THE GENDER OF SOCIAL WELFARE: MATERNALISM AND PATERNALISM IN BAHIA’S ESTADO NOVO

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Abstract: The decades of the 1930s-1940s saw an unprecedented expansion of social welfare programs dedicated to poor Bahian mothers and their families. These initiatives embodied the state’s most comprehensive attempts to become a type of substitute for those elements of family life that medical reformists defined as essential to healthy child-rearing and by implication to the future health and vigor of the Brazilian populace. Though Bahian maternalism preceded the Vargas era, the Estado Novo provided a new national context for the state’s assistance programs. The presidency of Getúlio Vargas, Brazil’s ultimate patron and Father of the Poor, epitomized the political salience of women’s health and their childrearing activities. By tracing the experiences and ideologies of Bahia’s maternalist movement during the Vargas administration, this paper argues that a tension existed between the national effort to shore up working-class patriarchy and a local emphasis on mothers and women of color as the links between poor families and state resources.

Keywords: Bahia; Maternal Policy; Patriarchy; Race; Social Welfare.

O GÊNERO DA ASSISTÊNCIA SOCIAL: MATERNALISMO E PATERNALISMO NO ESTADO NOVO BAIANO

Resumo: As décadas de 1930 e 1940 presenciaram uma expansão, sem precedentes, dos programas de cuidados sociais dedicados às mães pobres baianas e suas famílias. Essas iniciativas corporificaram tentativas mais abrangentes do Estado de substituir certos elementos da vida familiar que os médicos reformistas definiam como essenciais para a criação de filhos saudáveis, e consequentemente para o futuro saudável e vigoroso da população brasileira. Embora a política maternalista seja anterior à era Vargas, o Estado Novo proporcionou um novo contexto nacional para os programas de assistência do Estado. A presidência de Getúlio Vargas, cuja imagem construída foi de patrono do Brasil e Pai dos Pobres, teve na política de saúde e de educação da mulher, um forte simbolismo. Ao traçar as experiências e ideologias do movimento maternalista na Bahia durante o governo Vargas, este artigo argumenta que existiu uma tensão entre o esforço nacional para apoiar a classe trabalhadora patriarcal e uma ênfase local sobre mães e mulheres de cor como as ligações entre as famílias pobres baianas e os recursos estaduais.

Palavras-chave: Bahia; Política Maternal; Patriarcalismo; Raça; Assistência Social.

LE GENRE D'AIDE SOCIALE: MATRIARCAL ET PATERNALISTE DANS LE ESTADO NOVO DE BAHIA

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Résumé: Les années 1930 et 1940 ont assisté à une expansion, sans précédent, des programmes de protection sociale dédiées aux mères pauvres de Bahia et de leurs familles. Ces initiatives donnaient corps tentatives plus larges de l'État pour remplacer certains éléments de la vie familiale que les médecins des réformateurs définies comme essentielles à la création des enfants en bonne santé, et par conséquent pour l'avenir sain et vigoureux de la population brésilienne. Bien que la politique de matriarcal est antérieure à Vargas, l'État Novo a fourni un nouveau contexte pour les programmes de service national dans l'État. La présidence de Getúlio Vargas, dont l'image construite a été patron du Brésil et père des pauvres, a eu sur la politique de la santé et l'éducation des femmes, une symbolique forte. À décrivant les expériences et les idéologies du mouvement matriarcal à Bahia pendant le gouvernement de Vargas, cet article fait argument qu'il y avait une tension entre l'effort national pour soutenir la classe ouvrière patriarcal et un accent local sur les mère et femmes de couleur comme liés entre familles pauvres de Bahia et les ressources de la région.

Mots-clés: Bahia; Politique de maternelle; Patriarcat; Course; Aide sociale.

EL GÉNERO DE LA ASISTENCIA SOCIAL MATERIALISMO Y PATERNALISMO EN ESTADO NUEVO BAIANO

Resumen: Las décadas de 1930 y 1940 presencieron una expansión, sin precedentes de los programas de cuidados sociales dedicados a las madres pobres bahianas y sus familias. Estas iniciativas corporificaron tentativas más amplias del Estado de sustituir ciertos elementos de la vida saludable, y consecuentemente para el futuro saludable y vigoroso de la población brasileña. Sin embargo, la política maternalista sea anterior a la era Vargas, el Estado Nuevo proporcionó un nuevo contexto nacional para los programas de asistencia del Estado. La presidencia de Getulio Vargas, cuya imagen construida fue patrono de Brasil y Padre de los Pobres, tuvo la política de salud y de educación de la mujer, un fuerte simbolismo.

