SOLO MOTHERS AND NEW FORMATIONS OF COLLECTIVE LIFE IN SÃO PAULO'S PERIPHERIES

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In 2010 in the city of São Paulo, 37 percent of mothers were solo mothers, compared to 16 percent in 1960. This meant that more than 1 million women in 2010 were raising their children without a partner.[1] The increase in solo motherhood is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of deep transformations reshuffling entrenched formations of gender hierarchies, family arrangements, class inequalities, and racial discrimination in São Paulo. These changes happen at the level of the everyday; they seldom result from organized action. They have not been planned by any kind of institution. Rather, these transformations have unfolded through small changes in practices here and there that, after at least two decades, have amounted to a revolution in ways of living together, reshaping femininities and masculinities, creating new kinds of families, reconceiving of racial identities, and challenging class barriers. In this article, I focus on solo mothers as a way of thinking about broader intertwined changes in patterns of gender, family, race, and class. I argue that analyzing the lives and perceptions of solo mothers allows us to identify an emergent formation of collective life and, consequently, the simultaneous unmaking of the established pattern that tied together the categories of nuclear family, breadwinner, and housemaker.

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Two issues set the problem space of this article. First, the results of a socioeconomic survey I conducted in Jardim das Camélias, a neighborhood in São Paulo's peripheries, in 2013 and that replicated one I did in 1980.[2] Families and domestic arrangements have changed significantly: families are smaller, people are having children later, and many adults choose not to constitute a new family. In Jardim das Camélias, the proportion of nuclear families (a couple and their children) dropped between 1980 and 2013 from 60 percent of total families to 46 percent, while the proportion of women-headed households increased from 11.9 percent to 30.8 percent. Significantly, in 2013, I classified 20 percent of households as "complex," since they would not fit any standard classification (for example, a household formed by two women who are friends, not partners, living together with their children). I came to understand that many of the women-headed or "complex" households included solo mothers. It was unclear how to describe and interpret these changes in modes of living together and how the proportion of solo mothers increased so sharply.

Second, around 2017, the expression *mãe solo*, solo mother, started to circulate in São Paulo. The expression first appeared in middle-class feminist online spaces. *Mãe solo* refers to women who are mothers raising children by themselves and who reject the adjective "single," which categorizes them in relation to marriage, with the connotation of something lacking. Self-declared solo mothers want to emphasize their agency and autonomy, their choice, their independence. They reject the common imaginaries of abandonment and victimhood associated with being a "single mother." *Mãe solo* is a term that indicates change, an emergent phenomenon, and thus anchored my investigation of current social transformations.

Three important factors shape the definition of solo mother. First, the circumstances that lead a woman to become a solo mother vary significantly. Some may have decided to have a child without a partner from the start—in the Brazilian context, they are referred to as choosing *independent production* and usually hail from the middle classes, as this choice often involves expensive assisted reproduction. In the peripheries, the situations vary. Some mothers may have had a child in a marriage that was dissolved; others became pregnant in a casual encounter; others had a relatively stable relationship but the partner remained uninvolved with the child. They may be widows, or their partners are in prison. Basically, every woman I interviewed described different circumstances. However, only rarely had they been abandoned, as the stereotype of single mothers suggests. Usually, it was their decision to go solo. Second, since being a solo mother frequently proves a difficult project in contexts of accentuated poverty,

their domestic arrangements change frequently. One day they live alone with their children; the next day they may go back to their parents' home, to live with relatives, to move in with other solo mothers, to join a collective house for students, and so on. Some solo mothers may form a new partnership, but this usually does not change their responsibilities in relation to their children, so, in this sense, they continue to be solo mothers. All arrangements are temporary. Transitoriness is a central characteristic of the new formation of collective life emerging in the peripheries of São Paulo (Caldeira 2022). This suggests a limitation to household-composition statistics in understanding the situation of solo mothers. For example, many are heads of households, but not when they go back temporarily to their parents' homes. Third, not all women raising children alone like the label "solo mother." Some call themselves simply "mothers,"; others "single mothers." The objections usually refer to *solo* evoking notions of solitude and isolation, which they think inaccurate, as they feel supported by large networks of kin and friends. In this article, I use the expression *solo mother* to refer to women who have the main responsibility of raising their own children, regardless of how they became solo mothers or their domestic arrangements at the moment we met. I also include women who object to the label, but whose lives and arrangements are almost identical to the ones who call themselves solo (though I indicate their preferred labels).

Formation of collective life is an analytic that enables studies of the shifting ground on which solo mothers and many young women are operating.[3] Formations are ways in which socio-cultural elements combine and coalesce temporarily. A formation is a common repertoire, a way in which people live their everydayness and create their individual lives. It is collective because it refers to shared patterns of practice, signification, and language that produce opportunities and constraints in people's lives.[4] It is what is tacitly shared in the context in which people frame their options. Formations change. From the 1940s to the early 2010s, peripheral urbanization—fundamentally, families autoconstructing houses—constituted a dominant formation of collective life in São Paulo's peripheries (Caldeira 2017). Millions of people in the peripheries of São Paulo autoconstruct and live according to certain available parameters (such as homeownership). They build their houses and shape their lives in similar ways, act in concert with others, but without having to be organized or following formal procedures. Peripheral urbanization is anchored by a nuclear family organized around heteronormative values in which the figures of the breadwinner and the housemaker dominate. In this formation, the figure of the worker, *trabalhador*, proves central.

