

WHO WILL KEEP THE CHILDREN?: ORPHANHOOD AND MATERNITY ESTABLISHED THROUGH COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes orphanhoods and motherhoods established after Covid-19. To this end, it presents three ethnographic cases, the result of fieldwork carried out by a team of four researchers in the first half of 2023. They tell the stories of three women —a grandmother, an aunt and a sister— living in three different geographic regions in the state of Paraíba, in the Brazilian Northeast. In the midst of socially reinforced moralities and affections, each of them took on the work of caring for Covid-19 orphans in their respective families. There are a total of ten children and adolescents aged between 2 and 17 years. We conclude that they were potential caregivers even before the deaths occurred, and that the guardianship obeyed their gender identity, degree of kinship, blood ties, affections, age, geographic proximity and financial condition, causing negative impacts on their lifestyle and life project, and on their mental health, during this time that gave new meaning to their lives, devastated by grief.

KEYWORDS

Orphanages; Maternities; Covid-19; Moralities; Affection.

QUEM VAI FICAR COM AS CRIANÇAS?: ORFANADES E MATERNIDADES ESTABELECIDAS A PARTIR DA COVID-19

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa orfanades e maternidades estabelecidas a partir da Covid-19. Para isso, apresenta três casos etnográficos, resultado de trabalho de campo realizado por uma equipe de quatro pesquisadores em 2023. São as histórias de três mulheres — uma avó, uma tia e uma irmã — residentes em três diferentes regiões geográficas no estado da Paraíba, no Nordeste brasileiro. Em meio a moralidades e afetos reforçados socialmente, cada uma delas assumiu o trabalho do cuidado de órfãos da Covid-19 em suas respectivas famílias. São, no total, dez crianças e adolescentes, com idade entre 2 e 17 anos. Concluímos que elas eram potenciais cuidadoras antes mesmo dos óbitos ocorrerem, e que a tutela obedeceu à identidade de gênero, ao grau de

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parentesco, ao laço sanguíneo, aos afetos, à idade, à proximidade geográfica e à condição financeira, acarretando impactos negativos em seus estilos e projetos de vida, e na saúde mental, nesse tempo que deu novo sentido às suas vidas, devastadas pelo luto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Orfandades; Maternidades; Covid-19; Moralidades; Afetos.

QUI PRENDRA SOIN DES ENFANTS?: ORPHELINATS ET MATERNITÉS ÉTABLI À PARTIR DE LA COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse l'orphelinage et la maternité établis à partir de la Covid-19. À cette fin, il présente trois cas ethnographiques, résultat d'un travail sur le terrain réalisé par une équipe de quatre chercheurs en 2023. Il s'agit des histoires de trois femmes — une grand-mère, une tante et une sœur — résidant dans trois régions géographiques différentes de l'État de Paraíba, dans le nord-est du Brésil. Au milieu de moralités et d'affections socialement renforcées, chacun d'entre eux a assumé la tâche de prendre soin des orphelins du Covid-19 dans leurs familles respectives. Il s'agit au total de dix enfants et adolescents, âgés de 2 à 17 ans. Nous avons conclu qu'ils étaient des aidants potentiels avant même que les décès ne surviennent, et que la tutelle était basée sur l'identité de genre, le degré de parenté, les liens de sang, les affections, l'âge, la proximité géographique et la situation financière, avec des impacts négatifs sur leurs modes et projets de vie, et sur leur santé mentale, à un moment qui donnait un nouveau sens à leur vie, dévastée par le chagrin.

MOTS-CLÉS

Orphelinats; Maternités; Covid-19; Moralités; Affections.

¿QUIÉN CUIDARÁ DE LOS NIÑOS?: ORFANDADES Y MATERNIDADES ESTABLECIDAS A TRAVÉS DE COVID-19

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las orfandades y la maternidades establecidas a partir de Covid-19. Para eso, presenta tres casos etnográficos, resultado del trabajo de campo realizado por un equipo de cuatro investigadores en 2023. Son las historias de tres mujeres — una abuela, una tía y una hermana — que viven en tres regiones geográficas diferentes del estado de Paraíba, en el nordeste de Brasil. En medio de moralidades y afectos reforzados socialmente, cada una de ellas asumió la tarea de cuidar a los huérfanos de Covid-19 de sus respectivas familias. Son diez niños y adolescentes en total, con edades comprendidas entre los 2 y los 17 años. Concluimos que ellas eran cuidadoras potenciales incluso antes de que ocurrieran las muertes, y que la tutela se basó en la identidad de género, el grado de parentesco, los lazos de sangre, los afectos, la edad, la proximidad geográfica y la situación financiera, con impactos negativos en sus estilos y proyectos de vida, y en su salud mental, durante una época que dio un nuevo sentido a sus vidas, devastadas por el luto.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Orfandades; Maternidades; Covid-19; Moralidades; Afectos.

