

## **Where are the women? Empowerment and female participation in social and solidarity economy.<sup>1</sup>**

**Key words:** empowerment, female participation, social and solidarity economy.

The issues related to gender inequality are not only myths grounded in the sexist characteristic of our society. Despite the Herculean struggles outlined by several movements trying to guarantee gender equality, in practice prejudice still hunts its victims. Some data reveal, for example, that women earn 73.8% of the income paid pay for men to occupy the same positions and / or roles. When it comes to leadership positions, the process is further intensified. For every six men in leadership positions, there is only one woman (Brasil, 2013).

The organizations inserted in the social and solidarity economy field are – or at least should be - underpinned by values that differentiate them from capitalist enterprises. These figures point to the pursuit of equity among individuals who mobilize projects. This horizontality perspective is of utmost importance so that the organizations truly practice a social and solidarity economy. Therefore, the issue of gender disparity is also present in this organizational format, as Bonet and Moreno (2004), and León, Lario and Hernandez (2011) point out.

The issue of gender inequality draws the attention of several multilateral organizations, such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), which proposed to organize, back in 2005, a study to delineate gender disparity. For that, it carried out its survey in 58 countries worldwide. One of the considerations that caught our attention in this report was the fact that it points empowerment as a theme of interest. Therefore, empowerment can be appraised in many different ways, as we are going to reveal throughout this research. It can, nonetheless, be seen from the perspective of assisting the promotion of gender equity.

With these findings, this article intends to reflect on the phenomenon of empowerment in organizations of social and solidarity economy, pointing out its possibilities and limitations within the contemporary society. For that, we are going to stick to the story of two women, both occupying leadership positions and involved in handicraft in the organizations for which they work. These organizations are based in the cities of Blumenau and Florianopolis, both in Santa Catarina State, South of Brazil. In order to increase the scope of interpretation and the search for greater contextualization, we have opted for oral history as a research method.

The article is then sectioned as follows: we will draw out some considerations on the social and solidarity economy theme, to then discuss about social and solidarity economy and gender issue, and empowerment and gender. After these theoretical developments, we will draw out methodological procedures that will help us to conduct the research based on oral history. In sequence we will analyze the data according to the theoretical perspectives developed, so in the end we are able to deliver some final remarks on the cases along with the researched themes.

### **Social and Solidarity Economy**

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Here we will talk about some concepts related to social and solidarity economy (SSE). The theme is of great importance for this research, since it congregates several definitions and conceptions. Therefore, if treated superficially, it can lead to epistemological problematic regarding the theoretical development of the research. The comprehension of how the terms were built, along with their historical and social context are of utmost importance to us.

Based on that, Reintjes (2008) states that SSE arrives as an answer to social, economic and cultural deterioration descendant from the dehumanization of the economy that affects mainly the most vulnerable portion of the population. If thought globally and with a strong ethical force, SSE contributes to democratize and socialize the economy and society itself. It aims the search of the roots of the economy, putting it at people's service, which have necessities that are not only the demand for goods. Reiterating Rattner's thought (2008), SSE slowly raises awareness and motivates people to transform economical values, structures, and relations. In which a "cooperative globalization of solidarity, an economy (from the Greek *eco-nomia*) recreated as the management and care (-*nomia*) of the house (*oikos*), from the domestic, the home, and the local community until the Planet Earth" (Reintjes, 2008, p. 89).

The expression 'social and solidarity economy' refers to several experiences, such as familiar agriculture forms, cooperatives, recyclers, experiences of solidarity finances, exchange clubs, amongst many others, pointing out to a vast amount of activities. According to Lisboa, A. (2009), the term has consolidated and unified all these experiences, enabling their articulation around a broad social movement.

The interpretation to which SSE proposes is a kind of specific articulation among the economical, political and social spheres according to the different logics that underline these experiences. Soon, it is a kind of economy that does not come to form a sector of itself (the third sector), but to interact with the dominant economical forms in a private perspective of diverse economical principles, considering other imperatives of the organizational or collective action, such as an associative project, for example.

The participants of this kind of activity establish a bond of reciprocity as the foundation of their cooperative relations, featuring solidarity that extends to the neediest social sectors, through the mobilization of unemployed workers, and also via services destined to homeless people.

On the other hand, says Lisboa, A. (2009), it is important to highlight that these enterprises are on the market, and not in a non-mercantile or non-monetary, nor in an unprofitable sector as the third sector. SSE is not part of an unprofitable dimension, because there is a profit measure in ventures even when using other terms as results, leftovers or surplus. It is the presence of this dimension that allows the venture to reinvest on itself, to renovate, giving sustainability to the economic activity. However, the author continues, the originality of SSE is being on the market without compromising with the relentless profit pursuit, as the practice of fair price in the projects demonstrates. We think in an economy seeking an advance of civilization through the improvement of its productive force in a sustainable way, generating a new pattern of human relationships. The differential is, therefore, on the idea that solidarity cannot be seen as an adjective only, but as a new form to economic logic that incorporates the social (Lisboa, A. 2009).

