

The meanings of "help" within "Bolsa Família" cash transfer program in Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

This communication aims to present the results of an investigation among beneficiaries of the "Family Aid Program" (PBF in its Portuguese acronym – Programa Bolsa Família – used throughout this text), the Federal Government's main cash transfer program, in the municipality of Campinas, in the State of São Paulo. In this study I seek to understand the importance of this public policy, taking into consideration the views of the target audience themselves and their families.¹

The study is based on beneficiaries' perception that the *Bolsa Família* "helps". On the basis of this classification, I shall aim to understand the meanings of the word "help" from two angles. Firstly, I examine how one meaning of "help" ties in with the fact that people receive the benefit in a region like Campinas, which clusters 20 municipalities and has an estimated population of some 2.5 million people. As will be seen, people's perceptions of their lives and the PBF are not only pervaded by economic factors, but also by symbolic processes that ascribe meaning to their actions and representations. I therefore think it important to take into consideration what Pierre Bourdieu (2000) understands as "forces of attraction" working in the social field of urban reality, and which present both as an objective mode in access to urban goods and services, and in people's subjectivity, in the recognition, for example, that this way of life is superior to others in a number of aspects. This process of valuing the city, as Bourdieu argues, involves, among other things, the prestige enjoyed by some institutions such as schools, acknowledged as being fundamental for providing a set of necessary skills for a person to enter the job market. Thus, for the interviewees, living in an urban environment such as Campinas enables an economic and symbolic capital to be built up, which at some moment can be enjoyed both by the generation of recipients of the PBF and by their children. Secondly, it will be seen how the word "help" denotes how the family incorporates the program's money in ways pervaded by gender roles (links). An analysis of the interviews carried out so far suggests that the PBF money is perceived as female money; in other words, it should be managed and spent by the women. Throughout the text it is clear that women have a lot of freedom to decide on how to use the PBF money as well as how this use of the money is charged with a strong degree of morality, expressed as the right way or the wrong way to

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spend it. As a resource deemed 'female', money from the program is symbolically marked as "help", even though it may be used to purchase fundamental consumer items for survival and for helping socialize the people who benefit from it. Within the same section, I discuss how the participation of women in the PBF reflects tension between two poles. On one hand, entering the program enables undeniable gains for women, such as access (certain patterns of consumption that were formerly hard to obtain), and the affirmation of their authority within the domestic space. Furthermore, the study showed that meeting the conditions of the program paved the way to establishing links between beneficiaries and the State, enabling the women to play the role of intermediaries between the family and the "outside world", without the need for masculine figures to mediate. All of these gains, however, are only possible within the context of a public policy that fosters a taking for granted that the exercise of mothering is a skill exclusive to women.

In this study, fifty initial conversations were held from November 2008 to June 2009, with participants in the PBF who were attending the Public Center for Worker Support (Centro Público de Apoio ao Trabalhador — CPAT) of the City Hall of Campinas (Prefeitura Municipal), where enrollments and supervision of those registered in the PBF are carried out².

The fieldwork was carried out while participants were being seen at CPAT, which draws up a schedule according to where people live, so that people from different neighborhoods of the city are seen on different days. I tried as far as possible to make contact with inhabitants from all the regions of the city, without concerning myself to make up a representative sample. The initial conversations were held in the CPAT waiting room while the interviewees waited their turn to be seen, and were not recorded. I tried to make it clear that my being there in that context had nothing to do with the City Hall or with the Government, and that I was completely unable to "get anyone into or out of PBF". After these conversations, which were often interrupted when my interlocutor was called, I tried to book interviews, which depended basically on the availability of potential interviewees to see me at a place and time that suited both parties. Thus fourteen in-depth interviews were carried out in the homes of the interviewees — male and female. In some cases, these interviews took two or three sessions.

The interviews were structured on the basis of a three-part script. The first part had questions about where the interviewees came from, and their future plans. The second part was about their assessment of the PBF, asking how the money from the program was used, the working and wage-earning situation of people in the family, and the importance of receiving the family aid within the metropolitan context. The final part had to do with socialization (within and outside the household) and with interviewees' representations of poverty. It is important to note that, depending on the dynamic of the interviews, some questions could be added, and

² I would like to thank CPTA employees and above all coordinator Gisleide Abreu for their support throughout my research. The following undergraduate social sciences students of the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC) Campinas, through scientific initiation scholarships, took part in the interviews: Cinthia de Oliveira Cunha, Douglas Nascimento, Fernando Monteiro, Haretha Kazumi Itoman and Marcela Nappi Alvares, to all of whom I am grateful for their contributions.

certain topics could be explored in greater depth. Out of respect for the free and informed consent form signed by interviewees, any personal information that could enable identification has been omitted. Additionally, transcriptions have preserved the oral format.

Thirteen women and one man were interviewed; however, male participation was not limited to this single interviewee because in other situations interviewees' husbands or sons took part in the conversation. The age of the interviewees ranged from 23 to 53. Six are in a younger age bracket: 20 to 29; six are between 40 and 49; and two are over 50. The majority of the household arrangements (nine cases) are married couples, of which eight are nuclear families (husband, wife and children) and one is an extended nuclear family (parents, children and grandchildren). The other five cases are single-parent families (one of the parents plus children). With regard to schooling, the majority (nine) failed to complete primary education, four had (completed or uncompleted) secondary school and one interviewee began a university course but dropped out. It is important to note that only three of the fourteen interviewees were born in Campinas, the rest coming from other cities in the state of São Paulo (three cases), or from cities in other states and regions of Brazil (Paraná, Minas Gerais and states of the north-east, in the case of eight interviewees). Several of the interviewees (five) reported that they are unemployed, three are housewives, and the rest (six) are cleaners, maids, or sell some type of product such as cosmetics. With regard to religion, slightly over half are Catholics (eight) while the rest are Evangelicals.

THE ADVANTAGES OF THE METROPOLITAN CONTEXT

One striking feature in the discourse of nearly all interviewees about the importance of the PBF in their lives is that the "Family Aid helps". Answers of this type were actually very frequent despite the wide range of origin, age, address and income patterns of the interviewees. Here are some examples:

A

I think it helps a great deal, you know, because we need it. I need it because it's only my husband who is employed and what he earns is not enough. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

B

Well, I think it's good, because it's like a help that we have, I think, because sometimes you can be unemployed, you have kids, so it helps, it's 122 Reals, it's a real help, you can buy, like: 100 Reals' worth of food, rice, beans, a bottle of gas, sometimes it helps pay a telephone bill, sometimes it helps pay your electricity bill, I think it's really good, sincerely, I do. (Female interviewee, 51 years of age)

C

Look, it's one way of helping us Brazilians. It's not that much, but it helps, you know? (Female interviewee, 40 years of age)

D

The money is a sort of help that people get given, but if someone says they're bothered by the money, then they're not happy with what they're given, and really they should take it and be satisfied with it, shouldn't they?
(Male interviewee, 44 years of age)

