


Experiences of Portuguese Women in the Precariat: Between Frustration and the Lack of Meaning in the Future

Experiências de Mulheres Portuguesas no Precariado: Entre a Frustração e a Falta de Sentido no Futuro

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ABSTRACT

How does the growing precariousness in employment and labor relations impact the construction of subjectivities and the personal and professional narratives of Portuguese working women? This research focuses on one of the distinctive aspects of this “class” – the precariat, which refers to highly educated young adults with jobs below these qualifications –, with the relations of production. More specifically, it focuses on women who believed that higher education would allow them to have a safe career/work trajectory. We conducted interviews with highly educated young women and adult women with precarious jobs, who perform functions below their academic qualifications. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques, with the aid of the software Atlas/TI. The results show how precariousness means not only the uncertainty of salaried work but also, and above all, uncertainty as a way of life, of forms of subjection, and of bodies. This uncertainty extends to the whole sphere of life, producing subjectivities marked by anxiety, stress, pain, vulnerability, frustration, and hopelessness concerning the future.

Keywords: precariat; precariousness; women; governmentality; subjectivities.

RESUMO

Como a crescente precariedade no emprego e nas relações de trabalho tem impacto na construção de subjetividades e nas narrativas pessoais e profissionais das mulheres portuguesas trabalhadoras? A investigação centra-se num dos aspectos distintivos desta “classe” – o precariado, que se refere aos jovens adultos com alta qualificação e trabalhos aquém desta –, com as relações de produção, especificamente no caso das mulheres que acreditavam que o ensino superior lhes permitiria ter uma carreira/trajetória segura de trabalho. Realizamos entrevistas com mulheres altamente qualificadas que estão em trabalhos precários, em que desempenham funções abaixo de suas qualificações acadêmicas. Os dados coletados foram analisados com técnicas de análise de conteúdo qualitativa, com auxílio do software Atlas/TI. Os resultados mostram como a precariedade não significa apenas a incerteza do trabalho assalariado, mas também e, sobretudo, a incerteza como modo de viver, dos modos de subjetivação e dos corpos. Incerteza que se estende à toda a esfera da vida, produzindo subjetividades marcadas por ansiedade, estresse, dor, vulnerabilidade, frustração e desesperança em relação ao futuro.

Palavras-chave: precariado; precariedade; mulheres; governamentalidade; subjetividades.

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Introduction

In this paper, we explore the ways in which the growing precariousness in employment and work relations have an impact on the construction of subjectivities and of personal and professional narratives of women workers. This path will be based on Standing's concept of "the precariat", through which we are going to address one of the distinctive aspects of this "class in the making" with the relations of production, specifically in the case of women graduates in Portugal, who believed that higher education would allow them to have a career and a safe trajectory of work. The precariat presents at the level of these relations of production something that seems to be unique in history: it is the first class in which the rule is to have a level of qualifications (skills and abilities) superior to the type of work that it performs or can aspire to perform, (STANDING, 2013, 2014a), with a strong penalization of women who, through the adaptation of inequality dynamics, now assume the role of the "ideal worker" (ACKER, 2004) throughout the world.

After generations of efforts to integrate women's equality into labor wage, we are witnessing a restructuring of the work landscape that has brought it closer to the characteristics attributed in the past to women's work: vulnerability, paid and unpaid work time, lower wages without respect for working hour limits. Precisely because precarity is not only a condition of women, although it is a dominant trait in its historical course, it is necessary to understand it, as Judith Revel explains, in the context of a set of devices of subjection, exploitation and control that characterizes neoliberal rationality, to better understand the specific ways in which precariousness is experienced (or rather applied) to women (MORINI, 2014).

The option for the study of this specific group intends to bring to the discussion the commonly accepted premise that the modernization of the social, labor and educational status of women is in itself a criterion for the development of countries. While, on the one hand, women are in a larger number in higher education since the mid-80s, (PORDATA, 2016) on the other, the data show that female workers in Portugal receive about 81.5% of the average monthly wage of men. This difference increases as the level of qualification increases, being particularly high among the upper management, where the ratio is 72.6 (Cite, n.d.).

