

## **Halfway between the private and public sectors: a debate on the role of women in social welfare policy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This work intends to put forth some reflections on the relationship between the public and private sectors in the context of the operationalization of social welfare policy, with the focus on the family and the assigned to women. There has long been criticism of the instrumental role of families and women within the design of social protection policies, especially those of income transfer programs in the arena of public assistance. Based on our research in this arena, our research tends to have at its core the family as the locus of social policy; especially policies to combat poverty in the arena of social welfare, women and mediation between social welfare policy in the context of the Unified Social Welfare System (Sistema Único de Assistência Social).

**Keywords:** public and private; women, family and social policy; public assistance policy.

### **RESUMO**

Este trabalho se propõe a fazer algumas reflexões sobre a relação entre o público e o privado no contexto da operacionalização da política de assistência social, tendo por foco a família e o papel atribuído às mulheres. Há muito se vem criticando o papel instrumental das famílias e das mulheres dentro destas, no desenho das políticas de proteção social, com destaque para os programas de transferência de renda no âmbito da assistência. Com base em pesquisas<sup>1</sup> por nós desenvolvidas nesse âmbito, nossas reflexões são desenvolvidas tendo por eixos a família como locus da política social, com destaque para as políticas de combate à pobreza no âmbito da assistência social; as mulheres; e a mediação entre família e a política de assistência social no contexto do Sistema Único de Assistência Social.

**Palavras-chave:** público e privado; mulher, família e política social; política de assistência social.

**The family as locus of social welfare policy**

The National Social Welfare Policy states in its guidelines that the focus of its activities and programs is the family. Our goal in this work is understanding how the introduction of women occurs in a policy aimed at families. At the core of our concerns are the effects of that policy on the citizenship of women, The first step in such an inquiry is the denaturalization of the family.

The naturalization of the institution “family” and the difficulty in understanding it as a social construction should be, according to Chiara Saraceno, based on the fact that the family is in physical, relational and symbolic space at once, “on the verge of being used as a metaphor for all situations having to do with spontaneity, naturally, with recognition without the need for mediation – we are a family – a family language – a family member”.<sup>1</sup> For the author, the family turns out to be one of the privileged places of the social construction of reality, beginning with the social construction of events and apparently natural relationships.

Saraceno believes that the family is the privileged material with which to build the social archetypes and myths that are not always positive. The images of family-shelter, the family as a place of intimacy and affection, a space of authenticity, solidarity and archetype of privacy, exist alongside images "of the family as a place of inauthenticity, of oppression, obligation, exclusive selfishness, the family as a generator of monsters, violence, the family that kills.”.<sup>2</sup>

These images reinforced by naturalization are found not only in everyday personal relationships, but also the principles and practices that guide the formulation of legislation, social policies, "which speak of reclaiming family values, encouraging family solidarity, or conversely of a family which expels its members who are sick or in need".<sup>3</sup> The strength of this naturalization leads not only to an understanding that ignores its historicity, but also considers the family as a fully framed reality, internally homogeneous and as such in any appreciable social and historical context, that is, "the family" as reiterated by Saraceno.

The family, as Lena Lavinas states, has become the paradigm of the private, the space of domestic life, interpersonal relationships, the place of the feminine and of subjectivity. With that, the family began to have an important ideological role, if not an essential one, conveying the values of bourgeois morality, socializing children, promoting the care of the elderly and the sick.

As Eli Zaretsky indicates,<sup>4</sup> while the family was a unit of production based on private property, its members considered that their home life and personal relations were rooted in mutual work. The proletarianization separated most of the people or families from the possession of productive property, thus making prevalent the idea of family as a separate domain of the public

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<sup>1</sup> Chiara SARACENO, 1997, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> SARACENO, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> SARACENO, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Eli ZARETSKY, 1976.

sphere and the world of work. This perspective of the family confined to the private sphere reigns jointly with naturalization.

The dissociation between the spheres of production and reproduction as dichotomous pairs overlapping the opposition between public and private sectors is a key feature of liberal thought.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, it has the family as a paradigm of the private, the space of domestic life, of interpersonal relationships, and the place of the female and of subjectivity. On the other hand, it has the domain of the public, of impersonal - and thus civil and universal - interests, the place of politics and business, exclusive arena of men. While the private sphere implies a relationship of dependency, the public sphere is marked by egalitarian assumptions that characterize the relationship of citizens independent of each other.

