"Not quite women: Lesbian activism in Portugal"[1]

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Abstract:

Lesbian activism is a recent phenomenon in Portugal. Due to the country's specific development pattern, lesbian organisations only began to emerge during the 1990's, usually as subsidiary of major lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual organisations. They have, nevertheless, roots in past attempts of consciousness-raising led by some women networks. Lesbian activists appear to be very critical of the extent and scope of women's *and* lesbians' social mobilisation abilities in the context of the Portuguese society, and consequently of its actual outcomes in terms of women's empowerment. As for women themselves, involvement in political activism is seen alternatively as a dangerous or as an unnecessary and personally awkward exposure. Adhesion to lesbian organisations, as well as the very formation of lesbian networks seems to be particularly dependent on opportunity structures – namely State policies, juridical frames, and class origin –, as much as on dominant and class-specific representations of lesbianism. Furthermore, Portuguese feminism, with few exceptions, seems to have always opposed itself to any kind of alliance with lesbianism and to the admission of formal lesbian networks within feminist organisations. Altogether, these factors contribute to highlight the existence of a socially variable access to cultural, social, and economical resources, which determine both women's willingness to get actively involved in political struggles, and the way they deal with same-sex desire, with considerable and uneven impacts on their personal and psychological well-being. This paper, resorting to document analysis and to interview data, is an attempt to explore the origins and representations of lesbianism in Portugal, relating them to the recent emergence of a lesbian activism oriented towards the promotion of women's well-being and political rights.

Introduction

In Portugal, scientific production on homo-eroticism, in general, and on female homo-eroticism, in particular, is quite scarce, especially when compared to Anglo-Saxon countries. In part, this can be explained by the strength of these countries' gay and lesbian activism, which has contributed to the proliferation of research on the subject and to the affirmation of its importance next to public powers.

This article is largely based on the results of a PhD research on female homo-eroticism and the social construction of identities, which included an attempt to draw the main development lines of gay and lesbian activism in Portugal. The research followed a qualitative approach, combining macro and micro-sociological analysis. Data presented here were gathered through interviews and document analysis. Interview data refer to five in-depth interviews conducted next to the leaders of the four main Portuguese gay and lesbian organisations, namely *Opus Gay*, *Grupo de Trabalho Homossexual do Partido Socialista Revolucionário* [Homosexual Work-Group of the Socialist Revolutionary Party] (G.T.H.-P.S.R.), *Grupo de Intervenção e Reflexão sobre o Lesbianismo* [Group of Intervention and Reflection on Lesbianism] (*G.I.R.L.*) (one of *Ilga-Portugal*'s interest groups), and *Clube Safo*; and to the life-stories of eighteen anonymous women, aged between twenty-three and fifty-four by the time they were interviewed, and living in the North of Portugal. Women were chosen through snowball sampling and belong to three distinct generation groups: one whose adolescence and coming of age took place prior to the 1974 Revolution; another one whose adolescence and coming of age took place during the stabilisation stage of the democratic regime, a transition period; finally, a group whose adolescence and coming of age took place by the end of the 1990's.

Considering both the incipient research on such matters in Portugal and the fact that this work is one of the first – and still one of the few – in-depth works on the subject, results should be viewed with caution, and certainly do not intend to be exhaustive. An additional limitation should be emphasised: the fact that it is sometimes rather difficult to locate and to have access to sources produced by women and about women, especially in the historical context of the Portuguese society.

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1990's, usually as subsidiary of major lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual organisations. They have, nevertheless, roots in past attempts of consciousness-raising led by some women networks. However, as lesbian activists themselves contend, women's *and* lesbians' social mobilisation in the context of Portuguese society is still rather limited and so are the actual outcomes in terms of their empowerment. Moreover, whereas feminism, in other societies, has sometimes worked as an incubator of lesbian activism, in Portugal, with few exceptions, it seems to have always opposed any kind of alliance with lesbianism, let alone the admission of formal lesbian networks inside its organisations.

In fact, such standpoint is not completely alien to other realities, since feminism seems to have always been at odds with a common representation of feminists as being not quite women – just as lesbians have. This imagery, of course, contributes to render affairs between both less than peaceful, and constantly recalls two major features of our societies: hetero-normativism and male domination. Against such backcloth, women's involvement in lesbian activism is seen alternatively as a dangerous or as an unnecessary and personally awkward exposure. In particular, adhesion to lesbian organisations, as well as the formation of lesbian networks seems to be particularly dependent on opportunity structures – namely State policies, juridical frames, and class origin –, as much as on dominant and class-specific representations of lesbianism.

This article is organised in two parts. It sets off a brief historical outline of women's condition in Portugal since the last century, focusing on the emergence of feminist struggles. Its purpose is to draw the country's social, cultural, and political context and its impact on the late emergence and limited scope of lesbian activism. Such historical background provides, therefore, basic information to understand the relation between lesbian activism and the women's movement in Portugal, as well as the difficulties they both face(d) regarding women's political mobilisation.

In fact, considering that the regulation of sexuality is intimately linked to gender relations, feminism is an important part of the history of lesbian activism. Feminists have frequently been taken for lesbians, either as confirmation of the latter's actual involvement in the women's movement or as an intimidating strategy against feminist contentions. But if it is true that many lesbians have actively engaged in political struggle due possibly to their particular awareness of gender inequity, such threat also explains feminist organisations' conflicting and ambivalent positions towards lesbianism and especially towards any public declarations of lesbianism. Conversely,

and also considering the limited reach of the women's movement in Portugal, lesbian organisations have had to deal not only with the stigma of lesbianism, but also with the lack of support of feminist organisations regarding the discussion and advancement of their claims. Considering this picture, lesbian activists' systematic allusion to persistent mobilisation problems is perhaps not surprising.

In part two, women's representations of lesbianism and of lesbian activism are discussed. Socially variable access to cultural, social, and economical resources seem to determine both women's willingness to get actively involved in political struggles, and the way they deal with same-sex desire, with considerable and uneven impacts on their psychological well-being.

To many women, homo-erotic desire continues to be a source of considerable inner pain and a hindrance to the fulfilment of their citizenship rights. However, their fear of the negative consequences of disclosing their homo-eroticism both on the personal and social levels emerges as the central reason for their refusal of any public political involvement. Nevertheless, and despite their (non)adhesion to lesbian activism, especially whenever the latter implies public exposure, and their more or less constant appeal to a "normal" life, interview data highlight the fundamental contribution of lesbian organisations' action in the reduction of personal and social isolation, as well as of feelings of inadequacy with important impacts on women's lives and well-being. This can be seen especially by comparing the descriptions that different generations of women provide regarding the way they have dealt with homo-erotic desire.

By comparing the discourses of gay and lesbian activists with those of common women, this article aims to contribute to highlight the semi-peripheral characteristics of the Portuguese society, especially those linked both to divergences between the elites' representations and those of the common citizens to whom their claims are addressed, as much as between what is stated in legal codes and ordinary people's experiences. Particularly, it shows that recent social, political and juridical changes do not prevent homo-erotic desire from emerging as a disaggregating experience to many women, even if it is already possible to observe the positive effects of such transformations both from the personal and social points of view.

1. The "women's issue"[2] and lesbian activism in Portugal: a contribution

By the end of the XIXth century, the women's movement has brought to public what had remained private for centuries, and articulated women's experiences in a multiplicity of different discourses and strategies of action. For the first time, changes in capitalist societies provided conditions for women to denounce, in a systematic way, through their own voices and more or less acutely, the life conditions they were subject to. Transgressing the public space and claiming access to dominions up to then considered being masculine – school, paid work[3], personal and sexual autonomy –, feminists departed from the traditional prototype of femaleness. For this reason, they were/ have been the target of a number of diatribes, all invariably highlighting the splintering of gender borders and sexual transgression. It is against such backcloth that Portuguese feminists, too, have been frequently classified as "masculine", even "inverted" or "lesbians" (Abranches, 2001; Emonts, 2001; Silva, 1983)[4].

In Portugal, the process of female emancipation presents some historical divergences when compared to the rest of economically developed Europe. The outburst of feminist struggles by the late XXth century was cut short by the emergence of the autocratic regime known as *Estado Novo* (1933-1974)[5]. The specific configuration assumed by Salazar's regime in the world context and its particular impacts on gender relations and the family stand for a retrocession, despite its frequently paradoxical and ambivalent stance on these levels. The appeal to conservative and traditionally Catholic ideals of femininity and family has led, namely, to legislative recoil regarding some conquests of the I Republic (1910-1926). Changes in women's juridical status during the latter included, specifically, the right to divorce, access to public office, the right to publish their works, and some changes in family law linked especially to parental rights, as well as a more favourable position regarding the penalties for adultery. The emergence and consolidation of the *Estado Novo* brought legal changes, which, among

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[2] The "women's issue" was the expression commonly used in Portugal during most of the XXth century to refer broadly to feminist debates.

[3] Especially in the case of middle and upper class women, since lower class women were already part of the labour force by an imperious need of survival. In Portugal, in 1890, according to Nunes (1991), women were 36% of the active population, concentrating especially in services (81% of the total labour force of the sector), transformation industry (35% of the total labour force of the sector), agriculture (31% of the total labour force of the sector), and commerce (30% of the total labour force in the sector).

[4] In fact, these seem to have been common accusations against feminists in other countries (see, e.g., Faderman, 1992).

[5] This could be translated as the "New State".

other things, prevented married women from leaving the country or starting their own business without their husbands' consent; these regained the right to require their judicial "return" should they abandon home; women were banned from access to judicial magistracy and to certain public office functions; they were prevented from collecting their own pay; and the signature of the 1940 Concordat with the Holy See prevented all catholically married individuals from divorcing, which, in a Catholic country, meant that, in practice, divorce became basically forbidden[6].

The *Estado Novo* emerged with an evident hierarchical proposal of social and political organisation where each individual had a precise role necessary to the "good health" of the public thing. Beside the individual's submission/ sacrifice to the collective, such hierarchy was characterised and reinforced by a clear demarcation of gender borders: men and women were considered to be "naturally" and essentially unequal, a principle consecrated in the 1933 Constitution[7]. Men were seen as "family heads" and breadwinners; women were supposed to be the family's "moral guardian", in charge of "domestic economy" and child education and care (Belo, Alão & Cabral, 1987; Gameiro, 1998; Guinote, 1989b, 2001b). To the regime's ideologists, the ideal woman was thus defined by domesticity (all women being formally dissuaded from engaging in paid work) and motherhood, and economy, sacrifice, submission, and resignation were the exalted "feminine" virtues.