Palabras-clave: Bahia; Política Maternal; Patriarcalismo; Raza; Asistencia Social.

THE GENDER OF SOCIAL WELFARE

In April 1932, local parents and children helped to celebrate a milestone at the Liga Bahiana contra a Mortalidade Infantil. That April the Liga marked its 100,000th medical consultation, an impressive achievement for a private philanthropic organization that had recent and modest beginnings and was the brainchild of a small group of dedicated physicians from the Medical School of Bahia. The Liga had been serving soteropolitano families for nearly ten years by then, offering free prenatal and well-baby care in cooperation with the State of Bahia and the Santa Casa de Misericórdia.

By the 1930s, several such private and public clinics existed in Salvador where physicians and family advocates attempted to meld health care and welfare assistance programs together. That thousands of local mothers sought out these services over the
years demonstrated the success of that blended model in finding common ground with Bahian families. In Bahia, mothers and mothering were the primary concern of social welfare efforts, reflecting the strength of the maternalist movement that emerged in medicine and in beneficence at the end of the previous century. Embodying its historical context, and differing from the assumptions of official Estado Novo family policy, Bahian social welfare materialized cultural assumptions of gender and race as well as the realities of family life, domestic service, and patronage in the City on the Bay, as this article will argue.

Seven months later, on December 24th of 1932, President Getúlio Vargas sent a telegram to his personally appointed state governors, the interventores (VARGAS, 1932). This was two years after the “Revolution of 1930” that brought the president to power and spelled the end of the República Velha. In the brief lines of his “Mensagem de Natal,” President Vargas strongly argued that the nation’s future was compromised by a lack of attention to its children. For Vargas, maternal and child welfare were the central, linchpin issues in the quest to “perfect the race” and advance the nation.

Bahian Interventor Juracy Magalhães would read the president’s call to afford greater attention to maternal assistance and to child development—crucial issues for “national salvation.” He would read the president’s lament that Brazil’s urban infant mortality rates matched “tropical” places in Africa and Asia, revealing the failed effort to elevate and to “Europeanize” Brazil. Bahian maternalist reformists and child advocates pointed to the “Mensagem de Natal” to justify their own local efforts and to evidence the supposed priority the Vargas administration placed on the well-being of disadvantaged women, children, and families.

The “Mensagem de Natal” foreshadowed policies to come. For an administration firmly and publically dedicated to regional integration, centralization, cultural nationalism, and economic growth, family dynamics might seem a peripheral interest. Yet Vargas’s administration did develop and enact more family and social assistance projects than any regime past, earning Vargas the nickname, “O Pai dos Pobres.” The Constitution of 1934, for example, defined and pledged special protection to “the family” as the bedrock of the Brazilian nation. By way of definition, the Constitution recognized men and women united by formal marriages, fulfilling distinct and complementary parental and household roles.
Adult male heads-of-household were to be the breadwinners with young children and wives removed from the workforce, at least ideally. By way of protection, the state vowed to shield women and children against abuses in the workplace and from labor unsuitable or incompatible with their roles within the family. Most Brazilian families did not fit this idealized pattern. Few were bound in formalized marriages and only a small minority enjoyed the luxury of neatly dividing their labor, generational, and gender roles.

Opening his tenure with the Mensagem of 1932 and the Constitution of 1934, President Vargas established his role as symbolic patron of the women’s and children’s health and welfare movement, in Bahia and beyond. The heft of the president’s voice gave credibility to a movement that was already in full force in Bahia. Bahia’s first efforts at maternal and child welfare began back in 1903 with the creation of the Bahian branch of the Instituto de Protecção e Assistência à Infancia (IPAI), and this was two decades prior to the Liga contra a Mortalidade Infantil’s founding. By the 1930s, a number of organizations had joined the IPAI and the Liga, including Pro-Matre da Bahia and a much expanded Santa Casa de Misericórdia.

While the Vargas administration drafted new legislation in favor of maternal and child welfare, Bahian institutions remained deeply involved in the work on the ground. And Bahians had myriad opportunities to experience the rhetorical side of the president’s promise to add policies and programs to the new decrees through the many radio broadcasts sponsored by the federal administration. These occasions allowed citizens across the nation to directly connect public policy with the so-called greater good, particularly as the regime moved into the closed politics of the Estado Novo (1937-1945).