Although peripheral urbanization probably remains the hegemonic mode of the creation of spaces in the peripheries—and the large majority of houses have been autoconstructed—it is clear that the ways of producing and inhabiting residences is changing, especially since the 2000s. The nuclear family now constitutes a minoritarian arrangement. Solo mothers are central in the new emerging formation, characterized by a diversity of family compositions, a dominance of female-headed households, the increase in rental options (vis-à-vis autoconstruction), and substantial transformations in labor, marked by the disappearance of the "proper job" (see Ferguson and Li 2018) and the spread of precarious platform work (see Guimarães 2020).[5] Solo motherhood is, then, one of the many elements articulated in this emergent formation. In what follows, I will focus on solo mothers to investigate the depth of some of these transformations and to argue that women and their efforts to resignify their lives, their everydayness, and their modes of living together are fundamental in shaping this new formation.

In my interrogations into solo mothers and the emergent formation of collective life of which they are protagonists, I proceed both historically and ethnographically. I rely on an ethnographic archive I have produced in São Paulo, and especially in its peripheries, from 1978 to the present. I place this archive in dialogue with other historical references and with socio-demographic statistics to establish the significance of contemporary changes. I then discuss in-depth interviews I conducted with solo mothers in 2022.

From my ethnographic archive, especially relevant for this discussion are a series of interviews and participant observation undertaken between 1978 and 1980 focusing on family composition and the project of autoconstruction (Caldeira 1984). As I mentioned, autoconstruction was a project of nuclear families, and the dominance of this mode of inhabiting serves as the parameter in relation to which I analyze current transformations. In 2001–2002 and again in 2012–2013, I researched new forms of cultural production emerging from the peripheries, interviewed young people and artists involved in many different forms of artistic production, and conducted participant observation at performance sites. This research clearly revealed changes in gender roles among the younger generation. In 2018 and 2019, I started to explore peoples' new ways of living together, and learned much from weekly discussions with a team of researchers from the peripheries. However, I am not analyzing the 2018 interviews here as most of them were not with solo mothers. After the pandemic, working alone, I focused my research on solo motherhood, transformations in gender roles, and family formations. In 2022, I interviewed fifteen solo mothers:

two are white and the others either black or *pardas*, the Brazilian classification for people of mixed race.[6] I interviewed three of them several times, including two who I had interviewed in 2013 and with whom I had remained in touch since. Almost all of interviewees work in low-paid service jobs in offices or stores. One has a university fellowship and another works at an NGO. The 2022 interviews were all open-ended and ranged from 90 minutes to 3.5 hours. I reached the women via two networks, one of university students, and one of activists working to improve infrastructure in São Paulo's peripheries. Not all interviewees were participants in these collectives and actions; some were referred to me by participants.[7]

ON NUCLEAR FAMILIES, BREADWINNERS, AND HOMEMAKERS

Solo mothers challenge established notions of a normative nuclear family and its associated gender roles. Much academic, popular, and policy discourse takes the nuclear family as the norm. Since the prevalence of solo mothers and other socio-demographic indicators point to fractures in this norm, I briefly illustrate the history of, and transformations in, the nuclear family arrangement. This article cannot provide a detailed investigation referencing all relevant literature; it points to some key issues that serve as references for my arguments about current transformations.

Great debates and disagreements exist among historians and demographers about the history of the nuclear family in Europe and the USA and its establishment as the dominant mode of organization of a group of kin. By *nuclear family* I refer exclusively to the group formed by a couple and their children (biological or adopted) living together. Despite disagreements, the literature on the North Atlantic agrees on several points. First, the nuclear family has been a most common form of family organization, or even a dominant form, for centuries. Second, different configurations of the nuclear family have existed over time. For example, the rural family as a unit of production in which all members participated differed quite markedly from the urban nuclear family of early twentieth-century factory workers. Third, in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, the urban nuclear family became attached to notions of breadwinner/housemaker (Seccombe 1986; Horrell and Humphries 1997). The idea that the male salary should suffice to support the whole family (the family wage) became widely accepted, with disastrous consequences for women's independence, autonomy, and presence in the labor force. From the late nineteenth century, women's participation in the labor force declined, a tendency only reversed at

the end of the twentieth century (Seccombe 1986). The family wage has never been totally sufficient, but nonetheless, it became a dominant value and the notions of breadwinner and homemaker became normative, especially in the post–World War II context, in the North Atlantic and beyond. The dominance of the nuclear family, the breadwinner/homemaker model, and the family wage has never eliminated other family formations, such as African American families in the USA (Stack 1974; Ruggles 1994), but they have been seen as non-normative and faced discrimination.

The literature on Brazilian families indicates that great variation in family composition has always existed.[8] The nuclear family may have been dominant only during a short twentieth-century period. High-quality population censuses in nineteenth-century São Paulo allow detailed analyses of household composition. Eni de Mesquita Samara (1989, 28–29) shows that in 1836 there was great variety in family compositions, and the nuclear arrangement represented only 35.4 percent of the total. The percentages of female-headed households in São Paulo were 28.8 percent in 1765, 44.7 percent in 1802, and 39.3 percent in 1836 (Kuznesof 1980, 591): "The female-headed household was the modal form in urban São Paulo in a period of rapid commercialization preceding the separation of residence from workplace" (Kuznesof 1980, 606). Additionally, in colonial and monarchical Brazil, informal marriages and so-called natural children (either born in informal unions or resulting from concubinage) were dominant (Silva 1984; Kuznesof 1991).

Data from 1889 to 1960—a period of intense urbanization associated with industrialization in São Paulo—indicate an increase in the prominence of the nuclear family, a decrease in the participation of women in the labor force, and a rise in men as heads of households and breadwinners. In Brazil, Getúlio Vargas's government promoted this model after the 1930s, and especially during his dictatorship in the 1940s (Nascimento 2024; Cortado 2022, chap. 2). Policymakers saw the property of a unifamilial house as a way to make workers "sedentary;" fix migrants in cities; tame their inclinations to revolt; and improve their moral standards by extricating them from the "promiscuity" of tenement housing. In São Paulo, this model was articulated by associations of industrial producers such as IDORT (Instituto de Organização Racional do Trabalho), which in the 1920s and 1930s argued that the diffusion of the nuclear family and of homeownership would promote a more docile inclusion of the working classes to the factory and the city (see Holston 2008).

