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Women's Revolution, a Revolution in Progress: Gender Representation in Children's Literature Through Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres*

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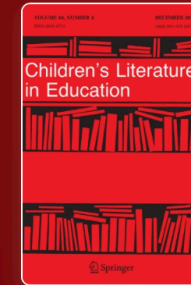
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Women's Revolution, a Revolution in Progress: Gender Representation in Children's Literature Through Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres*

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Abstract

This article examines Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres*, a children's book celebrating the 50th anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution. Designed for readers around 10–11 years old, yet equally compelling for adults due to its layered meanings and nuanced themes, the book features 25 alphabetically organised stories of ordinary women, reflecting their diverse lives and experiences within Portuguese society. This structure provides a captivating entry point for discussing gender equality and societal expectations. Set against the backdrop of the Carnation Revolution, which ended decades of authoritarian rule and marked significant progress for women's rights, the book uses its historical context to inspire contemporary dialogue. Significant themes include freedom, empowerment, equality, and identity while addressing topics such as disability, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and LGBTQ+ experiences. Each story challenges traditional gender norms, offering readers examples of resilience and courage. Costa's illustrations enhance the narrative, combining vibrant and subdued tones to capture the essence of each woman's story. Unlike conventional narratives, Costa's work highlights anonymous, everyday women, creating a mosaic of voices that resonate across ages. By exploring the portrayal of gender roles and societal expectations, this article assesses the book's impact on fostering an understanding of historical and contemporary issues related to women's rights. This study underscores the importance of integrating feminist perspectives into children's literature to promote intergenerational dialogue and ongoing reflection on gender equality.

Keywords Children's literature · Gender representation · Carnation revolution · Portuguese history and culture · Women's rights

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Introduction

Raquel Costa's children's book *25 Mulheres* [*25 Women*] (2024) serves as a compelling case study of how children's texts can offer readers windows into the feminist revolutionary activism of the past, specifically the Carnation Revolution and its enduring influence, as portals to becoming active agents in exploring how gender might shape their own identities via scenes of activism and advocacy. Grounded in contemporary feminist perspectives, the book challenges traditional developmentalist views which perceive gender as a biologically determined trait, instead aligning with poststructuralist and postdevelopmentalist approaches that emphasise gender as a socio-cultural construction shaped through socialisation (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2019a). From an early age, children internalise gender norms and stereotypes, and children's literature can play a key role in deconstructing them by offering alternative narratives that challenge restrictive gender roles (EIGE, 2019b), as seen in *25 Mulheres*. Far from a role model narrative (Gruner, 1998), this book does not reduce the complex lives of exceptional women to idealised templates for young readers to follow. On the contrary, Costa's approach resists the prescriptive nature of traditional role model literature, which has been critiqued for its tendency to present female figures as static exemplars of virtue or success, rather than as historically situated individuals shaped by sociopolitical struggles.

Published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution of 25th April, 1974, the book introduces readers to 25 women, each presented alphabetically on dedicated pages. This structure, while seemingly simple, is profoundly effective in highlighting the diverse lives and experiences of women across Portuguese society, breaking away from traditional portrayals of gender roles often found in children's literature. By showcasing women from various walks of life, Costa challenges conventional gender norms and promotes female empowerment, aligning her work with the broader goals of gender studies.

Costa's approach leverages the unique elements of children's literature: narrative simplicity, illustrative appeal and rhythmic patterns, to create an accessible and engaging format for young readers. The book's historical narrative framework enriches its educational value, drawing connections between past struggles for justice with present-day themes. In fact, its historical grounding in the Carnation Revolution, a transformative moment for women's rights in Portugal, underscores its themes of empowerment, equality, and resistance. Furthermore, *25 Mulheres* addresses contemporary themes such as disability, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ experiences, making it a versatile tool for both education and transformation. This article explores Costa's work within broader debates on gender in children's literature, emphasising its potential to inspire critical reflection on societal norms and encourage advocacy for inclusion and equality across generations.

The following pages frame the historical period of the Carnation Revolution and its transformative impact on Portuguese society and women's rights, setting the stage for insights into gender studies within children's literature. This historical and theoretical context, rooted in feminist critique, provides a critical lens through which to analyse *25 Mulheres*, considering both the sociopolitical shifts that shaped women's roles and the evolving discourse on female representation in children's literature.

Before delving into the book's exploration, however, it is essential to first introduce its writer and illustrator.