The classic separation between the public and private sphere that goes back to the period of ancient Greek cities, as discussed by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*,<sup>6</sup> was directed by one basic criterion guided by the existence and attention to need. Thus, the private sphere, associated with the domestic space, fulfilled the task of meeting the needs of its members, while the public sphere, understood primarily as a political space, was reserved for individuals free of the constraints imposed by such needs. Thus we can then say that "necessity" was the category that distinguished one sphere from the other and which conveyed the present status of equality in the public sphere and subordination present in the private sphere. With the development of industrial society, the world of work, understood as productive and gainful activity, also comes to be the public sphere.

There are countless feminist studies that link the perverse effects of strict separation of public and private,<sup>7</sup> this separation that is associated with several other dichotomies, such as, for example, male and female, political and domestic, production and reproduction, culture and nature, independence and dependence, always so as to reinforce each other and establish a hierarchy between the opposite poles which results in the association of women as the inferior pole of the relationship.<sup>8</sup> For this dichotomous and binary tradition, woman is to the private and domestic what man is to the public and political world.

The contemporary critical thought has shown that the traditional way of distinguishing between private and public is part of a discourse of domination, legitimizing the oppression of women in the private sector. In this regard, Elizabeth Jelin highlights how, within a society, at a given time, what is defined as private can become public at another moment. The contemporary

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<sup>5</sup> LAVINAS, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah ARENDT, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of this discussion, see Gabriella BONACCI and Angela GROPPPI, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Silvana Aparecida MARIANO, 2005.

family, to Jelin,<sup>9</sup> occupies a contradictory place between the public world and the world of privacy and intimacy:

On the one hand, it is subject to the "policing" of social institutions, especially those dealing with the "development of a population and with strengthening the nation." The invasion of social agencies, professionals and *experts* that indicate and promote "appropriate" and "good" practices (of nutrition, child, interpersonal relations, body care, hygiene and childcare, etc.) do not stop increasing, eroding the areas of competence of the very family - competency previously centered on the patriarchy and on traditions handed down from grandmothers to mothers and daughters [...] On the other hand, and in a seemingly contradictory manner, the family also presents itself as a stronghold of intimacy and privacy. But what are the limits of this intimacy? How can you redefine the distinctions between private and public function to protect the desired privacy and intimacy?

We may note that this contradictory place between the public and the private worlds takes on specific contours according to the social group to which we refer. In this case, poor families, especially those which are beneficiaries of social welfare programs, particularly experience the contradiction between the limits of intervention of the public authorities and the stronghold of intimacy and privacy. We venture to assert that this stronghold is remarkably narrow when we refer to the reality of poor families.

What is understood by "good family" is an arrangement that takes good care of its members, maintaining good emotional bonds, as well as its providing for them. This assumption, combined with the concept of class, constitutes much of the conceptual basis of social policies, including programs and social welfare services. The logic created in this way has as its understanding that poor families need guidance, information and education for such care. Thus, to achieve this condition of good caregiver, the family would be prepared for autonomy, for the exercise of citizenship and emancipation. These concepts and categories - autonomy, citizenship and empowerment - are increasingly trivialized and treated wrongly, as if they were axiomatic and transparent categories. This is how we find them in the documents that outline the guidelines of the social welfare policy and the daily practice of professionals. If it is true that the family is considered one of the pillars of Brazilian social protection, it is also correct to state that this principle is presented fully based on social welfare, the object of our research.

State intervention in the family dates back to the emergence of the modern State, which engendered a public sphere subtracted from the direct control of kin and lineages, constituting a precondition for the emergence of the modern family as a private and affective space.<sup>10</sup> Over the past centuries, the State has become a source of control and norms relating to the family as an institution, as well as family relations. Thus, social protection policies implemented by the State, notably in the twentieth century, based primarily in the governmental sphere, have the family as one

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth JELIN, 2004, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> SARACENO, 1997.

of the principle mediations between public action and its individuals. To this end of mediation, the family is considered with reference to the sexual division of labor, with a strict separation between the productive sphere and so-called reproductive sphere, as well as between the tasks and responsibilities of men and women.<sup>11</sup>

However, the relationship between family and State is also contradictory. As a result, we can say that the desired state control is not always accompanied by public protection for families. Thus, in recent decades, in Brazil and many other countries, programs that focus on "development", which have as their axis the fight against poverty adopt as their main strategy the so-called privatization of the family or the privatization of family survival, suggesting explicitly the transfer of responsibilities that should be borne by the State, to the family unit, based on a proposal for a plurality of well-being.<sup>12</sup>

There is in these programs a validation of the family as a privileged locus for overcoming the legacy of social issues facing a state that has scarcely prioritized spending on social security and has scarcely implemented, in terms of social policy, strategies for overcoming social inequalities.

