscious and subjective existence in the world, which, especially when it takes the form of a collective attitude, can critically (re)construct the public sphere, making it a space of democratic discourse (Fleming, 2009). In critical education knowledge, in its typical meaning as acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles is not the aim. Malewski argues that knowledge becomes a set of cognitive means engaged in the natural process of learning, and searching such knowledge is the task of adult learners, whose educator/facilitator tries to make this search easier in the role of active, "reflective practitioner" (Ecclestone, 1996; Malewski, 2010), helping the learners to undergo genuine transformations as a result of learning experiences. Common knowledge and everyday life as a space of informal learning are of significant importance here, as Knowles (1990) points out. He also recommends treating life experience of adult learners as valuable sources of knowledge. Thus the main aim of (critical) education of adults will be supporting the organisation of people's everyday life as a source of knowledge and recognising it as educationally and developmentally important. It will strive for bigger 'subjectification' (considering the learner as a 'Subject') of adult learners in the process of adult learning (Aittola, 1998), including 'subjectification' of women and men in the process of creating their own identities and mutual relation.

## Conclusions

Traditional ideas rooted in essentialism and androcentrism about men and women characteristics inform socialization in different contexts of life and give rise to gender stereotypes that may have an impact in how adults see themselves as learners and participants in learning situations as well as in social life. They could also contaminate the role of the educator in a silent or a surreptitious way. Because of that, sexist attitudes against the individual's true potential to learn could be exerted either by the learner and the facilitator or learning, and in both cases it may not be a conscious process.

Following the thought of Brookfield (2009) adult education practitioners should exert an effort of reflection in the exercise of their profession, but such attitude could be congruent with the maintenance of the several roots of inequalities in which our society is built up. It is time to go further and make use of critical reflection, and this means an auspicious tendency by adult educators – and all the entities with educational responsibilities (like family, children' and adolescent' teachers, media, political agents – to question canons, structures of power, hegemonies, uncover forms of alienation that prevent male and female adults from opening before themselves new possibilities of learning and to perceive some learning experiences as valuable and useful for themselves. Such competence of critical reflection must be first developed by the adult educator, as a process of self-inspection about own beliefs and conceptions that may be clouding the lenses through which the world and knowledge is approached, and only after that it is possible to strive to develop the aforementioned competency in the learners.

As a synthesis of the utopia that foster adult education field, the Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire asserts, in 2002, that

It is part of the dream of liberation, the constant pursuit of freedom, [the improvement of] life, and the overcoming of all forms of discrimination. Critical education, able to unveil processes, plays an undeniable role in this practice. It will be more and more effective in the daily experience of society if it diminishes the strength of discriminatory processes. (p. 228)

The process of learning itself, and the knowledge can in fact be the best tool to improve our lives, but "it may also thwart our development by entrapping us in the vicious circle of unreflectively reproduced socialization patterns" (Nizińska, 2016, p. 102). It is connected both with the contents of educational curriculum and with knowledge derived from everyday life. The knowledge of educational curriculum reflects interests of its creators, their aims and cultural ways of world conceptualization, supporting existing social, political, and economic systems (Barr, 1999; Machado &

Formosinho, 2012). That is why we need a critically and emancipatory focused adult education that is based on critically oriented teachers/facilitators who are analysts of individual ways of life, and who do not treat knowledge naively, also regarding gender issues directly connected with their own and others' daily experiences.

As we presented before, the idea of integration of gender issues in adult education has a developmental potential for all the participants in the learning process, especially for women. That is why it is worth thinking how adult educators or facilitators can be helped to be more sensitive and aware of inequalities and gender (as well as race, class, disability or religion) discrimination through courses and training, as well as to create more supportive, egalitarian relations with adult students. Critically analysing and revealing hidden aspects of adult education, the functioning of adult education institutions and the process of adult learning could allow both women and men to develop more entirely and to realize their own aspirations. Including gender perspective in educational curriculum could contribute to build learners' gender awareness and their sense of creating new social values such as equality, and social justice.

The contemporary world will require more and more often, people to be members of an open, plural, multi-cultural, individualised and egalitarian society. Education should prepare them for such world because this is what democracy and social justice demand. In this sense, gender sensitive adult education is education aiming at decreasing inequalities (not differences) between men and women in creating life (and educational) expectations and opportunities to reach one's own goals; inequalities which do not result from the differences in sex but from the organisation of institutions and social life in which "masculine" traits and values are appreciated and rewarded. Such education will make it possible to create alternative systems of meanings and going beyond the dominating interpretation and representation of the world, which will enable meeting the demand for creating equal opportunities for men and women. This, however, should not be done in the way Robin Hood used to do, i.e. equally, that is the same for everybody, but the aim should be making equal "initial conditions, progress and effects of education" (Kwieciński, 2007, p. 46), which would result in general critical literacy. Thus, critical and reflective education, which first of all will give men and women basic competencies needed to understand the culture and social world in which they live; to (re)construct their own life in an autonomous way, which does not have to be consistent with the dominating culture or structure. All types of education should take into consideration social contexts conditioned by gender in following and reaching ultimate education aims, which means an education understood as an integral part of social policy, not detached from real social life, nor excluding or undervaluing some types of individuals or groups and their specific problems.

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