

# “Hunger doesn’t wait”: the struggle of women in the peripheries of São Paulo during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## **Abstract**

This article examines solidarity networks that have been organized during the Covid-19 pandemic in the peripheries of the city of São Paulo to respond to the overlapping of economic and sanitary crises, which particularly affect families in precarious living conditions. The objective is to argue that these articulations reveal a context marked by the state’s abandonment of its responsibilities to guarantee social rights, and by resistances and struggles that articulate race, gender, class and territory, which have grown in the past decade in the peripheries. Finally, it emphasizes the fundamental role of women who construct these networks through their daily experiences providing care. Care is not understood here as being restricted to the domestic dimension, but as a *gendered* practice that produces relations and struggles.

**Keywords:** Peripheries, Covid-19 Pandemic, Social movements, Care, Social Markers of Difference.

# “A fome não espera: a luta de mulheres nas periferias de São Paulo durante a Pandemia Covid-19

## Resumo

Este artigo examina redes de solidariedade que tem sido organizadas durante a Pandemia Covid-19 nas periferias da cidade de São Paulo para responder às sobreposição de crises, econômica e sanitária, que afeta, particularmente, famílias em condições precárias de vida. O objetivo é argumentar que estas articulações revelam um contexto marcado pelo abandono do Estado de suas responsabilidades para garantir direitos sociais, e pelas resistências e lutas que articulam raça, gênero, classe e território, que tem crescido na última década nas periferias. Por fim, enfatiza o fundamental papel das mulheres que produzem essas redes a partir de suas experiências cotidianas marcadas pelo cuidado. Cuidado não é entendido aqui como restrito à dimensão doméstica, mas sim como prática *generificada* que produz relações e lutas.

**Palavras-chave:** Periferias, Pandemia Covid-19, Movimentos sociais, Cuidado, Marcadores sociais da Diferença.

# “Hunger doesn’t wait”: the struggle of women in the peripheries of São Paulo during the Covid-19 Pandemic<sup>1</sup>

*Milena Mateuzi Carmo*

## Introduction

I’m sorry, I just heard your audio message. We are delivering the food package. It’s very sad to hear, you can’t imagine, there’s so much suffering! We are doing very little, we have to do more for these people, they are being decimated! Today I saw three families come for the food package, you know? Hunger doesn’t wait! We make deliveries and the families appreciate it...there are people from Embu, from I don’t know where, Taboão, looking for the food basket... They cry when they get it! We’re coming, ok?” (Railda, social educator<sup>2</sup>)

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit São Paulo followed by the confusing and contradictory government measures to contain it, virtual conversations like this have become common among people who live in the peripheries of the city, mainly those with some community engagement. Avalanches of messages with requests for help, especially for money, and expressions of collective concerns and proposals to deal with the living conditions that have become even more precarious, have been flooding various WhatsApp groups that link networks of activists in these territories. The devastating potential of the disease in regions with scarce urban infrastructure and social policies was already known and feared, (homes with many residents, interruptions in water supply, insufficient healthcare services, lack of personal hygiene and cleaning products, etc.). For this reason, some of these places were able, from the beginning of the pandemic and through extreme efforts, to prepare in advance and collectively try to control it, as was the case of the neighborhood of Paraisópolis, which received considerable attention in the media<sup>3</sup> at the beginning of the crisis. However, even before contamination, other effects of the pandemic were felt. Overnight, a large number of people lost their jobs or were not able to work. To have nothing to eat, a ghost that haunts the memory of families who lived in the peripheries of the city during the difficult 1980s and 1990s, returned as a severe and generalized reality. In this situation, in which poverty, racism and state violence intersect, residents of the peripheries have organized since the first months of the pandemic to face the hunger in a context in which the state has taken an increasingly reduced role for something that it never completely accepted as its responsibility, which is the guarantee of basic social rights to a portion of the population. This responsibility is increasingly delegated to families and other non-state spheres. My intention in this article is to conduct a preliminary reflection on how these mobilizations reveal forms of resistance that have been reconfigured in the peripheries of the city of São Paulo in the past decade and that articulate in their struggles agendas related to race, gender, class and territory in which women assume a fundamental role.

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<sup>1</sup> This study was conducted with support from the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Código de Financiamento 001

<sup>2</sup> Maria Railda Silva is founder of Amparar [Support] – the Association of Friends and Families of Inmates and she choose to have her real name used here. She affirmed that this is a political choice to give up her privacy to give visibility to her actions and her institution. The other women who appear in the text have had their names changed to maintain their privacy.

<sup>3</sup> About community organization to face the pandemic in the favela of Paraisópolis, see [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020/09/28/eps/1601301353\\_524719.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020/09/28/eps/1601301353_524719.html) (accessed on 10.10.2020)

This text is linked to my doctoral research, still in progress, which investigates the effects of the return of state violence in the daily lives of families who live in the poorest territories of the city. Here, I reflect on how the pandemic has overlapped this violence and intensified the economic crisis that was triggered a few years ago in the country. In my work, I have sought to demonstrate how women are affected specifically by state violence. While men, mainly young and black men, are the direct targets of most cases of police violence, incarceration and homicides, women suffer the loss and assume the task of care which expands in these contexts. It is women who support the emotional and financial burdens generated by death and prison (Pierobon, 2018; Birman, Pierobon, 2021). It is women who organize themselves in help networks, assuming the tasks of care abandoned by the state (Brown, 2019; Han, 2012). With the pandemic, care became too exposed to be disregarded.

Railda and other women who I present in this text are residents of peripheral regions of São Paulo, the wealthiest and most populated city in the country. Even before the healthcare crisis, they already acted in, or were relatively close to, groups and networks organized around struggles such as confronting mass incarceration and genocide of the poor, black and peripheral population; or to peripheral feminist groups; or collectives with other agendas that interlink race, class, sexuality, gender and territory. These struggles have intensified the debate about race relations in the peripheries, particularly articulating gender and sexuality, seeking to produce an “us” (Moutinho, 2014) through a “collective internalized morality of the individual that recognizes the other as similar” (Lima, 2019: 7). Some studies have demonstrated the increase in the number of collectives involved with these agendas in the peripheries of the city, mainly in the past decade (D’Andrea, 2013; Moutinho, Alves, Carmo, 2016; Carmo, 2016; Klein, Carmo, Tavares, 2020; Alegria, Bulgarelli, Pinheiro-Machado, 2020). The voices that I raise in this article are those of some women, among so many others that I know from these networks, who undertake essential actions to support families in situations of vulnerability during the pandemic, assuming greater responsibilities and spending more time to care for people, thus redirecting their energies, which had been dedicated to community activism, to respond to urgent needs: for foods, cooking gas, medicine, cleaning and personal hygiene products, money for rent, etc.

This text was constructed through my participation in these networks, and is derived not only from my research, but also from my engagement as an activist for some ten years in collectives in the southern zone of São Paulo. I use virtual conversations that I had with some of these women, messages from WhatsApp groups in which I participate and online interviews that I conducted<sup>4</sup>.

I emphasize that this article was written amid chaos and uncertainty: are we experiencing the second or third wave of contaminations? Will we have vaccines for the entire population in 2021? How many variants of the virus are circulating in the country? How long will the economic crisis last? Should we leave home or not? Without answers, each day we lament the haunting increase in deaths. Increasing rates of contamination and fatal victims had become normalized<sup>5</sup> and a decline in the rates was no longer commemorated since we never know if a new wave will hit. At the time of my last review of this article, Brazil had exceeded 580 thousand deaths<sup>6</sup>.

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4 All of the statements and messages from WhatsApp presented here were authorized by the senders.