Potyara A. Pereira-Pereira,<sup>13</sup> when examining family protection from the perspective of welfare pluralism, points out several conceptual and political difficulties that this approach, with its "pragmatism, refuses to see." The first refers to the contradictory nature of the family, whose core is not an "island of virtues and consensus", but permeated with tensions and contradictions and, like any social institution, should be "considered as a unit simultaneously both strong and weak" . The second refers to the difficulty of defining the informal sector which the family is a part of in relation to other sectors – the official, commercial and voluntary:

For under social policy, public provision is often generically contrasted with private provision. By dividing private provision into three sectors, it is difficult to establish boundaries between these private sources of supply. The market may perform philanthropic activity, as has been performing in the midst of their marketing strategies, just as voluntary non-profit organizations may conduct commercial activities, as they currently practice, demanding financial compensation for their beneficiaries. .<sup>14</sup>

Pereira Pereira draws attention as well to the fact that "it is difficult to perceive the informal sector as a locus of pure and simple private welfare, as if it were not an object of legal regulation and public policies".<sup>15</sup> The author notes that, in this respect, "feminists have criticized the tendency to restrict family relations or personnel to the private sphere and forcefully reminded us that such relationships are not separated from broader socioeconomic structures."

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<sup>11</sup> SARACENO, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Cássia Maria CARLOTO, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Potyara Amazoneida PEREIRA-PEREIRA, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> PEREIRA-PEREIRA, 2004, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> PEREIRA-PEREIRA, 2004, p. 37.

If, in historical terms, the family as a social institution is responsible for protecting, with private individuals, the emergence of the social question, demands for accountability of the state in relation to social protection, even partially, changes the framework of the position of the family. With this, the family begins to occupy a dual position, both private and public, and is directly implicated in the different systems of social protection.

What is predominant in enabling us to consider the social protection systems, with special emphasis on the situation of women, is the way mediations are built between the family and the labor market. Different models of well-being represent various options to perform the mediation. The Brazilian case is devoid of such a state of well-being, "the family institution has always been an integral part of social protection arrangements".<sup>16</sup>

Jelin's<sup>17</sup> analysis is that the entire social edifice - at both the micro division of labor within the family as in social politics - is based on the existence and functioning of the domestic and family organization, and that given the contemporary diagnosis that expresses the crisis of the family, voices are raised calling for public intervention to save it from the crisis. Jelin draws attention to the fact that phrases like "strengthen the family" can have on the one hand, a charge of "policing" and on the other hand, there is only an implicit model of family to be strengthened, which is the model based on monogamous heterosexual couples and their children, with its traditional operating logic.

As Jacques Donzelot<sup>18</sup> asserts in his book *A policia das famílias*, we must "take care of poor families," meeting in some way their subjective / objective needs, so as not to destabilize the capitalist order. This care implies not only the transfer of material resources, but transmission of a cultural field, involving habits, values and behaviors necessary for a "good family", that is, one which can care for and "frame" their children so that they do not become unmanageable adults and destabilize the order, primarily through behaviors considered "violent," "delinquent," "criminal" and so on.

Although diverse in its composition, to be considered a good family, it should be able to secure financially, establish positive emotional bonds free of domestic violence; maintain children's school attendance, take care of their hygiene, food and clothing, and interact with blood relatives, such as, for example, grandparents and uncles. It is important to remember that often the grandparents - and especially grandmothers - have taken responsibility for the care and custody of children, providing a home, however small, but clean and "tidy", "with things in place."

Much is said about the transformations in the world of intimacy and recent changes in the

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<sup>16</sup> PEREIRA-PEREIRA, 2004, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> JELIN, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques DONZELOT, 1980.

diversification of family arrangements. However, as the past exerts its weight over the present, we still live with the tradition that governs family organization, structuring it based on the sexual division of labor and the supposed complementarity of roles. Thus, our studies indicate that the responsibilities of men and women differ within families, according to the current pattern of gender relations.

We can find objections, confident in the fact that this tradition does not faithfully represent the organization of Brazilian families in the way we find a plurality of empirical cases. However, since the tradition exerts its weight on the "ideal" constructed around the family, although not a universal standard, it is not difficult to find family arrangements that seek an approximation to the ideal of family. This ideal also influences the design and implementation of state policies in general and social policies in particular. Thus, the woman's relationship with the family is socially conceived as an almost natural one. "The woman is the pillar of the family," some women participating in social welfare projects told us. Such lines express the incorporation of a traditional pattern of family organization and social relations of gender that, anyway, is present both in the conceptions of women users of social welfare as in the professional practices undertaken in the execution of programs and service projects.

