



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global  
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,  
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Guedes Teixeira, E. (2012) 'Breaking women's social exclusion cycle? Social and education professionals' perspectives on Social Insertion Income beneficiaries', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 768 – 781.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

# **Breaking women's social exclusion cycle? Social and education professionals' perspectives on Social Insertion Income beneficiaries**

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## **Abstract**

*In the context of social activation policies, in 2003 the Portuguese welfare system launched the 'Social Insertion Income' policy, which universally grants the right to a minimum level of subsistence in exchange for its beneficiaries' insertion in several areas (namely employment, professional training and education). By focusing on the role of the education and training system in breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion, this paper aims to analyse the singular trajectories of women's social and professional inclusion.*

**Keywords:** *activation policies, adult education, social inclusion, women*

## **Introduction**

One may state that the study of underprivileged social groups' school practices has been analysed in reference to education underachievement and the reproduction of exclusion. However, the work of authors such as Bourdieu (1997), Lahire (2002; 2005), Kellerhals and Montandon (1991) and Laurens (1992), broadens the possibility of analyzing several contemporary socialization contexts, that allow the incorporation of dissonant dispositional systems and may explain the existence of academic success in underprivileged social groups.

In this paper the authors will try to analyse the specific role of the education and training systems in the inclusion of SII (Social Insertion Income – see 2.1.2 below) beneficiaries, based on interviews with social and education professionals.

### **1. Adult education**

Since the 1960s/70s UNESCO has developed a concept of permanent education. Nowadays, adult education faces social challenges such as economic globalization. Learning has become merchandise, instrumentalised by the market, with a profitability objective and the increase of the entrepreneurial competitiveness:

People are responsible for their learning, if they do not invest in their on-going training and find themselves unemployed, then it's their problem, their own responsibility. (...) The education of adults feeds, more and more, individual

objectives, whether regarding its self-fulfilment whether regarding the practical survival skills to face the complexity of daily life. (Finger, 2005: 26)

In Portugal, in the 1960s, a permanent education programme was consolidated, (Nóvoa and Rodrigues, 2005: 9). However, structurally, low levels of academic and professional qualification of the Portuguese population were kept. Recently two ideas have established themselves in this theme-area: lifelong learning and the acknowledgement and validation of competences. Nevertheless, by themselves, these do not “magically” solve the Portuguese basic training problems.

Correia (2005) states that in the actual context of social crisis, training has become a duty, namely to those who are targeted by social activation policies. This author also mentions the challenge in the field:

training has to live with and learn to articulate with a training ethic built upon a exulting vision, which considers it the “magic” solution in order to solve all social problems, and nowadays a strong tendency in which the training field is established as a symbolical disqualification space for those who are in social exclusion risk, rather than a space of individual qualification, a space of duty or experiencing an ordeal rather than a place for exercising a right and for the construction of citizenship. (Correia, 2005: 71)

## **2. The welfare state, new Generation of social policies and activation policies**

In a context of economical globalization, the European states are forced to implement reforms in their employment policies which have been the founding speech of the activation policies. These are based in the idea that to earn the right of receiving a social income there is a trade-off by the beneficiaries: they have to commit to having an active contribution (socially useful activity, finding work or increasing their qualifications).

Some authors (Hespanha, 2008; Heikkilä, 1999; Hvinden, 1999; Bosco &Chassard, 1999; Geldof, 1999) have identified several activation’s strong and weak points such as, on the one hand, qualification improvement, the increase of employment and self-esteem, the decrease of a dependence culture and a concern with the right to work of the citizens, thus elevating “the work ethics to a central pillar of society” (Hespanha, 2008: 11). However, these authors also underline its weak points, namely, punitive character, autonomy and freedom restrictions, “the conduction of tasks that are socially undervalued or even degrading” (Hespanha, 2008: 12). Furthermore, they frequently remove responsibility in the exclusion situation from the companies and the capital and there are problems regarding the work rights: those who are in an activation process do not have the same negotiation rights of content, time and work conditions. Finally, very often, we are talking about precarious occupations and/or unfit jobs that hardly lead to a real professional insertion.