And, for that,

No doubt they have difficulties to affirm themselves before an insidiously conqueror liberalism and a competition hardened by crisis and globalization. No doubt, also, its integration in the management of very social and very competitive activities weakened the rebellious spirit of its origins. No doubt collective companies have difficulties to unite when what separates them (statutes, activities, size, strategic choices...) masks what unites them. No doubt, at last, this social and solidarity world seems to be, to the neophyte – and sometimes even to the embattled militant! – very complex, with its atypical statutes, its divisions, and sometimes its scandals [...] (Demoustier, 2006, p. 11).

However, even though all what has been exposed is true, it is noteworthy that collective enterprises are diverse and plural. That is why the questions that arise are also numerous and complex. Nowadays, differently from what was presented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when people were looking for alternatives to capitalism, they are encouraged to manage everyday issues, which signals the inability to modify the structures seen as an issue in changing social progress in the short term (Demoustier, 2006 p. 11).

The multiplicity of organizational forms, characteristic of the SSE field of study, is a reflex of a vast space of theories and practices. Within this context, the gender matter is noteworthy, since this organizational type is intended otherwise in the economic exercise. With that, dealing with the distinct values of a neoclassical economic view, what can be said about women in SSE? This is an issue we discuss below.

### **Social and Solidarity Economy and Gender**

Brazilian population is of approximately 198 million people, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2011). Of these, about 100.8 million are women, 97.5 million are men, 85% of them live in the urban area, while 15% live in the rural area. The economically active population (over 15 years of age) is of 69.88%, out of which 59.74% are women. The average amount of time spent on housework by women is of 22 hours a week, and the time spent by men during the same period is near half of it, totaling 10.3 hours. Even though the average amount of women's years of study is 9.2 against 7.9 of men, the female income is lower, totaling about 73.8% of the male income. Regarding the leadership positions, the numbers indicate greater inequality. For every woman in a leadership position, there are six men (Brasil, 2013).

It is possible to observe, with the data presented above, that women are indeed incorporated into the labor market. On the other hand, the differences are many.

Even though they have different characteristics and values in traditional organizations, these disparities are also present in SSE. This emphasis occurs due to the perceived relationship between SSE and the theme of inequality between men and women. SSE's entities are based in values such as democracy, equality and solidarity, and have their interest focused on the most disadvantaged, which demonstrates a higher sensibility for people's problems and necessities. Besides, they perceive the economic and human development from other types of economic, ideological, political and social matters, as aforementioned. A direct relationship between the SSE fundamentals and the fundamentals related to gender equality is then formed, once these enterprises are based on principles against discrimination (Bonet; Moreno, 2004; León; Lario; Hernandez, 2011).

SSE organizations are inserted within a society with distinct values, and therefore are not exempt to absorbing these values. However, care should be taken not to end up losing their identity when they start reproducing such discriminatory behavior, because this hurts their fundamental principles. SSE organizations must be consistent to their values, empowering them within SSE itself, and also within society. Differently to the neoclassical thought, that sees human beings only as economic figures, SSE considers people to be multifaceted, however not exempt from presenting gender discrimination due to the influences of the social and cultural context where they are inserted. The familiar and social structures are then reproduced within SSE (Bonet; Moreno, 2004).

The formal equality between men and women achieved by the recognition of the rights along with the triumph achieved by women and the advancement of society itself with regards to that, may give the impression that there is no discrimination against women. However, gender discrimination is a reality in today's society – a society that, besides preventing women to have the same opportunities as men, allows a loss on the contribution of women to the labor market, and to the social value they may have for companies and for society in general. It is necessary to promote a change of habits in a way to allow women to grow and remain in positions in which they can fully exercise their duties, promoting a participatory and equitable development (López, 2005).

The concept of empowerment is of great value for understanding the limits and the possibilities that an organization inserted in SSE presents when it comes to the idea of gender inequality.

## **Empowerment**

The concept of empowerment dates from 1960, and mainly refers to the civil rights struggle. With emancipatory politics connotation, it arrives in Brazil in the 1970s, through feminist and black movements. Therefore, as its use was expanded, a conceptual breadth was created with different intellectual and political perspectives, in several knowledge fields (Horochovski; Meirelles, 2007; Kleba; Wedhausen, 2009).

Empowerment may be seen as a structure that links individual strengths and competencies through natural helping systems linked to behavior with proactive policies and social changes. It is a process of formation of organizations and communities, in which the individuals that compose it obtain control of their lives, democratically participating of different collective arrangements in a way to critically perceive their environment, according to Horochovski and Meirelles (2007).

Villacorta and Rodrigues (2002, p. 48) reiterate this thought by stating that empowerment

Is a process through which groups have been excluded and marginalized by economic, social, political, gender causes etc., and try to change this situation and incorporate in the determination of the direction its localities, countries, regions and the world should take. That is why empowerment strategies are paths to more democratic local or national companies, through which groups, actors and sectors get in the process that decide their ways.