INTRODUCTION⁵

The purpose of this paper is to analyze orphanhood and motherhood as established by Covid-19. To this end, we will present three ethnographic cases that are the result of fieldwork conducted by a team of four researchers in the first half of 2023. These cases tell the "stories" (Perez, 2013, p. 150) of three women—a grandmother, an aunt, and a sister—living in three different geographical regions of the state of Paraíba, in northeastern Brazil. They took on the task of caring for ten children and adolescents, between the ages of 2 and 17, orphaned by Covid-19, in the midst of socially reinforced morality and affection.

This work is part of our socio-anthropological scientific research efforts on the *Paraíba que Acolhe* Program (PPA), a public income transfer policy established by Law No. 12.049, of September 14, 2021, and regulated by Decree No. 41. 818, of November 4, 2021, to support children and adolescents orphaned due to Covid-19, as an action of the Thematic Chamber of Social Assistance of the Interstate Consortium for Sustainable Development in the Northeast (*Consórcio Nordeste*), which decided to create a program of the same nature in all states of the region in 2021.

The study is based on a socio-anthropological analysis, with fieldwork conducted through home visits to beneficiaries of the *Paraíba que Acolhe* program. The meetings lasted between one and three hours and followed a semi-structured interview and conversation script. Children, adolescents and adults suggested possible and appropriate questions. We emphasize that we visited bereaved people, families destroyed by an early and, for many analysts, avoidable death, given the genocidal policies of the Bolsonaro government, which has neglected the purchase of vaccines and the establishment of social confinement. In addition to the understanding that speech, hearing and sight give us, we were open to understanding with other senses, such as unexpected sensations, like the pure and simple unity that came from the shared grief that broke out in the crying of our team or in the emotional exhaustion at the end of the fieldwork.

To deal with children and adolescents, we work with drawings, short texts (poems, sentences, exhortations) and conversations during these playful productions. We take into account the theoretical and political principle that children and adolescents are intelligible subjects, capable of collaborating with scientific research, affiliating ourselves with childhood studies and the anthropology of childhood and children (Ferreira, 2023; James, 2007; Pires, 2008; Santos; Pires, 2018; Silva, 2013; Müller, 2012; Ribeiro, 2015; Sousa; Pires, 2020; Sousa; Pires, 2021).

⁵ The authorship of this paper is equally shared by the four authors, as is the field research and the theoretical conception of the paper. The first author has overall responsibility for the research and the article.

From a theoretical-conceptual point of view, when we ask the question "who will take care of the children?", we propose to reflect on "who will take care of the children". In this sense, we turn to the anthropologist Márcia Longhi (2019), who, in dialogue with feminist approaches to caregiving, draws our attention to three main dimensions of the analytical category of caregiving: 1) the practice of caring as work, often unpaid; 2) caring work permeated by the sexual division and by androcentric and patriarchal power relations that feminize caring, make it impossible and disqualify women caregivers, limiting their performance in the labor market; 3) caring as a relationship composed of affective, moral and emotional investments. In summary, we understand the concept of care as:

An activity of the species itself, which includes everything we can do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it in the best possible way. This world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, and everything in which we seek to intervene in a complex and self-sustaining way (Fischer; Tronto, 1990 *apud* Longhi, 2019, p. 151).

In addition to this introduction, this paper consists of four other sections. In the first three, we will present ethnographic cases of women living in the Paraíba municipalities of Picuí, João Pessoa and Campina Grande. In the last section, we will discuss the data and present the results found, and finally, in the conclusion section, we will take up and highlight the most important points of the debate.

DONA GLÓRIA: MARINA AND MARIANA'S MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER⁶

On a Monday, at 8 a.m., July 3, 2023, we set out from the UFPB Campus I in the direction of the city of Picuí, located in the center-north of the State of Paraíba. We were transported in a van provided by the UFPB, and the driver was hired by the CCHLA center management. The trip, which lasted about three hours and thirty minutes, took place along the state's highways, which are characterized by typical vegetation landscapes, towns and small communities. The purpose of the trip was to visit the home of Dona Glória, the maternal grandmother of Marina (15 years old) and Mariana (13 years old), adolescents in a situation of bilateral orphanhood due to Covid-19 — a social situation in which both parents, legal guardians and/or primary caregivers have died (Lopes, 2023). Both adolescents are direct beneficiaries of the PPA.

⁶ The first names of the interlocutors are pseudonyms, while the region where they live is not.

Figure 1. Photo rack at the home of Dona Glória, Marina and Mariana, with photos of family members, Catholic objects and a spray bottle of alcohol.



Source: Authored by us in 2023.

Shortly after lunch, in the afternoon of the same day, we climbed the stairs to the second floor, holding a peanut cake that we had brought for the visit, expecting to meet these people and their realities in person. In the living room of the house, with a white ceramic floor and red and yellow walls full of pictures of family members, there was a small television shelf decorated with sculptures of angels and Catholic images, as well as a plastic spray bottle containing the transparent liquid sign of the syndemic period (Singer; Rylko-Bauer, 2020): alcohol.

