

# “É pelas mãos das mulheres que vai passar a retomada econômica do país”: a cidadania maternal nos discursos da extrema-direita brasileira<sup>1</sup>

*“The country’s economic recovery will be driven by women”: mothers as moral citizens in Brazilian far-right discourses*

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**Resumo** Partindo do argumento transnacional de que as mulheres representam uma nova fronteira para o desenvolvimento econômico das nações, este artigo analisa um conjunto de discursos de gênero entrelaçados a estreitos ideais de cidadania materna. A partir de uma análise de discurso, analiso a noção de neoliberalismo como tecnologia móvel para ilustrar como o uso de narrativas moralizantes da extrema direita brasileira durante o governo Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) enquadra as mulheres como figuras maternas e empreendedoras. Responsáveis por imbuir as futuras gerações com condutas autônomas, destaca-se que as mulheres pobres se tornam moralmente responsáveis por promover o progresso nacional, um enquadramento que tem sido aplicável tanto a orientações neoliberais progressistas quanto neoconservadoras.

**Palavras-chave** Maternidade. Cidadania. Extrema-direita. Governamentalidade. Neoliberalismo.

**Abstract** *Departing from the ubiquitous transnational argument that women represent a new frontier for the economic development of nations, this paper analyzes a set of gendered discourses intertwined as an ideal maternal citizenship. Through a discourse analysis, I take the notion of neoliberalism as a mobile technology to illustrate how the Brazilian far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) employed narrow moralizing narratives framing women as responsible maternal and entrepreneurial figures. Tasked with nurturing future generations with expected self-governing*

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*conduct, I highlight how poor women become morally responsible for promoting national progress, a framework that has been applicable both to progressive and neoconservative neoliberal political orientations.*

**Keywords** *Maternity. Citizenship. Far-right. Governmentality. Neoliberalism.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the intricate interplay of positioning women as privileged driving force for economic development based on reinforcing their roles as responsible mothers, endowed with an innate predisposition for caregiving within the Brazilian context. I consider how the alignment with development guidelines, as proposed by international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations, was initially embraced by right and left-wing governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2002) and the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, 2003-2016), respectively, to promote gender equality through the expansion of gender mainstreaming in state-level policies. However progressive these international frameworks were initially propelled – a result, albeit partial, of the ongoing advocacy of subaltern anti-racist and decolonial feminist struggles from “developing” countries for a global gender justice agenda – its deeply utilitarian approach focused on economic productivity and representations of women as idealized altruist mothers was, paradoxically, not absent in the tenure of the far-right government led by Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022). Despite its opposition to the so-called “gender ideology,” Bolsonaro’s government promoted gender-specific policies, emphasizing women’s integration into micro-entrepreneurship as a crucial means to address the country’s economic and purported moral crises.

Over the past three decades, the rise of transnational narratives positioning women as a pivotal force in combating poverty, economic crises, and inequalities has been grounded in the ripple-down effect concept. It suggests that investing in women’s education, human capital, and expanding female paid labor could lead to widespread benefits for their families, communities, and nations (Roberts, 2015; Calkin, 2017; Switzer *et al.*, 2016). In this article, I delve into the specific mobilization of those ideals within the Brazilian far-right discourses and policies. Despite former President Bolsonaro consistently opposing Brazil’s adherence to international organizations, suggesting to withdraw the country from the United Nations during his electoral campaign and labeling the institution as ‘a gathering

of communists<sup>2</sup>, the mandate did not fully deviated from specific guidelines endorsed by these entities, including gender and development approaches. Specifically, I will concentrate on how the tenure of the former president, marked by several detrimental policies for women, including significant budget cuts – e.g., a reduction of 97.5% for child daycare construction<sup>3</sup> and a 90% decrease in funds for combating domestic violence<sup>4</sup> - selectively promoted programs aimed at integrating women into the labor market. Initiatives such as Qualify Woman (*Qualifica Mulher*), Work-Family Balance (*Equilíbrio Trabalho-Família*), and the campaign The force of Brazilian woman (*A força da mulher brasileira*) illustrate how promoting women’s economic participation extends across a wide political spectrum to serve diverse political objectives. Despite the political diversity within these initiatives, I highlight how they share common arguments centered around motherhood, economic productivity, and national development.

My point is that the notion of women as an “untapped resource” for national development is presented ambivalently across conservative and progressive political arenas. In a similar vein, Cruikshank (1999) observed that the premise of “empowering the poor” was present in endeavors of both neoconservative movements and the American New Left in the U.S., aiming for the self-organization of the poorest. Although distinctly differentiated in their intentions, the mobilization of empowerment tactics throughout various social programs shared a common political strategy: influencing individuals to act in their own self-interest. These were strategies for constituting and regulating political subjectivities of those ‘yet-to-be’ empowered to produce citizen-subjects capable of governing themselves, and fostering desires to guide their actions towards a specific end: contributing to the society. Individuals become citizens in liberal democratic societies through technologies of citizenship, a political rationality that operates through a set of programs, training, discourses, and strategies designed to produce politically active self-governing productive citizens.