Despite the action of the *Estado Novo* being often characterised by duplicity and by the difficulty to control the unintended results of national and international transformations[8], the subaltern situation Portuguese women were formally forced to

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[6] On these matters, see Catroga (1988), Beleza (1990), Ferreira (1993), Guimarães (1986), and Vicente (2001).

[7] Article 5 of the 1933 Constitution read: "Equality before the law involves the right to be provided in public office according to ability or rendered services, and the denial of any privilege accorded to birth, nobility, aristocratic title, sex, or social condition, except, *in the case of women, differences resulting from their nature and the good of the family*, and as for the citizens' duties or advantages those imposed by the diversity of circumstances or by the nature of things" (in Miranda, 1976: 221, our italic).

[8] Ideological concern with all those who departed from the ideal life-way and conduct – the "deviant", the "promiscuous", the "wanderers" – consecrated in what Pais (1989: 352) has called the "social prophylaxis of «con»", can be read in more than one way. It reveals the presence of a variable distance between normative frames and social practices. In this sense, such ideals would refer to precepts more characteristic of certain social milieus, and were far from being universal. This would explain the regime's special concern with blue-collars, city folks, and women who departed from the domestic ideal, for example. Dominant discourses may thus represent more an aspiration than the faithful portrait of a more complex social reality always at risk of evading their regulatory power, although the implementation of censorship certainly made it difficult to escape their (re)socialisation abilities. In fact, the regime itself often provided the conditions for this evasion. As an example, Belo, Alão, & Cabral (1987) remark it has ended up ascribing women un unprecedented social and political visibility, especially when compared to its Italian and Nazi counterparts: unlike these, in Portugal women were not driven away from school (even though schooling indicators have remained enduringly poor), intellectual

would only change notoriously with the Revolution of April 1974. Up until then, changes were slow and contradictory, but they would eventually give place to an increasing distance between the institutional discourses of the regime, on one side, and the citizens' attitudes and practices, on the other[9]. This gap intensified during Portugal's "golden years" of economic growth (1960-1973) as a consequence of an industrialisation outburst, investment on tourism, migratory fluxes, and increasing job opportunities for women linked to the scarcity of male labour force brought about by emigration and the colonial war.

Meanwhile, the regime's position regarding feminist pretensions had been made very clear when, in 1948, the major and most enduring Portuguese feminist organisation – the *Conselho Nacional das Mulheres Portuguesas* [Portuguese Women National Council], founded by Adelaide Cabete, in 1914 – was compulsorily extinguished (Silva, 1983; Vicente, 2001). If this did not prevent many women from continuing such work, it led to a certain erasure of feminist concerns from public view. Nevertheless, the ongoing transformations would make way for the gradual emergence of the second wave of Portuguese feminism in the 1970's[10], in the context of a widespread social and political unrest, which would culminate in the 1974 Revolution.

The Revolution hastened changes, especially in legislation. Education and access to certain civil rights had been first wave feminists' major concerns[11] and they will

women were not devalued, and Salazar accepted and favoured single women's access to public office and political action. Curiously enough, it was also during his regime that women were allowed to vote for the first time, in 1934, even though such right was limited to those who had a university or high school degree, or the ones who were actually considered to be "family heads" (widows, separated, divorced, and celibate women in charge of a family, or married women whose husbands were not in the country) (idem; Rosas, 1985).

[9] Such distance seems to increase namely from the 1950's on under the influence of the country's adhesion to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (O.E.C.D), the European Free Trade Association (E.F.T.A.), and the General Agreement on Trade Taxes (G.A.T.T.), which forced economic – but also cultural – opening to external influence.

[10] The publication, in 1972, of the book *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, authored by Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Isabel Barreno, and Maria Velho da Costa is usually considered the most significant sign of the public resurgence of Portuguese feminism. Both the book's themes – including subjects such as the body, sexuality, pleasure and gender relations – and the always straightforward and sometimes intrepid language reflects a position literally at odds with the regime's regarding women's place, and it was a bold denunciation of their actual condition. The work was confiscated by the political police and the authors were subject to a legal sue (known as the "Three Marias' process"), which would only be withdrawn after the Revolution. The three women only escaped prison, according to Magalhães (1998), because the regime was under the attention and hostility of the international community due to the colonial matter and thanks to the intervention of international feminist organisations.

[11] Though not peaceful ones: divorce and the right to vote have never been equally viewed and defended by all feminist organisations during the I Republic. Instead, they were matters of internal dissension (see Catroga, 1988, Esteves, 1998, and Ferreira, 1993).

remain so for second wave feminists, but their contours change[12]. However, just like their first wave counterpart, they met with disbelief and resistance. In fact, in 1975, the first and only feminist demonstration in Portugal took place in Lisbon. Folk reactions recalled by Magalhães' (1998) interviewees show that shortly after the fall of the autocratic regime (just as between the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth) feminists were seen as gender transgressors. The women who took part in the demonstration were insulted and accused of being "shameful", "ill-loved", and lesbian, and encouraged to return to "their" places – "kitchen and bed"… In fact, women's – and especially lower-class women's – difficulties to be heard inside and outside political parties and trade unions, and to participate in public and political debates have been pointed out as the main reason for a dislocation of the feminists' initial focus on legal battles to consciousness-raising activities (Magalhães, 1998; Rodrigues, 1983)[13].

But despite profound transformations in written law, during the following decades factual inequality between men and women continues to be manifest, often remaining implicit and working against the latter. The construction of female identity, specifically, continues to rest on the internalisation (and expectation) of a – at least relative – pattern of sexual restraint and on the overvaluation of women's roles as mothers and wives, along with a depreciation of female sexuality detached from marriage or "serious" commitment, from maternity and from men, even if the shapes and liaison principles to the conventional heterosexual patriarchal model it is the heir of have changed (cf. Beleza, 1990; Machado, 1999; Pais, 1985b)[14].

Regarding specifically the relation between lesbianism and activism, two factors are indispensable to its understanding in the Portuguese case: on one side, the fact that most discourses – religious, clinical, political, and juridical – about the first have been

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[12] Magalhães (1998), for example, marks that the essence of feminist concerns with education no longer refers to women's access to formal education, but more often to criticisms addressing the "male" character of pedagogical practices, of the construction of scientific knowledge, and of the hierarchical social relations in the school context.

[13] According to Magalhães (1998), Portuguese second wave feminism will subsequently focus on: legislation changes, especially regarding the Civil Code (1970-1978); consciousness-raising and access to decision positions (1984-1990); and the production of knowledge about women (since 1990).

[14] Furthermore, in jurisprudence texts and law codes it is still possible to find embedded forms of gender discrimination. Referring specifically to Family and Penal Laws, Beleza (1990), e.g., claims that in juridical discourse women are usually represented as "objects" and men as "subjects"; women appear as part of a family, whereas men appear as citizens; women are seen as "non-men"; and men continue to be implicitly seen as "family heads". And recent research continues to show the presence of gross gender asymmetries in three fundamental areas: conciliation between private and professional lives; scarce, or inexistent female rise to decision positions within political, corporate, religious, military, and civic organisations; and the use of physical, sexual, and psychological violence of which women are the main victims (Vicente, 2001: 208).

invariably characterised by condemnation or dismissal. This means that although legal codes did never explicitly consider lesbianism as a crime, they did so implicitly by allowing it to be included in general clauses referring to (male) homosexual practices or to the figure of "outrage against decency". On the other side, the country's specific characteristics in terms of economic, social, and political development – and particularly, its late industrialisation – have prevented the formation of gay and lesbian enclaves, and consequently the emergence of a sense of common identity or its social revaluation through the action of a gay and lesbian movement (Gameiro, 1998)[15]. Importantly, limitations to freedom of association and speech during the *Estado Novo* period have worked as an important impediment to any such attempts.

Still, research on the relation between lesbianism and feminism has systematically revealed the existence of internal dissensions regarding the meaning and the importance of feminism to lesbian women (Faderman, 1992; Kitzinger, 1995; Stein, 1997; Wilton, 1995). One of the reasons provided for such internal conflict would be precisely the resistance of certain sectors of the women's movement to the full inclusion and acceptance of lesbians as a reaction of defence against suspicions, or accusations of lesbianism as strategic attempts to cut short its actions. Simultaneously, lesbian feminists' critical view of heterosexuality as essential to the preservation of male domination seems to have also been seen as a direct questioning of non-lesbian feminists regarding their own "choices".

Symptomatically, studies about feminism in Portugal – additionally to being scarce – continue to be curiously alien to such problematic. Nevertheless, interviews with lesbian activists seem to point to a certain similarity regarding this matter between Portuguese feminism and its Anglo-Saxon counterparts:

> "[…] there were many lesbians involved in feminist groups in April 1974, but it seems that «lesbian» was a bit of an ugly word back then. And people were there but one pretended there were no lesbians. // As it seems, that was packed up with lesbians,

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[15] According to Gameiro (1998), in Portugal, the phenomenon of geographic appropriation and concentration that can be found in other societies has always had a narrow expression and has been practically circumscribed to the capital. Several factors have concurred to this situation: the small dimension of urban middle classes that only began to have some expression with the 1960's economic modernisation, which would also explain the more recent growth of industries linked to gay and lesbian consumption patterns; the small dimension of the Portuguese "pink market" and the general population's low income; finally, youths' prolonged financial and value-related dependency on their families. Adding to this picture, the presence of an autocratic regime and its censure and repressive mechanisms, and the inexistence, in Portugal, of a movement similar to Gay Liberation can explain why, even today, organised gay and lesbian "friendship networks do not have among Portuguese gays the same core importance they have in other contexts" (idem: 168).

speaking bluntly, but then, what was discussed were matters such as abortion and the like – the usual stuff in feminist groups. And except for groups such as the *Movimento de Libertação de Mulheres* [Women's Liberation Movement] (M.L.M.), where it seems there was some discussion of the primacy of heterosexuality – in short, regarding why these things happen –, among other groups things never went so far... They were less radical, eventually, and so I think it was a bit awkward for them, people coming out as lesbians back then. As some people recall, it was a word that wasn't even spoken inside..."