Despite the fertility of the criticisms already elaborated, there remains in our midst an understanding that the family is the locus of action of the woman and the labor market, the locus of action of the man - even knowing full well that men and women are present in both spaces - and this conception is incorporated into state interventions. Moreover, the family policies called for are preferentially directed at the women. It is the woman, imbued with the female role traditionally attributed to her, who incorporates these policies into the family.

It is no coincidence that the major focus of policies to combat poverty is on the care of children, since one of the principle constraints on access, for example, to income transfer programs relates to maintaining their attendance in school. As Ana Maria Medeiros da Fonseca<sup>19</sup> notes, the anti-poverty programs presuppose an investment in the children in order to break the cycle of poverty. In this approach, the center is the family and the strategy is the manipulation of the role of wife / mother through her responsibilities in the private sphere, for the good performance of these programs in the neoliberal context, that is, in the context of containment or reduction of social expenditures.

This approach in which the woman embodies the family group before state policies directed at the family is repeated in all Brazilian social policies, which can be identified in health, education and social welfare. In this paper our emphasis is on social assistance policy as it is our field of empirical research.

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<sup>19</sup> Ana Maria Medeiros da FONSECA, 2001.

## **Women and mediation between the family and social welfare policy**

Based on analysis of official documents and qualitative research conducted in cooperation with the Reference Centers of Reference of Social Welfare (CRAS) in Londrina, Parana, we can visualize the way in which the woman takes the place of "family" in social welfare policy, incorporating the role of mediation between the family arrangement (private sphere) and public policy (public sphere). It is noteworthy from the start that the woman is the main actor / actress in social welfare policy, whether in management and implementation, whether as a beneficiary. This starting point is already standard product of gender relations that guide, in a more or less rigid fashion, the conduct of individuals and the state action. The association family-woman is incorporated as much into the beneficiaries of the policies as in the institutions responsible for the policies. This association is so "natural" that it must be named in the documents of the Ministry of Social Development and Hunger Combat (MDS).

Reviewing the documents produced and published by MDS, we can observe that the organ considers its practice as focusing on family, understanding it in its various arrangements. The incorporation of the diversity of family arrangements in the definition of family does not imply, however, the elimination of the idyllic features. Thus, it states that "family is the basic nucleus of affectivity, acceptance, coexistence, autonomy, sustainability and reference in the development and recognition of the citizen."<sup>20</sup> This is an idealized and naturalized conception of the family, since it represents only one of its facets, that of harmony, and hides the others, conceals its opposite, where there is conflict and even violence, as discussed earlier .

With this conception of the family, informed by an approach of cooperation and harmony, the MDS has developed the "methodological guidelines of work with families and individuals," aimed at the operational guidelines of the Unified System of Social Welfare (SUAS) and the Centers of Reference of Social Welfare (CRAS). In this document we can highlight some points, such as the orientation to "accomplish work with groups of families or their representatives."<sup>21</sup> This is the strategy of adopting "dialogic and participatory methodologies" which takes place with the group work. In practice, those who participate in the groups are almost always women. Although the paper used the category "gender" in a few moments, it operates with a strict gender blindness when it comes to service procedures. The same is true when speaking of "family interview." It is assumed that the family group is present, when it is usually the woman who provides information

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<sup>20</sup> MINISTÉRIO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO SOCIAL E COMBATE À FOME, 2006a, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> MINISTÉRIO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO SOCIAL E COMBATE À FOME, 2006a, p. 35.



about the conditions of family members. Once again the subject<sup>22</sup> is diluted into the notion of family.

The programs and services of social welfare produce an invisibility of women, conceal their roles and responsibilities while at the same time make use of their traditional roles. Here is its ambiguity. However, this practice cannot be named in the discourse, for it reveals the fragility, if not contradiction, to assert that the focus is family. To be sure, the focus is women. If the documents so stated, they would reveal its ideological character. Thus, in the name of consistency, it remains unsaid. According to Marilena Chauí,<sup>23</sup> silence is a way of operating this ideology. Thus, the "subject" of these programs in its discursive form is abstract and disembodied, contradicting the reality that proves to us that the 'subject' is gendered: women.

What is silenced in the guiding documents cannot be concealed or denied in practice. In this sense there is a clear distance, a detachment among the documents establishing the guidelines and operational policy. These do not say that the woman is the preferred representative of the family, but in practice the strategies are directed towards the participation of the woman / wife / mother.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the MDS postulates that "gender equality should be a guiding theme, to reverse unfair and onerous situations for women within the family context".<sup>25</sup> We nevertheless consider that for the fulfillment of this goal, it is essential to make visible the power structures that operate within families and are eventually reproduced in state actions. We understand that it is absolutely impossible to change situations which rest on invisibility, which are hidden by the very practice of state policy. Once again we are on the turf of ambiguity when dealing with the discourse of MDS.