While Bahian organizations and Vargas both championed the importance of healthy families for Brazil’s prosperous future, local and national initiatives diverged in their purposes and processes. For President Vargas and his highly visible Minister of Education and Health Gustavo Capanema, family welfare was a matter of national stability and security, productive capacity, and a significant aspect of their signature trabalhista politics—a national “valorization of the working man.”

Vargas and Capanema understood family stability to be a prerequisite for worker stability; devoted husbands and fathers in the home were disciplined laborers on the shop floor. And extrapolating more broadly, they expected order, duty, and respect for
authority to inspire love of country. In return for helping working men create and maintain their families, the Vargas state expected loyalty, pacification, service, and buy-in to a certain interpretation of Brazilian national identity, especially during the tumultuous period of World War II. This *trabalhista* version of Brazilian families promoted a type of working-class patriarchy of which protection of mothers and children formed a significant part.

Rewarding working-class paternalism fit perfectly within the larger goals central to the Estado Novo regime—*conciliação* as well as nationalism and economic growth. Thus, family policy conferred benefits and provided incentives for the “*homens do trabalho.*” And new family policy was accompanied by a host of new labor legislation, culminating in the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho. The period of the Estado Novo, in particular, introduced specifically gendered privileges. The Estatuto da Família of 1941 provides the best example of the legislative support for working fatherhood, being the first modern legislation to guarantee *benefits* to fathers beyond reinforcing and enforcing their authority over wives and children.

The Statute promised loans via the Caixa Econômica Federal to engaged couples for the purchase of a first home, for example. Loans were also available to married couples for the purchase of a home, though couples with children received preference over those with none, and those with the most children were favored above all. In all circumstances, the bank agreed to reduce interest rates as couples grew their family size.

Moreover, the Statute created a new official category, the “numerous family,” comprised of parents and eight or more children under the age of 18. Fathers of numerous families were entitled to family wages and a number of benefits and preferences, including lower taxes. Numerous fathers received preference in hiring for civil servant jobs and for promotion, and their sons were favored over others in admission to recreational and sports societies.

Unlike the protected mothers in earlier labor legislation, the law required fathers to prove their paternal responsibility in order to gain the benefits and entitlements outlined in the Estatuto da Família. Therefore, the state sought to create and reward stable, hard-working, and disciplined fatherhood that would complement the ideal of the patriotic and productive worker-citizen. The state required fathers to demonstrate that they attended to the “physical, intellectual, and religious” upbringing of their children and continue to prove this annually in order to renew their privileges. Despite the
conservative Minister Capanema’s preferences, the state prized responsible fatherhood even over the sacrament of matrimony (SCHWARTZMAN, 1981 and SOUSA, 2000).

Estado Novo policies encouraged fathers to recognize their children born out of wedlock, making the process free of fees and eliminating the filial distinctions between “natural,” “illegitimate,” and “legitimate” children. The law made no differentiation in benefits and family wages. “Numerous” households with parents bonded through consensual unions rather than formal marriages were eligible for all benefits, thereby offering a further incentive to recognize children. Via these policies and incentives, the Estado Novo made important overtures to working-class patriarchy, valorizing, as Vargas would say, the multiracial working classes in the national imaginary.

Meanwhile in Bahia, family dynamics were also the backbone of local health and social assistance efforts in the 1930s and 1940s, and there these dynamics were also politicized public issues (MARTINS, 2005 and MOTT, 2012). This article argues that there was a stark gendered distinction, however, as Bahian advocates emphasized the health and well-being of mothers and their children, regardless of marital status and without presuming the presence of a male head-of-household. Bahian family reformism remained mother-focused even within the father-focused national discourse that championed patriotic patriarchy.

While the Estado Novo rewarded stable fatherhood, Bahian organizations in partnership with the state government supported a litany of social services to help mothers raise healthy children. What accounts for the maternalism of Bahia’s welfare policies in light of the Estado Novo’s paternalism? The answer to this question lies in both socioeconomic realities of the state of Bahia during the era and in Bahia’s specific cultural politics.