(Susana Marinho & Luísa Corvo, *GIRL*, interview in Lisbon, May 7th 2003).

In short, lesbianism – or the heterosexual norm, for that matter – seems to have never been part of the feminist agenda in Portugal, and inside feminist organisations there were never organised and formalised lesbian groups or networks (Amaral & Moita, 2004; Marinho, 2001). Several factors may have concurred to this situation: on one side, the fact that Portuguese feminism has always been characterised by elitism and a weak social rooting. Its actions have usually been intermittent, its organisations short-lasting and contrary to clear confrontation with dominant morality. On the other side, the emergence of the *Estado Novo* and its ideological model, which was clearly unfavourable to women has provided a strongly discouraging and restrictive context, rendering more difficult the formation and preservation of specifically female – and therefore, lesbian – networks.

In fact, class and its relation with gender representations appear to have been both an important matter of internal dissension and a fundamental variable to understand why feminists, in Portugal, have been at odds with the political mobilisation of women. Emonts (2001: 32-33), for example, classifies the first wave of Portuguese feminism as a "corset feminism", considering that the metaphor conveys both the idea of its even organised and relatively successful liberation attempts, though it never succeeded in freeing itself from male domination, or of the "cleavage between the official Portuguese feminist movement, the «Ladies'» movement and the rest of the «women», who in most cases could not even afford to buy a corset…". And Catroga (1988: 350-368) similarly defends that it was a "bourgeois feminism", which did not dare to question the fundamental pillars of the capitalist system, or to contest the class inequalities that traversed the female condition.

Curiously, the distinction between "ladies" and "women" emerges once again with second wave feminism. According to Magalhães (1998: 65), difficulties referred even to the choice of the feminist organisations' designations since the word "woman" (unlike the word "lady") was connoted with prostitution or domestic housework. In fact,

this appears to be an ongoing polemic. As two lesbian activists remark, inside feminist organisations some women still claim

> "[…] they are not feminists; they belong to the «feminine» movement […]. Apparently, people are ashamed of the word «feminist» and so they call themselves of the feminine movement!"
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> (Susana Marinho & Luísa Corvo, *GIRL*, interview in Lisbon, May 7th 2003).

Although a history of lesbian networks (and communities) is still lacking for the Portuguese case, it is likely for these to share some features not just with feminist organisations, but also with gay ones.

Homo-eroticism (male and female) was evidently not an unknown phenomenon in Portuguese society, nor was the existence of specific, essentially male homosexual gathering sites at least since the beginning of the XXth century. According to Gameiro (1998), these appear to have been mainly public and marginal spaces – particularly, linked to prostitution circuits – at least until de 1960's, when the first pubs one would nowadays call "gay" or "gay-friendly" opened in Lisbon, behind closed-doors and requiring specific entrance codes. The repressive atmosphere of the *Estado Novo* and the risk of being imprisoned or subject to extortion both by fellow citizens and by the Police was common knowledge. This must have rendered gay and lesbian lives highly secretive, and access to others with similar erotic preferences very dependant on personal acquaintance.

Only in 1974, after the Revolution, which would lead to the implantation of a democratic regime would be possible to watch the first timid public manifestations of a specifically gay activism[16]. Nonetheless, in the Revolution's aftermath and just like feminists, gay activists' intentions would be cut short by a troubled political climate characterised by a generalised opposition of extant political parties to their claims. Even left-wing parties, which are traditionally seen as more favourable to such claims, highlighted the primacy of class struggles and viewed gay and lesbian claims either as a distraction from this core concern or as the manifestation of bourgeois inclinations (Cascais, 2006; Guimarães, 1986).

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[16] Cascais (2006) has recently proposed a typology of Portuguese gay and lesbian activism. According to the author, it is possible to divide the latter into a three stage model: between 1974 and 1990, a period marked by scattered and ephemeral public interventions of particular individuals; between 1990 and 1994, a period marked by the gradual emergence of the first formal and enduring gay and lesbian organisations, under the impulse of the Aids epidemic; since 1995, a period of maturation, marked by an accrued visibility and by the multiplication and geographical spreading of gay and lesbian organisations.

In fact, and unlike other countries, in Portugal, the visibility of gays and lesbians as a specific community with organised forms of political intervention would only emerge as a consequence of the Aids epidemic. Aids, as well as the country's integration in the European Community and the promise of approaching central countries under the latter's influence particularly regarding civil rights, appear to have been fundamental in providing the conditions to form enduring networks, which would be the foundations of forthcoming gay and lesbian associations (Santos, 2005)[17]. In short, Portuguese gay and lesbian activism is an activism, which emerges from friendship networks formed in the context of the first non-governmental organisations linked to Aids prevention and support, where gays and lesbians could be found, although not as such (Amaral & Moita, 2004; Gameiro, 1998; Santos, 2005).

Nevertheless, lesbian activism and lesbian activists have always had a secondary position regarding gay ones, especially a non- or less public one. Lesbian visibility is, in other words, a phenomenon even more recent than gay visibility, and Portuguese formal lesbian organisations emerge much later than gay organisations, even if the latter have often included "lesbian" in their formal designations[18]. Attempts to create organised and specifically lesbian networks seem to date back to the 1990's. They do not emerge as formal organisations but as groups of women gathered around the common idea of changing the *status quo*. Throughout a few years, some of these women – although not all of them at all times – will subsequently publish the first two Portuguese lesbian magazines: *Organa* (1991-1993) and *Lilás* (since 1993).

Document and interview data provide a curious exploratory approach as to the emergence of Portuguese lesbian activism. Specifically, they highlight what seem to be the main characteristics of its history: first, the women who took the initiative to publish those magazines were already friends or the members of lesbian couples; second, many of them had already been in touch with feminist organisations, both national and foreign, and so they were already more or less politicised and/ or had lived in countries where both feminism and lesbian activism were already in place and had already

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[17] And also unlike other countries and largely due to its semi-peripheral situation, in Portugal, the State's late recognition of the need of public intervention to limit the consequences of the epidemic as well as its primal role on this public health matter have facilitated a certain public acceptance of gay and lesbian pretensions, namely since by the time interventions actually began to take place, the initial classification of "risk groups" had already been replaced by the one based on "risk behaviours" (Cascais, 2006)…

[18] As in the case of *Ilga-Portugal*, the first Portuguese gay and lesbian association to focus not just on political work, but in providing community services and care for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals. It was founded in 1995, by a group of young people coming from *Abraço*, an Aids NGO (Sá, 2001).

delivered some important outcomes; and third, they would be involved in the subsequent creation of diverse formal lesbian organisations, usually born from internal group dissensions, which often rested on distinct views as to their mission.

The initial concerns appear to have been double: on one side, grassroots work aimed at the formation of a lesbian identity; and on the other side, a political stance focused on conscientiousness-raising. In fact, privileging one or the other has been advanced as the main reason for the end of *Organa* and the subsequent launching of *Lilás*. According to one interviewee, who took part in both projects, whereas *Organa*'s founders privileged lesbianism over feminism, the women behind *Lilás* wanted the publication to reflect a more political-feminist approach:

> "*Organa* stops working the moment the core group who made the magazine, who organised things stopped being just these two initial women and began to include other women. These other women had quite different characteristics. They were not radical lesbians with foreign influences, but essentially much more academic feminists who wanted very different things for the magazine"
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> (Fabíola Cardoso, *Clube Safo*, interview in Porto, May 7th 2004).

Both magazines had a rather rudimentary character. They were type-written, bended, stapled and photocopied leaves of paper. Distribution worked on command and they were delivered by mail. Publicising appears to have been rather limited if one considers that *Lilás*, for example, never reached more than 200 signatures (Marinho, 2002). Anyway, despite this and internal divergences, these first initiatives seem to have worked has incubators for the subsequent creation of formal lesbian organisations.

The first formalised Portuguese lesbian organisation was founded in 1998, inside *Ilga-Portugal*, precisely by women who had been previously involved in the *Lilás* network. It was the *Grupo de Mulheres* [*Women's Group*], whose internal splitting would give place, in 2000, to the *GIRL*. The emergence of this group appears to have been due to the fact that lesbians considered *Ilga-Portugal* to be essentially focused on male interests and problems, neglecting the specificity of lesbians as lesbians *and* as women within the Portuguese society. Some activists recall that

> "[…] this organisation [*Ilga-Portugal*], when we arrived here, was a gay and lesbian organisation, in general… LGBT… But it only worked in the G component … […] it was an interesting work to create that L component inside, because at the time we had to struggle because gays are – a part of them – rather misogynist… // […] [the female world] it's a universe they don't want, they're not interested in and they have no affinity with whatsoever, not even cultural, nothing at all!"

"Women continue to be made invisible, continue to be made subaltern inside the gay and lesbian movement as inside any other social structure, because the gay and lesbian movement is also a reflex of a social structure, which is highly patriarchal and that's the model that continues to be manifest"
(Fabíola Cardoso, *Clube Safo*, interview in Porto, May 7th 2004).

Such readings are also shared by some gay activists:

"I think [lesbian identities] inside gay organisations are sometimes very much formed in contraposition to gay ones, because gays show a sexism that is very similar to the one lesbians already know from men, which is curious!"
(Sérgio Vitorino, *G.T.H. – P.S.R.*, interview in Lisbon, May 20th 2003).

The *GIRL*'s emergence has once again originated from disagreements regarding the group's core vocation: whereas some women wanted to discuss and politically intervene in the defence of lesbian rights from a feminist perspective, most of them were more interested in recreational and cultural activities, and particularly in sociability networks (Marinho, 2001). In fact, and broadly speaking, Portuguese activists unanimously complain about the low politicisation of women affiliates and their refusal of any public exposure, often underscoring that they are usually interested in gaining access to networks and meeting spaces, which appear to work simultaneously as a kind of sexual and amorous market. Remarks such as:

"I don't see the movement growing. I see it growing in number, […] not in terms of – I can't say «quality» – maturity, because many young people came forward but they have a thought level as maybe we had ten years ago! // One never steps forward! // […] there is another curious phenomenon in this organisation […], which makes me a bit sad – people come here with a hell of an interest in working until they find a partner… The moment they do this, they leave, they're gone! // The relationship ends, they come back again, with a hell of an interest in working and doing stuff…"
(Susana Marinho & Luísa Corvo, *GIRL*, interview in Lisbon, May 7th 2003).

are quite common in the interviews.

