# Social Work, Motherhood, and Mothering: Critical Feminist Perspectives

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# Social Welfare Policy in Brazil: The Reproduction of Gender Stereotypes and the Invisibility of Work Overload for Mothers

*This article approaches how gender stereotyping shapes social welfare policy implementation in harmful ways in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Social welfare workers were submitted to online questionnaires and personal interviews who revealed that gender stereotypes are present in the implementation of social welfare policy. Therefore, these practices end up reinforcing the sexual division of labour inside the family itself. Within this context, the majority of users of social welfare are women. The social welfare policy contributes to the maintenance of stereotyped gender roles when they attribute the care of children and the household chores to women rather than providing the needed support for the family to be able to protect their family members. The article concludes that the social welfare policy is contradictory because it defends the maternity protection. However, the structural context of rights violation experienced by these mothers—such as lack of daycare, lack of an adequate income, and poor living conditions—is dismissed during the intervention process. Therefore, women are considered responsible for the fulfilment of the program conditions, and if they fail, they are considered responsible and may lose their social benefit, reproducing the cycle of victimization and poverty.*

## Introduction

In the Brazilian context, social welfare policy is aimed at confronting socio-territorial inequalities, guaranteeing social minimums, providing conditions to meet social contingencies, and universalizing social rights (Brasil, "Política Nacional de Assistência Social"). Previous research from the state of Rio Grande do Sul attempted to answer the question of how gender stereotyping is reproduced within social welfare and social protection by investigating the social safety nets of a single social welfare system (SUAS). This article aims to

discuss the invisibility of women's workload in their role as mothers by social welfare policies practices and to explore the reproduction of gender stereotypes within the implementation process of social welfare policy in Brazil to contribute to the social protection of social welfare. This will be done through analyzing the social safety nets within the single social welfare system and examining the gender stereotyping present in this public policy that results in a discourse blaming mothers who fail to protect their children or who do not fulfill the requirements for receiving the social benefits. The findings presented in this article show how the SUAS addresses mothering and gives voice to social workers who work at social welfare centers as direct services providers or as managers (Gasparotto).

In 2005, the SUAS was established in Brazil. This system develops the provision of services, programs, projects, and socio-welfare benefits in a decentralized and participative manner throughout Brazil. SUAS manages social welfare centres, which are public units that offer services and organized according to the provided level of social protection. Furthermore, there are social welfare reference centers (CRAS), which aim to provide basic social protection, and specialized reference centers for social welfare (CREAS), which are designed to implement special social protection of medium complexity (Brasil, "Política Nacional de Assistência Social").

However, the SUAS does not effectively guarantee rights and social safety nets in Brazil, as collective investment and governmental responsibility are imperative to guarantee a welfare standard for mothers in need of welfare assistance. State intervention must ensure the reduction of social risks in the defense of a basic standard of living in order to distance social protection and welfare from the assistance, patronage, and patriarchal practices that contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Yet despite the predominance of women as users and workers affected by this policy, several studies have found the invisibility of gender issues in social welfare policy (Gasparotto; Brisola, Silva, and Sá; Carloto and Mariano).

Moreover, various personal and partisan/electoral interests are still strongly present in the management of SUAS, which are superimposed on the legitimate collective and public interest. The workers linked to CRAS and CREAS who participated in the research, as well as technical assistants working for the government, revealed the strong presence of conceptions and practices linked to electoral partisanship, patrimonialism, meritocracy, clientelism, and patriarchy (Gasparotto ). Thus, these limitations impact the social welfare safety net's ability to promote social equality between men and women.

To further elucidate this point, one example of this electoral interest in perpetuating gender inequality can been seen in the minister of the Ministry of Woman, Family, and Human Rights, Damares Alves. When Alves was designated as minister by the government of the president Jair Bolsonaro, she

said in her speech in Congress that a woman's ideal place is at home and that a women's natural role is to be a mother, even if she does not work at home. The minister emphasized that women are born to be mothers and that this special role in a woman's life is the most important one. Therefore, a woman should postpone her career and ambitions in order to fulfill the role of raising her children and caring for her family.