At the beginning of the interview, Glória told us that she, her two granddaughters, Marina and Mariana, and a puppy lived in this two-story house. She told us that before them, another granddaughter lived in the same house, whom she took care of for a long time and who is now in Campina Grande studying at university. She told us that she was a pensioner and that she managed to take care of the house with the money she received from her pension. Her life plan, before the Covid-19 tragedy that killed her daughter and son-in-law, was to live in Campina Grande with her granddaughter, whom she raised and cherished - and of whom the girls expressed a slight jealousy. However, the need to take care of Marina and Mariana, both orphans, limited her plan to move to another city and continue living with the granddaughter with whom she had lived for many years.

With a concerned look, the grandmother told us that Marina has serious mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, self-harm and a diagnosis of epilepsy. The amount of financial support from the PPA (approx. US\$ 94.54 per month) is mostly used to

pay for her health treatments. She said that her granddaughters really need psychological support to deal with the trauma of losing their parents to Covid-19. When asked how she deals with this pain, she said that she clings to God as if He were her psychologist.

Dona Glória was very emotional when she spoke about her deceased daughter. The teenagers' grandmother seemed to want to preserve the image of her daughter and son-in-law, explaining only the qualities and good moments of the deceased, which Marina found annoying. The girls, on the other hand, tended to talk about unpleasant situations that had occurred in the house when they still lived with their parents, especially revealing moments of domestic violence, of which Dona Glória said she had no knowledge.

Marina and Mariana defined their father as an alcoholic, a Bolsonaro supporter, violent and absent. He worked as a truck driver, traveling for weeks at a time and returning home only a few weekends a month, while their mother worked at an educational institution. They say they didn't like living with their father, but that their mother was a wonderful person. She was demanding about her daughters' expectations for the future, trusted them, and valued their potential. The granddaughters and grandmother believe that the teenagers' mother contracted the disease from her husband, who didn't isolate himself because of his work and engaged in risky behavior without following the biosafety protocols recommended by health authorities. The girls' speeches are marked by feelings of injustice (mainly because of their mother's death), indignation (at the mismanagement of the pandemic by then-President Jair Bolsonaro), longing and mourning.

The whole family became ill. The mother, father and the two girls had obesity as a comorbidity and risk factor for infection with the new coronavirus. The teenagers' parents were admitted to different hospitals in the city of Campina Grande after contracting the disease and developing a serious condition. Marina also contracted Covid-19, was in serious condition, and was sent for treatment to Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte, where she has an aunt. Mariana was isolated in a room at her aunt's house in the same city. While in the hospital, Mariana didn't know what was happening to her parents or how serious their condition was. At one point during our visit, when she commented on the moment her parents' death was announced to her, she said in an embarrassed voice, "Your world collapses, you don't expect it" (Marina, 2023). At this point, she was indignant that she had not been informed of her parents' condition beforehand.

In response to our suggestion that she draw or write about her perspective on the PPA, the situation of being an orphan, family memories, or another free topic, Marina, who revealed that she found refuge in writing poetry, gave us the following production (Figure 2), talking about deaths, losses, memories, and her mother.

Figure 2. Poems written by Marina and given to the research team, dealing with death, mourning and the memory of her mother.

Reconheço que tudo tem fim,
mas a realidade conta a falta
de sua voz.
(Quanto tempo terei de ir antes
dos 18 anos?)

- Partidas doem...
- Não, não doem. A partida é como
uma vírgula, a história continua.
Mas que bem depois de um ponto
final? Bem, esses são os fins.
(Obrigado a todos os que partiram,
minha história tem um pouco de
vós.)

Mamãe I

Para evitar teu esquecimento,
Emraizei-te em mim e como profeta
te apresento ao mundo.

Mamãe II

Rever teus vestígios já não me são
motivos de lágrimas.

Source: Marina, 15 years old, July 3, 2023, Picuí (PB).

When asked about the girls' paternal family, Dona Glória confided to us that their paternal relatives did not mobilize to take custody of the teenagers and assume responsibility for their education and care; moreover, the girls said that they didn't want to stay with them anyway. Just as the father was absent and distant, the paternal family is not close to the girls.

Some factors conditioned Dona Glória's acceptance to take care of Marina and Mariana. These are: the distance from the paternal family, which reduced the options for caregivers; the fact that she is a maternal grandmother; Dona Glória's previous experience of caring for another granddaughter; the granddaughter's move to Campina Grande to study for a university degree, giving up space in her grandmother's house; and the financial stability provided by her pension and retirement.

In terms of intergenerationality, after the death of the teenagers' parents, there was a transfer of care responsibilities between different generations, from the parents to

the maternal grandmother. In this context, the grandmother is seen as a support and safety net for the granddaughters in coping with the death of their parents and the absence and inertia of the paternal family. The grandmother takes on the responsibility not only of providing shelter and material conditions for these adolescents, but also of organizing their routine (for example, in terms of education, leisure, and physical exercise) and providing them with emotional and spiritual support.