Still, the presented term is seen as an approach that seeks to improve the situation and position of the most vulnerable groups. It may present, as a translation, for its Anglo-Saxon origin, an authoritative and allowance meaning, and with that serves as a controlling instrument by some groups or institutions that influence the distribution of power according to their groups of interest, eventually legitimating assistance practices, and depoliticizing conflicts and social contradictions. In this way, it refers to a static process, external to the people that take it in to themselves without actually understanding the context in which it was generated. Therefore, empowerment in the first sense characterizes a dynamic process, built from the practices of the people within the context they are inserted in. It is necessary for researchers to clarify the meaning they are attributing to the concept, identifying the usage possibilities as well as its limits (Kleba; Wendausen, 2009; Meirelles; Ingrassia, 2006).

With that, the idea of the necessity to define of which “empowerment” we are talking about is reinforced, and that is why the perspective of this article sees empowerment as a deepening of democracy, for it sees the individual as the “protagonist of his/her own story” (Gohn, 2004, p. 23), in which the improvement of culture, politics, capital, and democracy are compulsory for the consolidation of this process (Gohn, 2004; Horochovski; Meirelles, 2007; Kleba; Wedhausen, 2009).

Horochovski and Meirelles (2007) ensure empowerment can be comprehended from an emancipatory perspective, in which individuals, organizations, and communities collect resources in order to have a voice, visibility, influence and capacity both for action and for decision. In other words, they are able to control the themes that affect their lives. It relates to a process of citizenship development, which incorporates dimensions of social equality, and differences recognition, for it is malleable and inclusive, allowing invigoration and enhancements with ambiguities, and not necessarily eliminating hierarchies. Empowerment can not be provided or performed by persons or groups – it happens in processes that empower themselves (Horochovski; Meirelles, 2007; Taques, 2006).

The authors warn that external interventions are needed, however, because those who are after empowerment would hardly get the necessary resources (of any kind) spontaneously, due to the disadvantage condition they are in. External agents may favor the actions, creating spaces that benefit and sustain the empowerment processes, since they are profound changes in the empowered lives, providing subsidies so that they can overcome the limits of a naive consciousness. They become critical citizens, conscientious of their positions as individuals in a historical process. This happens because they stop living under guardianship, dependency and impotency, to start living an active life, as people who fight for autonomy, controlling the paths of their own lives (Horochovski; Meirelles, 2007; Kleba; Wendhausen, 2009; Meirelles; Ingrassia, 2006).

Reiterating that thought, Kleba and Wendhausen (2009, p. 736) say empowerment

Means increased power, personal and collective autonomy in interpersonal and institutional relations, especially those submitted to oppressive and discriminatory relationships, and social domination. It happens in a context of social transformation and political development, promoting equity and quality of life through mutual support, cooperation, self-management, and the participation in autonomous social movements. It involves non-traditional learning practices and instructions that develop a critical conscience. In empowerment, process and product imbricate, suffering interference from the social-ecological context, of which profits cannot be measured only in concrete terms, but in relation to feelings, knowledge and motivation etc.

Besides, the process of empowerment can be seen active in three dimensions of social life. Personal empowerment allows the emancipation of the individuals through an increase in the autonomy and freedom of each person. The group level through respect and mutual support among members increases the sense of belonging and reciprocity solidarity practices. Regarding the structural level, it promotes greater engagement, responsibility and effective social participation in the citizenship perspective, and all of these levels happen interdependently and not statically, according to Kleba and Wendhausen (2009).

Empowerment and gender are, therefore, concepts that may result in a rich theoretical debate about how to intervene to improve the situation of gender inequality. In this same line of discussion, we present the section below, which aims to draw bridges between empowerment and gender.

## **Empowerment and Gender**

Gender is not a synonym for women, nor a situation in which the gain of one determines a loss to the other, in case, men. On the contrary, it refers to both, women and men, and to its status in relation to each of those. Gender equity refers to the stage of human development in which "rights, responsibilities and opportunities" of individuals are not determined by the fact that they were born a man or a woman. In other words, a stage in which both, men and women, work in their full potential (FEM, 2005, p. 4).

Inequality between women and men, and gender oppression are based in dogmas that claim the diversity among women and men ends inequality in itself, the latter being natural, historical and therefore irreparable. The social movements have insisted in equity, in the recognition inequality was built and that is unnatural, and also in the necessity of working on concrete actions that aim parity between men and women. Being different does not mean being unequal, and therefore diversity and parity are ethical principles guided by paths that for long have been searching a reality grounded in gender equality, within a democratic base in which humanity would become inclusive and fair (Lagarde, 1996).