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2 As reported by *G1* in the article titled “Bolsonaro diz que vai tirar Brasil da ONU se for eleito presidente”, on August 18, 2018. [<https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/08/18/bolsonaro-diz-que-vai-tirar-brasil-da-onu-se-for-eleito-presidente.ghtml> access on October 20, 2023].

3 As reported by *O Globo* in the article titled “Orçamento de 2023 proposto por Bolsonaro corta 97,5% dos recursos para novas creches: só há dinheiro para cinco escolas”, on October 14, 2022. [<https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2022/10/orcamento-de-2023-proposto-por-bolsonaro-corta-975percentdos-recursos-para-novas-creches-so-ha-dinheiro-para-cinco-escolas.ghtml> accessed on January 15, 2023].

4 As reported by *Folha de São Paulo* on September 17, 2022. [<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2022/09/bolsonaro-cortou-90-da-verba-de-combate-a-violencia-contraa-mulher.shtml> accessed on 15 Jan 2023].

Taking a Foucauldian approach to comprehend the various forms technologies operate in as sets of power-knowledge apparatus employed to control, regulate, and shape individuals and populations, the concept encompasses a broad spectrum of social and disciplinary practices. Amidst various forms that neoliberalism can adopt across different contexts and political regimes, Aiwa Ong (2006) introduces the notion of a ‘mobile technology’ – a rationality functioning in distinct ways in diverse settings, whether in socialist regimes like contemporary China or in pro-capitalist regimes aimed at ensuring women’s rights in Malaysia. In this paper, I employ Ong’s concept to explore how an examination of the neoliberal governmentality concerning women’s integration into the economy proves insightful in analyzing the emergence of an ideal maternal citizen in the Brazilian context. This ideal was actively shaped through technologies of citizenship, playing an important role in constructing, producing, and surveilling maternity – technologies that demonstrate applicability across both progressive and neoconservative neoliberal political orientations.

Since the emergence of a robust agenda promoted by international organizations emphasizing women as ‘good business’ (Prügl and True, 2014; Bedford, 2009) for government and corporate investment, I argued elsewhere (Garcia, 2023) how Brazil has become fertile ground for the implementation of such guidelines, due to both its long-standing engagement of its feminist movements and the State with international organizations, as well as due to the historical informality of its labor market (Guimarães, 2007).

In the following sections, I elaborate on the instrumentalization of women within conservative neoliberal frameworks, evoking flexible work in the form of micro entrepreneurship as idealized means to create a powerful nation through women’s economic inclusion. This is notably evident in policies of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights (*Ministério da Família, da Mulher e dos Direitos Humanos* - MMFDH) to promote female entrepreneurship, simultaneously forging subject positions of the ‘good mother’ as insignias of responsible citizen.

Employing a critical discourse analysis as a method (Krippendorff, 2004; Bardin, 2011) to investigate the construction of these narratives, this paper analyzed two institutional videos and the policies of Qualify Woman and Work-Family Balance launched by the Bolsonaro administration in 2021. The broad political spectrum within which neoliberal discourses and policies targeting women – and particularly poor women – is rooted in the idea of economic integration as a form of citizenship inherently guided by an active embrace of individual maternal

responsibilities, in which moralities of work ethics (Weeks, 2011) and family values (Cooper, 2017) are at its core.

## WOMEN AS SMART ECONOMIC: NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Women's exercise of agency improves their children's welfare. Gender differences in preferences are reflected in different patterns of expenditure and consumption within the household, with women more strongly favoring investments in children's human capital (World Development Report, 2012, p. 151).

International organizations' narratives often depict women as enduringly vulnerable subjects, in need of both protection and assistance<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, there is a growing body of policy briefs and recommendations proposing biopolitical interventions to be led by states, NGOs, and private sector, in which women are to be empowered to better conciliate their productive and reproductive roles (Calkin, 2014). The prevailing discourse of human capital activation seems to hinge on the belief that women's purportedly inherent nurturing and maternal qualities can be leveraged to yield more lucrative and sustainable development results, ultimately acting as a savior of global capitalism (Calkin, 2015; Moeller, 2018; Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 led to what Alvarez (2014) referred to as a 'gender political wave' in Latin America, garnering state commitments to supranational agendas. This expansion occurred amidst a second phase of neoliberal reforms concurrent with the Washington Consensus in 1989, which ushered in a new phase of neoliberalism with a 'human face' (Molyneux, 2006; Alvarez, 2014). The global poverty alleviation concern emerged supported by microcredit policies and conditional cash transfer programs, with women as