The Author: a Brief Note on Raquel Costa's Artistic and Educational Contributions

Raquel Costa is a writer, visual artist and illustrator born in Porto in 1979. She holds a Degree in Fine Arts and Sculpture from the Faculty of Fine Arts of Porto and a Master's Degree in Visual Arts Education. Raquel Costa has made significant contributions to both artistic and educational fields. With a portfolio of nearly two dozen published books, some of which are included in the Portuguese National Reading Plan and have been finalists in various international illustration contests, Costa's work is widely recognised. One notable book, *Noa*, written by Susana Cardoso Ferreira, was selected for the White Ravens catalogue by the International Youth Library in Munich in 2021. It was also a finalist in the Bologna Children's Book Fair Illustration Contest and won the Bissaya Barreto Prize for Children's Literature in 2022. Costa co-founded the *Little Black Spot Creative Studio*, a multidisciplinary studio working in illustration, visual development for animation, interior and furniture design, and communication design. She regularly participates in solo and group exhibitions both in Portugal and abroad and conducts illustration workshops for children and adults.

Setting: The 50th Anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution and its Impact on Portuguese Society and Women's Rights

Fifty years ago, Portugal entered a new era. Portuguese army captains overthrew the dictatorial regime (1933–1974) of António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcelo Caetano in a matter of hours, seizing strategic positions of power and obtaining the surrender of the governing bodies. (Robert-Gonçalves, Brenez & Khoshnoudi, 2024, p. 81)

Celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024, the Carnation Revolution was a pivotal moment in Portuguese history. This peaceful coup on April 25, 1974, brought down a long-standing dictatorship and reinstated fundamental civil liberties and democracy in Portugal. The revolution's impact on society, particularly on women's rights, remains significant and far-reaching. During the Estado Novo regime (1926–1974), which spanned nearly five decades under António de Oliveira Salazar and later Marcelo Caetano, Portugal was under fascist rule. The regime's isolationist and authoritarian policies heavily curtailed civil liberties, including freedom of the press, association, and education (Dantas et al., 2024). This period saw Portugal clinging to its colonial empire, with territories in Africa and Asia, enforcing brutal policies to maintain control over these regions. The oppressive conditions led to mass emigration, as many Portuguese sought better opportunities abroad, including significant waves to Brazil and other countries (Alecrim, 2023).

Women in Portugal faced severe restrictions during the Estado Novo. They were particularly oppressed, barred from accessing education and symbolic production, and relegated to the roles of wives and mothers. They were denied the right to vote or travel without the consent of their parents or husbands. Valley-Fischer and Fischer (1975, p. 52) drawing on Cohen's writings about Portuguese machismo, reported that a married woman could not obtain a passport without her husband's permission. Additionally, her husband could prohibit her from working outside the home or even compel her to leave her job. The regime sought to domesticate women, limiting their potential and participation in public life, and maintained a patriarchal order that kept women subordinate. As Papadogiannis and Ramos Pinto argue, "With the exception of the communist-linked *Movimento Democrático de Mulheres*, there was little in the way of organised feminist movements in Portugal before the Revolution." (2023, p. 7)

The Carnation Revolution, driven by a movement of the armed forces (MFA in Portuguese) and supported by civil society, marked the end of this oppressive era (Varela, 2012). Soldiers marched into Lisbon with carnations in their guns, symbolising a peaceful transition of power. The revolution led to the establishment of a young democracy committed to restoring basic civil rights and implementing crucial health and education policies. In the years following the revolution, Portugal saw significant improvements in literacy rates, life expectancy, and overall quality of life. The country underwent a profound transformation as new policies and reforms were introduced to address the deep-seated inequalities and injustices that had persisted under the dictatorship. Education became a priority, with increased access and improved quality, which in turn boosted literacy rates and educational attainment. The health sector also benefitted from these reforms, resulting in higher life expectancy and better healthcare services for the population (Royo, 2018).

Portugal's transition to democracy was accompanied by significant migration shifts. Many had emigrated during the dictatorship to escape political repression and seek better economic opportunities, while post-revolution, an influx of returnees and immigrants from former colonies enriched Portuguese society but also posed challenges to integration and social cohesion (Kalter, 2024).

Women, who had been marginalised and oppressed under the Estado Novo, began to see significant changes in their status and rights. The new democratic government enacted policies to promote gender equality and women's rights, including laws that guaranteed equal access to education and employment. Women were no longer confined to the roles of wives and mothers; they could now pursue careers, participate in politics, and enjoy greater personal freedoms (Strippoli, 2023; Valley-Fischer and Fischer, 1975). The legacy of the Carnation Revolution is evident in contemporary Portugal, where gender equality and women's rights are integral to the nation's identity. However, the journey is ongoing, and there are still challenges to be addressed. The revolution's anniversary serves as a reminder of the progress made and the work that remains to ensure a truly inclusive and equitable society.

Gender Studies in Children's Books

A. Representation of Women in Children's Literature

To date, research has demonstrated that pervasive gender stereotypes exist in children's picture books (...).