Initially we should consider some of the meanings given to the word “help” in the transcriptions. We may think, first of all, of the meaning of help as something that supplements something else, something that serves to aid or boost another income — often larger and from other sources. This is what happens with the families of the interviewees in the cases mentioned, since the bulk of the family income comes from the labor (whether salaried or otherwise) of a family member, and not from the income transfer program. In example A, the interviewee’s husband is the main breadwinner. In examples B and C, most of the household expenses are paid by a son or a brother, who are wage earners. In example D, the interviewee’s own salary is the main source of income. To give the reader a more accurate idea, in 11 of the 14 families interviewed, the money from the PBF is added to another income resulting from the salaried labor (with or without professional working papers) of some family member. A case that illustrates well the conception of the aid program money being an income supplement comes from the account given by a female interviewee who was saving the resources of the PBF on behalf of her 14-year-old son. Saving the money gained from the program on behalf of her son implies that expenses needed for the family’s survival are paid for using other resources. In this case, the mother works as a formally registered maid, and only she and her son live in the household. When she had to re-register in the program, something which has to be done periodically, the wage recorded in her working papers tipped her over the threshold for the program and her benefit was “grabbed back — arrancado” (example E). Obviously this displeased her, but since she had another source of income from her salaried job, this did not have a drastic effect on her household’s consumption pattern. As soon as she was removed from the program, the interviewee managed to offset the loss of the PBF money by enrolling her son in the “business” of a non-governmental organization (NGO), which will actually bring her a monthly income above what she was receiving from the PBF. One can see this in her statement:

E

Anyway, they grabbed it back from me, which I didn't like, because I used to pass that money straight on to him [her 14-year-old son]. I used to deposit the PBF money in his savings account... but I've got all the documents with me right now, because in this new course he will be paid 100 Reals. It's a training course in computing, one of these NGO things to keep kids off the street, next door to the Castro Mendes theater. So when he comes out of school, he goes straight to this course, and he won't be hanging around the streets... (Female Interviewee)

In another case (F), while the interviewee was employed and her husband was helping pay household expenses, the PBF money was earmarked to pay half of the Internet bill, a share which her son was supposed to pay. The interviewee says “Mom pays for the Internet with his

share of the PBF”, which shows a clear sharing of the money for each child, and in this situation the PBF money would be used as if it was alimony, since the boy’s father apparently was not meeting his obligations. Soon after this she lost her job, and ceased living with her spouse, her son started working and paid for the Internet himself.

F

André: So, when you started to receive the PBF, about seven months ago, what extras were you then able to buy? What changes occurred in your shopping habits?

Female Interviewee: I was able to get Internet for my kids. My son asked me to do that, because my brother had got him the computer. He said, look, I’ll make the call and you request the Internet, and then we’ll split it — that blasted Internet. Then I said, okay, because he [the son] and my husband were going to split it, right? Then I said we’ll take his share [the son’s] of the PBF, and then Mom here will pay for the Internet. Your mobile phone bills, chatting to your girlfriend and everything, Mom will pay for that. And then her [other daughter’s] share, she can pay [with the money she gets from her father’s alimony payment]. (40 years)

An analysis of these interviews suggests that seeing the PBF money as a supplement makes a lot of sense in settings such as the city of Campinas, where the chance to earn income from work, to enjoy financial benefits from state programs whether federal, state level or municipal as well as from third sector organizations, is apparently greater than in other cities. I was able to see, for example, how often, in the budget of the families I interviewed, they linked the PBF money to other sources of income earned by one of the family members, and how this changes the use of the resources (a savings account – example E, paying for the Internet – example F). It was significant to see how the PBF is not a means of obtaining income just through having children, since this type of resource can be obtained from NGOs (example E) or through other conditional income transfer programs at municipal and state level.

The interviewees see the city of Campinas as a place that offers a range of benefits, where “there are many places that help”. And this help may come from public services such as programs aimed at the least fortunate (like income transfer) and from NGOs, as mentioned above.³ It is interesting to note that many of the interviewees had had experience of income transfer programs before joining the PBF.

G

... you know, I think, just like I told you, it’s like this... if this PBF was a little bit more, it would help the needy population more... not just the PBF, but

³ The analysis of the interviews suggests that there is a discrepancy between people’s perception of the city of Campinas, which is seen as a good place with an abundance of opportunities, and their perception of the neighborhood where they live. There were frequent complaints about public services in the neighborhood, unsatisfactory health centers, poor transportation, difficulties in finding day care for children, and, above all, violence. Thus, in the opinion of many, being upwardly mobile socially meant moving out of the neighborhood, while remaining in the same city

the other benefits that there are, because Campinas is a very good city to live in, right? There are a lot of places that help... you know what I mean... just but, you know, the help is too small... (Female interviewee, 43 years of age)

H

I used to receive the [municipal] minimum income also, until my daughter fell sick, and then I started to receive the PBF, because my daughter had a problem and became very undernourished, she didn't gain weight and she didn't grow, she even had to be treated at UNICAMP [the University], so then I started to receive the PBF, it was at the health care center that I started to receive it. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

There were three conditional income transfer programs in Campinas when the interviews were being carried out. The Program to Guarantee a Minimum Income (Programa de Garantia de Renda Mínima – PGRM), provided by the City Hall, Campinas being one of the first cities in Brazil to do this (it was set up in 1995); the Citizen Income Program (Programa Renda Cidadã), of the São Paulo State Government, and the Federal Government's PBF. The PBF was the most important, both in terms of resource allocation and in terms of the number of participants. In 2006, for example, it brought together more than two thirds of participants in conditional income transfer programs in the city, followed by the PGRM and then by the Citizen Income Program. Each of these programs was run under its own criteria, meaning a range of selection strategies and benefits for participants.

Despite the differences, it is worth pointing out that living in Campinas enables access to three income transfer programs, a situation unlikely to be found in most Brazilian cities, above all those with insufficient municipal income from taxation for such policies. Similarly, the existence of these varied options enables certain family strategies that result in a significant number of people staying a long time in programs of this nature, starting in one given program and then migrating to another (example H). It can also be seen that some of these strategies not only take into consideration the possibilities of a single municipality (such as Campinas), but of the metropolitan region as a whole. Such is the case of the declaration below (example I), where the interviewee, originally from Brazil's Midwest region, first moved to Valinhos (a neighboring town within the Greater Campinas Metropolitan Region– RMC), where he took part in that municipality's transfer program. He then moved to Campinas itself and took part in the PBF. His statement further suggests that "living off charity" entails negotiating with a huge network of public and private organizations, such as NGOs, churches, and even City Halls, all of which deal directly with the poorest. All of these types of "help", whether governmental or otherwise, enabled him to build up a small amount of capital and open his own deep-fried pastries business ("pastel") and invest in an "old Opala", essential for his business:

I

When we first arrived here in Valinhos, we lived on charity for a long time, depending on the community here in the neighborhood, we started out begging, out on the streets. One day we managed 300 Reals. We didn't know what to do, we wandered around, people gave us stuff and little by little we managed to get what we needed. First a house, which we rented, then the church started helping us, giving us basic food baskets. Then we started working, then we got the benefit — the Valinhos Minimum Income. My wife started to receive a benefit of 200 Reals, for one year. Then we set up a deep-fried pastry stand, savories, that sort of thing, but we weren't allowed to set up a stall there and we got kicked out. We couldn't get anywhere in Valinhos, so we moved to Campinas. I found an old Opala, the hood was virtually coming off it, and I said: let's sell something, everybody is selling something on the street, like pineapples and stuff, let's give it a try too. We went to a plastic wares store, everything for R\$1.99, and I bought 300 Reals' worth of products, and left. I spent a whole year selling those things, all over the streets of the town. My wife and I moved to Campinas, made some sales, went to Valinhos, sold stuff there too, then my mother started working with us, she was receiving the benefit, and our situation gradually improved. (Male interviewee, 43 years of age)

It is worth pointing out that most people are encouraged to enter income transfer programs by the public authority agents who work in health centers, schools, nurseries, municipal social assistance reference centers, and so on. Information on income transfer programs passes through public agencies and reaches the ears of those potentially interested.

