

Virgínia Faria Gersão (1896-1974): a Portuguese teacher, grammarian and member of the National Assembly *

Virgínia Faria Gersão (1896-1974):
una profesora portuguesa, gramática femenina y diputada

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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the life and work of Virgínia Faria Gersão, a Portuguese teacher who stood out at the beginning of the twentieth century. She was a woman dedicated to the cause of teaching, which led her to write didactic works such as *A Gramática das Criancinhas* (1921) as well as literary works. Her active spirit is also visible in her social and political involvement. She was a member of the National Assembly (1945-1949) at a time when the participation of women in political life in Portugal was extremely low. She campaigned for the introduction of important changes in the education of children, supporting their need to play and the reduction of very complex school programmes. To carry out this investigation, archival, bibliographic and hemerographic sources have been consulted in order to understand this specific context and to know more about this important woman who deserves to be remembered.

Keywords: Virgínia Faria Gersão. Female grammarian. Teacher. Member of the National Assembly.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la vida y el trabajo de Virgínia Faria Gersão, una profesora portuguesa que se destacó a principios del siglo XX. Era una mujer dedicada a la causa de la enseñanza, lo que

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la llevó a escribir obras didácticas como *A Gramática das Criancinhas* (1921), así como obras literarias. Su espíritu activo también es visible en su participación social y política. Fue miembro de la Asamblea Nacional (1945-1949) en un momento en que la participación de las mujeres en la vida política en Portugal era extremadamente baja. Ella hizo campaña para la introducción de cambios importantes en la educación de los niños, apoyando su necesidad de jugar y la reducción de los programas escolares muy complejos. Para llevar a cabo esta investigación, se han consultado las fuentes de archivo, bibliográficas y hemerográficas para comprender este contexto específico y saber más sobre esta importante mujer que merece ser recordada.

Palabras clave: Virgínia Faria Gersão. Gramática femenina. Profesora. Diputada.

SUMMARY

1.—Introduction. 2.—Academic life. 3.—Teacher. 4.—Grammarian. 5.—Member of the National Assembly. 6.—Final Considerations. 7.—References.

1.—Introduction

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a movement for the defence of female education began to gain support, and it was in this context that several important female voices appeared, intervening actively in the fight for women's rights and against the tremendous oppression that was imposed on women. Some of them¹ defended the implementation of the Republic, believing that this political system would be more favourable to women and that through education this minority group would obtain a more important role in society. They also argued that work outside the home would be an important condition to guarantee female emancipation. However, it was difficult to change the deep-rooted mentality that assumed a woman's mission was to be at home, dedicated to their families' wellbeing, and without leaving the domestic sphere. Moreover, Portuguese society was strongly Catholic, which reinforced this idea of women as weak, inferior and submissive beings.

This mentality gradually changed due to the active intervention of several women and women's associations and with official initiatives that promoted female education. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, an important step was taken with the creation of the first female secondary school in Lisbon. This school, "Escola Maria Pia", renamed as the "Lyceu Maria Pia" (Decreto,

1. Among those names can be found women like Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcellos (1851-1925), Alice Pestana (1860-1929), Adelaide Cabete (1867-1935), Alice Moderno (1867-1946), Maria Velede (1871-1955), Ana de Castro Osório (1872-1935), Virgínia de Castro e Almeida (1874-1945) and Virgínia Quaresma (1882-1973), some of whom joined Freemasonry, as is the case of Ana de Castro Osório.

1906: 727), was formally established as the first model for future female secondary schools (Carvalho, 2008: 646). The majority of the teaching staff in these secondary schools was female, although male teachers were admitted, especially at the beginning, to make up for the lack of trained female teachers.

The creation of female secondary education in Portugal was similar to what happened at the end of the 19th century in Europe and the USA, progressively abandoning the traditionalist vision of women's education, which contributed to the social ascension of women:

O ensino secundário feminino partilha assim de uma concepção optimista da educação, promotora do progresso social, suscitando as mudanças que este exige, neste caso num terreno muito sensível, porque estruturante da vida social: a mulher e a sua função numa fase de mudança social (Rocha, 1991: 220).

It was in this period, when more than 80% of Portuguese women still remained illiterate², that Virgínia Faria Gersão lived, profiting from a remarkable educational background. In this paper, we intend to bring to light this outstanding lady who was able to assert herself in a traditionally male world.

