



“Direito à preguiça”, de Camila Betoni, 2021, acrílica sobre tela

Women-Mothers-Waste Collectors: Maternity and Urban Solid Waste Collection in the city of Caxias do Sul, RS*

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Abstract

This article aims to understand how motherhood is expressed in women collectors of solid waste from recycling associations in Caxias do Sul, RS, through seven interviews with collectors and the respective field diaries produced by the researchers. Discursive textual analysis was used as a methodological path. Motherhood was identified as precarious due to the women's social conditions, in which they experience the absence of labour rights during pregnancy and are forced to raise their children in recycling warehouses, due to the difficulty of accessing public policies.

Keywords: Women collectors, Maternity, Solid waste collection, Recycling associations.

* Received on 6 August, 2022, accepted on 13 September, 2023. Translated by Philip Badiz.

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Introduction

Motherhood is encircled by discourses that are produced in social contexts and conditions. Given this, motherhood is understood as a social fact, since it is a produced, signified, multiform reality, whose historicity is one of its most important axes (Machado; Penna; Caleiro, 2020; Perrot, 2007). Surpassing the biological notion, the concept is linked to a historical social construction (Vasquez, 2014) and, therefore, has different meanings that depend on the historical moment and experiences of each woman (Machado et al., 2020).

Throughout the history of society, social changes have altered the discourse surrounding motherhood and led to the emergence of a naturalised conception of the female role. Until the nineteenth century, for example, the relationship between motherhood and love, called maternal love, did not exist. Mothers who did not want to take care of their children could place them in the 'foundling wheel' or assign child-rearing to wet nurses, whose functions were breastfeeding and primary care (Badinter, 1981). In the Brazilian context marked by the colonisation process, this maternal role was assigned to Black women, who, in addition to caring for their own children, were delegated to raise the children of white women and the masters. This attribution was implicated in the transmission of the language and values of Africanity that constitute Brazilian culture (Gonzalez, 2019b). The conception of maternal love as an ideology of motherhood was established at the onset of the industrialisation process, becoming part of the function and main mission of middle-class women. This occupied the private and domestic space, considered natural for the wife-mother-housewife, while men occupied the public space (Rago, 2004).

Thus, the female body was at the mercy of motherhood, which subjected the woman to the identity of mother. The social imaginary concerning femininity established motherhood as a condition of the feminine and constructed values based on discourses of power around this (Machado et al., 2020). Thus, motherhood interpenetrated in the conception of the subject-mother is the effect of these discourses based on specific social, cultural and economic contingencies. Therefore, it is understood that which is recognised as motherhood is not natural to women, rather it is a standardised phenomenon (Vazquez, 2014).

Although Machado et al. (2020) indicate that this narrative is currently being deconstructed, mainly due to the possibility of a woman choosing whether or not to have children and due to feminist social changes, motherhood needs to be rethought within the condition of women in situations of poverty. It is in this sense that Fonseca (2004) discusses the contradiction that exists between the poor woman-mother and the middle-class woman-mother. For the author, the feminist movement and the new conception of female autonomy made it possible for middle-class women to be the head of their families; however, she mentions that it is a mistake to attribute this same reasoning to low-income women. This is because the high rates of poor women as head of the family nucleus are related to poverty and not to the evolution of social movement (Fonseca, 2004).

As Carneiro (2019) highlights, it is also worth emphasising that the situation of poverty is experienced mainly by Black women, since racism permeates the construction of class and gender inequalities. While White women demanded the possibility of entering the job market and becoming the heads of their families, this was not an issue that included Black women, since, historically, they are required to occupy subordinate jobs as a condition of survival. Thus, as Gonzalez (2019a) and Carneiro (2019) point out, based on the colonial structure of the Brazilian state, there are hierarchies of race, class and gender that, articulated with each other, lead Black women to experience oppression with specific contours within the exploited classes. In the Black feminist movement, these are the classes that denounce the feminisation of poverty as a political project of neoliberalism in contemporary times (Carneiro, 2019).