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5 These narratives are rooted in the realm of gender and development studies, where distinct frameworks have emerged to address the role and impact of women in the development process. While Women in Development (WID) focuses on integrating women into existing development initiatives, emphasizing their participation and the removal of barriers to their economic contributions, Women and Development (WAD) critiques the WID approach by highlighting how existing structures inherently disadvantage women, advocating for structural changes to address these inequities. Gender and Development (GAD) shifts the focus from women alone to the broader social relations of gender, emphasizing the need to transform power dynamics and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequalities (for an in-depth analysis of these debates, see Miller and Razavi, 1995). Finally, the Postmodernism and Development approach (Parpart, 1993) aims to question the universal applicability of development models, advocating for a recognition of diverse experiences and local contexts, and critiquing grand narratives that overlook the complexities of gender and development.

its privileged recipients. The premise of empowering the poorest as rights-bearing subjects through social interventions solidified, contributing to adapting large segments of the population to markets as both producers and consumers. A solid adherence to the precepts of international organizations, particularly the Action Plan of the IV Conference, to which Brazil was a signatory, would be characterized by the expansion of state policies, culminating in the establishment of the Special Secretariat for Women's Policies (*Secretaria de Política para as Mulheres*, SPM) in 2003, during the first term of the Lula government (PT). Among various demands, the SPM would respond to a call for gender mainstreaming in public policies proposed by international organizations.

Extensive literature exists on the topics of women's empowerment and its political utilization within anti-poverty programs, as well as in broader agendas of the development industry (Schild, 2014; Kabeer, 2011; Moeller, 2018; Garcia, 2023). Schild (2015) argues that projects of women's emancipation to transform individual behavior represent a form of moral regulation, a recurring element in Latin American feminist pedagogies, serving as an ambivalent tool for feminist activism, in which its notable emphasis on self-development has evolved into a fundamental component for shaping new forms of neoliberal citizenship. States and NGOs regulate “the poor by rendering ‘poor women’ visible as objects of social policy and by targeting them through techniques for self-regulation” (Schild, 2014, p. 284) seeking to bring women as agentic individuals. Adapting the poor population to new demands of transnational capitalist flows were central for antipoverty, gender-sensitive initiatives such as the Conditional Cash Transfer Programs.

Widely implemented across Latin America, Conditional Cash Transfer programs like *Bolsa Família* in Brazil, *Chile Solidario* and *Oportunidades* in Mexico were designed to uplift families from poverty by enlisting women as pivotal agents of transformation. These programs distinctly prioritize women as recipients of financial aid, contingent upon meeting specific criteria related to employability and ensuring education and health management of their children. Public policy thus, was a fundamental mechanism to consolidate entrepreneurial societies marked by self-responsibilization of individuals (Schild, 2014).

As one of the world's largest conditional cash transfer programs, *Bolsa Família* stood out as a flagship initiative under the Workers' Party administrations. In 2021, during Bolsonaro's presidency, the program was renamed as *Auxílio Brasil* with supplemental increase in benefit amounts. One notable adjustment in the program was the removal of the requirement for school attendance and vaccination of chil-



dren as criteria<sup>6</sup>. Despite both programs not specifically targeting women, recent data on the now-again rebranded *Bolsa Família* in 2023 reveals they comprise 82.9% of the program's beneficiaries<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, 50.16% of the families are single-parent households headed by women, and there is a marked predominance of black individuals, constituting 73% of the total beneficiaries.

Defining gender equality primarily through labor market participation or financial inclusion usually relies on the continuation of gender-based division of reproductive work, as well as the perpetuation of the gendered altruistic stereotypes that supports it (Wilson, 2015). The hypervisibility of women's purported capacity to engage in reproductive labor is then instrumentalized as an important asset to be performed in the productive sphere, and micro entrepreneurship emerges as a silver bullet for women to conciliate productive and reproductive roles at home (Garcia, 2023), and particularly for beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família*.

Mothers, thus, entrusted with the task of nurturing the next generation of citizens, face growing expectations to actively shape the destinies of their families, to employ their entrepreneurial skills to navigate life's challenges, and to harness their resources, connections, and capabilities to envision and pursue a rewarding prosperous future. If the Marxist perspective tended to view domestic labor as unproductive, acknowledging its use value while overlooking its exchange value (Bilac, 2014), I argue that in the current neoliberal context, there is a renewed emphasis on the valorization of the future productive potential represented by children, idealized citizens in-the-making to be improved by caregiving labor. The physical and emotional care of children are currently characterized as integral parts of the capitalist mode of production; consequentially, care work becomes a central preoccupation for the economic development.

