

ELETRÔNICOS

Direito Internacional sem Fronteiras

AGENCY AND POLITICIZATION:

Experiences of the Migrant Women's Collective - Cio da Terra¹

AGÊNCIA E POLITIZAÇÃO:

Experiências do Coletivo de Mulheres Migrantes - Cio da Terra

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ABSTRACT: In this work, we shed light on the actions carried out by the Migrant Women's Collective - Cio da Terra, active mainly in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (RMBH - MG, Brazil). This is an experience report that seeks to focus on the proposals and activities carried out by two areas of the collective: Sociopolitical Formation and the Course of Portuguese as a Host Language (PLAc) for Migrant Women. The aim is to demonstrate in what ways these collective activities are permeated by processes of politicization, evidencing the political agency and the importance of building bonds between women. In order to do so, after situating the socio-historical context, when dealing with women's mobility in a broader sense, and sociopolitical, when presenting the collective in its spheres of action, we will share, in two sections, the experiences in the scope of each area presented. Without losing sight of the intersections between them and the other fronts of action of Cio da Terra, we will contemplate the initiatives that seek to promote the politicization of migrant women within the collective, such as the pedagogical project of the PLAc Course for Women, and beyond its borders, such as the participation in events and public spaces by members of the Socio-Political Training area, ensuring the representativeness of migrant women, the promotion of their rights and the occupation of different spaces.

¹ This material was translated and reviewed by Marina Caldeira Ladeira (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais); and Vinicius Villani Abrantes (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais –UFMG). The translation was authorized by the authors, Bárbara Mano de Faria and Paula Dornelas, and by the editor-in-chief of the periodical in which it was originally published. All ideas and quotations contained in this text are the responsibility of the author.

Keywords: Migrant women. Collectives. Sociopolitical Formation. Portuguese as a Welcoming Language.

RESUMO: Neste trabalho, voltamos nosso olhar para as ações conduzidas pelo Coletivo de Mulheres Migrantes - Cio da Terra, atuante sobretudo na Região Metropolitana de Belo Horizonte. Trata-se de um relato de experiências que busca focalizar as propostas e as atividades realizadas por duas áreas do coletivo, a Formação Sociopolítica e o Curso de Português como Língua de Acolhimento (PLAc) para Mulheres Migrantes, com o intuito de demonstrar de que maneiras essas atividades coletivas são permeadas por processos de politização, evidenciando a agência política e a importância da construção de vínculos entre mulheres. Para tanto, após situarmos o contexto sócio-histórico, ao tratarmos da mobilidade de mulheres em sentido mais amplo, e sociopolítico, ao apresentarmos o coletivo em suas esferas de atuação, compartilharemos, em duas seções, as experiências no âmbito de cada área a ser apresentada. Sem perder de vista as interseções entre elas e também com as demais frentes de ação do Cio da Terra, contemplaremos as iniciativas que buscam promover a politização das mulheres migrantes no interior do coletivo, a exemplo do projeto pedagógico do Curso de PLAc para Mulheres, e para além de suas fronteiras, a exemplo da participação em eventos e espaços públicos por integrantes da área de Formação Sociopolítica, assegurando a representatividade das mulheres migrantes, a promoção de seus direitos e a ocupação de diferentes espaços.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres migrantes. Coletivos. Formação Sociopolítica. Português como Língua de Acolhimento.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

The role of migrant women is central to all the processes that involve displacement, and they play a leading role in various social contexts. In places of destination, despite many experiences being marked by violence and social inequalities, as well as racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination, these women have shown how they individually and collectively challenge hierarchies, question gender stereotypes and break with representations that classify them as "others", sometimes seen as undesirable, sometimes seen as victims (EREL, 2009).