## 2.1 Social issue and autonomy

In the 1980s/90s there was an evolution rupture in Welfare-State. According to R. Castel (1999), the *salary society* entered in a state of crisis. Duvoux (2009) mentions the arising idea of “return to the bad poor”, inspired by the conclusions of Serge Paugam about the representations’ changes concerning poverty and overvaluation of individual factors to its explanation, instead of structural causes. As we have previously seen, this perception was also at the basis for the emergence of active social policies (Duvoux, 2009: 2-3)

### 2.1.1 Transformations in the social contract: from the salary society crisis to the insertion contract

The beginning of the crisis in the *salary society*, characterized by instability of work, unemployment and social assistance mechanisms opened a debate about the protection of the new poor. In the 90s, in France, the social issue (Castel, 1999; Rosanvallon 1995) considered the social vulnerability of layers of the population that until then never had to rely on welfare.

However, from 2000 onwards, the consensus about the new poverty was broken and reforms of the contribution system were carried out, based in the social representations’ change towards the beneficiaries, which started being seen as privileged rather than victims (Duvoux, 2009: 9). A feeling of injustice/resentment arises throughout the employed low classes towards the beneficiaries, as they consider the values received too close to the incomes obtained through work. The insertion contract meets these anxieties (from the GMI - Guaranteed Minimum Income scheme - to the SII), establishing a subtle way of workfare.

Following the above, Duvoux criticizes the imposition of autonomy by considering it a paradox in two senses. Materially, the follow-ups, contracts and obligations that the beneficiaries are subjected to in order to avoid assistencialism end up having a perverse effect, by forcing them to prove their assisted condition. On the other hand, symbolically, the internalization of norms promoted by the institution may lead individuals to a self-devaluation and to the internalization of dependence towards welfare.

Serge Paugam (2003) constructed a typology of people's relationship with assistance during the process of social disqualification, namely: *frailty*, where one learns the disqualification, *dependency*, when services assume the difficulties of the assisted and *rupture* when the aid ceases and the handicaps are maintained. Regarding the moral career of the assisted, the same author distinguishes between *indirect assistance*, in which individuals maintain motivation in seeking employment, *installed assistance*, marked by a progressive identification with the status of assisted and *demande assistance*, when there is a very strong dependence and lack of motivation to work.

Nicolas Duvoux (2009) has worked with Paugam's typology, using a narrow definition of autonomy (seen as an institutional norm) and tried to understand the relationship of individuals with it, i.e., the autonomy that individuals are able to maintain when they are assisted by social institutions. The sociologist distinguishes between *internalized autonomy*, *contradicted autonomy* and *dependence refusal* in order to analyze the relationship of SII beneficiaries with the institutional norm of autonomy. The first is an "adherence response in which the beneficiary anticipates what is expected of him by the social worker in order to avoid its enforcement" (2009: 33), proving to himself that the social benefit is a transitory aid in a critical situation and refusing the status of a person living on welfare. The internalization of the autonomy norm helps to resist stigma. Many of these people are considered by the institutions as employable and the resources that they have allow them to negotiate with social workers.

Regarding the *contradicted autonomy* (ibidem: 34-35), the adherence to the norm is hindered by the present and future situations of the beneficiaries. They try to keep the status of assisted person. One should highlight that the intersubjective relationship (based upon rationalizations and negotiations) established between social workers and the beneficiaries overrides the abstract relation of the contract. In some ways, "social monitoring is used to compensate the lack of prospects of employability". A personality transformation takes place linked to the internalization of the stigma and the devaluation of the status of assisted person itself. The references to health and transportation difficulties validate the *contradicted autonomy*.

Finally the *dependence refusal* arises when "the demand for autonomy tends to be lived as a pure constraint to the most marginal beneficiaries", given that it is perceived as unrealistic and as a domination strategy (ibidem: 35-36), being characterized by a strong ambivalence in the relationship with the professionals, that includes claims and conflict.