Furthermore, we consider that the characterization of Standing of the "precariat" – like the other groups framed in the class structure – as bringing together a combination of distinct relations of production, distinct relations of distribution and distinct relations with the State (STANDING, 2013) allows us to overcome the use of the term, as coined by Castel and Bourdieu, in the 1980s to describe the precariousness of working conditions, extending its meaning to the dimension of existential precariousness that results from instability in work and life, that reveal the 'many faces' of the precariat (RAUNING, 2008; STANDING, 2011; MORINI, 2014).

Based on the analysis of the presence of categories associated with status frustration, deprivation in relation to the future and greater vulnerability to precariousness traps, which according to Standing characterize the fraction of the precariat that is made up of people with academic training, this paper intends to show how the insecurity and instability in employment and work relations associated with the rhetoric of “freedom through work” (BECK, 2000) has profound consequences in the production of subjectivities. This set of categories forms an ideological precondition of precariousness as a technique of governmentality. We focus on women’s experience because, with the historical condition of women becoming the exploitative measure of all people, women are now exposed to a “double penalty” – as a subfigure pushed to the margins of their own condition (MORINI, 2014). The next section presents a brief discussion of the precariat as a class in the making.

The Precariat: promises of women emancipation and a new class in formation

The discussion about the globalization era usually refers to a complex series of events beginning in the 1970s that brings together a multitude of changes that have altered the contours of economics, politics, and social life (e.g., ROSE, 1996; BECK, 2000). Standing explains the changes brought about by globalization using the notion of “Global Transformation”, assuming the affinity with the work of Karl Polanyi – The Great Transformation (2000). The author refers to Polanyi to characterize this phase of disembodiment of the national market systems towards a global market economy, based on competitiveness and individualism, built upon the untying of the economy of society (STANDING, 2014a). The concept of Global Transformation serves the purpose of explaining how these changes produced a systematic crisis and a global fragmentation of social structures – with a globalized class structure superimposed on the previous class structure (STANDING, 2014b). In this process, the systems of regulation, redistribution and social protection were progressively dismantled along with the institutions that contextualized them; the economy has become more volatile and the incidence of social, economic and ecological shocks has increased; economic and social insecurity has spread and has become chronic and recurrent, affecting millions of people throughout Europe and around the world; the *deindustrialization* of employment has become a global phenomenon, alongside the spread of precarious and flexible labor markets and the growing acceptance of the *servicization* of work and employment (“*servicialização*” by ALMEIDA, 2012, p.30). We have also witnessed the growth of the most varied forms of inequality – large differences in wage levels, the shift of labor income to capital and the loss of social rights by the middle and lower classes. It is within this historical movement that we witness the emergence of a new global class structure.

We believe that it is not possible to speak of globalization, its effects, without mentioning the centrality of women's work as a resource for global capital (ACKER, 2004), as well as the appropriation by capitalism, not only of their productive and reproductive work, as has long been pointed out by feminists, but also the appropriation of their ideology and political work, placing feminist ideals at their service (EISENSTEIN, 2009, JAMESON, 2011). The claims of the second wave of feminism meet and coincide with neoliberal ideologies, the contradiction settles in the working world (FRASER, 2009, EISENSTEIN, 2009). This parallel movement has led to the current situation of women at work and in society – in the West and also to a greater degree in highly capitalist countries such as India and other emerging economies. The critique of “economicism”, of the “androcentric” state, has led to a relative integration of women, including in state apparatus, but according to Eisenstein (2009) and Fraser (2009), led also to the normalization of feminist ideology and to the lack of vision in the face of the seduction that the “market” and neoliberalism directed towards the ambitions of affirming the individualities and the rights of women.

As Cristina Morini (2014) explains, the body of women is the biopolitical body *par excellence* – the object of consumer and advertising investment, the main support of commercial desire. This is a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, the use of images, ideologies of femininity, to construct models of desirable workers and services (ACKER, 2004) and, on the other hand, the persistence of the image of “*corps dociles*” (FOUCAULT, 2014), perfect for routine work and no prospects. The feminization of labor thus emerges as a double movement, the massive entry of women into the labor market, but also, and above all, the frightening extension of the conditions of exploitation and subjection, which historically belong to women, applied to the whole sphere of production, made possible by means of the introduction of a series of management prerogatives on the organization and working conditions, proper to neoliberal policies (OKSALA, 2013; MORINI, 2014).