J

André: How did you hear about the PBF, what was your first contact with it?

Female Interviewee: Ah, when the PBF was launched they told me about it here at the school...

André: They who?

Female Interviewee: Ah, I don't know really, just that my son told me that these people came round and said that there was this PBF, and that I should look into it. He brought home a piece of paper with the address on it...

K

It was my kids who said "hey Mom, you have to enroll in the PBF. After that I had to get myself on the books, that is something I did myself, but it was the school that put me on the right track. (Female interviewee, 51 years of age)

It is worth going back to an important point about the interviewees' perceptions of the chances of finding work and enjoying income (even if only temporary) in the Campinas region:

L

... [My husband] is enrolled in the program. Even though he doesn't earn as much as he should do in his profession. He's now bringing home 800 Reals. As a leader he ought to be earning more, but we'll see what happens, his dream nowadays is to study and get his pilot's license. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

M

Female Interviewee: Oh, I've done a lot of things, I've been a nanny, a maid, I've done domestic work in people's houses — an elderly couple actually, a gentleman and a lady, she wasn't very well, and they asked me to look after him because the lady was afraid of being left alone, but it didn't work out for me... So I've done just about every job there is.

André: What about your husband?

Female Interviewee: He can do everything, he's a builder, a carpenter, he can do just about every type of task, he works really hard, right now he's on the books of a bus company in Valinhos, where he's one of the washers, he washes the outsides of the buses, you know? It's not far from here, he takes a bus, gets off on the Valinhos Highway and walks the rest of the way to the company; sometimes he gets a ride with some people who pick him up here and take him there, but they don't always come here, you know? (23 years)

N

Female interviewee: Oh I do a little bit of everything ... I can work as a maid, a cleaner, then sometimes I stop everything, open a little business for myself, close it again, you know?

André: And what are you doing at the moment?

Interviewee: Cleaning...

André: And is that OK, what's it like?

Interviewee: Well, it's not that great, you know? But they're paying me... (laughs)...

Her sister: The worst thing about cleaning work is it's very heavy...

Interviewee: Right... you earn money ... if you accept the whole week then there are some places where you can earn 80, some where you can earn 70, some where you can earn 60... If you work for the whole week, you get to the end of the week with some money... But here at home there is never

enough money, my friend. There's the funeral home to pay, soccer strips you have to buy, soccer shoes you have to buy, gloves, my son's studies, I help with the grandchildren, my husband's medication, so it's just as well my family is helping me now, his medication is R\$ 35.00.

O

I have experience in maintenance work, I worked at OBA (a sort of farmers market), I was on the books at OBA [...] I helped build an OBA in the Morumbi neighborhood; me and my team we built that too, then we came here, reviewed the whole project [...] then I thought I had to seek formal employment again. So I was on the books at that new supermarket in Valinhos [...] Russi it's called, I went there to see if they needed a builder, they said they didn't but they needed someone for security, so I started working as a security guard [...] and since I worked "efficiently", I was welcome there, the São Paulo folks liked me. I also worked at Nextel, I had a lot of equipment, I was in charge of the escalator, and then I also was a night watchman, know what I mean? (Male interviewee, 43 years of age)

P

It's better here in every sense, because when you see the situation I was telling you about just now, my life, what I mean is, even though I may not be working now, my children help me, my partner is helping me, I was unemployed, then I asked for a divorce from my husband, and only my son was helping me [...] and that's when my partner came into it, I asked him to help me. (Female interviewee, 51 years of age)

From these accounts, we might well think that it makes a difference taking part in the PBF in a city like Campinas. The experience of living in the city leads to a whole set of real opportunities such as access to the job market, both with proper registration in the working papers and without, which allows a pattern of family income that is very often above what is found in other places. In examples L and M we see that the interviewees' husbands are formally employed with their working documentation in order. Even in example O, where the husband is unemployed, it can be seen that his professional experiences involve him entering and leaving the formal salaried job market. Also noteworthy is example L, where the interviewee's husband shows a strong desire to rise in his profession and become a pilot (obtain a pilot's license). In examples M and N we can see that for women, experience of the job market involves a series of sporadic activities such as looking after the elderly, working as maids and cleaners and so on. Therefore it's very telling when one interviewee says "I'm working as a cleaner", because she is denoting something temporary which can change at any moment (as opposed to "I am a cleaner"). The last of these statements, given by an interviewee who came from the northern state of Maranhão, suggests that a comparison between her place of origin and Campinas favors the latter. The advantage lies above all in the chances that children and partners have of finding paid work somewhere. Availing oneself of these possibilities may, as in the case transcribed below, lead to receiving less money from the PBF. The interviewee lost part of her benefit because she found a cleaning job.

Q

...it's like this, when we moved here, I took all the papers that the girl asked me to, everything, and I was cleaning three times a week, I couldn't lie now, could I? So when I took the papers, she [the CPTA employee] asked what I was doing, and I said that I was cleaning three times a week, so they cut that. So now all I get is for the two boys, isn't it? And that only comes to R\$ 60. (Female interviewee, 42 years of age)

There is another aspect which seems to interfere with how the interviewees see their own social status and their opinions of the program. The chance of using public services in the metropolitan region one day (above all education), encourages them to imagine a better life in the future. One can see this in these statements:

R

I always wanted to do physical education ... Always. So I heard that if I took the ENEM exam and was in ProUNI, then there would be a university that I could be attending; except I was indecisive because I've just about done everything you can imagine. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

S

Really, there is one thing that I still have in mind ... that's to be an accountant [...]. Right now it's a bit difficult getting into university... I don't mean it's difficult exactly, but sometimes money is a bit short, isn't it? Because these days, there are far more universities, so that there are more chances for people. There's the ENEM, where the government helps people get scholarships, right... actually I enrolled twice, I did the university entrance exam. (Male interviewee, 44 years of age)

Analysis of the statements shows that the dream of taking a higher education course does not seem entirely out of reach for some of the interviewees. It is a dream, but they see it as achievable. Things are complicated at the moment, but it is not so difficult, as S says. It is not difficult because, in principle, the interviewees value living in a city where there are several colleges and universities (with a whole range of undergraduate courses) and with programs to help people enter higher education.

