

**Men go around making kids and “don't even care”: gender, parenting and social protection in northeastern Brazil****Homem sai fazendo filho e “tá nem aí”: gênero, parentalidade e proteção social no nordeste brasileiro****Hombre hace hijos y “no está ni ahí”: género, paternidad y protección social en el noreste brasileño****Received: 01/06/2016****Approved: 10/09/2016****Published: 01/01/2017****Octavio José Rio do Sacramento <sup>1</sup>**

Considering gender, conjugality, parenthood and social protection policies as an articulated whole, the study aims at understanding how the day-to-day life of lower class women from the neighbourhood of Ponta Negra, in Natal-RN, Brazil, are permeated by a cumulative series of constraints and responsibilities. Gathered during an ethnographic field study, especially through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the empirical elements show that the dominant gender values and the matrifocality that they originate force many women to assume, almost exclusively, the roles of economic, educational and affective providers for their children, generating situations of vulnerability which demand the existence of social protection devices, which, paradoxically, tend to burden them even more and reinforce gender asymmetries.

**Descriptors:** Gender identity; Marriage; Parenting; Public policy; Brazil.

Considerando de forma articulada o gênero, a conjugalidade, a parentalidade e as políticas de proteção social, o estudo visa compreender como os quotidianos de vida de mulheres de classes populares do bairro de Ponta Negra, em Natal-RN, são permeados por uma série cumulativa de constrangimentos e responsabilidades. Recolhidos no âmbito de um trabalho de campo etnográfico, sobretudo por via da observação participante e de entrevistas semidirigidas, os elementos empíricos mostram que os valores de gênero dominantes e sua matrifocalidade decorrente obrigam muitas mulheres a assumir, quase que em exclusivo, o papel de provimento econômico, educacional e afetivo dos filhos, gerando situações de vulnerabilidade que exigem dispositivos de proteção social, os quais, paradoxalmente, tendem a causar ainda mais encargos e a reforçar assimetrias de gênero.

**Descritores:** Identidade de gênero; Casamento; Poder familiar; Política social; Brasil.

Considerando de forma articulada el género, la conyugalidad, la parentalidad y las políticas de protección social, este estudio busca comprender cómo los cotidianos de vida de mujeres de clases populares del barrio de Ponta Negra, en Natal-RN, Brasil, están permeadas por una serie acumulada de restricciones y responsabilidades. Recogidos en el ámbito de un trabajo de campo etnográfico, sobre todo a través de la observación participante y de las entrevistas semi-estructuradas, los datos empíricos demuestran que los valores de género dominantes y su matrifocalidad a ellos asociada obligan a muchas mujeres a asumir, casi exclusivamente, el papel de provisión económica, educativa y afectiva de los hijos, generando situaciones de vulnerabilidad que exigen dispositivos de protección social, los cuales, paradójicamente, tienden a causar aún más sobrecargas y a reforzar las asimetrías de género.

**Descriptor:** Identidad de género; Matrimonio; Responsabilidad parental; Política social; Brasil.

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## INTRODUCTION

Using as an empiric reference the neighborhood of Ponta Negra (Natal/RN, Brazilian Northeast) and the circumstances of life of women from the so called lower classes, this article succinctly explores the articulation between gender, conjugality, parenthood and social protection.

Gender here is seen as a system of values and norms, contextually variable and multidimensional, comprising male and female identities and taking into account that, as a result of social constructs, "masculinity and femininity are not superposable, respectively, to men and women", as Almeida highlights<sup>1</sup>.

The gender system originates some of the main coordinates which regulate the organization of conjugal ties — relatively well sustained projects of common intimacy (marriage, cohabitation, living together) —, as well as parental responsibilities vis-à-vis the couple's children

When the gender values are highly asymmetrical, as it is common in the social context of Ponta Negra, Brazil, they tend to become a disruptive factor of conjugal ties, and when the couple has children, they contribute decisively to burden women with most of the parental responsibilities.

Hence, the recurrence of matrifocal situations: that is, familial configurations where the mother has a central position inside the domestic sphere, taking responsibility over most productive and reproductive obligations, whilst the father is either absent, or assumes an intermittent and less significant role<sup>2-8</sup>.