It is not easy to identify the limits of precariousness as circumscribed “to the lower classes,” as passive subjects pushed into precariousness, as described by Marx, nor even as self-excluded subjects, a thesis that interweaves precariousness with the neoliberal idea that the losers of society actually choose for themselves the existence in which they live, since this self-exclusion evidences their inability to conduct themselves according to the norms that guide neoliberal governmentalism (RAUNING, 2008).

Standing relies on its argumentation in defense of the concept of the precariat, as a class, in a three-dimensional definition of relations: specific relations of production, specific relations of distribution (income sources) and specific relations with the State. This combination produces a distinct awareness of desirable social reforms and policies

(STANDING, 2013, 2014b). It should be noted that the explicit inclusion of relations with the State as one of the distinctive features of class definition is quite significant. It seems to us that Standing does exactly so to draw attention to the growing marginalization of many people in relation to the rights normally associated with citizenship. First, we have the dimension “relations of production”. They are mainly characterized by existential precariousness, since insecure work, term contracts and the constant alternation between being employed and being unemployed, also lead to a precariousness of the other dimensions of life (STANDING, 2014b). The traits that characterize this relation are (STANDING, 2014b): “absence of an occupational identity or narrative”; “lack of control over time”; “excess of qualifications”; and “psychological detachment from work.”

Second, there are the relations of distribution. The income of the precarious is concentrated in the income of the work, mainly in the ordered ones in money. Their “flexible” situation does not allow them to count on most of the benefits given by companies to career workers and often also fail to meet requirements such as “rebate time” or to pass successfully on “proof of condition of resources “to have access to the support of the State. This reality transforms the members of the precarious into “supplicants,” dependent on the discretionary decisions of others to survive. The aspects of this distribution relation are the uncertainty and the decline of social mobility, which already appear as effects of some of the traits that characterize the relations of production (STANDING, 2014b).

Third, there are relations with the State. The pressure exerted by all the aspects described above, strongly driven by the processes of globalization of work, is causing systematic erosion in the rights of citizenship historically consecrated: civil, cultural, political, social and economic. This reality transforms many people who live in precariousness into sub-citizens (denizens, similar to supplicants in the Middle Ages) (STANDING, 2014b). Burton and Bowman (2022, p. 507) discuss that “the ways precarity acts and works through the intricacies of institutional systems and personal relationships is complex”, and this complexity, what they call as the “‘unknowability’ of these interwoven structures, politics, and social mores that produces vulnerability as part of the state of precarious living and working” (BURTON; BOWMAN, 2022, p. 507). Ornelas *et al.* (2017) inform that the lack of opportunity to build and keep under control professional narratives based on their real qualifications, when investigating women, is at the base of feelings associated with the frustration of status, aggravated by a strong lack of secure prospects for the future and a greater vulnerability to certain traps of precariousness, namely of seeing their capacity for work diminished. The combination of flexible labor markets and the functioning of the social security system contributes to the last aspect of precariousness: the pitfalls of

precariousness and poverty. These pitfalls are caused by the impossibility of counterbalancing the costs / benefits of accepting any job. These characteristics are not all exclusive to the precarious. However, the combination of its elements defines a social group and, for this reason, it is possible to call the precariat a “class-in-construction” (STANDING, 2014b).

Methodological Procedures

This work has an exploratory character, based on a qualitative approach, making use of a conceptual variation (not to confuse “term” and “concept”) that adds new traces to the concept of “precariat” that allow to overcome the uses of “precariousness” and “precarization” to describe certain working conditions, or to discuss forms of self-exclusion, a simplistic use typical in neoliberal discourses to explain the experiences of those who are unable to “win” in society. In this type of approach, we do not seek the generalization of results but rather “deepening, comprehensiveness and diversity in the process of understanding” (MINAYO, 2017). In order to guarantee reliability and relevance in the construction of the corpus, the principles of representativeness, homogeneity and pertinence were observed, which refer respectively to the essential characteristics of the intended universe, the attributes of the interlocutors and the capacity to respond to research objectives. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured individual interviews with six graduated women who were living in a precarious professional situation, invited to describe their perceptions about topics and dimensions selected according to Standing’s work on the precariat, that are included in the script/protocol.