However, we know that plans to move up the social scale by means of education depend on conditions in the present. This is clear in the case of T, where the choice of the course to follow depends on a negotiation with her husband to see who will look after the children — something the women normally do.

T

So since I got a job in January, we will have to see, either I'll take a course or he'll take the course, because in the evening somebody has to stay with the children, so we'll begin to see who it is more favorable for; I was giving him

preference to study since I've already done lots of courses. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age) Despite the personal difficulties, sacrifices and frustrations surrounding the planning process and the achievement of these ambitions, the point in question is that living in a place with abundant opportunities (universities, the ProUNI University For All Program (Programa Universidade Para Todos), courses of Brazil's National Service for Industrial Learning — SENAI, and so on) even if, objectively speaking, they are unattainable at the moment, this is enough to change perceptions of the city. It should be added that many interviewees appreciate living in Campinas precisely because the city enables education for their children, and it should be stressed that sometimes the plan to rise socially does not apply to the interviewee's generation but to their children.

U

I want them to have what I didn't have, because when I was studying my father used to have to move from one farm to another and I would be unable to complete the year, I would have to leave the school, I could no longer adapt to it, so I never studied a whole year. [...] I want to give them a good education, I want to see them well-educated. If they can't find a job, that's their problem, but at least I want them to be educated. (Male interviewee, 43 years of age)

In this comment we see a strong link between the children's schooling and their chances of having a better life. Living somewhere like Campinas has enabled the interviewee to "give them [his children] a good education", to give them something he himself never had, trusting

that this is bound to make a difference in the future. Ana Fonseca, in her study of beneficiaries of the Campinas City Hall's program to guarantee minimum income in the 1990s, has noted how the issue of education is fundamental in the discourse of interviewees about the chances of getting ahead socially. In her words: "in [the interviewees'] stories, education seems to symbolically condense the (fragile) space granted to the hopes of a better future, which, leaving poverty behind, may come true in the following generation" (Fonseca, 2001, p. 203).

It would be timely to remember that acknowledging urban school institutions as places able to offer skills seen as fundamental is one of the important elements in the so-called attraction forces within the process of building the symbolic dominance of urban reality, as Bourdieu (2000) argues. It is important to understand that the prestige of the city and city institutions (such as schools) involves, as Bourdieu suggests social recognition that the information that truly makes a difference is the information generated and circulated in spaces of this nature. We should be aware of the fact that this information is not limited to a set of technical skills present in school curricula, for example, but goes beyond that and encompasses tastes and preferences of all types: in music, literature, fashion, speech, and body care. This cultural capital that can be transmitted and stored enables so-called gains in distinction that, as has been seen, link to processes of symbolic domination. There is a telling reference to the issue of access to information in what the daughter of one of the interviewees says, comparing Campinas with her mother's home town:

*I went there when I was 13, and I can't imagine living there. Everything is so difficult there... there is no cinema, there's no shopping mall. There's no the information that we have here... it's much easier to get information here.
(Female interviewee, 16 years of age)*

In *World of Goods*, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (2004) suggested that the difference between wealth and poverty does not only have to do with the quantity of accumulated goods, but also to access to certain essential information so that specific social groups are able to establish and maintain given social hierarchies. As the authors aptly put it, “the actual goods are the visible tip of the iceberg” (p. 220). Based on the assumption that there is a dispute in any society for scarce goods (both economic and symbolic), Douglas and Isherwood consider that the possibility of obtaining certain information held to be most important and prestigious is fundamental for assuring an advantageous social position. In the authors’ view, social hierarchies are maintained in any society by restrictions that given groups impose on others in terms of the circulation of information — for example, establishing consumption rituals that hinder or bar access to outsiders. Goods, owing to the meanings they acquire socially, may act as bridges (establishing solidarity among people) or fences (establishing differences and hierarchies).

What interviewee V’s daughter says clearly shows that living in a city like Campinas enables access to certain information that, in Bourdieu’s terms, promotes gains of distinction — something which would be difficult, if not actually impossible, in the family’s place of origin. Taking part in certain consumption rituals such as going to the mall, or to movie theaters, enables one to extend one’s social connections, and this is valued as something that can make a difference to future plans.

The material presented is sufficient to sustain the idea that receiving the PBF in Campinas entails a set of experiences (present/future; concrete/virtual) that interfere in people’s appreciation of the program and of their own social status. Thus the use of the term “help” bears out this understanding. Finally, what one migrant said is worth highlighting, since most of the interviewees are migrants. This male interviewee had been receiving money from the PBF in his hometown in rural Minas Gerais, and transferred the payments to Campinas. In his words, the difference between receiving “there” and “here” is: “there, the money allowed me to buy almost everything. Here, the money helps”.

FEMALE SPENDING

The other meaning associated with the term “help” and which is found in the statements given by the interviewees about the importance of the PBF has to do with gender. The money received is held to be the women’s responsibility. With the passing of time, the income provided by the program is gradually incorporated into the family budget and allows a great many goods and services to be purchased. Let us examine this. Let us begin with some of these expenses and how the money was spent.

A

They [the children] know about it [the PBF money] but they don't demand it, whenever they want something they ask if Mom has the money and if she can afford it, because that's not how things are. If they need a piece of fruit, a pair of sandals, then they ask if there is enough money. Then if there is, there is. And if there isn't, there isn't. They don't scream or throw tantrums. It has to be something necessary and that I can afford, otherwise no. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

B

André: But then, for example, if you want to buy a TV, what you do?

Do you talk to your husband?

Interviewee: No, I went ahead and bought the TV with the money from the minimum income program. I had R\$140 and I managed to open a line of credit and obtain it from [popular electrical appliance store] Casas Bahia... Thank the Lord, it's fully paid off... the stereo, he [husband] already had one... I think that's all I used the money for... The fridge, it was grandma who gave us that... The bed was my sister-in-law, the wardrobe was the man who lived here before, the cupboard, it was my uncle who gave me it...

C

Oh, a lot of things, because since I no longer need to give my son money, I can buy myself a microwave, because my son spends my money like water, know what I mean? And right now I've bought a lot of small stuff, thanks to the money I no longer have to give him... So it helped a lot, but I tell him, don't be fooled by this money, because when it runs out there'll be nothing for you here either... (Female Interviewee)

In the first place, one can see in the statements that the female interviewees often use the money from the PBF without their husbands/partners knowing. The statements show that a whole range of goods, like TVs, microwaves, computers, have been purchased using the money from the program, but without husbands/partners knowing beforehand. Furthermore, the children expect that the PBF resource be spent on consumer goods for themselves — clothes, sneakers, or even an allowance so they can go out with their girlfriends. The main point here is that decisions as to whether to spend the money on the children, or on household appliances, and weighing up the priorities (for example, should they spend it on sneakers for the boy, on electrical appliances or on food) fall exclusively to the mother.