## Maternity Protection in the Social Welfare Policy

The legislation that establishes social welfare as a public policy and part of the Brazilian social security system defines as one of the objectives of this policy, among others, protection of the family, maternity, childhood, adolescence and. old age (Brasil, "Lei Orgânica da Assistência Social").

Considering the objectives of social welfare, the protection of women is considered a necessity that is exclusively related to being a mother, with a special focus on the period in which the woman is pregnant. Within the patriarchal capitalist system, in which the ideology of the bourgeois traditional family prevails (Marx) becomes a social determination that seeks to impose on women the traditional gender roles, including the need to comply with motherhood.

Within the formal level of public policy, this social imagination becomes constructed based on the sexual division of labour, through which women are entrusted with tasks related to the social reproduction of the family through a reductionist perspective. Ermildes Silva and Márcia Tavares argue that the role of care falls almost exclusively on poor women, who deprived of legal labour guarantees and quality public services, as they are responsible for the family, for caring for their children, for household chores, and for household finances. This role of caregiver is often invoked by social welfare policy. When analyzing this situation through a critical and gender perspective, the policy strategies can be seen as reinforcing the association of women with motherhood.

The formal documents that regulate social welfare as public policy maintain and reproduce the traditional ideas of social roles and spaces assigned to men and women, which represents a setback in the struggle for gender equality and acts as an important limitation within women's battle for equality. As women are required to fulfill the commitments imposed on the family by social services, social welfare helps to reinforce these traditional roles of care exclusively for women. Studies show that because of these policies, domestic activities and care become naturalized as women's work (Silva and Tavares; Carloto and Mariano; Gasparotto; Gasparotto and Grossi; Cisne; Biroli).

Social law, expressed in the social protection system, also characterizes the ambiguous way women's participation in society is conceived. The mixtures between public and private, rights and favours, as well as rights and obligations,

and the way women are fixed to motherhood define the contours of this weakened and sex-based citizenship (Carloto and Mariano). The strong presence of conservative culture in public policies, which associates women with motherhood, constitutes a significant limit imposed on women's citizenship and autonomy, especially due to the fact that throughout human history, the relations between men and women and the roles society attributes to them, have reproduced exploitative relationships, in which men possess the economic/political and social power (Lima, et al; Biroli) and women remain more vulnerable and are relegated to the domestic sphere.

## Methodology

This social study was guided by the dialectical-critical method, based on Marx's social theory. The research was conducted within the territory of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, which is located in the southern region of Brazil. The state of Rio Grande do Sul is made up of 497 municipalities (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística). The research settings included 697 social welfare centers (CRAS and CREAS) in the state (Secretaria Nacional de Avaliação e Gestão da Informação).

In addition, a total of 116 subjects participated in the study, all of whom were workers in the social welfare policy field at the municipal and state levels. Out of the 116 subjects, ninety-six were municipal workers linked to the social welfare centres established in the municipalities of the state, and twenty were social workers of the executive branch of the state, which is linked to the state managing body of SUAS. Within the municipal workers' sample, seventy-nine were social workers, representing 82.3 per cent of the total participants. The other professionals who participated include psychologists, pedagogues, and administrators.

Moreover, the ninety-six municipal workers represented 13.77 per cent of the centres located in the state. Out of the total of twenty-two professionals responsible for the technical assistance and monitoring of the municipal units, twenty participated in the survey, representing 90.90 per cent of the state employees. It should also be noted that all the state executive workers participating in this study were women. As for the workers in the municipal sphere, 90.62 per cent (eighty-seven) consisted of women and only 9.37 per cent (nine) consisted of men.

The objectives of this study were to analyse whether social welfare policies address gender inequalities and to describe the way gender stereotyping may shape social welfare policies and harm women welfare recipients. Data were collected through in-person interviews, which were carried out between October 13, 2015, and April 28, 2016, and online questionnaires, which were answered between September 21, 2015, and December 8, 2015. Semi-

structured interviews were conducted with the twenty female workers linked to the state. The main questions in the interviews were as follows: a) How is gender stereotyping present in SUAS?; b) How do you see the role of women in SUAS?; and c) How do the services, benefits, and programs of SUAS contribute to overcome gender inequalities?