Considering this circumstances, it is frequent for women to resort to help from their familial circle, as well as to more formal types of support, such as the social protection policies based in conditioned financial transfers (like *Bolsa Família*), which aim at surpassing more immediate material vulnerabilities, stimulate citizenship and inhibit the reproduction of poverty and exclusion<sup>9-13</sup>.

However, these very same policies of social integration also contribute to the

"feminization of responsibilities"<sup>14</sup> in the familial context, reproducing regimes of symbolic violence and male domination<sup>15</sup> which severely impact women.

Rooted in this theoretic-conceptual framework and designed as eminently exploratory, the discussion brought by the text is targeted at three main objectives: to map gender settings and the dynamics of conjugality and filiation which are the bases of situations in which the mother bears most of the domestic and parental responsibilities; to signal the role of the larger familial system as an informal support network to lone motherhood and, on the other hand, to show how this same network can become another source of burdens for the female; and to highlight the paradoxical and perverse effects that can come from the social protection which benefits so many women.

## METHODS

The analysis developed here is supported by a field research conducted in Ponta Negra in 2009/2010, regarding transnational intimate relationships between European tourists and Brazilian women<sup>16</sup>. Even though that investigation did not have as a priority the themes here discussed, the empirical research has offered elements regarding the condition and life paths chosen by local women, as well as information about their gender relationships, conjugality dynamics and practices, parental responsibilities, and the connection with the devices of social assistance. The methodology followed was a quantitative approach, resorting to ethnography as a guiding strategy for a process of information collection in which participant observation and semi-structured interviews were privileged.

Unlike more standardized approaches, the ethnographic field research, which has as an important reference the participant observation, represents a methodological strategy from social sciences which does not follow rigid plans and procedures, nor does it consider sample criteria.

The researcher develops an empirical investigation process, temporally extended, spatially circumscribed, profound and with

artisanal features<sup>17</sup>, which aims at ensuring his effective immersion in the context where his study takes place<sup>18</sup>.

Through this immersion, the researcher builds a relatively vast relationship network which offers a firsthand access to an ample group of experiences and discourses from social actors, and comprehensive data regarding their respective contexts. The collected information is registered in narrative form in a field journal. However, beyond the notes in this journal, there is always another diffuse set of references and “impressions” which are inscribed in the researcher themselves in the form of tacit knowledge, almost naturalized knowledge, later used, sometimes imperceptibly, in the production of analyses and texts.

The central role of participant observation in the field work in Ponta Negra was also useful to pave the way for the use of other complementary methodological procedures, and for the craft of respective research instruments.

That was the case of the semi-structured interviews, a type of interview which is flexible, non-standardized, non-imposed, and according to which the interviewer does not intervene much, offering the speaker the opportunity to lay out and explain his discourse. The process which led to the interview followed, generally, a certain sequence of events: first, there were informal conversations and attempts to generate empathy; only after those would the researcher conduct the more formal interview, which generally was subject to audio recording.

It is also important to highlight that all research procedures have followed the fundamental ethical imperatives of scientific investigations, namely those which take into account free and informed consent of the people interviewed, as well as the rigid maintenance of their anonymity.

## RESULTS

In total, more than 20 interviews were carried out with women at Ponta Negra, Brazil, along six months. After that, such interviews were transcribed and subjected to

content analysis, in order for inferences to be generated from their elements and most significant signs.

## DISCUSSION

### Gender, conjugality and parenthood

Still relatively young (most of them between 20 and 30 years of age), the women surveyed generally express a profound dissatisfaction regarding the gender dialectic which serves as a base for their relationships with their co-citizens, and this is one of the many reasons which justify their preference to have intimate contacts with European tourists which go to the Ponta Negra neighborhood, one of the most famous and cosmopolitan *Balneários* in Natal.

The *Brazilian* man (particularly the one from the northeast) tends to be pictured by them in negative colors. They refer to them with terms such as sexist, *womanizer*, *rude*, selfish, and not really worried about their partner and children. Regarding more concrete behaviors, they accuse their Brazilian ex-partners of such things as infidelity, absence of romanticism, not fulfilling parental obligations, and scarcely contributing for day-to-day expenses, and that behavior compromises aspirations (passion, trust, sharing, equity and stability) which are fundamental for their conjugal projects.