In the following sections, I present two programs proposed by the MMFDH aimed at increasing women's participation in the Brazilian economy, a set of state practices and discourses rooted in 'fictions of femininity' (Alexander, 1993, p. 140). The empirical data serves to evidence how these practices actively produce disembodied idealized female subjects, compatible to neoconservative views of maternal citizenry, narrowly aligned to neoliberal aspirations of ambitiousness and self-reliance.

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6 Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/por-tras-dos-numeros/a-volta-do-bolsa-familia> access on Dec 11, 2023.

7 Available at: <https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2023/10/no-mes-em-que-completa-20-anos-bolsa-familia-implementa-beneficio-a-nutrizes-e-fecha-ciclo-de-modernizacoes> access on Dec 11, 2023.

Neoliberal and neoconservative policies for women’s micro-entrepreneurship Established in 2019, the MMFDH, led by evangelical pastor and lawyer Damares Alves, played a notable role in addressing what is often referred to as ‘gender ideology.’ Frequently employed by neoconservatives, the term encapsulates issues raised by feminist and LGBT movements to challenge conventional perspectives on gender roles and hierarchies (Miguel, 2021). Miskolci (2018) highlights the reaction to the concept of gender gained strength after the IV Women’s Conference, as policies previously centered on women began to incorporate discussions on gender relations, sexuality, and reproductive rights. In response to the notion of gender as a social construct, neoconservative sectors perceived these interpretations as conflicting with “biological nature”, thereby posing a threat to heteronormative nuclear family structures built on the concept of complementary gender roles, family values, and conservative beliefs.

Although it is not the focus of this paper to delve into the religious dimensions of these discourses – mainly due to its directly absence in the analyzed material – it is pertinent to underscore the connection between Minister Damares’ evangelical background and Prosperity Theology, a Christian doctrine that has been proliferating in Latin America since the 1970s, particularly in Brazil due to the expansion of neopentecostal churches. This doctrine posits that Christians can attain and should pursue material prosperity, portraying financial blessings as a manifestation of God’s will by intertwining financial success and faith, and emphasizing material success as divine rewards. As Dias and Romancini (2022) observe, neoliberal rationalities and political-religious conservatism, particularly within evangelical circles, have led to an adaptation of Prosperity Theology in Brazilian far-right movements, emphasizing entrepreneurship and individual responsibility.

Minister Alves garnered public attention by reinforcing gender stereotypes, such as ‘boys wear blue, and girls wear pink<sup>8</sup>,’ and by stating she identified as a “feminine woman fighting for women’s rights” rather than a feminist<sup>9</sup>. Despite this opposition, policies implemented by the MMFDH did not deviate from international gender and development frameworks. In fact, they effectively promoted programs aligned with women’s economic integration and the principle of gender mainstreaming through inter-ministerial initiatives, a core principle outlined in

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8 “Menino veste azul e menina veste rosa, diz Damares” Folha de S. Paulo, January 3, 2019. [https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/01/menino-veste-azul-e-menina-veste-rosa-dizdamares.shtml access on February 7, 2023].

9 “Eu não sou feminista, sou feminina”, diz ministra Damares Alves”. R7, March 8, 2020. [https://noticias.r7.com/prisma/r7-planalto/eu-nao-sou-feminista-sou-feminina-diz-ministra-damares-alves-29062022 access on February 7, 2023].



international guidelines for advancing gender equality. Among policies aimed at women's economic integration, the *Qualifica Mulher* project was designed to enhance "women's economic autonomy in contributing to the country's economic and social development" (MMFDH, 2021). It aimed to offer professional training, entrepreneurship support, income-generating opportunities, and access to micro-credit for 'socially vulnerable women'.

On March 8, 2021, the MMFDH in collaboration with the Ministry of Citizenship, inaugurated the campaign *The strength of Brazilian women leading the country*, introduced as part of a series of initiatives aimed at "valorizing and defending" women, with the goal of enhancing socio-economic status of those regarded as vulnerable to be integrated into the *Qualifica Mulher* pilot project (MMDFDH, 2021c). Endeavors to confine women within the national development semantic network advocated for investments in their human capital, grounded in economic efficiency arguments. Although these discourses explicitly target women as gendered individuals, they are implicitly racialized (Murphy, 2017), geographically and socially located (Padovani, 2019) in the realms of urban peripheries and impoverished strata.