The identification of potential respondents started from the accessibility criterion and continued with the “snowball” strategy, in which one participant pointed out others that had characteristics of interest for the research. This method is useful in accessing populations that are difficult to identify (BOGDAN; BIKLEN, 2007). It should be noted that there was some difficulty in getting volunteers for this study. Some women in this situation showed a fear of being identified, especially by the employer, perceiving some social shame about the situation. All our respondents had the expectation that higher education would provide them with a career in their field of specialty. All but the youngest, had work experience in their studies field, but none so far with perceived security, both financial and professional. Table 1 outlines the information considered important to contextualize the trajectories of each interviewee. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, their communications are marked with the letter “E” followed by the number that corresponds to the order in which the interview was performed.

Table 1 – Interviewee’s profile

	Age	Academic degree	Occupation / job	Marital status/ Children	Dwelling-place
E ₁	47	Postdoctoral	Postdoctoral scholarship /researcher	Married with children	Lisbon
E ₂	43	Graduate	Customer service representative	Single no children	Lisbon
E ₃	35	Graduate	Trainee	Single no children	Coimbra
E ₄	33	Masters	Administrative	Married no children	Faro
E ₅	41	Graduate	Lawyer and Call center agent	Single no children	Lisbon
E ₆	24	Masters	Sale assistant	Single no children	Coimbra

Source: Authors’ elaboration (2023).

The interview protocol consisted of a request for the interviewee to give a brief summary of her academic career, as well as an appreciation for the reflection of this career path (links, periods of unemployment). Interviews lasted about 30 to 40 minutes, conducted via Skype, in 2016, and recorded with the agreement of the interviewees. The research followed the ethical precepts of the educational institution where it was developed and all participants received clarifications regarding the research, their right to withdraw at any time and guarantee the confidentiality of their data. To describe and interpret the content of the interviews, we used Content Analysis technique (BARDIN, 2006). The established categories correspond to those already mentioned by Standing in his work on the precariat, grouped into families according to their contribution to the most present consequences in the fraction of the precariat which is made up of people with an academic background (STANDING, 2013, 2014b).

Results Presentation and Discussion

The results are presented in this section, discussing the findings based on the literature.

Status frustration

The precariousness of production relations, as a consequence of insecurity in employment, is not in itself the distinguishing feature of the precariat (STANDING, 2013). It is not a threat to the order and techniques of neoliberal government (LOREY, 2015), but rather the installation of precariousness as a permanent regime. The ‘new economy’ discourse, which idealizes ‘creative workers’, is often a pretext for imposing precariousness (KAPUR, 2007) or for concealing labor exploitation. In one of the statements of one of the interviewee’s reports:

Contract agreement? A real contract? ... Never! Because it is these temporary agency work contracts that can rescind and put another job and send the person off. So I never had a real work contract (E5).

Most of the available work in global capitalism has now the characteristics historically present in female work-precariousness, flexibility, mobility, fragmentary nature, low status, and low pay (OKSALA, 2013). According to Casaca (2013), Portuguese women workers are among those that, within the framework of the European Union, show more continuous labor involvement. The fragmentation and growing precariousness of productive processes have made social identity extremely fragile, and increasingly imagined, with processes of identification focused on what we could be (BERARDI, 2009), opening the way to a sense of frustration:

It's hard to identify with what I do. Honestly, at the height when I have to write on my profession ... when I look at these papers, I have a feeling of revolt and at the same time of sadness. An uprising because, obviously, when we study, we aspire to work in the area where we fought so hard, and sadness because it was also so much money invested, so much time, and now it comes down to ... nothing! (E4).

