

Craft production and design as women's emancipation instruments

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Abstract

The craft production from Maranhão, for its strong influence on the generation of employment and income, has contributed to the development of women's empowerment, a new conception of power that allows women greater participation in decision-making as a group or association, in the management of responsibilities towards family, work and regarding the masculine gender, giving them greater autonomy. The present study identifies and discusses some design initiatives in the state of Maranhão (Brazil) that corroborate the autonomy and emancipation of artisans.

Keywords: empowerment, gender, craft, design.

Introduction

In actions for the perpetuation, safeguarding and utilization of regional vocations, craft stands out because of its capacity to generate income and its coverage: according to IBGE (2013), artisanal activities, present in 70.7% of the Brazilian municipalities, are configured as an activity practiced mostly by women. Women's empowerment breaks the "traditional domination" of men over women, granting them relevant advances as to autonomy in controlling themselves, their bodies, their sexuality, and their rights.

In this context, from the characteristics and parameters of what is named empowerment, we will present some design initiatives that aim to establish such autonomy and how the artisans involved in these actions develop their role as managers of their own productions

Women's empowerment

The concept of empowerment arose in the United States in the 1970s, when, through the banner of black power, self-valorization and conquest of full citizenship was sought. Empowering is, therefore, taking control of one's own life, being aware of the skills and competencies to manage, "taking control of one's own affairs" (Costa, 2007, p. 37).

Kleba and Wendausen (2009, p. 733) further define empowerment as a "dynamic process involving cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects". Empowering is to increase "power to the personal and collective autonomy of individuals and social groups in interpersonal and institutional relations, especially those subjected to oppression, discrimination and social domination," such meanings are evoked in the World Economic Forum document entitled "Women Empowerment – Assessing Global Gender Disparities" (FEM, 2005), which identifies five dimensions that are important for empowering women:

- Economic participation: the presence of women in the labor market in quantitative terms;
- Economic opportunity: the quality of the economic involvement of women – concentrated in the majority of cases in professions considered "feminine" and which tend, according to the patriarchal culture, to remain in the labor categories lower than men;
- Political Empowerment: Equitable representation of women in both formal and informal decision-making structures.
- Educational achievements: the right to quality education and access to better paid employment, career advancement, participation and representation in government and political influence;
- Health and well-being: provide women with services that enable their physical and mental health.

When we relate these concepts to the experiences of the craft groups existing in the state of Maranhão, we realize strategies and initiatives of design and management that, when associated, lead such groups to a situation of women's empowerment

We also find examples of processes that associate design and empowerment, as well as manifest the changes pointed out by Stromquist. Among the groups, we highlight the Association of Mothers of Itamatatiua, located in the municipality of Alcântara, and the group *Mulheres de Fibra* (Women of Moral Fiber), located in the Industrial District of São Luís.

The knowledge as potentializer of the women's empowerment

The question that guides our discussion is how crafts, considered a primordially feminine activity, can help deconstruct these pre-established social positions and reproduction through proactive attitudes?

Women, traditionally relegated to housework and child care in their homes, now use the same space to generate income from craft. It is well known that the organization of cooperatives with their own spaces is a huge gain in productivity increase (Keller, 2011; Noronha, 2011), but the barriers that prevent women from leaving home persist: make food, take care of the house and children. These activities are among those that hold women in their homes.

In the examples of the two groups mentioned, we observe the aspects identified by Stromquist (2002) as being parameters of empowerment: self-esteem and self-image; Critical thinking; Group cohesion and decision making; And actions that modify the relationship with work: management, access to resources, control and participation.

Strengthening the group and the political management of the village

In Itamatatua, a village in the municipality of Alcântara in which we surveyed (Noronha, 2011), the degree of women's emancipation observed is quite high compared to other communities. The women organized over the last fifteen years, around the Itamatatua Mothers' Association, with their own headquarters, conquered in the contemporary times, the role of mediators, and their symbolic position in the community changed

Besides having economic power, generated by the craft production, they also assumed political power. The president of the Association of Mothers of Itamatatua also received a hereditary position in the village, named *land commissioner of the lands*, which is an attribution similar to that of a mayor, to manage all the region denominated by Terras de Santa Tereza, which places the manager in a position of political importance, before considered masculine. Neide de Jesus is the first woman to take up this position and, accumulating the role of president of the association, this political power extends to all the women with whom she shares the attributions of her two political activities.

Income generation with crafts was the cornerstone of the community over many years – almost three hundred – since the production of crockery began in this quilombo. From utilitarian and subsistence craft – bricks, tiles, pots, and pans – the production of Itamatatua crockery gained regional importance, fueling the villages of the region.