The grandmother's resources are important sources of support, but the complexity of her granddaughter's needs, including the cost of mental health treatment, exceeds her personal resources, which are divided between caring for her granddaughters, their home environment, and herself. The case illustrates how the combination of family resources and resources from cash transfer policies is essential to ensure comprehensive care. Moreover, by going beyond a purely economic ideal, it confirms the urgency of establishing a public support network for mental health issues specific to this vulnerable group — children and adolescents orphaned by Covid-19.

In Marina and Mariana's existential fabric, their grandmother's care takes on different faces and responsibilities, considering the complexity of the bilateral social situation of orphanhood experienced by these teenagers. Dona Glória then assumes the role of the family's financial provider, in addition to the social benefits provided by public policy, mobilizing to guarantee her granddaughters' housing, food, leisure, studies and other ordinary daily material expenses.

The readjustments in family dynamics that occurred after the death of Marina and Mariana's parents from Covid-19 are remarkable, with Dona Glória playing a central role in redefining the care and motherhood of the teenagers. The effects of death and orphanhood lead to changes in Dona Glória's role: once a maternal grandmother, now also the main caregiver. This reveals the dynamism and adaptability of family relationships (Fonseca, 2005; Scott, 2011) in critical contexts - in this case, in the face of syndemic conditions.

JANDIRA: MATERNAL AUNT OF MATIAS, HELOÍSA, ADRIAN AND SAMUEL

It had been three weeks since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the end of the public health emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic, when we carried out our first fieldwork on the morning of May 27, 2023. We left Campus I of the UFPB in João Pessoa, in the neighborhood of Castelo Branco, to go to the rural area of Gramame, also in the southern zone of the state capital of Paraíba. Jandira (53) had moved at the last minute, the night before our meeting, from her house to a farm that, as we later discovered during the visit, belonged to the employers of Edilma (50), her sister and the children, and the teenager's maternal aunt.

We met Matias (14 years old), Heloísa (9 years old), Adrian (3 years old) and Samuel (2 years old), all of them orphans from Covid-19 due to the death of their mother and direct beneficiaries of the *Paraíba Que Acolhe* program. We sat down on chairs on the porch of the house and began to talk with the sisters Jandira and Edilma.

Edilma held Samuel on her lap for most of our visit. The other two children and the teenager were shy, watching us carefully and interacting with us gradually. During the interview, Jandira told us that she didn't want to be a mother, but with the sudden loss of her sister to Covid-19, she started raising her four nephews. At the time, she was working as a domestic worker and had to make an agreement with her employers to reduce her working hours from five days to two. This was a strategy to prevent her from leaving her job permanently and losing her financial autonomy and social security rights.

Jandira told us that her sister, Amélia, was 34 years old, an evangelical, and six months pregnant when she fell victim to Covid-19. It is believed that Amélia was infected during one of her visits to a hospital in the capital of Paraíba for prenatal care. After being diagnosed, Amélia had to be hospitalized. She was then intubated. The news reached the family through phone calls from the medical team, as visitors and companions were forbidden to avoid further infection.

According to Jandira, Amélia was stubborn. A religious fanatic, she belonged to a conservative branch of the neo-Pentecostal Assembly of God Church and neglected the new virus, adhering to the position known as "denialism," the action of those who deny the seriousness of the disease and its mortality rate. Already showing symptoms of infection, she sent this message — which would be her last — to her brothers via *WhatsApp*: "Hi, I'm going to the hospital, and I don't even know if I'll be back.

During her hospitalization, she had to undergo emergency surgery to remove her baby, Samuel, who was born prematurely but survived. About a month later, Amélia died as a result of a worsening of her clinical condition due to Covid-19.

Amélia was married, but her four children didn't stay with their father during her hospitalization or after her death. They stayed with their father's sister for about a month during her hospitalization and after Amélia's death because he had to go to work, we were told. But Jandira didn't feel safe in the care of her late sister's sister-in-law and decided to stay with the children and the teenager. In her opinion, she didn't take good care of them because she didn't provide ideal care (Genta, 2019), which in her understanding means educating them and taking them to school. Also, Jandira thought she was closer to her nephews.

For a short time before moving in permanently with Jandira, her nephews stayed with her sister-in-law while she prepared a space to receive them. After taking over the care

of her nephews, baby Samuel came to stay with her sister Edilma, with the intention of sharing the care to make their lives somewhat sustainable (Garganté, 2017). She said:

At first, when my sister was in the hospital, they stayed with my sister-in-law who lives nearby. Yes, she supported them, and they stayed with my sister-in-law for about 15 days. Then after what happened, the turn of events that led to her death, they stayed with their father. The three of them stayed with their father until Samuel left the hospital. Samuel stayed in the hospital for a few days. Then he was discharged and stayed with his sister, you know? He has two sisters. They have kids too, a lot of responsibility for them, so it didn't work out, you know? Because we were already closer to my nephews, we had more contact than his sisters [the children's father], they didn't fit in there. So, we sat down and talked, and I decided to stay with them (Jandira, 53, July 2023, João Pessoa/PB).