As Morini (2014) explains, a very different situation would be the situation in which work, whether good or bad, was capable of guaranteeing certain levels of freedom, of individual and collective growth, if it granted some possibilities of emancipation, formation and economic level. The subsumption of the mind in the process of capitalist valuation leads to a constant attentive stress (BERARDI, 2009) and contributes to the configuration of anxious selves who have internalized the imperative to perform (MOORE; ROBINSON, 2015), visible in the testimony that follows:

What makes me go to work is simply having to pay my bills. That's it. Because... it's a climate in which you always feel worn, always lacking (E2).

The condition of precariousness is thus a source of negative identity (SOEIRO; CAMPOS, 2016) and a condition of non-freedom. This reality induces provisions marked by the need for constant adaptation and the emergence of a “new psychological contract” based on short-term commitments (STONE, 2001) and a detachment from work and from the employers (STANDING, 2014b), as it is clear in this statement:

I go to work and I think “I have to go there”, but I am not at all angry, I am happy, I am grateful; I hope this lasts at least until the summer. Now, “that” motivation, I do not have (E5).

It begins to become clearer how precariousness is a growing part of government standardization techniques (LOREY, 2006). This normalization is also ensured by the construction of what is deviant or abnormal (LOREY, 2006; RAUNING, 2008).

The threat of insecurity, a consequence of unemployment, for example, has a subjectivating function here, ensuring that behaviors and discourses are normalized, by a disciplinary power (FOUCAULT, 2014) that makes bodies docile and useful (MORINI, 2014). Faced with the threat of unemployment (understood as an abnormal and deviant category), a temporary job, demotivating and without perspectives, becomes even motive of being grateful.

No sense of future

The feeling of having no future is, according to Standing (2014b), one of the differentiating characteristics of the fraction of the precariat who believed that the investment in their schooling would put them in a position to have a safe work path, with prospects of socially advancing. Berardi's statement (2009, p. 25), "Do not worry about your future, you do not have one" seems to convey perfectly the irony of this experience:

[...] I try not to make such plans in the long run ... It's all very unstable and then what happens is that a person makes plans, like I did 10 years ago or 5 years ago and the plans come out all stuck. So I opted for ... ready, that cliché phrase: live one day at a time, I think ... it applies, it applies more and more. Because otherwise a person ends up getting frustrated, anxious ... (E3).

The austerity context in some countries of the European Union, especially in Portugal, places particularly women and young people in a situation of great vulnerability (ESTANQUE; HERMES, 2012), that only increases the pressure, the anxiety, the stress, and the pain (MORINI, 2014).

I live in a rented house. If I lived alone, I would have to go to my parents' house again. Because at my salary level, obviously I cannot afford all the expenses [...] It's me and my husband. The budget is not enough to think about children (E4).

According to Rosa (2016), based on the Eurostat database, in 2009 the average remuneration of men in Portugal was higher than that of women by 10%, increasing in 2014 to 14.9%, contrary to the European trend, where this difference decreases in 2.09% over the same period. The permanence of these differences illustrates well how the processes of change, despite great achievements associated with the feminization of education and work, are in general inducers of new dynamic inequalities that seem to be due to a permanent readjustment (ESTANQUE; HERMES, 2012).

Such awards (of performance) that are distributed annually in April, are based on that assessment ... and that is done ... it's horrible, it's horrible. They close you up in a room with 3 people: a director, the supervision and the coordinator ... They say: ready, let's give you one more chance, we hope that next year will run better... So you always get the feeling that ... hey! "They're giving me one more chance to see if I'm not fired!" They're giving me one more chance! (E2).

It is clear from this experience how members of the precarious can become "suplicants" – in medieval terms – (STANDING, 2013, 2014b), in an experience in which they are subjugated and simultaneously endowed with agency (LOREY, 2006). Looking at the experience mentioned above, we see how the process of normalization of precariousness is also (re) produced by each one of us. This freedom to decide is essential, precisely because the techniques of self-government arise from the simultaneity of subjection and empowerment, from compulsion and freedom (LOREY, 2006). For most workers, the high degree of uncertainty to which they are subjected, including income insecurity, results in a chronic uncertainty (STANDING, 2011), often implying the underutilization of cognitive – relational capacities (MORINI, 2014). The same interviewee realizes this experience when the question arises: don't you think you could try to change jobs or go abroad?