For example, research shows that children's books more often feature male characters in titular roles (...), as agentic (...) and as leaders. Women and girls are more often portrayed as subservient, passive and obedient (...). Therefore, children's books may be considered a source of intensified gendered stereotyping. (Pownall and Heflick, 2023, p. 758)

Costa's *25 Mulheres* stands out as a noteworthy work of children's literature that presents young readers with stories of women's lives, some celebrating their achievements, others revealing the injustice they endure. Through its focus on women from diverse backgrounds and life paths, the book disrupts traditional depictions of gender roles, providing an empowering and historically rich perspective on female agency. Its allusion to Portuguese history and cultural idiosyncrasies offers young readers a localised yet universally relevant lens through which to explore gender equality, activism, and historical change. Unlike many earlier children's books that relegated female characters to passive or secondary roles, as noted in the epigraph to this section, Costa's work actively foregrounds women's achievements and resistance, aligning with feminist and poststructuralist perspectives that view gender as a socially constructed and dynamic concept.

In contrast to traditional frameworks like developmentalism (Katz & Ksansnak, 1994), which often perceive gender as a natural and biologically determined aspect of identity, contemporary feminist approaches challenge these assumptions by emphasising the social construction of gender. Feminist poststructuralist and postdevelopmentalist scholars provide a counterpoint by arguing that children are not passive recipients of gendered norms but active agents in constructing and reconstructing their identities. These constructions, influenced by intersections of age, race, religion, and socioeconomic background, carry multiple meanings (Valentine, 2007; Osgood & Robinson, 2017). This perspective underscores the importance of equipping children with tools to critically engage with issues of identity and social norms, a need that children's literature is uniquely positioned to address (Smith et al., 2017; Amante, 2024).

Children's literature holds a profound capacity to shape young minds, providing not only entertainment and aesthetic value, but also foundational lessons on culture, identity, and social norms. Through stories and illustrations, children's books introduce readers to a wide array of experiences and perspectives, including those related to gender, helping form their first understandings of the world around them. As such, it plays a pivotal role in influencing how children perceive and internalise concepts of masculinity, femininity, and equality (Yigit-Gencten et al., 2024; Pownall & Heflick, 2023). Historically, the representation of women in children's literature has been

shaped by gender stereotypes. Female characters were often limited to passive or supporting roles, reflecting societal norms that cast women primarily as homemakers, caregivers, or minor characters whose primary function was to support the male protagonist. These portrayals were consistent with the prevailing gender ideologies of the time, which emphasised traditional roles for women and restricted their opportunities for independence and personal growth (Carter, Pitts & Cart, 2025; Castrillo et al., 2025; Kakkai & Dave, 2024). Classic fairy tales and stories often reinforce these stereotypes (Lindsay, 2023). For instance, characters in classic fairy tales like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White are typically portrayed as beautiful but submissive, awaiting male heroes to rescue them. Such narratives subtly reinforced the idea that a woman's value lay in her beauty and her ability to attract and support male protagonists (Manaworapong & Bowen, 2022).

In recent decades, however, there has been a conscious effort to challenge and revise these outdated representations. Contemporary children's literature increasingly features female characters who are active, independent, and multifaceted. These characters are often portrayed as protagonists who embark on adventures, solve problems, and assert their agency. From the 1980s onwards, feminist retellings of fairy tales have subverted traditional gender norms (Kalloli & Tyagi, 2022; Roots, 2021), while ironic picturebooks, such as Anthony Browne's *Piggybook* (1986), have critiqued domestic drudgery. More recently, books like Jacqueline Wilson's *Opal Plumstead* (2014) have explored feminist activism through historical fiction, following a young factory worker whose exposure to the Suffragette movement sparks her desire to fight for women's rights, while also confronting labour struggles. These works reflect a broader shift towards stories that do not only feature strong and independent female characters but also engage critically with themes of gender equality and social change.

In Portugal, there has also been progress in this area (Amante, 2023; 2025). Books such as *Portuguesas com M Grande* (2018) and *Sarita Rebelde quer ser Astronauta* (2019) by Lúcia Vicente, *Portuguesas Extraordinárias* (2018) by Maria do Rosário Pedreira, *Pardalita* (2021) by Joana Estrela, and *25 Mulheres* (2024) by Raquel Costa, to name a few, highlight strong, independent female characters and challenge traditional gender norms. These stories offer young readers diverse and empowering representations of women, encouraging them to see beyond conventional roles and imagine broader possibilities for themselves. Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the need for diversity and inclusion in children's literature. Contemporary authors and illustrators strive to represent a wider range of experiences and identities, including different races, cultures, and family structures. This inclusive approach not only reflects the diverse world in which children live but also helps to foster empathy and understanding (Boutte et al., 2008).

