

# ***Bolsa Família* and women's autonomy: What do the qualitative studies tell us?**

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## **1 *Bolsa Família* and the consequences of instituting women as preferred beneficiaries**

The Programa *Bolsa Família* (PBF) currently serves 13.8 million Brazilian families—corresponding to the poorest 25 per cent of the population—combining cash transfers with conditionalities met by the beneficiaries.

Funds are transferred directly to beneficiaries, who can then withdraw them using a bank debit card. The programme is aimed at extremely poor families (monthly per capita household income of up to BRL85.00) regardless of family composition, and poor families (monthly per capita household income of between BRL85.01 and BRL170.00) if they include children and adolescents aged 0–17 years. The PBF includes a few benefits, but, in short, it transfers the necessary funds to extremely poor households so that each and every family member may overcome the extreme poverty threshold (BRL85/month). Poor families, in turn, receive so-called 'variable benefits'—BRL39 per child or adolescent aged 0–15 years and pregnant or nursing women, limited to five benefits per household—and a variable benefit for adolescents of BRL46 per adolescent aged 16–17 and attending school, limited to three benefits per household. The average monthly benefit is approximately BRL182 (as of July 2016).

PBF households must fulfil education and health conditionalities that depend on family composition. Regarding health care, pregnant women must undergo prenatal care, nursing mothers must monitor their health status and that of their babies, and children up to 6 years old must follow the vaccination schedule. In education, individuals younger than 15 years old must attend 85 per cent of classes; those aged 16–17 must attend 75 per cent of classes.

Households are selected using the *Cadastro Único* (Single Registry), an administrative registry containing socio-economic information about approximately 26 million households—mainly those with monthly per capita incomes up to half the minimum wage (in 2016, BRL440). The registry is quite comprehensive, with data on 40 per cent of Brazil's population. It is used primarily by the PBF, but it also informs 20 additional federal programmes and is the main structuring database used by the *Sistema Único de Assistência Social* (SUAS—Unified Social Assistance System). Using information from the Single Registry, the PBF runs a monthly automated selection of households that should be included in the Registry and identifies those that should be excluded for no longer meeting the service criteria. The Single Registry information is used to prioritise PBF beneficiary households in other social policies and programmes aimed at improving their lives.

The PBF includes a legal provision stating that women should be the preferred beneficiaries (Law No. 10.836/2004). From an administrative standpoint, the designation of women as preferred beneficiaries goes back to the definition used in income transfer programmes that preceded—and were subsequently incorporated into—the PBF in 2003. From a conceptual standpoint, this choice reinforces the view that transferring the money directly to women increases the likelihood that it will be used to benefit the entire family. Currently, women are the benefit recipients in 92 per cent of beneficiary households, regardless of family arrangement.

Analyses of the effects of the PBF on gender relations often find that the decision to make women the preferred recipients of the benefit is not happenstance; rather, it was based on a clear understanding that women are better equipped to use the money to cater to the needs of their children or of the family. The strongest criticism from feminists against conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes and the PBF itself focus on the fact that even though the State chose to direct the benefit at women, it does not provide for their underlying and preferential access to monetary resources: this choice makes women responsible for mediating the relationship between the State and the household, acknowledging women from the perspective of their motherly duties and, therefore, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Molyneux 2007; Costa 2008; Carloto and Mariano 2010). As a representation of families seen as homogeneous entities (Santos 2014), women recipients share the responsibility for fighting intergenerational poverty, as they must monitor the conditionality agendas established by such programmes. The PBF is unable to provide mechanisms to expand opportunities for the productive engagement of women; therefore, the programme would be ineffective in terms of gender emancipation (Lavinás, Cobo, and Veiga 2012).