5 The first months of 2021 had rates of contamination nearly two times higher than the peak of the pandemic in July 2020. April 2021 was the most lethal month of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil until now.

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/equilibriosaude/2021/04/abril-foi-o-mes-mais-letal-da-pandemia-de-covid-no-brasil-com-mais-de-82-mil-mortes.shtml> (accessed 9 May 2021).

6 This was the data from 31.08.2021. It is important to emphasize that on this date there was a sharp drop in mortality with a daily average of 670 deaths <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2021/08/30/brasil-tem-media-movel-de-671-vitimas-diaras-de-covid-total-se-aproxima-de-580-mil-ghml>. It is important to highlight the advance of the vaccine which until this date has reached 60% of the population with at least one dose <https://especiais.g1.globo.com/bemestar/vacina/2021/mapa-brasil-vacina-covid/>. (Accessed on 31 August 2021).

It is unlikely that anyone in the country did not lose at least one acquaintance. And over the bodies of Covid-19 victims, men have engaged in political disputes over vaccines, ministerial positions, and elections. Four ministers of health rotated through office in the year of the greatest healthcare crisis in the history of Brazil. Irresponsible declarations from the president continue to resonate in our already tired ears: “A little flu”, “We’ll all die one day”, “There are still idiots who stay home”, “I’m not a gravedigger”, “A country of pansies”. On the other hand, the population has returned to the streets, if there was a day during the pandemic that in fact it was not out in the streets, whether because of confusion about the ambiguous guidance about social isolation, or because they find themselves squeezed between death by Covid or death by hunger. Unfortunately, we are still very far from the end of this affliction.

The pandemic highlighted the contemporary faces of reproduction of inequality and amplified its effects. In daily life it is possible to observe this process incarnated in bodies, relations and in forms of agency and resistance. More than reaching any conclusion, I intend here to give visibility to the chaos, wounds, and possibilities. I do this by dialoging with some reflections produced in an urgent and anguished rhythm by researchers who risk reflecting on these tragic times. I also reflect along with women who are responsible for their homes, who confront the penitentiary system to care for jailed relatives, who process their mourning in daily life, who cry and have fun in the hope of better days and who weave infinite networks of solidarity and struggle.

### **The unequal administration of precariousness of life in the pandemic**

“When a poor person returns from a trip they bring cheese, whiskey and a memento. The rich bring the coronavirus”. This was one of the *memes* that circulated on social networks soon after the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Brazil. The virus reached the country through a 61-year-old white man, a resident of a wealthy neighborhood at the center of São Paulo who had returned from a trip to Italy, which at the time was the epicenter of the disease. He was attended at the Hospital Israelita Albert Einstein, a private institution known as a “rich hospital” by those unlikely to have access to it, precisely because it is one of the most expensive and exclusive in the city<sup>7</sup>. The mocking and vengeful tone of the joke were an early indication of how the pandemic will be experienced and processed here, exposing and deepening structures of suffering, injustice and inequality (Segata, 2020). We quickly find that the idea that was broadly promoted that the virus does not know social frontiers is not quite true.

In early March 2020, our perception of the pandemic was still quite diffuse. The cinematographic images presented in newspapers - babies in isolation bubbles accompanied by healthcare professionals with apparel that appeared like that used in nuclear accidents, or bodies of people who died in their homes in Italy due to the collapse of the healthcare system - seemed to be a science fiction film, provoking perplexity and indifference while Brazil was enjoying Carnival. Nevertheless, it did not take long for the health crisis to reach Brazil. Here, it also seemed, and continues to appear, like fiction, but with a dystopic and gloomy script. There has been widespread denial of the gravity of the disease and a denial of science<sup>8</sup>; stories of corruption in the purchase of vaccines<sup>9</sup> and in the administration of public funds for fighting the disease<sup>10</sup> are abundant in the media,

7 <https://noticias.r7.com/saude/primeiro-caso-confirmado-de-covid-19-no-brasil-completa-seis-meses-26082020> (accessed on 9 February 2021).

8 For more information about denialism in Brazil, see <https://www.unicamp.br/unicamp/noticias/2021/04/14/negacionismo-na-pandemia-virulencia-da-ignorancia>; <https://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/saude-e-ciencia/2021/05/negacionismo-omissao-covid-19-leta-brasil-oms/> (31.08.2021).

9 Newspaper articles about vaccine related corruption <https://g1.globo.com/politica/cpi-da-covid/noticia/2021/06/30/vacina-davati-entenda.ghtml> (accessed 31.08.2021); <https://listoe.com.br/novas-denuncias-de-corrupcao-na-compra-de-vacinas-atingem-o-brasil/> (accessed 31.08.2021).

10 Charges of corruption in various Brazilian cities and states <https://www.brasilefato.com.br/2021/06/03/pf-acusa-desvio-de-r-28-mi-de-verbas-para-o-combate-a-pandemia-no-am-e-prende-seis>; <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2020/09/29/esquemas-de-corrupcao-desviaram-quase-r-18-bilhao-da-saude-do-rj-desde-2007-valor-supera-gastos-com-a-pandemia.ghtml> (accessed 31.08.2021).

particularly since the installation of a Congressional Investigative Commission, the CPI Covid-19<sup>11</sup>; illegal parties causing agglomerations of thousands of people;<sup>12</sup> and other absurdities of these unimaginable times overlap in the public debate causing indignation and disorientation.

In the city of São Paulo, the first measures of social isolation were adopted by the state government on 17 March 2020 – when the first death was registered in the state – and schools and cultural spaces were closed. The municipal government followed the recommendation, adopting a quarantine the following week, on 24 March, when the state government determined the closing of commerce.

The weeks that followed saw sharp changes in routines. Controversial, and experienced differently in different regions of the city, the social isolation never reached the target rate of 70%. The highest point it reached, according to daily monitoring by the media, was 59%<sup>13</sup>. The daily average in the months of April and May 2020 did not reach 50%. “There is no isolation here”, or “there is no pandemic in the periphery”, are statements that I heard more than once when speaking with people who live in peripheral neighborhoods of the city. Simone, a social worker in a government facility in Capão Redondo told me: “But the thing is that people are being required to keep active. And so its nearly like ‘give yourself up to God!’ For believers, they accept and go out. The buses here, the mayor reduced the fleet. But he did not tell the bosses: ‘Hey boss, reduce your staff!’”, referring to workers who had to continue to circulate through the city.

In December 2020, along the route that I took on an Uber to the home of my mother who also lives in the periphery of the metropolitan region of São Paulo, I spoke with the driver, Marcos. He was a black man, about 30, who lived in the neighborhood of Sapopemba, in the periphery of the eastern zone of the city. We passed in front of a large restaurant close to the highway known as the Marginal Pinheiros, in the Morumbi region, when he commented that at the beginning of the pandemic he had worked there. The inauguration had taken place a bit before social isolation began. He said that the restaurant had more than one hundred employees, with a large flow of takeout orders. He said that right after he was hired, he became ill with a strong cough and fever: “I could barely stand up”. But he did not tell anyone he was sick, for fear of being fired, because his job was still not assured. Marcos said he did not take a Covid-19 test and was very scared that the symptoms would get worse or that he would contaminate other people, but said that his fear of losing his job was much worse. Months later, he was fired along with other people, because the restaurant could not keep the whole staff. Marcos now drives for Uber with a car he rents from his neighbor.

The conversation with Marcos demonstrates how the dilemmas of the pandemic have been faced and supported. In the case of the company where he worked, there was no policy to face the disease, not even a protocol for cases of illness among staff. Without support or guidance, from either governments or companies, the decision to either go to work and risk illness or stay at home and risk hunger posed an individual responsibility whose consequences fall on family members, networks and communities.