This experience report is based on the work of the Migrant Women's Collective - Cio da Terra (in portuguese: Coletivo de Mulheres Migrantes - Cio da Terra)², of which we are a part, to reflect on political agency, the building of bonds between women and the processes of politicization, since it depends, in our view, "not only on their political empowerment or the existence of legislation favorable to them, but also on the education of their surroundings to guarantee this respect" (MAHER, 2007, p. 255). To this end, we will present Cio da Terra, focusing on the actions that the collective carries out in two areas, specifically Sociopolitical Training and the Portuguese as a Language of Reception Course (in Portuguese: Português como Língua de Acolhimento - PLAc), offered by the organization to migrant women.

The Migrant Women's Collective - Cio da Terra, founded in April 2017, is the result of a project that brings together women of different nationalities, histories, languages and cultures,

² Cf. @ciodaterramigrantes (Facebook e Instagram).

and is a reference for migrant, refugee and stateless women. It is a civil organization³, active in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (RMBH - MG), which brings together, welcomes, guides and strengthens each and every one of them, seeking to promote justice and social transformation. Through principles such as sorority, the collective strives to strengthen women's critical sense, autonomy and self-esteem, with a view to guaranteeing their rights.

From this perspective, the activities promoted by Cio da Terra stand out for their commitment to promoting gender equality and access to social rights in Brazil; strengthening self-employment and helping people into work; contributing to the construction of public policies aimed at immigrant, refugee and stateless women; and valuing different cultures and intercultural exchanges. To this end, the collective works on the following fronts: home visits, bilingual social assistance and support, social actions in defense of migrants' rights, activities to generate income and employment, comprehensive health promotion, cultural activities, socio-political training, legal support, communication, human resources and teaching Portuguese as a Reception Language (PLAc). Currently, around 20 women from different national origins make up the collective's management team. In addition to this nucleus, which acts on a voluntary basis, other women join the group through their participation in the different areas presented above, totaling an average of ten volunteers on the Sociopolitical Formation front and forty volunteers active in the PLAc Course.

2 INSIDE THE CIO DA TERRA: THE AREA OF SOCIO-POLITICAL TRAINING

Based on the common understanding that migration is a human right and that no person should be considered illegal for moving between different territories, the Sociopolitical Training area aims to promote actions that involve the fight to guarantee and access the rights of migrants, particularly women. These activities, carried out by migrant and Brazilian women, involve organizing and running workshops, roundtables, lives and other events where topics related to migration, gender and human rights can be debated. The proposal is that Cio da Terra, as a collective, and that we, as women, can strengthen ourselves politically, seeking to occupy spaces that are often deprived or denied to us, to a greater or lesser extent, considering barriers such as gender violence, xenophobia, racism and LGBTphobia, among others.

Given this context, the actions developed within the scope of the Sociopolitical Formation front involve, among other initiatives, (i) planning, executing and supporting public policy conferences - such as the pre-conferences held by Cio da Terra in 2021 to draw up the First State Policy Plan for Migrants, Refugees, Stateless Persons and Returnees in Minas Gerais; (ii) political advocacy with public authorities and other state actors, such as the collective's participation in meetings held at the Belo Horizonte City Council, constant dialog with parliamentary mandates and involvement in processes such as the formation of the Municipal Council for Migrants in the city of Contagem; (iii) the establishment of partnerships with international organizations and agencies, educational institutions and other civil society actors to carry out projects on migration and women's rights; (iv) participation in popular actions,

³ Cio da Terra is a collective that, to date, has not been formalized, so it is not classified as an NGO, association, cooperative, etc. The collective acts independently, completely voluntarily and on a non-profit basis, and is not linked to any other institution.

marches and demonstrations, such as the March 8 (8M) actions, held worldwide as part of International Women's Day⁴.

Among the activities carried out by Cio da Terra's Sociopolitical Formation area, we would also like to highlight the building of networks and the strengthening of dialogue with other collectives and migrant groups, such as the "Regularization Now" campaign, started during the Covid-19 pandemic by various collectives and organizations from Brazil and abroad that work on the issue of migration. Demanding immediate, permanent and unconditional regularization for migrants, the #RegularizaçãoJá campaign in Brazil was inspired by mobilizations in Europe in 2020, which demanded that governments in countries such as Spain and Portugal grant residence permits to migrants with irregular documents. As Villalón, Moya and Bejarano (2021) point out, this initiative, which brought together more than 20 organizations from Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Argentina, is an example of a migrant struggle (VARELA HUERTA, 2015), given that "people who are made invisible by the state, people who are denied the political dimension or even people who are kept in a situation of irregularity mobilize to achieve this recognition" (VILLALÓN; MOYA; BEJARANO, 2021, p. 70).