Men controlled sales and financial gain – parents, husbands, neighbors. There was a greater circulation of money, and the dishes were bought to store water and food. But since the 1970s, when clay was replaced by plastic, the utilitarian function of pottery was replaced by a symbolic function – that of representing the *quilombo's* cultural identity. Since then, women have controlled profits from the sale of craft and pay for male labor, restricted to the auxiliary stages of the productive process, such as the extraction of raw materials and the burning of the pieces, which are activities that require greater physical strength. Since the formation of the Association of Mothers of Itamatatua that the work with the clay has become more detached from the activities of the familiar routine. They produced in the backyards of the house, along with the children, and today they leave them at home to go to the headquarters of the Association to produce craft.

In the testimony of an artisan, one has the craft associated with other domestic activities:

Artisan 1: We work here with pottery, then we work at home, sometimes we still make olive oil, we make charcoal, we take a pindova, then everything helps. This one from here, we never stop coming because you know that every month, even if it is only a hundred reais, you have to get from here.

They produce an artifact whose function is to represent ethnic identity and their own way of life. In a metonymic relation, their craft reproduces themselves and the whole *quilombo*. It is perceived in their talk – in the form of self-esteem – the material and symbolic benefits brought by empowerment from artisanal production.

Researcher: Do you think you are more artisan or more rural worker?

Artisan 2: No, now more artisan ... And much more because this one does, made me buy many things that I have in my house. Of course, we bought things with the crops the, but it was never like this one.

R: Canuta, why do you think people come here to look for your work?

A2: Value the work? It's because we know how to do it well.

R: And do you think people value it?

A2: Yes. They give value, they give value. They come and say: "oh, how beautiful, how wonderful, you are artists, you are the kings of Itamatatua"

The artisans work to maintain the tradition and to complement the retirement income and the *Bolsa Família* Programme (Federal family grant). The income of the dishes is fundamental for the maintenance of the families. Unemployment is a reality among the young people of the village, regardless of sex. The men participate in activities for the subsistence of the family or work rented, receiving daily allowances. An artisan analyzes the financial reality of the Family:

Artisan 3: We do not have a job at home, right? We get the Bolsa Família Programme (Federal Family Grant) and my husband works from time to time, not every day, because he does not have a service for every day. When there is a service for him to do, he does, but the income we have is very small. And I also get the pottery here. So, we live like this. God willing, too.

Among the twelve artisans who produce crockery in Itamatatua, only three are less than fifty years old. All the others receive pensions as rural workers and accumulate the income received with the artisanal production. Most are widowed and raised their children only with the money of the dishes. They have the best houses, appliances, and, as was said earlier, they have political ancestry over land management, which is a remainder community of *quilombos*. In the words of an artisan, we observe the feminine daily life:

Researcher: How long have you've been working on this?

Artisan 4: At the age of eight

R: And with whom did you learn Domingas?

A4: With my mother.

R: Tell us what it was like when you were a child.

A4: Then when we were ten years old, I already knew how to make a pot, right? So, I was helping her. Then in the morning we would do a piece together with her, in the afternoon she would put us to pick up crabs in the marshes to give food to the other children, then she would stay home and my father would go out to work, that was to bring the flour, to bring us to eat. Then I looked for family soon, I had a lot of children. Then I kept on doing it, I raised all my children with ceramic business money. I bought clothes, flour, everything.

So, in Itamatatuiá, we observe that women's emancipation arrives in a cumulative way: women do not cease to have their household chores; they accumulate external and internal activities at home, as it is easily seen in urban settings. Women's participation is extremely important in the family income, and this positions them in decision-making levels in the community.

Awareness and work management

Among other group of artisans, now within the urban environment of the city of São Luís, in the industrial district, a group of women from the villages of Industrial, Primavera and Sarney met under the guidance of the NGO World Vision to seek alternatives to the unemployment situation. Once the local potentials were diagnosed, the buriti fiber craft was the chosen option for the formation of a working group, since many of these women already had the ability or the willingness to learn the weaving technique with buriti fiber.

The artisans and apprentices were successful over the following years, identified as *Mulheres de Fibra* ("Women of Moral Fiber") and in 2008 founded the association Buriti Arte, so that they were formalized legally, and through the association were able to enjoy the support initiatives of institutions that promote craft. As for the current situation, the income generated by the artisanal production of the group and, consequently, the individual income, is higher, considering the previous situation, where it depended on variable revenues from the sale of products from the plot, or sporadic services.

Artisan 5: At first my husband didn't want me to come here, he thought it was a waste of time. It took time, but today he accepts, thinks that what we do is beautiful and even helps me when there's a lot of service. My whole family helps.

With the gains obtained by the commercialization of the pieces, many of these artisans began to provide, on a regular basis, access to consumer goods, education and leisure in their family environments, but they did not necessarily earn recognition and concession of benefits for their actions. They still occupy a situation of subalternity, as imposed by the ideological apparatus that commonly construct men and women as "subjects entangled in a relationship of domination and subjugation" (Costa, 2007, p. 38).