11 A Parliamentary Investigative Commission was installed in the Federal Senate in April 2021 to investigate omissions and irregularities of the federal government in actions to confront the pandemic.

12 About clandestine parties during the Covid-19 pandemic: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/quase-mil-eventos-clandestinos-sao-fechados-em-sao-paulo-em-meio-a-covid-19/>; <https://veja.abril.com.br/brasil/o-submundo-das-festas-clandestinas-que-se-espalham-pelo-pais-na-pandemia/> (accessed 31.08.2021).

13 For more information about social isolation in the city: <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2020/04/13/taxa-de-isolamento-social-durante-quarentena-de-coronavirus-sobe-para-59percent-em-sp-no-domingo-indice-continua-abaixo-dos-70percent.ghtml>; <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2020/12/14/cidade-de-sp-registra-pior-taxa-de-isolamento-social-em-um-sabado-desde-o-inicio-da-pandemia.ghtml>; <https://noticias.r7.com/sao-paulo/isolamento-social-na-cidade-de-sp-e-de-48-abaixo-da-meta-do-governo-16062020>; <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2021/01/22/com-nova-piora-de-indices-de-saude-governo-de-sp-deve-colocar-estado-na-fase-vermelha-da-quarentena-aos-finais-de-semana.ghtml> (accessed 9 February 2021).

## Peripheries: the invisibility of those who provide care

São Paulo is the wealthiest and most populated city in Brazil. Its more than 12 million inhabitants are distributed unequally through its territory. While the central regions, with robust urban infrastructure and services, are inhabited by wealthy families from the privileged and mostly white social classes, the peripheral regions have insufficient public services in terms of quantity and quality, and mostly black residents (Caldeira, 2000; Kowarick, Marques, 2011; Baeninger, 2011). Although there are “peripheral” neighborhoods in the center of the city (Cracolândia<sup>14</sup>, a few favelas, *cortiços*, etc) and there are a few neighborhoods typical of “centers” in the peripheries (wealthy gated communities), the logic of real estate speculation continues to operate through peripheralization, increasingly valuing regions close to the center and compelling the movement of poor families to the margins of the city.

Since the first weeks of the pandemic, people who live in these more privileged neighborhoods and centers of the city have been able to work from the much-commented home offices, in homes that are a bit larger and with smaller numbers of people, compared to those in the periphery. On the margins, the possibility for social isolation and home work is not the same. Not only because many workers are in essential services and must continue to circulate through the city, but also because in many of these residences the housing conditions are insufficient to guarantee the social distancing indicated by specialists. Images of crowded public transportation have been frequently presented in the media and social networks, denouncing the conditions to which these people are submitted<sup>15</sup>. A lack of water supply and difficulties buying personal hygiene and cleaning products are also frequent complaints.

The peripheries of the city are certainly diverse, and not everyone who lives in them have the same conditions. In recent decades, many studies about the periphery have emphasized the heterogeneity of these territories (Marques, 2010; Magnani, 2012) both in terms of economic conditions, and in the multiplicity of networks, types of circulation, political, religious and cultural engagements. This emphasis is important so that stereotypes about these regions as places of scarcity, violence and political passivity are avoided. I also try to not reiterate the center-periphery dichotomy that depicts opposite poles, in which the center, mirrored in the “backwards” periphery, appears as a dynamic, modern place of citizenship, that is, the “Cidade” [City] (Galicho, 2021) *versus* its distant and violent periphery. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that inequality in São Paulo continues to be reproduced in territorial terms and that the peripheries continue to be places that are less seen in terms of access to rights and more submitted to state violence (Telles, 2013; Feltran, 2011). Thus, it is not a question of reinforcing stigmas that homogenize, essentialize and polarize territories of the city, but to note how the city continues to be reproduced through the logic of peripheralization.

Peripheries are territories, as many studies have shown, which still have very little of the government investments needed to guarantee basic social rights (Feltran, 2011; Carmo, 2016; Fernandes, 2019). The state is present through control and violence, provoking high rates of homicides and prisons, mainly of young black men (Feltran, 2011; Telles, 2013; Farias, 2014). It is not that violence and scarcity are essential characteristics of these regions, a stigma that winds up also falling on the residents. To use the terms of Judith Butler, the precarious conditions are politically induced causing some populations to suffer because of insufficient social and economic networks, and remain “exposed in a differentiated way to the violations, violence and death” (Butler, 2015: 46). These populations, according to Butler, are more vulnerable to disease, poverty, hunger, dislocations and violence with no protection.

<sup>14</sup> Area in the central region of the city of São Paulo occupied mainly by crack users and target of repressive actions by the municipal administration.

<sup>15</sup> Some articles: <https://noticias.r7.com/sao-paulo/fotos/com-mascara-sem-distanciamento-cenas-do-transporte-em-sao-paulo-07062020#!/foto/1>; <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/08/18/covid-mata-mais-entre-trabalhadores-que-dependem-do-transporte-coletivo>; <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/2021/02/07/sem-home-office-periferia-se-expoe-mais-ao-coronavirus-no-transporte-publico> (accessed 9 February 2021).



Another fundamental aspect to be emphasized, which became even clearer during the pandemic, is the territorial division of the work of care. It is residents of the peripheries who provide care services to central regions. In the seminar *Tramas do Cuidado em Tempos de Pandemia* [Trauma of Care in Times of Pandemic]<sup>16</sup> Nadya Araújo Guimarães called this the territorialization of the work of care. Workers in services that were considered essential during social isolation live in the peripheries, such as nurses, nursing aides, supermarket tellers, ride-sharing app drivers, care providers, etc. In his study *Segregação Racial em São Paulo: Residências, Redes Pessoais e Trajetórias Urbanas de Negros e Brancos no Século XXI* [Racial Segregation in São Paulo: Residences, Personal Networks and Urban Trajectories of Blacks and Whites in the 21st century], Danilo França demonstrates how Whites and Blacks are distributed in the metropolitan region of the city, through social classes. He demonstrates how middle- and lower-class workers, whether they are skilled or not, mainly Blacks, inhabit peripheral regions. That is, while upper- and middle-class whites are concentrated in wealthy and central regions that are racially segregated, in the peripheries there is a greater residential contiguity between whites and blacks of lower and middle classes (França, 2017). Thus, nurses, nursing aides, social workers, cleaning women, care providers, drivers, and other occupations essential for “the city” to continue to function during the pandemic, are supplied by the peripheries, revealing a relation of dependence that is continually hidden.

While in the first weeks of the health crisis deaths and contaminations by Covid-19 were concentrated in the territories whose residents could pay for the poorly remunerated labor of care, it did not take long for the situation to shift to the regions of those who provide the care. According to a study reported on by the national business magazine *Exame*, conducted by a professor at the School of Public Health at USP Francisco Chiaravalloti-Neto, beginning in April 2020, the second month of the pandemic in Brazil, the risk of dying by Covid-19 became 50% higher in the peripheral neighborhoods than in the central regions. The article indicated that<sup>17</sup> the districts of Parelheiros and Capão Redondo were those most affected. In early August 2020, the online newspaper *G1* also reported data from the São Paulo municipal government that indicate that the highest rates of death were in the periphery<sup>18</sup>. Accompanying the advance of the pandemic in the city of São Paulo and the following vaccination campaign that began in January 2021, the LabCidade, Laboratório de Espaço Público e Direito à Cidade [The Laboratory for Public Space and the Right to the City], produced some maps that demonstrate the territorial distribution of deaths by Covid-19<sup>19</sup>. The rates obey the same standards as other indexes of social vulnerability, in which the central regions always appear to have better conditions than peripheral neighborhoods. The map shows that the concentration of deaths intensified as it advanced to the margins.