Faced with the inequalities, violence and countless challenges that arise in the daily lives of the migrant population, the work of migrant women in the collective and especially in the area of socio-political education stands out as a way of questioning exclusionary logics, of seeking recognition as citizens and subjects of rights, and as a way of collectively demanding a guarantee of their rights to remain and belong (VARELA HUERTA, 2015).

It's also important to point out that, although Cio da Terra's work is divided into areas to better organize its actions, they are all interrelated and in constant dialogue, given that the demands and activities usually involve more than one front. We understand and therefore seek to ensure that the collective's work is carried out horizontally and transversally, involving the various areas and all the women who make up the group, while also considering their differences and particularities.

As an example, we can mention the project "Art and Sorority without Borders", developed by Cio da Terra with resources from the Belo Horizonte Municipal Culture Fund in 2021. The project aimed to map migrant women artists living in Belo Horizonte from the 1990s to 2021, reaching migrants from different national origins, such as Argentina, Peru, Cuba, Colombia, Italy, Venezuela, Haiti, Cape Verde, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Canada, among others. The aim was to disseminate their work and artistic practices through the creation of pieces such as affective maps, collective timelines, profiles and video letters, which were built collectively with the 50 or so women who took part in the initiative.

The main idea, as can be seen on the project's website, which brings together all these materials, was to "promote collaborative artistic production among women, denounce and confront prejudice, spread the art of migrant women from Belo Horizonte and highlight the importance of multicultural coexistence" (ARTE E SORORIDADE SEM FRONTEIRAS, 2021). Also, in the case of the project, many women artists who agreed to take part in the initiative ended up developing closer relationships with the collective, which lasted beyond the period of the project. Many migrant women joined Cio da Terra after their participation, which led to the creation of a new area within the collective, the Cultural.

⁴ It is important to note that both the 1988 Federal Constitution and the current Migration Law (Law No. 13.445/17) guarantee migrants, regardless of their migratory status, equal rights, free expression of thought, the right to participate and assemble, as well as the "right of association, including trade unions" (BRASIL, 2017).

In this way, we highlight how in their activities, in the daily life and in the development of collective projects, the artistic and cultural manifestations of migrant women emerge as fundamental elements for establishing relationships and diverse forms of resistance (DORNELAS, 2020). As Rosana Bacron (2021) points out when she analyses the work of migrant women's collectives in São Paulo, interculturality is an important element in the political mobilization of migrants.

3 INSIDE THE CIO DA TERRA: THE PORTUGUESE AS A HOST LANGUAGE (PLAC) COURSE FOR MIGRANT WOMEN

The PLAc Course for Migrant Women aims to promote the teaching and learning of the Portuguese language from the perspective of critical literacy, understanding the social uses of language as instruments of power and social transformation (MATTOS; VALÉRIO, 2010). Bearing in mind that migrant women need to act linguistically, autonomously, in a context that is unfamiliar to them, we recognize that the host language represents⁵ "the link of affective (bidirectional) interaction as the first form of integration (in linguistic immersion) for full democratic citizenship" (GROSSO, 2010, p. 74). 74) and is also "an asset that [...] can be used to improve their living conditions and/or reduce their vulnerability, as it increases their ability to respond" (LOPEZ, 2018, p. 20).

With this in mind, PLAc for Migrant Women grew out of a social initiative that predated the creation of the collective itself. Initially aimed at individualized and voluntary teaching of the Portuguese language to women who were victims of domestic violence and/or in situations of social vulnerability, in order to contribute to their social reintegration, this initiative was restructured in 2018 as an area within Cio da Terra, responsible for developing a PLAc teaching project for classes of migrant women. After a year of face-to-face activities, carried out in two modules throughout 2019, the course began to be offered solely in distance learning mode - initially, due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and, later, due to the significant increase in demand for classes by migrant women living not only in the RMBH, due to the contact networks established by members of migrant communities.