Alba Zaluar (2000) has observed that in poorer households the way consumption occurs follows the gender patterns of the family so that there are certain types of expense deemed to be male and others, female. Household equipment, such as electrical appliances, even if bought using the man's money, belongs to the woman (Zaluar, 2000, p. 102). Furthermore, there is one essential type of consumption: "bringing home the food", which falls to the head

of the family — the man. These are expenses carried out once a month, the so-called “monthly shopping”, consisting of staples such as rice, beans, oil and a range of cleaning products. These purchases, even if bought above all by using money provided by the male partner, are mostly controlled by the women, who, it is supposed, master the art of eking out the money till the following month.⁴ Some excerpts from the interviews illustrate this pattern:

D

Oh, that would be me, right? [laughing]... He works and pays his bills, but if I tell him I need this or that... He has to give me the money, because I wear the trousers here, right? (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

E

He [the husband] doesn't know the password for his salary card, he earns R\$470, R\$500. I pay some things upfront. I bought some clothes on the credit card, shoes, but recently what I've been paying for is the air ticket [to go to her father's funeral in Maranhão]. When we didn't have a cooker and fridge, I bought them, and I'm paying off the bills with his money, so I give him, I don't know, R\$20, R\$30, whatever, for him to “wet his whistle” and that's okay. (Female interviewee, 51 years of age)

The examples presented bear out some reflections made by Cynthia Sarti (2007), in a study carried out in São Miguel Paulista, an outlying neighborhood of São Paulo. Sarti argues that among the poor, all spheres of social action are mediated by a set of moral precepts represented by the family.⁵ In the author's view, it is “a fundamental symbolic reference that enables us to think of, organize and give meaning to the social world, within and outside the family environment” (p. 9); all those actions that figure in the foreground as individual actions, such as entering or leaving the job market, consuming certain goods and services, taking part in certain sociability activities, are subordinated to family logic and strategies. Given the importance of the family, understanding how authority is structured within the family becomes a fundamental component for understanding the way of life of the poor. The authority of the family is made up of social roles ascribed to people by their gender positions⁶.

Making a fundamental distinction between Home and Family, Sarti argues that the family is the masculine domain par excellence. The man is the highest authority and it is for him to mediate between the family and the outside world (as the family's spokesman), to provide money, impose and demonstrate morality, which in an oversimplification means being a hard-working individual and not drinking alcohol.⁷ On the other hand, the home, hierarchically

⁴ See also CALDEIRA (1984, p. 106) on this point.

⁵ Duarte (1986), Caldeira (1984) and Zaluar (2000) generally share this understanding.

⁶ For Joan Scott (1990, p. 14), we should remember, “gender is a building block of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is the principal mode of giving meaning to relations of power”.

⁷ On this point, it is interesting to highlight the fact that for Sarti, the male role does not necessarily have to be played by the husband; in non-conjugal households it can be shifted to other men like a mother's brother, an older son, the godfather of a child. Of course there is a certain loss in such cases: “Recent studies on the urban poor show, to the contrary, the symbolic strength of these patterns even today,

equal to the family, is a female domain. Women must be the housewives, bring up the children and occupy themselves with the money and with consumption:

However, the fact that the man is identified with the authority figure does not mean that women are without authority. There is a complementary division of authorities between the man and the woman in a family which corresponds to the differentiation between the home and the family. The house or home is identified with the wife and the family with the husband. [...] In line with the precedence of the husband over the wife and of the family over the home, the husband is deemed the head of the family and the woman the head of the household. (SARTI, 2007, p. 63)

In an interview where the husband and wife talk about task sharing, the distinction between home and family proposed by Sarti becomes very clear:

F

Female Interviewee: I'm the one who takes all the initiatives, I deal with the kids' school, teachers and parents meetings, he rarely goes it's all me...

Husband: Each has their own little duty.

Douglas: Right, what's yours?

Husband: Oh, mine is looking for work, taking the kids to the doctor when they're sick, tidying up... (Interviewee, 43, and husband, 42)

Each member of the couple has their own "little duty" in the family hierarchy, in other words, a set of specific obligations to be met by the husband and by the wife. It is true that in many situations this sharing of roles (or of "little duties") leads to certain conflicts. In the case of women we see that their individual plans, such as taking a course in higher education, may be blocked by obligations such as looking after children and the home. For men, this sharing of roles very often entails the major responsibility of being the principal breadwinner.

Thus, despite the personal problems and dramas involved in the process, social recognition for men involves good performance as a providing husband: "a good husband is one, therefore, who likes working; in other words, one who will work overtime in order to shoulder the burden of expenses alone" (Zaluar, 2000, p. 101). When the man cannot bear this "burden" (example G) of carrying the family by himself, a great deal of his prestige ebbs away. Receiving help from anyone is shameful for men, as this declaration shows:

G

Men have this burden, since they think they are the leaders in the home, they think they have to work to bring home food for everyone, don't they? [...] Actually I think men are ashamed to say: "I couldn't make it, my family is in difficulty and I was unable to provide for them". Whereas this isn't the

reaffirming male authority by the central role of the man as mediator with the outside world, socially weakening those families where there is no male 'provider' of a roof, of food, and respect" (2007, p. 58).

case for us women. If a woman realizes she is in difficulty — not herself exactly but her children — then a real mother (know what I mean?) will do it, she will humble herself. (Female interviewee, 23 years of age)

The household expenses and the socialization of the children, according to Zaluar, fall to the women. Teresa Caldeira, in her *Política dos outros* [“Politics of the others”], mentioned that child-raising tasks fall almost exclusively to women. Caldeira also observed that the presence of children in poor families, far from harming women, can be seen on another plane as a source of acknowledgment. Mastery of the home, despite signifying constraints and frustrations, is a space legitimated by gender roles in which a woman holds great autonomy and authority: “the woman is the head of the household” (Sarti, 2007).

As we saw in examples D and E, women’s autonomy in spending is noteworthy, the husbands bring in money for the monthly expenses, while the women manage and carry out the purchases. Mastery in the home does not end with the administration of money for household purchases and bills; above all it means the upbringing and socialization of the children, a task deemed fundamentally feminine. As Zaluar observed: “whereas the father is the main provider, the mother is responsible, beyond household chores, for the important tasks of managing the home and socializing the children” (2000, p. 97). The interviews demonstrate how independent women are in deciding what to do with money in the case of the children, above all cases A, B and C, where purchasing decisions concerning food, clothing, footwear and entertainment for the children fell exclusively to the woman.

Analysis of the interviews also suggests great decorum in the use of PBF money. We may notice that the use of money from the PBF is accompanied by a strong morality, a right and wrong way of spending this money, and this is a moral judgment that seems absent in relation to the use of money from other social policies, such as pensions. We shall later see how the role of the state, by making the benefit conditional on school attendance, on the nutritional and health follow-up of the children, and also on ante-natal tests for pregnant women, has had a decisive influence on the spending patterns of the money from this public policy⁸. Thus, the analysis of opinions about the use of money given by participants in the program finds a set of moral obligations that interfere decisively in the ways in which the money from the program is spent.

H

Female Interviewee: This month even... I get one hundred Reals, and with eighty Reals I bought my daughter’s school materials and right now I’m going to the store to buy her a sweater, because she asked me for one, with the twenty that was left over, you know? So it’s really for my daughters.

André: The money that you get from the benefits, you spend only on your daughters?