In her testimony, Jandira said she knew she would have difficulty caring for four children. The youngest, Samuel, is disabled and has been diagnosed with West Syndrome, a rare form of epilepsy that usually manifests in the first year of life. This syndrome is identified by electroencephalographic testing and clinical signs such as developmental delays and physical spasms that may go unnoticed or be mistaken for colic. When noticed, the spasms manifest as sudden bending of the head, extension of the upper limbs, and flexion of the legs.

Samuel's care was later turned over to his aunt, Edilma. Edilma, who has no children of her own, agreed to take in her nephew and raise him as her own son. After many years of working as a domestic worker in a family home and raising her employer's two children, she continues to work today, with the help of her employer's daughter, to "take care" of Samuel, and she has also chosen her employer to be the boy's godmother. She assures us that they are working hard to ensure Samuel's well-being and that his godmother is trying to get him on her family's health insurance plan.

Samuel is currently being treated with cannabis. His aunts are fighting to appeal to the National Social Security Institute (INSS) so that he can receive the disability benefit (BPC/LOAS). "Samuel has come to change my life, those who take care of children don't live," said Edilma (2023). Among his care needs, he has to be taken to physical therapy and the neurologist, health services paid for out of pocket because he has not yet been able to receive free care through the Unified Health System (SUS). For now, Samuel cannot walk or talk. According to doctors, the syndrome could be caused by COVID-19, premature birth, or a combination of both. During the interview, Edilma said:

Thanks to the financial support of *Paraíba que Acolhe*, we were able to buy their things, because you know that children have a lot of expenses, right? I don't have to worry about the situation we live in Brazil, right? Except for Samuel's allowance, we can do the monthly shopping and live comfortably for about twenty days, you know? Then, since I still work and have the support of my employers, we can get by, doing everything we can to give them the best (Edilma, 50 years old, July 2023, João Pessoa/PB).

With her four nephews living with her and no support from the PPA, Jandira's budget was tight. She could no longer afford the rent. So, she moved in with her brother, who is single and has two teenage children. Jandira is now responsible for six children and teenagers. In total, eight people live in the same house, making housing an even more central issue in her life. She is now building her own house with the help of PPA benefits. She has been and continues to be a juggler in an unequal society (Faur, 2014).

The gender aspect of the feminization of care; family disagreements (between the paternal and maternal families) about what constitutes "care" for children and adolescents; the close parental and emotional ties between the maternal aunts and nephews; the fact that the brother already has two children; the fact that none of the maternal aunts have children and are therefore considered "free" to care for others: these are some of the factors that led Jandira to take care of Matias, Heloísa, and Adrian, and Edilma to take care of Samuel. These are facts that seem to have reconfigured the responsibility of care in matrilineal terms: from the previous mother, now deceased due to Covid-19, to the mother's sisters.

Edilma told us that she never wanted to be a mother and that her life was very different from what it is now. She said that weekends were for fun, dancing and drinking. That her life was not regimented at all and that being a mother did not suit her at all. Edilma said she really enjoyed playing football, something she had not done since she "took Samuel in."

Jandira says she wants custody of her nephews, but their father refuses to give it to her. Heloísa is the one who misses her father the most. While she would like to be a baby again so that she can have her mother back to hold her on her lap, as she told us, the girl wants to grow up quickly so that she can build a bigger, more spacious house to accommodate her entire extended family.

Despite the adversity, the aunts insist that the arrival of the children has given new meaning to their outlook on life and prompted a change in their plans for the future.

LUARA: SISTER OF LETÍCIA, LUAN, LUCAS AND LAURA

Our destination was Campina Grande, a city 126 km from João Pessoa. The trip took place in June 2023, a time marked by the city's June festivities, the region's characteristic cold weather, and frequent rains — three factors that helped set the tone for our visits during those days. It was Thursday, June 15, when we met Luara (21), mother of a boy and legal guardian of her four younger siblings.

Her family consists of her, her partner, with whom she has been in a relationship since she was 13, her three-and-a-half-year-old son and her four siblings. Between the

household chores and everyday life, she tries to complete her basic education at night, accompanied by her husband, in the Youth and Adult Education Programme (EJA). Luara's family more than doubled in 2021 when she became the legal guardian of her four siblings - two children and two teenagers who, like her, were left motherless after complications from Covid-19. Her siblings are Letícia (17), Luan (14), Lucas (4) and Laura (3).

It was raining heavily that morning, the GPS couldn't find the address, we were lost for a long time in the area, and the car provided by the university had mechanical problems. The driver had to drop us off to try and get the car into a garage. Even in this scenario, as we tried to find our way around, we could feel the suspicious looks of the locals. After we got out of the car, the driver who was accompanying us, even though he was wearing a university badge, was approached by two young men who asked if we were from the police or some other inspection body ⁷. At the end of the interview, when we met the driver again, he told us that the area was known for its high crime rate. We didn't find any official information to confirm this, only newspaper reports.