While Vargas’s notion of social policy built from an expectation of working-class female domesticity and male productivity, Bahian health care advocates recognized the reality that there were many families in which mothers were critical wage-earners or even the sole providers for their children. “Protecting mothers and children” meant keeping them together, healthy, and in decent conditions, not necessarily out of the workforce. Given that female domestics comprised the vast majority of women enrolled in assistance programs and the essential nature of household service in Bahia, this must have seemed implausible.
Though the Vargas administration worked toward the consolidation of a welfare state offering national benefits to industrial working men, Bahian maternalism continued a longstanding trajectory of orienting social assistance around the actual and perceived needs of working women (OTOVO, 2011). In this way, female domestics, their children, and their alternately problematic and cooperative interaction with social reformists sat at the center of the state-building process that linked Bahian assistance to the establishing Brazilian welfare state.

In Bahia, Vargas-era labor reforms made little impact where industrial employment was not a possibility for the majority of working mothers or fathers, meaning that social policy aimed at parents laboring in factories fell short of assisting most Bahian parents in securing better conditions for their children or their households. A demographic portrait of Bahia helps to elucidate this discrepancy. In the year of 1940, 3,918,112 residents called Bahia home, making it one of the most populous states in Brazil. The majority of the working population, 71% in 1940, was men and women of African descent, giving Bahia the highest population of people of color in the nation.²

Yet Bahia did not fall among Brazil’s most industrial states, even into the 1940s. For example, Salvador had a population of approximately 300,000 residents but only 87 industrial firms in 1944. Thus, Salvador’s industrial production fell behind the other large capital cities, such as Recife (253 firms), Belo Horizonte (192 firms), and the industrial centers of Rio de Janeiro (2,150 firms) and São Paulo (3,549 firms). Industrial work slanted toward male labor in Bahia, but even among men, factory work was less typical than employment in agriculture, fishing, forestry, and service. The majority of Bahian men did not work in industry; therefore, their state-guaranteed patriarchal rights remained ambiguous.

If Bahian men were largely absent from national labor discourse, working women (be they mothers or not) did not factor into these conceptions of working class families at all. Most Bahian women labored in domestic service; a significant number also found employment in the informal sector as street vendors or artisans.³ The new labor codes did not apply to domestics and informal workers.

In fact, the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho (1943) specifically disqualified domestic service, continuing the long tradition of affording patrons free reign to exert

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² This and all of the statistics in this section were pulled from census data compiled by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística.

³ As late as 1950, only 20,427 Bahian women—barely 1%—found employment in industrial firms.
authority over their household servants. Therefore, most working Bahian mothers would find little to no protection in the Vargas-era labor codes designed for factory employees. Social justice, the elevation of the “homen de trabalho,” and the protection of wives and children presumed an industrial wage-labor model that was not reality for most Brazilians, and certainly not for the majority of Bahian families.

Finding a balance between motherhood, childrearing, and the insecurities and demands of domestic or informal market labor placed Bahian women and their children in a precarious situation. This insecurity could prejudice the health and welfare of mother and child. Anecdotal accounts from physicians suggest that employers were often unsympathetic to their maids’ maternal responsibilities. The Constitution guaranteed paid maternity leave, periodic breaks in the workday to breastfeed infants, and protection from firing due to pregnancy, but these rights could not be enforced in private households under informal arrangements.

In reality, these guarantees were often ignored even in the factories. Domestics who became pregnant often feared they would lose their jobs, and nursing an infant while working in the laborious and physical realm of household service was nearly impossible. Household servants did not have set working hours as well, and the lack of set working hours was also hostile to raising children. “Sleeping in” service meant being separated from one’s children and calling upon trusted friends, relatives, and caregivers to look after the youngest ones. Separated from their mothers during the workday or workweek, infants consumed animal milk and other nourishments to supplement the inability of their mothers to nurse, opening the possibility of gastroenteritis related to bacterial contamination.

Physicians at the Medical School of Bahia attributed a large portion of the infant mortality rate among poor children to this practice. Bahian women, therefore, could not find protection or advocacy in Estado Novo legislation either as workers or as mothers. For Bahian women, the very typical combination of motherhood with household service had no place in trabalhista politics. However, Bahia also maintained its own politics of who the needy were and what needy families looked like.

Due to the realities of female labor and the weight of poverty in Bahia, women of color who worked in domestic service along with their children were the vast majority of clients and patients in the free prenatal and children’s preventative clinics. Death in childbirth, infant mortality, and childhood morbidity were serious problems
that many families faced, but all of these rates were steadily declining in the twentieth century especially in urban Salvador. By the third decade of the century, Salvador boasted several public and private clinics serving mothers and children.