The conception of the importance of gender issues for human development reverberated in the World Economic Forum. A broad study on the gender matter was carried out in 2005, involving 58 countries. The research aimed the delimitation of gender disparity, tracing a quantitative profile as a starting point for further analysis regarding women in the

labor market and their achievements, difficulties and opportunities. The Forum has drawn the attention for the issue after realizing gender equity goes beyond being a politically correct topic. It is a strategic matter for many countries that wrongly allocate their human resources when they do not capitalize the potential of half their populations. Thus, from 2005 on women empowerment became a theme of interest for the Forum. Five dimensions were seen as fundamental by the Forum (2005) in order to perceive female empowerment and opportunities: economic participation; economic opportunity; political empowerment; educational advancement; and health and well-being.

The female **economic participation**, in other words the presence of women in the labor market in quantitative terms is important, for it reduces female poverty disproportionalities, as well as it is an important measure to increase the family income and even the countries' economic development as a whole.

Another dimension is the **economic opportunity**, which is related to the quality of economic involvement of women, which goes beyond the verification of the female presence in the work force. It is the work condition, the matching of wages compared to men in the same hierarchical level or in the same function, mobility, growth opportunity, among others.

**Political empowerment** is related to the equitable representation of women in decision-making structures and effective participation with a voice in policies that affect the society of which they are part of. In other words, the absence of women in governmental structures makes priorities and resource allocations to be defined without the meaningful participation of women that own a distinct comprehension when it comes to the society's necessities, concerns and interests.

**Educational advancement** is the prerequisite for women empowerment, since without quality education the women rarely get better jobs, career progresses, government participation, and political influence. The lack of this advancement also perpetuates the exclusionary model in future generations.

**Health and well-being** are related to the considerable differences between men and women when it comes to having access to adequate nutrition, health care, and reproductive facilities, as well as personal integrity. To illustrate the importance of this dimension, here is a fact: 1.600 women die every day worldwide from causes related to pregnancy.

To Friedmann (1992) three spheres of power are compulsory for empowerment to occur. **Social power** refers to access to information, knowledge and skills, social participation and financial resources. An increase in access to these bases promotes an improvement in the ability to set and achieve goals, and also becomes a guarantee of economic survival and independence. **Political power** is related to the access of the individual to the decision making process, especially the one, which affects his/her future. Not only voting, but mainly the speech and the collective actions. **Psychological power**, at last, results from the individual consciousness of strength and confidence. Usually this power is a result of a successful action in the political and social spheres within an inter subjective process. These three types of power form a structure connected to others, creates a net of relations that provide women's empowerment, allowing social change. There is a citizenship achievement, for it is a process in which people create their own vital spaces, in which they start dealing with basic problems, in which they discover capacities to win and overcome both individual and social problems.

First, empowerment occurs in an individual level in which women need to realize they found themselves in a situation of subordination, domination, and discrimination as well as being aware of the reasons for this situation in relation to society. After that, in the group level, in which the identification with other women going through a similar situation should occur; and at last in the structural level, when there is a clash with organized groups and the public sphere. In order for that to occur, it is necessary the empowerment types proposed by Friedmann (1992) - social, political and psychological – articulate themselves, according to Lisboa, T. (2007).

Empowerment, therefore,

Is a power that **affirms, recognizes and values** the women; it is a precondition for equality between men and women; it represents a challenge to patriarchal relations, especially within the family, to the male dominant power, and the maintenance of their gender privileges. It implies radical changes in the processes and structures that reproduce the subordinate position of women as gender; it means a transformation on the traditional dominance of men over women [...] (Lisboa, T., 2008, p. 2, our emphasis).

According to Costa (2006), the empowerment of women also empowers men when they have access to material resources for the benefit of family and community, when sharing responsibilities, and in the emotional field when they allow themselves to go through new experiences, getting rid from the gender stereotypes. With that, the empowerment of women may generate new forms of power, more democratic, with collective responsibilities and shared decision-making processes.

On the other hand, achieving gender equity is a slow process, since it involves changing one of the most deeply rooted human attitudes and requires much more than simple changes the on laws or politics established by society. It requires the adopted practices, from homes to communities, are altered especially in the decision-making processes.

## **Methodology**

As a research strategy, we have used oral history. This methodology allows the researcher to reconstruct the relations among people, to perceive the socialization methods, and the individuals and communities' trajectories. Besides, it allows us to recover stories of groups who have not been previously covered by official records or are unknown to the general public. It is a peculiar approach, since it is a recovery from those who have lived the fact (Vergara, 2010). It is this recovery possibility we have set as our goal throughout our research. It is giving voice to these women, trying to comprehend them, the historical moments they went through and their transformations, and with that understands their empowerment process.

Oral history allow the approximation of an object of study by interpreting the people directly involved with it. It becomes a methodology that previews the participation of those who build the reality to be investigated. With that, oral history can be seen as a interdisciplinary confluence when promoting a qualitative approach between social and individual phenomena (Feuerschütte, 2006). When listening to the SSE women, we are able to work with this proximity regarding their experiences and the social movement in which they were/are involved, and with that we will be able to comprehend how this influences their empowerment.