An online questionnaire was sent to the coordinator of 697 social welfare centres within the municipal sphere and was answered by ninety-six professionals. The questionnaire was developed using Google docs tools, specifically Google Forms with closed answers and open ended questions. The main questions concerned their perceptions about how gender issues are present in the SUAS system, about women's responsibility for meeting the program´s conditionalities in order to receive the benefits, the role of women as mothers, and how the social services address gender inequalities. The collected data were submitted for content analysis based on Bardin.

## Findings

In relation to the responsibility that has been placed on women regarding the attachment of families to the services offered by SUAS, forty-six of ninety-six workers linked to the CRAS and CREAS believed that women were being overburdened from the assumed responsibility of accessing and participating in social services for the family. Below are some of the participant reports regarding the responsibilities and burdens imposed on women in relation to their participation in the social welfare services and activities:

> I believe that women are overburdened because they are held responsible for protecting their loved ones, participating in social welfare services, ensuring family provision, and educating children…. The father, regardless of how often he is called to the services, shows less commitment due to the cultural belief that childcare is primarily a maternal role. (Worker two, personal interview, Oct. 15 2015)

> Female participation is still greater, precisely because of the unequal gender relations that still perceive women as responsible for caring for the family. (Worker three, personal interview, Nov. 12, 2015)

Additionally, the workers mention the reproduction of cultural practices that overburden women. The interviews carried out with the technical assistants of the municipalities who were social workers validate this information as well, Two main empirical categories emerged: the reproduction of traditional gender roles and the gender invisibility in SUAS. As the participants discussed:

Families are not only composed of women…however proposals and strategies do not include men … We discussed getting rid of prejudices to work with families, and since most of them are women, about how to enable them to reach their autonomy and play a leading role. (Social worker one, personal interview, Dec. 10, 2015)

The patriarchal figure still predominates, causing women to still be submissive to their companions. (Social worker two, personal interview, Dec 17, 2015)

The Integral Family Protection and Assistance Service has groups of women in most of them. (Social work three, personal interview, 7 Jan. 2016)

I often see the presence of women, but I do not see SUAS directing their efforts towards women. (Social worker four, personal interview, Jan. 13, 2016)

Such actions are not exclusively aimed at women, but gender, race, and social class are known to be some of the characteristics that define profiles that are more vulnerable than others. Also, personal risk is added to social risk, and these profiles include girls and women. (Social worker five, personal interview, Jan. 20, 2016)

These findings indicate the large presence of women in social welfare services, the absence of services and actions to meet women's demands, as well as the invisibility of these demands. Therefore, it is essential and urgent to identify alternatives that break down the conservative social practices that are still present in social welfare policy and seek to address gender inequalities within the scope of SUAS. This can be accomplished by involving men and women in the groups and discussing issues concerning gender equality and equal responsibility for childcare, among others. Furthermore, ongoing training for professionals on gender equality will help to avoid gender stereotyping in their practices, which prescribes separate gender behaviours and roles for men and women based on anatomical and biological differences between the sexes.

**Gender Stereotypes and Social Welfare Services Practices**

Social practices related to socio-welfare services reproduce the dominant ideology that contributes to the preservation of gender stereotypes and the sexual division of labour. Women are responsible for the care and protection of the family, including domestic tasks, such as cooking, doing groceries, washing dishes, washing clothing, ironing, cleaning the house, and taking care of the children (e.g., diaper changing, bathing, and feeding), which are necessary for the social reproduction of the family. Within this logic, the

reproduction of inequalities between men and women seems natural, in which women are given responsibility over the social issues that materialize in the everyday life of the family: "The existence of the sexual division of labor and its expression in gender relations becomes social inequality. Gender inequality coexists with other forms of inequality, especially with the inequalities produced by the social/sexual division of labor and the existence of social classes" (Gama, "Trabalho, Família e Gênero" 60).