Artisan 6: If the craft cooperates? Craft is everything to me, I don't know what I would do without it! My work and my dignity come from my hands. I cannot even imagine what it would be like to continue working on what I did before.

The awareness of their self-worth and satisfaction with the occupation are cited as the greatest benefits gained. The Buriti Arte Association is seen today by the community as an example of organization in what concerns the development of activities that promote income generation and occupation. They are constantly accepting apprentices who, according to their discipline and ability, can become part of the group of artisans *Mulheres de Fibra* (Women of Moral Fiber)

Design as an instrument of emancipation

Among the groups observed, it is possible to perceive, throughout the process of organization and formation of associations, the role of the designers and the governmental and non-governmental institutions involved in this process of incentive and promotion of the citizenship and women's emancipation.

Each group, in its specific stage and with its peculiarities, allows us to relate design and empowerment, starting from the exchange and the relationship established between specialized knowledge and vernacular knowledge.

The balance and proportion between each kind of knowledge can also be considered a marker of female empowerment. Gabriel do Patrocínio (2015, p. 69) presents us with a Virtuous Escalade of Design and Development. The four steps: Design for > Design in > Design with > Design by, reveal the degree of dependence of the "assisted" in relation to the designers, varying the scale from a stage of total dependency to a stage of autonomy. In the cases listed, not coincidentally, the groups already walk more independently, resignifying the improvements and innovations brought in moments of greater intervention

Mulheres de Fibra (Women of Moral Fiber)

For *Mulheres de Fibra* (Women of Moral Fibers), from the island of São Luís, the exercise of artisanal group activity, since its beginning, started with the follow-up of design consultancies. The group was formed by the participants of a creativity workshop and since then has kept interest in the exchange of knowledge with designers, either in the creation of new product models or in the elaboration of the projects and the required scientific knowledge, such as ergonomic adjustments and in conscious use of raw material, such as cutting techniques and use of inputs.

The design represents for the group an essential instrument of innovation focusing on the management of production: control over the costs involved in production; formulation of the final price of the products adapted to the costs of each piece (time worked, materials and necessary inputs); product diversification; proportionality in dimensions (obtained through use of templates); record of techniques and creative exercises (maintenance of an album of developed weaving techniques, schemes and

dimensions); control of resources required to maintain production, payment of associates, orders and pre-established deadlines.

Itamatatua

In Itamatatua, the follow-up process by designers was interrupted at the end of a SEBRAE-MA (Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service – Maranhão) project, which stopped focusing the craft as an axis of action in the so-called cultural projects. Since 2012 there are no systematized works to monitor production.

Among the design initiatives observed at Itamatatua, we highlight the craft qualification workshops promoted by SEBRAE-MA from 2005 to 2008, which rescued the production of old utilitarian pieces, such as the pig-shaped platter and jugs, and also introduced a machine that grinds the clay and makes it easier to knead it, since most of the artisans are old.

Another fact that demonstrates the empowerment brought by design professionals to Itamatatua is the issue of the recovery of self-esteem with the production of dolls as souvenirs. In 2006, Márcio Guimarães, then a SEBRAE-MA consultant, aimed at recovering the production of the dolls, in a process of self-esteem reconstruction. The dolls tell the story of ancient artisans and women from the village; speak of the activities performed in the daily life of the village, and all this is translated through these symbols of the *quilombo*. They bring the memories of the ancestors of the craftswomen, who model them and tell their stories. Today the *quilombo* doll is the most expensive product in the portfolio of artisans, and has a great demand for its strong aesthetic and symbolic appeal.

Another initiative was directed at the very constitution of the clay, which according to local knowledge is very susceptible to cracking. In 2013, Glauba Cestari, a student of Design Graduate Program from Federal University of Maranhão, had the objective of identifying the ideal proportion of ground ceramic powder (chamote) to be added to the clay mixture, so that the pieces did not crack in the oven. She made precision measurements on the specimens during pre-established periods, before and after burning, to obtain the variation curves according to the different percentages of the clay and chamotte mixture. The result (Cestari, 2014) has brought a molded piece with a strong cultural identity, an exceptional quality finishing.

Final considerations

In this article, we present the discussion about artisanal production as an instrument of emancipation based on the observation of some productive groups, in which community interest was combined with the interests of nongovernmental institutions and/or public management that see in artisanal production an opportunity for the women's empowerment.

The refinement and learning of the technique along with the interest in the improvement of the quality of artifacts, obtained in workshops with designers, led artisanal production to win prizes and to provide a previously non-existent income for most of the women involved. In addition to the monetary gain, it is nowadays identified that women artisans have experiences of decision-making and control, previously not exercised. The design, due to its mediating and multidisciplinary character, is an essential instrument in the concretization of technological and sociocultural innovations.

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