Gameiro's (1998) work specifically points to the adequacy of such readings, remarking that the near absence of women in the public actions of gay and lesbian organisations, the reduced number of women affiliated, their scarce participation in meetings, and their refusal of any kind of prominence take place parallel to a quest for friendship networks, which seems to be their core concern. In short, in Portugal, gay and lesbian attempts to politically mobilise its publics have been frequently frustrated

by the latter's recalcitrance. At least apparently, then, as the author contends, "the Portuguese homo and bisexual population has clearly incorporated silence as a *negotiation* strategy in terms of sexual identity" (idem: 178).

The first (and up until now the only) exclusively lesbian Portuguese organisation – *Clube Safo* – had already been created in 1996, but its public registration only took place in 2002. It has been essentially focused on a patient work of lesbian bonding and on reducing the isolation (geographical, though not exclusively) of Portuguese lesbians, promoting meetings as well as training and information actions for its associates. Reconciling the need to create a common identity and sociability networks, on one side, and political intervention, on the other, is precisely one of the difficulties pointed out by its most prominent leader:

> "[…] the kind of work we used to do was a much personalised intervention. Nowadays, we have another difficulty, which is to think that that work is still necessary – we must keep on providing that support, that identity reinforcement, that work of contributing to a positive identity –, but on the other side, we also have to work more on a more social, more political level. So, we have various speeds inside the Club, which forces us to many activities"
>
> (Fabíola Cardoso, *Clube Safo*, interview in Porto, May 7th 2004).

The work developed so far therefore reflects a certain distance between gay and lesbian leading activists' personal positions and trajectories and those of their associates, highlighting the difficulty to achieve the latter's clear public mobilisation and intervention. Gameiro (1998) defends, in fact, that if during the 1980's it was already possible to see the effects of globalisation with the first signs of a "gay subculture" in Portugal, in the Portuguese case the phrase seems to refer more to a life-style, which imported a designation than to the political attitude and symbolic revaluation that can be observed in other societies.

The features that have been enunciated seem to support Gameiro's thesis. They are, in fact, not alien to the low rates of Portuguese participation in associations, to the transitory character of protest actions in Portugal, to their local character, to the well-known distance between the elites and the general population in terms of reference and action frames, or to a kind of absence of communitarian sense (Estanque, 1999; Mendes & Seixas, 2005). To these reasons one can ad the fear of public exposure, most probably as a way to avoid social stigmatisation and/ or actual discrimination.

Both lesbian and gay activists are somehow alert to these issues. António Serzedelo, the leader of *Opus Gay*, e.g., defends that the current situation of the Portuguese gay and lesbian activism

> "[…] is linked, in my view, to the homosexuals' egoism, in general, more to male than female ones. Second, with the habit of clandestine life and the collusion they are addicted to. Third, with the fact that they don't want to go public, they don't want to come out unless it is to have sex and go right back into the closet… Fourth, with the Portuguese lack of tradition of each person supporting the civic organisations that concern him/ her! // And fifth, probably […] because we ourselves haven't yet found the right discourse to draw people to us"
> (António Serzedelo, *Opus Gay*, interview in Lisbon, March 28th 2003).

This vision is partially shared by other activists:

> "I believe that if we think of the majority of these associations' affiliates, yes, their lack of politicisation equals the community's lack of politicisation. Obviously, the community in Portugal is extremely un-politicised and unconscious of its own rights, and so unconscious of these that it sometimes even denies discrimination when it's most evident. It's a form of defence, of self-protection"
> (Sérgio Vitorino, *GHT-PSR*, interview in Lisbon, May 20th 2003).

> "Lack of politicisation and lack of people standing up against society and see that for things to change in Portugal and for things to move forward, people have to get involved! There's lack of involvement. People are always sat down waiting for things to fall on their laps. They're little used to fight for themselves […]. They wait. They quarrel, they talk a lot, but when the time comes to act, there's nothing, they don't act!"
> (Susana Marinho & Luísa Corvo, *GIRL*, interview in Lisbon, May 7th 2003).

Despite such difficulties, the fact is that important changes have been introduced in the Portuguese Constitution in 2004 to prevent discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation" with its consequent extension to legislation referring namely to work and employment, as well as to some sexual self-determination rights. These achievements have certainly been partly due to gay and lesbian activism. But it is important to bear in mind that the fact of Portugal being a full member of international organisations such as the Council of Europe, OECD, and especially the European Union, has provided favourable conditions to their action, namely due to the State-members' obligations to transpose directives to national legislations[19].

In any case, gay and lesbian organisations' action is a central element to understand the way actors face and deal with homo-erotic attraction, their own and/ or

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[19] For an extensive analysis of this matter, see Santos (2005).

that of others. Apart from the more political struggle for equality, they show the existence of life-ways alternative to heterosexuality, namely by promoting the visibility of lesbians (and gays) and their communities and sociability spaces. This is particularly important in a country where surveys continue to highlight the population's overwhelming antagonism towards homo-roticism[20], and where most therapists still look at the latter as an "anomaly", a "paraphilia", a "deviance", a "dysfunction", or a "flaw"[21].

The consequences of this in terms of the mobilisation of the population are clear to gay and lesbian activists. Apart from the general lack of participation of the Portuguese in cultural, civic and political organisations, activists highlight that fear and common (and negative) representations of homo-eroticism are major impediments even to establishing direct contact with gay and lesbian organisations:

> "And they have, there's immense fear! // Huge… The number of times people come by and they're afraid to come inside! They don't come in! // Up and down the street… Peeping, looking, looking to the other side and moving on… Then, they come up again, someone walks by, they keep on moving. Until they can't see anyone and, suddenly, vrruucc, they run and come in and stand at that corner… Not to be seen from the outside!"
>
> (Susana Marinho & Luísa Corvo, *GIRL*, interview in Lisbon, May 7th 2003).

In any case, it is possible to notice some important changes in this picture in the last two decades. They are certainly not coincidental, but rather the consequence of social, economical, and political transformations, as much as of the work of gay and lesbian organisations. Concerning this matter, activists tend to focus their analysis, on one side, on the dissemination of the Internet, which has had a fundamental role by emerging as a medium of indirect contact with gay and lesbian communities and subcultures, especially for all those who are geographically distant from major urban centres. On the other side, they underscore the importance of such changes in terms of the individuals' well-being, especially in terms of the latter's ability to resist negative messages regarding homo-eroticism. The following quotes illustrate both:

> "We must get through those isolation isles. The Internet is a way through, […] a lot of our associative network works through the Internet. Ilga, for instance, now has a most interesting project called Decentring, which is linked to this, which is a project that works mainly through the Internet, but then also provides face-to-face meetings. The

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[20] See, e.g., Pais (1985, 1998) and more recently Cabral & Ferreira (2007).
[21] See Moita (2001).

idea is to form collectives of youngsters in all districts of the country, especially those where youngsters are more isolated, and it was there that most people came immediately forward, in fact. They're collectives of sociability, of socialisation, of activity planning, a go to the movies, which can be very important in those youngsters' growth."

(Sérgio Vitorino, *GHT-PSR*, interview in Lisbon, May 20th 2003).

"When we started, almost all women came to us with very low self-images, with a dreadful fear, a very ashamed awareness of their acts or thoughts, with a huge sense of marginality. […] many women who came to us, for instance, couldn't say the word «lesbian» […] and this was the case of most women! Nowadays, things are quite different. Women who are at that point of their individual paths still come by. // The situation hasn't become suddenly wonderful. Women who stay quiet for two hours smoking a pack of cigarettes, shaking, and cigarette after cigarette, still come by. Women who know no one else still come by. Women who've never read a book, who've never seen a positive image of other lesbian women still come by. But gladly, there are more and more women who already live their sexual orientation in a much healthier way, who think they're entitled to be happy, who think they haven't committed any crime and so they're valid people, even if society doesn't recognise them as such. I think this happens because there were big changes in the Portuguese society. // In Portugal, today, we come across reports, books, and magazines with some naturalness… // The word «lesbian», today, is part of many people's dictionary. Ten years ago, it didn't! // I think it's got a lot to do with social and economical improvements, too. The fact that there's been a clear economic development during the last years also allows women, for instance, to have a larger autonomy degree. People, today, feel discriminated, diminished in their rights, for instance, in matters such as adoption, co-habitation, marriage. A couple of years ago, the consciousness level was so low that only a very scarce number of people felt entitled to claim such things. Today, this already happens."

(Fabíola Cardoso, *Clube Safo*, interview in Porto, May 7th 2004).

In fact, a gay and lesbian community to which individuals may have access to fulfils an important reinforcement function (Jensen, 1999; Gagnon & Simon, 1977, Ponse, 1978; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991; Faderman, 1992). The community works as context where the person is confident to talk about his/ her feelings, and offers encouragement to sharing them with others – family and friends, especially. Besides, it also acts as a protective environment, which counteracts the burden of oppression and the negative messages about homo-eroticism that affect individual self-representation. In addition, direct contact with a gay and lesbian community offers diversified models regarding how homo-erotic attraction can be lived, thus contributing to undo preconceived ideas. In this sense, and despite their leaders' difficulties, gay and lesbian organisations can be seen as active contributors to the well-being of many women and men who find in them the necessary support to deal with the negative effects of the stigma.

2. Women, lesbianism, and politics: a view from the "other" side

Considering the principles that define gender in close connection to (hetero)sexuality, homo-erotic desire often begins to be felt as an "anomalous" element, i.e., as an element that is not part of an expected life trajectory, or identity. Because identity rests fundamentally on feelings of continuity and coherence, the integration of that element starts off a work aimed at situating it on both levels. This, however, more often than not takes place, as Markowe (1996: 194) remarks, "within a social context that includes perceptions of people's views of lesbians as negative; a stereotype of lesbians as masculine, abnormal, aggressive and unattractive; and lesbian invisibility". Associated to such perceptions, one can also find the idea that there is a specific lesbian life-style, characterised by sexual promiscuity and ghettoization. Hence, the possibility of defining oneself as lesbian includes, within such imaginary, a significant change of status both in terms of present life conditions and future life chances (Plummer, 1996). Altogether, these factors tend to contribute to non-identification with the lesbian category, at least initially, as much as to the difficulty of emotional acceptance of the homo-erotic dimension of experience and/ or identity.