### 2.1.2 Social insertion income<sup>1</sup>

*Guaranteed Minimum Income*<sup>2</sup> had at its origins a social policy created in 1996, later called *Social Insertion Income*, which universally granted the right to a minimum level of subsistence in exchange to insertion in several areas (namely employment, professional training and education)." (ISS. I.P., 2011: 3)

In June 2011 there were 372 632 beneficiaries of SII in Portugal, which represented 3,6% of the total population<sup>3</sup>. The number of holders was 139 410, of which 65% were women (90 806). The largest percentage of beneficiaries was under 18 years old (39%), followed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Rendimento Social de Inserção

<sup>2</sup> Rendimento Mínimo Garantido

<sup>3</sup>2001 Census

35-44 age range (16%). The average value of provision per household was EUR 243 and per beneficiary was EUR 88.

#### 2.1.2.1 Social insertion income and education/training systems

As mentioned by Rodrigues (2010: 149) “right from the start education is a central aspect in the vulnerability process of important population layers”, considering the qualification deficit as a social immobilization process. Regarding the impact of the GMI, there are studies (CNRM, 2002) about the memories of adult women regarding education as deeply connected to school dropout (for most of them, their education goes no further than the 4<sup>th</sup> or the 6<sup>th</sup> grade). These studies highlight the recreational and social value of training and the learning of useful skills for the everyday life, but when there is no practical possibility of using such qualifications in the job market people become frustrated.

A study (CNRM, 2002) distinguishes between several types of women beneficiaries. Here we will stress the results concerning single-parent families. Three ideal types have been identified: *single mothers* (first unwanted pregnancy, early motherhood and absence/instability of conjugal relationship); *separated women* (often experienced a traumatic conjugal relation, followed by an abrupt abandonment or a voluntary break up) or *widows*. About their future, one can distinguish between those who have the will to fight and will try to get a job and work, and those whose expectations are very low as well as their own initiative. (CNRM, 2002: 49)

Rodrigues (2010) refuses the idea of homogeneity of the GMI/SII beneficiaries and creates a beneficiaries’ typology that differentiates between those *settled in*, who consider the social benefit as something that will be indefinitely given to them, and who perceive their life story as irreversible, the *blocked* ones, unable from inclusion socially and professionally at the moment because they are occupied with family obligations, and the *unsettled* who foresee the social benefit as temporary and that are motivated for professional insertion (Rodrigues, 2010: 243-244).

### 3. Methodology

Institutional contacts were established, in the districts of Porto and Aveiro, situated in the North of Portugal, where the following 8 exploratory interviews (some were group interviews) to privileged informants (social and education professionals who work with SII beneficiaries, such as teachers, social workers, psychologists and social educators) were conducted in a school, 2 community centres, a professional training centre, a professional insertion office, a local development project and 2 Social Insertion Income Local Teams (Social Security institute).

These interviews had 3 main goals:

1. To know the reality of professionals who work with beneficiaries with the profile previously indicated and to analyse the type of relationship developed between them;
2. To debate the national statistics, as well as clues for the analysis of the research;
3. To assess the possibility of signalling potentially interested beneficiaries for participating in the study.

#### **4. Main impacts of education and training measures: breaking the social exclusion cycle?**

Some results of the interviews conducted to social and education professionals who work with SII beneficiaries will be presented, taking into account 6 analytical dimensions: types of courses available for SII beneficiaries, external and internal constraints, gender differences, main impacts of the implementation of these measures and key factors for the beneficiaries' education/training success.

##### ***4.1 Education and training courses***

The interviewed professionals mentioned the existence of the following possibilities linked to training and education of SII beneficiaries: courses of Education and Training for Adults, Back-to-School Education, courses for acknowledgement, validation and certification of competences (New Opportunities Program) and Professional Training. In addition to these, it was mentioned the organization of workshops for the development of personal, parental and social skills as well as domestic skills such as hygiene, food, household care. These actions are normally carried out by social workers, social educators and psychologists, but also by nurses or technical assistants, in the latter. The professionals emphasised the work with beneficiaries in their appearance, hygiene and posture, for greater success in recruitment interviews, as well as in future work places.