The nuclear family arrangement increased significantly during the first half of the twentieth century in Brazil. In 1970, it represented 57.6 percent of domestic arrangements (Berquó 1998, 425), and female-headed households reached a low of 12 percent in the São Paulo metropolitan region (Kuznesof 1980, 612). The participation of women in the labor force dropped to 16.5 percent in 1960 in Brazil, and to only 19.1 percent in 1970 (Guimarães, Barone, and Brito 2015, 406). All data indicate the consolidation, at that moment in urban Brazil, of a formation of collective life that combined nuclear families, male-headed households, family wages, women outside the labor force, and the corresponding subjectivities of breadwinners and homemakers. The peripheries of São Paulo—formed through autoconstruction from the 1940s onward—expressed the pervasiveness of this pattern. Autoconstruction has always been a (nuclear) family project. Many autoconstructors were migrants: members of the first generation of urban residents who constituted their families in the city and kept only loose ties with their places of origin. The 1980 survey of Jardim das Camélias shows that the percentage of homeowners and of nuclear families basically coincided at 60 percent. Women only headed 11.96 percent of households and constituted 29.5 percent of the residents in the labor force.

The 1970s constituted a moment of inflexion. Since then, and more pronouncedly in the 1980s, the nuclear family–breadwinner configuration has come slowly undone. The percentage of nuclear families declined steadily from 1970 to reach 42.3 percent in 2015.[9] Brazil has seen a sharp and fast demographic transition, with the total fertility rate dropping to 1.9 in 2010, from 5.8 in 1970. In the past fifty years, the incorporation of women into the economically active population increased fourfold, reaching 52.6 percent in 2010 (Guimarães, Barone, and Brito 2015, 406). Despite marriages and children, women now remain in the workforce longer (Hoffmann and Leone 2004, 36). Between 1981 and 2002, the contribution of men's income to the total household income dropped from 69.6 percent to 53.6 percent (Hoffmann and Leone 2004, 43). The proportion of woman-headed households jumped from 22.9 percent to 40.5 percent between 1995 and 2015.[10] In 2022, according to the census, women headed 49.1 percent of households. In the city of São Paulo, the proportion was 53 percent.[11] In the peripheries, changes have followed the same pattern: in 2013 in Jardim das Camélias, the percentage of nuclear families had dropped to 46 percent, while woman-headed households increased to 30.81 percent, and women constituted 42.4 percent of residents in the labor force. In sum, these indicators for Brazil, the city, and the peripheries all point in the same direction: deep changes

in the configuration of nuclear families-breadwinners-homemakers. It seems that this configuration dominated for around sixty years (1920–1980). In the 2020s, it became the minority arrangement. The numbers, visibility, and arrangements of solo mothers are not only made possible by this transformation but also indicate its depth.

Two other processes of change have contributed significantly to current configurations. First, in the past two decades in Brazil, education has improved considerably. Although the quality of this education remains precarious, the percentage of young people (18–24) without basic education (eight years) has dropped significantly. Access to higher education expanded considerably among all social groups, although it remains extremely limited among the lowest income groups (Balbachevsky, Sampaio, and Andrade 2019). In Jardim das Camélias, the percentage of people with a university education went from zero in 1980 to 5.73 percent in 2013. Most of the solo mothers I interviewed had a university degree or were attending, or planning to attend, university. Second, alternative modes of living reflect other shifts in articulations of gender and sexuality. Central to these changes is the role of LGBTQ+ people. If in the past openly LGBTQ+ people were visible only in a few downtown neighborhoods, now they are present across the city, including throughout the peripheries. Several solo mothers I interviewed are bisexual.

In spite of all these changes, some features of Brazilian society endure. Social inequality and racial inequality are the most obvious. From the 1970s to the present, the Gini coefficient has oscillated but has always remained very high. In addition, the gains of equalizing policies in the early 2000s have seen a reversal in recent years. Social inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient started to increase in the 1960s and reached 0.623 in 1976, and 0.636 in 1989, establishing Brazil as one of the most unequal countries in the world (Hoffmann 2002, 214). The coefficient dropped during the 2000s, reaching the lowest level in 2014 (0.518).[12] In 2020 it was 0.573.[13] Racial inequality is pervasive, persistent, and deadly. Indicators demonstrate deep racial inequality: from income, life expectancy, education, and access to housing, to levels of homicide, killings by the police, rape and sexual abuse and beyond, black people, and especially black women, consistently are in the worst situation (Olivera, Vieira, and Baeta 2021; Lima and Prates 2015; Telles 2004). In the past decade, activism from black collectives and organizations has brought racism to the forefront of public discussions, and affirmative-action policies have opened some spaces for the inclusion

of black people, particularly in higher education and cultural production. Nevertheless, racism and discrimination continue to run deep in Brazilian society.