The *macho* practices and ideologies, with their patriarchal features, are alleged as the main cause of the consecutive problems in a couple's history, since the moment they start dating up to their marriage, and after. Most of the women interviewed have been through several divorce or separation experiences.

The children born during the relationships that ended — almost all of the women have children, being that many of them have two or more children, though they are quite young — stay, in most cases, under the responsibility of these women. The participation of the fathers regarding parental obligations is generally not meaningful. In Ponta Negra, as in other Brazilian contexts where there are low income Brazilian families<sup>19</sup>, and especially in

the *vila* whence the neighborhood came, lone mothers are quite common. That's the origin of the popular saying, so many times repeated by the participants, which was also used as a title to this work: *Men go around making kids and don't even care*.

The reason for this pronounced gender asymmetry regarding parental responsibilities amounts to an ideological system in which one can see, quite clearly, that the mother is assumed to be a person with natural inclinations toward caring for kids.

Also, that assumption about the mother tends to be weighed quite heavily as a condition when it comes to legal decisions regarding child custody, after conjugal ties have been undone. That continues happening even after the introduction of meaningful changes in the laws which, at first, seem to contribute for more equal gender relationships when it comes to the regulation of parental influence<sup>20</sup>.

Until some years ago, the Brazilian Civil Code only accepted exclusive or unilateral custody of children (that is, only one of the parents had integral custody) and children stayed under their mother's custody in most cases<sup>20</sup>. Law n. ° 11.698/2008, from June 13, 2008<sup>21</sup>, instituted shared custody, based on the notion that the progenitors have equal duties to their children, and since its institution, it became the legal norm when it comes to the attribution of parental responsibilities.

This relevant legislative change may, however, not mean (at least initially) the change one hopes for in the (re)organization of the obligations regarding motherhood and fatherhood. In this case, as in others, it is likely that a certain cultural inertia will contribute to generate dissonances between legal determinations and their operationalization, and according to them, women-mothers, supposed to be naturally more apt for child care, tend to be overburdened with parental obligations<sup>20</sup>.

### **Female burdens, family support and social protection**

Similarly to what happens all over Brazil, most lower class women in Ponta Negra are at the fringes of the formal labor market or in extremely precarious situations, with low income, and no stability or work progression perspectives of any kind<sup>22,23</sup>.

Some women resort to "transactional sex" (*hooking*) with tourists as a main or complementary form of achieving their livelihood<sup>16</sup>. In this economic framework, the fact that women take parental responsibilities almost entirely upon themselves, without much help from previous partners, contributes to intensify the burdens they have to carry, and they find themselves managing their complex and simultaneous participation in both production and reproduction spheres<sup>19</sup>.

While simultaneously being mothers, heads of the family, and workers, they often benefit from the support of an extended familial network when it comes to caring for the children, especially from female relatives in the mother's side of the family (mother, sisters, grandmother and maternal aunts). However, their integration in this circuits of reciprocal giving, receiving and giving back within the bosom of a "family-extended-kin"<sup>24</sup> equally imposes upon them a moral duty to contribute to the economic effort their family space needs.

Beyond the children, female responsibilities extend, thus, to their respective familial groups, in which both close relatives and more distant ones are included. That means that the needs and expectations of the relatives are factors almost always considered when these women are defining their respective life goals, particularly when it comes to strategies of socioeconomic reproduction.

Some of them benefit from the federal program Bolsa Família, from the Ministry of Social Development and the Fight Against Hunger (MDS). Commonly considered the most relevant policy among Brazilian social protection structures, Bolsa Família offers a financial support which, in 2010, could amount to a total of between R\$32,00 and

R\$306,00, depending on the family composition, characteristics and earnings of the family household<sup>25,26</sup>. In June 2016, the average monthly amount received by each beneficiary family was R\$176<sup>27</sup>.

The positive effects of this flagship social protection policy are undeniable, allowing people to face extreme financial shortages while, at the same time, promoting equity and social integration. It is, therefore, a relevant structural device when it comes to fighting against the intergenerational persistence of poverty and exclusion cycles, contributing, simultaneously, to consolidate citizenship, and forward democracy.