⁸ Article 3, of Law no. 10836/2004, the act which set up the family a program, sets forth that “Granting of the benefits will depend on an individual’s meeting, as appropriate, conditions of ante-natal tests, nutritional follow-up, health follow-up, an 85% school attendance in regular education, as well as other conditions laid down in the regulation” (BRASIL, 1994).

Female Interviewee: Just on my daughters... but more for the older one, you know? Because the younger one's father provides [an allowance], right? The older one doesn't get anything from her father... I think what's right is doing what I'm doing, spending it on my daughter. It's not right to spend it on myself, because it's something that belongs to the children; unless I was pregnant, because pregnant women also get the PBF, but even then I think it should be stuff for the kids, like a trousseau and everything. (29 years)

I

She [an acquaintance of the interviewee] had three children, but she didn't spend it on the kids, she spent the money on drugs[...] There are a lot of mothers who do that these days, unfortunately, many mothers do that, instead of treating their children to a Danone, you know? or a piece of clothing or some material for the school, because the government provides most of the material, but sometimes something is missing, and instead of helping, it doesn't, it goes on rum or on those goddamn drugs. Do you know what I mean? I think that's really wrong. I just don't agree with that, you know? (Female interviewee, 40 years of age)

Somewhat schematically, what one can understand from this is that the correct use of money is spending directly on the children – clothes, school materials and food.

In the case of food, most often the items purchased using the PBF money are those not included in the monthly purchases: candies, chocolates, and soft drinks, normally given to the children by mothers as a treat. A survey conducted by IBASE (the National Institute for Social and Economic Analyses — Instituto Nacional de Análises Sociais e Econômicas) into food and nutritional safety among beneficiaries of PBF identified a major dilemma concerning food. “The fact that women in their totality are the titled beneficiaries of the program and use the resources to a large extent on food, particularly on items demanded by the children, has also led to dilemmas with regard to promoting a healthy diet in the family environment. The task of giving in to or resisting children's whims is also the mother's responsibility, in a decision-making process that may be perverse. Many women, despite considering certain foodstuffs unhealthy, described difficulty in denying their children these desires, especially since so many other cravings are denied”. (IBASE, 2008, p. 75-76)

It was possible also to identify that the correct consumption may encompass the payment of certain services, such as renting videos for the children, paying for cyber cafés, and in one isolated case, Internet expenses exclusively for a 16-year-old son. The main point is that money is spent directly on the children.

Indirect uses, in other words those not specifically aimed at the children (since the other inhabitants of the household could benefit from them) are also seen as correct, but on a slightly lower threshold to the direct expenditures. Such is the case of expenses on the home and on foodstuffs not included in the monthly purchase, like fruit and vegetables, and sometimes a cut of meat. Likewise in certain cases (B, C and E) it was possible to observe the purchase of household appliances such as a television, microwave oven, DVD player, on credit

using the program's money. In other situations it could be observed that the PBF money was used to pay off utility bills: gas, electricity, telephone etc. or also, as in the case of one account collected by Ana Fonseca, of a participant in the Minimum Income Program of Campinas who used the money from the program to get married and thus strengthen the family ties:

The atmosphere was getting difficult. The kids kept asking me: Mom, why didn't you get married with my father? [...] So with this money from the minimum income I made a dream come true. I saved up and bought what I needed. It was a very simple wedding: from the registry office and back home. I prepared lunch, we had lunch; I invited the witnesses. All this time that I was on the minimum income I managed to achieve a lot of things, especially this dream because I wasn't married, and I got married. (2001, p.196-197)

Whereas the wrong type of use is when the money is used for the recipient or other people, but not the children. And even then there is a question of degree. A mother who spends the money on personal items such as a manicure, or on nail varnish or perfume, is using the money "wrongly", but not too wrongly. However, those who spend the money on alcohol, cigarettes, drugs (example I) are harshly condemned. The point to be emphasized here is that women are responsible for complying with the moral precepts in using the PBF money, and they have the autonomy to decide on the use provided that it is related to expenses with their children and household. It is therefore significant to find that, for the interviewees, social recognition necessarily involves a good performance in taking charge of the home. As Marlene Rodrigues observes:

It is in the domestic sphere and in caring for the children that they can stand out and show what they have made of their lives and what they know how to do. The importance ascribed to child care, and the recognition of women's preoccupation with this, makes the behavior of those who don't play the role properly even more reprehensible. (2009, p. 236)

That is the case with this interviewee who feels deeply ashamed because she did not manage to throw a birthday party for her daughter:

J

This one here [referring to one of her daughters], it's her godmother who throws birthday parties for her every year. But that one over there [the other daughter], poor thing, she's never had one... that's why my dream was to have a job and be able to have a party for her, you know? She's almost becoming a teenager, poor thing. You know, one day she'll turn up with her boyfriend, get married and say "oh, I never had a birthday party!" Imagine my face, right? (27 years)

It is important to bear in mind that the association of women with reproductive and maternal roles, within the design of the conditions attached to PBF, as well as in government public discourse and in the way the program is actually experienced by people, is the major objection to the ability of this public policy to emancipate women. It can be seen that much of the criticism of conditional income transfer programs lies in the fact that the state, by privileging women as the interlocutors of the program, contributes greatly to producing and

disseminating social representations associating women with the role of mothering⁹. Thus not all individuals are entitled to this income, but only those who play certain social roles such as for example that of the mother, and in the name of this role receive the benefit as representatives of their families.

Ana Fonseca has observed that in conditional income transfer programs, restrictive conceptions prevail that mean that they are not a universal right, and that the bridge to assuring this right involves the family. On the topic of the Campinas Minimum Income Guarantee Program, she says:

...the family bond, after respecting income conditions, is the determinant element of access to the program, and once again we see the valuing or privileging of the family: income reinforcement associated with the nature of family ties and to the bringing up of children. (2001, p. 28)

Carin Klein (2005, 2007), analyzing the School-Scholarship Program (Programa Bolsa-Escola) — set up in the second term of office of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1999-2002) and seen as an embryo of the PBF because it was an income transfer policy conditional upon children's attending school), argues that the main effect of the discourse produced by the state within the scope of this public policy (either by its representatives or by advertisements) is to produce a "regime of truth" by means of a social pedagogy wherein women are "naturally" associated with their reproductive and maternal role.

Along these lines, I am saying that the benefit paid by the program intends to assure, as a counterpart, family commitment — usually triggered by the intervention of mothers, who will be able to guarantee attendance at school of all children of school age. Thus, representations disseminated and instituted in public policies such as the Bolsa-Escola seek to impose a given way of being a member of a family structure (mother, father, son, daughter, or other) indicating and defining, for example, "natural" behaviors that are essential for a child's development. (2005, p. 32)

Delaine Costa (s.d.), addressing the effects of the PBF on the empowerment and autonomy of women, understands that concepts of gender relations linking the reproductive role of women to childcare are expressed in the program. Social behavior is thus taken for granted, insofar as "the social role played within the reproductive sphere is linked to gender identity, for this set of women, who 'naturally' perform activities ascribed to them by the sexual division of labor" (p. 7).