<sup>16</sup> See the online seminar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3g5HPwMbEE&t=75355>

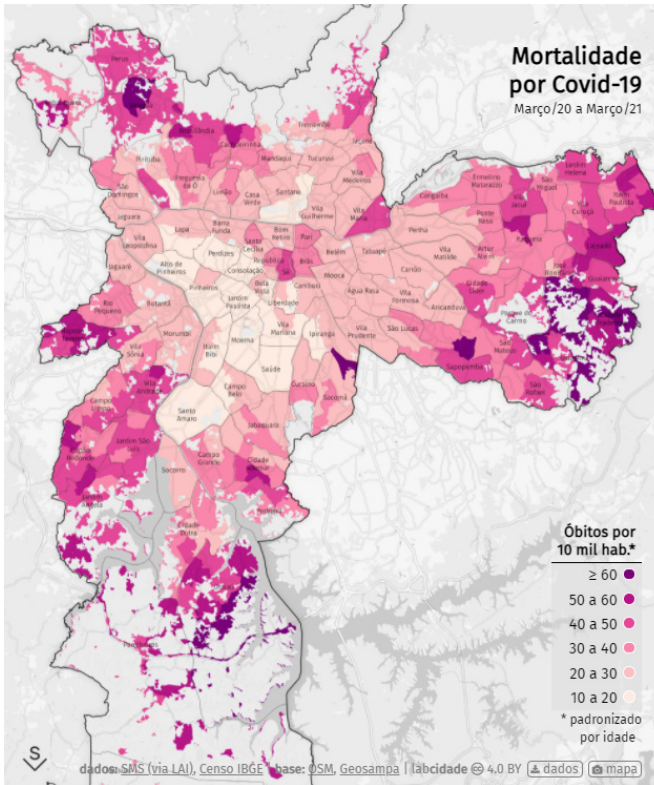
<sup>17</sup> <https://exame.com/brasil/risco-de-morrer-por-covid-19-em-sao-paulo-e-50-maior-na-periferia/> (accessed 9 February 2021).

<sup>18</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2020/08/04/periferias-de-sao-paulo-seguem-na-lideranca-do-ranking-de-bairros-com-mais-mortes-por-covid-19.ghtml> (accessed 9 February 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Map produced by LabCidade published in the article, *Prioridade na vacinação negligencia a geografia da Covid-19 em São Paulo* <https://www.labcidade.fau.usp.br/prioridade-na-vacinacao-negligencia-a-geografia-da-covid-19-em-sao-paulo/> (accessed 24 August 2021).



MAP MORTALITY BY COVID-19 IN THE CITY OF SÃO PAULO – MARCH 2020 TO MARCH 2021



Government actions in these regions, or the intentional lack of these actions, intensify the precarious conditions in the peripheries. The emphasis on the family as being responsible for confronting the pandemic, whether in prevention or care for the ill, or to face the economic crisis, has placed thousands of families in dramatic conditions in which deaths, disease, and hunger overlap. As various articles in the major media have depicted, food insecurity is once again a social problem in the country<sup>20</sup>.

In the city of São Paulo, unemployment rates rose and the lack of income especially affects informal workers<sup>21</sup>. The first emergency assistance payments<sup>22</sup> only began to be sent in early June 2020. The last payment was deposited in January 2021. A new assistance program was approved and began to be paid in April 2021, but at an even lower value and to fewer people<sup>23</sup>. In the first months of the pandemic, before assistance payments were issued, families who lost their income had no support from the state. Just like those who would have no more income in coming months. It is the residents of the peripheries of the city, and those in the rest of the country, who are most affected by the health and economic crisis. Black men are the leading victims of Covid-19<sup>24</sup>. And it is the women who must care for the ill, the families and the support networks to meet the avalanche of demands generated by the overlapping crises.

20 About the end of emergency assistance and hunger in the media: <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2021-01-23/o-brasil-que-reduziu-a-pobreza-em-plena-pandemia-ve-a-fome-rondar-quem-deixou-de-receber-o-auxilio.html>; <https://economia.uol.com.br/columnas/carla-araujo/2020/11/16/fome-betinho-cidania-fim-auxilio-emergencial-natal-sem-fome.htm>; <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2020/12/29/O-que-vem-ap%C3%B3s-o-fim-do-aux%C3%ADlio-emergencial-aos-brasileiros> (accessed on 9 February 2021).

21 <https://www.brasildéfato.com.br/2020/11/03/prefeitura-de-sp-faz-pouco-contradeseemprego-apesar-de-taxas-acima-da-media-nacional> (accessed 9 February 2021).

22 Emergency assistance was instituted in Brazil by law nº 13.982/2020, which called for monthly payments of 600 reais to informal and low income workers, the self-employed and those who pay into the national social security system to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic.

23 The payments were at first R\$600,00 but dropped to a range from R\$150,00 to R\$375,00 in 4 payments. One third of the people who received the assistance in the past year did not in 2021. <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2021/05/25/auxilio-segunda-parcela.htm#:~:text=Aux%C3%ADlio%20com%20valor%20menor%20e,a%20um%20benef%C3%ADcio%20por%20fam%C3%ADlia>.

24 For more information about mortality by race and gender in the city of São Paulo see <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/saude/noticia/2020-08/mortalidade-por-covid-19-e-maior-entre-populacao-negra-em-sao-paulo> (accessed 31 August 2021).

## “What will I do with 300 food packages a month?”: the state that lets people die

I have had difficulties sleeping. And I know this is a reflection of what will happen when I get here. I think about getting here, about taking care of everything, without answers for anything, what could be worse? To have no answer. I think this is frustrating. And then I feel weak, right? I never know what will happen when the bell rings. I never know.... To hear [people's] needs and not have a response to give. No objective responses, efficient responses... Because I depend specifically on the state, the government, the municipality. And this government has not had a real concern with social assistance. (Simone, social assistant)

During the 1990s and decade of 2000, there was a proliferation of government institutions and services in the peripheries of the city (Feltran, 2011; Carmo, 2016). Institutions related to social movements, NGOs and public services formed a complex network at the margins of the state, supported by a human rights discourse, but they also reproduced state bureaucracy through their role in controlling and normalizing poor and black populations of the peripheries. However, if on one hand the state, at its margins, is made concrete in daily life, not as a monolithic block, but through its practices and effects (Vianna, Lowenkron, 2017), it is also at these margins that the gaps open for the production of agencyings and resistances (Carmo, 2016).

Simone, 40, has lived in Capão Redondo since she was born. She is self-declared black and participates in anti-racist collectives of black women in the region. Since 2016 she has been an administrator of the Social Assistance to the Family Service (SASF) in Capão Redondo, one of the main services “na ponta”<sup>25</sup> of national policy for social assistance administered by the municipal government. That is, it is a service implemented in the neighborhood and that has direct contact with families in situations of vulnerability. According to the guidelines established by the national social assistance policy, the focus of the SASF actions “is on the conviviality and strengthening of family and community ties, to provide families access to the social assistance network, to develop potential, participation and ability to attain autonomy. It also works as an identifier of requests for access to benefits and income transfer programs” (São Paulo 2012).

However, what is written on paper is very pretty, but the reality is quite different”, as the professionals at the front of these services repeatedly affirm. They speak of the poor conditions of these services, considering the complex and dramatic demands caused by precarious living conditions (Carmo, 2016). This situation has worsened with the defunding and abandonment of public social assistance services in recent years with the closing of many public facilities, as I have observed in my field work. This has combined with the interruption of the projects of NGOs due to the lack of financing. This weakening of an already fragile network to guarantee social rights in the peripheries has placed even more pressure on living conditions during the pandemic causing the needs that intensify with the overlapping of the crises to fall on families and networks of friendship and neighborhoods.