## 2 A summary of the results of quantitative analyses

PBF impact assessments and other analyses—based on national household surveys and a more quantitative approach—do not allow for a closer examination of the legitimacy of this criticism. The impact assessments analyse the effects of the programme on women's well-being by focusing exclusively on access to, and frequency of, prenatal consultations and the decision-making process at home. They point out that the PBF has increased the number of prenatal consultations and has improved the autonomy of women recipients in urban areas regarding their decisions to purchase durable goods or medicine for their children, send children to school and use contraceptives (De Brauw 2010; 2014). Regarding the access of women beneficiaries to paid work, the assessments do not find significant differences between male and female beneficiaries in terms of participation in the labour market (De Brauw 2010; Oliveira and Soares 2013). There are, however, indications that the reduction in the number of hours devoted to productive work among women beneficiaries would be offset by the increase in hours devoted to domestic tasks, which would not occur among male beneficiaries (Teixeira 2008; Passos 2015).

Indeed, the decision (made exclusively by women) to use contraception does have a positive impact on women's autonomy and overall gender equality, as it indicates that women can now exercise their reproductive rights more fully. Other findings allow for different interpretations. While the intensification of women's (exclusive) decision-making powers on matters pertaining to the home and to children can mean greater autonomy, it may also simply mean that men are less likely to share housework with women—which would, therefore, exacerbate the excessive burden placed on women in the household (as housework is traditionally linked to women). Replacing productive work by housework may also push women away from the type of work that promotes greater autonomy and independence, but may also be a reflection of the fact that women can now choose to engage in domestic work instead of precarious and exploitative work.

## 3 Findings of qualitative analyses

In such a controversial field, the findings of qualitative studies carried out among BFP beneficiaries warrant consideration. After all, how do these women see themselves in the possible interpretative dichotomy that reinforces traditionalism vs. possible increases in female autonomy? In an attempt to answer that question, this text systematises the main qualitative studies focused on the participation of female PBF recipients in Brazil. The results of the studies are presented from the perspective of topics common to most of them:

1. Who the PBF benefit belongs to, and how it should be used;
2. Overburden due to care-related tasks imposed by conditionalities;
3. Changes in male authority within the home; and
4. Changes in the community or in life projects.

Before launching into a discussion of the topics, it should be noted that the notion of the PBF as an agent that strengthens the link between the female identity and the

ethos of motherhood is an interpretation found in virtually all qualitative studies. Similarly, many of them have found that women recipients largely agree with this option (Libardoni 2008; Pires 2012; Pereira and Ribeiro 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014): in a consensus between women and the State, women should represent the household and receive the benefit, as they are the ones who understand the needs of the children and of the home—they know how to 'get things done' (Libardoni 2008, 4). In this sense, it should be determined whether the PBF—despite the traditional roles assigned to women—is indeed successful in increasing their autonomy, and how this increase has been achieved.

Also, these studies are of no help in determining whether there are any distinctions about the role of the PBF in the lives of women based on their family arrangements—which is why, despite its importance, this characteristic cannot be included in this paper.

### 3.1 Who the PBF benefit belongs to, and how it should be spent

Studies show that, as a priority, women recipients perceive the PBF benefit as belonging to their children (Pires 2012; 2013; Pereira and Ribeiro 2013; Ahler 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014; Santos 2014), which generates a strong moral obligation among women recipients to use the benefit correctly (Pires 2012; 2013; Pereira and Ribeiro 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014). They also note that the benefit is usually seen as the woman's contribution to the household budget (Pires 2012; 2013; Pereira and Ribeiro 2013; Ahler 2013).

Pires (2012) emphasises the freedom of women recipients to use the benefit without negotiating it with their partners; however, he also perceives among them a moral judgement about the way money is spent. There is a 'right' way to spend it—to directly benefit the children—and a 'wrong' way to spend it—on products that go against the idea of responsible motherhood, such as alcohol and drugs. There are intermediate levels between the 'right' and the 'wrong' ways to spend it: spending it on goods that indirectly benefit the children (such as durable goods for the home) is also deemed correct; spending it on the recipient of the benefit herself is considered acceptable as long as her children's needs have been met. Rego and Pinzani (2014) even refer to the women interviewed expressing shame when admitting they had spent the money on personal care items.