In order to achieve this objective, we have divided this text into four parts, taking into account the different areas in which she intervened and managed to stand out. At first, we will focus on her academic life, which allows us to understand the privileged cultural environment in which she grew up. Secondly, we will highlight her career as a teacher, an area to which she devoted most of her life with great passion. This love for teaching led her to write some didactic works, namely *A Gramática das Criancinhas*, which we will concentrate on in our third part, focusing on its peculiar structure designed to help students in this difficult area. Finally, we would like to shine a light on her participation as a member of the National Assembly, a forum in which she also fought for the defence and improvement of national education.

2.—*Academic life*

Virgínia Faria Gersão (1896-1974) was born in Cernache, Coimbra, on 1 July 1896³, the daughter of Virgínia da Conceição Bacelar Faria Gersão, a homemaker,

2. According to Vaquinhas (2005: 79), “a evolução da população liceal feminina progredira a passo lento mas de uma forma contínua. As raparigas constituíam, em 1908, apenas 9,5% da população liceal global chegando, em 1920, a 24,2% de todos os alunos matriculados”.

3. Here is the transcription of the information provided in the baptism register book: “No dia quatorze de Setembro de mil oitocentos e noventa e seis nesta Igreja Parochial de Sernache, Concelho e Dioceze de Coimbra baptizei solemnemente a um individuo do sexo feminino a quem dei o nome

and Augusto Liberato de Figueiredo Gersão, a pharmacist and primary teacher in Cernache. She grew up in a family that valued training, making no distinction between men and women⁴. All her siblings had access to higher education, and only one of them did not complete a degree.

Virgínia's eldest sister was the first one to assert herself in this male-dominated society. Augusta Faria Gersão Ventura, who, at the age of fourteen, went alone to Coimbra, the city of knowledge, opened the doors for all the siblings who followed her. Augusta attended the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Coimbra in the section of Mathematical Sciences, later taking the State Examination for high school teaching. Virgínia Faria Gersão was the second to join the University of Coimbra, followed by Albertina Faria Gersão, who, despite having attended the Faculty of Letters in the German Philology Section, did not complete her degree. The first of the boys to attend the same university was Manuel Liberato Faria Gersão (1903-1982), who graduated from Medical school in 1930 and was chosen to teach General Pathology at this same university in 1931. The youngest son, Augusto Liberato Faria Gersão, followed in his father's footsteps and enrolled in the Faculty of Pharmacy at the University of Coimbra.

It was in this privileged cultural environment that Virgínia Faria Gersão grew up, graduated and became an active woman involved in different domains and causes, which gave her a special status in the society of the time.

Her training was always connected to teaching, and she started on this path by taking the admission exams to the “Escola Normal Primária de Coimbra” on 26 October 1911. This was the way forward for those who wanted to obtain a pedagogical and scientific preparation to start a teaching life.

At that time, Portugal was in the beginnings of the republican period, which had as its banner the defence of education, considered as the basis for the development of a country. “Os professores eram os agentes desta política e as reformas republicanas do ensino normal, a partir da de 1911, refletiram a preocupação com a formação deste professor que também se queria *novo*” (Mogarro, 2012: 45). This concern with teacher training was one of the principles that underpinned the 1911

de Virginia e que nasceu neste lugar e freguezia de Sernache no dia primeiro de Julho ultimo pelos septe horas da tarde, filha legitima de Augusto Liberato de Figueiredo Gersão e Dona Virginia da Conceição Bacellar Gersão, proprietarios, naturaes ella do lugar e freguezia de Maiorca, Concelho da Figueira da Foz desta Dioceze de Coimbra e elle natural e moradores neste lugar e freguezia de Sernache dónde são parochianos e recebidos na dita freguezia de Maiorca. Neta paterna de Liberato Augusto de Figueiredo Gersão e Dona Bernardina Augusta Pessoa Gersão, Materna de Manuel Bacellar Faria dos Santos e Dona Albertina Augusta da Conceição Faria. Foram padrinhos que sei serem os proprios Manuel Bacellar Faria dos Santos e sua espoza Dona Maria Eliza da Conceição Faria, proprietarios. E para constar lavrei em duplicado este assento que depois de lido e conferido na presença dos padrinhos o vamos assignar (1896, setembro 14)”.

4. According to the information provided by her niece, Eliana Gersão, the encouragement to study was equal towards all the Gersão children, with no distinction between the boys and the girls.

reform “Reforma do ensino infantil, primário e normal” which was concerned with the intellectual level of the teachers: “O ensino normal, como fica instituído por este decreto, elevará cada vez mais o nível intelectual do professorado, tornando-o apto para a sua missão social. A escola normal, agora decretada, corresponde ás exigências da pedagogia moderna” (Decreto, 1911: 1342).

