



# Case Study: Empowering Skills Training in Brazil

## Summary

For generations of workers in the sugar cane plantations of north-eastern Brazil, the long months between harvests have been a time of hunger. Sugar cane cutting is hard labour. Women workers rise in the early hours to prepare food for their families and leave for work before dawn, working long hours in the scorching sun. Alternatives are limited. An innovative training programme is using the time between the harvests to change women's prospects, with transformational effects.

## Research Process

An action research project co-ordinated by Pathways Global Hub convened feminist bureaucrats from government, the NGO sector and inter-governmental organisations to reflect on strategies for supporting women's empowerment. Cristina Buarque, the visionary State Secretary for Women's Policies from Pernambuco, Brazil was one of these. Her reflections on how a state-funded training programme became a pathway of empowerment for women sparked interest from a filmmaker and an anthropologist. This led to the production of a film documenting the quiet revolution that is spreading through the sugar cane plantations of north-eastern Brazil, and ethnographic research with those involved with the programme.

*"Chapeu de Palha, for me, signifies life. Life that I thought of quitting, and now I want to fight!"*

## Key Findings

The design of the Chapeu de Palha programme offers a way to channel social policies through women to households without instrumentalising women in the process.

The programme has three unique components:

- All participants must attend a preliminary course on rights and citizenship prior to entering the employment training part of the programme



Photo: Andrea Cornwall

- Participants are offered training in non-traditional jobs like welding, soldering, electrical work and taxi driving, which gives them access to a growing employment market in a region with many new jobs in the construction industry
- Stipends for attending the course complement existing benefits, such as bolsa familia, to provide women with a basic income during the time of hunger.

Some 39,000 women have now graduated from the programme. In a context where there is rapid growth and a booming construction industry, the skills they are learning pave the way for jobs. The State Secretary for Women's Policies is lobbying the major companies in the area to create the conditions for women to take up the new jobs.

The empowering effects of the programme are evident from their accounts of their own journeys, as well as from interviews about their domestic and working lives. For some women, it's been the broadening of their horizons that has made the most difference: many spoke of a life constrained to 'house, husband, children' before the training, and how their new perspective has given them greater freedom.

## Policy Recommendations

- Social programmes with a cash transfer and skills training component can serve as an entry point for transformative interventions that challenge gender stereotypes and go beyond targeting women in their reproductive roles
- Conditional Cash Transfer and employment training programmes can amplify empowering effects by including a module in rights and citizenship as a condition for cash transfers and a compulsory component of skills training programmes
- To ensure that women are able to take up training opportunities, consideration should be given to providing practical support such as childcare, refreshments and transport
- Combining the personal with the professional in employment training can help to ensure sustainability and efficacy, and can have markedly positive results on women's capacity to learn and to use what they learn to make changes in their lives
- Using methods of popular education in the delivery of training can enhance the empowering effects of such training
- When accompanied by a process of capacity development within civil society, training institutions and the state, and the fostering of networks of women's organizations at the local level, such interventions can build longer-term basis for supporting women in their pathways of empowerment



Most striking has been the impact of the rights and citizenship training on their sense of entitlement. Surveyed to find out what the programme had done for them, women responded that not only had it brought them income and training that could lead them into employment, it had opened their eyes to their rights as citizens, and brought them a sense of personal transformation. Women talked of recognising how limiting the belief was that certain jobs are “men’s jobs” and that women lack the knowledge, strength or capacity to do them.

Admitting women to learn skills such as welding and plumbing has challenged attitudes within government training institutions, creating the basis for sustainable change. By working with ‘power within’ and creating space for women to come together to build ‘power with’, as well as by enabling women to recognise and exercise their ‘power to’, Chapeu de Palha is an instance of ‘liberating empowerment’ (Sardenberg, 2009).

*“I learnt about women’s rights, things I had never learnt before. Today I know that a woman can also be a taxi driver, a mayor, even a president, that we’re equal to men. Before I didn’t know where I was going. Now I know.”*

## References

Sardenberg, C. (2009) ‘Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment: Conceptualising Women’s Empowerment from a Latin American Feminist Perspective’, Pathways Working Paper 7, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

### Contact:

Pathways of Women’s Empowerment RPC, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 9RE, UK

**E-mail:** [Pathways@ids.ac.uk](mailto:Pathways@ids.ac.uk)

**Website:** [www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/](http://www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/)

**Tel:** + 44 (0) 1273 915729

**Fax:** + 44 (0) 1273 621202

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