In October 2020 I conducted an online interview with Simone, who is part of the network of activists that I am following. She told me that from April to October 2020 the only provisions received by the SASF for that time of contingency was 2 thousand basic food packages. That is, just over 300 packages per month: “Each month I attend to one thousand families who are in a situation of vulnerability because of the pandemic, what can I do with 300 packages per month?” The situation forced Simone and her team to determine to whom to donate. In addition, she also reported that there was no planning for how to receive and deliver these food packages: “I never know when they will arrive, and I do not know if in the next month we will receive them again. When families ask, I say that they must wait”.

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<sup>25</sup> It is common to refer to the services and professionals who work directly with the execution of policies as those who are “nas pontas”, literally “at the point”, or at the frontline.

Simone is under contract to an NGO, because SASF is administered under an agreement between the city government and the institution. Nearly all the services that compose the social assistance network in the municipality have this configuration. She believes that her current economic situation is stable. Even with the pandemic, the greater suffering has been the anguish of not being able to respond to the demands of residents who come to her. She has made contacts with other local solidarity networks to “respond to” the needs of the families who seek out the service, but she says it is not enough. As she said in the statement quoted above, she has not been able to sleep because of the situation that has afflicted people in the neighborhood where she lives, works and engages in political activity.

Local groups and networks not linked to social policies (such as the Campaign in Solidarity of Inmates Families, promoted by Amparar [Support]<sup>26</sup>; the Network for the Support of Women and Families of the southern zone, organized by feminist collectives and women in the region<sup>27</sup>) began to work together to meet these demands from their neighborhoods. These mobilizations are supported not only by their experience that “seeking out the state gets nowhere”, but also from their experience that it is the state that kills.

Dona Amélia, who participates in one of the networks examined here, is retired and contributes to the family income along with her daughter Patrícia, who is a domestic worker. With the quarantine, Patrícia, who has signed working papers, had her salary cut in half. With three children at home all day due to the suspension of classes, family spending on food increased substantially. The situation was aggravated because the price of foods also rose exorbitantly<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, Dona Amélia had costs for a grandson who is in jail. Each month she and Patrícia save money to send him a supply package known as the “jumbo”<sup>29</sup> in prison, which was already a burden for the family. This burden has increased with the increased price of food and the fact that they cannot take him the jumbo themselves<sup>30</sup>. Due to security measures imposed at the prisons, she must place the package in the mail, which is even more costly. The family has been able to feed itself with help from the networks composed by feminist groups in the region that donate basic food packages and money to purchase gas.

Iara is associated to a network of family members of inmates and got out of prison just before the pandemic. She lives in the far east of the city with her two adolescent boys who are unemployed. As a former inmate, she had great difficulty finding work. Through contacts from a friend, she found work as a domestic worker in the house of a state prosecutor. She had been working there for 3 months, and her life was gaining a certain stability when she “became trusting and told her boss that she had been in jail”. The prosecutor fired her immediately and she was unemployed in the first month of social isolation. Iara also turned to the network of families of inmates to be able to pay her rent.

The cases of Dona Amélia and Iara demonstrate, as do those of other families, that even without having suffered cases of disease, that they were affected by the pandemic. Unemployment, financial difficulties, and overburdening from the work of care are setbacks that are confronted by those who did not have an easy life before the crisis. Neither Dona Amélia nor Iara had access to emergency assistance, the first because she was retired, while Iara does not know why she was not approved. They also did not have any support from public

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26 <https://abacashi.com/p/amparar>

27 <https://www.vakinha.com.br/vaquinha/rede-de-apoio-as-mulheres-e-familias-da-zona-show>

28 Articles about increased food prices published during the pandemic: <https://brasil.elpais.com/economia/2020-09-10/inflacao-da-cesta-basica-corroio-bolso-dos-mais-pobres-e-deixa-bolsonaro-em-alerta.html> <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2020/10/20/aumento-dos-precos-dos-alimentos-tem-impactado-no-bolso-dos-brasileiros.ghtml> <https://economia.uol.com.br/colunas/jose-paulo-kupfer/2020/09/08/preco-alto-de-alimentos-afeta-mais-pobres-mas-nao-e-inflacao-antes-fosse.htm> (accessed on 09 February 2021).

29 “Jumbo” is the name given to a package of basic products, such as food and personal hygiene products, sent monthly to jailed people by their families. For more information <https://ponte.org/em-sp-familias-so-poderao-entregar-comida-e-itens-de-higiene-a-presos-pelos-correios/> (accessed 9 February 2021).

30 Determination by the Secretariat of Penitentiary Administration (SAP) to guarantee “the safety of employees, inmates and their families” during the pandemic.

social assistance services in their neighborhoods, precisely because of their reduced scope of action. If it was not for the support of community networks, the situation of both women would be much worse.

But it is not only the insufficiency of these policies that leads families, particularly women, who are residents of these territories, to seek alternative forms of “help” instead of claiming their rights. In the daily activities of these state services, stigmas, judgements, humiliations, and criminalizations tend to be reproduced that revive hierarchies and control. Accompanying daycare centers in a favela of Rio de Janeiro, Camila Fernandes analyzed accusations about sexuality that are embedded in discourses, acts and practices within these institutions (Fernandes, 2019). Fernandes demonstrates how the attribution of an “improper and irresponsible” sexuality to black, poor women living in favelas is used to justify the inadequate public policies (which are never sufficient for women who “make too many children”), and is also said to be at the root of social problems.

Accompanying the policies of social assistance in the southern zone of São Paulo, in my master’s research, I also observed the presence of a stigmatizing discourse about these families, mainly about women (particularly mothers and grandmothers), which underlies daily practices of professionals who blame the women for their children’s use of drugs or for their involvement in practices considered criminal. The effect of the stigmatization was very concrete in the life of these families, often representing a punishment, like the removal of some benefit or the choice of one family over another for access to a program or even, in extreme cases, the loss of custody of children (Carmo, 2016).

Fear and mistrust of public services and of state agents by the population that is the target of these policies is common in the statements of many residents and also of professionals who implement the policies. Simone, speaking as a social assistant, told me: “The bigger dispute is often with the state itself which criminalizes the mother and requests removal of custody of children. And when you go to see, you find the mother did nothing wrong, she is just poor. So, there is a criminalization of poverty by the state”. Thus, the social assistance network found in peripheral regions, not only is a network to guarantee rights that are being abandoned, but is also constituted at the *margins* of a state that violates, normalizes, and stigmatizes poor, black and peripheral people (Das, Poole, 2008; Feltran, 2011; Carmo, 2016). It is a state that kills and lets people die. (Foucault, 1999).

### **“Help” at the margin of the city, beyond a humanitarian logic**

As I told you, I never cared about this kind of thing. I never wanted to get close to this type of social action. And it was because of a person who asked me for food at a stoplight that I became aware and then I sought to do something and was able to. But I began to see peoples’ needs. Because it’s no use. OK, I can go there and get help to make lunch and distribute it to people. Great, the person is fed that day. But do they only need to eat that day? No. You know, people need income. People have no work, they don’t have work, you know? (Aline, manicurist)

Requests for “help” like food, gas, medicine, personal hygiene and cleaning products and money to pay bills or to buy medicine became common on WhatsApp groups in which I participate that were formed by activists related to agendas like: feminism in the periphery; the struggle against genocide of black, poor and peripheral people; or against mass incarceration. At the beginning they were requests of the members for themselves or for people they knew: “can anyone help Ana pay her rent? She is a survival of the system and was fired, she risks being evicted with two adolescent children”; “the family of an inmate has a baby daughter who underwent surgery, can someone help to buy milk?”; “Angela has no cooking gas, who can help?”. But as the weeks dragged on, these requests grew, and it was increasingly difficult for the groups to absorb all of them. This is because the people in the groups had economic needs. They had to expand the networks, look for more resources, more help.