The state of Bahia sponsored or co-sponsored six of them: the Centro de Saúde on Rua Dr. Seabra (1932), the Centro de Saúde Mario Andréa at Calçada (1932), the Abrigo dos Filhos do Povo clinic at the Santa Casa de Misericórdia (1933), the Centro de Saúde at the Estrada de Liberdade (1935), and the Posto de Saúde at Rio Vermelho (1935) plus the Serviço Suburbano de Higiene Infantil which was ambulatory program and the longer established Maternidade Climério de Oliveira (1910).

Beyond the clinics, private benevolent organizations administered maternal cantinas, free daycares, maternal shelters, birthing assistance, visiting sanitary nurse brigades, foundling and foster care, lactários and breast milk distribution centers, and even an Instituto de Puercicultura. In addition, the Liga contra Mortalidade Infantil, mentioned in the opening paragraph, maintained a flagship program called the “Premio de amamentação” that offered direct-aid cash support to mothers of infants on the promise that they breastfeed their child and regularly visit one of the city’s hygiene clinics (OTOVO, 2011). In the first two years of the Estado Novo, in fact, the Premio program supported 258 mothers and their babies. And like many of the aforementioned, this was a collaborative program jointly sponsored by the state government. As the opening example of the Liga’s 100,000th celebration demonstrates, mothers and children accessed these many services by the thousands annually. The existing programs were never sufficient to comprehensively meet the degree of need in the state, but they did represent a marked increase in the availability of prenatal and child medical care compared to any prior period in Bahian history.

The maternalist disposition of social welfare in Bahia was evident in the multiple academic publications, newspaper articles, and public speeches delivered by prominent physicians, philanthropists, and local politicians. They bemoaned the plight of the “mãe solteira,” “mãe desamparada,” or “mãe pobre.” In the burgeoning welfare state of Bahia’s Estado Novo years, there was really no conception of working poor families. Reformists and advocates assumed that abandoned mothers struggled to sustain their deprived children in fatherless households.

This “single motherhood” narrative almost completely excluded the possibility of devoted fathers and male partners. Assistance programs sidelined fathers, enrolling
mothers and children without recording any information on the children’s fathers, not even registering their names. In many of the Postos de Puericultura, for example, staff members did not consistently collect information on the partners or fathers of their patients. The closest data recorded women’s marital status and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their children, leaving fatherhood, male-headed families, or even nuclear families tangential in these records. Fatherhood did matter to Bahian social assistance briefly during the war due to the local activities of the Legião Brasileira de Assistência, which advocated for support for the wives and children of deployed soldiers.

Like Vargas-era national policy, local Bahian social welfare was skewed and gendered as well but in a distinct way. The Bahian paradigm of impoverished single motherhood either presumed that fathers were absent from the lives of their children, or it relegated fatherhood to a non-essential and even irrelevant aspect of the campaign to improve maternal and child health and reduce mortality. Erasing the fathers erased the dynamics of fatherhood, patriarchy, and partnership from the lives and experiences of these families as they encountered and accessed welfare aid.

Bahian maternal and child advocates encouraged a holistic approach to social welfare—but one predicated on the assumption that assistance programs guard working women and their children from hapless men and absent fathers. The goal of aid programs was to protect women and children from men, rather than to protect the interests of men. The silences and unasked questions on fatherhood and partnership left the impression that Bahian mothers seeking health and welfare assistance raised their children on their own and beyond the parameters of the traditional, patriarchal family model.

Beyond the lived experiences, analyzing the cultural politics of social welfare, it is clear that being female, poor, and alone was a rhetorical orientation that guided policy and program implementation in Bahia. This vision of families-in-need that presumed unprotected mothers of illegitimate children was intimately linked to constructs of both gender and race and to the realities of Bahian inequality. Bahian ideologies of social welfare arose from different circumstances and dialogues about mothering, servitude, and child-rearing than the Estado Novo version of the 1930s and 1940s.