When it comes to analyses of the racial and sexual division of labour (Gonzalez, 2019b), capitalist logic was also inserted into the concept of motherhood, since a society based on the accumulation of capital transformed questions of the natural order, such as the birthing of children, into social problems. Women were assigned the sole responsibility for caring for their offspring (Saffioti, 1976). Based on the sexual division of labour resulting from such a system, women were assigned reproductive work (Federici, 2004). Since the state is interested in the birth and socialisation of children as a condition for its maintenance, it creates devices that solve problems that motherhood

causes to professionalisation. Saffioti (1976) cites paid leave as one of these practices, but reveals that this is only a partial solution, given that it continues to place women in a subordinate position at work. However, this logic does not apply to women who occupy informal jobs because they have no labour guarantees, like paid leave.

Although pregnancy itself can be considered a phase in the life cycle, it can marginalise and increase the precarity of the lives of women living in vulnerable situations, such that this social condition is one of the factors that most affect and condition motherhood (Scorgie et al., 2015). In conditions of poverty, the existence of women who experience motherhood is linked to precarity: underemployment, the need to be the head of the family, complications in the process of pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period (Muñoz et al., 2013). In the relationship between social vulnerability and motherhood, informal work presents itself as a means of survival and of raising children (Silva; Menegat, 2014). The condition of leadership in the home of poor women results in their submission to precarised work¹, since informal jobs are mostly filled by female heads of families (Pinto et al., 2011). According to Arcos et al. (2011), both reproductive health and gestational periods are affected when women have precarised jobs, low education, live in precarious housing, and lack social assistance coverage during pregnancy, among other factors.

This is the scenario experienced by Brazilian women, including solid waste collectors. According to data from the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE) [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] (2020), informality has become a growing characteristic of work throughout the country, with 41.6% of workers in this situation in 2019, leading to a lack of social protection. Thus, the work of collecting recyclable materials is an alternative for women who suffer from unemployment and exclusion from the formal job market (Silva; Mcenegat, 2014). An exclusion that is marked by the structural racial division of labour, when you consider that the collection of usable materials was configured as a means of survival for part of the Black population that has remained outside the occupation of salaried work, since the onset of Brazil's industrialisation process (Cherfam, 2016). According to the IBGE demographic census, conducted in 2010, 66.1% of collectors self-declared as Black (Dagnino; Johansen, 2017). They are workers who have historically suffered from precarisation and an evident lack of protection of their labour rights, while being subjected to unhealthy and dangerous work (Basso & Silva, 2020). In the case of women collectors, there is an intensification of precarisation, as they also suffer from gender inequalities that are reproduced at work. The double – often triple – working day overloads these women, since feminine tasks are required beyond work, extending into the private space (Coelho et al., 2018).

Among the studies on solid waste collection work, research focused on gender relations is scarce (Camardelo; Benedetti; Nostrane, 2020). Among these, those involving motherhood are almost non-existent, and even when mentioned, it is understood as a factor that limits women's access to work (Coelho et al., 2016; Moura; Sopko, 2018; Paiva, 2016). In previous research, Camardelo, Benedetti and Nostrane (in press) reveal that motherhood in the work of collecting recyclable materials is a lacuna in the current understanding of *women collectors*, given it appears as a transversal axis in the narratives of solid waste collectors organised in recycling plant associations in the city of Caxias do Sul.

Considering the relevance of deeper studies that deal with the theme of motherhood in the work of collecting recyclable materials, this investigation seeks to answer the following research problem: how motherhood is expressed for women who work collecting solid waste in recycling associations in the city of Caxias do Sul? This study forms part of the research conducted by the CNPq research group 'Cultura Política, Políticas Públicas e Sociais' [Political Culture, Public and Social Policies] of the Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas em Políticas Públicas e Sociais (NEPPPS) [Centre for Studies and Research in Public and Social Policies] at the University of Caxias do Sul (UCS). The project '*Catadores de resíduos: de 'papeleiros' a agentes ambientais*' [Waste collectors: from 'paper workers' to environmental agents], financed by the National Council for Scientific and Technological

¹ In this text, *precarised work* is understood as the concept of *social precarisation of work*, proposed by Graça Druck (2013). The author argues that, among other aspects, this is a phenomenon that arises from changes in the way work is organised and the state and its policies. There has been a social, economic and political process that has institutionalised the flexibilisation and precarisation of work in Brazil over the last two decades.