However, one cannot forget that, generally, women are the ones to assume the burden of contracting Bolsa Família and answering to its conditional rules, which regard their children's education and health. Hence, this social support policy for the fight against poverty finds itself in a manifest situation of feminization and maternalism<sup>14,28</sup>.

Certainly guided by the stereotypical notion that men do not manage this kind of financial support in the most careful ways possible to satisfy the needs of their household<sup>29</sup>, the State gives the responsibilities of the program mostly to women, especially in their capacity as mothers, selecting them as the fundamental partners when it comes to prevention or minimization of social vulnerabilities. The same phenomenon of "social inclusion feminization"<sup>30</sup> is evident in most social policies based in conditioned financial transfers that exist in other Latin American countries.

Such a situation, albeit provides certain material empowering conditions to women and recognizes the relevance of their role in the management of the domestic space resources<sup>29,31,32</sup> still contributes, paradoxically, to reinforce the re-traditionalizing of identities and gender inequalities<sup>33</sup>, as well as to the persistence of familial canons<sup>34,35</sup>.

Therefore, the formal social protection turns itself into another axis for the reproduction of iniquity, in a system based

upon male privileges and many female obligations, revealing scarce sensibility to the many negative impacts (domestic violence, risk behavior, conjugal and familial instability) which result from gender inequality and exaggerated masculinity models<sup>36,37</sup>.

Similar paradoxical effects are found in the formal social protection to which many of these mothers and heads of family resort. Despite having its virtues when it comes to the production of answers to situations of vulnerability and exclusion, even promoting a certain degree of female emancipation, the *Bolsa Família* policy, in the name of a supposed especial natural aptitude of women<sup>30</sup>, holds them as the main responsible for meeting the many requirements that stem from social assistance, burdening them with even more obligations and reproducing gender values which are one of the main causes of much of the multiple constraints to which women are subjected<sup>38,39</sup>.

The State should set an example, and develop policies that are not hostage to hegemonic male or female models<sup>40</sup>, being more sensitive to the growing diversity and flexibility of family and domestic space settings.

## CONCLUSION

The everyday life and path of many women of the lower classes of Ponta Negra is permeated by several instabilities, constraints and responsibilities which largely arise from local genre structures. It's in the framework of these structures, namely in the field of masculinity, that lie some of the main causes of disturbance and rupture of conjugal ties.

The weight of gender values once again is perceivable during the dissolution of conjugality, contributing for the custody of any children born in a relationship to almost always be given to the mother, who then has to assume most parental responsibilities and manage them together with the need to work in order to ensure the livelihood of her household. During this process, the extended family is an important informal support

system, even if, on the other hand, they are also another focus of obligations.

Therefore, it is important to evaluate in detail the perverse effects of social programs (such as *Bolsa Família*) and rethink their operation, not losing sight of how important it is to neutralize the persistence of sexist ideologies and strong gender asymmetries, which are profoundly responsible for several serious and quite evident problems, both in the familial context, and in the field of health.

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#### CONTRIBUTION

**Octávio Sacramento** was responsible for the design of the study, and for the writing of the article.

#### How to cite this article (Vancouver)

Sacramento O. Men go around making kids and “don't even care”: gender, parenting and social protection in northeastern Brazil. *REFACS* [Internet]. 2017 [cited in: *inserir dia, mês e ano de acesso*]; 5(1): 6-12. Available in: *link de acesso*. DOI:

#### How to cite this article (ABNT)

SACRAMENTO, O. Men go around making kids and “don't even care”: gender, parenting and social protection in northeastern Brazil. *REFACS*, Uberaba, MG, v. 5, n. 1, p. 6-12, 2017. Available in: *link de acesso*. Acesso em: *inserir dia, mês e ano de acesso*. DOI:

#### How to cite this article (APA)

Sacramento O. (2017). Men go around making kids and “don't even care”: gender, parenting and social protection in northeastern Brazil. *REFACS*, 5(1), 6-12. Recovered in: *inserir dia, mês e ano de acesso*. *Inserir link de acesso*. DOI: