Chapter 14

Gender Equity in the Medical Profession as a Democratic Culture: The Portuguese Experience

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ABSTRACT

Gender Equity is still a challenge 45 years after establishment of democracy in Portugal. The author makes a historical framework of gender equality in the context of democracy and brings together demographic and statistical data on education, science, women’s political participation in governments, parliament, and local power levels, the medical profession, and medical specialties. Also focused are the governmental structures to promote gender equality and the way of recruitment/appointment for public administration leaders. A comparison is made with other countries, using data from the OECD. The conclusion is that although there is a high rate of feminization in medicine in Portugal, this is due to the great competitiveness, work capacity, and dedication of women, which guarantees the entry of more women into medical schools. It remains to be seen that men are better represented in top positions and women are clearly overlooked, although the best performance of women in financial management is known. There is a lot of work to do until achieving a true gender equality in Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

Portuguese laws concerning Gender Equity had the most important modifications in the 1970’s, following “carnation’s revolution” of 25 April 1974. From a regimen of fascism to democracy, beyond global freedom of expression, improvements in women’s rights were one of the most impressive effects of democracy. In 1974 women could vote and be elected for the first time in a free and universal way. In 1976, a husband’s right to open the postal mail of his wife was abolished. Other equity rights were given to women in the Civil Code revised in 1978. In 1974 new Laws opened to women the opportunity to become magistrates, diplomats and to have a local administrative career.

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Traditionally the Portuguese woman is an important pillar within the family. She is the Mother, the educator, the manager of the family economy, the holder of ancestral knowledge in the art of cooking, feeding, dressing the children, creating the basic agricultural and farmer resources for the support of the family, caring for disease, teaching ethical and religious principles and basic school knowledge. This central position of women in the family is widely, highly respected and recognized by the Portuguese men, and it is even expressed in the popular saying that men like to remember as a joke: “In home, she is in charge, but I am her boss”.

Even before “April Revolution” in 1974, many girls were students in the Portuguese Medicine Faculties. In the years post revolution, the political crisis and the democratic values of the Universal Right to Health positively influenced the role of female physicians in the community.

The project of a National System of Health was a challenge and one opportunity for the young female physicians in the building of a new country. In the first 10 years of democracy, one of the most important political decisions was to spread medical services to the small cities in the country.

To promote equal access to medical services was a democratic objective. At that time, the first democratic governments sent young doctors to work for one year in small cities as a civic service. The experience of working in rural areas attracted young physicians; this helped to develop small Charity Hospitals from the local charity associations named “Misericórdias” and fixed physicians in the less developed regions of the country.

This spread of General Practitioners and family doctors was the basis of primary care that still today has an impressive impact in many health indicators and improved the wellbeing of Portuguese population. Infant mortality rate decreased from 38.9 in 1975 to 3.2 in 2016 (Children who die less than one year old for 1,000 births) and the Maternal mortality rate decreased from 42.9 in 1975 to 7.3 in 2014 (women who die because pregnancy or after delivery per 100,000 births).

Women were a significant proportion of physicians who chose to be General Practitioners at that time (1980’s). Not because they could not compete with men in the national examination of access to the specialty, but because it was easier to reconcile the medical profession with maternal and family duties.

At a time of financial crisis post revolution, which brought the International Monetary Fund to Portugal for the first time, it was also easier and cheaper to start a new family, buy a home and live, in the country regions, than it was in the big cities. All these factors influenced many women in the 80s, to choose Primary Care and be General Practitioners.

The proportion of female Medical Doctors in research also increased after this revolution period. The political change opened the country and opened the frontiers to Portuguese people. The training exchange with other countries created opportunities and developed scientific research.

The Portuguese are creative and curious people. The interest in “discovery” has remained in the Portuguese DNA longer than the time of the Discoveries in the 15th- 17th centuries. Democracy brought to Portuguese women the opportunity to contribute as researchers and physicians to develop medical careers in Public hospitals and democratise the National System of Health.

Considerable data were obtained and analysed and are presented in the rest of this chapter, with links that have not previously been correlated. The limitations were the availability of some data.