The *Qualifica Mulher* launch ceremony was broadcast on YouTube. During the event, the National Secretary for Women's Policies, Cristiane Brito, emphasized the "deep historical roots" of March 8, officially recognized by the United Nations in 1975, to "commemorate women's political and social achievements." While highlighting the date's significance in terms of financial independence to combat domestic violence, its historical connection to labor rights movements, which laid the foundation for its establishment, was not acknowledged. The project was presented as the initiation of a "movement", reflecting the substantial potential for "social transformation of *our* women" (emphasis added), underscoring the idea of a nation that believes in the productive capacity of "its" women to turn "crises into opportunities" (MMFDH, 2021b).

Referring to data from the International Monetary Fund to bolster her arguments, Brito encouraged women to have confidence in their "own strength" to propel "the country forward," with the backing of a Ministry fully "dedicated to the women's agenda." By asserting women possess the "strength that Brazil needs," Brito concluded updating certain essentialist principles regarding the presumed potential of women, based on attributes associated with maternal, altruistic, and resilient femininities (Calkin, 2014; Khonje, 2020; Wilson, 2015).

In the following speech, Alves proclaimed herself to be a Minister of Human Rights committed to "incarcerating" the perpetrators of violence against women,

expressing her determination to combat domestic violence while honoring the thousands protective measures issued in the country on that day. Emphasizing the significance of collaborating with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Economy in the project, with the goal of establishing “the most women-focused government in the Brazilian history,” Alves asserted the government’s unparalleled efforts to “*protect them*” (emphasis added). Furthermore, the Minister highlighted another notable form of violence against women: unemployment, recognizing hunger as a form of violence experienced by women who “cannot feed their children.”

Here, vulnerability is projected over specific subjects: women who were simultaneously under threat of domestic violence, unemployment, and hunger. Vulnerability therefore is to be addressed through the apparatus of state control, a condition that is produced by and a producer of these state apparatuses. The dual principles underpinning the project of valuing-and-defending women were merged. While emphasizing the State role in protecting women by punishing their aggressors, the statement reveals a dual form of tutelary power exercised simultaneously through care, protection, and cultivation of skills, akin to what Lima (2002) terms “nurturing and managing”. Nurturing is defined as a pedagogical, maternal dimension, related to educating and fostering women with appropriate marketable conducts to prevent unemployment. On the other hand, managing pertains to the daily administrative control of a population considered vulnerable, involving vigilance to maintain potential dangers – such as aggressive men and absence of personal income – under State control. In both forms of tutelary power, vulnerability is ascribed to a specific category of women: those framed as dependent on state subsidies as an Other who requires rescuing through Ministry’s policies.

Within the technocratic sphere of economic efficiency, international organizations have consistently depicted domestic violence as an undesirable catalyst for public expenditure. According to the Engendering Development report (World Bank, 2001), domestic violence is intricately connected to elements such as diminished productivity, workplace absenteeism, heightened homelessness, increased demand for medical services, and outlays on law enforcement and judicial services. These facets are considered pivotal in substantiating the imperative of combating domestic violence as a financial problem to states. Notable statistics, such as the projected GDP loss of 2% in Chile and an annual expenditure of \$1 billion in Canada (*ibid*), vividly underscore the intimate correlation between violence and its economic quantification.

Alves continued to propose that micro-entrepreneurship was an attainable activity for any woman, offering a practical solution to vulnerabilities stemming from domestic violence and income scarcity. To illustrate this point, the Minister recounted an encounter with a female worker in Brasília who was producing “gourmet popsicles” and earning a monthly income of R\$ 11,000 as an accessible opportunity available for any woman interested in starting her own business. While acknowledging potential criticisms regarding the proliferation of labor informality during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Minister appealed: “Hold on: first, [access to] food. First, survival”, placing the issue of labor formalization as a secondary concern in face of the high levels of hunger affecting the country at the time<sup>10</sup>. Formalization, however, never attained a priority status in the government’s policies. In fact, Alves’ speech resonated a recurring discourse from the 2018 presidential campaign, during which the then-candidate Bolsonaro identified the “excess of [labor] rights” as a fundamental obstacle to expanding employment in Brazil. This perspective placed the burden of choosing between “more rights or jobs” squarely on the shoulders of workers. According to this viewpoint, labor rights were perceived as a hindrance to the nation’s economic development. Consequently, the government enthusiastically embraced self-employment as the most effective response to reducing poverty, encouraging women to seek their own means of survival through micro-entrepreneurship.