In the first stage dedicated to teacher training, Virgínia Gersão was very successful, graduating from the “Escola Normal Primária” (Primary Normal School) on 5 August 1914 with the highest classification mark (20 values) which, according to the records contained in *Livro de Termos - Exames da Escola Normal para o Sexo Feminino em Coimbra [Exam records] (1905 a 1914)* was a rare classification, revealing the commitment of this student.

Her academic life continued in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Coimbra, where she took a course in Romance Philology in the academic year 1915-1916, a time in which the presence of women in higher education was minimal compared to that of men. Based on the data available in the “Livro de Inscrição da Faculdade de Letras” (Course Enrolment Book), it is clear that she was a dedicated student who registered only one enrolment for each subject and finished the course at the scheduled time. The following is a list of subjects Virgínia Faria Gersão studied while taking the course in Romance Philology.

TABLE 1
LIST OF SUBJECTS VIRGÍNIA FARIA GERSÃO ATTENDED IN ROMANCE PHILOLOGY
(SOURCE: AUC, 1915-1916, FL. 89R; AUC, 1916-1922, FL. 92V-93R).

<i>Academic year</i>	<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Academic year</i>	<i>Subjects</i>
1915-1916	Portuguese Philology	1916-1917	Philosophy II
1915-1916	French Language and Literature I	1917-1918	Portuguese Literature I
1915-1916	Latin Language and Literature I	1917-1918	Latin Language and Literature III
1915-1916	General History of Civilisation	1917-1918	Modern and Contemporary History
1915-1916	Practical French Course I	1917-1918	Epigraphy and Palaeography
1915-1916	Philosophy I	1917-1918	History of Medieval Philosophy
1916-1917	French Language and Literature II	1917-1918	Spanish and Italian Literature
1916-1917	Practical French Course II	1918-1919	Archaeology
1916-1917	Latin Language and Literature II	1918-1919	Romance Philology
1916-1917	Medieval History	1918-1919	Portuguese Literature II
1916-1917	History of Portugal	1918-1919	Aesthetics, Art History
1916-1917	Geography of Portugal and Colonies		

Throughout her academic life, she kept in contact with prominent figures of the time, including some who were her teachers, such as Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos in Portuguese Philology; Eugénio de Castro e Almeida (1869-1889) in subjects related to French; Joaquim Mendes dos Remédios (1867-1932) in Portuguese Literature; and António Garcia Ribeiro de Vasconcelos (1860-1941) in the area of History. It is important to mention that her relationship with these and other figures was not restricted to the academic space but extended to an exchange of regular correspondence. Notable among her teachers and correspondents was the philologist Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos, whose letters cover a great variety of subjects that range from personal themes to issues related to Gersão's academic life or doubts about the Portuguese language, as one can see in the letter in which the "disciple" asks the "master" about some consonant sounds in Portuguese (fig. 1).

Virgínia Faria Gersão completed her studies in Romance Philology and was awarded her degree on 17 December 1920.

She was then admitted to the "Escola Normal Superior de Coimbra" (Superior Normal School of Coimbra) in the section of Romance Philology. The "Escolas Normais Superiores" (Superior Normal Schools) were created to train teachers pedagogically in order to "[...] promover a alta cultura pedagógica e habilitar para o magistério dos liceus, das escolas primárias, das escolas primárias superiores, e para a admissão ao concurso para os lugares de inspectores do ensino" (Gomes, 1989: 19).

The "Escolas Normais Superiores" were attached to the Faculties of Sciences and Letters at the Universities of Coimbra and Lisbon and were organised into a two-year course that comprised a set of subjects oriented to teaching and pedagogical practice.

After the completion of her training at the "Escola Normal Superior de Coimbra", she was prepared to begin her teaching career to which she would passionately dedicate most of her life⁵.

It should be noted that in the period in which Virgínia Gersão concluded her training and started her professional career, the percentage of female teachers in secondary schools was very small. Although the feminisation of teaching in Portugal had already started at the end of the 19th century with primary teachers, in the case of secondary education, "a visibilidade feminina na profissão de ensino [...] emerge particularmente nos anos 50 e 60 — depois de, ao nível do ensino primário,

5. Her passion for teaching led her to idealize and plan the creation of a private school where she could put into practice her pedagogical ideas, as one can see in the following letter: "[...] Lembra-me falar do grande sonho de toda a minha vida, daquele Colégio maravilhoso de que eu era a directora, e que, vivendo no meu pensamento desde os mais tenros anos, nunca consegui ter uma existência real. Por duas vezes me assustou a ganância dos sócios, e eu não tinha dinheiro. // Podia dizer talvez que num sonho do meu Colégio eu tinha pensado mesmo em fazer os programas, para que os resultados fôssem estes ou aqueles, e não isto ou aquilo" (Gersão, 12-06-1943).