The perspective presented in the documents that guide SUAS reiterates the idea that it women's responsibility to use the social welfare policy to guarantee access to goods and services that are not reached by the family through the market. For example, "when the family's consumption needs are not met with income from labor (male and female) it is up to women to seek government resources" (Carloto and Mariano460).This responsibility is placed on women, as there is an established association between welfare and failure (Carloto and Mariano). According to the socially expected role for men, by virtue of their masculinity, they are not allowed to admit to experiencing fragility. Yet since women are positioned as the fragile sex, it would be easier for them to publicly recognize the difficulties the family is facing. This social construction of gender roles reproduces gender inequalities based on the sexual division of labour as the material basis of exploitation and oppression of women.

The social imagination that reiterates gender inequalities is present among the SUAS workers, following the logic of the documents that guide the system and reproduce the invisibility of gender inequalities in its operations. 11,4 per cent of the workers participating in this study (eleven of ninety-six), claim that the teams do not identify gender inequalities among the demands of the user population. In addition, 5, 20 per cent of the participants (five of ninety-six) reported that although they identify instances of gender inequalities among the demands of the service users, they said that it is not SUAS's objective to cope with these situations, which is the responsibility of other public policies. Denying the existence of gender inequalities occurs initially in the formal SUAS plan and is reproduced in the social practices of some workers and managers. The reproduction of invisibility and denial of gender inequalities at the social practice level for SUAS workers are also related to the lack of permanent education for professionals. These services are not providing ongoing training on gender issues or other subjects due to financial restraints and lack of acknowledgment by management to the importance of this issue. Therefore, Rio Grande do Sul is not fulfilling its social responsibilities. Thus, both the private and public realms share a responsibility in reducing class and gender inequalities (Silva and Tavares).

The conservative cultural and social gender norms attributed to men and women become reproduced by the workers of the social welfare centres, where ideologies of the bourgeois nuclear family materialize in a contradictory

manner. This conservatism can be seen in this study's result. Forty-four per cent of the participating workers (forty-two of ninety-six) reported women being linked to social welfare services in terms of social roles traditionally attributed to women in the family. As a result, 22 per cent of workers (twenty-two out of ninety-six) reported that women are more easily linked to the family because, in general, women participate more in social welfare services because they have more free time than men. Moreover, 16, 66 per cent of the professionals (sixteen of ninety-six) referred to the predominance presence of women in the services because of the ease in dealing with them and women's willingness to participate. And 5 per cent of the participants (five out of ninety-six) stated that women should be responsible for interacting with social welfare services, considering that they are better prepared to protect and care for their family members.

The assumption that women have more so-called free time reinforces the invisibility of their domestic work. It should be noted that Rio Grande do Sul "systematically structured the provision of social welfare through the invisible work of women" (Gama, "Entre o Trabalho e a Família" 95). This is done without considering that women are divided between invisible private work carried out in the domestic sphere and the work they do in the public sphere, be it formal or informal. They often need to work double or triple shifts to meet all the demands that are imposed on them.

The belief that the greater involvement of women in social welfare services is due to the ease in dealing with women reproduces the idea that women are the more fragile and docile sex. In these situations, a power imbalance that disqualifies and oppresses women is reaffirmed; patriarchy, submission, and chauvinism become legitimized, and limited choices concerning sexuality, family life, and other matters are imposed. Thus, the myth of the maternal instinct (Badinter) as well as retrograde and conservative ideas about women's free time, docility, and the fragile sex are some of the ways in which women are pressured to submit to not only men but also the state itself.

Furthermore, women have been called to be present at social welfare services as the ones responsible for compliance with the conditions and definitions emanating from the services themselves, or even from the professionals who execute them. In situations where the family does not meet the criteria and conditions, women are also blamed for the family's alleged failure to provide services. Women are often blamed if children are not attending school or receiving immunizations, and it is the mother who is called upon if the child presents any disruptive behaviours at school. Mothers are also blamed and labelled "disorganized" if they are unable to meet the family's economic needs with the government income allowance. The individual responsibility placed on the mother neglects to acknowledge the social, political, cultural, and economic context of the family. Within this perspective, social welfare policy

maintains the continuity of the traditional bourgeois family, placing upon women the expectations and responsibilities that legitimize gender inequalities. In this context, the penalization of women becomes reproduced. As a result, women often experience not only work overload and lack of autonomy but also a negative self-image, anxiety, chronic stress, low self-esteem, and depression (Lemos 55).