The methodological choice through oral history was made because it allows the identification of the memory as a foundation of identity, of collective behaviors and mentalities, in which the possibility of individual memory is related to the social and historical insertion of each narrator, allowing multiple elaborations of representations and reaffirmation of identities.

Lang (1996) states oral sources can be in the form of oral history of life and oral accounts of life (thematic oral history) parting from the life and experience of the narrator. The oral history of life is the narrator's story about his/her existence throughout time, and from that the group relations are built, as well as profession, social sphere, and other topics that are up to the researcher to unravel. In the oral accounts of life (thematic), the narrator approaches a life aspect in a special manner, with complete freedom of expression, but aware about the researcher's interest in a given subject. In this case, the selective process involves the narrator and the researcher. Each woman's story is very important for the empowerment process. Therefore, we have opted for the oral history by imagining that empowerment is mainly associated with their participation in the SSE projects.

## Data Interpretation

The first woman interviewed was Ms. I. 56 years old, president of *Tecer*, a business located in the city of Blumenau, in Santa Catarina State, South of Brazil. Her company has 9 associates. All the women involved produce handicrafts. Some are weavers; others work with bookbinding, purses, dressmaking, hair accessories, cabinet items etc. They basically work separated, each in their own place. However, when there are many fairs and expositions, they share the workload in a way they are all able to produce the required amount to such events. This is possible because most of them master the technique employed by the others. The products' sale is mainly done in a space ceded by the local University (Universidade Regional de Blumenau - FURB) once a month in the Solidarity Economy Fair, and also in fairs and expositions that are in town and in nearby cities. Their work is also on the Internet, in websites that sell handicraft. They do not own their own website, though.

Ms. I. is a housewife, mother of four birth children and one adopted child. She has always worked with handicraft. She has started the social and solidarity economy practice when she started working with a neighbor for making crafts for Easter time, aiming the payment of her children's education. The partnership consisted in Ms. I.'s creativity and dressmaking ability, combined with her neighbor's sales and assisting abilities. After that Ms. I. significantly diversified her activities, formally joined the Solidarity Economy Forum of Santa Catarina State, and *Tecer*, from where she is the current CEO. She basically produces jewelry, bags and purses.

Throughout her life, Ms. I. states since she left her parents' house when she was 18, she has always tried to improve her abilities and the quality of life. She got married really young, and dedicated to her family as much as she could, even though she never stopped sewing – she sewed the family's clothes so they could save some money, too. Besides, at the time she already sold some handicrafts (paintings), but as a hobby only. As her kids grew up, she could slowly dedicate a bit more to her training and the improvement of her abilities. She did several DIY courses, and says she did not want to stop learning. When her younger son (the adopted child) went back to live with his mother, Ms. I. abandoned the handicraft and started working in a sock industry – after 30 years working at home. In the same period she started to study Pedagogy, always trying to keep up and improve.

“So, if I had continued with my studies... because only high school wasn't enough. I didn't have computing classes, none of that. And I also didn't want to leave my neighborhood that is why I chose to work in this factory, because it was close to home. I didn't want to go downtown, face traffic, stress, all that.”

After two years of work, she realized she could not keep away from handicraft, and left the company she was working for. In order to establish herself financially, she decided to work as a cleaning lady so she could buy material to restart working on what she loved. In the meantime, her husband got unemployed and she had to quit college to work for more hours and be the breadwinner of the house until her partner found a new job. Her family did not want her to leave her studies, but she had no choice. She needed to increase the family income. After some time her husband also started working with handicraft, but soon left for a regular job.

At this time, Ms. I. states the whole experience was important for her personal growth.

“Yes, it was good. It's because when we do what we love, it's great! And with time, after my husband got fired, we had to learn how to control our income, keep focused, and all that. And I must say handicraft is what maintains us now. I pay for the material, I invest [...]”

In her story we see an indication of an increased control of her personal life, with Ms. I. going from passive to active, as previously pointed out by Horochovski; and Meirelles, 2007. We realized Ms. I. changes her position from housewife to breadwinner. After some time, even not being the breadwinner any longer because her husband got a new job, she was

autonomous with respect to what she produced, and did not depend other people's work to live, but her own.

Another growth opportunity highlighted by her was her participation in *Empretec* (entrepreneurship course offered by the Brazilian Supporting Service for Small Enterprises - SEBRAE). The course is more focused on technology, but it was an initiative promoted by the Technological Incubator of Popular Cooperatives (ITCP) as a way to improve the entrepreneurial capacity of those involved in SSE. Ms. I. was the only one to accept the challenge, and says it was great because she has learned a lot, especially in focusing on and developing cooperation abilities, since during the classes they had to work in teams most of the time. On the other hand, she said it was somewhat difficult, since her husband was working in a different city and she had, at the same time, to spend her days studying and be able to meet the orders made by her customers. A credit union was presented in the course, and even though she did not use the services of this credit union specifically, it was with the help of one that she was able to buy her first industrial machine.