It was only after we called Luara, who sent her brother Luan to meet us on foot, that we arrived. We had a long way to go, a long way down. The road was steep, cobbled, wide, lined with trees, and from there we could see a large hilly green area where you could even see horses, a typical rural image, although we were in an urban area. We also noticed many structural differences between the houses at the beginning of the street and those that came closer to the green area, as was the case with Luara's house. At the beginning of the street, the houses were made of brick, painted and with signs of access to consumer goods; near the house to be visited, the houses were half-finished, there were no pavements, there were bushes in front of the houses and access was improvised with a few stones.

Situated on a slope in the street, the house is built in the conjugated style, where all the neighboring houses are glued together, almost as one, without being divided by alleys or pavements. The closeness of the houses seems to reflect the relationship between the neighbors. During our stay in the house, three neighbors came and went without much ceremony, seemingly free to move around the house whenever they wanted. The simple building was divided into a small terrace, two bedrooms, a kitchen and a small living room where we chatted. All the rooms were separated by makeshift curtains, the floor was made of thick cement, the walls were unpainted and had many damp spots. The house, given to them by Laura's husband's father, was home to a family of seven.

We sat in the living room with Luara, who saw our visit as a kind of program inspection, even though we had explained the reason for our visit before and during the

⁷ Suspicions about our intention to listen to them about the PPA were a constant feature of our visits. There were frequent suspicions that we were agents of the state government or some kind of inspection — but that's a subject for another article.

interview. There was a rocking chair, a small sofa and a white plastic chair. A medium-sized television mounted on the wall completed the scene. After a short presentation of the research, we began to listen to Luara, asking her about her and her family's history, about her mother, about the children, about daily care, about Covid-19 and about mourning.

Our interview was mainly with Luara. The siblings didn't want to take part, even though they were at home when we visited, and the husband only felt comfortable from the middle to the end of the interview, although his contribution was important. It was one of the most difficult interviews of the research (it is no coincidence that it was one of the poorest houses). It was clear that she was worried about a 'possible' evaluative visit; we could see that she was looking for the 'right' answer to the questions we were asking, and it took a while for us to really move from a system of questions and answers to a real conversation. It was only then that we saw the whole context of this older sister, guardian of her younger siblings, a situation that involves multiple layers of vulnerability and hardship - economic, social and emotional.

Luara grew up in a dysfunctional family. According to her, her father had a drinking problem and beat everyone in the house. From this first 'marriage' her mother had three children, Luara being the youngest. When the marriage broke up, each member of the first nucleus went to a different place. Later, her mother, who had spent some time without a serious relationship, met the man who would become the father of Luara's younger siblings (it is not clear whether the older ones, Letícia and Luan, were also his children).

As she talked about her mother, her problems and her personality, Luara tried to justify her behavior. For her, what happened to her mother was the result of a life of suffering based on bad choices: "She couldn't find anyone to help her or take care of the children. The last one, the last time he came, he made a fuss at the door, I'd rather he didn't come at all [...] He only showed up when our mother died" (Luara, 2023).

Her mother's last partner wasn't much different from her father, who also had problems with alcohol and drugs. According to Luara, her mother and siblings were often beaten, were socially vulnerable and had no permanent home. At the age of 19, she turned to her mother for help. She says it was not uncommon for her to have to intervene and tell her mother to "get over it".

This situation continued until 2020, when her mother became pregnant with her younger sister. Pregnant, with serious health problems (Luara couldn't say exactly what they were) and constantly beaten, the mother moved in with her daughter, grandson and son-in-law. This decision was mainly motivated by the fact that she would need help with her newborn baby and medical treatment. After the baby was born, she spent a year in and out of hospital.

She got sicker after Laura was born. She had heart and liver problems before, things like that. When the baby was born, she didn't feel well, they made her wait for a long time, when she couldn't afford it. After that she lived with her belly "full of water", then she went there [to the hospital] and they took it out, she was tired, dizzy [after giving birth]. I think something went wrong with the birth. On one of those trips, because she was so swollen, she got Covid and died. That's what they said, but I don't know. It could have been one of those things she had (Luara, 21 years old, July 2023, Campina Grande /PB).

We asked her if she suspected that Covid-19 had caused her mother's death, as she was already weak, and she tilted her head to the right and said: "we don't even know what she had, nobody came to say anything, and I had no way to follow up" (Luara, 2023). Luara confirmed that the cause of death in the obituary was Covid-19.

Before taking responsibility for her siblings, Luara took responsibility for her mother. According to her, she had long tried to warn her mother not only about their relationship, but also about the health and care of her younger siblings. Luara's husband confirmed that little had changed since their mother-in-law's death, as his wife had always been busy caring for her mother and siblings. When we asked him how he felt about taking responsibility for his wife's siblings, he smiled amusedly and said: "OK, but what can you do?" (Luara, 2023). Luara added that her two youngest siblings even treat her husband as their father.