Mortom (2013) notes a gap between households in the level of autonomy of women recipients when spending the money and their representation. In poorer households, the benefit is used mostly for short-term purchases, such as food and medicine. Providing food for the family is seen as a male task; therefore, in these contexts the benefit is linked to the husband and the home. In less poor households, food supply is less dependent on the PBF, and, as such, the benefit can be redirected to other purposes—such as purchasing durable goods under instalment payment plans. In these households, the benefit is seen as the woman's contribution to the budget and is commonly used by women for this exact purpose. According to the author, purchasing durable goods strengthens the bond between the purchaser and the ability to consume—the purchased product is visible every day and

calls to mind the person who enabled its purchase. As such, the permanent nature of the products purchased with the benefit would strengthen women in less poor households.

### 3.2 Overburden due to care-related tasks imposed by conditionalities

Among the studies under review, the topic of conditionalities is addressed by Libardoni (2007), Pires (2012; 2013), Pereira and Ribeiro (2013), Rego and Pinzani (2014) and Santos (2014). In none of them, however, do women recipients see conditionalities as something that overburdens them in terms of time or labour. Pereira and Ribeiro (2013) and Santos (2014) suggest that this is because women recipients see their responsibility for caring for their children as something natural.

Although the contexts of their studies differ significantly—urban in the case of Pires (2012; 2013) and mostly rural in Rego and Pinzani (2014)—both present similar and positive interpretations of the role of conditionalities for women recipients: they are a link between the women and the State, independent of male mediation. This link elicits in women a sense of citizenship and participation in a wider political circle, as the State recognises them as having rights and duties. When the trajectories of women are marked by an absence of the State, the PBF and its conditionalities are interpreted as a public acknowledgement of these women's very existence. It should be noted that in both studies there are several cases in which women recipients personify the State they interact with in the image of former President Lula. Pires (2013) points out that this characteristic may be related to the way political visibility functions in countries with presidential systems. Rego and Pinzani (2014) suggest that this embodiment stems from the fact that women recipients identify with the former president—the notion that he cares about them because he has also experienced poverty.

### 3.3 Changes in autonomy and male authority in the household

With the exception of Ahlert (2013) and Pires (2013), who do not address this issue, all other authors stress the increased autonomy of women recipients in the home (Libardoni 2007; Pires 2012; Pereira and Ribeiro 2013; Mortom 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014; Santos 2014). Basically, the benefit—often the greatest (or only) source of regular income—provides women with a certain degree of financial security and the perception that they have an income. This enables them to make purchasing choices on their own and not be subservient to their partners' wishes. Most studies find that this income security elicits a feeling of self-respect and more positive prospects for the future; this includes questioning traditional male authority figures and the prospect of ending unwanted conjugal relationships (Libardoni 2007; Pires 2012; Mortom 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014; Santos 2014).

According to Pereira and Ribeiro (2013), the repeated comments from female interviewees about female independence may be a sign that the PBF is strengthening this type of posture. Mortom (2013) finds that there is a greater potential to increase female autonomy in households that are less poor, where women assert themselves as owners of an income that enables the acquisition of goods that circulate in the economy in the long term (see Section 3.1). Rego and Pinzani (2014) emphasise the

feeling of freedom brought about by a regular income, which translates, among other things, into women no longer feeling dependent on their partners.

It should be noted that, in these studies, increased autonomy is not restricted to productive engagements and women's financial independence; it should be understood broadly as an expansion of the choices available to women recipients within specific social structures, usually marked by deprivation and traditional gender relations.

### 3.4 Changes in the community or in life projects

Most studies show that the PBF has increased expectations, both in the perceived increase in the choices available and, sometimes, in the way women recipients participate in the community (Libardoni 2008; Pires 2012; 2013; Mortom 2013; Ahlert 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014; Santos 2014).

Libardoni (2007) notes that the mere fact that women living in social isolation must have civil documents issued to them to register with the PBF elicits in them a feeling of participating in a broader circle and becoming socially visible. Pires (2012; 2013) sees the conditionalities as commitments that generate feelings of social recognition among female beneficiaries. Ahlert (2013) finds that the benefit eases the need for women to work without weekly rest. Rego and Pinzani (2014) state that the fact that women are the benefit recipients enables them to reject devaluated, underpaid and precarious jobs. According to Santos (2014), the rejection of this type of work would be accompanied by an expectation of a job that upholds labour rights—a way of reconfiguring the precarious history of female employment that has thus far marked their households.