The Census Bureau and other statistics producers have not yet caught up with emergent formations of families and households and do not use the term *solo mother*. There are data about mothers whose civil status is "single." However, since there has always been a significant number of non-marital unions in Brazil, "single" does not accurately reflect solo motherhood. In 2010 in the city of São Paulo, 50 percent of mothers were officially single, but this does not mean that they were raising children without a partner; many were just not officially married. Recognizing the dimension of informal arrangements, the census records conjugal status. Leonardo de Carvalho and I thus calculated solo motherhood considering women raising children without a partner regardless of their civil status (single, divorced, widowed): the percentage is 37 percent. This gives a more accurate indication of solo motherhood. Table 1 shows the percentages of solo mothers for the period 1940–2010. After decreasing in the first part of the twentieth century, a period of rapid urbanization, migration, and the predominance of the nuclear family, solo motherhood has increased considerably, from 16 percent of the mothers in São Paulo municipality in 1960 to 37 percent in 2010. There is also an important racial component: 61 percent of mothers living alone with children younger than fourteen years old in 2010 were black.[14] Significantly, low-income solo mothers do not live only in the peripheries of the city. Central districts with a high concentration of tenement housing (*cortiços*) tend to have a high proportion of solo mothers. To own an autoconstructed house proves difficult for solo mothers, and they tend to live in rented spaces, frequently either in cortiços or in extensions of autoconstructed houses.[15] Additionally, there are many middle-class and upper-class solo mothers living in upper-class neighborhoods.

Table 1. Percentages of Solo Mothers, 1940–2010

Geographic unit	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1991	2000	2010
Brazil	26%	22%	17%	23%	20%	27%	29%	32%
State of São Paulo	17%	15%	14%	22%	19%	26%	28%	32%
Municipality of São Paulo			16%	26%	22%	31%	32%	37%

Source: Brazilian Census. Elaboration by Leonardo de Carvalho. A solo mother is a woman older than fourteen living with a child/children without a partner, regardless of her civil status (single, widowed, divorced). Percentages were calculated considering the total number of women older than fourteen with at least one living child.

Solo mothers, their histories and their narratives, clearly indicate the ways in which established formations of collective life are set aside and new ways of living together are taking shape.

SOLO MOTHERHOOD

The interviews I conducted with solo mothers on the peripheries of São Paulo indicate—in more compelling ways than statistics—the depth of the transformations in women's lives and in ways of living together. Roles, sensibilities, practices, and language are changing, and women articulate these transformations explicitly. A common way to discuss the transformations is through comparisons with lives of women in the past, even one generation ago. Vera's conversation with me proved especially interesting in this regard. It was marked by a series of comments about her mother and her life. Both women have had marriages end, but in different contexts. They have dealt with marriage, children, and work in completely divergent ways, resulting in different lives. Vera's choices were not available to her mother.

Vera, a fictitious name, aged forty-two when I interviewed her in 2022, has three sons. She calls herself a solo mother. She is black. She got married at nineteen, and her first son was born while she was married. When she was pregnant with her second son, she discovered that her husband was having an affair and kicked him out of the house. A few years after the split, she had a brief relationship and got pregnant. She separated from this partner while pregnant, deciding that things between them were not working. She has always worked to support herself and her children, with almost no help from the fathers. Her ex-husband intermittently gives her some money; never enough for basic expenses. She calls him an absent father and says that his younger son, aged thirteen, doesn't even have a birthday picture with him. They live on the same street, but he never sees the sons. For a while, she lived in a very poor and precarious favela, until her sister, also a solo mother, who owns a lot, told Vera that she could build a home for herself as an additional floor to her own house. After freeing herself from rent payments, Vera managed to enroll in a university nearby. She had a fellowship, but still paid half of her salary to the university. She studied at night while working during the day in a clerk job. Meanwhile, Vera's neighbor picked up her children from school, and the eldest son watched the younger ones back home. After many years alone with her sons, and after the eldest son entered college, she found a partner who moved in with her and her sons. He is not responsible for any of the children's expenses.

Vera contrasts her life with that of her mother, who hails from an impoverished town in the northeast of Brazil. She married very young, as was common, and had three children. When she was pregnant with her youngest daughter, her husband simply vanished. Vera's mother could not raise the three children. There was no work available in her small town, so she moved alone to a bigger town to work as live-in maid. Her children were distributed among family members: one stayed with the maternal grandparents, one with the paternal grandparents, and one with her sister. A few years later, she met Vera's father and had two children with him, Vera and her brother.

> She already came from that first failed marriage, and in the past women had this shame regarding failed marriages, shame of having children alone, without husbands. A woman without a husband was a woman of bad reputation, she always said this to us . . . . But my father was an alcoholic, and so her life was very difficult. I remember that my father used to drink, he was violent . . . . I used to say: I don't want this for me, no, I don't want this for me!

The theme of the failed marriage (*casamento fracassado*) has been constant in my interviews since the 1980s, but how failed marriage is discussed has changed significantly. For Vera's mother and her generation, a woman with children without a husband was seen in deeply negative ways. From the late 1970s to the 2000s, my ethnographic archive contains many indications of the deep stigma and marginalization associated with being a woman (but not a widow) raising a family without the presence of a man. In Jardim das Camélias, there were very few, and residents called them *mulher largada do marido*—literally, "a woman dumped from the husband"—though my 1979 interviews indicate that several of these women were, in fact, not abandoned but had left their husbands.[16] In the late 1970s and 1980s, women who faced marginality but had the courage to change their lives lacked terms and ways of conceiving of their own agency: they were still *largadas*, dumped, set aside. This was a situation associated with shame and irresolvable ambiguity: these women had to construct their lives in entirely non-normative spaces. To raise their children, they had to "work like a man" and be household heads, a role associated with male breadwinners; they could not just be women or mothers. By the 2010s, the expression *largada do marido* had vanished from my interviews.

Vera has always felt deeply uncomfortable with her mother's situation. She could not accept that her mother would tolerate violence, although she explained her tolerance by remembering her past failed marriage.

> I always questioned her: "Mom, why do you live this life? Leave him, leave him. . . .
>
> Since I can remember, I already used to say that I did not want that life for me. I was the first to say: **I don't want to be like my mother!**

In fact, Vera has never been like her mother. Although she also found herself alone and pregnant, her life has differed in every way. She never thought of herself as someone with a failed marriage, or a *mulher largada do marido*. She left her husband as a way to take control of her life and choose something better. She did not want to be like her mother! She never presented herself as a victim or as an abandoned woman. At every step of her life, she chose to be otherwise. She says that a lesson she learned early in life was that every difficult situation presents her with two options: either stay crying or find an alternative. She has always sought the alternative.