Development (CNPq) from 2017-2020, focused on recovering the history of the city's solid waste collectors. This project led to the perception of the importance of entering into studies in the field of race, class and gender to understand the relationships that are established in the profession of solid waste collector.

The issue of motherhood expressed in the research path

Discursive textual analysis was used as a methodological path, since, in the field of qualitative research, it aims to reconstruct and expand discussions on research themes, based on the understanding that there is a multiplicity of meanings that circumscribe the phenomena. To this end, as a first step, the corpus of analysis was deconstructed and unitised (Moraes; Galiazzi, 2016) through the exploratory reading of semi-structured interviews conducted with eleven male and female collectors from nine recycling associations in Caxias do Sul/RS, which were transcribed in full. These interviews were conducted using the snowball sampling technique (Vinuto, 2014), with the participants being nominated by the collectors themselves and the end of the interviews defined by the saturation of indications.

In view of the objective proposed in this article, only interviews conducted with women solid waste collectors were selected, a total of seven, in which motherhood was highlighted as a crossroads in the work carried out within the associations. In reports on women collectors, it is worth noting that motherhood emerges as a narrative concerning their own history and did not constitute a topic in the script of the semi-structured interviews prepared by the group of researchers. Therefore, discourses on motherhood were evident in interviews with women, drawing attention to the fact that in interviews conducted with men, concern about childcare is a practically non-existent issue. Thus, the corpus of analysis is made up of fragments of interviews conducted with the women collectors, together with field diaries prepared by the group of researchers, which contain observations that enable a broader discussion.

The categories of analysis were defined through a combination of the deductive and inductive methods (Moraes; Galiazzi, 2016), in which aspects of motherhood were sought in the context of the informal work in question. Thus, with the grouping of explicit and implicit data from interviews and field diaries, the following categories were created: *precarisation of the work of collection and motherhood*; *raising children in recycling warehouses*; and *the social construct of being a mother-woman-collector*. To analyse the categories, we sought to describe them and subsequently interpret them based on theoretical references from recent literature, which cover the interfaces of motherhood and precarised work, in addition to authors dedicated to gender studies, who analyse the socio-historical construction of motherhood. Using this, a metatext was elaborated to create dialogue and expand the discussion of the empirical data of the categories described (Moraes; Galiazzi, 2016).

The research project to which this work is linked was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Caxias do Sul (Report no. 2.449.361), using data collected with the express authorisation of the interviewees, granted by a term of free, informed consent. This term guarantees the confidentiality of information and the preservation of the participants' identity. Thus, the collectors are referenced by acronyms and the field diaries presented by coding. The research was conducted between 2017 and 2020.

The narratives of women-mothers-solid waste collectors from recycling associations

The women collectors interviewed currently form part of recycling associations that have agreements with the municipal government. The municipality has 13 recycling associations that receive urban solid waste from selective collection, which is carried out by the *Companhia de Desenvolvimento de Caxias do Sul* (CODECA) [*lit.* Caxias do Sul Development Company], which is responsible for rubbish collection in the municipality. The associations' collectors are responsible for sorting, separating and selling the recycled materials. In research on the socio-demographic characterisation conducted out in the municipality, Camardelo, Stédile and Oliveira (2016) reveal that this work is mainly done by women with low education who have difficulty entering the formal job market. These collectors also need to do the work in recycling warehouses that are located in areas

that are sometimes inadequate and possess precarious infrastructure (De Mori et al., 2016). These are women who, for the most part, began this work by involving family members in collection and found a way to raise their children within this environment.

The municipality of Caxias do Sul currently has more than 500,000 inhabitants, and became and distinct political unit when it separated from the municipality of São Sebastião do Caí, in 1890. The formation of the municipality was strongly influenced by Italian immigrants, as part of the government's official project to occupy lands that had been destined for the settlement of Italian immigrants, a process that took place from 1875 onwards (Machado, 2001). The colonisation and development of the urban centre brings with it fundamental elements of an understanding of the woman-mother-collector from Caxias do Sul. On the one hand, the city was transformed into a metal-mechanical centre after World War I, which contributed to its growth and settlement (Machado, 1998); on the other, the Catholic religious tradition disseminated a moralistic discourse concerning the ideal of the figure of *wife* and *mother* (Dotti, 2007), such that it was incorporated into the regional culture of the so-called *Regiões de Colonização Italiana* [Italian Colonisation Regions] and can be observed in the expressions of motherhood encountered. These characteristics continue to the present today, since Caxias do Sul is considered the city of *faith* and *work*.