We were able to see how willing Ms. I. was to carry on with her classes in the Technological Incubator of Popular Cooperatives, a way she found to improve; and SEBRAE's will in offering her and other people the chance to improve professionally. As previously exposed by Horochovski; Meirelles (2007); Kleba; Wendhausen (2009); Meirelles; and Ingrassia (2006), the external agents are necessary, since these opportunities would hardly have come up if Ms. I. had not been part of ITCP. Besides, the concern with the training of professionals is pointed out by Friedmann (1992) as key to personal empowerment.

By then Ms. I. was strongly involved with SSE, actively participating in forums and fairs promoted by the movement.

"And being part of this group is great, being with the other associates, we travel and we help each other. Last year we went to Santa Maria. I was representing *Tecer*, and the other, Rute, was representing another business. But I took them all, because *Tecer* is the largest group of the region producing crafts. So we help each other, while some people got to work on their own [...]"

There is a strong concern of the enterprise with environmental issues. Much of the material used is reuse of other materials, especially the fabrics. Ms. I. was alerted about the amount of plastic she used in the partitions of the necessities and handbags she produced. She immediately went after a fabric that could replace the plastic, and at the same time maintain the transparency. This fabric basically comes from curtains' leftover. Even the bags used to pack *Tecer's* products are made of reused fabric. Once again we were able to see the synchrony between SSE and empowerment, since authors dealing with both concepts, as Lagarde (1996); Lisboa (2009), and Gohn (2004) state the importance of sustainability for the actions of SSE and empowerment to extend the critical awareness of all those involved.

At this point we could see Ms. I.'s process of personal empowerment, going from a subordination condition (to her husband at the beginning of her life) to an autonomy situation, reversing the positions. He is the one who nowadays helps with the tasks, not the other way around. According to Friedmann (1992), this would be the first empowerment level, the individual level. Lisboa, T. (2007) states that the empowerment process goes through the change of patriarchal relations, starting by the family, altering the traditional domination structures (of men upon women), guaranteeing more autonomy to the women – phenomenon present in Ms. I.'s speech.

"He, let's say, at the time I started to be more involved, in meetings and such things, he didn't approve it. Then he started going with me, to fairs and all... He represented me in several fairs. Like these days, I was in a fair and spent my Saturday at home, working. I had an order to supply, so he went there in the morning for me, and I met him later on in the day. He likes it nowadays. He also organized our stuff on the Internet. The sales, the contacts with customers, he does it all. He sends the e-mails to me and says: 'Look, you got to do this and that. What do we do first?'"

Another aspect highlighted by her is that SSE has helped her being more independent and confident.

“Along the way [...] Because before I was part of the social economy, I was a mother, a housewife, an artisan... but I lacked confidence. Maybe because I spent many years in the house, and my husband used to look after the bills before that. You know what I mean? Nowadays I do that. At least the main things it's me who does it. I'm better with deadlines.”

A transformation that has also been highlighted by Ms. I. is with relation to her activities both in the newcomers' forums, and on other projects in the training of artisans. She offers short courses before Easter, teaching other people to work on DIY items related to the date. She has taught the participants of *Enlourescer* to confection purses for Mothers' Day, and she has helped a fashion teacher from another project to work with corn stove. In other words, she has served in various ways in the transmission of knowledge, becoming an important reference both in ITCP and the Forum.

Ms. I. says SSE has helped her changing the way she saw the world around her, as well as her participation in it.

“This really gave me more confidence. Even because when I, for example, went to the *Empretec* training, most of the people there already had a college degree, or were almost getting it. There was only one other person who was a bit older, but she also had her college degree. In the beginning I felt lost, with all these people, all with their degrees. I had started my university course, but then I stopped, then I returned for a year and a half. So in the beginning I felt tiny there, but what I could feel during that first week is that it was an amazing week, there was lots of interaction between people, and I realized no one knows everything. Ever. And sometimes you looked at someone and thought 'This one is going to be the best', but that person also made mistakes. Then you see that at the same time SEBRAE taught you how to earn some money, they also worked with you as a person. I believe that is exactly what gives you that self-confidence, because that was when you needed to get up and do your stuff. It wasn't only theory it was practical too. That was what gave strength to everyone, the whole set. Because we were a group [...]. I didn't know if I was going to be able to get my diploma, so when I did, it was a bliss! All the week without sleep, going to bed late because I had other things to do, getting up early, at 6 am, to go to class... it was all worth it. Many people are too critical, saying that SEBRAE only wants our money and all that. But it's not like that. Of course they lead people in a way they'll earn their own money in the future, but they first teach you how to be confident in yourself. So we can not say bad things about the whole without being aware of the details [...] That was when I realized that what is done collectively is what really works. Otherwise it doesn't.”

