

Maternity denied: single mothers and infanticide women in Ceará in the 19th century¹

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Abstract

The text analyzes the experiences of single mothers and infanticide women in the second half of the 19th century and the ways in which they were represented in the Ceará press of the period. The disputes over the formulation of hegemonic family patterns in the 19th century showed several subjects and forms of family ordering, evidencing stories of female protagonism in the head of their homes and in the definition of values and practices about motherhood. In this sense, both the ways of naming, representing and punishing crimes against honor and the crime of infanticide, as well as the ways in which women expressed other values and affections about marriage and children are part of this paper. This research used newspapers, official documents, police reports and literature as sources.

Keywords

Women. Maternity. Family. Infanticide.

Da maternidade (re)negada: mães solteiras e mulheres infanticidas no Ceará oitocentista

Resumo

O artigo busca analisar as experiências de mães solteiras e mulheres infanticidas na segunda metade do século XIX, destacando as formas como foram representadas na imprensa cearense do período. As disputas em torno da formulação de padrões hegemônicos de família nos Oitocentos revelaram a multiplicidade de sujeitos e formas de ordenamento familiar, evidenciando histórias de protagonismo feminino na condução de seus lares e na (re)definição de valores e práticas acerca da maternidade. Nesse sentido, tanto as formas de nomear, representar e punir os delitos contra a honra e o crime de infanticídio quanto as maneiras como as mulheres expressaram outros valores e afetos acerca do casamento e dos filhos fazem parte do objeto de estudo aqui apresentado. Para tanto, esta pesquisa utilizou como fontes jornais, documentos oficiais, boletins policiais e textos literários.

Palavras-chave

Mulheres. Maternidade. Família. Infanticídio.

¹ Versão em inglês traduzida originalmente do português por Marina Lima Pompeu.

Maternidad negada: madres solteras y mujeres infanticidas en Ceará en el siglo XIX

Resumen

El artículo busca analizar las vivencias de las madres solteras y las mujeres infanticidas en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX, destacando las formas en que fueron representadas en la prensa cearense de la época. Las disputas por la formulación de patrones familiares hegemónicos en el siglo XIX mostraron la multiplicidad de sujetos y formas de orden familiar, evidenciando historias de protagonismo femenino en la conducción de sus hogares y en la (re)definición de valores y prácticas sobre la maternidad. En este sentido, tanto las formas de nombrar, representar y sancionar los delitos contra el honor y el delito de infanticidio como las formas en que las mujeres expresaron otros valores y afectos sobre el matrimonio y la niñez forman parte de este estudio. Esta investigación utilizó periódicos, documentos oficiales, informes policiales y textos literarios como fuentes.

Palabras clave

Mujer. Maternidad. Familia. Infanticidio.

1 Introduction

I really want children / Joyful, alive, healthy, / Who live like hopes, / Filling the home with joy. // Always sleepy, restless, / Gossiping, gentle, / Like cute butterflies / Subtle flying around. // I want them so badly! And upon seeing them / Who will stop wanting them, / Who will stop looking for them? // They are fragrant flowers / Fruits of our love / Delights of our home! (OLYMPIO, January 15th, 1887).

In the sonnet above, published in the first issue of the magazine *A Quinzena*, José Olympio described children in a romanticized way, typical of the bourgeois sensibility at the end of the 19th century. In the power struggles that reflected the ideal family models, stiff definitions about the condition of a child were forged, seen as divine gifts - treats - and not as social beings, part of a varied environment with diverse culture and affective elements. However, the child, as a receiver of care and protection, is a modern invention, as historiography has shown from the pioneering studies of Ariès (1981). The concept of childhood isn't timeless and its historicity is linked to structural economic changes, as well as behavioral changes in the family environment.

Inserted in the set of bourgeois aspirations that involved the defense of civility, progress and norm and vigilance in people's daily lives, José Olympio's question about children - "Who will stop wanting them?" - seemed to express a feeling of tenderness and tried to convey on some feeling of happiness when watching children's games. His verses

were part of a view already shared by many - promoted by Christianity and echoed through serialized publications, novels, songs, and even advertisements in the newspapers - that the family was the base of the nation; it was perceived as the origin of good conduct, of values considered beneficial for life in society - such as obedience and respect. Therefore, Olympio's poem should sound natural, as if there was only one answer to his question. But the desire to have children wasn't so unanimous. It wasn't independent of class conditions. What can be seen is that there were long and multiple searches to standardize motherhood, in which marriage was transformed into a mandatory part of the constitution of a family group. The circulation of these ideas and the attempts to propagate a kind of recipe to form a family (marriage, the birth of children, the presence of grandparents and other relatives) fueled different prejudices against women who didn't comply with these regulations for some reason. Not marrying before conceiving or not wanting the child was a notable transgression.