Like the first category of analysis – *precarisation of the work of collection and motherhood* – it is clear that there is a correlation between the precarisation of work and motherhood, which characterises the double day of work for women collectors. Elements of their routines were observed that comprise collecting during the day and the need to take care of their children and domestic activities. The reports show the work overload they experience during the gestational period and following the birth of their children. Such elements can be verified in the following fragments:

So, you get home from work, we have children, you're always doing something, right? (Collector I)

So, I worked my entire pregnancy, collecting and receiving CODECA's surplus at night and early in the morning. [...] I'd go at one in the morning and stay until four in the morning waiting for material. Pregnant, with a small baby, until I got a chance to pick up that day's selective rubbish. (Collector J)

As observed, some of their statements reveal stories marked by precarisation and vulnerability, because they have been exposed to these factors since they started collecting on the streets. In these situations, the gestational period emerges as a condition associated with the struggles these women fought through to guarantee their livelihood, as seen below:

I was about three months pregnant and I said to him [the person responsible for distributing the material]: 'are you only going to send me night time and early morning material?' 'It's Ms. Collector J, [...] what's left over is this from early morning'. And then I said to him: 'are you going to make me work just for this from early morning?' [...] 'then I don't want it anymore'. [...] Girl, then I arranged all sorts of trouble for myself. So, I went collecting, I spent eight months collecting, I put up with it my entire pregnancy. (Collector J)

I was eight months pregnant with my daughter who's now 40. So, I picked up some boxes in front of Casas Uruguay and a man approached me, girl: 'this box is mine'. I said: 'no, hold on a minute, I've been waiting until now'. I know that each of us pulled in different direction, that trash was left all over Júlio [city street, located in the central region] and no one got that box. (Collector G)

Women collectors, working within associations, remain in a situation of social vulnerability. One of the factors that constitutes this condition was emphasised in the interviews: the low remuneration of workers. The collectors talk about the sale of recycled waste and their share of profits, relating them to the difficulty of raising their children, especially in periods of solid waste scarcity and devaluation in the price of the materials.

It's not a stable thing and, as I said, in a while, prices will very good, a little later everything will drop. It's very difficult to work, but we like it. On top of that, we raised our children like this and we're in this fight, right? (Collector E)

As I said to Prof., I don't accept your share is R\$500.00. This is unacceptable. How are you going to raise... Prof., with R\$1,000.00 for me and R\$1,000.00 for [husband] it's not easy to raise three kids. (Collector J)

In the second category – *raising children in recycling warehouses* –, it is clear that some of the women interviewed raised and still raise their children in recycling warehouses during motherhood. Their workspace offers the possibility of bringing the children with them, which differs from companies or factories, for example, since these do not allow children to be with their mothers in the same environment. It is even possible to observe that the choice to carry out collecting work is sometimes associated with viability and the need, due to the lack of options for women collectors, to exercise motherhood and work in the same place, as observed in the following narratives:

[...] I worked for a long time in a private company. I worked for 20 years at the same company. When I left, I got pregnant with my son who is 7 years old. My husband always worked in this [recycling], and I always worked at the company at night and helped him on weekends. It's always been like this in our lives. Until, when I left with a baby, I couldn't work, [Collector E] said: 'no, let's work... let's continue recycling'. (Collector E)

They were raised here in recycling, we put them in the fruit box, and they stayed there. (Collector A)

You see the girl who brought the coffee? She's my daughter, she was raised among recycling, she makes lunch, makes the coffee. (Collector E)

Caring for children in recycling warehouses appears as a way to protect them from exposure to drug trafficking. Furthermore, the concern is that they can do a job that is valued socially. This is evident in the testimony of the following collector:

[...] once upon a time it was a [source of] pride to say that your son works at Marcopolo, at Randon [municipal metal-mechanical companies]. This was [a source of] pride for a poor father who couldn't afford it... to this day, he can't afford to pay for his son's college education. But today, with what you see, you have to pray that your son doesn't end up in drug trafficking. (Collector E)