Coimbra - Cernache (9-9-1918)

Querida Senhora:

Uma das alunas da Universidade consultou-me acerca dos pontos de Filologia Portuguesa, pois elas, como não sabem latim, têm em geral certas dificuldades.

Um dos pontos é o seguinte:

Consonantecos
 Sons novos da lingua portuguesa seu valor primitivo e sua pronúncia moderna.

Fig. 1. Letter from Virgínia Gersão to Carolina Michaëlis de Vasconcelos.

um processo semelhante ter tornado a actividade como área de intervenção quase só feminina [...]” (Araújo, 1992: 91).

3.—Teacher

Her professional career was mainly at the “Liceu Infanta D. Maria”, which was created by the Decree of 14 July 1918. This school was very important in Coimbra, which had long awaited the creation of a female high school that would

contribute to the education of women. “Tratava-se não só de melhorar a educação da juventude, mas também de ir desenvolvendo a ideia de que a mulher poderia ombrear com o homem na frequência da Universidade e ocupar determinados lugares no funcionalismo público” (Seabra, 2003: 204).

The creation of female secondary schools allowed women to have a great visibility and offer them the opportunity to assume a wide range of roles in these schools, from teaching to management roles. In the specific case of the Liceu Infanta D. Maria, among the eight deans it had throughout its existence, only one man held the position of dean. As far as the teaching staff is concerned,

As professoras, que no início estavam em minoria, foram paulatinamente substituindo os professores que iam regressando ao seu lugar de origem. A taxa de feminização do corpo docente ia aumentando, de acordo com o preceituado no Regulamento da Instrução Secundária Feminina, que determinava o preenchimento dos lugares do quadro somente por elementos do género feminino (Seabra, 2003: 2012).

It was at this female high school that Virgínia Gersão started her job as “professora provisória” on 11 November 1922 and became a “professora agregada” in the academic year 1924-1925. About ten years later, she was appointed “professora efetiva” of the second group by order published in the *Diário do Governo* on 23 December 1935.

In addition to the work developed at this school, she was also a “professora agregada” at the “Escola Normal Primária de Lisboa” in the academic year 1927-1928, where she was responsible for the Portuguese subject (Pinheiro, 2004: 86). Both positions considered, it was at the “Liceu Infanta D. Maria” that Virgínia Gersão left her mark, standing out alongside other notable women, such as the dean Dionísia Camões (1896-1984), the teachers Augusta Gersão and Hilda Figueiredo, who made a strong contribution to the establishment of the school and its administrative and pedagogical organisation and who also helped in the school’s cultural and social dimension.

Virgínia Gersão played a very important role in this school, being very active at different levels. Besides being a remarkable teacher⁶, she was also director of the school library for several years, starting this job in January 1953. Furthermore, she was deeply involved in the cultural spirit that characterised this school⁷:

6. As Pinheiro (2004: 86) pointed out, she was “[...] uma brilhante professora e educadora dos ensinos primário, normal e secundário, tendo dedicado grande parte da sua vida profissional ao ensino e à cultura no Liceu Infanta D. Maria, em Coimbra”.

7. She also wrote the lyrics of the school’s anthem.

[...] desenvolveu palestras sobre variados temas, em sessões solenes de abertura de aulas e em sessões culturais. Na sessão solene de abertura das aulas, em 23 de Outubro de 1940, versou o tema “A Infanta D. Maria”, que foi notícia no Diário de Coimbra. O seu amor pela arte cénica levou-a a escrever e ensaiar muitas peças de teatro de que são exemplos “Rosas” e a opereta “A Pastorinha”, representadas em Maio e Junho de 1938; a “Branca de Neve” e “Filipa de Vilhena, em 18 de Março de 1940, representadas no Teatro Avenida, tendo grande projecção a nível da cidade (Seabra, 2003: 214).

She left for posterity an interesting set of works, namely children’s plays, which had a great impact not only in this high school but also in the city of Coimbra itself. Many of these plays were set to music by her distinguished friend Tomás de Borba (1867-1950) and were performed at school parties in Coimbra and in other cities under the direction of Virgínia Gersão herself. These are moments that still last in the memory of the former students due to their magnitude, as they usually involved numerous characters from different age groups who were perfectly well-dressed, with every detail being carefully considered and executed (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Virgínia Gersão and some of the protagonists of her play “Anjos de Portugal” (10 May 1952) (Source: Pedro, 2010: 166).