##### ***4.2 External constraints***

The main external constraint exposed by the interviewed is the employment crisis in the current economic situation and the financial difficulties. Indeed, as stated in interview 2, the SII beneficiaries have greater difficulty in continuing their training due to monetary reasons, because the training scholarships are not enough to endure for a year and a half and so they quit. The family, technical and financial support that beneficiaries get is insufficient and therefore they seek work, however precarious it might be. When they see themselves again unemployed, the cycle repeats itself, because during this period of work they don't study and ultimately they cannot finish the 6<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Women want a better life for themselves and for their children, but they don't have personal, social and structural resources. They need to have the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in order to get a better job, but they are unable to finish it. The training scholarships (EUR 146 plus lunch [in 2011]) are not enough. (int. 2)

One should also take into account the negative role of the male partners, which lessen the training importance (saying that "ending the 9<sup>th</sup> grade isn't useful at all") and do not appreciate the influence of colleagues. "They follow them to confirm whether they are even there. For the male companion it is preferable that the woman stays home and takes care of his clothes and makes his food. He lives at her expense. He benefits more if she's at home."(int. 2)

This view is corroborated in interview 8:

(...) women's success in education occurs mainly with those who were separated or divorced. This, in my opinion, is because the fact of the husband or partner accepting that the companion will study, which from their point of view is a waste of time, accepting that she will have knowledge, will move up, will free herself somehow, is very complicated in family dynamics. There are cases where the family relationship was shaken, because the woman now confronts some things, some of the ways of life that they had and so the family structure can be called into question. They are more successful when he also goes to training, or when women are alone, with or without children, but on their own. (int. 8)

On the other hand, the issue of transportation to training is essential. As it was seen, the male companions are against the training and therefore usually don't help them with it, even if they have the means of transportation and themselves do not work. The absence of public transport to places of training or the inadequacy of timetables can prevent women from attending.

Another central issue with implications at various levels is the legislation's rigidity concerning employment. The fact that the law of SII prioritizes employment and training limits the professionals' scope of intervention to deal first with other issues, as the development of basic skills, like hygiene and self-presentation, for instance.

The beneficiaries are placed in temporary or precarious jobs and don't have the skills to actively search for jobs, thus returning to unemployment and to welfare, i.e. the SII compulsory measures regarding training and employment turn out to be counterproductive. As mentioned in interview 8:

How can we ask a woman who is doing a rehabilitation process, to have self-esteem, to get a job, if there is not even money to pay for a dental prosthesis to improve her appearance? How can you ask this person to have dreams, hope and empower herself? How can you ask much from them if the benefit is barely enough



to feed their children? The SII limits the intervention, because it forces those who have no basic schooling to go back to school or be available for employment, while limiting other fundamental actions, such as improving the appearance of the person, the organization of everyday life or the management of the family budget. Social intervention is limited to what is stated by the law. It would be preferable first to decide about small actions in order to proceed to employment and schooling. (int. 8)

Another major factor is the inadequate educational and training offer that does not take into consideration the real needs of local labour markets and of the population.

Finally, it is mentioned that beneficiaries don't value education and training. In the past, with 4 years of schooling people could easily find work. Only when difficulties in obtaining employment began and training requirements were imposed by SII and also by employers, did mentalities started to change, but it is a long process and one full of contradictions and constraints.

#### ***4.3 Internal constraints***

The main constraints to the education and training referred by the professionals are related to the beneficiaries' age (older people refuse it more, because they consider that at their age the training isn't useful anymore), their health (physical and mental) and/or the constant renewal of sick leaves, cognitive problems and lack of appreciation for training (people feel that they are losing useful time rather than having a job and earning money to sustain their family).

In this regard, an interviewee referred to the immediacy that is so often associated with this type of population and that should be contextualized into a culture of poverty:

students spend all their money, as soon as they get it; they skip classes to go to the post offices to collect the SII money and then go shopping. They spend all their money. They have no notion of savings. For example, in my class nearly everyone has a plasma tv. I realize that it's a way of personal valorisation for them, through the things they buy. So they prefer to go hungry and feel more integrated into society, in that sense." And she adds: "Some (not all) who are attending training, feel enclosed in the classroom (...) and have no motivation. People are forced to be in class and don't feel motivated to literacy. For these people with low qualifications, it would be more helpful if they would be assigned to community service, with a more immediate compensation, both at a psychological as well as at an economic level. (int. 1)

#### ***4.4 Gender differences***

All the interviewed professionals reported gender differences in terms of training, related in particular to requested training areas, classroom behaviour, results obtained, school absenteeism, valorisation of training or resistances towards it.