According to the observations we make regarding the CRAS, we may affirm that women are the principal claimants of welfare benefits, including income transfer programs, and are primarily responsible for the fulfillment of conditions whether directly participating in the scheduled activities or making sure that other family members also meet the requirements, such as school attendance and health care. This means that when the "need" for family consumption are not satisfied with the income from work (male and female), it is the woman who must locate government resources. Why is this mode of meeting the needs of the family generally the prerogative of women in impoverished families?

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<sup>22</sup> We do not treat in depth the notion of "subject" in this article, especially with regard to discussions on the subject of right and law. It is noteworthy that the status of the beneficiaries or users, of social welfare as "subject" or "object" of politics is one of the issues that fuel the debate on social policy and citizenship in Brazil. Here we use the category "subject" without assigning any particular political status, referring only to those who in any way take part in the development of programs and state services.

<sup>23</sup> Marilena CHAUI, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> See MINISTÉRIO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO SOCIAL E COMBATE À FOME, 2006a e 2006b.

<sup>25</sup> MINISTÉRIO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO SOCIAL E COMBATE À FOME, 2006a, p. 41.

Cynthia Sarti draws attention to the importance of considering poor families not only from a perspective of "productivist", which restricts the family to a unit of consumption, with analysis as "reproduction of labor power" and "survival strategies", but incorporating as well the symbolic dimension which constitute the reality of poor families. The concern of the author is considering research that corresponds to the assumption that "poverty is therefore a social and symbolic dimension that defines the poor".<sup>26</sup> Certainly the social and symbolic dimensions do not exclude the economic dimension, but they are not subordinate to it. Understood in this way, "the poor are not the typical *homo economicus* of the capitalist system nor do they form a fully autonomous culture in the sense that they have a specificity, a diversity, and are, at the same time, partly subject to a larger whole".<sup>27</sup>

These caveats are useful for us to think that the role of women in the sphere of the family is produced and reproduced in such a varied way between groups from different social classes, as well as between race / ethnicity and religion, among others. However, the events are associated with the existing patterns of domination, so that women experience these sorts of varied spaces, though differently, as "the combined effects of class exploitation and gender discrimination".<sup>28</sup>

Within this perspective, when we speak of "poor" or "poor families" it is important that we have the insight to identify the gender divisions to understand the role of women and men. Even allowing that the inequalities are reproduced by a multidimensional structure that goes beyond gender relations, it is still conceivable that we speak of a "woman question" in that " economic and political power concentrated among men still persists in most of the world, and women continue being largely responsible for the family and the 'care' – of the children, of the house and, increasingly, of the family".<sup>29</sup>

This role of "caretaker" falls most heavily on poor women, deprived of the services offered by the market, jettisoning many of the technologies and facilities provided by recipients of public services often of dubious quality. From another angle, it is also the role of caregiver that is most often invoked by the policy of social welfare to address poor women. We can even assert that, under these circumstances, social class combines with the structure of social relations of gender and these two phenomena take shape in the design of an extremely precarious social protection.

There is clearly a marker of gender in the design of programs and access to social policies, which influences the conduct of men and women in order to guide who seeks which goods and services. This refers to how a pattern of cultural value is institutionalized in social welfare policy, such as, for example, always calling the women to the meetings. We found in the various groups

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<sup>26</sup> Cynthia Andersen SARTI, 2005, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Andersen SARTI, 2005, p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Maria Lygia Quartim de MORAES, 2000, p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> MORAES, 2000, p. 97.

gathered for our research, different explanations by the women for their presence and the men's absence.

*I think the woman [...] in general they are at home to solve [...] may men do not want to know or to help his wife, for example, he can come to the meeting. Sometimes the wife isn't well or [...] to help because many of them here work, sometimes they couldn't be here because they work (Group 6).*

*She has a husband who leaves everything to the wife, everything is done by the woman and the man doesn't get involved with anything [in the house] (Group 7).*

*Men do not go to the CRAS because they do not like to sit and wait. The woman doesn't like it, but she's used to it because it's also like that at the clinic (Group 9).*

*Sometimes they are embarrassed. Ashamed to be in the middle of the chicks, ashamed to participate in a social assistance program. - Yeah, I think they are ashamed. - I think the man feels humiliated, some might feel, will say, "oh, there he goes after things" [...] (Group 1).*