We were listening to her story when we were interrupted by a man at the door shouting for Luara. She went out to answer him and we heard the whole conversation. The man was there to complain that one of Luara's older sisters (from her mother's first marriage and not under her guardianship) had stolen a mobile phone from his house. The man added that he was there to warn her because, out of respect for her, he wanted to try to resolve the situation amicably. Luara returned to the living room, aware that we had heard the story, and continued to tell us about her life and that of her family members, making it increasingly clear that if she wasn't responsible for her siblings, who was?

When her mother died, her siblings were already living with Luara. She even tried to send the children to live with other family members, aunts and grandparents, but no one was willing. Of her two older sisters, one lived in João Pessoa, had started her own family with children and a husband and didn't want to take them in, and the other, who was involved in petty crime and a drug user, couldn't take them in. The children's father, also a drug user and abuser, was not an option, and foster care was out of the question. This left Luara, 21, as the most responsible adult in the family.

Living with the help of her father-in-law and her husband's "odd jobs", soon after her mother's death, she resorted to begging in order not to go hungry with her siblings.

I'm not ashamed to say that I used to go with them to ask at the traffic lights, we'd go out and ask at the gates, and I also got a basic food basket from the social assistance department [...]. I had never really done a market before I got this aid, now I go to the

market, and I don't just buy couscous or sugar. I do the market for us (Luara, 21 July 2023, Campina Grande/PB).

During our interview, Luara cried several times as she complained about how tired she was, about the difficulties of demanding respect from her teenage sister, who is only three years younger than her, and about giving up on having another child. Although she wants a second child, her husband won't accept it, saying the house is too crowded and resources are limited. Finally, she spoke of her constant anxiety, her reluctance to leave the house and her feeling of being much older than her years. When asked if she had received or was receiving any psychological counselling, she said no.

In a scenario where all the adults seemed to be suffering from other demands, Luara was forced to take responsibility for the lives of her mother and four siblings. There was no other way to ensure the children's well-being, and no other relative was interested in taking them in. Luara couldn't afford it, but in the absence of others, she was forced to become a mother. There is no romanticism or heroism in Luara's words; she wishes she could have shared the burden of caring for and feeding four more people. Once she realized her social and emotional responsibility to her siblings, she had no choice.

Today, her family doesn't beg; they live on the three grants they receive from the PPA, worth approximately US\$284.47, which, divided between the inhabitants of the house, amounts to approx. US\$40.63. Before we left, she told us that no one knew she was receiving the PPA benefit. She said she preferred to keep it a secret because she was afraid that the children's father would take custody of them because of the money.

When asked about her future plans, she didn't know how to answer.

AND WHO IS GOING TO LOOK AFTER THE CHILDREN NOW?

In the three ethnographic accounts presented here, gender identity components come into play when it comes to women caring for children. It is clearly women who care for the children orphaned by Covid-19. Although one father had died, in the other two cases the parent was alive. Grandfathers and uncles were also present but were not considered as possible caregivers. This suggests that childcare is feminized. Although this is nothing new in the literature, it is important to point it out. It is also worth noting that whether the caregiver is a grandmother, aunt or sister, the caregivers belong to the extended maternal family of the children and adolescents, reinforcing the gender issues that prevail in this type of social dynamic.

When it comes to deciding who gets the children, kinship is a key factor. In none of the cases analyzed by the research, in the overall total of fourteen families so far, did the children go to the homes of unrelated people. The maternal grandmother is undoubtedly the preferred choice, or what seems to be the "natural" destination for children and

adolescents when “the mother is missing”. It is important to highlight the centrality of maternal grandmothers, as this seems to be the preferred option for caring for children and teenagers in the event of orphanhood. This issue deserves further study.

The age of the carer is also an important factor, which partially explains the choice of aunt and grandmother. However, age alone is not a limiting factor; it must be accompanied by a degree of financial and emotional stability. Luara's case is also unique in that she is a young mother of a young child. Despite being very young and lacking financial stability, she felt obliged to stay with her siblings in the face of an extremely vulnerable family situation. In many contexts, taking on the motherhood of siblings is a great responsibility, and this act of “taking on” goes through several affective and moral layers. When the mother is absent or unable to care for the siblings, taking on this responsibility may be necessary to ensure that the family remains in the same home, for their well-being and for the affection of the bloodline. Throughout the research we have found that in the absence of grandparents or aunts to take the lead, older siblings have a prominent place.

Luara's outbursts while talking about life after her mother's death, highlighting the moments of strain, social pressure and challenges she faced with family members, revealed something that was also present in the other three stories: compromised mental health. The young woman's outbursts revealed the emotional impact of losing her mother, compounded by the urgency of caring for her siblings. Her moment of grief was silenced, and while she was trying to cope with the loss, she needed to appear strong and stable to her siblings, especially the newborn, who was orphaned in her first year of life. This can hinder the grieving process and potentially reduce the emotional resources available to take care of herself.