In this context, the concept of the “enabling state,” as identified by Rose (2000, p. 1400), supplants the social mentality of welfare state across the political spectrum, evoking politics to be reorganized not under a social form but rather as individual moralities to take responsibility for their own destinies, as well as society’s good development. Exclusion is framed as the lack of conduct stabilization provided by work and family, requesting conformity to work ethics where income becomes a “mechanism for reattachment to moral community” (*ibid*). Women targeted by *Qualifica Mulher* were expected to become productive moral citizens, contingent on embracing a “realistic” behavior to accommodate the absence of secure job positions. The Ministry’s program then acted to facilitate an opportunity for full membership in the moral community by fostering self-reliance and a commitment to their children as core values.

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10 March 2021 was considered the deadliest month of Covid-19 pandemic to date, with mortality rates approaching nearly 4,000 people per day. See: “Brasil encerra pior mês da pandemia com novo recorde: 3.950 mortes em 24 h” [<https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2021/03/31/covid-19-coronavirus-mortes-casos-31-de-marco.htm> access on Nov 3, 2023]

## WORK-FAMILY BALANCE AS A NATION-BUILDING TECHNOLOGY

In the Work-Family Balance, the objective was to promote conditions for strengthening “family bonds” to men and women, enabling them to better fulfill their parental roles without compromising paid work. During the launching event in 2020, invited speakers emphasized the importance of regarding the family as the “foundation” of society, promoting the State as an animator to create conditions for individuals to establish a harmonious balance between work and family nurturing responsibilities.

In the program director’s speech, Lilia Santos emphasized the government’s commitment to fostering a balance between professional roles and family life in the changing landscape of family structures, including single-parent households, where “women have to reconcile these diverse realities” (MMFDH, 2021b). Despite the program’s intent to involve men in fostering these connections, the responsibility seemed largely ascribed as a managerial challenge for women. The shifts in the world of work, moving from “stable and structured jobs” to the current environment of “insecurity and unpredictability of work schedules,” impeding the fulfillment of caregiving responsibilities, should, according to the director, be addressed through state interventions promoting “reconciliation.” This reframing replaces the issue of job insecurity with a vague notion of balance.

Many scholars have highlighted the consistent conceptualization of the nation through familial and domestic metaphors (Ramos-Zayas 2020; Ribeiro, 2022; McClintock, 2010; Grewal, 2017). Consequently, situations in which idealized familial bonds and aspirations appear weakened often provoke concerns about the nation’s stability, its political environment, and future; the state thus must actively participate in shaping and endorsing specific family structures and parental roles.

The rationale behind the presumed enhancement in productivity for companies adopting the *Empresa da Família* badge, a facet of the project, implied that the optimization of time to “maximize” family nurturing should be autonomously managed by individuals. Presenting the State as women’s *partner* suggests a win-win scenario in which the integration of companies, civil society, and the family unit could be equally more *efficient*. This synergy could lead to increased profits for companies while fostering improved education and childcare within households, an outcome contingent upon families effectively optimizing their *performance* in both the job market and child-rearing.

Alves focused her speech on how reinforcing family bonds had been designated, via a presidential decree<sup>11</sup>, as a “responsibility of the federal public machinery” and a “national strategy” to be championed by the Interministerial Committee led by the MMFDH. Consequently, the “advancement” of Brazil towards becoming a “powerful nation” was contingent upon the State actively promoting appropriate family bonds and values aligned with the government’s conservative conceptions. Within the context of the pandemic, the emergence of new work patterns that facilitated working from home was positively acclaimed, as it supposedly allowed families to stay “closer” however limited this option could be for most. In the Minister’s view, strengthening family ties would be central to make a powerful nation: acknowledging the “world has changed” in face of the growing global demands to integrate women into the labor market, without such efforts, Brazil would not “advance”, presenting a particular notion of national development tied to strong family values. Pointing to the rationale that a balanced integration of work-family life was a crucial governance policy, the Minister conveyed her belief in how the state’s promotion of such values could propel Brazil to become “a wealthy nation, a powerhouse, a sovereign nation” (MMFDH, 2021b).

In this perspective, Brazil materializes as an imagined community (Anderson, 2008) steeped in pervasive conservative family values – a paradigm to be pursued through the daily observance of rituals and discipline. Das *et al.* (2008) shed light on the deployment of a sentimental language surrounding the realm of domestic intimacy as a foundation for connecting individuals to the nation; the domestic sphere, thus, emerges as a domain wherein distinctive forms of citizenship can be cultivated. As illustrated in Alves’ speech, the alignment of domesticity with endeavors to produce ‘nationalized subjects was attainable through the imposition of disciplinary norms, with the familial space serving as a pivotal site to reproduce national values.