In addition to the various plays she wrote⁸, Virgínia Gersão also stood out in other areas of writing, particularly poetry. If we take as an example the news that focused on the publication of her work *Ao tear*, in the *Gazeta de Coimbra*, we can easily understand the prestige that she had in contemporary local society:

Bibliografia

Ao tear, quadras de D. Virginia Gersão

D. Virgínia Gersão, um dos mais brilhantes e delicados temperamentos da poesia feminina portuguesa, acaba de publicar um primoroso livro de quadras, que intitulou “Ao tear”.

O aparecimento de um livro da ilustre poetisa é sempre um acontecimento literário que à crítica compete registar com largueza e alvoroço.

Por agora queremos somente transmitir aos nossos leitores a grata nova. Brevemente, diremos neste lugar das impressões que nos deixou a sua leitura (GC 2606. Terça-feira 21 de outubro de 1930: 1).

4.—*Grammarian*

In addition to the mentioned works, Gersão strongly committed herself to the creation of innovative teaching materials that could meet the needs of young learners and fit with the movements that were shaking up the educational world at that time, namely the New School movement:

A Escola Nova foi o mais importante, e influente, movimento educativo do século XX, tendo mesmo moldado a “modernidade pedagógica”. O ideário que ainda hoje é o nosso, da autonomia dos educandos à diferenciação pedagógica, dos métodos ativos à criatividade, dos projetos educativos ao trabalho cooperativo, foi elaborado nesta altura (Nóvoa and Alvim, 2021: 8).

The work *A Gramática das Criancinhas* (1921)⁹, which was first published in 1921 and was based on her dissertation for the state school teaching exam, should be highlighted¹⁰ (fig. 3). This grammar was printed in a second edition in 1932 (fig. 4) and it had a considerable impact at the time as one can confirm from the

8. Virgínia Gersão is part of the list made by Vasques (2001) about the Portuguese women who wrote theater plays in the 20th century.

9. In addition to this didactic work, Gersão also published the *Geometria das Criancinhas* (1933).

10. For more information about this grammar, see Coelho and Fontes (2019).

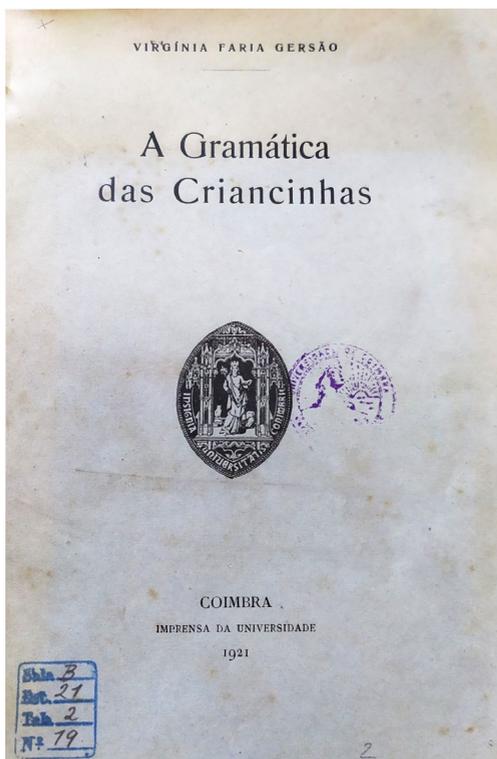


Fig. 3. First edition of *A Gramática das Criancinhas* (1921).

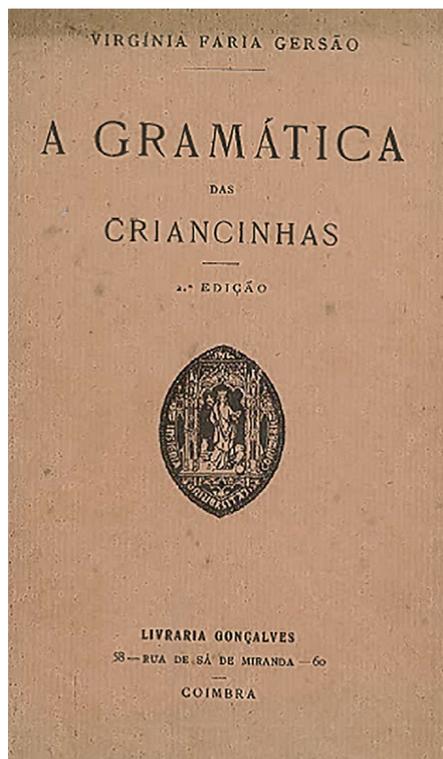


Fig. 4. Second edition of *A Gramática das Criancinhas* (1932).

many letters she received from teachers wanting to adopt this grammar in their classes.