Servitude is fundamental here due to the population of women served by assistance programs. Welfare advocates were well-aware that domestic servants performed most of the “mothering” in society, and local physicians had been discussing
this issue since the late nineteenth century. Bahian families’ widespread use of female
domestic labor and the racialized nature of those occupations were obvious remnants of
Brazil’s long history of slavery. In the late 19th century, physicians had worried over
the supposed failures of nannies, wet-nurses, and maids, both enslaved and free (Borges,

But by the Vargas era, Bahian maternal and child health and welfare programs
had shifted their focus from domestics-in-service to domestics raising their own
children. The official invisibility of their partners suggests that social welfare advocates
conceived of domestics as outside of the familial model, as women broken from
conventional family bonds and permanently appended to the homes in which they
served. In the very recent past, household labor had been a form of bondage for
enslaved women so the assumption that domestics had no personal lives beyond service,
that they were “members” of their patrons’ families, pulled the cultural baggage of
slavery’s social and labor relations

Thinking in terms of gender, working “unprotected” in the homes of strangers,
surrounded by non-kin men and the potential of sexual dishonor or abuse, was a
position to which only certain women were subjected. Women working in those
situations culturally suggested that they had either no honorable male to protect them or
a male who failed to adequately provide—hence a condemnation of men of the popular
classes and men of color in particular. The wealthy home stood as a privileged space
governed by its patrons and not by the state. All this reinforced the assumption that
domestics fell under the authority of the head of household in which she labored, rather
than that of a husband or a senior male relation.

This was explicitly clear in the exclusion of domestic service from the labor
protections and regulations codified in the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho. Seen
through this lens, patriarchal authority and domestics’ own family obligations and
intimacies were incongruous with household service—especially for women. Thus,
within a certain racialized cultural logic, it proved easier for maternal advocates to
conceive of female servants, being in their majority women of color, as abandoned
mothers rather than as wives or companions.

At the Liga Bahiana contra a Mortalidade Infantil, the figure of the desperate
single mother had been around since the beginning. During the opening ceremony for
their first clinic in 1923, founder Dr. Martagão Gesteira spoke on behalf of the
organization’s efforts to aid poor but deserving mothers (Gesteira, 1923). Ten years later when the Liga inaugurated new services at the Casa dos Expostos on the campus of the Santa Casa de Misericórdia, Gesteira regretted the fate of women abandoned and ignored by their “seducers” and kin, who never learn to love their “fatherless” children (Gesteira, 1933).

But it was the Liga’s second president Dr. Álvaro Bahia who articulated this point fervently and often, referring to maternal health and advocacy work as providing a form of justice for impoverished single mothers (Bahia, 1944). For Dr. Bahia, single motherhood was a social ill that left women rejected by their families and employers and overburdened by the attempt to sustain their children all on their own. One way that poor mothers would exercise their “rights,” according to the doctor, was through the ability to breastfeed their own children. This was a new formulation. Bahia’s use of the word “rights” had specific aims; it was much more common for maternal nursing to be expressed as a women’s duty or a right of the child. Dr. Bahia was certainly not the first to draw attention to the complications poverty and women’s wage labor wrought for maternal nursing.

At the Medical School, there had been a small contingent of physicians (since the late nineteenth century) arguing that the children of wet nurses were at an especially high risk of infant mortality. In order to nurse and care for their charges, these domestics were compelled to neglect their own infants. Soon this line of reasoning extended to all female household servants who had to be separated from their babies in order to earn a living. Thus, it was in this vein that Dr. Bahia connected single motherhood, household service, and the “right” to breastfeed.

Labor law did not extend into private homes as has been mentioned; so the right to nurse children, of which Dr. Bahia spoke, required the cooperation of servants’ employers. Unsurprisingly, Dr. Bahia never spoke explicitly about the tension between wealthy families’ demands and the childcare responsibilities of their female servants. The Liga and other private organizations needed the public support and financial patronage of these families so any direct condemnation would be foolish. Nevertheless, the Bahian “Mãe Pobre” or “Mãe Desamparada” became a recognizable type in the 1930s and 1940s, a symbol of the campaign to aid abandoned women and children.

Appealing to the plight of these symbolic mothers proved very useful in marshaling resources from benefactors and adding legitimacy to the cause. Thus, the
“social forces,” to use Dr. Bahia’s vague language, preventing impoverished women from breastfeeding remained largely ambiguous and unspoken. Highlighting the need to work outside the home over inflexible patrons and domestics’ low wages distanced employers from culpability in the plight of that “mãe pobre.” By remaining elusive on the causes of working mothers’ alienation from the right to nurse their infants, Dr. Bahia and other advocates avoided problematic accusations by placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of irresponsible, absent (poor) men.

However, one can read the single motherhood rhetoric as a backhanded critique of domestic service. Mammies, maids, and nannies may have been treasured fictive kin rhetorically, but those fictions did not erase the real relationship of employer and employee. Well-to-do households were not a protected space for domestics, but in fact a perilous one, at least for servants’ bonds with their children and for those children’s physical well-being.