We realized there was a constant change in Ms. I.'s life throughout the years. These transformations allowed her to see herself more independent and confident. Such changes have also positively affected her family that started seeing her as an active and dynamic woman who continued dedicated to the family members even when busy with so many professional tasks.

The second interview was done with Ms. M., a 65 year-old lady, president of *Cooper*, a business located in a neighborhood named Nova Esperança, in the town of Florianópolis, Santa Catarina State, Brazil. Her business counts with 18 associates, and is based in a space beside the local community's Comunitary House. They work with handicraft, with special attention to the “amarradinho” technique, a kind of DIY that uses fabric clippings to make rugs, purses, accessories, aprons, among other items. They basically work in their houses, except when the demand is greater. When that happens, they reunite in the Association and share the tasks in order to reach their goal. As some of the women do not own their personal sewing machine, they use the machines available in the office. The women meet monthly in order to see what has been done, to verify the finances, and to decide what will be done from

that moment on. The main selling space is an office ceded by the Ministry of Labor in a Solidarity Economy building. They have recently organized a fair in the downtown area, near a supermarket. It is noteworthy a partnership they have with a local university (Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina - UDESC) for the production of bags. The university is also responsible for the development of several DIY courses, and classes related to the community's social demands.

Ms. M. has always been involved with social causes in all the places she has lived in. She got married young, and at 20 she was a widow, with a four-month baby to look after. She wanted to become a midwife and work with her grandmother, but this was not possible due to her lack of study. Ms. M. then started working as a cook. She worked in it for the next 40 years, and got retired by disability, due to a hand injury caused by the many years of work.

"I used to work as a cook in a bank (BESC), and have my weekends off. On Saturdays and Sundays I worked as a volunteer in a community warehouse. And after some time there I retired because my hand was injured. And my salary as a retired person was not enough. No dinner, nothing. Because if you go out and do something, people delate you. Because you are retired by disability and you're not supposed to do anything outside of the house. Just like me, many people in the community needed help."

Always involved with social causes, Ms. M. participated of the occupation of the area where she lives today<sup>2</sup>.

"We were organized to occupy. At first the idea was to force the government to work on a housing project for the needy. As they did not do it, we occupied the space eight months later. All organized. When we did it, we placed the sign 'Nova Esperança' on top of it. We already brought the health people, the education people, the water people... Those who spoke to politicians, those who didn't. I was working at the time and I got a month off because of it. I knew my holidays were over, but it was worth it because these people have been living here for 10 years now."

After occupying the site and organizing the community's ideas, the headquarters of the association and the community house were built. *Cooper* is in the association's headquarters. The sewing machines were originally lent by Ms. M. Posteriorly, UDESC also lent some machines, which are currently being used in the business.

We have seen in Ms. M.'s story the importance of external interventions in the empowerment process, as stated by Horochovski; Meirelles (2007); Kleba; Wendhausen (2009) and Meirelles; and Ingrassia (2006). Throughout her account, for several times she highlights the participation of Archdiocese Social Action (ASA) and of UDESC as important agents both in her training (in case of UDESC), with the offering of training and courses; and in the occupation of the community and in the beginning of her life as an initiator in the social movements (in case of ASA). She also highlights the importance of not being subordinated when manifesting her autonomy and independence to these institutions.

Ms. M. is very active and always participates of the events promoted by the Secretary of Solidarity Economy. She has recently been to the Fair of Santa Maria, in Rio Grande do Sul State, Brazil, an important SSE event, also formed by the II World Forum and the II Solidarity Economy World Fair. She is helping with the participation of several women in the Women World Forum, to happen in Sao Paulo in September 2013. Ms. M. is mobilizing communities to raise funds with festivals and fairs. Besides, she is affiliated to a political party, being asked by some people to apply for a councilor position - which she did not accept because she does not feel able to cope with the intricacies of politics.

At the moment she is thinking about leaving the party (Workers Political Party – PT), for not agreeing with the actions of the current government. She believes the secret is to

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes in Brazil the less favored population, who do not have access to housing in urban areas due to expensive mortgages, invade unoccupied private areas where they built their houses, forming new communities.

educate, train, and let the people follow their own paths, since there are other people who need the same help and they are not able to keep guiding the same ones for a long period without giving chances to others.

“It’s wrong to give the food instead of teaching how to fish. That is why I’m against Dilma’s project. Lula’s project<sup>3</sup>. I believe it’s okay to help. But only until you learn how to walk with your own feet. Because sometimes people come from the country, all they knew was how to plant. So they arrive here, and what do they do? Clean other people’s houses? Sometimes they can’t even do that. So these people got to be trained, and then this training must be given to other families who are in need.”