After divorcing, and finding herself with two children, Vera knew that she had to give a direction for her life and decided to go to university. That decisive move in her life was, she says, worth her sacrifices.

It was not an easy path. Her interactions with her ex-husband have always been tense. He has oscillated between trying to rekindle the relationship and totally ignoring her and the boys. She narrates these conflicts in telling ways. She told me that he always puts her down, often saying that he liked her despite her being thin and ugly. This emerges as a common pattern in the narratives of solo mothers: their ex-partners frequently call them ugly. In Vera's case, her ex-husband also came with proposals that appealed to stereotypical images of the male provider:

> He used to say: "Look, I will go back home, you don't need to work anymore." . . . I think he imagined that the woman separating, she becomes disabled, who knows what he imagined. . . . I replied: "Did you meet me like this, doing nothing? You met me working, I have always worked, I have never needed you, not for work."

Vera works. She has always worked, as have all the other solo mothers, who are usually the main or sole providers for their families. The idea of staying at home supported by a man appears strange to them. Vera does not understand why her ex-husband relapses to this notion. She sympathizes with the fact that at a certain point he decided to enjoy life, since he had also had a difficult childhood and married very young. But as he enjoyed life, he left the family behind and never shared parenting duties.

> He is a super absent father, totally absent, absent, absent, absent from everything. He occupied himself with enjoying life, and in this new life he chose, there was no space for his sons.

She says: "He always made it very clear to me that the children were my problem. I was the one who wanted to have the children."

There is a shift from the role of men as breadwinners to the new configuration in which men wish to live independent lives and are asked to be different kinds of fathers. Vera understands her ex-husband's desire to "live his own life" and accepts that the children have become her responsibility entirely. But she also accuses her ex-husband of being an absent father. Absence here is not conceived primarily in relation to the role of the economic provider, but as emotionally absent from the children—someone who does not even show up for birthdays.

There are several indications of the deep change in expectations and conceptions of masculinity and femininity among the people I interviewed, and I would say among residents of the peripheries in general. My own archive of ethnographic research and studies from the 1980s in the same neighborhoods (Caldeira 1984; Sarti 1985, 1996) reveal utterly different expectations of women and men, mothers and fathers, and of the family. According to Cynthia Sarti (1985, 74), in the 1980s, the ideal family model was the nuclear family, constituted on the basis of a clear division of roles between men and women: "The men will always be the provider, although not always the only one; the woman will invariably be the housewife." According to Sarti (1985, 151), the family was based on an asymmetrical and hierarchical principle grounded in ideas of complementarity and reciprocity. Because of poverty and a lack of resources, women ended up working outside of the house, but their work was perceived as a complement to men's income—*uma ajuda*, help. The woman worked as a mother, and to help the father and the household, but work did not constitute her identity (Sarti 1985, 244); meanwhile men always identified themselves as *trabalhadores*—workers and providers.

This simple and dualistic model of opposed and complementary gender roles arranged hierarchically may have been dominant as an ideal, though not necessarily in practice. In 1980 in Jardim das Camélias, 40 percent of household arrangements were not nuclear families, and many women worked regularly. People lived in many ways, but the model of the nuclear family/household dominated people's perceptions and desires. Now that the nuclear family makes for a minority arrangement in practice (40%), and that women are acquiring formal education, entering the labor force in new ways, contributing decisively to the household income, and being heads of 53 percent of city households, the role of the provider/breadwinner has changed and its power as a model has weakened. Women who work regularly no longer think that they "work like men."

Among solo mothers one can observe an inversion of the old dominant model. Women are the main, and usually the only, supporters of their children. But they expect from men some kind of *ajuda*, help, exactly the same term used in the past to qualify the income provided by married women. Several solo mothers complained that the fathers of their children do not provide any *ajuda*. They give examples, always recurrent: to bring some diapers, a couple of cartons of milk, medicine when needed, some clothes for the children, or provide money to buy food. But this is hard to come by regularly and depends on the men's disposition. The *ajuda* is unreliable.

The obvious alternative is to go to court and request legal alimony (*pensão*). All women I interviewed used the same phrase to characterize the *pensão*: "It is a right of the child." It's not for the mothers; it is for the children and an obligation of fathers. But for reasons still unclear to me, women hesitate to go to court. Brazilian family courts are known for their efficiency, and it is not difficult to get a mandate for alimony. Several women cannot turn to the courts, as the fathers of their children are imprisoned. For others, the fathers have not recognized the children and are not legally registered as fathers. According to data from the Cartórios de Registro Civil, the civil register, between 2019 and 2024, 41,285 children (5.4 percent of births) were registered with only the mother's name in the city of São Paulo.[17] Some women argue that informal agreements can prove more advantageous. Moreover, legal alimony would involve a clear-cut decision, ending constant negotiations over *ajuda*. It might also involve the agreement that the children regularly spend time with the fathers and their relatives, which makes many mothers uncomfortable. Most solo mothers will not entertain the idea of joint custody with their children's fathers. In many cases, people only go to court in the case of a significant conflict, a crisis, or violence.