Educational Impact

... we know that gender bias in children's books can reinforce dominant conceptualizations of "masculine" and "feminine" behavior (...), and promote a sense of entitlement among boys, while negatively impacting girl's self-esteem (...). Further, the majority of the text exemplars do not represent female characters who identify with multiple historically marginalized social groups, which means that some of the complex social issues that young girls encounter outside of school are not reflected in the curriculum. (...)

Access to children's literature that reflects the diverse experiences, identities, and perspectives of students reinforces to young readers that they matter (...) and belong in the classroom. (Gomez-Najarro, 2020, pp. 405–406)

Research continues to show that despite progress, gender stereotypes remain pervasive in children's literature and in many textbooks (Ullah et al., 2014; Dong & Li, 2023). The educational impact of such portrayals cannot be overstated. As Gomez-Najarro notes above, exposure to limited and stereotypical roles can reinforce traditional gender expectations, negatively impacting girls' self-esteem while promoting entitlement among boys. This lack of representation can have a limiting effect on children's understanding of themselves and others, reinforcing narrow definitions of gender and identity. There is still currently a notable underrepresentation of women of colour (Martin, 2024), LGBTQ+ characters (Keyser and Whitford, 2024), and those with disabilities (Tondreau and Rabinowitz, 2021) in school curricula, textbooks, and children's literature. This lack of representation perpetuates narrow, exclusionary perspectives and denies children the opportunity to see diverse identities and experiences reflected in their learning materials. For instance, stories that celebrate women of colour or LGBTQ+ individuals often remain sidelined, limiting the visibility of these groups and the richness they bring to cultural and historical narratives. Similarly, characters with disabilities are frequently absent or depicted in ways that reinforce stereotypes, rather than presenting them as multidimensional individuals with agency and unique contributions. Addressing this gap requires a conscious effort to include diverse voices and perspectives in children's literature. By doing so, educators and authors can create a more inclusive environment that fosters empathy, combats prejudice, and helps all children feel valued and represented.

In Portugal, books like *25 Mulheres* actively work against limiting trends by representing women as strong, active agents in their own stories, while also giving space to the often-overlooked voices of those whose contributions have historically been marginalised or silenced. By spotlighting a diverse range of women, three well-known and the rest entirely anonymous, this book challenges traditional narratives and celebrates the richness and complexity of women's experiences. This approach avoids erasure and instead acknowledges the layered realities of women's lives, including their struggles, resilience, and triumphs. Through its rich storytelling and compelling illustrations, *25 Mulheres* serves as a bridge between past and present, allowing readers to connect with these figures on a personal level while understand-

ing the broader social and cultural contexts that shaped their lives. While significant strides have been made in the representation of women in children's literature, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure that all children see themselves reflected in the stories they read. This visibility is crucial not only for fostering self-worth but also for developing empathy and understanding among peers. Books like Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres*, which will be analysed in the following section, play an important role in this endeavour. By actively integrating such works into educational and cultural contexts, society can continue to evolve, promoting gender equality and inspiring young readers to envision a more inclusive and respectful world.

An Analysis of Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres*

Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres* is a captivating, multifaceted children's book that combines educational content with artistic appeal, stimulating curiosity and critical thinking in young readers. Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution, the book is structured in an alphabetical format, with each page dedicated to a different woman. This format is both engaging and educational, designed to allow young readers—typically those over 10 years old, as stated by publishers and critics—to effortlessly navigate the book while gaining insights into the diverse experiences of women in Portuguese society during the 1970s and beyond.

In fact, the selection and diversity of the 25 women (as a tribute to the 25th of April 1974) featured in the book are noteworthy. Each narrative reflects how the freedoms gained from the Revolution—freedom of expression, gender equality, and the right to autonomy—manifested in the lives of women from varied backgrounds. Costa's deliberate inclusion of a wide spectrum of professions, struggles, and achievements emphasises that these freedoms belong to everyone, creating a richer and more inclusive vision of society.

From Abrilina, for instance, who ventures out to buy flowers and opens her window to banish the winter's mould and welcome the morning light, mirroring the spirit of the Carnation Revolution, which, on April 25, swept away the remnants of dictatorship, to Eunice, who dreams of places where ramps, not staircases, accommodate her disability, each story brims with distinctive characters and contexts. This diverse representation underscores the book's commitment to inclusivity and offers readers a mosaic of down-to-earth examples to learn from. In fact, each page, sometimes extending into a double-page spread, unfolds like a tapestry, and close examination reveals more than women's struggles and expectations, as Costa's work is also a powerful vehicle for historical memory. By shedding light on the often-overlooked contributions of women in key social and political moments, Costa challenges dominant historical accounts and highlights the key role of women in shaping history, as the selection of the women's stories in the following sections discloses through both text and illustration.