## Implications for Social Work Practice

It is important that social workers reflect on their professional practice in the perspective of gender equality, following their professional ethical-political project, considering that "having as a horizon the feminist project of gender equality is an ethical duty and not an option that is situated in the field of morality" (Mesquita and Monteiro 12). Social workers can resist the practices that reproduce gender inequality through professional ongoing education, connections to women's social movements, neighbourhood associations, and women's policy council. Also, the implementation of services to combat violence against women that foster critical consciousness raising actions, promotion of women´s autonomy and empowerment through the challenge of traditional social care roles and building coalitions are strategies that can be implemented to overcome barriers for access to women's citizenship rights. One of the greatest challenges is to promote the participation of men in the social welfare services in order to change the belief that men are superior to women and perform more important tasks in society. Working with men is essential to overcoming gender inequalities embedded within the services.

According to the evaluation of social workers, facing gender inequalities through the social safety net of SUAS is related to the following actions: qualified professional listening, holding discussions with the user population about gender roles, planning activities that meet the demands of both men and women users participating in the construction of intervention strategies, empowering female autonomy, using collective methodological strategies, creating links between the team and users, and communicating between network sectors. Furthermore, social welfare policies could be designed differently by codesigning these policies with mothers, fathers, social workers, and other family members to overcome gender inequalities in these policies.

## Challenges for Implementing Social Welfare Policy Action to Promote Gender Equality

The results of this research show that social welfare policy strengthens the maternal function while reproducing the assumption that domestic duties are women's work:

> The State to which the women turn is the same patriarchal state that appropriates the unpaid domestic work of women in the mothering of children, in the treatment of the elderly, the sick, and the disabled. It also appropriates in the reproduction of the family and in overcoming material shortages whose solution goes through not public, but essentially private arrangements that translate to more hours of toil and the mobilization of many efforts in kinship and neighborhood networks. In other words, the acute crisis of the Brazilian State is greater today because the services and production of goods that should have long been the responsibility of the State, are re-privatized in the domestic realm. And this is only possible because the social and sexual division of labor founded on anatomical-biological differences between the sexes has constructed such distinctions. (Lavinas 174)

It appears that the expansion of a new democratic culture with new values is lacking. We live in a time of perverse social relations, and we must break this paternalistic and chauvinistic cycle that, a priori, harms women and imprisons them in imaginary roles by recognizing and challenging this culture (Cortizo and Goyeneche).

Therefore, the following challenges are highlighted in order to materialize a social welfare policy that ensures rights and defends and promotes gender equality: expanding democratic culture in social welfare services; breaking with the present conservative culture, which reproduces gender inequalities; Disseminating gender equality social values in the domestic and public sphere; creating spaces for debate about the sexual division of labour; demanding that family care be included in the public agenda; and addressing the participation of the state in the provision of care.

There is an urgent need to address the invisible social inequalities that arise from class, gender, race, and ethnicity, which significantly affect the population beyond the scope of the social welfare policy.

## Conclusions

This study revealed the prevalence of traditional and conservative conceptions and practices in the Brazilian social welfare policy, which reproduce gender inequalities. Only 56 per cent of the workers recognize the existence of gender inequalities among the demands presented by service users. However, these workers evaluate that this public policy does not offer the needed support and structure to address these inequalities. Moreover, 16 per cent of the workers affirm that they do not identify gender inequalities among the demands to be addressed by SUAS. A total of 46 per cent of workers consider that women have been overloaded with work due to their participation in the social welfare services as the responsible family representative. However, 44 per cent of the

participating workers connect the predominant female participation in social welfare services to the social role traditionally attributed to women in the family and in society.

In view of these contradictory statements, the invisibility of the gender perspective in SUAS reveals the reproduction of the traditional sexual division of labour, which deepens gender inequalities. Social practices related to social welfare services often reproduce the dominant ideology, which contributes to the preservation of gender stereotypes, associating women with the care and protection of other family members. There is an urgent need of structural policies that focus on income distribution, considering the determinants of gender and race/ethnicity that structure inequalities in a capitalistic society. Focusing on income distribution is a way to promote women's empowerment and overcome harmful gender stereotyping.

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