The case of the aunts reminds us of the change in plans that became necessary when the children arrived. Both were over 50, had no desire to be mothers, no emotional relationship, and no legal obligation other than to themselves. In the absence of the father, the paternal family and even other relatives, they felt obliged to stay with the four children, including the responsibility of caring for a child with serious health problems.

We would like to emphasize that taking responsibility for these children and young people has meant changing plans and lifestyles: giving up the desire to move to another city, as in the case of Dona Glória; changing lifestyles, as in the case of Edilma, the maternal aunt who took responsibility for Samuel - a child with West Syndrome; giving up having children of her own, as in the case of Luara. At the same time, in some cases, the presence of children in the home can be a comfort to the heart, a hope for better times and a driving force to go on living. In this sense, caring for someone is a responsibility that ultimately brings benefits to the carer. In other words, bereaved families often find comfort in the children and young people themselves.

In addition, we can think of care as an exercise of *grandmothering*, *auntmothering* and *sistermothering* (Cavalcante, 2022), that is, when grandmothers, aunts and sisters care, "[...] but try not to replace this doing with the doing of the mother, try not to appropriate the place of the mother's mothering" (Cavalcante, 2022, p. 17). Given the parental and family ruptures caused by the death of Covid-19, this care is then seen as the "[...] exercise of filling and/or replacing gaps in mothering" (Cavalcante, 2022, p. 17).

After the death of their father and mothers, Dona Glória's granddaughters, Jandira and Edilma, and Luara's sister, became integral caregivers, "[...] providing food, affection and care to sustain life" (Cavalcante, 2018). In other words, they provide care with the intention of ensuring the wellbeing and healthy development of their granddaughters, nephews and siblings, taking on responsibilities previously assigned to their mothers. The impact on the family of the death and orphanhood caused by Covid-19 cries out. One word is heard in their echoes: mother. A mother dies, and with the orphanhood that results from that death, the mother's mother, the mother's sisters and the mother's daughter become the primary caregivers for the children of a deceased mother.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Taking on motherhood means taking on the daily tasks that a mother would normally do, such as feeding, dressing, taking to school, helping with the demands of development and survival, and ideally providing an atmosphere of security and affection. The person who takes on the responsibility of not wanting for the other, the responsibility of caring, whatever the circumstances, is the person who has no right to refrain from caring. So, we are talking about people who, driven by complex and often contradictory factors, have made a commitment that they cannot refuse. If not them, who else could make a commitment to these children and teenagers?

Caregiving is what keeps the human race alive; every living human being has had to be cared for at some point. Being cared for in childhood is not optional. However, caring is a task that carries great social and emotional weight. As we have seen, whether it is a grandmother, an aunt or a sister, the need to fill the gaps left by orphanhood is a role that requires selflessness (Carneiro *et al.*, 2022; Cavalcante, 2022; Puig de la Bellacasa *et al.*, 2023; Zelizer, 2011; Federici, 2018).

The maternities — or *grandmothering*, *auntmothering*, and *sistermothering* (Cavalcante, 2022) — that we have analyzed were established to ensure the care of these ten children and teenagers orphaned by Covid-19. It was the female members of the family who took on the commitment that the other family members refused or did not even consider.

The three women undertook the work of caring — with a sense of morality and socially reinforced affection that meant they saw no other options.

We conclude that the way in which the idea of caring is socially constructed has led to these women being seen as carers. It is important to note that the presumption of motherhood, which is somewhat coercive in the case of Covid-19 orphans, was based on gender identity, degree of kinship, blood ties, established affection, age, geographical proximity and financial standard.

In deciding who will keep the children, there seems to be a rational assessment, very well thought out by the respondents, considering various factors. There are more or less ideal levels that determine where the children go: older age, stable financial and emotional conditions, geographical proximity, well-established bonds of affection - all of which translate into a genuine interest in the child's well-being. In the absence of one or more of these factors, families adapt to the circumstances and arrive at their own conclusions

The amount to be received from the programme, which is often not even known to the relatives, prevents them from wanting to "take" the child out of pure financial interest. The interest in the child's welfare is understood to be independent of the amount received from the State, motivated by pure love or debt to the deceased.

At the same time as there is reason and logic, there are moral imperatives that prevent certain women from leaving children in shelters or with relatives who might harm them. There is also the belief that women naturally know how to look after children, even if they have never been mothers, like Jandira and Edilma; even if they are young, like Luara; even if they are old, like Dona Glória. At the same time, it is the very presence of these children and teenagers in the lives of these women, the result of the Covid-19 tragedy, that gives them a new meaning to life and the strength to carry on. Life doesn't stop, the children are there, and they need to be cared for.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was funded by the National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), a body linked to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, with the aim of promoting research in Brazil, under Call No. CNPq/MCTI/FNDCT No. 40/2022. It also had the support of the State Secretariat for Human Development of Paraíba (SEDH), mainly through the social worker Jéssica Juliana, and the families interviewed, who welcomed us with commitment, courtesy and courtesy.

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Received on January 30, 2024.

Approved on August 17, 2024.