J is for Julieta: Weaving Voices Across the Wires

Julieta's passage and its accompanying illustration convey a powerful critique of colonial and militaristic narratives. As seen in Fig. 1¹, we are introduced to a woman engaged in the often-overlooked labour of communication and the double-page spread reveals Julieta's disillusionment: the repetition of "toca e toca [rings and rings]" suggests an endless cycle, emphasises the relentlessness of her work and, metaphorically, the persistence of the narratives she is exposed to. She listens to "histórias de heróis e façanhas [stories of heroes and feats]," a phrase that initially frames these accounts in a grand, almost mythological tone. However, the shift in perspective is striking because, over time, she realises that these are mere tales, detached from reality and, in Costa's words, spun by men who have lost the thread of humanity. This final expression is particularly significant. It plays on the metaphor of "losing the thread," which ties into both Julieta's literal work with telephone wires and a broader sense of losing ethical grounding. The contrast between her position as a listener and the male narrators who shape these stories stresses the gendered divide in how history is told and understood. The passage critiques the glorification of war, portraying it as a narrative constructed by men who no longer recognise the human cost of their actions.

Hand in hand with text, the illustration reinforces this critique. On one side, Julieta is depicted working at the switchboard, symbolising her connection to the flow of information. She is engaged in unseen yet essential labour, a role traditionally associated with women, particularly in wartime. On the opposite page, the chaotic, fragmented imagery suggests the distorted nature of the stories she hears. The figures, drawn in tangled red and brown lines, evoke violence and confusion: men with weapons, arms raised in aggression. Notably, these figures, along with the airplane, guns, and other surrounding objects on that page, are literally drawn as thread unravelling, a visual metaphor for the fraying of reality under oppression and the instability of the dominant narrative. The colour palette, with rich earth tones and streaks of blue against a yellow backdrop, conveys both intensity and distance, as if these scenes exist in a world removed from Julieta's contained space. The blue airplane stands out, representing colonial military presence or the distant battlefields she hears about

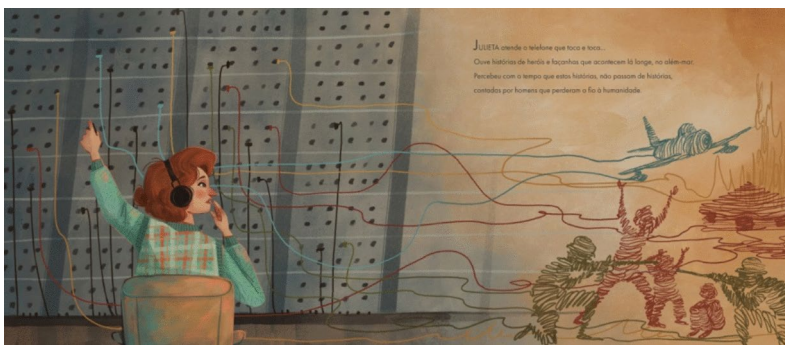


Fig. 1 Julieta at the switchboard in wartime

¹ The publishing house and the author have granted us permission to reproduce the pictures in this article.

but never sees firsthand. Costa's text and illustration work together to highlight the tension between those who create history and those who bear witness to it. As mentioned, Julieta represents the often-silenced perspectives: women, civilians, and those who process and transmit information without being in control of its content. As Domingos dos Reis and Ramos Marcos (2025, p.3) remind us, resisting the regime was met with severe repression of civil rights, and defying the dictatorship was a dangerous act that often resulted in imprisonment, torture, and exile for those who dared to challenge it. In such a climate, maintaining a low profile and blending into the background became a means of survival.

The depiction of war as something abstract, spun from the threads of a switchboard, suggests that these stories are not just misleading but also deliberately constructed, shaped by those in power to maintain a particular narrative. This passage thus aligns with the book's broader feminist and postcolonial themes, inviting young readers to question the dominant historical accounts they encounter. It subtly encourages critical thinking about who gets to tell stories and whose voices are left unheard, reinforcing the idea that history is not neutral but actively shaped by those who hold power.

T is for Teodora: Between Memory and the Pursuit of Knowledge and Freedom

Seated at her desk, Teodora is surrounded by objects that bridge the past and the present, memory and exile. The books, notes, and academic symbols, such as the framed certificate from the Sorbonne or the CNRS medal, signal the path she has carved for herself in France, a country where she has rebuilt her life as a researcher and now breathes an air infused with freedom. Actually, the Sorbonne, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, represents not only her pursuit of knowledge but also the freedom of thought denied to her in Lisbon.