The field diaries further highlight and corroborate the relationship between childcare and the space of the recycling warehouses, as seen in the case of Collector A, who barely participated during the interview – conducted together with her husband –, except regarding motherhood in this context:

What stands out is that Collector A participated more actively in the interview when reporting certain experiences she had with her young children, who were placed in fruit boxes so she could work there. (Diary A1)

A characteristic of numerous waste collection associations is that they are located in the same terrace where the waste collector families live. This means that even if the children are not specifically raised inside the warehouses, they constantly have access to the work and recyclable materials. In the following account and in the field diary elaborated concerning the interview, it is possible to observe these aspects:

I raised my children, raised several grandchildren, both mine and his [husband], right? Many worked with me too [...] (Collector G)

In these cases, in general, children are already present in that environment from a young age and can become familiar with the conditions and mediations of work [...]. Upstairs, where the interview took place, a box of recyclables was noted next to the sofa. There were PET bottles, milk cartons, etc., in addition to the presence of an eight-month-old baby, the grandson of [Collector G], who was playing with a keyboard. We assume that the box was a possible toy [...] it is interesting to note the presence of recyclable materials before he was even a year old. (Diary 5G)

The third and final category – *the social construct of being a mother-woman-collector* – encompasses the perception that women collectors play the social role imposed on women-mothers in their activities within the recycling associations. The social ideology of being a mother, a woman and a collector is intertwined in the work of collecting solid waste. Women collectors consider themselves responsible for the workers and, as a result, exercise mothering in relation to the members and the association itself.

I'm also [proud] of the other Associations, which you know I'm very proud of, it's just like your kid. Association, for me, is like my daughter [...]. As I've said, it really created this umbilical cord of being a bit of a mother, a bit of a leader, a bit of a boss, a bit of you're just president. Because when you go there to represent at city hall, you're just president of the association, but here things are different, there has to be someone who gives orders, someone who encourages, someone who coordinates (Collector J)

For the most part, these collectors are in leadership positions in the associations, occupying the position of president. Therefore, they feel responsible for recycling members, planning actions that can help them avoid difficulties, as seen in the following statements:

I'm not going to lie to you, Prof., 400 reais [result of the share in one month], do you know what people said to me? 'Collector I, you're crazy'. I said: 'No, I'm not crazy guys, it's the situation. It's here, oh, here are the bills, here's what we invoice, okay? Here are the bills, this is left over, we divide it between us, it comes to this here: it comes to 400 each'. 'What about my rent, what about this and that?' And then you think what am I going to do? Then, I went home crying, I said, crying: 'My God in heaven, where am I going to get materials?' I thought about doing a, look here, for you to see, a charity dinner to raise funds, I thought about doing a thrift store again [...] to raise funds, you know? Everything to invest here, in the people who were here, so as not to discourage them. (Collector I)

A month ago, I went there [Foundation] to look for donated clothes, right. Eek, people here didn't have enough winter clothes, so I went to get some. (Collector I)

When we got the food bank, I said: [responsible for the Food Bank] 'I'm going to be very honest with you'. She said to me: 'with the number of people, what the cook does is excessive'. So, I opened the fridge and said to her: 'do you see the four buckets? The thing is, at lunch time, whatever's left over, the kitchen aunt – as we call her – provides food for four people. This person lives with two, this person with three, this person has four children. I actually end up ordering more, because of them'. (Collector J)

Another statement reveals the role of reference that these women collectors occupy for the members of the association:

You have to be here, inside, learn about the difficulties that people go through. I took one day a week to listen to them all. They came and they trusted me, they told me everything that was happening at home, what I could do, how we could help each other. (Collector F)

Precarisation of work, social vulnerability and the idea of maternal love interlaced with the discussion of motherhood

The interfaces between the *precarisation of work* and *motherhood*, in the context of solid waste collection, denote the oppression that women collectors experience in their daily lives. Observe how they are inserted in environments where they carry out unhealthy and dangerous work, which, added to the responsibility for caring for children and activities carried out at home, qualifies a double day of work. Such characteristics highlight the context of women in the world of work in contemporary capitalism in Latin American countries. As Nogueira (2017) highlights, the incorporation of women into the job market occurs mainly in precarised positions, at the same time that they continue to be assigned activities that refer to the reproductive sphere. According to Nascimento (2019:288), in the Brazilian context, within the production of gender hierarchies it is the Black woman who "[...] is found at the lowest position of the social hierarchy". Thus, because these women are involved in precarised

work occupations in the public sphere, while simultaneously carrying out work in the private sphere, which involves motherhood, it is evident that the exploitation to which they are subjected is intensified by capital, with them held responsible for both productive and reproductive work (Antunes, 2013; Nogueira, 2017).