Regarding the choice of training area, women give preference to areas related to sewing, education and geriatric help, as well as administrative work (commercial and accounting). In interview 2, concerning the behaviour in the classroom and absenteeism it's stated that, in general, women are more responsible and committed, have better grades and are more concerned with skipping classes. They only give up when there is no alternative left. Men drop out of training when they then find work, women leave when their children are sick or are themselves sick (depression, chronic illnesses). This view is shared by several other interviewees. Another interviewee says: "men like more to do a sort of riot in the classroom. Women are calmer, more soothing. Women can understand that there is a purpose, they see a path for the future. They say that they do not want the same future for their children. Men just want to get done with it." (int. 1) On the other hand, the fact of being part of a couple can boost the man to "put up a fight" (int. 3), influenced by the woman. Men who are living alone tend to be more passive: they do not show interest in their own valorisation and downplay the training.

For everything that has been said, there is a consensus on the greater resistance of men towards training, although there is a tendency to fade away, if they manage to overcome the first steps. However, men in training are outnumbered, even more because they have greater ease in finding employment. The reasons pointed for this are the fact that they have own transport and that they don't have to take care of the children. Women accept more easily the task of studying and the challenge of change. But men do it more out of obligation, because it is mandatory in the SII and they don't want to lose their benefits.

#### ***4.5 Main impacts of the implementation of measures relating to training and education***

##### *4.5.1 Insertion in the labour market in the short-term*

In the current economic climate there are very few practical results, due to lack of employment. Integration into training allows an increase of qualification, but not an immediate professional integration, although later this is facilitated. These measures make it possible to get other jobs apart from the usual occasional jobs, precarious and without rights (odd jobs). At this moment, for the beneficiaries of SII, proposals for part-time or temporary employment are more frequent. In the area of family support and Geriatrics, there are still placements in institutions through the support of governmental programmes and some people end up working there definitely.

##### *4.5.2 Employability*

School certification (9th or 12th grade) allows beneficiaries to apply for jobs that otherwise they could not have access to. Indeed, many of them have only the 4th grade of schooling (or less), which makes difficult their placement in a job, even if it is undifferentiated work. Thus, there are companies that require the 6<sup>th</sup> grade or even the enrolment in the new opportunities program for completing the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. People begin to realise that they cannot do only odd jobs or jobs in agriculture.

With the training, there is a positive development because people feel they already have a suitable profile for the position they are filling or are likely to fill, improving their professional skills. The measures relating to education and training motivate people to pursue higher levels. On the other hand, some allow internships, providing work experience for a future job.

#### *4.5.3 Literacy*

These measures have allowed the literacy of adults that were not even at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, thus reducing the high percentage of illiterates that existed until a few years ago, improving national literacy levels. On the other hand, they opened the possibility of people with only the 4th or 6th grade, who left school prematurely, to resume their studies and to be able to do something that seemed impossible to them. Finally, it was stated in the interviews that the compulsory school attendance until the 9th grade, under penalty of losing their right to the benefits, effectively fights absenteeism of children and increases their levels of school attendance.

#### *4.5.4 Personal valorisation and social interaction*

The interaction permitted by training between people in the same circumstances, with the same problems, which see themselves as equals, enables the exchange of experience between them and increases social skills. The sessions often deal with themes which they had never spoken about and the fact of being a part of the group acts as a stimulus to improve and care for your presentation. Concerning personal valorisation, it is referred an increase of self-awareness and self-esteem, as well as opening of new horizons. As mentioned by a social worker: "For these women who go through training or improve their school qualification is as if the world had other colors and shapes that they had never thought of." (int. 8)

### **4.6 Essential factors for success in education and training**

The professionals interviewed pointed to the importance of reconciliation between family life and training for success. It is crucial the existence of a network that supports the family of the beneficiaries, for example, grandparents who take care of the children or a day-care centre (free of charge and with extended working hours, which offer a snack and/or other

meals to children) i.e., community support, either from local structures of social support, or from neighbours.