Despite being in Paris, her new homeland, Teodora carries Lisbon with her. A postcard featuring a bridge, most probably the '25 de Abril' Bridge for its significance, once named after the dictator Salazar, serves as a silent link to the city of her past. The rooster, a traditional Portuguese symbol, reinforces this longing for her roots. Conversely, the globe and books signal her engagement with a broader world, possibly hinting at her role in resistance movements. Two significant books stand out in Teodora's passage (Fig. 2): *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a groundbreaking feminist work, by the three Marias whom we will allude to below, which was censored under the dictatorship, and *Ela é apenas mulher* [*She is just a woman*], whose title drips with irony, reflecting the persistent struggle against gender-based oppression. The illustration itself captures her in an act of writing, a gesture of resistance, an assertion of voice.



Fig. 2 A glimpse of Teodora, on the left, and Umbelina, on the right

U for Umbelina: The Watchful Eyes of the Neighbourhood

Umbelina, on the other hand, represents a different kind of awareness, one rooted in everyday vigilance. Her sharp gaze and strategic position, leaning out of the window, suggest she is both an observer and a guardian of local knowledge, customs, and the moral fabric of the community. The text emphasises that she “... sabe sempre quem vai e vem no bairro [always knows who comes and goes in the neighbourhood]” (Fig. 2, page on the right), hinting at a time when watchful eyes and good hearing could mean survival in a society under surveillance. It is interesting to notice the use of alliteration in the repeated ‘v’ sounds to create a sense of movement and rhythm. This mirrors the constant flow of people—and information—through the neighbourhood, reinforcing Umbelina’s role as a silent but ever-watchful presence. Additionally, the repeated phrasing—“Ainda que a vista lhe fraqueje [Even if her eyesight weakens]” and “Ainda que a audição lhe falte [Even if her hearing fails]—contributes to a rhythmic pattern, as if the act of watching and listening has become instinctual. Despite the frailties of old age, her knowledge remains sharp. Meanwhile, inside the house, the man, her son-in-law, takes notes in his black notebook. According to the text, this notebook is “sinistro [sinister],” and it immediately raises suspicion. Is her son-in-law a figure associated with the political police (Policia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado—PIDE), symbolising how the regime relied on informants and close-knit social networks to control the population?

The spatial separation between Umbelina and the man inside cannot go unnoticed. It represents two types of knowledge: while Umbelina operates in the open, gathering oral, local wisdom and gossip, her weathered face framed by the outside world, in contrast, her son-in-law is enclosed in shadows, his face tense as he clutches the notebook, a symbol of written records and covert knowledge. This contrast suggests a wider commentary on power, control, and the hidden mechanisms of political repression, aligning the historical analysis of Portugal’s intelligence apparatus under Salazar’s Estado Novo, as examined by de Castro and Fernández-Carrera (2024).

X is for Xantipa: A Voice that Will Not be Silenced

Unlike the covert, shadowed knowledge of the PIDE informant or Umbelina's oral, communal awareness, Xantipa's knowledge is public, assertive, and voiced in defiance. Xantipa is depicted as a powerful orator, standing at a podium and addressing a room full of men (Fig. 3). Her expression is fierce, her mouth open mid-speech, and her body leaning forward in a gesture of defiance, her finger pointed as if challenging those before her. The men below her, rigid and visibly taken aback, appear either shocked, fearful, or attentive, perhaps in reluctant acknowledgement, highlighting the disruptive nature of her presence in a male-dominated space. Her blue foulard contributes to the scene and is no mere accessory: it transforms, ending in an inquisitive, pointing hand, as if reinforcing her argument, challenging assumptions, and demanding accountability.

Y is for Yolanda: Teaching Resistance at the Dinner Table

Seated at the dinner table with her two children, a boy and a girl, Yolanda is both a nurturing and instructive maternal figure. Her children's attentive expressions suggest that this is no ordinary conversation; rather, it is a lesson in truth, morality, and survival under an oppressive regime. The close, warm setting of the dinner table stands in stark contrast to the adjacent page, where PIDE informants are shown searching, reinforcing the omnipresence of fear and state surveillance. The colour choices in the illustration further accentuate this division between private defiance and public control, as the shadowed world of the informants contrasts with the lighter earthy tones of the family's space (Fig. 4).

The presence of the radio on the left page is particularly striking. As a key vehicle of information, it holds a dual meaning: on one hand, it symbolises state propaganda, the controlled messages disseminated by the regime, as mentioned above; on the other, it represents access to forbidden knowledge, a source of underground resistance. After all, as Alexandra Reza reminds us, "The Estado Novo, the Portuguese fascist dictatorship (...) were obsessed with information: with collecting it, and,