The arguments between ex-partners indicate that the negotiation involves not only the terms of the relationship but also how to conceive of work and income, responsibility toward the children, affection, independence and autonomy, masculinity and femininity. In a revealing moment, Vera told me that one day during the pandemic lockdown she asked her ex-husband to take their second son to the hospital, as he was having difficulty breathing and she was already at the hospital taking care of the younger son. He did not show up. She exploded at him over the phone, as he again tried to put her down:

> "For God's sake! Do you think my life stopped?" You tell me: "You are unhappy, because you don't have anyone, you're lonely, and whatever." I said: "Who told you that the happiness of a woman is a man? Love, sex, we have with anyone, anywhere, is just a matter of wanting it: and if there is not a human being to have sex with, there are other toys that support it. Thus, it is not a matter of sex either. What do you think it is? While you are in the same position you were thirteen years ago, I have evolved, I studied, I work, I raised the children you did not have conditions to raise; they are well brought up and you don't even need to thank me. Thus, my life went on and I don't know where you see any sadness in my life."

This is the opposite feeling of that associated with marriage failure. Vera went ahead, built an independent life for herself; he did not catch up. But if independence and autonomy in men's case may be associated with being alone, often without their children, for solo mothers, *independence and autonomy are not dissociated from maternity*. They shape themselves as independent women through maternity, not in opposition to it—as seems to be the case for men and paternity.

The majority of the solo mothers I interviewed had children when they were rather young. With few exceptions, these children were unplanned. This differs from the average population of women having children in their thirties, after establishing a career. For solo mothers in the peripheries, the first child was seldom a choice. This fact emerged very clearly in an interview with another solo mother, Ana. As she told me that she got pregnant at seventeen while only dating (*namorando*) someone, I wrongly said:

Teresa: And then you decided to have the child.

Ana: Well, it was not exactly to decide. After you are pregnant, there was not such advance to think of reproductive rights, to allow women to decide if they are having the baby. I was in another place, really, I did not know all these things, these debates. In the place I was in, the subjectivity I had was this:

> you get pregnant, you will have the child, right? Tough it out. It was natural, it was like this: I'm a girl, it was natural, my life project would be to have a child. It was totally natural. It was only later that I could see other things that are not only being a mother.

Yet once these women become mothers, they take hold of their own lives. They find jobs, usually badly paid. But their most common and crucial decision is to make it to university—an option unavailable to their mothers. The university marks a space of ambiguous experiences. It certainly means an opening up of options, though, contrary to popular opinion, the most important options lie not necessarily in the professional realm, but rather in networks, collectives, and cultural production. There is a clear mismatch between a university degree and professional life. Even people who graduate from an elite university find themselves forced into "uberized labor": temporary, without contracts, and overexploited. The women I interviewed who had a university degree mostly worked in low-paying service jobs, making less than $600 USD per month (making them poor according to Brazilian socioeconomic indicators).

Additionally, the experience at university—marked by racism and class discrimination—proved difficult for all first-generation students from the peripheries I interviewed. As Tânia, another solo mother who identifies as black, put it:

> The university is really a crazy environment, really crazy. . . . For me, it was very good, because I met a lot of people from social movements . . . . But there are also things that are sickening, that target our mental health. It's really structural. It starts with the texts that do not dialogue with our reality. . . .
>
> The fact is: those people at the university were not prepared to have students like me, students who come speaking slang, you know? Students who . . . like funk, who live this reality, who are stopped at the gate by security, who don't have the look of a student.
>
> The university will not immobilize me, will not domesticate me: I am not ashamed of being who I am. People discriminate against us. They don't like people speaking slang, but love to talk about dialect, linguistic prejudice. It's like this: they want me as an object of research, but not as a researcher.

The most powerful thing university offers young people from the peripheries is the possibility of accessing new modes of thinking, and especially of organizing. They create networks, engage in collectives, and participate in a vibrant scene of cultural production in the peripheries. The young people organizing today belong to *coletivos*, collectives, small groups of people who gather to discuss common problems, take care of each other, and promote events. Feminism is important to groups involving women. It is an intersectional, re-interpreted branch of feminism that they call "peripheral feminism," one that elaborates their experiences of class, gender, race, and sexuality. It seems to be in these feminist collectives that the expression *solo mother* first began to circulate.

Solo mothers are proactive in relation to their sexual and reproductive lives. All report seeking/using birth control, and a few mentioned having abortions, something they decided against in their first pregnancies. They take control of their sexuality and are open about their choices: Vera's comment about masturbation would have been inconceivable twenty years ago. Several are sexually fluid, and some are bisexual or have women partners.

The process of becoming independent and leading an autonomous life with children is not easy. Ana said:

> This *process of becoming a woman via motherhood* was something very violent and difficult . . . . I don't remember before motherhood thinking of myself as a feminist. I think that maternity brought me the place of being a woman. It's very difficult. I needed feminism to give me strength and then start to think of myself as a feminist and to see: this is not only my problem, there is a whole structure that is making me feel this way, because I felt very bad . . . .

Being an independent woman and a mother is not an easy proposition. In collectives and places of cultural production, solo mothers network, support each other, and articulate views that stand in sharp contrast to those of the generation of their parents. They forge new subjectivities. For the women, this offers the space to re-imagine their roles and ensure that they will not be like their mothers. However, the references of what used to be expected remain quite engrained—the voices of their mothers are always there and frequently invoked in interviews.

One challenge the women mention is figuring out how to lead the life of a young woman. They try to go out, party, maybe date, but it proves difficult,

because people place them in the position of a mother—who should be with her children on Saturday night, not out partying. They say that they are discriminated against, yelled at, called *vagabundas*. Prejudice against them is common.[18] If they leave their children with their mothers, their mothers send texts telling them that it is time to come home.