Since then, the project has been breaking down physical borders, attracting an average of 250 migrant women a year, living in all regions of Brazil and in some Latin American countries, during the 2021 and 2022 registrations⁶. Given this situation, the course is now structured into 12 classes, organized into three quarterly modules, corresponding to Elementary (1 class), Basic (5 classes), Intermediate (4 classes) and Upper Intermediate / Advanced (1 class) levels, in addition to the Celpe-Bras Proficiency Exam Preparation Course (1 class). At the same time, in order to cope with the growing demand, we held two open calls for

⁵ Originating in the context of the "Portugal Acolhe" program, implemented by the Portuguese government in 2001, the concept of host language refers to a proposal to teach Portuguese "not as a vehicle language for other subjects, but for different contextual needs, often linked to solving urgent survival issues" (GROSSO, 2010, p. 74). Recognizing the relevance of this concept to the Brazilian context, some authors point out, however, that the Portuguese program was guided by a language policy that made access to social rights conditional on learning the language (ANUNCIACÃO, 2017; LOPEZ, 2018; BIZON; CARMARGO, 2018). Thus, transposing its use to the designation of teaching-learning practices in this field in Brazil, it is necessary to emphasize that they should contemplate a broader perspective of welcoming in languages (BIZON; CAMARGO, 2018), transcultural and translingual (ANUNCIACÃO, 2017), in which welcoming itself is understood as an attitude that is built on the possible dialogue between different forms of agency (BIZON; CAMARGO, 2018), which also occur in the relationship between different languages and languages.

⁶ Data obtained from the forms used in the registration processes for each module of the PLAc for Women Course, namely in March, June and September 2021 and 2022.

new volunteers, one at the beginning of the 2021 school year and the other at the beginning of 2022. Organized into working groups, these women will work on the following activities: Portuguese classes, tutoring, conversation and content creation.

Once committed to the teaching and learning of migrant women and aware that women's migratory experiences are crossed by specificities linked to gender and power relations, the course's political-pedagogical project is a project in constant (co)construction, guided by the cross-cutting theme of "being a migrant woman" and the sharing of trajectories, experiences and daily needs presented by the migrant women who take part in the classes. Among its objectives, we highlight the politicization (MAHER, 2007) of migrant women, by addressing the rights and duties of women and the migrant population in Brazil, as well as access to the various public services, without losing sight of their problematization and the education of the environment, through the provision of listening spaces (LEROY, 2021) and representativeness, as a fundamental element in guaranteeing the place of speech (RIBEIRO, 2019) of these women.

Regarding addressing these aspects in the Portuguese course curriculum, we have collectively drawn up an annual content plan for each level, guided by cross-cutting thematic axes that cover various spheres, such as maternity, care, women's health, employability and training. As well as promoting literacy practices, in which language is used as a tool to (inter)act in these various spheres, the aim of this curriculum plan is to make students reflect, based on various data and materials and their own narratives, on how gender issues and different power relations condition democratic access to rights and services. In this sense, the teaching-learning context exclusively for women is an important space for socializing and listening, in which they feel freer to share their experiences, forming networks of support and affection beyond the classroom environment.

It should be noted that, in the emergency context of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was necessary to create strategies not only to provide technological resources to ensure democratic access to the means of training and disseminating knowledge among students (and educators), but also to promote their digital literacy. To this end, in addition to campaigns to collect devices and "sponsor" internet data for the students, we mobilized and produced materials, such as tutorials for accessing the technological resources used in synchronous and asynchronous classes, given that for many of these students, weekly meetings are the only socializing environment beyond the family and home space.

At the same time, we understand, along with Maher (2007, p. 267), that "any educational project aimed at empowering minority groups in the country must also include educating those around them to coexist respectfully with the linguistic and cultural specificities of these groups". Thus, one of the main pillars of our pedagogical project has been the ongoing training of volunteers to promote the teaching and learning of Portuguese with a view to the critical literacy of migrant women, but without losing sight of awareness and debate about the various political and social agendas focused on contemporary migration and the issues that affect women's realities.