Markowe (1996: 195) contends that there is a set of factors, which may contribute to overcome such difficulties, namely the perception of lesbianism as an option, linked to available social representations of gender and human nature, and the ability to deal with identity threat. However, this ability appears to be closely linked to the actors' particular socialisation conditions. For example, among older women lesbian invisibility emerges as an impediment to the interpretation of homo-erotic feelings and to acting on them, whereas among younger ones the matter relates more to a perceived distance between the stereotype of the lesbian and her presumed life-style, on one side, and the sense of who they are as much as of who they want to be, on the other.

In fact, women whose first homo-erotic passions took place under the *Estado Novo* regime verbalise at length about the absence of any instruments – including words – to describe their feelings:

> "I had absolutely nothing except my feelings... Just feelings because basically I had almost no information. // I think back then I didn't call it anything at all…"
>
> (Zulmira, 47 years old, middle class).

The idea that they felt something, which they could not objectify, constantly appears side-by-side with the absence of the necessary tools to name such experience. When models are absent it becomes difficult, not to say virtually impossible to frame experience and to include it in the self. Silence around homo-eroticism simultaneously implies the lack of social confirmation of the worthiness of such feelings, since symbolically the name's absence corresponds to the absence, and especially to the lack of legitimacy of the thing (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989). Awareness of the meaning of this silence is translated in the silencing one's own feelings, and so of at least a part of one's being, something that is intuitively grasped by women. It is namely for this reason that when Emília, e.g., recalls that her quest for information

> "[…] naturally must have been the attempt to understand something one couldn't speak of with anyone else"
>
> (Emília, 54 years, upper upper class)

she expresses the dominated reduction to the domination situation as much as the awareness of the illegitimacy of her discourse. Just as in the case of the legitimate use of language, it is truly the "certainty of negative sanction, which condemns to dismissal and to silence" (Bourdieu, 1998: 74-75).

Apparently, among older women, class origin[22] had an important role in this matter – much more than among subsequent generations. Women coming from middle classes seem to have had much more trouble finding any references to homo-eroticism than more privileged ones, especially when they did not live in major urban centres. Often, they had to wait until the 1974 Revolution to know of and have access to a lesbian community and finally finding out how to classify their feelings. In contrast, and despite censorship, for upper class women, things seem to have been somehow less difficult. It was easier for them to have access to publications due both to their economic and cultural resources. The following quotes are illustrative of this contrast:

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[22] The determination of the interviewees' class origin and position obeyed the criteria used by Machado, Costa, Mauritti & Martins *et al.* (2003: 46), whose proposal melts the contributes of traditional social class approaches, combining namely the "plan of professional qualification and certification" with approaches such as the one of Bourdieu, which allow for the conjugation of "the plans of cultural resources and symbolic status". Still following the same authors (idem: 53), and considering recent changes in economically developed societies, the class determination obeyed the "criterion of «dominance» or that of «conjugation» […] in any case integrating in the classification, with no *a priori* hierarchy, both sexes". The authors' original designations were adjusted to the more conventional distinction between upper, middle, and lower classes.

"[…] it was only when I began to be part of a clearly gay group [...] that I got a clearer notion of what those names [homosexuals, bisexuals, heterosexuals] meant. // […] to me, it was like reading a book where I got information from"

(Zulmira, 47 years old, middle class).

"[Freud's] Books that I borrowed, that I borrowed from the library, I can't remember anymore... // I was entertained by it and kept all those essential notes! That stuff was really important! // A lot of it was questioned later, but the truth is there was nothing else! // [and] a book by Colette. I didn't know who Colette was; it wasn't a study matter in school [...]… It was called *The Vagabond*! And inside she described a – not exactly a passion, but something between two women and I recall I was on the train reading it and I was so... // It was striking because it was maybe the first literature where I found a sign that shed some light..."

(Emília, 54 years old, upper upper class).

As for those who became aware of their first homo-erotic feelings during the transition period that goes from the Revolution to the 1990's, class differences persist, but they appear to have been attenuated by democracy, the dissemination of mass communication media and the increasing access to education. Most of them recall having had access to more or less scattered information on homo-eroticism, especially through newspapers, books, and magazines. And class differences refer more specifically to the type of information they could resort to – upper class women had the resources to locate and acquire foreign language literature, for example, whereas middle and lower class women most often refer to newspapers and current newsmagazines. But the main disparity rests on whether they lived in large cities or not, especially regarding the possibility of having direct contact with a lesbian community. This can be seen in the contrasting memories of Raquel and Margarida, the first living in Lisbon at the time and the latter in Porto, and those of Beatriz, who lived in the outskirts of a small town:

"When I was fifteen, I already knew quite well what it meant for a person to be a homosexual [...]! I think that's what made me sure. // I think that maybe that's because it's when one wakes up for sexuality, because I already knew well what it meant to be heterosexual and homosexual, and because I was already able to explain what I felt"

(Raquel, 31 years old, middle class).

"My first girlfriend knew a lot of [gay and lesbian] people here in Porto. She was linked to football [...] and there were many contacts, much acquaintance, even with Lisbon, and very quickly I entered that milieu. Shortly after I met a lot of people, I went to pubs, I went to discos, I went to discos in Lisbon... It was a merry-go-round!"

(Margarida, 33 years old, middle class).

"I thought women like me only existed abroad […] [a reference associated to] some TV program [...] (a program or a news bulletin, I don't remember any more), but I recall that idea, I got it from TV, and that news bulletin, or that program, or that movie, took place abroad and I think that's why because I'd never heard anyone talk about

homosexuality... Until I was thirteen, fourteen, I never heard of it and that was my idea of it. There was no information in the school library..."

(Beatriz, 33 years old, middle class).

This type of recollection is in sharp contrast with the ones of the younger women whose adolescence took place by the time gay and lesbian organisations were already in place. Access to information was easier, and so their chances to locate themselves from the personal and social points of view were increased. As Paula recalls, by the time she fell in love for the first time for another woman, she

"[…] knew that a woman who was sexually attracted to another woman […] was a lesbian. Back home there were never any problems to buy books about sex, no one ever told me the stork story and I've always been extremely curious about this subject. // Back then, I remember there was this boom about the subject because it was «in» to talk about gays and lesbians, lots of TV reports... // It was «in» and so information flooded in. One didn't get it only if one didn't want to"

(Paula, 23 years old, upper upper class).

Nevertheless, and considering that our societies continue to be largely characterised by hetero-normativism, and consequently in variable degrees by the stigmatisation of gays and lesbians, to the large majority of the interviewees, the moment the first intuitions of homo-erotic desire surface can be compared to a "decisive" or "critical moment" (Giddens, 1997: 105). In other words, most women recall a more or less long period of internal questioning, sometimes of identity crisis, articulated around a clearly defined set of questions: on one side, there are feelings of shame, abnormality, guilt, and sin; on the other, the sense of isolation, fear of solitude, and hopelessness in fulfilling a homo-erotic passion.

It should be emphasised that the most excruciating recollections tend to come from women belonging to the older and transition generations (though not all of them) and highlight the presence of intense internal conflicts. Although they often underline that it is not the gender of the object to be at stake, the fact of the latter being a woman is vital and causes a sense of ambivalence between passionate desire and the impacts of evading the norm – that which Alexandra calls "social feelings":

"I didn't want to be like that, I didn't feel like that because, really, it was such a strange thing, but it's more a social thing, social feelings. As for me, feelings or emotions, I found things I'd never felt, or had felt differently. // So, there were these very diverse levels. A huge sadness. A huge sorrow, a bad acceptance, and at the same time a magical feeling"

(Alexandra, 37 years old, upper upper class).

Some interviewees even describe this period of their lives in almost obsessive terms:

> "[…] at that point, I began to be very focused on those matters. I think my life was organised very much like the ones of drug addicts craving for a fix, I think it was a theme that filled my head up"
>
> (Marisa, 37 years old, coger upper class).

It is among these generations that the homo-erotic dimension of these women's lives is often – and revealingly – described as a "weight", "the price", or even a "cross", phrases that cannot be found among the younger women's narratives. In fact, the latter usually reveal a more peaceful inclusion of homo-erotic desire in their self-sense and the absence of internal splitting. This can be seen, for example, in Sofia's recollections of her thoughts when she first realised she was in love with another woman:

> "I'm not sure if I recall this, or if this is a subsequent construction, but I have the vague idea of thinking: «How odd! Why should it be a woman?» And at the same time: «But I have no reason to stop this, to think this can't be so...» I have the clear sense that I never felt awkward for her being a woman, nor have I ever given it much importance..."
>
> (Sofia, 24 years old, lower upper class).

Nonetheless, the most urging and most enduring feeling is the sense of isolation, which once again appears to have been particularly acute among the two older generations of women and those who did not live in urban centres. Several reasons explain its centrality. On one side, when they find out they are not who they thought they were this represents not just a loss of their selves, but also the loss of their corresponding worlds. Therefore, somehow they are "alone" with their experience, wrestling with something that is as yet incommunicable, since they do not know exactly who they are, and this brings along a gap between events and their understanding of them, and they are aware of this gap (Strauss, 2002: 40). This impression is heightened when the scripts necessary to frame experience are lacking. Additionally, since heterosexuality is presented as the "normal" way of living sexuality and affections, all other alternatives are usually not part of most women's primary range of possibilities, which contributes to a sense of uniqueness. Finally, and because to avoid the destructive effects of social discredit (Goffman, 1988) they strive to make their homo-erotic proclivities invisible, in many cases they do not contact, or do not know they do, with

others with similar experiences. Of course, such feelings circularly reinforce the impression of escaping "normality".

Due to all these reasons, many interviewees recall having had, at some point,

"[…] the sense of being almost unique in the whole world. It was something that was happening to me, that didn't happen to anyone else!"
(Margarida, 33 years old, middle class).