On the other hand, it is also crucial how people are welcomed at school or in training and that teachers/trainers have a specific approach to this type of population, as is stressed out by one of the teachers:

the perception and understanding of students' experiences, ultimately leads to lessons being given in a different way. It is necessary to have a closer knowledge of people's lives, of their homes. You need to go there to see why they are not in school. To immerse yourself in their lives is to realize that often they are starving and their children also, it sends schooling to the background. Often it is also necessary to stop what was programmed to do and bring this subject up in the classroom for sharing or talking to them, apart from the rest of the class. It's to understand their side. (int. 1)

The previous working habits, the existence of some school certification and the consequent competences acquired in these areas are other key factors for success in the return to school, and it is essential to have opportunities in local businesses and jobs available, so there can be a return on the investment made in training, which is embodied in finding a job. The possibility of this happening means a greater motivation and commitment to training. In short,

the ones who are successful have a family and life's path where school is valued, where work is valued, where there is a certain family structure whose momentum for some reason overbalanced, as for example the loss of employment. These people find it much easier to resume their path and, with help, to return to employment and a stable life. People who come from situations of poverty have much more difficulties because they don't value fundamental aspects such as education, training, employment. People without aspirations in relation to the construction of projects of life.(int. 8)

### **Conclusions and further work**

In industrial societies the status of the individuals is closely related to their work. As we have previously seen, in activation policies the poor and the excluded are increasingly held responsible for their condition, growing the social stigma towards them. Regarding Duvoux's (2009) *internalized autonomy*, individuals with material, relational or symbolic resources, which allow them to develop autonomous strategies, are the ones that can start over more easily, according to the interviews that were analysed. This is clearly the case of those who have higher school qualifications, personal and professional skills. Social technicians recognize they put more effort into the integration of these specific people and that they suggest them first when training or career opportunities arise. Indeed, social intervention

institutions, mostly the governmental ones, maximize efforts in the follow-up of individuals that are believed to have higher probabilities of leaving welfare (as professional insertion is the first and main goal established in the SII law).

The individuals that refer most concerns related to health or to transport issues (that justify the setbacks suffered by them in their desire for autonomy) and who present themselves as victims of the circumstances are those classified by Duvoux in the *contradicted autonomy* type. Given that SII was not designed to be extended in time, social technicians and beneficiaries make successive rationalizations about obstacles and handicaps for the fact that the latter remain on welfare far too often for years: "the institutional work of «activation» tries to act as a palliative to the devaluation and increasing isolation of individuals. The application of a set of «actions» of training, learning, socialising legitimizes beneficiaries (...)."

Taking into consideration the qualifications' deficit of this population in particular there are some constraints in education/training and in the subsequent integration into the labour market, such as individual barriers (cognitive, physical and mental health, age and lack of motivation) as well as others, like the low values of training scholarships or the SII. This enhances the abandonment of training and education whenever there is a possibility of employment, because the salary will be higher, which causes the cycle to repeat itself, since there was no time for actual learning or certification.

As mentioned, only people with more resources, not only relational but also local (people who live in places where there are good structures for children and youth and a well-structured transport network) manage to succeed. This fact thereby increases discrimination vis-à-vis the more excluded from the excluded, which may only benefit from the playful side and social interaction of training and education, but are not really maximizing all the possibilities it has to offer at professional and citizenship levels.

In fact, in order to belong to the category of *internalized autonomy* (Duvoux, 2009) or *unsettled* (Rodrigues, 2010), and thus belonging to the group of beneficiaries who understand the measure as transitory and as a stepping stone for professional inclusion, it is necessary that one has never experienced generational trajectories of poverty and exclusion and that its resort to welfare is due to a crisis such as unemployment, deaths, divorces/separations, and so on.

This paper is part of a PhD investigation which main objective is to understand processes that enable women from comparable social background (age, social and economical origins, educational pathways, professional trajectories, family history) to have different socio-professional inclusion trajectories after being subjected to activation policies. Research will continue by elaborating sociological portraits, based upon Bernard Lahire's methodology, of eight women who are now socially and/or professionally included and another eight who have remained in an exclusion situation.

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