Among the continuing education initiatives, we would like to highlight some projects which, although open to the community in general, met the demands presented by us through partnerships with higher education institutions. The Extension Course "Teaching Portuguese as a Language of Reception for Specific Groups", offered by the Extension Program in Portuguese as a Foreign Language of the Federal Technological Center of Minas Gerais (CEFET-MG), took place in February and March 2022 and resulted in teaching units to be used in the

PLAc course itself for Migrant Women, produced by the teachers who took part in the training and shared with the other course volunteers at subsequent meetings. The cycle of workshops "Gender Violence at the Intersection of Immigrant and Refugee Women", offered by Axis 4 of CRIM - Extension Program on Crimes against Women, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), between May and August 2022, covered content such as identifying forms of violence, means of prevention and sheltering victims, as well as publicizing the existing coping network.

At the same time, this effort to politicize the surrounding society goes beyond the borders of the collective, with initiatives that promote the sharing of agencies and experiences aimed at welcoming migrants, such as the meetings promoted by the Migration Studies Group: Reception, Languages and Policies (GEMALP), which resulted in the publication of a book with accounts of these experiences, including teaching PLAc to migrant women in different contexts (FARIA, 2022). We would also highlight existing and/or embryonic collaborative work, such as the production of the didactic material *Vidas e saberes: itinerários para aprendizagem do Português* (FLISTER; FARIA; BALMANT, in press), which is currently being experimented with and (re)evaluated, but is based on the demands presented in practice by migrants covered by three Portuguese teaching projects: Cio da Terra's PLAc Course, the READ Project - Reading and Writing with Refugees and Migrants, of the Postgraduate Program in Letters at PUC Minas⁷, and the TECER Project, of the Jesuit Service to Migrants and Refugees (SJMR)⁸.

Last but not least, we note the participation of members of the Cio da Terra course, especially migrant women enrolled as students in the project, in lectures, conversation circles and training days as part of the PLAc. Considering that "the knowledge produced by individuals from historically discriminated groups, in addition to being important counter-discourses, are places of power and configuration of the world through other perspectives and geographies" (RIBEIRO, 2019, s/p), this participation is fundamental to enable the creation of "listening spaces" (LEROY, 2021) in which these women share their knowledge, their experiences and their perspectives in relation to the welcome promoted by our society.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Critical, politically situated action based on feminist, anti-racist and anti-xenophobic perspectives guides the entire work of the Migrant Women's Collective - Cio da Terra. We understand and emphasize that migration is a human right and must be guaranteed and ensured for each and every person, regardless of the territory in which they are located. Guided by these assumptions, the collective's actions are divided into interrelated areas, such as Sociopolitical Training and the Portuguese as a Language of Reception Course (PLAc), presented throughout this report.

Although we haven't described all the organization's work fronts, we would like to highlight the importance of migrant and pro-migrant collectives in defending and enforcing human rights, strengthening social participation and promoting critical thinking in fields such as migration studies, language teaching and politics. What's more, it's essential that these initiatives are based on the agency and protagonism of migrants.

In the case of women, coming together as a collective favors the exchange of experiences between people who are socially different, the building and strengthening of

⁷ Cf. <https://www.projetoler.com/about-1>.

⁸ Cf. <https://sjmrbrasil.org/curso-portugues/>.

emotional bonds, mutual support in cases of violence and the shared construction of other possible worlds based on respect, justice and sorority.

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DADOS DO PROCESSO EDITORIAL

Recebido em: 08 de outubro de 2022;

Controle de plágio: 08 de outubro de 2022;

Decisão editorial preliminar: 10 de outubro de 2022;

Retorno rodada de correções: 29 de outubro de 2022;

Decisão editorial final: 31 de outubro de 2022.

Editora: SÁ LEITÃO, A.I.B.L.

Correspondente: FARIA, B. M.