“We aren’t doing enough, we must do more for these people, these people are being wiped out!” This was the anguish that drove Railda to expand the possibilities of help for families of women inmates. Or of Aline, Simone, Miriam, Gabriela, Elaine, and many other women who take on the non-paying work of capturing funds, distributing food packages, visiting families in situation of vulnerability, the work of home office, for some, and the work of care expanded for all. And they also assumed the risk of contamination by the disease because of the circulation that this type of activity requires.

Aline is 40, she is self-declared *parda* [brown] and lives in Parque Arariba, a district of Campo Limpo, in the periphery of the southern zone of the city, with her husband, a 17-year-old son, a daughter who is 6, and a mother who is 71 who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease. Since Aline is responsible for caring for the house, and her daughter and mother, she has not worked outside the home for a few years. Recently, she has taken odd jobs in the neighborhood as a manicurist, but nothing steady due to the demands at home. Her husband, Gilberto, works as an Uber driver and contributes most of the family income. He has long worked in community issues in the region and is involved with various human rights networks and institutions in the city. I met Aline through him, because Gilberto was my colleague at an NGO in the region and we now participate in some of the same collectives. Both he and Aline are now my friends and as soon as I saw him promoting the actions on social networks during the pandemic I wanted to speak with her to know about the experience.

Aline had never been involved before with “these social actions”, as she told me. However, this situation changed at the beginning of the pandemic, when she engaged vigorously in the distribution of meals to people living in the street who were close to her home. It all began at the beginning of the social isolation when she went to visit her sister, in a nearby neighborhood. Aline was approached by a person living in the street who asked her for something to eat. She even offered him money, but the man refused it. He said that the stores in the region were all closed due to the social isolation and that he had not eaten in 3 days, because institutions and restaurants that made food donations had stopped their activities, leaving he and other people in the street nearby without support.

Aline said:

That was gnawing at me inside and I was imagining: ‘boy, we go three or four hours without eating and we feel hungry, imagine three days without eating!’ So I spoke with Gilberto about this and he said: “Ah, I don’t think it’s good because people just don’t eat one day, they eat every day. Are you ready to assume this commitment? You will have to stop your life!” And I said: “I am, I’m ready”. And I posted something on Facebook, saying what happened and if someone could help, I don’t know, somehow with rice, beans, or with a cooked meal. And I had a big response that I did not expect. And I had a lot, a lot of help.

Aline had support from two other neighbors and with many donations from merchants and residents of the region. She also had support from other networks of activists in the city through contacts from her husband, who works on cases of violence (related to gender, arrests, deaths, and police violence) and with other types of assistance (food vouchers, 50 payments of R\$100 that they received from an NGO in the center of the city, the provision of guidance about issuing documents, etc.). For six months, every evening, after they finished their work in their own homes, the three women prepared 100 meals and distributed them at various points of the neighborhood, where people were living in the street.

The actions of these women also expanded to the distribution of food packages and clothes for families in the neighborhood. The donations arrived at Aline’s home and were passed on to those who requested. Many people went to her to make donations, and others to ask for food packages and other types of help. Aline became one of the connections in these solidarity networks that were formed in the peripheries of the city at the beginning of the pandemic.

At first, it would be possible to define Aline's initiative and that of her neighbors exclusively as charity, which is characterized as an isolated action that does not question the abandonment by the state of its responsibility to guarantee social rights. Charity is often anchored in religious principles of benevolence and may construct asymmetric relations between those who donate and those who receive. It should be emphasized that much of the major media has repeatedly presented the theme of food insecurity and promoted and supported the solidarity campaigns to collect food throughout Brazil.

Clara Han, referring to recent criticisms of humanitarian assistance programs, observes that the emphasis on compassion towards social suffering and inequality involves political values and specific forms of intervention that maintain social inequalities and hierarchies (Han, 2012). Didier Fassin, analyzing immigration policies in France, called attention to how these policies have been supported by a morality that combines compassion and repression. At the same time that the repression of immigrants intensifies because they are seen as a threat to the nation, those who request political asylum have their requests accepted more frequently for so-called humanitarian reasons, based on a sense of compassion for the body that suffers, and not for the principal of refugee guaranteed by human rights. Thus, these undesirable immigrants are recognized for their their basic biological existence and not for their political existence. Fassin also affirmed: "to commiserate with the asylum seeker or with the undesired immigrant brings less benefits to these figures than to ourselves, given that we show how human we really are" (Fassin, 2014: 20).

Families that now face risk of hunger and that are targets of these solidarity campaigns are also those whose children are targets of state violence, are occupying prisons or are homicide victims. They are the undesirable racialized, poor families who live in the peripheries. Reports on Brazil's leading television news programs have presented stories that seek to cause commotion, presenting large campaigns to collect provisions. With the exception of the mention of emergency assistance offered by the federal government in the pandemic, little is said about holding the state responsible for food security, which is not referred to as a right.<sup>31</sup> The response has been campaigns to collect and distribute foods by NGOs and community networks throughout the country.

But what happens when the agents of this humanitarian assistance are not "us" but "them"? Or if not them but "us"? I affirm that although the actions of women and networks that I present here do involve compassion and humanitarianism, this morality, in and of itself, is not sufficient to explain them. Many members of the solidarity networks, such as Aline, also need the food packages they collect. Between the targets of the actions and those who conduct them, there is an identification in terms of life experiences that are marked by scarcity, because both have lived, or are living or run the risk of living, in similar precarious situations.

Aline lives in a "typical" neighborhood of the periphery of the city of São Paulo. Brick houses stacked on top of each other dominate the landscape, interspersed by small squares, public schools, bars, churches and shops. Aline's family also lives in one of these multi-storied houses. She is on the first of three floors. Her father built them and gave one floor to each of his three daughters. So, they do not need to pay rent. The Parque Arariba neighborhood where Aline lives is in the district of Campo Limpo, whose per capita income is R\$1.747,00 per month and the homicide rates of youth from 15-29, is one of the highest in the city at 49,91 deaths per 100 thousand residents<sup>32</sup>.

31 See the news program on TV Globo on 04.04.2021 about solidarity campaigns <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/9409545/programa/>. Some examples in the on-line press: <https://economia.uol.com.br/videos/index.htm?id=redes-de-solidariedade-ajudam-familias-na-quarentena-0402CD9A346CE0B96326>, <https://g1.globo.com/fantastico/noticia/2020/12/27/rede-de-solidariedade-transforma-paraisopolis-em-meio-a-pandemia.ghtml> <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2020/07/16/pandemia-cria-rede-de-solidariedade-para-ajudar-populacao-mais-carente.ghtml> (accessed 9 February 2021).

32 Data synthesized by Rede Nossa São Paulo, a civil society organization whose mission is to "mobilize various segments of society to, in partnership with public and private institutions, construct and be committed to an agenda and a set of goals, articulate and promote actions, aimed at a city of São Paulo that is just, democratic and sustainable". (<https://www.nossasaopaulo.org.br/quemsomos/#rnsp>) (accessed 09 February 2021).