In this sense, the exploitation experienced by women collectors is expressed mainly through work overload, which is evident in reports on the lack of decent working conditions, low pay and the responsibility for raising children. According to Silva and Menegat (2014), it is worth highlighting that the feminisation of precarised work and the need to administer themselves and their children are the main circumstances that lead women to undertake the work of solid waste collection – together with the intersections of racial inequalities that, as highlighted by Vasconcelos et al. (2020), lead black women to experience these circumstances throughout the course of their lives. According to Vallin (2016), the majority of women collectors are solely responsible for domestic activities, particularly with regard to motherhood, since they do not have the financial resources to share these activities using contracted services that can help them, for example, child sitters or day-care centres.

Due to the devaluation of the price of solid wastes, the financial difficulties of the women collectors interviewed are perceived with concern due to the responsibility of caring for and raising children. This is evident in narratives in which the collectors are indignant at the value of the share, which is insufficient to ensure a dignified upbringing for their children. Thus, based on the category of *raising children in recycling warehouses*, the collectors reveal aspects that relate to the care of their children and difficulties in collection work. Initially, what caught the researchers' attention was the elaboration of the discourse on motherhood coming, above all, from women, especially with regard to raising children in the recycling environment.

Further investigation showed that raising children within the associations is not related to the responsibility of them working to provide a living, even though the children help in certain activities. An example of this is the collector who introduces and praises her daughter, revealing that she helps prepare meals for association members. In a study involving the children of waste collectors, Ferraz and Gomes (2012) sought to understand the reasons for the introduction and presence of children from a young age in waste collection, and concluded that the mothers believe that the work helps them care for, protect and teach their offspring. This observation is consistent with the notes in the field diary that mention a child playing among recyclable materials, in a place where recycling remained in the same environment as the home.

Another important aspect concerning raising children in recycling warehouses is mentioned by Costa and Neves (2007): the lack of public apparatus designed to care for young children of women collectors is an obstacle to occupations outside the home. This adds to the fact that available jobs remain far from their homes, involve the high cost of transportation and require a long commute. These situations create difficulties for women collectors, since in many cases, it means that their children would be alone for longer. Thus, raising children in the recycling environment emerges as a response to the lack of other possibilities.

Given this, they have no option other than to construct significations that assign new meanings to these issues in light of the situation in which they find themselves (Almeida, 2007). This concerns the set of meanings that permeate the interrelationship between precarised work, mother-collectors who are heads of families, and the public service neglect of their children within the context of social vulnerability. Furthermore, there are significations that involve the fact that caring for children in recycling warehouses also translates into the reproduction of the model followed by their own mothers, who also brought them to this environment (Vallin, 2016). Thus, there is a cycle of repetition in the family trajectory within waste collection.

Such meanings, which refer to the social values assigned by waste collectors to work, motherhood and child care (Almeida, 2007), can guide the raising of children in the work environment. A survey conducted by Benatti, Pereira, Santos and Paiva (2020) indicates that, when caring for their children, vulnerable mothers express the fear that they will be exposed to alcohol and other drugs. The authors reveal that women develop coping strategies to avoid vulnerable situations. Based on these observations, it is possible to reflect that Collector E's fear that her son will be led into trafficking leads her to work, as a form of protection. However, the exposure of children and

adolescents to solid waste can be a risk factor for their emotional and behavioural development, a fact that continues to be neglected by the state (Dumcke et al., 2020; Balico et al., 2021).