Because I'm afraid! Notice! I have nothing behind me to support me, in case anything goes wrong. I do not have! If I suddenly fail to receive my salary, I have no one to turn to. Therefore, I am bound with arms and legs! I have to be there, doing something that makes me unhappy (E2).

The difference between the notion of risk and that of uncertainty is well summarized by this last excerpt. The possibility of investing in a change cannot be considered a risk since the probabilities do not allow any type of evaluation: strengths/weaknesses; threats/opportunities. In this sense, the calls made everywhere for greater 'flexibility', also means redistribution of risks away from the State and the economy towards the individual (BECK, 2000). In such insecure living conditions, it is evident that social mobility becomes an almost impossible undertaking. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have pointed out "greater income differences seem to solidify the social structure and decrease the chances of upward mobility, where there are bigger inequalities of outcome, equal opportunity is a significantly more distant prospect" (2009, p. 169).

I am currently on unemployment benefit. Fortunately I have the support of my parents when it is necessary and ... They have their own house, it is not rented or any of that, and by itself it already helps in terms of expenses ... we try to make it work out, but it's not so easy... (E3).

The impact of flexible and precarious forms of employment and the increase of unemployment, especially among young people and women, even among graduates (KOVÁCS; LOPES, 2012), shows that the promises contained in this neoliberal model, that presented a promising future, based on a meritocracy model, which would allow, through investment in qualifications, better living conditions and the possibility of social ascension, turned out to be simply an illusion.

Precariousness traps

One of the distinctive aspects of the precariat, the relations of production, which seems to be unique in history, is related to the gap between the level of qualifications possessed and the type of work that one performs or can aspire to perform (STANDING, 2013; 2014a). The way flexible labor markets work worsens the vulnerability of graduates, especially younger ones, to the pitfalls, or traps, of precariousness. Investment in education presupposes the acquisition of skills and knowledge that will be realized, developed and recognized in the following years through the construction of a professional career. However, if the next years are to change from precarious employment to precarious employment, the possibility of developing these talents is potentially permanently impaired (STANDING, 2013, 2014b).

The fallacy of entrepreneurship [*“A Falácia do Empreendedorismo”*] (SOEIRO; CAMPOS, 2016) depends on what has been criticized as ‘magical voluntarism’, an ideology which insists on the miraculous power of each individual to be whatever they want to be. This “magical voluntarism” overlooks the reality of class exclusion, blocked opportunities and structural decline. This belief that poverty, lack of opportunities, or unemployment, is our fault and our own fault alone (FISHER, 2014), creates conditions for another precarity trap. These costs are associated with the “truth regime” (FOUCAULT, 2013) legitimized by neoliberal discourses in which subjects self-define in terms of their status for the external gaze (MOORE; ROBINSON, 2015), meaning that if someone presents herself with such high level of skills and yet works in a low work level something must be wrong with this person (ROSE, 1996).

My parents obviously know, and a more closed circle of friends who also know.... [...] Now ... there it is, I do not tell the truth to anyone, nor think ... no doubt they would think then if she is a lawyer and doesn't practice it must be for some reason... So I say that I am a lawyer, I have my own office, I work very much at home because I have this opportunity! (E5).

The citizenship conceived as a working citizen, typical of industrial capitalism (BECK, 2000), now gives way to the rhetoric that citizenship must be active and in-

dividualistic. “The political subject is henceforth to be an individual whose citizenship is manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of choices” (ROSE, 1996, p. 65), Or in other words, freedom and self-determination become necessary elements to stimulate productive creativity and innovation (MORINI, 2014). The problem may arise when, in a labor market characterized by precariousness, as in the case of Portugal (RAMOS, 2012), having a too many options, often leads into situations of “unbounded rationality” (STANDING, 2013), not knowing which of our actions may have the desired return – an employment contract. This reality is well illustrated by this interviewee:

My posture is one day at a time. But I do not stop; I’m always working and enriching my resume, because when it comes one opportunity that may worth something I think! I am always going to congresses and making communications, publishing (...) Therefore, I still do not know what to apply for next ... besides being a research professional, I am a contestant. (...) I spend the time competing for anything. (...). Every day I read the *Diário da República*, the job sites, etc., and I have everything prepared, in the folders of the PC, to be able to compete (E1).