This opens another gendered and racialized reading of the “Prêmio de amamentação,” the pioneering subsidy program in which poor women with infant children received a small subsidy in cash to promote breastfeeding and to temporarily alleviate the need for new mothers to seek employment outside the home. In a fascinating twist on a decades-old debate, participants in the Prêmio program in the 1930s-1950s were given the opportunity to augment their stipends by contributing breast milk to the local milk bank.4

These milk donations were undoubtedly life-saving to local babies in need and provided badly needed financial resources to the donating families, but the program itself proved an ironic continuity with the past. The fact that impoverished women seeking public aid were sought out as sources of breast milk for needy infants does not necessarily mean that “mães pobres” were exclusively and persistently bound to be “mães pretas.” However, it does imply that the “social justice” of nursing their own children of which Dr. Bahia spoke came with the continued assumption that their bodies were convenient and available for service to the community at-large. And the common institutional labeling of these mothers in the Prêmio program as “nutrizes” and “amas” donating milk for the children of some of Bahia’s wealthiest families, and expressing their gratitude to a benevolent state, only makes this more problematic. The contrast

4 Mothers could earn between $1.50 and $4 cruzeiros per liter for any breast milk donated to the dispensary.
between Bahian and national rhetoric on social assistance is laid bare. Bahian welfare policy turned on a particular understanding of female domestic labor, race, and patronage—not working-class patriarchy.

Taking these complications one final step further, metaphors of race and motherhood are inescapable for the study of twentieth century public health and social welfare and conflated in deep and intriguing ways with Bahia’s own cultural narrative and its imagined place in a “progressive” nation. Bahia as a state and its capital at São Salvador have long been depicted through maternal and mammy metaphors. Even Vargas indulged in these gendered metaphors during his first trip to Bahia, referring to the state as the “birthplace” and the original “virgin territory” of Brazil’s nationality (Vargas quoted in Silva, 1940, p. 193). These labels were commonly known; the “Cidade das Mulheres,” the “Cidade Ama-de-leite,” the “Mulata Velha” all culturally placed Bahia within Brazil as a whole (LANDES, 1947; HEALY, 1998; SEIGEL, 2009; and PINHO, 2010).

Salvador appeared as a city populated and served by poor women of color and their children. This association between gender, race, and place begs the question of to what extent the long-held imaginary of baianas as natural mothers and mother-substitutes in the form of wet-nurses provided a sort of implicit subtext in the politics of aid to single and “abandoned” motherhood. These narratives melded well with the vision of women of the popular classes as independent, unattached, and struggling to sustain their children without the help of a male partner. In sum, Bahia’s prototypical laborers were of a different kind than the prolific and productive fathers lauded by the Estado Novo. Their work seemed to bear little relation to the industrial development upon which Brazil was pinning its hopes for “modernity.”

While the Estado Novo government tried to court men into responsible fatherhood, the Bahian welfare policy took much less interest in working men than in working women. The politics of family patronage still governed poor women’s labor when the maternalist movement emerged, creating a complex association of racialized servitude, poor maternity, and social welfare. Advocates presumed a narrative of women’s independence, broken family bonds, and the vulnerability of women and children in need.

These assumptions derived from cultural stereotypes about poor families, but also the very real experience of female domestic service. Though clearly concerned over
the trials of healthy childrearing among domestics, advocates backed away from explicit critiques of the low wages paid in domestic service, of the limited opportunities for education, and of the expectation that domestics subordinate the needs of their own children and loved ones to the needs of the families who employed them.

Despite the divergence between the local and the national, Bahian maternalism did not present an explicit challenge to Estado Novo paternalism. If anything, Bahian physicians and family advocates cast their work as local expressions of federal directives, completely in line with the president’s own declared commitment to mothers and children in the “Mensagem de Natal.” Under the Vargas administration, the idea of a national, comprehensive welfare state was new, but social policies aimed at family well-being and reform were quite old and quintessentially local.

Such local-level social policies like those conceived and implemented in Bahia informed the eventual birth of a welfare state. Thus, the discrepancy between Bahian approaches and national ones elucidates the ways regional social policy enjoyed a boost from national attention while maintaining the distinct character inspired by local interests and local actors. These peculiarities and deviations reveal a richer understanding of the complex history of Estado Novo politics and of Bahian family policies through a gendered reading of social welfare.

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