Gohn (2004) highlights the importance of the development of a critical view of society contrary to another perception that does not deprive the individual being empowered by depending on NGOs or the State. In Ms. M.’s speech, we have seen the proximity of Gohn’s (2004) idea and what she has been through, since she highlights her involvement with the SSE. When disagreeing with the fact of becoming a counselor and thinking on leaving the political party, she shows she has a broad and critical perception of the Brazilian politics.

She encouraged her son to study despite all the difficulties, and today he is an Engineer and promotes, through the Communitarian Association, the education of children and teenagers in an attempt to promote a better life for them in the future. She asked her son to teach computing for children, she promoted courses for volunteer firefighters, as well as several training courses for the community.

Throughout the observations of Ms. M. about the importance of education, we realize that with that she sees an opportunity of empowerment to those people. She encourages, both herself and the others, to go from the condition of patients to agents in their own lives, as stated by Horochovski; and Meirelles (2007). With that they also reach the levels of empowerment highlighted by Friedmann (1992), personal and group, possibly influencing in the structural level.

Ms. M. highlights the importance of the cooperative work,

“Because I believe neighborhood associations got to work together. Only when we, the people, learn by giving hands we are stronger, then we’ll get anything we want. With a community working alone is much more difficult.”

We have also realized Ms. M. has a fairly large role in the political life of the city. She is affiliated to a political party, president of the enterprise to which she is associated, a community leader, and was, on several occasions, the association president and president of the association of associations. She is always in contact with the community’s leaders, and political parties’ leaders. We can also see that she could have an important political participation, based on what Lisboa, T. (2007) calls ‘time and voice’. To Friedmann (1992) political empowerment requires a social empowerment, which is due to an improvement in self-confidence, which in turn comes from greater participation. That, in Ms. M.’s case, is a constant.

Another concern of Ms. M. is with the environmental issue. Most of the material she uses while working is donated fabrics and plastic bottles. It is only when she can not get specific reused materials that she buys them. She has even modified her production process once she realized what was being done was not that useful for selling. The greatest demand is for craft with practical utility, such as rugs, purses and aprons instead of dolls and such ornaments.

Ms. M. says being part of SSE throughout her life made a huge difference in her training. It was there she found support to arrange and organize the communities in which she lived in the past and lives nowadays, and as she is extremely active, we can see that this is

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<sup>3</sup> Dilma Rouseff is the country’s current president, and Lula is Brazil’s former president. Both are part of the Worker’s Political Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT).

part of her daily life. She knows the people involved in the social movements, participates in several fronts, knows the leaders, operates in more than one community and is often the acting president of the business she is in.

We believe that from the stories of Ms. I. and Ms. M., even though they are different, it is possible to see the empowerment of each of these women throughout the years. The growth of each of them, the acquired self-confidence, the independence and the importance of each on the social and solidarity economy in this process was highlighted in their speeches. Both are active on their own way, and also dynamic and influential, going from a spectator position to the position of agents of their movements. With that, we understand there is a strong participation of women in SSE in the cities of Florianópolis and Blumenau. We interviewed only two women, but in their speeches they demonstrated the involvement of others in their businesses, and also on the movement as a whole. We understand the research can be extended to other businesses so we can renew our perception about female participation, empowerment, and social and solidarity economy in Santa Catarina State, Brazil.

We will now give our final remarks on this research, working with the idea of possibilities and limitations this study has brought to light. We believe new ideas for future researches may arise from these findings, thus seeking to extend the concepts treated in this field of study.

### **Final remarks**

Both cases brought into light by this paper are instructive, in our view, for debating the gender and empowerment matters in a way which helps to glimpse a horizon based on the promotion of equity, with this process occurring in organizational formats that emphasize horizontality, thus postulating the equality of rights and conditions for the exercise of leadership positions.

Dealing with the presented cases specifically, the increase of control on the personal lives of these women caught our attention. Usually related to the gain of financial autonomy, this fundamentally changes the familiar structures, for what before was the man's part, becomes the woman's. With that, women become an important piece in the domestic life's decision-making processes.

Another fact we would like to discuss is their engagement in perspectives that were previously not treated in their everyday lives. Environmental matters and support to a given political party, for example, became common in the lives of these ladies. This happened because they both gained awareness of the contexts in which their lives were embedded. As a consequence, their craft-making began to be linked with environmental issues. Another matter is their political involvement, during all the stages of their lives, shown from their worry about the access to housing to the support given to political parties.

At last, we have raised two topics that may assist in enlarging the perspectives discussed above. First the importance of external organizations in promoting the empowerment of these people, as ITCP and UDESC, for example. However, up to what point are these organizations able to influence the possibilities drawn by these people? And, second, when should these organizations let these people follow their paths on their own?

The businesses visited by us were all formed by women. Based on this, an interesting question to be asked is: to what extent the access to leadership positions would be possible in an environment where men were also present? How would that perspective be in a business composed by both men and women?

We are aware these matters arise from our perception after speaking to these two ladies, and will certainly be useful for future studies based on what we have found out here – the female empowerment process associated to social and solidarity businesses.

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