Despite the popularity of this work in her own time, her importance has been much neglected.

This work presents an innovative approach that abandons the formalism and rigidity of a grammar manual and is structured into lessons that work as a narrative in which the characters, the ants, go on presenting the grammatical concepts in a natural and contextualised way. This strategy that combines learning with play puts the child at the centre of this process, following the pedagogical ideas of the time.

As the author argued, the child should be respected as such: “educá-la como um adulto é um erro grave, apontado por todos os pedagogos. Nas primeiras idades só se pode ensinar brincando [...]” (Gersão, 1948a: 34).

On the other hand, this work reveals a professional teacher who looked for strategies that would benefit the child and help her to overcome the aridity that characterised grammar studies.

The peculiar structure and originality of this grammar motivated the interest of the editor of the magazine *Os Nossos Filhos*¹¹, and the grammar was adapted and published in the magazine in article format over a four-year period under the title “A Gramática no país das formigas”. The fact that it was published in a magazine allowed a wider dissemination of this work, as one can confirm from the testimonies of readers who bought the magazine in order to have the complete collection of the grammar. In Fig. 5 is an excerpt from a letter sent by Virgínia Gersão to Maria Lúcia Namorado which mentions a request by a reader to send the magazine’s numbers with the complete collection of the grammar.

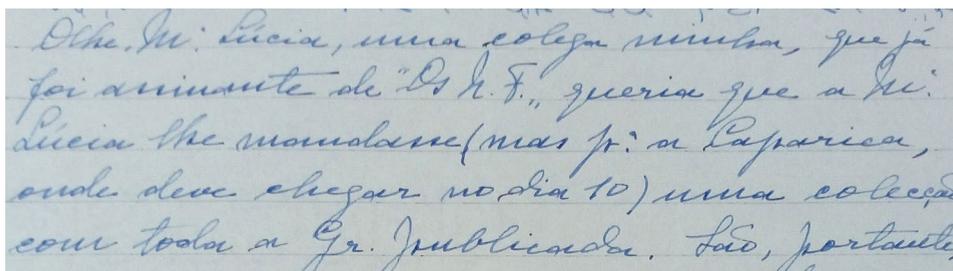


Fig. 5. Request for the grammar collection published in magazine *Os Nossos Filhos* (Source: Letter by Virgínia Gersão to Maria Lúcia Namorado 04-08-1955).

5.—Member of the National Assembly

At a time when women had very little representation in the political world, Virgínia Gersão took up the challenge of this very difficult task and accepted the invitation to enter the political world¹². She was elected a member of the National Assembly in the IV legislature (1945-1949) representing Lisbon, with a total of 107,549 votes (AN, 1947: 30), a very similar amount to those obtained by her male counterparts (fig. 6). In the same legislature, only one other woman was elected, Maria Luísa de Saldanha da Gama van Zeller¹³ (1906-1983), who was likewise elected to represent Lisbon.

11. The magazine *Os Nossos Filhos* was published between 1942 and 1964 and edited by Maria Lúcia Vassalo Namorado (1909-2000), defining itself as “[...] um espaço de divulgação das ideias educativas e uma forma de escola não formal para pais, sobretudo para mães” (Pessoa, 2005: 793).

12. She might have been invited by the doctor, and also member of the National Assembly, José dos Santos Bessa (1905-1991).

13. Maria Luísa de Saldanha da Gama van Zeller graduated in medicine in 1932 and practised as a doctor and director in various health institutions. She was very active, integrating and directing several women’s associations of the time, such as the “Liga da Acção Católica Feminina”. As a member of the National Assembly, she was elected during three legislatures (1938-1949), referring, “[...] em muitas das suas intervenções parlamentares, aos problemas mais prementes das mulheres do seu tempo, assumindo-se, por vezes, como sua ‘representante’” (Sousa, 2005a: 724).