In the regime of biocapitalist accumulation, precarization, while it does not guarantee the continuity of income and rights, necessarily requires enthusiasm, a powerful suggestion that can lead the subject to be sold in a regime marked by gratuity (MORINI, 2014). Professional internships are a good example of this reality. The transformation of the wage-earner into a “self-entrepreneur” (ROSE, 1996), as it forms contemporary techniques of domination, is the simultaneous realization of processes of subjectivation and exploitation processes. On the one hand, the individual takes subjectivation to the exacerbation, since it implies in all his activities the “immaterial” and “cognitive” resources of “themselves”, and, on the other hand, it leads to identify subjectivation and exploitation, since they are at the same the time master and the slave of themselves, capitalist and proletarian, subject of enunciation and subject of statement (RAUNING, 2008).

The frustration can come from having too many qualifications, as this is a group of workers for whom the rule is to have a higher level of qualifications than the type of job they may aspire to or may be forced to perform (ORNELAS *et al.*, 2017). This feeling is reinforced by the absence of prospects for the future and the aggravation of fragility in relation to the precariousness traps. The articulation of these categories is quite visible in this comment:

When I have to identify myself professionally, I always present myself as a student. Because I do not see this work as ... a profession, a career. [...] It’s not a job where I see the future, I want to build a career. But no, not even thinking... (E6).

The way in which these categories are articulated, from the combination of three dimensions based on the concept of class, according to Standing (2011) – distinct relations of production, distinct relations of distribution and distinct relations with the State –, must be understood as a dynamic in network, in which the insecurity acts as a sort of glue. Increased flexibility in labor markets has led to increased work-related stress, increased feelings of uncertainty and insecurity (EU-OSHA, 2007). This uncertainty extends to the whole sphere of life, producing subjectivities marked by anxiety, stress, pain, vulnerability, frustration and hopelessness in relation to the future (BERARDI, 2009; MOORE; ROBINSON, 2015). By establishing “labor rights” based on the stability of the employment relationship and the “years of service”, access to social protection, regulation and redistribution the lack of this may endanger women’s rights (BERARDI, 2009; LOREY, 2015).

Conclusion

These experiences exemplify the distinctive aspects and effects of contemporary work processes and show how their combination and interaction impact on all dimensions of life. As Isabell Lorey wrote recently, “If we fail to understand precarization, then we understand neither the politics nor the economy of the present” (LOREY, 2015, p. 1). Based on the concept of “precariat”, we discussed how the precariousness amongst female graduate is concealed by the increasing feminization of work and how this phenomenon impacts on the construction of subjectivities and of personal and professional narratives of women workers.

At first, we presented how and why the relationship between academic formation and the respective professional paths no longer allow to create safe and rewarding trajectories of work, resulting in a source of feelings of hopelessness and frustration. Then, we showed how the various categories work in a relationship in which it is often difficult to distinguish the effects of each one. These two moments of this paper allow us to perceive that insecurity is the common feature of these experiences and how precariousness works as an instrument of government. In other words, governing through precariousness means that our relations with the state are characterized by insecurity, as it is clear in the importance that the category “relations with the State” assumes in our results. The ideological normalization of precariousness becomes a technique of subjectivation.

This research can be a starting point for future research on the real employment situation of many of the graduates in Portugal and other countries. Future research should deepen the implications of these new experiences in the world of work for social and labor policies, namely to assess whether legislation promoting equality include women in the labor market, work placements, reduction of TSU (a Portuguese Tax) paid by

employers – which will benefit all employers paying the minimum wage, or measures to support women with one-parent families. Are all these policies actually improving the living conditions of these women, or just the financing of precariousness, the lowest variant of feminized labor?

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