"[…] [of being] the only one, which is quite sad!"
(Emília, 54 years old, upper upper class).

Among younger women, the sense of isolation appears to be, nevertheless, less due to a lack of knowledge than to anticipated difficulties regarding the possibility of meeting other women with similar experiences with whom the latter may be shared. Once again, distance to major urban centres appears to accrue such feelings, especially in the case of the transition generation since among younger women this distance can be more easily bridged, among other reasons due to the extensive dissemination of the Internet. This, of course, does not prevent the need for direct contact, but it seems to render it less urgent: to younger women, the problem is more specifically one of sharing than one of being able to interpret their own experiences. Directly or indirectly, the action of gay and lesbian organisations emerges as a light in the dark. The following quotes highlight the importance of their support function:

"*Lilás* was my breakthrough! There I did find out! // […] whenever I got the magazine, I went to the garden benches and devoured that magazine! // I remember it was made of type-written paper leaves, which were bent and stapled. It was very rudimental, and it included some articles by girls from Trás-os-Montes[23], from those most obscure places, who felt alone and I did identify myself much with them..."
(Beatriz, 33 years old, middle class).

"I had no one to talk to, and so, one day, I had internet, didn't use it much [...], I went searching to the internet […] and it did give me a different idea, I was so relieved!..."
(Adriana, 24 years old, lower upper class).

However, the importance ascribed to the gay and lesbian community seems to be variable and especially dependant on the characteristics of peer groups. Whenever the latter are sensed as supportive, sometimes even including others with similar experiences, the need for direct contact with that community tends to be considered less, or even not important. But differences among generations and residence area once again

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[23] Region in the North interior area of Portugal.

emerge: older women and those who lived in less urbanised areas tend to ascribe it a centrality, which is more rarely found in the narratives of younger women, or of those who lived in major urban centres.

In short, generation, peer group characteristics, and residence area emerge as interconnected variables. The explanation for this most probably lies in the fact that as generations succeed, so does the degree of social acceptance of homo-erotic experience, which would account for the fact that it has become easier for younger women to find the support they need among already existing acquaintances. On the other hand, it is likely for this to be easier still for those who inhabit major urban areas, since, as Simmel (2001) has pointed out, the city dwellers' mental attitude ("reserve") contrasts precisely with the one prevailing in smaller communities where each one is easily apprehended in his/ her individuality, therefore increasing vigilance over individual conduct.

Despite the interviewees, in general, acknowledging the importance of having access to a lesbian community, this is not a peaceful relation. Among the conditions that facilitate or prevent both the inclusion of homo-eroticism in the self and the initial identification with others with similar experiences, it is important to refer, particularly, the heterosexism and homophobia, which characterise some social universes (Jensen, 1999: 150-151) and their consequences from the personal and social points of view. These factors underlie the initial non-identification, on one side, with the gay and lesbian community, and on the other, with gay and lesbian activism.

So, if to older women the absence of any references to homo-eroticism causes a sense of rarity, even abnormality, regarding the only model they know – the heterosexual one –, to the others there are other institutionalised models – namely, the one of the lesbian –, nevertheless corresponding to the image of a "deteriorated identity" (Goffman, 1988). What is at stake, then, is a sense and/ or a risk of personal and social degradation produced both by stereotypy and by the suppression of individuality, which assumes variable impacts and is also traversed by class origin, generation and the fact of inhabiting a urban or rural area.

Many interviewees' descriptions of their internal conflicts when confronted with their own homo-erotic desire, or that of others exemplify the internalisation of the "limits of aversive reaction" (Elias, 1989), of "disgust"[24] (Bourdieu, 1979), characterised as "visceral" since made flesh, part of their *habitus*, which set the frontiers

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[24] In the original, *dégoût*, which means "displeasure", "repugnance", "aversion" or "nausea".

of the embodied social order. In no circumstance this is clearer than when Marisa describes her first erotic experience and her first incursion to a lesbian pub:

> "She, that night, wanted me to kiss her. It's something she insisted on, which she didn't get! I think I even felt some revulsion! I think that was really a visceral thing, and I think it had to do with the fact of her being a woman! // […] as long as physical involvement didn't involve a French kiss, we didn't have to look at one another. I think it's almost as if it could be not taking place… // […] the kiss itself, specifically, was a thing that repulsed me! Really!"

> "[…] that night was awful, alter leaving the pub, because the feeling I had was: «I don't identify myself with this!» It was as if there's only a way of living lesbianism, of living female homosexuality: it's that way. // […] and I remember perfectly that I cried for a long time because all that construction I'd done before was now falling apart because I wasn't non-lesbian, but on the other hand neither was I lesbian that way. I was sure I wasn't! So, I was nothing!"
>
> <div align="right">(Marisa, 37 years old, lower upper class).</div>

The need to belong can thus be doubly frustrated when they feel they do not belong to any one of the two worlds.

Symptomatic of the pervading presence of heterosexual domination is precisely the fact that homophobic feelings emerge closely linked to gender crossing, gender being virtually the most strongly incorporated form of inequality. Exactly because they see themselves as women, with everything this means also in terms of self-presentation, the stereotype of the lesbian as mannish is one of the main obstacles to identification:

> "For example, I couldn't understand how could someone, being a lesbian, if she liked women, why did she have to dress like a man?... I couldn't understand that! // Maybe that's why, in the beginning, when I realised, «O.K., I'm a lesbian!» [I thought] «This world's exclusively mine…» [that was] because I had those ideas, which were about completely effeminate gays and lesbians with a masculine look. I didn't identify with this at all"
>
> <div align="right">(Adriana, 24 years old, lower upper class).</div>

In most cases, initial feelings of non-identification are attenuated only as women expand their exploration of the gay and lesbian world and acknowledge its diversity, which supports findings in this dominion (see Jenness, 1993; Markowe, 1996; Stein, 1997). In some cases, however, this kind of "typification" (Schütz, 1964) does not appear to have effects from the subjective point of view. When the category is not considered important, neither the ascription of belonging, nor the feeling of non-belonging brings a problematic situation. Similarly, if the typification is not ideologically significant to those around, it will not have major impacts on identity. So,

the interviewees whose mention to internal conflicts of identification/ non-identification is inexistent or marginal are those whose peer groups already included self-defined gays and/ or lesbians, and/ or in the context of which homo-eroticism was accepted, sometimes even exalted as an integral dimension of human experience. In other words, homo-eroticism is not sensed as a threatening experience to the I, nor to these women's usual life-ways, which contributes to the absence of identity splits.

But it is still possible to point out some divergences among the interviewees. A clear identification with the lesbian community seems to be less common among women coming from the upper class than among those who come from the lower and middle classes. This may be due to several reasons. Apart from acquired dispositions, which produce a rejection of certain life-styles, it is important to recall that classes also distinguish themselves according to their universes of meaning. So, whereas lower and middle class women tend to highlight values such as group belonging and communitarian living, upper class ones value the pursuing and fulfilment of individual difference. Additionally, if, as Gagnon and Simon (1977: 197) have pointed out, for the first access and integration in a gay and lesbian community may represent "a new kind of opportunity structure", for the latter it may be seen as "a resource that is paid for by withdrawal from the larger community".

The preservation of image and social status is, in fact, more clearly verbalised by older women, especially by the ones coming from the upper class and/ or who lived their adolescence and coming of age in rural areas. In the minutest details, there is an acute awareness of what is at stake in social interaction, and conduct is more consciously monitored. Emília clearly manifests this consciousness when she explains, referring to the "impossibility" of openly manifesting her homo-erotic feelings, that

> "[…] it was clearly a matter of class, too. I was in a certain social class – the bosses'
> children – in a small land, a town. I related to people who had the same life I did:
> students and afterwards university students... // For example, on Sundays, mass at
> eleven a.m., which is «social», to show the clothes, the outfits, that hour... Not at seven
> a.m., when the poor go running in because they don't even sleep. They're used to wake
> up at five a.m.. So, the «social», that meeting after the mass, in the atrium... If, by any
> chance, one tried to escape the situation and go for a stroll here or there – I did it so
> often! Me and my younger sister, wandered around... That staff of small lands... All
> ended up being known! The daughters of so-and-so!... Everything ended up being
> known! A disgrace! Yes, really!"
>
> (Emília, 54 years old, upper upper class).

In short, upper class women may have felt/ feel they have more to loose with the engagement in a gay and lesbian subculture, namely the deprivation of their status as well as of the corresponding privileges (see Stein, 1997). This risk appears to have been accrued among older generations and for those inhabiting more rural areas. At the same time, upper class women owned and still appear to own resources that the others can hardly attain. Among these, there is the fact of moving within social universes more tolerant towards homo-eroticism and the tenure of the cultural and economic capitals that render easier the access both to information and to sociability contexts alternative to the more public circuit of gay and lesbian pubs. In a way, this also means that they can more easily control the damages linked to a broader public exposure.

This does not mean that for other women the risks involved in the eventual disclosure of their homo-eroticism is not a concern, but more adequately that attempts to control them are a mandatory requisite that has to be regulated along the need to belong, which is more likely to be fulfilled within a lesbian community than within pre-existing sociability contexts and groups.

In fact, the clear recognition of the stigmatising effects of such a disclosure emerges as a persistent problem to most interviewees, which means that many of them go at lengths to avoid it. This can have considerable impacts on their lives as much as on their psychological well-being. Disclosure can be seen as a threatening process for the individual, causing variable degrees of anxiety linked to the anticipation of its results (Markowe, 1996; Wells & Kline, 1998). Considering that these can affect their current and future life conditions, practically all interviewees manage such disclosure with caution, which implies constant monitoring and vigilance over conduct.

The purpose of such strategies is to reduce tension and facilitate interaction (Goffman, 1988). But if they can avoid social discredit, they can also question the sense of personal integrity, of wholeness on a daily basis. Regarding this matter, in the interviewees' discourses emerges a set of feelings ranging from a sense of lacking authenticity, of dishonesty, to the difficulty to support and develop intimate relationships with family, friends, and co-workers. Several interviewees even describe feelings of fragmentation of the social reality and of the I.