Along the same lines of those conversations, one group dialogues at greater length about the supposed virtues of the women and the irresponsibility of men in the care of children and the house. This point deserves a little more of our attention so that we may problematize the way in which women mediate between the family and social welfare policy. Thus, we see the dialog:

- Tem homem que é tão sem vergonha que se pegar o dinheiro vai parar de trabalhar. (Grupo 5)*  
*I think it's great [the transfer of the benefit to the woman], lots of husbands don't want to give money to the wife and the children ask the mother for things [...] mother mother I want this, mother I am want to eat such and such, give me money [...] and the person doesn't have anything to give. Then [the benefit] is in the name of the mother and she has the hope of having money at the time the child asks, then the mother goes out [...] and [buys] because when she gets her Family Grant, she pays. That's how it is.*
- Yeah, they only come to the mother, they don't go to the father.*
  - It's that they ask the daddy and the daddy, oh, go eat rice and beans and that's it.*
  - They already know how the mother is and they know if they ask they'll get it [...].*
  - The man, not all men, take the money to buy cigarettes, to drink, [...] for cock fights, and the woman, no, a woman knows what goes on inside a home, what you need, especially with the children.*
  - The majority.*
  - I met a man that received the Bolsa Familia and he didn't give it to his wife and he took the money and spent it. It was pinga, it was alcohol, every month.*
  - Women are more secure, she doesn't give money left and right and the man, not any more.*
  - A woman is more on top of what happens inside the home. She knows when it's lacking rice, beans, sugar, shoes for the child, slippers. The woman knows what is lacking. The man doesn't. The man's on the job, arrives in the evening, has dinner, goes to sleep. He doesn't even want to know.*
  - The man is so shameless that if he gets the money he'll stop working. (Group 5)*

Of the many aspects to which we could give our attention in these dialogues, what interests us in this moment is to capture the way in which an idealized conception of sex-role divisions oversees the conduct of the people and is introduced into a social policy. This view expresses,

explicitly or implicitly, the validity of a model of family, with complementary and hierarchical roles which, in turn, represent the legacy of a philosophy about the distinction between public and private.

The symbolic universe constructed in social interactions within poor families explains the organization of tasks and responsibilities from a "complementary division of authority between men and women in the family, which corresponds to the differentiation made between home and family."<sup>30</sup>

As Cynthia Sarti argues, "the house is identified with the woman and the family with the man. Home and Family, as a woman and man, are a complementary pair, but hierarchical".<sup>31</sup>

When this cultural pattern is institutionalized in social welfare policy, there is a translation. As the woman is associated with the sphere of reproduction and the man, the sphere of production, and as social assistance is linked to reproduction, it operates, then, a certain change in this arrangement. Given the policy, the family is identified by the figure of the woman, and not by man.

The reports of the users explain how the social roles of women, sponsor and caretaker, responsible for "reproductive" work, still fall upon them. They also reveal the differences in recognition of men's and women's time, suggesting that women have more time to waste waiting to be attended for public services, which often involves long hours of waiting. Finally, part of the quotation, composed of the words of several women, reveals the gender differences regarding self-esteem and shame. The feelings of shame and humiliation affect men and women differently in relation to the pursuit of social welfare assistance precisely because of the paradoxes of female citizenship.

The role of the woman as mediator between the private and the public spheres, as happens in the context of social welfare policies, denotes the fragility of that family group. This role is assumed by the woman when the man failed to fulfill his responsibilities, as he failed with respect to the "provider ethic." As stated by Sarti, supported by Alba Zaluar, "the work ethic, for [poor]urban workers, no moral value comes from the activity itself, but from the role of family provider that has the worker, thus, as an 'ethical provider'".<sup>32</sup>

Thus in light of this, the weight of failure is heavier on the man than the woman, which explains the massive presence of women in social programs and projects, considering that there is a symbolic association established between assistance and failure. If the failure weighs less heavily on women, since their main role is that of *good housewife*, and not of provider, taking on the failure

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<sup>30</sup> SARTI, 2005, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> SARTI, 2005, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> SARTI, 2005, p. 49.

and turning to an assistance program is comparatively a less difficult act than it would be for the man.