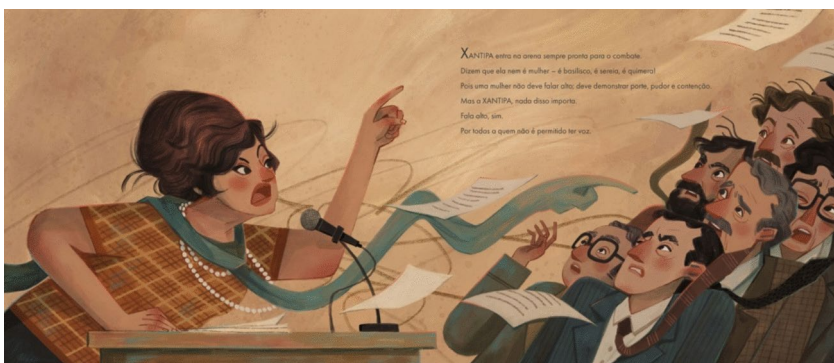


Fig. 3 Xantipa ready for battle, as if in an arena



Fig. 4 Yolanda, a nurturing maternal figure in the foreground, with PIDE informants in the background

often, suppressing it” (2022, p. 863). The fact that the radio is positioned within the family’s intimate space also suggests the power of oral transmission, not just through media, but through intergenerational teaching. Yolanda’s lesson to her children about balancing truth with strategic disobedience reflects the complexity of life under dictatorship. Her words guide them towards an understanding that rules are not absolute; instead, they must be critically examined. While obedience is often framed as a virtue, Yolanda’s instruction introduces a very important nuance: when rules uphold injustice, breaking them becomes an act of moral courage. This echoes themes of resistance, in which individuals, including children, must learn when silence is safety and when speaking out is necessary for justice. Just as with Xantipa, Yolanda resists oppression, in this case through education and quiet acts of defiance. She embodies the transmission of critical thinking, ensuring that even the youngest members of society understand that freedom sometimes requires knowing when to challenge authority.

Other Voices of Resistance: Thematic Depth and Depictions of Change in *25 Mulheres*

All these women described above are always ready for battle, contradicting the stereotype that a woman should be quiet, passive, and reserved. The passages discussed above critique traditional gender expectations, according to which women are expected to remain silent, to be docile and composed. These characters refuse to conform, and they speak either loudly, or more silently, not just for themselves but for all those who are denied a voice. By pairing textual and iconographic elements, Costa challenges the erasure of women from public discourse and history.

Actually, Costa suggests that women have superpowers: they are depicted as larger than life, striding over houses on their way to school, embodying both strength and mythical presence, just like in the depiction of Benedita (Fig. 5), the tireless teacher whose multiple arms humourously yet powerfully symbolise the unseen, multitasking labour of women, showing that they ‘make the world’. With hands extending



Fig. 5 Benedita, the multi-armed, multitasking teacher, meeting every need, reaching every student

in all directions, she distributes apples, symbols of knowledge, along with shoes, books, and care to children who dream of letters and multiplication tables, even in remote mountain areas. Her figure represents an alternative form of battle, just like Yolanda's: not one fought with weapons, but through education, nurturing, and the persistent act of empowering others. Many of Costa's illustrations emphasise crowds of people, with women at the centre of action and activism. These visual compositions reinforce the idea that resistance is rarely an individual endeavour but rather a collective force.

Just like the flowing scarf of Xantipa and the threads in Julieta's section, the illustration depicting Benedita also reinforces the idea that women's resistance is woven into everyday acts, such as of generosity and teaching. Together, all these pictures challenge the traditional perception of struggle as solely violent or masculine. Women have historically fought battles, not just in the streets, but in classrooms, kitchens, and within the social fabric itself. Whether through speech, writing, teaching, or caregiving, these women embody alternative modes of resistance that are just as transformative and enduring as any revolution fought with weapons.

While these acts of resistance are central to *25 Mulheres*, Costa's work also explores the many ways women fight oppression, reshape their realities, and assert their agency, and we may say the thematic range of *25 Mulheres* is one of its greatest strengths. Costa explores freedom, equality, empowerment, resilience, access to education, the constraints of family traditions, the lives of rural and urban women, the student movement and the experiences of elderly women. But these women's stories are also about identity, hope, and the quest for a sense of belonging, delving into issues of homosexuality, disability, emigration, abortion, and many other themes presented with sensitivity, while avoiding explicitness and any overtly propagandistic or victimising stance. Every page encourages readers to think critically about ongoing gender issues and inspire them to envision a world where everyone, regardless of gender, can pursue their dreams and aspirations freely. The book effectively addresses the persistent challenges women face and emphasises the importance of continuing this fight.

Costa's artistic style is instrumental to the book's impact, complementing the narratives with visual depth and emotional resonance. Her illustrations are dynamic and rich in detail, bringing each woman's story to life and making the narrative more engaging for young readers, but also highly recommended for adults. The visual elements, which include both vibrant colours and subtle pastel and greyish shades, capture the nuances of each woman's experiences. They balance the short, direct, and sometimes raw presentations of the characters' traits and lives, amplifying the text with visual imagery that enriches these written introductions to the 25 women.