To be a solo mother, a woman who takes charge of her own life while raising her children, is a huge challenge, especially in contexts in which institutional support is weak, and childcare centers, especially for infants, are non-existent or costly. Thus, solo mothers rely on networks of support. They find crucial support in their extended families. When the solo mothers I interviewed learned that they were pregnant, most were living with their parents, not their partners. When the relationship had some stability, the couple would often move together into the home of one of their parents. When the relationship was unstable, or when men refused to acknowledge their fatherhood, the women remained with, or were taken in by, their own parents. The pregnancy may have involved much doubt and suffering for the women, but none reported strong negative reactions from their parents. Many feared their father's reaction, but in the end, all seemed not only accepting but in fact happy with the situation. No interviewee's parents tried to force a marriage, and many rejoiced on Facebook about becoming grandparents. Women's relatives seemed happy to help with childcare, when possible. Continuous daily childcare—such as grandmothers caring for the child while the mother works or attends university—is usually paid, either in kind (food) or money. This payment is flexible, and may be interrupted in cases of crisis, but both sides expect it. Sometimes the grandmother gives up a job to care for the grandchild. Solo mothers also rely on friends, neighbors, religious centers, and paid professional help.

Almost all solo mothers I spoke to dream of having a house for themselves and their children, but this often proves infeasible. One day a solo mother may live only with her child, but another day she may move in with her parents or a friend who is also a solo mother. If in the past autoconstruction and homeownership fixed people to place and domestic arrangements, in the emergent iteration of collective life, people live in rented spaces, circulate, and spatial arrangements change accordingly.

AN EMERGENT FORMATION OF COLLECTIVE LIFE

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler (2004, 1) argues that "gender is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint." She continues: "The terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself

in a sociality that has no single author." I argue that underway in São Paulo is not only improvisation but also a change in the "scene of constraint." There is change in the terms under which gender, sexuality, family life, and ways of living together are articulated. As young people reshape relationships, socialities, and practices, the model of the heterosexual nuclear family headed by a male breadwinner is displaced as the dominant ideal; other arrangements are becoming acceptable, desirable, and common. Women and LGBTQ+ people are at the center of these transformations.

These make for deeply significant socio-cultural transformations, considering the extent to which the nuclear family/breadwinner model shaped everyday life, the family, and gender hierarchies in Brazil and elsewhere during the last century. In São Paulo, the dominance of this model seems to have increased during the twentieth century, reaching its peak around 1970. In the peripheries, it coincided with the spread of autoconstruction, basically a project of young nuclear families, and has been a central element in the formation of collective life I call peripheral urbanization. Under this formation, the heteronormative nuclear family emerged as the norm—even if in practice considerable variation existed—and mothers without husbands were associated with failed marriages and seen as *largadas do marido*. The contemporary lives of solo mothers indicate that this scene of constraint has weakened; other possibilities have already emerged that may not be dominant, but are not totally marginal either. There are alternative repertoires molding sensibilities, even when not explicitly. It is because understandings have shifted that new lives are possible.

There are new modes of practice and a new common sense in the making. For young women, it opens some possibilities of reinventing their lives, femininities, sexualities, and motherhood in more positive terms—and as they do this, they also force transformations in masculinities, marriage, partnership, and families. They do not have to think of themselves in terms of failure, be ashamed, or behave like men. There is already a collective repertoire available that allows their new practices to be articulated and treated as possible options. They operate in a context in which their practices can be assimilated, even if with tension and reproach. There are still the ex-partners who call them ugly; there are partners and ex-partners who become violent; there are the universities unprepared for people who don't "look like students"; there are political regimes such as that of Bolsonaro and others who attack what they call "gender ideology"—basically the empowerment of women and LGTBQ+ people (Gevisser 2020). Solo mothers still feel disoriented, depressed, but they do not try to find comfort in

formations of the past. There is tension in everyday life, but clearly important norms have been set aside, and what may have once been an indisputable heteronormative canon is being displaced. Solo mothers, not wanting to face the same constraints as their mothers, look for alternatives for support: feminist collectives, extended networks of female kin and friends, Candomblé. The alternatives exist. There are fissures in the old scene of constraint, and an emergent set of references that enables different lives.

Transformations in family and demographic patterns and in gender hierarchies are not easy to come by and not easy to explain. Sometimes, they result from explicit public policies, the most effective of which rely on draconian forms of enforcement, such as the Chinese one-child policy (see Greenhalgh 2008). Frequently, however, these transformations happen under the radar, through small changes in practice here and there that after an extended period coalesce into new formations. This was certainly the case of Brazil's sharp decline in fertility rates starting in the 1960s (see Oliveira, Vieira, and Marcondes 2015). This drop was not the result of anti-natalist policies as in China. It was only detected after the fact, when demographers had to explain the sharp declines, in the absence of policies and cultural movements leading to them. Vilmar Faria (1989) offered the most provocative explanation. The decline had been the unanticipated consequence of the confluence of other policies, such as the medicalization of society and the extension of a public health system that provided women's health care and contraceptives; the expansion of the welfare system; and the massive expansion of a national television system that broadcast daily a new model of families with few children and working women. No policy told women what to do. But women found possibilities of thinking and doing otherwise, and embraced them massively.

Current transformations seem to be happening in the same way, under the radar, until they coalesce in numbers requiring explanation: 37 percent of mothers being solo and 53 percent of households headed by women in the city of São Paulo. If there is a public policy to be associated with these numbers, it is the expansion of the university system and the adoption of quotas to facilitate access for African Brazilians and students coming from K-12 public schools, usually attended by poor people. Of course, those policies did not mean to increase solo motherhood and change family patterns. That young women from the peripheries found at the university possibilities to re-invent themselves and their motherhood and to find support networks was an unintended consequence. Political economy may offer explanations for some aspects of the changes, like how the

production of housing for the popular market has been capitalized and financialized in ways that make autoconstruction less attractive and rental a more available possibility (Guerreiro 2024). Again, this does not explain solo motherhood, but it helps to understand the range of available housing options for women going solo with their families. Solo mothers invariably rent. Political economy may also assist in explaining transformations in the labor market. One of these transformations is the steady increase in the participation of women, who remain in the labor market after having children, even when married.[19]

None of these explanations address the core of what seems to be happening: a huge cultural change that affects a deeply entrenched model of the family, gender hierarchies, and sexualities. Something to consider is the spread of feminist ideas among young women, even among those who would never call themselves feminists. Certainly, the collectives of university women that call themselves feminists have a significant role in shaping new sensibilities, but their reach remains limited. Social media has certainly spread new images and behaviors associated with being a woman—in a similar way to how television exposed a previous generation of women to the possibility of taking control of their fertility. Social media usage in Brazil is high, and it was on social media that the phrase *solo mother* first circulated.