ASSEMBLÉIA NACIONAL

IV LEGISLATURA

1945 - 1949

120

Pede-se a fineza
de juntar
quatro
fotografias

Boletim para o Registo Biográfico de Senhores Deputados

Nome: *Virgínia Faria Gersão*

Filiação: *Augusto Liberatto de Figueiredo Gersão e
Virgínia da Conceição Barcelos Faria Gersão*

Naturalidade: *Lamego - Concelho e distrito de Coimbra*

Data do nascimento: *1* de *julho* de *1896*. Estado: *solteira*

Funções públicas, políticas ou particulares que desempenha: *Professora
efectiva, do 2º grupo, do Liceu da Infante
D. Maria*

e que tem desempenhado: *Professora
agregada da Escola Normal Trindade de Ben-
fica - Lisboa*

Condecorações e louvores que possui: _____

Obras que tem publicado: *Do teatro infantil; # Juba Borracheira, Branca de Neve,
Afrodite, etc.; de carácter didáctico: # Geometria das Curvas; # Geometria
no País das Formigas, etc. Vários artigos, em revistas, de carácter pedagógico. Algumas peças p.º o
Teatro 3.º Precioso.*

Lisboa, 26 de Novembro de 1945

Assinatura
Virgínia Faria Gersão

Fig. 6. Biographical record of Virgínia Faria Gersão.

The inclusion of women in the National Assembly began in 1935, with Domitila Hormizinda Miranda de Carvalho (1871-1966)¹⁴, Maria Cândida Bragança Parreira (1877-1942)¹⁵ and Maria Baptista dos Santos Guardiola (1895-1987)¹⁶ as the first women elected as members of Parliament in the history of Portugal. The participation of women in the political field can be seen as an important strategy of António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970), who saw women as a necessary means to build and propagate the ideology of the regime.

These women belonged to a privileged group in society, all possessing higher education at a time when most women were excluded from the public sphere and confined to the domestic space. According to Adão and Remédios (2005: 90):

[...] se, em termos de ocupação profissional, elas se demarcam do papel de género reservado à mulher, tal ruptura acentua-se ainda mais ao serem escolhidas num universo fortemente masculino para desempenhar funções políticas fulcrais de estruturação ideológica do regime e de implementação das políticas de Oliveira Salazar. Essa apropriação diferente do papel de género salienta-se também quando algumas destas deputadas não se casam, e, deste modo, não vão realizar a missão que lhes está reservada, a maternidade, tendo em atenção a sua natureza.

In fact, the participation of women throughout the various legislatures of the “Estado Novo” was always very minimal, as can be confirmed by the data offered in Fig. 7.

This is not surprising, since the Portuguese people lived under a dictatorship that imposed a strongly conservative and traditional mentality which did not generally recognise the right of women to actively intervene in the political domain. Many voices were openly opposed to the participation of women in the National Assembly, as can be ascertained by the words of the president of the National Assembly¹⁷, José Alberto dos Reis (1875-1955), when he referred to the possible continuity of the female members of the National Assembly in the III legislature (fig. 8).

14. Domitila Carvalho was a teacher, doctor and poetess. She was the first woman to attend the University of Coimbra and finished her university degree in Mathematics, Philosophy and Medicine with distinction (Pimentel and Esteves, 2003: 292). She was a member of the National Assembly during two legislatures (1935-1942).

15. Maria Cândida Parreira graduated in law in 1919 and worked as a lawyer. At the same time, she was also considered a writer and a public speaker. She was a member of the National Assembly in the First Legislature (1935-1938) (Sousa, 2005b: 601).

16. Maria Guardiola graduated in Mathematics in 1920, and her professional career focused on teaching in the main national female high schools. She was dean of the Liceu Maria Amália Vaz de Carvalho from 1928 to 1946. She was a member of the National Assembly at I, II, III and V Legislatures, being considered “[...] uma das mulheres mais importantes e emblemáticas do Estado Novo” (Pereira, 2005: 593).

17. José Alberto dos Reis was the president of the National Assembly between 1935 and 1945.

Ano	Lugares	Homens	Mulheres	%
1934	90	87	3	3,3%
1938	90	87	3	3,3%
1942	90	88	2	2,2%
1945	120	118	2	1,7%
1949	120	118	2	1,7%
1953	120	118	2	1,7%
1957	120	118	2	1,7%
1961	130	127	3	2,3%
1965	130	126	4	3,1%
1969	130	126	4	3,1%
1973	148	139	9	6,1%

Fig. 7. Percentage of women elected in various legislatures during “Estado Novo”
(Source: Vargas, 2000: 59).

Dr^a. D. Maria Baptista dos Santos Guardião - Pessoalmente inteiramente indicada. Mas a experiência da representação feminina aconselha a que se continuei? A meu ver, não.

Dr^a. D. Maria Luiza de Saldanha da Gama Vanzeller - Pessoalmente inteiramente indicada. Mas a experiência da representação feminina aconselha a que se continuei? A meu ver, não.

Fig. 8. José Alberto dos Reis's opinion on the female participation in the National Assembly
(Source: Reis, 1942: 9).