The Minister then shared her experience during the launch of a low-income housing program in Bahia to “assist mothers of children with disabilities”, where single women with children would have priority to receive a house:

They received their little houses! In a single condominium, 259 mothers were assisted! And we went to talk to these women, and what did we discover? Most

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11 Decree No. 10,570, dated December 9, 2020, established the National Strategy for Strengthening Family Bonds. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/navegue-por-temas/familia/acoese-programas/estrategia-nacional-de-fortalecimento-de-vinculos-familiares> accessed on January 31, 2023.

cannot work with a child with a disability. They said that before having their babies, they earned three thousand reais, but far from family support networks, they lost their jobs.

Stating she was “shocked” to find this reality, Alves reported her encounter with one of these mothers: a woman who had lost her job due to the necessity of attending her son’s medical appointments and specialized therapies. Nevertheless, Alves highlighted how this mother argued she could be “earning much more” than the Continuous Benefit Payment<sup>12</sup>, thus “boosting and contributing to the economy, even as a mother of a child with disabilities” (MMFDH, 2021b). Using the woman’s narrative, the Minister contended it was “not fair to condemn women to lag behind” in the labor market due to the absence of public policies to promote a proper balance between work and caregiving responsibilities.

Entangling personal ambition, motherhood and a preoccupation with national development, the woman portrayed in the Minister’s speech appears, as Allen and Taylor (2012, p.2) suggest, “tokenistically represented” as an exemplary visionary woman. Her future-oriented perspective not only encompasses a concern for her son’s well-being but an additional commitment as a self-reliant citizen contributing to the national economy. By positioning herself as an active pursuer of increased earnings, women who were not similarly engaged in enhancing their incomes were deemed to represent the flip of the coin as irresponsible benefit-earners. This Other display a personal failure, perceived not only as falling short to contribute to the country’s development but, perhaps more crucially, as a failure to serve as ethical maternal role models for their own children.

The woman, thus, disidentifies with the ‘undeserving’ benefit recipients, proving her respectability by voicing desires to widen her earnings and aligning herself to middle-class values and expectations of the ‘deserving’ poor. These dispositions are considered indicative of a personal moral character grounded in care and work ethics (Weeks, 2011). As Gillies (2012, p. 82) notes, “those unable or unwilling to participate and govern themselves are positioned as corrosively dependent on the state and in need of community-led help to become more active and self-reliant citizens”. Alves’ quote of this woman plays a performative role in reproducing hierarchies of what constitutes a respectable maternal citizen, valued by her adherence to neoliberal norms of self-responsibility determined by her

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12 The Continuous Benefit of Social Assistance (BPC), provided for in the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS), ensures a minimum wage per month for individuals aged 65 or older or for persons with disabilities of any age.



readiness to positively contribute to her community, which creates Others who cannot or are not inclined to do so. This implies a categorization in which some are evoked to present themselves in specific manners to establish their respectability, reflexivity, and moral worth as “subjects of value” (Skeggs, 2002; 2004).

Hence, racialized working-class women lacking a stable income were depicted as simultaneously the root cause and the remedy for national issues (Skeggs, 1997). They become a central focus in addressing the perceived disengagement from the labor market and dependency on social benefits. The lauded position of a woman who articulates her concerns to overcome the economic crisis creates a contrasting class of undeserving women who are not personally invested in generating the powerful nation envisioned by the Ministry’s programs. The risk of failed femininities – and maternities - is, therefore, an inherently classed and heteronormative discourse shaped by the valorization of specific dispositions, parenting styles and choices, taken as a result of a moral character simultaneously based on care and work ethics rather than the unequally distribution of capital and resources.\

The notion of family as a nuclear and heterosexual unit, wherein active emotional and financial investment in children translates into a higher morality, engages with what Ramos-Zayas (2021) termed as parenting empires. The concept is explored through an analysis of the moral economy articulated by urban elites in Ipanema (Rio de Janeiro) and El Condado (Costa Rica). In the ethnography, the author identified how parenting practices of these elites effectively underpin the advocacy of neoliberal austerity projects for both countries. By asserting moral superiority through their own cosmopolitan and diversity-embracing child-rearing practices, the elites simultaneously reproduce hierarchies of race and class over individuals who do not have the same resources to cultivate such idealized childhoods – the same individuals whose domestic and caregiving work enables the elites to support and reproduce their positions of social privilege.

The idealization of particular child-rearing practices manifests as imperial formations marked by attributes of race, gender, and class to determine which individuals have the means to provide childhoods enriched with the cultivation of values such as self-awareness, equality, empathy, and self-reliance (*ibid*). This stands in contrast to a classed-racialized Other, perceived as incapable of instilling such morally superior values in their own children. While the elites engaged in a profound critique of consumerism and materialism, fostering a discreet subjectivity focused on self-cultivation, their discourses revive narratives of austerity, projecting dysfunctional habits of ostentation, waste, dependency, and indebtedness among the poorer population.