Thus, it is also possible to perceive that the state is absent as a body that guarantees the rights of women collectors and their children. There are no public policies for protecting maternity specifically aimed at the work of waste collectors, which forces them to carry out waste collection work during the gestational period and immediately after the postpartum period, since there is no provision for maternity leave and the women need financial resources. On the one hand, since they do not have an employment relationship under the *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (CLT) [Consolidation of Labour Laws], since this is considered informal work, they do not have state protection, but on the other, the low amount collected from the sale of waste makes it impossible for them to contribute to social security, through the *Instituto Nacional do Seguro Social* (INSS) [National Social Security Institute], a means that enables people to receive assistance.

This same absence is perceived in relation to the care of these children after their birth. No interviewee mentioned the use of public day-care centres to care for their children, which demonstrates that the state is absent, particularly in the lives of women who live in situations of social vulnerability, as Nardi (2006) argues. Access to public policies for these women is often made more difficult, not due to the absence of the means of assistance, but rather their actual implementation. In this sense, it is also necessary to create policies aimed at combating racial inequalities and reducing violence in peripheral communities (Santos, 2022), an agenda of the Black movement which understands that the lack of protection of basic social rights constitutes a practice of extermination by the state (Carneiro, 2019). Access to health policies essential for prenatal care during pregnancy is an example of a service whose scope does not involve waste collectors. In the interviews, access to health policies was not mentioned.

Although the right to health is configured as a universal right, there is a lack of medical guidance and difficulty in accessing public services for waste collectors, especially in relation to women's health (Dias et al., 2018). Accordingly, the distancing of waste collectors from health services may occur due to the trivialisation of the severity of possible accidents, when these are not disabling, or due to a lack of resources or information (Coelho et al., 2016). Thus, it appears that mother-collectors raise their children in recycling warehouses because they are not properly supported by the state and as a means to try to avoid exposing their children to social vulnerability.

It is worth highlighting that, according to Coelho et al. (2016), collection work presents a risk of illness due to exposure to chemicals and sharp materials. However, given the need for subsistence, women are forced to continue in this activity, even during pregnancy. In her research, Coelho et al. (2016) sought to understand the main reasons why women collectors are absent from work and identified miscarriage, with symptoms beginning during collection activities, as one of the causes. Even though there is no specific data that corroborates this fact, only the report of an interviewee in this piece of research, it does reflect the relationship between unhealthy work and its impacts on pregnancy.

Faced with this neglect of mother-collectors, it appears that reports concerning the way mothers raise their children in these work environments – whether by placing them in fruit boxes or inserting them into the reality of the work – refer to the way how these women deal with the distancing and absence of the state. This becomes evident when the collector sees in her recycling work the possibility of continuing to work, even with her new-born child, which would not be permitted if she worked in a company.

In addition, Silva and Menegat (2014) point out that the exercise of motherhood is associated with the meaning of work assigned by women in waste collection and, therefore, it is possible to observe the conception of maternal love, of care and protection for children that women collectors experience, even living through daily work marked by precarity. According to Matias, Barone and Rodrigues (2021), the socially assigned role of care and zeal that characterises motherhood, ends up becoming a justification for the suffering that constitutes women's existence.

Thus, the reproduction of the female social role, imposed on women in the collection of solid waste, referring to the category *the social construct of being a mother-woman-collector*, establishes the interlacement between *being a collector* and *being a mother* at work. The perception is that, for

these women, motherhood does not only translate into more concrete aspects, such as the precarisation of work, the absence of labour and social rights, and the use of warehouses to raise children, *being a mother* also interferes in the manner they act and manage work for and with the association members.

It can be assumed that the reproduction of so-called feminine values takes place in this work due to subjectivation and contradiction. The first concerns the structuring of female identity, in which the ideal of woman-mother is internalised, enabling the existence of a device for the production of maternal practices, since motherhood is the *sine qua non* condition for *being a woman* (Machado et al., 2020; Vasquez, 2014). This aspect is evident in the conception that there is a correlation between the umbilical cord and the role of mother, in which recycling appears in the place of daughter. The second, in which the first is a requirement, refers to the contradiction between the sexual division of labour and women's advances. This is because, despite the advancement of women in the occupational and professional field, there has been no denaturalisation of the roles linked to motherhood and the mother figure (Guedes; Araújo, 2011), imposing double day working hours and childcare on women collectors (Coelho et al., 2016), which is expressed according to the intersection of social markers of race and class.