Mortom (2013) highlights that even in the poorest households, where the benefit is not perceived as belonging to the women, it still helps women follow their dreams, such as sending their children to college or buying animals for breeding and resale. Women can save part of the money to achieve these dreams without the need to inform their partners. Rego and Pinzani (2014) see the PBF as the beginning of a process with the potential to break away from a culture of resignation, the constant feeling that extreme poverty is a matter of destiny. Even those women beneficiaries who realise that only their children's generation will climb out of poverty feel that it is, indeed, possible to break away from historical extreme poverty. Access to regular income affords them greater autonomy to move about in the community: they go to markets, they shop, and they feel respected by traders; as such, they no longer feel as isolated and are endowed with a stronger sense of dignity.

In this sense, some authors also point to important gaps where the PBF could act indirectly—that is, by means of the public services associated with it. In 2008, Libardoni considered the possibility of having the PBF implement federal mechanisms to enhance the capacity of women beneficiaries through social programmes connected to it. Santos (2014) notes that many women recipients have had unwanted pregnancies and find it very difficult to gain access to information about contraception or the contraceptives themselves. Sterilisation appears a desire that, considering the inefficiency of the public health system, can only happen by chance. The author believes that the PBF only strengthens the bond between women recipients and the

public health system in terms of maternity, and it should also address reproductive rights, even if only minimally. In the study by Rego and Pinzani (2014), tubal ligation also often appears as a desire or achievement for women. This shows how important it is for the State to support initiatives in which women beneficiaries can organise, share experiences and voice their demands to the State—as corroborated by Libardoni (2008).

#### 4 Final considerations

The studies under review show that the PBF does not negate traditional gender relations. What it does is strengthen the link between female identity and child care. However, women recipients report nuanced changes in their life trajectories: in self-perception, in questioning unwanted conjugal relationships, in their greater freedom to make choices and their ability to participate publicly in the world. This feature was observed in studies conducted in urban contexts (Pires 2012; 2013; Pereira and Ribeiro 2013; Santos 2014) as well as in rural areas (Libardoni 2008; Rego and Pinzani 2014). In other words, the studies under review seem to indicate that, when it comes to gender relations, reality does not allow the PBF to be interpreted in a binary fashion.

The PBF tends to contribute to women's autonomy in two ways. First, regular income: it allows women recipients to turn their attention to concerns other than their immediate survival (Rego and Pinzani 2014), reducing social isolation, increasing their participation in the world (Libardoni 2008; Rego and Pinzani 2014) and providing women with more choices (Pires 2012; 2013; Santos 2014; Rego and Pinzani 2014). Second, conditionalities: paradoxically, they symbolically reinforce the maternal role of women and contribute to women seeing themselves as holders of rights and duties as citizens that interact with the State regardless of male mediation (Pires 2012; 2013; Rego and Pinzani 2014).

If changes in gender relations encompass various dimensions and constitute long-term achievements, it seems overly

presumptuous to require a programme focused primarily on cash transfers to lead this endeavour forward. Potential improvements to public services associated to the PBF seem consistent according to some authors. Since PBF conditionalities strengthen the link between women recipients and the public health system, it would be beneficial if this relationship were to go beyond the concerns for children's welfare and also promote these women's reproductive rights. Another reasonable suggestion is the creation of spaces for women recipients to meet, share experiences and organise their list of demands to the State. It should be noted that all municipalities in Brazil have councils responsible for social control over the PBF (in the form of municipal social assistance councils) with the mandate to promote the participation of policy users. Such spaces could, therefore, be connected to the councils, but participation by women recipients should be voluntary and unconditional, so as not to undermine the breadth of the choices they wish to expand.

Although the improved performance of the State in promoting the autonomy of poorer women was never within the scope of the PBF, it can nonetheless be indirectly facilitated by the programme through its information structure and liaison with the government. However, lest the reader think that this is a short and easy path to follow, we must remember that coordination entails significant challenges. These include improving the provision and quality of public services in the current (fiscally constrained) scenario and also preparing and providing gender equity training to the professionals who will be delivering services directly to the population. ■

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