This process also mirrors the elites’ perspective on the “excessive spending” of social policies of Workers’ Party governments (2003-2016). According to Ramos-Zayas, the elites’ parenting empires construct imaginaries through which neoliberal austerity policies of states gain moral resonance. By promoting parenthood based on ideologies of self-regulation and individual responsibility, localized forms of sovereignty emerge as legitimate ways to purge a perceived excessively “welfare mentality” promoted by left-wing governments to strengthen the nation. As a locus of governmentality, “parenting cultures revive moral concepts such as entitlement, inclusion/exclusion and citizenship”:

A shrinking welfare state and severe austerity measures have become morally justified through new positions of active and responsible citizenship, including forms of parenting empires. Having absorbed this profound significance, parenting is imagined to be both the cause of, and solution to, all social ills and structural inequality. (Ramos-Zayas, 2021, p.12-13)

The family’s role in instilling a set of values crucial for constructing a ‘good’ nation, as emphasized in the narratives of the elites, was evident in the Minister’s discourse. This underscores the State’s role in promoting the governance of conduct within civil society, seen as morally superior and infused with values of parental self-responsibility essential for realizing ideals of national development that are both moral and economic. The concept of state governance to ensure that families nurture their children, shaping them into the nation’s future revolves around positioning female subjects as providers of specific moral education. According to the former government, this responsibility did not lie with schools but within the family. In this context, working from home as entrepreneurs emerges as a means of reconciling work-family life through dual economic activities: providing income and enabling women to cultivate human capital crucial for the reproduction of a wealthy nation in the future.

The political project of the MMFDH to promote micro entrepreneurship while positioning itself as the most women-oriented government “in history” aligns with framing women within a discourse shaped by conservative ideals of a “traditional” family, e.g., heterosexual, where women shoulder the primary burden of reproductive labor. According to these narratives, the State should maintain a certain distance to ensure individual freedoms yet tasked with instilling idealized notions of family and motherhood within a predetermined social stratum, encouraging increased participation of the poor in the labor market. The program prioritizes

a specific social group: those receiving welfare subsidies, who could potentially “earn more” by breaking away from a perceived “passive” position as beneficiaries. The project facilitates the dissemination of international organization prescriptions, outlining ways to advance the “women’s agenda” in diverse and sometimes ambiguous ways under the umbrella of promoting their financial autonomy.

### **CONCLUDING: THE MOBILE NEOLIBERALISM BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT-WING POLITICS**

In this paper, I followed MMFDH programs to question how women’s inclusive policies participated in shaping neoliberal formations in Brazil while promoting particular notions of maternal citizenship underpinning conservative family values and privatization of responsibilities. Though neoliberal forms of individual responsabilization were not absent in policies such as Cash Transfer Programs promoted by left-wing governments, as a global rationality, I sought to evidence how neoliberalism as a mobile technology operates across various political arenas in Brazil, a country characterized by a historical informal labor market. The notion of women as an untapped resource for national development is presented ambivalently across conservative and progressive political spectrums, producing contemporary neoliberal forms centered around motherhood, economic productivity, and national development. As Molyneux (2001) recalls, motherhood as a political ideal has been a ground of dispute under both liberal and socialist regimes.

This paper explored the intersection of diverse and often conflicting discourses, practices, and technologies in shaping an ideal entrepreneurial maternal citizen as a particular manifestation of neoliberalism in the Brazilian context. It suggests that the roles of mother and entrepreneur are intertwined, imbued with a moral responsibility to contribute to the envisioned society advocated by the far-right government. Its legitimacy is derived from a moral commitment to safeguard those deemed incapable of self-governance (Lowenkron, 2015), while simultaneously urging women to adhere to predetermined maternal citizenship ideals. The enthusiastic reception of women’s financial inclusion in conservative sectors underscores the possibility that this rhetoric demands further investigation into how “empowerment” in development initiatives yields locally variable outcomes in historically, politically, and socially diverse contexts when embraced by national governments.

The moral efficacy of awareness-raising strategies concerning women’s labor integration directly aligns with imperatives to protect childhood, as the parenting empires concept suggests. This moral foundation underpins the existence of

Ministry projects: it is primarily in the role of working mothers seeking to “emancipate” themselves from reliance on social benefits that women are validated as a sound public investment, mobilizing pedagogies aimed at distinguishing the “good” gender from its others” (Vianna and Lowenkron, 2018). Such a narrative ensures the establishment of hierarchical power relations, creating spaces for exemplary victims whom the state protects from oppressive marital relationships, yet who are virtuous and capable of being rescued from positions of vulnerability through seizing opportunities—a construction that relies upon deeply gendered, class-based, and racialized inequalities to bolster austerity processes in various ways.

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