In the complementary division of roles and authority between men and women, it falls to the woman to maintain the unity of this group and control the household budget, a task which is not related to earning capacity, but the role of housewife.<sup>33</sup> It is these attributes that favor the election of women as responsible for the funds transferred by income transfer programs, an example of which occurs with the Bolsa Família Program (BFP). Making use of these responsibilities socially assigned to women, these programs aim to enhance their chances of gaining efficiency. Pragmatically, without losing sight of the ideological factors of gender domination, these programs reinforce the symbolic dimension of the value that the woman is the manager of the home. Taking as synonyms "centrality in the family" and "family in matrix", the social assistance policy reveals in the subtext reveals the idea that its focus, for that matter, is the "maternal role".<sup>34</sup>

In considering the economic and moral aspects of the role of provider, we say that it falls to the man, in that model of complementarity, to mediate the family with the outside world, and that when he "fails" in the performance of this role, it is the woman who assumes the mediation. Two caveats should be made about this. First, this occurrence does not characterize a crisis situation, it is preferable to treat it in terms of the dynamics of family groups. Second, this change does not authorize us to speak of a process that eventually contributes to greater empowerment for women, since their inclusion in the policy of social assistance is not given based on citizenship rights, but on the basis of her role as wife and / or mother, work that is not a commodity. The first effect is the expected reinforcement of traditional gender roles. In this there is an important complication if we consider that the "work" of women aimed at social programs has the characteristic of not being a commodity, and, according to Francisco de Oliveira, "the worst thing in the world of the commodity is when you are not a commodity".<sup>35</sup>

In incorporating the tradition of the care provided by women uncritically, social welfare organizes socio-educational groups which meet monthly, attended almost exclusively by women. It is assumed that these groups have the character of spreading and multiplying information, and women will transmit to their family and community information and knowledge provided by the social worker. Again, we can infer that there is, implicitly, a family model in which the woman is the support and mainstay of the family, the potentiator of ties and initiatives to improve living conditions, this woman who has a family who is willing to listen to it, eager to share her new knowledge, with an ease of relating to partner and children; that is, in this idealized model of the

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<sup>33</sup> SARTI, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> According to the Novo Dicionário Aurélio (2004), *matri* is a compositional element which means mother, 'mãe': *mátrio*, *matriarca*.

<sup>35</sup> Francisco de OLIVEIRA, 2006, p. 73.

conjugal nuclear family without generational and gender conflicts, in which members have common interests or otherwise, the woman will be able to articulate these interests and promote family harmony, "autonomy" and "emancipation."

From what we can learn in field research, the idealization present in social welfare policy regarding women's domestic duties of care and affection is consistent with the values carried by users of the policy. We can synthetically characterize the perceptions of users as follows:

a) regarding the responsibilities of women: in general terms, women see very naturally the responsibilities assigned to them, think that these responsibilities are excessive, but do not voice criticism or a desire to change; they believe that men would not take into account the tasks they fulfill or would not do them with responsibility and appropriate quality;

b) regarding the allocation of benefits to women: they believe that the resources of income transfer programs should be given to the women, because men have less responsibility in money management. No one admits that her husband / partner fits this pattern, but some believe that the other husbands are thus irresponsible;

c) regarding coercion to participate in group activities:<sup>36</sup> as the women demonstrated acceptance of this; they admit that the requirement to attend the meetings represents a big responsibility, but do not complain about it because they understand that they really should offer a "hand";

d) regarding the objectives of socio-educational group meetings, according to the perceptions of women, the goal is to keep themselves informed about new programs, notably the PBF; we consider this a very mild goal very shy, which shows that the results regarding social changes desired by management are very far from fulfillment; and

e) regarding changes in their lives with the PBF: changes in relation to consumption (purchase of school supplies, uniforms, clothes, food, etc.) are noted. Asked about other changes, the women were silent.

We can verify that the ratio of women to citizenship and the state occurs through the association of these with maternity. While men enter the public space with the status of individuals, citizens and workers (all of the qualities of the public sphere), women are often included through issues of the domestic world, those issues associated with the tasks of reproduction, which affirms their political status as related to maternal and care functions. Social law, expressed through the social protection system, also characterizes the ambiguous way of conceiving women's citizenship.

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<sup>36</sup> The Municipal Social Welfare Secretary of Londrina organizes socio-educational support groups, s a complementary activity to federal income transfer programs. Formally this is not a requirement, but there is strong pressure to ensure the presence of women in these groups.

The mixture of public and private, and of right and favor and right and duty and attachment of women to maternity define the contours of that weakened and sexualized citizenship.

Given the perceptions of users, we find the conditions for raising questions regarding the role of social welfare policy in the sense of contributing to the rupture of the confinement to the home to which extremely poor women are subjected, since they are cast away from paid work and spaces of political participation. The existence of such a break could be interpreted as conquering autonomy for women.