Thus, women seeking new social roles in the public sphere were assigned positions and functions that were in agreement with tasks considered feminine in domestic life (Silva; Menegat, 2015). This is the background that weaves the social construction of motherhood in the work of collecting, in which the collectors exercise a maternal role with their associates through the concept of responsibility and caring for them. A role that is inseparable from their experiences of suffering in the context of precarity they experience, which forces them to establish care strategies for themselves and others through a concept of collective organisation (Vasconcelos, 2020). The collectors of these associations plan and carry out actions so that members and their respective families are not left unprotected. For example, they look for clothes so that the members do not feel cold, they collect more food so that the members do not go hungry, and they look for alternatives – such as organising a thrift store – to raise funds so that the members, seen as their children, are not neglected.

In this sense, *being a mother* does not imply the need to have biological children, and it is not reduced to this; it is enough to occupy this socially constructed place of responsibility of caring for others. In light of this, mothering can be exercised by women in relation to any other person or animal (Machado et al., 2020). In solid waste collection, even when faced with the contradiction of the sexual division of labour, women have occupied positions of leadership and protagonism, enabling the discovery of their potentialities (Silva; Menegat, 2015). In these positions, women can exercise motherhood, that is, reproduce the place of care and protection, which is consistent with the reproduction of the socially produced female role and one exploited by the logic of capitalist production. Therefore, in a contradictory manner, mothering and its practice in collection work can also offer the fundamental conditions for collectors to exercise leadership positions, since, according to Souza and Fonseca (2015), they are responsible for coordinating the group of male and female workers.

Guarantees of social rights for women-mothers-collectors: final notes

The social construction of motherhood permeates the history of the women collectors interviewed. Thus, it is evident that motherhood should be studied and investigated while considering the different contexts in which women are inserted. The specificity of this research proposes an analysis of the question of motherhood for women-mothers-collectors living in Caxias do Sul, which must be considered in relation to the historicity and organisation of the city, including with regard to the possibility of creating ruptures in the hegemonic narrative of local history. In this sense, it is impossible to carry out an analysis of maternal roles without covering the specificities that characterise the work of solid waste collection and social reality. In the case of the women collectors studied, they experience work overload due to the responsibility for raising children and the fact that collection is carried out in an unhealthy manner, which includes low pay and the absence of labour and social rights.

There is an interrelationship between the work of collecting, precarisation, motherhood and social vulnerability with intersections between race, class and gender that occur in the lives of the

collectors. This work impacts the exercise of motherhood, while social vulnerability habituates the existence of waste collectors to precarised conditions, subjecting them to this field of actuation. This concerns workers who require public policies that provide them with decent working conditions and assistance in the areas of health, child-rearing and labour rights, in addition to enabling their children access to educational spaces, particularly in their primary years.

The absence of the state as a protective agent and the difficulties that arise in everyday life contribute to the creation of coping strategies by women waste collectors in the context in which they are inserted. Collection involves raising children in the workplace and the ideal of maternal love, associated with the idea that, for the sake of the children, they give up everything and everything is sacrificed to provide care and sustenance for their offspring. Given this, the role of mothering forms part of the meaning of the interviewees' work, since it is not limited to the care of children, but also encompasses care for members and the association itself. Thus, the reproduction of the maternal ideal is observed, and it is worth highlighting that the condition of social vulnerability exposes women to situations of violence. This means that the ideal of maternal love can have different meanings depending on the social structure in which the woman waste collector is inserted, contributing to violence that arises from the logic of subalternisation, gender and racial inequalities, of which the latter is an issue that must constitute future research.

Finally, as a research limit, this study presents expressions of motherhood that permeate the history of waste collectors who are inserted in the context of association work in a city on the Serra Gaúcha; therefore, it is not possible to generalise the data obtained. Research related to women who collect waste on the streets and in different territories is essential, so that a greater understanding of the interfaces between motherhood and women collectors is made possible. There is a lacuna in research involving analysis of women's exposure to solid waste during pregnancy, which may be a risk factor for pregnant women. Thus, research like this can serve as a resource in the creation of protective public strategies in regard to women waste collectors and motherhood.

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