Despite the heterogeneity that marks the peripheral territorialities, as discussed, the intensification of the precariousness experienced during the pandemic generates needs. And because of the lack of a network of public services to respond to them, the responses spread through relations of daily life. The community organizing by these women express this. That is, in a context of reduced social programs, the needs of families in precarious living conditions wind up falling on networks that interlink families, friendships, neighbors (Marques, 2010) and activism. Thus, the families who live in the peripheries, even those who are in more stable economic conditions, are convoked to engage in networks of help and reciprocity. To offer help to people living in the streets, in the case of Aline, is to expand this practice. During the pandemic the number of families that need this help increased drastically, revealing these already existing forms of support, but also revealing the state's inability to guarantee basic social rights, emphasizing the politically induced precarious condition to which residents of the periphery are submitted. Finally, it has emphasized how women have taken the lead in assuming these fronts of struggle strongly marked by care.

Nadya Araújo Guimarães and Priscila Pereira Faria Vieira note the appearance of help networks in contexts in which poverty and limited state support are combined. These authors frame the actions of solidarity within the neighborhood as “help” that can be characterized as one form, among others, of the work of care found in societies marked by inequality (Guimarães, Vieira, 2020). This form of care, which differs from professional work or from obligations due to the status of women in families, is located in a specific circuit and takes on other meanings. This help is not understood as work that should be remunerated, or as an obligation, by the people involved in the relationship. Thus, the authors affirm, “they are sustained by (and reproduced through) social relations based on group or community reciprocity” (Guimarães, Vieira, 2020: 10).

Although the authors are referring more specifically to tasks of care for children, the elderly, and the ill, I would like to suggest an expansion to the understanding of care. Isn't it possible to understand the tasks undertaken by these networks of solidarity to be framed within the scope of care and to go beyond the limits of domestic life? These forms of help include cooking for people living in the streets, visiting families in the neighborhood who need support, helping neighbors and friends with imprisoned sons and husbands, collecting donations and distributing food packages, that is, the entire effort to “respond to” needs for social well-being – which should be absorbed by the state in a context of guaranteed rights – presented by families who are found in extremely precarious conditions.

Joan Tronto argues that care is “an activity of the species itself that includes everything that we can do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it in the best way possible. This world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, and everything in which we seek to intervene in a complex and self-sustainable form. (Tronto, 2007: 285). I thus affirm that many of the actions assumed by solidarity networks that emerged in the city of São Paulo are guided precisely by the logic of care. It is not by chance that they are largely mobilized by women.

According to the tradition dedicated to research about care, it is understood here to involve complex webs of relations that take place in daily life involving concern and accepting responsibility for others, which goes beyond the private environment of family life and questions the notion of autonomous individuals who relate to each other rationally. Care here, as Han affirms, is understood as a problem of daily life more than a category with defined limits (Han, 2012). And in the pandemic care has revealed the unavoidable interdependence among subjects (Tronto, 1997).

Thus, if inequality and crises are shared among all people who live in the peripheries, women are affected and react more distinctly. During the pandemic, many scholars wrote about this. Denise Pimenta, based on her thesis about the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leon, found that the Covid-19 pandemic does not differ from other healthcare crises in the sense that it overburdens women with the task of care. She calls attention to how care, in the case of Sierra Leon, became dangerous, because while it promoted cure, it also killed



the caregivers. Women, by caring for family and neighbors, were more often contaminated, for this reason the highest death rates were among women. Reflecting on the Brazilian case, Pimenta affirms that the pandemic has the face of a woman, a black woman, not only because black women went to the front lines to confront the disease through multiple forms of the work of care, but because it is also black women who are in more vulnerable conditions, and therefore risk contamination (Pimenta, 2020).

Alessandra Tavares has contributed to this debate by considering how women who live in peripheries, mainly black women, have lived through these times seeking to “respond to” the demands of home offices, domestic chores, accompanying the schooling of children who have online lessons, illness, deaths and militancy (Tavares, Carmo, 2020). Nathalie Blanc, Sandra Laugier and Pascale Molinier argue that the visibility that care work gained during the pandemic did little to change the lack of recognition of women’s voices in the public space to face it (Blanc, Laugier, Molinier, 2020). Natália Lago and Natália Padovani write about the reorganization of networks of solidarity that women with imprisoned family members have undertaken to respond to the emergency demands of the pandemic (Lago, 2020; Padovani, 2020).

These texts, while addressing distinct aspects of the experiences of women in the pandemic, converge by expressing the excessive burdens of the work of care and its devaluation, as well as the forms of agencying and resistance that are deeply aligned to experiences that articulate gender, race and social class. Reflecting on them with the women with whom I have worked, I argue that even if they are tired, they have engaged in struggles that blur limits of what is understood by public and domestic, filling in the gaps between family and state, producing relations, subjectivities and moralities through a policy of care. In the act of distributing foods, visiting neighbors in situations of violence who have economic needs, and suffer illness, actions of care that blur artificial frontiers of what is public and private are not only reproducing a humanitarian morality, but weaving relations upon which recognition of race, gender, class and place are produced. This recognition is fundamental to strengthening struggles.

### **Food and struggle at the margins of the city**

Railda is one of the founders of Amparar [support], the Association of the Friends and Family Members of Imprisoned People, which for more than 15 years has supported family members of people in the prison system and those leaving it. The group mediates relations with the courts, denouncing violations of rights in prisons, strengthening articulations of families, composing the struggle against mass incarceration in Brazil, and many other actions. Amparar was created by and is composed of families of jailed people, mainly women, and by people who were in prison, “survivors of the system”. The institution’s work is not limited to a specific neighborhood, but it is located in the far east of the city, in the Conjunto Habitacional José Bonifácio housing project, in the district of Itaquera. Its activities function through a broad network of family members and “survivors” that extends throughout the São Paulo metropolitan region. It is important to emphasize, they are residents of the peripheries. In addition, Amparar is in contact with other human rights networks that work in Brazil and abroad. With the pandemic, the actions of the association changed radically due to an avalanche of old and new needs.

Visits to prisons were suspended, leaving families without news of their relatives amid multiplying rumors of contaminations by Covid-19. The *jumbos* families send to inmates had to go through the post office, which increased their expenses. The public defender’s office was closed, so people had no access to information about their cases and did not know to whom to turn in cases of human rights violations (Lago, 2020; Godoi, Campello, Malart, 2020). Many women lost their jobs during the social isolation making it even more difficult to send the provisions needed to the inmates. These demands, were all steered to Amparar, and now even more so. Railda’s WhatsApp doesn’t stop.

In the first months of isolation, Amparar mobilized its networks, which include people throughout the city. Many people tried to respond to each request: the daughter of an inmate had undergone surgery and needed a specific and expensive kind of milk; one “survivor” who had just lost her job faced eviction and needed help with the rent; there were requests for cooking gas, *jumbos*, food packages, and medicine. The list was long and varied. The WhatsApp messages circulated until a solution was found: raffles, campaigns, public notices, and donations were the sources for funds that needed to be gathered and steered towards the most urgent needs. There were many messages, and hours online.

Railda, 54, is a black woman. She has lived in the east zone of the city since childhood and has four children, one of whom has had a few passages through the prison system since adolescence. Railda participates in movements against the prison system since the early 2000s, when she organized with other mothers of youth who were held in the youth detention facility Fundação Casa. Since then, her daily life is occupied by movements through the city to meetings to articulate with social movements, institutions and legal agencies, visits to prisons or trips throughout Brazil or abroad. However, with the pandemic, this agenda of public activities was exchanged for a deep immersion in virtual conversations and in the exhaustive work of receiving and delivering food packages. This is not to mention the infinite number of live broadcasts to which she was invited to discuss the prison system during the pandemic.