The reception of *25 Mulheres* has been highly positive, with readers, educators, politicians, and critics praising its educational value, lauding its thoughtful integration of historical content and contemporary relevance (Almeida, 2024; Carvalho, 2024a, 2024b; Pinto, 2024). In an interview and written piece titled "São cravos, senhoras (e um livro sobre a condição feminina)," published by Raquel Dias da Silva (2024) in *Time Out Lisboa*, Raquel Costa discusses the creation of her illustrated book, and reveals that while the selection of women was based on historical research, her primary goal was to foster an intergenerational and multifaceted memory by crafting stories of anonymous, everyday women. Notably, the only biographical depiction in the book is of the "Three Marias"—Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, and Maria Isabel Barreno—authors of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a pioneering literary and political work that played an important role in the feminist movement in Portugal. Published in 1972 by the three previously mentioned Marias, this book is celebrated for its innovative literary style blending prose, poetry and letters, challenging the oppressive Estado Novo regime and its conservative views on women and society (Ribeiro, Torres Moreira and Pimenta, 2023). These three figures are also honoured in a scene set in Teodora's office, as mentioned earlier. Costa believes that fictional stories grounded in reality can evoke a sense of recognition and resonance, highlighting that many tales in the book represent the experiences of thousands of women.

Educationally, children's books like *25 Mulheres* play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of gender roles. As previously discussed, from a young age, children absorb the lessons and values presented in the stories they read, which can significantly influence their understanding of gender and their own identities. As we can infer from the diverse and multifaceted characters Costa presents, these stories can challenge traditional views and open up new possibilities for young readers. The role of educators and parents in discussing these themes through literature is vital. They can help children to critically engage with the content, encouraging them to reflect on the broader implications of gender roles and stereotypes. We can, thus, conclude that Raquel Costa's *25 Mulheres* stands out as a significant contribution to children's literature. Its thoughtful selection of diverse women, compelling themes, and engaging illustrations make it a powerful tool for encouraging the next generation to continue the fight for freedom and equality.

Conclusion: Ongoing Dialogue and Future Directions

Fostering intergenerational conversations about gender is essential for deepening understanding and promoting freedom and equitable opportunities for all individuals. Parents, educators, and community leaders can use books like *25 Mulheres* as tools to initiate discussions with children about the complexities of gender roles, identity, and equality or equity. By exploring the diverse experiences of the women depicted in the book, young readers can be encouraged to question societal norms, reflect on the complexities of gender roles, and develop empathy and critical thinking skills, preparing them to contribute to a more just and equitable society.

However, while *25 Mulheres* is undeniably impactful, its accessibility to a global audience warrants careful consideration. The book's foundation lies in the historical context of Portugal's Carnation Revolution, a pivotal event that ended decades of dictatorship and brought new freedoms to its citizens. This historical specificity enriches the narrative but may limit its immediate resonance outside Portugal, particularly in cultures unfamiliar with this transformative period. Yet, the themes of giving voice to underrepresented groups—women who were silenced or sidelined, individuals facing systemic oppression, and those struggling against societal norms—are universal. These themes resonate across borders, as many nations have experienced similar movements towards democracy, equality, and human rights during the 20th century, often linked to the global decline of fascist regimes. To enhance the book's global impact, supplemental materials could provide valuable context. For example, a preface or educator's guide could explain the historical significance of the Carnation Revolution and its parallels with other movements around the world, such as the fall of fascism in Spain, the end of apartheid in South Africa, or the civil rights movement in the United States. This framing would allow readers from diverse cultural backgrounds to draw connections between the stories of these Portuguese women and the broader struggles for freedom and equity that have shaped modern societies.

Moreover, highlighting the universality of the book's themes—resilience, empowerment, and the fight for recognition—can also bridge potential cultural gaps. These stories are not only about Portugal but about the broader human condition, shedding light on the collective struggles and triumphs of marginalised communities worldwide. By emphasising this shared experience and providing accessible cultural explanations, *25 Mulheres* can inspire readers globally, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of how historical movements for freedom continue to shape the fight for equality today. Addressing these challenges could expand the book's reach and relevance. Longitudinal research on how exposure to books like *25 Mulheres* shapes children's perceptions of gender and social roles could offer invaluable insights. Similarly, more specific studies could investigate how diverse representation in children's literature influences young readers' understanding of intersectional identities, including race, disability, and LGBTQ+ experiences, areas where representation remains critically underdeveloped.

While much progress has been made, *25 Mulheres* also underscores the work still to be done in creating a truly inclusive literary landscape. Raquel Costa's work reminds us of the enduring legacy of the Carnation Revolution and the importance of educating future generations about the strides made, and those yet to be taken, toward

freedom and equality. Every step forward matters, and fostering these conversations with children is a vital investment in a fairer, more equitable future for all.

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Declarations

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