Although it is seldom clear how new narratives become entangled with new practices and modes of living together, the circulation of narratives helps change the "scene of constraint"—that collective repertoire authored anonymously, by many, that constitutes the reference people engage with to shape their lives. In the past decade, probably longer, many young women found possibilities to shape their lives in ways that not only differed from their mothers' but that also significantly challenged the previously dominant model of the heteronormative nuclear family organized around a breadwinner and a housemaker. These possibilities and the agency to engage with them were socially constructed in a dispersed and mostly unintended way. Slowly, women felt empowered to simply start leading other lives. After some time, their individual actions and those of the people they live with have coalesced to anchor an emergent formation of collective life in which families and modes of inhabitation are articulated in different ways from those dominant until a generation ago. The old pattern is definitively displaced.

ABSTRACT

In 2010 in the city of São Paulo, 37 percent of mothers were solo mothers, compared to 16 percent in 1960. This meant that more than 1 million women in 2010

were raising their children without a partner. The increase in solo motherhood is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of deep transformations that have reshuffled entrenched formations of gender hierarchies, family arrangements, class inequalities, and racial discrimination in São Paulo. In recent decades, many young women found possibilities to shape their lives in ways that not only differed from their mothers' but that also significantly challenged the previously dominant model of the heteronormative nuclear family organized around a breadwinner and a housemaker. Analyzing the lives of solo mothers, this article identifies an emergent formation of collective life in which the nuclear family emerges as a minoritarian arrangement (around 40 percent) and in which women feel empowered to simply lead other lives. [solo mothers; nuclear family; reshaping gender roles; household compositions; collective life; peripheral feminism; São Paulo]

NOTES

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1. I discuss below how the demographer Leonardo de Carvalho and I made this calculation based on census data. The full results of the 2022 census remain unavailable as of November 2025.
2. Peripheries are a diverse group of areas of the city broadly characterized by having a significant proportion of low-income residents and autoconstructed houses.
3. The conception of formation of collective life has been formulated in dialogue with my colleagues Gautam Bhan, Kellie Gillespie, and AbdouMaliq Simone. For years, our collaborative thinking has proved fundamental to my work.
4. Therefore, I do not use *collective* to mean a cooperative enterprise or to refer to a project by a designated group.
5. I cannot analyze here all the elements of this emerging formation. Regarding the production of housing, see Nascimento and Mioto 2025; Guerreiro 2024.
6. In Brazilian censuses, race is self-declared, with the percentage of people who identify as *pardo* increasing. In 2022, 45.3 percent of Brazilians self-declared as *pardo*, 43.5 as white, and 10.2 percent as black. See the census numbers at https://censo2022.ibge.gov.br/panorama/indicadores.html?localidade=BR
7. I have coded and interpreted all interviews myself. I continue to study solo mothers and have recently broadened my research to absent fathers. This research is conducted at NEV-USP.

8. Until recently in Brazil, the extended patriarchal family, as conceptualized by Gilberto Freyre and Oliveira Vianna, was considered prevalent. However, several studies, including all cited in this paragraph and in Correa 1981, have disproved the dominance of this arrangement, especially in São Paulo.
9. Table 2.2c: Distribuição percentual das famílias, segundo tipo de arranjo familiar agregado, por sexo do/a responsável do domicílio - Brasil, 2016 a 2022, compiled by IPEA – Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Institute of Applied Economic Research). Accessible at https://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/retrato/indicadores/tabelas-completas
10. Table 2.1a: Número de famílias, segundo sexo do/a responsável, por localização do domicílio - Brasil e regiões, 2016 a 2022, compiled by IPEA – Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Institute of Applied Economic Research). Accessible at https://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/retrato/indicadores/tabelas-completas
11. See https://censo2022.ibge.gov.br/panorama/indicadores.html?localidade=BR
12. See http://www.ipeadata.gov.br/ExibeSerie.aspx?serid=37818&module=M
13. IBGE—Síntese de Indicadores Sociais.
14. The calculation was made by Rodrigo Burgarelli based on the 2010 census.
15. Faranak Miraftab (1997) found the same pattern in Mexico.
16. The expression *largada do marido* is ambiguous in Portuguese. *Largar* means to drop, to dump, to throw, and to let go; it can also mean to abandon. On the one hand, the expression *largada do marido* signifies a status: a woman (usually with children) once married and who is not living with a husband, as should be. On the other hand, it is unclear about how the separation happened, although it is frequently assumed that the man is the one who "*largou a mulher*" (dumped the wife). Regardless, the expression always carries a negative connotation: it refers to a woman living in a non-normative way and raises suspicion about her behavior.
17. See https://transparencia.registrocivil.org.br/painel-registral/pais-ausentes
18. Camila Fernandes (2021) has analyzed figures of single motherhood present in popular discourses that point to a "wrong maternity" and a "wrong sexuality." The analysis details the stigmas, but it does not allow single mothers any agency, focusing only on their victimization and lack of alternatives.
19. Unfortunately, I cannot address here the several deep transformations in the labor market.

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