Three factors appear to be particularly linked to the acuity of such feelings: the degree of centrality of homo-eroticism in the interviewees' identity definition; their personal ethos; and the characteristics of the specific contexts they move in. The workplace provides an enlightening example, for since it appears to facilitate the use of

passing strategies (Ponse, 1976), this depends on the fact of the professional situation endowing relationships with co-workers with a low degree of permanency and proximity. So, the tension between passing and disclosing tends to emerge more often when the interviewees work in such contexts, as well as when these are predominantly female, as Schneider (1986) defends. Marisa, e.g., notes that where she works,

> "[…] it's only women, so the inclination to talk about husbands, siblings, boyfriends is quite notorious […], and once one discloses a bit one's intimacy, it is harder! // So, for me it would be natural [to say] «Oh, this week was so funny! I went to the movies with Joana [the girlfriend] and we laughed a lot and she even…» whatever… «Oh, we were at the pub…» I enjoy talking about this stuff! It's a contention and it's a pressure I feel [for] not being able to tell, and sometimes I find myself on the verge of saying something I have to hold back…"
>
> (Marisa, 37 years old, lower upper class).

So, although in principle the professional world does not require intimacy and facilitates the use of passing strategies, the subject of authenticity can emerge there, too. Especially for those women who recurrently highlight their need for identity and conduct congruence, the exercise of a professional activity under such conditions may become highly conflicting. Alexandra, e.g., notes that

> "[…] not being able to be truthful […] it's the worse think that can happen to me. Additionally, as a teacher and even more as a sports coach, I abide very much by truth in this sense: kids lie a lot. One of the things I really insist on is [that] they have to be truthful. They can't say one thing here, another thing there! That's not the way it works! Things have to have a single thread! In terms of training, I know by experience that to be successful and to be productive, truth is everywhere"
>
> (Alexandra, 37 years old, upper upper class).

There are also cases where the professional activity's content seems to enhance the sense of dissonance. Marisa is one of the clearest examples. Working in an adoption agency, she repeatedly underscores that this

> "[…] is the area where I feel more incoherency […]. // I think I'm more and more incoherent, more and more diverging, [when I began working] […] I wasn't face with such complex situations, and so what I did, not only I was asked to do less – I could be conservative because I wasn't asked to be open, or liberal, because the kind of situations that appeared were from couples who wanted to adopt and who were married and fulfilled all the requisites. Meanwhile, things changed. // At work I violate myself because it's an area where those [conservative] vales are present! // At the moment, what I feel in work is [that I am] extremely liberal inside and extremely conservative outside, which sometimes is a bit schizophrenic. Regarding this, I think it's worse because it brings me more anguish. I think it improved because I'm a more open person

> – I was going to say more authentic. I don't think I'm more authentic. I think I'm more hypocritical now because I was more coherent before. I really thought conservative and acted conservative. I think now I can afford to think whatever I want, but I can't do, I don't allow myself to do whatever I want"
>
> (Marisa, 37 years old, lower upper class).

These excerpts illustrate situations where the simultaneous appeal to different social identities is felt as disaggregating. By intending to show only one of them in situations that appeal to both, a sense of disjunction of the global identity emerges. This brings along an impression of rupture of the whole, unitary self into its component selves, which correspond to the different aspects of the social process they are involved in and within which the unitary self has emerged (Mead, 1962: 144). The "schizophrenic" sensation Marisa refers to, or Alexandra's contention that "Things have to have a single thread" represent their inability to see themselves, in the situations they recall, as a whole, to unify and manage the diversities and contradictions of the I (Berger, 1986; Jenkins, 1996).

Besides, there is a different perception of the risks of disclosure between the interviewees who work in the public sector and those who work in the private sector. Contracts in the private sector are usually perceived as being more fragile and ensuring less protection from discrimination acts. In this sense, women working in the public sector tend to highlight the guarantees of job protection they enjoy, even if some of them consider the possibility of occurrence of informal forms of discrimination (Levine & Leonard, 1984: 706), and the likelihood of the latter rendering interaction difficult in the workplace:

> "[…] in professional terms, […] gladly, I have a job I apply to, I have a grade, and no one sees my face… There's a Ministry, although I have someone above me, hierarchically, at school, but he/ she has the same graduation I have. There, nothing can happen and I don't talk about discrimination"
>
> (Emília, 54 years old, upper upper class).

> "[…] if I came out, it was complicated! Not complicated! Surely, I'd get a letter to leave my job, considering all those obsessed, religious and whatever directors… // Directly they won't do that, but the Institute has a very delicate way of sending letters home telling people they're no longer needed, so… // In [secondary public]schools, I'm a permanent teacher. They can't really do that, but they can ruin my day"
>
> (Alexandra, 37 years old, upper upper class).

The attempt to keep the private and professional dominions separate rests on an evaluation not just of the kind of consequences that disclosure can bring in job terms,

but also on the work environment. Regarding the latter, the interviewees' beliefs and perceptions of the representations of homo-eroticism on the part of those with whom they share that context are at stake. In short, the decision of disclosing their homo-eroticism is linked both to differences in their professional situations and to the perceived receptivity of their organisational environments to such revelation (Markowe, 1996; Driscoll, Kelley & Fassinger, 1996; McDermott, 2006; Schneider, 1986)[25].

Very few interviewees declare having no concerns in keeping their private lives away from their co-workers, and all these cases correspond either to women whose jobs are characterised by transient relationships, or whose work contexts are somehow favourable to the acceptance of their homo-eroticism, such as academies and art worlds. Although this does not prevent them from engaging in passing strategies, these are usually mobilised only within unknown public environments.

But the interviewees' concern with the consequences of public exposure is clearer precisely when they speak of their potential engagement in lesbian activism. It is interesting to notice that it is almost exclusively among women coming from the upper class – and especially from its lower fraction, which, according to Bourdieu's proposals, is characterised by the extent of its cultural capital – that the subject of gay and lesbian activism emerges. This does not take place as a result of any particular question of the interviewer, but surfaces spontaneously in the course of their accounts related specifically to the gay and lesbian subculture's primary script – the "gay trajectory" (Ponse, 1978), or "coming out" process (Markowe, 1996).

A part of gay and lesbian activism's efforts focuses on the dissemination of that script, reinforcing the belief on a common identity on the basis of which group mobilisation may become possible. It is a kind of "professional presentation", a code encompassing a patterned set of matters considered fundamental that offers a desirable model of stigma disclosure and/ or concealment (Goffman, 1988). The mere existence and dissemination of that script is a direct and indirect appeal to its adoption. To the interviewees, this appeal can be felt as a kind of "moral imposition" linked to claims of belonging, which is counterbalanced by the fear of the consequences of a potential involvement in public and political forms of activism. It is a divided loyalty that we find

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[25] In fact, the same applies to other areas. In their private relationships, for example, disclosure decisions are also dependant on the evaluation of a person's specific characteristics as well as of the specific contexts within which women socialise with that person.

in many narratives, such as the one of Marisa, who recalls having written to the editor of the lesbian magazine she subscribed:

> "[…] to send this documentation I had and […] I said something like «I don't identify myself, but anyway I'd like to co-operate because I have this documentation so-and-so», and she said something like «Each one knows about oneself…», and for me that was important […] because I felt somehow guilty for not coming out […]. // On one side, I wanted to get the magazine and in the magazine people talked a lot about coming out, the apology of people coming out, and it's terrible because it's the others who make us be closeted and I began to feel some need to justify why was I in the closet…"
>
> (Marisa, 37 years old, lower upper class).

However, considering the possible consequences of disclosure, personal protection frequently wins over active and public political participation, showing how social regulation can be effectively self-imposed. The interviewees show some awareness of the way social reproduction operates through the self-imposition of limits and in this lays their ambivalence towards the role they could have in social change. The verification of their co-operation in the preservation of order is thus often present by contraposition to gay and lesbian activism. The latter's call is usually downplayed, or even refused in face of the anticipated difficulties of public exposure:

> "I love doing whatever I can for the community and helping others who'll come alter me, because maybe I'm already being helped by those who came before me […] [but] anyone with basic common sense knows there're no social, political, cultural, historical, or religious conditions in this country for all gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals to come out. So, there're those who can come out and those who can't for a matter of mental sanity, because if they do it's not going to be good for them. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals have to think, first, about themselves, in my view. I have to think about myself first"
>
> (Paula, 23 years old, upper upper class).

Some women avoid this difficulty defending that contributes to social change can take other forms, even if they often explain such position at least partly by their fear of public exposure:

> "I feel I probably get more results in terms of how I'd like the world to be transformed by me from my daily action than from a demonstration, or being part of a group. That doesn't interest me! // […] my struggle is in everyday life! Regarding these matters of sexual orientation, it's in everyday life and it's not public! // I'm not saying that's because it'd be public, or that I fear it, or … Probably also because of that stuff… I'm not saying that's clean! And that if I could… Maybe I wouldn't, probably..."
>
> (Bárbara, 31 years old, lower upper class).

In fact, the interviewees' great ambition is social integration. For this reason, the image conveyed by at least a part of the gay and lesbian activism appears to disgust them particularly. It is an image articulated around two stances frequently present in the forms of intra-group alignment, which characterise some professional activism: the defence of a militant line that may become a separatist ideology and the ostentation of stereotypical attributes that could be easily concealed (Goffman, 1988). For this reason, the public exposure linked to political mobilisation can be refused precisely because it is seen as the utmost example of reduction of the person to the socially devalued attribute:

> "[…] I find no fun at all in gay parades or other demonstrations of «gay pride»" [because they are] "too scandalous" [and convey] "an idea they shouldn't of the homosexual community. // I think it's too scandalous maybe for the people who are outside [and who] interpret homosexuality as being linked to that, to having those tics, or dressing effeminate, or putting up a show, when homosexuality doesn't have to be a relationship so different from the heterosexual one…"
>
> (Sofia, 24 years old, lower upper class).

Militancy brings attention precisely to the differentiating attribute, reifying it, and therefore rendering their lives even more distant from the "normal" lives they feel they are denied (Goffman, 1988). Militant activity is, in this sense, a paradoxical activity since although it ambitions to deny the stigma's differential and differentiating status, it contributes to assign it a real existence it does not have as such. From the personal and social points of view, gay and lesbian activism's posture and language may thus lead to an increase – not a shrinking – in the distance that separates the stigmatised from others, obscuring the power relations and struggles that constitute them as a group (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989, 1994).