These activities would be: taking care of children, managing the money, managing the household, etc. It should be noted that this taking for granted of gender roles present in the design of the program coincides with the representations of the interviewees themselves concerning their social condition and identity. The strong bond between the role attributed to poor women by the state and the self-representations of the (female) interviewees may also

⁹ Mothering is understood here as the performance, culturally ascribed to women, of care for children, whether actually as mothers as such, or as "proxy mothers", such as grandmothers, aunts, sisters. These cases of the mothering role being performed by "proxy mothers" are fairly frequent among beneficiaries of PBF (see Libardoni, 2008).

be seen in the national IBASE (2008) study of beneficiaries of PBF. A similar situation was found in the results of the national survey on the PBF as a means of fighting gender inequalities that was coordinated by Marlene Libardoni.

The legitimacy of this preference for women on the part of the Program was made clear by the fact that no beneficiary, and a negligible number of government agents (1.7%) said that they should not receive the benefit. The most common reasoning among beneficiaries is that women take better care and are better managers than men because, being mothers, they have greater contact with their children. The argument used by government agents also harks back to issues linked to motherhood, but places the accent on the fact that women have greater contact with the daily life of the household. Whether emphasis is placed on the children or on the home, the most widespread understanding is that women should be the title holders of the benefit because they are the ones with the greatest know-how. (2008, p. 4)

Two fundamental points result from this line of reasoning. First, the role played by government institutions in fixing rules and leading to women's maternal identity being taken for granted. Something worthy of criticism in itself, since taking this for granted legitimizes asymmetrical power relations between the sexes (Scott, 1990, p. 14). However, Klein adds that this type of association, in the context of a public policy, has the effect of making women equally responsible in facing the structural issues of poverty, and making them directly responsible for family failures.

Thus when the focus is on the stories of children in a context of poverty, violence, school failure, then institutions such as the school, the church, the media, the government and other social organizations often put forward the main explanation for this as being the failure of family relations, above all highlighting maternal/female absence or neglect. (2005, p. 40)

We see here a sort of privatization of the issue of poverty, which is no longer perceived as the result of broader social processes in which political institutions and the state play a fundamental role, but is seen as the result of direct personal efforts of mothers/women. As Gilson José Rodrigues Junior observes, "if it did not blame women, the state would have to face up to its inability to take care of most of its citizens, who, in most cases, do not even fit into this category" (2009, p. 33-34).

Carin Klein also suggests that this process of privatizing poverty and blaming mothers entails total exoneration of the masculine figure in assuming responsibility for its children.

...the core issue is: how, with this "new" conceptualization of the family, discussed and incorporated by most social programs, in the poor family it is basically "taken for granted" that it will be headed by women, matriarchal, in which men appear not to exist. (KLEIN, 2007, p. 352)

The criticism of public policies that make women responsible for facing up to structural problems enables us to raise another "core issue". Is it about knowing what should be done with women who neither wish to nor are able to be mothers or who "fail" in the task of dragging their children out of poverty by their own efforts? Gilson José Rodrigues Junior observes:

This is made clear in the moral grammar that is constructed around children and adolescents, that places them in a privileged position to the detriment of their families, above all their mothers, who by being made the people principally in charge, are also stigmatized as being especially guilty when they do not meet the expectations of society [...] Even today our society reduces women to the uterus, that is to say, the act of conceiving and caring for children and where those who are unable to or do not wish to have children are deemed “abnormal”. What should we then say of those who, having given birth to children, for a wide range of reasons and justifications consider themselves and/or are considered unfit to be mothers?

Undoubtedly a whole moral grammar has been constructed and is still being constructed today that relegates women to the plane of the under-other, and which will legitimize their exclusion from certain privileges reserved for the more civilized. Furthermore, for most of the women with whom I have interacted, the PBF, as already pointed out, is their only source of income, making them what Loic Wacquant has called welfare mothers, women who are demonized, considered a “phantom social threat” because they live off social welfare. (2009, p. 32-33)

As can be seen, poor women are doubly at fault. Firstly, they are directly responsible for the failures in combating poverty. Given the impossibility of defeating poverty merely by personal willpower and effort, the women who take part in income transfer programs are also blamed for taking money from the government without doing their part. It must be considered that in the interviews I carried out with PBF participants in Campinas I did not find this blaming made explicit. By and large, the interviewees do not feel stigmatized by taking part in the PBF, nor do they describe themselves as solely responsible for dragging their children out of poverty. What does seem to exist is a feeling of fatalism, in which poverty is something that has always existed, and that the pathway out of poverty depends to a large extent on types of “help”, those provided by the state being the most important, and very little depends on personal effort. The fact that we do not find this sentiment of guilt being verbalized in the statements of the interviewees does not seem to invalidate the argument that the design and introduction of this income transfer policy leads to the direct accountability of poor women in the fight against poverty.

This brief incursion into arguments that are critical of the PBF has been enough to demonstrate the relevance of such observations, particularly with regard to problems that the State represents by reinforcing the “natural” bonds between women and the exercise of mothering, as well as creating the conditions for them to be directly blamed for failing to address poverty. As Marlene Libardoni points out, these are relevant criticisms, but they should be played down by two approaches:

One of them is that in fact the beneficiaries use the money received to take care of the home, and above all to take care of the children, because they have always done that and not because the program establishes this. The other is that the urgency of relieving hunger in the here and now leaves little room for other considerations. Put differently, the change in the traditional role attributed to women has neither been thought through, nor even thought of, as unnecessary in the face of the pressing need to reproduce life through mobilization of this role. (2008, p. 13)

Marlene Teixeira Rodrigues, who took part in the national survey coordinated by Libardoni concerning the PBF and the fight against gender inequalities in two state capitals, Aracaju (SE) and Belo Horizonte (MG), has mentioned the possibility of also finding positive aspects in the inclusion of these women in public policy, aspects that could be deemed “unforeseen or not previously sought results” (2009, p. 222). According to the author,

...analysis of the data showed that being a beneficiary of PBF produces unquestionably positive results for these women in terms of improving nutrition and access to a range of resources. The chance of purchasing goods, buying on credit and scheduling expenditures gives them new tools for managing a world until then partially or totally unknown. (2009, p. 221-222)

As to positive aspects, we must consider that the gains provided by women benefiting from the program are not limited merely to improved chances of consumption of durable goods and foodstuffs for the home. Not that this is unimportant, since many of these items, considered to be “help” by being associated with the female domain, are often fundamental for the survival and the social skills of people targeted by the program. It can also be seen that it is money that women have the autonomy to spend. As Libardoni observes,

...there are strong signs that the purchasing power of these women has led to changes in the family hierarchy simply because the women can now exercise choice, and above all negotiate their authority in the domestic environment. (LIBARDONI, 2008, p. 8)

These aspects appear synthesized in the following excerpt:

K

André: And when you have some money like in the family a program, do think it changes things, and you think you can do things that you couldn't do before?