During the first six months of the pandemic, Amparar distributed nearly 2 thousand food packages and offered financial help totaling more than R\$30.000 reais – money that was raised by campaigns and raffles – for families who came from all regions of the city looking for help. Railda repeatedly sympathizes with the efforts of family members in search of food: “This morning I had a family member who came from Taboão to the José Bonifácio housing projects to get a food basket. Can you believe it? The situation is very difficult”. Taboão da Serra is a city located 45 km to the west of the city of São Paulo. It is an hour and a half on public transportation. This case is not an exception. It highlights the enormous movements that many people must take to obtain food, and demonstrates the absence of local programs in their neighborhoods. The exhaustion and astonishment are devastating, but at no time did Railda consider abandoning this work, even with recommendations from all sides that she should not expose herself to the risk of contracting the disease: “If I stay home, I’ll go crazy”.<sup>33</sup>

The news about the food distribution was promoted “mouth-to-mouth”. “Each time that we would take a basket to someone’s home, another neighbor came over to get information about the delivery point. There is always someone who needs it”, Sandra told me. She participates in a collective in Capão Redondo. Thus, to respond to these daily needs, the networks and groups organize to collect more resources and expand distribution. These resources, it must be highlighted, come from individual donations, NGOs, merchants or companies and online campaigns. There is little talk of

turning to government services and funds, except for the emergency assistance payments. These groups are suspicious of government action, as mentioned, whether because of the type of response offered, or because it is unlikely there will be a response to the needs. “It’s no use to send a request to CRAS, they don’t do anything”, Railda told me.

On the other side of the city, in the periphery of the southern zone, another group of women have also mobilized intensely to conduct similar actions: collect and distribute food, personal hygiene and cleaning products; find money for rent, electrical and water bills, and medicine; help women facing domestic violence; support families with jailed members or those assassinated by the police during the pandemic; find psychological support for women residents of the region; and other forms of help. The group Periferia Segue Sangrando [I would prefer to keep bleeding] was created in 2016 from the “need to think about our experiences

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33 For a more complete examination of the actions of Amparar during the Pandemia, see Lago, 2020

as peripheral women, to place ourselves in a united movement and break the silence that is so devastating” as its members wrote in a text published in a journal produced by an NGO in the region in 2016<sup>34</sup>.

The collective is composed of a group of women from 30 to 50 years old, mostly black, residents of the contiguous districts of Jardim São Luís, Jardim Angela and Capão Redondo. Nearly all of the members have had higher education and work in jobs related to NGOs, social policy, the arts or research. The collective has been conducting sporadic actions whose objective was, above all, to bring women from the region together to share experiences that articulate gender, class, race, sexuality and territory. With the pandemic, these women reorganized to conduct these actions to respond to the needs of families in the region. There were intense exchanges on the WhatsApp group where the cases were shared: a group of women immigrants with their families was undergoing situations of food insecurity in Jardim São Luiz; an 84-year-old woman had a grandson in jail and was alone and needed help to care for herself and to deal with the state prison bureaucracy; another resident was suffering from domestic violence and needed shelter. In a context of a state of law, these needs would theoretically be absorbed by social policies capable of guaranteeing rights, but with the advance of neoliberal policies and the rise of state violence, they are aimed at families and local networks.

In the pandemic, this flow of requests to the collective increased, whether from female friends, neighbors, more distant relatives or from unknown women who learned about the possibility to receive help. Thus, the women of the Periphery Continues to Bleed group began to accumulate home office work. The work of care at home intensified, mainly because children did not have school, while efforts were made daily to collect and administer funds, receive and distribute food, accompany cases of violence and other activities.

Once again it is important to observe these actions through the political meanings that the subjects attribute to them. In the past ten years there has been a multiplication of social mobilizations in the peripheries of the city through these collectives. These groups are composed mostly of youth, and many works with cultural manifestations and on agendas related to gender, race, sexuality and class as they are articulated to territory as do such Amparar and the Periphery Continues to Bleed collective. The issues addressed include peripheral feminism, genocide of black and peripheral people, “dis-incarceration”, and others that reveal the precarious living conditions in the peripheries, and the state is held responsible as the main agent of violations. These collectives have contributed to the production of new identities that shape a racialized “us” and that challenge the idea of a miscegenetic periphery derived from a “Brazilianness” linked to miscegenation (Moutinho, 2004).

Thus, in addition to being producers of a new racial grammar in the periphery and of new identities, these collectives begin to produce a discourse that frames the state not as a guarantor of rights, but as an enemy, a genocidal agent of extermination of poor, black and peripheral people. “Us for us” [“Nós por nós”] became a recurring expression in these movements, expressing the need to articulate those who share a common experience of race, class and territory and who are the targets of violent state actions. These groups raise new political discourses and new subjects emerged through the consolidation of democracy since the 1990s, with the promise that the state of law would guarantee greater social justice and decrease inequality. Instead of denouncing the absence of the peripheral state, these new subjects denounce its presence, which kills people and lets them die despite democratic advances in the Constitution of 1988.

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34 Revista Sujeitos Frutos e Percursos publicado pelo CDHEP, Centro de Direitos Humanos e Educação Popular - [http://cdhep.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Sujeitos-Frutos-Percursos\\_2013-2016.pdf](http://cdhep.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Sujeitos-Frutos-Percursos_2013-2016.pdf)

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The actions taken by the networks in which Aline, Railda and the women of the Periphery Continues to Bleed collective participate should be analyzed considering this entire context. The actions are not limited to a humanitarian logic promoted by a discourse that holds families exclusively responsible for access to social rights, and in the case of the pandemic for the effects of the economic crisis and propagation of the disease. It is necessary to analyze these actions considering the actions of social collectives and movements that have constituted an “us” marked by an experience of gender, race, sexuality and social class specific to a territory marked by violent state action (Moutinho, Alves, Carmo, 2016; Klein, Carmo, Tavares, 2020). In this process, the women assume a fundamental role, producing mutual support networks that are anchored by a perspective of care. These networks are vectors replete with political meaning, given that they are motivated by and reproduce another form of relation with the other, one of implication, recognition and care (Butler, 2015; Tronto, 1997).

When I began writing this article, I had a question in mind about the burden that participation in these solidarity networks meant for these women who also face: the needs of children with online classes; home office; domestic tasks in homes that were much more lived in; care for the elderly, children and ill; mourning; pain; and loss. I imagined that the women would be very tired. Obviously, they are tired, but for all of them, the domestic work was the most draining factor and “drove them crazy”. “I can’t stay home anymore”; “I’m going crazy here at home with my 6-year-old daughter and my mother, and I can’t stand staying home anymore”, were expressions that I heard from nearly everyone I spoke to.

Tronto affirms that the act of care emphasizes concrete connections with other people and evokes much of the daily life of women, revealing a fundamental aspect of life, that, in another manner, could appear to be irrelevant. In this sense, to expand the understanding about what it means to care for other people “reveals the need to restructure broader political and social institutions, if caring for others constitutes a more central part of the lives for everyone in society everyday” (Tronto, 1997: 200). That is, Tronto adds, to think of the social world in terms of caring of others differs radically from our current way of conceiving care as a pursuit of self-interest.

I emphasize here that the people who live in the peripheries of the city submitted to state violence, and consequently to the intensification of precarious conditions, are not passively subject to it, as Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2008) have recognized. It is in the cracks of these margins of the state, that subjects produce resistances and struggles. These solidarity actions are clearly not enough to mitigate the effects of social inequality that were amplified by the pandemic. These women obviously are extremely overburdened and tired because once again they have assumed the work of care and social well-being, which under the country’s constitution is understood to be a task of the state. Through this exhaustive work these women give meaning to their lives, they produce relations that sustain networks of solidarity and of struggles that (re)construct worlds (Das, 2011) where our precariousness and interdependence are recognized and valued.

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