In fact, among these eighteen women, only one equates the possibility of engaging in lesbian activism, as long as this does not involve any public exposure:

> "I've been more and more eager [to get] a bit more involved in some association, some activism […], but I always imagine a militancy in the shadow, a non-militant militancy, a militancy without exposure, which doesn't involve public exposure because, in terms of work and family, I don't imagine myself coming out"
>
> (Marisa, 37 years old, lower upper class).

So, despite these women's privileged origin, they share with others a dominated position: the opposite of the appeal to "normality", as the concern with (and the attraction to) "respectability" is the confirmation of its absence (see Skeggs, 2002). In

fact, as Seidman (2004: 15) contends, the purpose of assimilationist agendas has been precisely that of bringing gays to the circle of citizenship and respectability. The interviewees' concern with these matters is, therefore, closely linked to the risk of social discredit both in terms of public image and personal losses, as Adriana marks:

> "It's a bit of fear of what people may eventually say... // I don't know, I think it's a lot of fear on my part because I'm afraid of peoples' reaction, I'm afraid of loosing people, but it's also the feedback I get from society. I've this colleague where I work who's assumedly homosexual and I watch the way he's treated and I think: «I'll never be treated this way because I don't have to be!»"
>
> (Adriana, 24 years old, lower upper class).

Of course, prominently at stake are also the possible impacts that disclosure may bring in terms of survival conditions. Since they depend essentially on their jobs and pursue professional careers, observing situations of professional discrimination leads some women to equate concealment strategies as a way to ensure their actual or future financial independence, as they admit:

> "Since I don't [have an independent and autonomous financial life], and that's the only reason, at the moment homosexuality is really a life apart I try to live, even to organise so as to always find space to be alone with Sónia [the girlfriend]. To be with Sónia and other homosexual people"
>
> (Adriana, 24 years old, lower upper class).

> "The other way there's a meeting at the Club [Safo] and a woman came by who – I got to know afterwards – is forty and so, but she still lives with her parents and who has this business that's a bit dependent on a sister, and if the business doesn't allow her to go out, she doesn't! And she's afraid she'll be thrown out! // If I was financially dependent, I'd probably have the same fear..."
>
> (Antónia, 54 years old, lower upper class).

> "Look, do you know what the problem is? It's money! If I have the money so that no one bothers me, I do what I please! So, the problem's this: people don't come out more because they risk not even being able to ensure their subsistence, that's all! // Because status, you, having money, you don't give a shit! // All the rest's secondary!"
>
> (Catarina, 35 years old, lower upper class).

The relation between class origin and the matter of political intervention and social change therefore result from a deep awareness of what is at stake. Upper class women know better than anyone else what they have to loose with the public display of the stigma and it is this awareness that leads them to acknowledge that their actions may add either to change, or to social reproduction. Their ambivalence towards lesbian activism reveals the difficulty of dealing with the verification that they have the

instruments and the ability to intervene side by side with the will to safeguard their privileged social status.

So, the belief in the adequacy of the model of "gay normality" (Seidman, 2004) can be seen as a form of *illusio*, as Bourdieu (1994) calls it, which is translated, at best, in a gradual dislocation of the heterosexual norm and partly explains the slowness of social change. As the author contends, by definition, those who are in the best position to change the field, and therefore its structure, are those in the dominant position, for whom the field holds no secrets, those who master the games and the rules of the game. But these are also the ones most interested in the conservation of the existing order, in the defence of orthodoxy. Not just as the result of a conscious calculation resting on the effective (re)cognition of their domination and of what they have to loose with its loss, but because they – eventually, especially they – believe in the truthfulness of the game.

But this is just one side of the picture. The other side is each woman's calculation of the risks involved in disclosing their homo-eroticism in the context of a society, which is still hostile to such an admission, despite all recent changes.

Conclusion

The specific historical development of the Portuguese society constitutes a fundamental backcloth against which it is possible to understand, on one side, why homo-eroticism is still negatively represented, and on the other side, the late emergence of gay and lesbian organisations and their difficulties to mobilise their publics. Throughout nearly forty years, the country has lived under a dictatorship characterised by its appeal to traditional, conservative, and catholically inspired values, closed to external influence and little inclined to enhance the population's schooling. Ideal-types of femaleness and maleness rested on a clear-cut gender dimorphism, publicising a putative "natural" difference between women and men, and encouraging the first's roles essentially as mothers and wives. Propaganda, censorship and the presence of a political police in charge of repressing any attempts to deviate from the regime's ideals have certainly contributed to hold back both the formation and the accomplishments of feminist, as well as of gay and lesbian organisations.

The narratives of the interviewees who lived their first homo-erotic attractions during this period show that the demarcation between the sources of information they

could have access to in order to frame their feelings is much more pronounced than among subsequent generations. To older women, both the characteristics of the political regime under which they have lived until adulthood and the strong social inequalities that characterised the Portuguese society in economical and social-cultural terms appear as a source of accrued trouble, limiting their actual life opportunities. In fact, class origin surfaces in their narratives as an important exclusion factor, namely from information or even vocabulary, aggravated for those who inhabited far from large urban centres where meeting spaces were unlikely to exist, or were hardly known.

However, despite Salazar and his followers' original intents, worldwide and gradual internal transformations would lead to the fall of the *Estado Novo* in 1974. The advent of democracy, which has stabilised during the 1980's, has brought dramatic changes to the population's, and especially to women's life conditions in economical, social, and cultural terms. Specifically, it has provided particular conditions for the appearance of the first gay and lesbian organisations in the 1990's and to the increasing visibility of their political action. Born from the initial efforts of friendship networks and especially from support groups that emerged in the aftermath of the Aids epidemic, gay and lesbian organisations have profited from such changes as well as from Portugal's adhesion to the European Community. In fact, the country's current status as a full member of the European Union, namely due to the member-states obligation to transpose the latter's directives to their juridical codes has worked as an important asset to support gay and lesbian struggles and to further their claims.

Some clues also point to an additional and important factor to understand the contours of gay and lesbian activism in Portugal: the fact that many of its founders had lived for some time in central European countries, where the efforts of an organised and strong gay and lesbian movement, on one side, and of the women's movement, on the other side, had already delivered their fruits. In the specific case of lesbians, many of the first women who got involved in the creation of lesbian networks and organisations had already been actively involved in feminist organisations, both national and foreign. But if such previous experience has had an important role in their mobilisation abilities, it also adds to the distance between the activists' postures and resources and those of common and anonymous women.

Interview data highlight activists' complaints regarding the low degree of political awareness and the fear of public exposure on the part of Portuguese women, in general, along with a will to contact with sociability networks more than of engaging in

political struggles. As a result, activists highlight the difficulty to manage organisational activities so as to attain three distinct purposes: on one side, to provide essential support for all those who still feel socially and personally isolated within hetero-normative and sometimes homophobic contexts; on the other side, to develop grassroots work aimed at consciousness-raising; finally, to engage in active political struggle in order to foster social change. Although they attribute such hardship to the well-known low receptiveness and involvement of the Portuguese in civil associations and to the country's historical and political past, they are quite aware of the effects that widespread negative beliefs and representations of homo-eroticism have on gays' and lesbians' willingness to actively involve themselves in political struggle, especially when it comes to any public demonstrations.

In fact, interview data show that most women fear the results of public disclosure. Disclosure of their homo-eroticism is usually accomplished after a careful evaluation of its possible personal, social, and professional consequences. This is obviously linked to the belief that such decision can entail social discredit, with negative impacts on individual self-images. Particularly, the common stereotype of the lesbian as "mannish" – therefore, as being not exactly a woman since she does not comply with the conventional ideal of femaleness – is notably present in most accounts as a major factor preventing initial identification with the lesbian community or subculture. The gap between such stereotype and the women's self-images, as well as their belief that disclosure of homo-erotic interests may lead others to see them as "diminished" creatures work as determent factors both to accomplish such revelation and of publicly engage in political struggle, especially since the latter may imply at least a relative degree of public exposure.

In any case, it is already possible to verify important and positive changes in the way women deal with and live their homo-eroticism in the context of the Portuguese society. Comparing the accounts of three different generations of women, there are noticeable differences both in terms of the impacts and of the assets they can resort to deal with homo-erotic desire. Specifically, dissimilarities and similarities can be found among the interviewees according to a set of variables, which convey the presence of certain structural conditionings, particularly: generation, residence area (urban or rural milieus), and class origin. These variables show explanatory potential regarding variations in the eventual equivalence of the moment homo-erotic desire is acknowledged to a critical moment; in the ways of dealing with this moment and its

outcomes; and in the resources used in order to accomplish such task. These resources refer, specifically, both to the presence and to the opportunity of having access to models of sexuality and affections alternative to heterosexual ones. The influence of those variables is linked to embodied gender characteristics associated, on one side, to the social-historical contexts that characterise the period of adolescence and beginning of adulthood, and on the other, to class specific patterns as well as to the different possibilities of having access to such resources, which is mediated by class. Other variables interfere in this process, linked to particular life trajectories, even though they are related to the first. In this case, the micro-social contexts women move, or begin to move in from a certain moment on, particularly the composition and characteristics of peer groups, which can be more or less favourable to homo-eroticism, are prominent.

But despite the persistence of social inequalities, their influence seems to have been notoriously reduced, which is, actually, consistent with broader changes in the Portuguese society. This is certainly why in younger women's accounts, feelings of shame, abnormality, guilt, and sin, hopelessness to fulfil passion or clear indicators of identity crises cannot be found, even if the sense of isolation persists in some cases. Yet, even these appear to be more quickly and more easily overcome. Doubtlessly also due to the action of gay and lesbian organisations, younger women's socialisation conditions are quite different from those of the preceding generations. Access to positive and diversified models of lesbianism, as well as the possibility of contacting – directly and indirectly – with others with similar experiences, enhanced in particular by the dissemination of the Internet and by media publicity, therefore, emerges as an important factor contributing to counteract the negative impacts of stigma, and consequently contributing to women's well-being. As for the full enjoyment of their citizenship rights, it seems a long way still lies ahead, since despite formal changes in law, the fear of the consequences of public disclosure hint at the persistence of hetero-normativism and continue to thwart gay and lesbian activists' work.

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