Interviewee: Oh yes, it does get better, because suppose I need something that he [the husband] says is not very important... like, you know, I do people's fingernails for them... So I need to buy cotton wool, nail polish remover, enamel... He says “why did you buy that...” And I can say “look, I bought it with my own money, here, it's mine”... That's the thing... Or suppose the boys [her sons] want some DVDs, he says [her husband] “what, why more DVDs?”... So I just go and buy them... And in order to stop them hanging around on the streets, I let them watch cartoons... (23 years)

Female participation in the program encourages this incursion into a world that is “partially or totally unknown” to these women, beyond the spheres of consumption and autonomy within the home. The responsibility for meeting the conditions of the program, seen as a female task, seems to enable links to be established between the participants in the program and the “outside world”, and in particular the state itself, without intermediation by male figures such as husbands, partners or others. From this point of view, women's participation in the program is making the boundaries mentioned by Cynthia Sarti more elastic and flexible, between the role of the man as a mediator between the family and the outside world, and the woman as the home maker:

The Man embodies the idea of authority, as the mediation with the outside world for the family. He is the moral authority, responsible for the family's respectability. His presence makes the family a positive moral entity, insofar as he guarantees respect. He therefore answers for the family. The woman represents another important dimension of authority in maintaining the unity of the group. She looks after everybody and ensures that everything is in its place. She is the mistress of the house, a designation that reveals the same pattern of hierarchical relations in the family and work. (2007, p. 63-64)

The feeling of commitment aroused when the women start to take part in the program, and above all when they fulfill their "obligations", which are laid down in the conditions, is telling evidence of the direct relationship with the outside world that is enabled by the PBF. This sentiment comes through very clearly in the following statement:

L

Female Interviewee: So, if you follow the program just right, taking your child to be weighed, then it's steady money, like cleaning houses is not steady money [...] but I know that if I follow the program the money will be there for me at the end of the month.

André: When you talk about following the program just right, what do you mean?

Female interviewee: It means taking the child to be weighed every month, making sure the child doesn't miss school. That didn't used to happen, right? But it's a responsibility, it's a commitment. (29 years)

It is quite clear that taking part in the PBF means commitment, a sort of contract between herself as family representative and the state, mostly represented by the figure of former president Lula da Silva. One should not forget that the idea of commitment goes back to a set of obligations or undertakings entered into by people who share a temporal link. "Following the program just right" means meeting the conditions, embodied in the correct use of the money, and this produces a more reliable and longer lasting relationship between the parties ("steady money") than exists with private employers.¹⁰ The chance to establish links and build a long-lasting relationship with the outside world through PBF has also been noted by Marlene Rodrigues, when she reflects on socio-educational activities organized by city governments, which are often part of the routine for those participating in the program. For the author, ...involvement in activities promoted within the scope of the program has profound repercussions for these women's daily lives, by allowing them to integrate productively, even if in precarious conditions, but basically because it represents the chance of participation beyond the universe of the home. (RODRIGUES, 2009, p. 236-236)

The nationwide study of the PBF and the combat against gender inequality, which interviewed people living in capital cities, mid-sized cities and rural towns, highlighted the fact that,

¹⁰ In another text (Pires, 2010), I seek to explore how the conditions laid down by the PBF may be seen as setting up a relationship of exchange and reciprocity between beneficiaries of the public policy and the State.

especially in the case of the smaller towns, women's entry into the program was very often preceded by their need to obtain personal documentation for the first time, such as birth certificates or ID cards. Thus these women

...realized that they are somehow part of a broader social space that goes beyond the local streets and the neighborhood. In symbolic terms, this impact of the program on the lives of the beneficiaries is potentially more striking than the other two impacts described above [the women's visibility as consumers and the affirmation of their authority in the domestic space]. This is because knowing that they are part of a citizenship, while not actually exercising this citizenship because they have no existence in the public sphere causes, in the words of the administrator, an upheaval in these women's subjectivity. An upheaval that the Program ought to exploit in order to extend its own effectiveness. (RODRIGUES, 2008, p. 10-11)

Possibly the most important feature of women's participation in the PBF is marked by the tension between the chance of profit provided by entering the program on the one hand, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles pushing the exercise of mothering by these women into being taken for granted, on the other. As Marlene Rodrigues states, despite the positive aspects, it is an open question whether these gains only become possible through the emphasis on the role of the mother attributed to the beneficiaries. Going from one institution to another to take part in these activities to receive the benefit, or to meet the conditions, just like monthly access to a monetary resource, enables them to find value and revalue themselves in the eyes of the domestic group; however, this occurs because of the embodiment of and compliance with the roles that are forced on them by their condition as mothers. (2009, p. 235)

The same problem seems to be present in what one interviewee from the town of São Luís (MA) says in Libardoni's study: "We women feel much more self-assured. Since the money is guaranteed, we're not afraid any more. We know that the money will be there for us. But there hasn't been any real change in women's lives, though" (2008, p. 8) — in reference to the fact that the social roles attributed to women have changed little or hardly at all since they joined the program. Ultimately, these women will continue to be recognized as and valued for their performance as mothers. Finally, even had the original intention of the program been to fight gender inequalities — which in fact was not its purpose — then given the short amount of time since its implementation, it is very unlikely that there would have been changes in gender relations.

FINAL COMMENTS

I have tried to interpret the meanings of the term "help" when used in the speech of interviewees when asked about the importance of the PBF in their lives. It was possible to identify two important meanings. In the first place, the term "help" is used in certain situations to mean the specific fact of taking part in an income transfer program in the context of a region like Campinas. The chances of entering and leaving the job market (both formal and informal) and participating in social programs (both public and private) are seen by interviewees as being more abundant in this city than in other towns (remembering that most of the participants in the PBF were not born in Campinas). In fact, many situations were found in which the money received from the PBF is added to other sources of income, whether from

paid labor or otherwise, which would seem to establish the meaning of “help” as a supplement. Furthermore, the chance of accumulating a symbolic capital living in a place like Campinas, which in principle offers a range of coveted opportunities, such as higher education (both for the participant and for their children), even if these are unattainable at the moment, is part of a set of experiences that affect the way in which the PBF is perceived by people.

The second meaning of the term “help” results from the symbolic incorporation of the resources of the program as a female money. It could be seen that participation in the PBF, the uses of the money, and the spending decisions are seen as the jurisdiction of the women. It was stressed that women’s participation in the PBF is marked by tension. While exercising these competencies provides unquestionable gains — whether as a consumer or in reinforcing domestic authority — all of these achievements are only possible through the reinforcement of the association of women with the reproductive sphere and their roles as mothers. As Marlene Rodrigues and Marlene Libardoni state, it may be more important initially to show the complexities pervading participation in the PBF than to tilt the balance towards one or other side. Thus the example of Campinas gave signs that point toward “unforeseen results” in the participation of women, such as the possibility of establishing connections with the outside world, and in particular with the State, and thus feeling a sort of political belonging unfamiliar until then, a victory that goes beyond those gains offered by consumption or by greater autonomy in household decisions. It was important to see that the tension between greater autonomy and acceptance of gender roles, which seems to characterize the participation of women in this public policy, was reflected in the interviews, since this political belonging is only possible in as much as women play the role of mothers. The challenge for the PBF, to promote greater gender equity, is, according to Libardoni, that of incorporating into and valuing in the management of the program those advances in symbolic dimensions present in the way in which the program is experienced by women.

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