The social welfare policy gambles seriously on the possibility of autonomy. However, we believe that the tools utilized are not even compatible with the scale of the challenge to be faced. On the other hand, there is no use in speaking of promoting women's autonomy when the strategies are all aimed at strengthening the association between woman and motherhood. Besides the low value transferred - in August 2007 the average value transferred by the PBF was R \$ 74.00 (seventy four dollars) per beneficiary family - social welfare placed its confidence in change on the socio-educational groups and in the generation of jobs and income.

The socio-educational groups have as their aim the emotional, social and political enhancement of their participants. The jobs and income generating groups have as their objective financial autonomy, through training for the job market or the creation of productive inclusion groups, guided by the principles of economic solidarity, seeking the end of welfare benefits.

We can briefly say that both types of groups, in the experience of Londrina, do not correspond to the set goals. In short, what they promote is, at best, a means of socialization for the participants and, therefore, which can change, at most, is the level of self-esteem of the women. Regarding the political dimension seen in the socio-educational groups, what we found was its replacement by a psychologizing of social situation of the participants. An example of this is that women misunderstand the actual objectives of the existence of the group. As for the work, crochet and knitting groups, for example, constitute experiences in occupational therapy, without the prospect that women can derive from it gains sufficient for their livelihood.

By elevating the status of women to the status of mediator between the family group and the public world, through the social assistance policy, these programs do not go far enough to allow, in fact, the participation of poor and extremely poor women in treating issues that matter most in the public world: work and politics.

### **Final Considerations: An Incomplete Transition**

The experiences of the groups organized in Londrina by social welfare with people responsible for the benefits of cash transfer programs indicate, in a sense, the possibility that this

policy contributes to the departure of these poor women from the private to the public sector. This passage from one sphere to another, however, is ambiguous because it creates a space of sociability that is guided by the needs of the private and attributes of domestic life. Thus, the women are halfway between the private and public. It is a passage that is not complete.

These experiences do not constitute possibilities for an effective integration into the public sphere. We understand here that there are two fundamental criteria to qualify for the public sphere: participation in the labor market (paid and visible work) and active participation in the spaces of collective deliberation (use of voice, persuasion, influence). From this perspective, the space of sociability is insufficient to represent the public sphere. Equivalently, we believe that the formation of an ample, democratic and participatory public space is a necessary and indispensable condition for the construction of citizenship and the reduction of social inequalities. A policy of social justice without the citizens does not exist, that is, without a public sphere populated by women and men, including the sectors of those living in poverty.

As stated earlier, with regard to occupation and employment, social welfare, like so many other social policies in Brazil, generating activities and responsibilities for women which do not contribute to the conversion of their work into a commodity, and which, on the contrary keeps them in the arena of reproductive activities, however private. We have, herein, elaborated the way in which, in capitalist society, the value of work occurs only when it is a commodity.

Political life itself, understood as active participation in discussions and deliberations of collective affairs, is another sore point in relations between female participants and social welfare policy. This aspect of the public sphere remains generally unchanged. The women interviewed do not participate in discussions and decisions about actions that affect their lives, nor ways of implementing the programs and services that are "targets", not subjects.

Under these criteria, the social assistance policy does not achieve the result of lifting poor women into the public sphere. If participation in the public sphere is a prerequisite for citizenship, although it is not sufficient in and of itself, these considerations leave some concerns about challenging the notion of citizenship present in social policies, a vehicle for seeking interrelations between public and private sectors, and the effects on the citizenship of women.

In analysis of the family as a factor of social protection, Goldani<sup>37</sup> reveals the absorption by the family of greater responsibilities, given the fragility of state action, in recouping the impact of economic policies and capitalist restructuring of the labor market. It would be important, for the democratization of the family, that family policies take into account this social institution as a target

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<sup>37</sup> Ana Maria GOLDANI, 2002.



of their actions with a view toward greater autonomy of its individuals, not in order to benefit from its protective functions, reducing the need for public investments.

The models of social protection in some European countries also supported and continue to support a particular organization of the family, but the focus of the family has a different nature. Goldani<sup>38</sup> notes that, from the perspective of gender equity, one of the models most under discussion is that put forth by Nancy Fraser, in 1994 – a universal model based on the participation of men and women in paid employment and in the work of caregivers. The principal measures called for strengthening the family have been a priority investment in universal access to early childhood and elementary education, both full-time, and the integration of women into the labor market, with programs of affirmative character for families which have women as the figure of reference.

We conclude with a chorus, a phrase by Jelin: “The usual call to 'strengthen' the family without the social support implies that this call is in fact an expression of social cynicism and irresponsibility”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> GOLDANI, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> JELIN, 2005, p. 87.

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