Although the President of the National Assembly was against the continuity of women in this body, the fact is they remained in the Assembly, even though they were mainly members of the “Comissão de Trabalho, Previdência e Assistência Social” and the “Comissão de Educação Nacional, Cultura Popular e Interesses Espirituais e Morais” as education and social policies were considered to be matters that were more closely connected to women’s interests.

Virgínia Faria Gersão was part of this last committee¹⁸, which makes perfect sense, given her professional activity and strong dedication to the cause of education. She was elected to this committee with 85 votes (Diário das Sessões, n.º 39, 1946: 663). In this sense, it is clear that most of her parliamentary speeches during the IV legislature focused mainly on teaching.

The following is a list of her speeches at the National Assembly:

- At the first legislative session (1945-1946), she addressed the problem of the material circumstances of civil servants with tuberculosis;
- at the 2nd legislative session (1946-1947), she discussed the proposed re-organisation of vocational technical education law and defended the cause of the poor suffering from tuberculosis;
- at the 3rd legislative session (1947-1948), she referred to the reform of high school education;
- at the 4th legislative session (1948-1949), she spoke about the problems of education, condemning the excess effort required of the students as well as the excessive number of hours spent in school. She also discussed the draft law on private education (Castilho, 2009).

In her speeches, as well as in the speeches of Maria Luísa van Zeller, the characteristics of female discourse of the time are evident in the expressions of humility, subservience and subordination, as shown in this extract: “com estas largas considerações, que tão pouco valem, quis também oferecer à grande causa da nossa educação o meu insignificantíssimo tributo” (Diário das Sessões, n.º 82, 1 de Fevereiro de 1947: 448).

However, this was not always the stance taken and her feminine condition did not prevent her from expressing her opinion and criticism of situations or proposals that she considered inappropriate or wrong. Sometimes she even adopted a harsh tone, as can be seen in the following intervention in which the draft law that reorganised technical and vocational education was discussed:

18. It should be noted that Virgínia Gersão was one of those responsible for the proposal to change the name of this Commission, which was initially called “Educação Nacional e Cultura Popular” (Diário das Sessões, n.º 5, 1945: 42).

Pois bem: analisando a proposta do Governo e o parecer da Câmara Corporativa, tive também impressão de que se não tratava de nada extraordinário e parecia-me impossível que pessoas inteligentes, encarregadas há tantos anos de uma reforma destas, tivessem produzido tão pouco (Diário das Sessões, n.º 82, 1 de Fevereiro de 1947: 444).

According to her niece, it was this attitude of not being silent about the aspects with which she disagreed that questioned her continuity as a member of the National Assembly. At that time, the event that generated the most displeasure was the way she denounced some aspects of the reform of high school education by the Minister of National Education, Fernando Andrade Pires de Lima (1906-1970). In her opinion, it was urgently necessary to remedy certain problems, such as the excessive time children spent in school, the exaggerated breadth and depth of school programmes and their lack of adaptation to the pupils.

All her speeches about education reveal a woman aware of the teaching reality and its problems, focused on the children and their interests, and the woman who intervened most in the education landscape (Braga, 2014: 18).

6.—Final Considerations

An analysis of the life and career of Virgínia Faria Gersão, who lived in a very traditionalist and conservative country oppressed by a very narrow-minded mentality, shows us a highly educated woman who circulated among the cultural and political elites of the time.

Growing up in a family that valued training for men and women allowed her to not only have access to higher education but also to become an active woman with a teaching career, while also participating in the social, cultural and political context.

She left her mark on the various stages upon which she acted. She is still widely recognised today in the high school area, to which she dedicated most of her life. In the political sphere, she had the privilege of being one of the first and few female members of the Parliament at a time when, in Portugal, people felt the burden of an authoritarian regime that restricted women to the side lines, to the domestic sphere, in which they would be responsible for the care of the home and family.

In this predominantly male world characterised by a patriarchal structure, she used her voice to defend the cause of education, influenced by the pedagogical ideas of the time. She fought for a school that would better suit the children's needs. As we can see in her words, the consequence of this inadequacy is that:

[...] em vez de abriremos esses cérebros para a luz, embrutecemos-los com acumulações e velocidades, tiramos-lhe todo o interesse pelo saber, criamos a indiferença, o deixa-correr, a passividade.

A criança não pode fazer esforços intelectuais quando está cansada: aprende automaticamente, sem interesse, para esquecer depois (Gersão, 1948b: 193).

To sum up, with this paper about Virgínia Gersão's life and career, we hope to awaken curiosity for such an important Portuguese teacher, author, grammarian and member of the Parliament.

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