It was during the 19th century that the idealized figure of the selfless mother who was directly responsible for the babies' survival gained notoriety in the West, mainly linked to the diffusion of medical-hygienist knowledge, demographic and economic concerns around liberal ideas of production and market, and philosophical and educational constructs about the female roles in the shaping "modernity". The philosopher Badinter (1985) demonstrated how the collective imaginary concerning motherhood was constructed, reframed, and disseminated from the 17th century onwards in the writings of some European philosophers and jurists and how it widely disseminated in the following two centuries, resulting, at least in terms of ideas, in the fabrication of the "maternal instinct". In other words, there was an insistence on the repercussion of motherhood and childcare as practices and feelings naturally attributed to women. The general panorama that Badinter outlined about the elaboration of the myth of maternal love contributed, especially in the context in which it was produced, to denaturalize the social place of women and mothers.

The experience of mothers and how motherhood was built as a value cannot be taken as uniform in all social classes, as noted by Badinter (1985). Therefore, it's necessary to insist that the discursive formulations and the expected behaviors, imposed and/or imprinted in the social construction of motherhood must be investigated based on

particular historical conditions, highlighting processes, multiple subjects, and specific disputes in the fabrication of motherhood and deviations from the norm.

In this sense, the role of women in the composition of the family frameworks was taken as an object of study, observing how single mothers and how women who killed their infants were treated in the second half of the 19th century. Fragments of the history of women who defied hegemonic values and contradicted the myth of maternal love were found in the representations of intellectuals, politicians, doctors, and judges, especially on newspapers from that period. The same discourse that defended ideal models of women and mothers, questioned from the standpoint of women as active subjects in their history, indirectly revealed the female role in family management, in the choices about the future of the children, and in the decisions about motherhood.

News that circulated in the Ceará press, census information about the composition and head of households, police records, medical reports, and literary works were the sources used to analyze the lives of single mothers and infanticide women in confrontations with the Christian/bourgeois morality of the police, state interference and discursive violence on honor and maternal love. This article is, therefore, an exercise in analyzing the meanings of motherhood, seen in its heterogeneity and as a field of dispute. The clashes over women's rights/duties over motherhood weren't focused on the female oppression of the 19th century. The processes of diffusion of ideal models and the invention of deviations around the feminine are in the domestic daily life, in school education, in media representations, and cross all spheres of social life. The relevance of this theme is in the perception of the historical continuities that permeate maternal experiences today, as well as the need to reaffirm that the changes in gender relations aren't accidental, but they arise from historical struggles. It's necessary, therefore, to denaturalize motherhood as a moral punishment - diffuse, not by chance, in the collective imagination - of the female body in the face of conception.

2 Single mothers: giving up children, stigmas and family protagonism

Research in newspapers from the second half of the 19th century showed that the presence of children “exposed” in the city of Fortaleza during this period was quite common. The “exposed” were children left at the door of a family by their own mothers.

This practice had been going on for a long time, mainly in places where, as in the case of Fortaleza, there wasn't a place to surrender unwanted babies like Casa de Misericórdia. The practice of giving up babies persisted for a long time in Brazil since only very recently the state took the responsibility for the care of those children. Until the 1980s, almost all the adoptions were informal, so much so that the expression “Brazilian adoption” became common in the legal system, referring to the registration or donation of children without the use of legal means. Only in 2009, the National Adoption Law was approved, in an attempt to discipline the process of transferring children and adolescents, barring direct adoption. The law also prioritizes that children stay with their biological family, except when it's legally impossible to do so. However, it appears that some things don't change in the way of giving up and adopting children and an insistence of many mothers who try to choose a new family for their children, as analyzed by Ferreira (2015).

How is it possible to analyze the historicity of the donation of children and its permanence? How did the production of the discourse on female honor, the social vulnerability of single mothers, and the absence of child care in the 1800s contribute to the phenomenon of the adoption of children? It's necessary to understand the notions of abandonment and rejection built by hegemonic groups (including government, law, and religious authorities) concerning poor families in Imperial Brazil. Giving up children cannot be understood simply as irresponsibility, lack of love, or promiscuity of women. Fragments of family histories and the trajectories of poor single women can elucidate the tensions surrounding this practice.

In 1863, at dawn, a newborn baby boy was found inside an uru (a straw basket) on the fence of a farmer's house, near Fortaleza. That same man - José da Costa Lobo - referred the child to a lady - a neighbor of his - so that she could take care of the boy, the man was willing to pay the expenses and spared a goat to give milk to the boy. Almost two months passed when José was visited by the child's father. He wanted to take the boy with him. Claiming affection for the baby, the man who had found the baby refused to give him up. However, for fear of a lawsuit or any involvement with the justice, he gave in to the threats, and the boy was taken from the neighbor's house who had served as “nanny”. The real father was married and the illegitimate child wasn't accepted at the biological father's home and, thus, the baby went to the care of Eugenia Maria da

Conceição, the paternal grandmother. But this case was reported in the newspaper *O Sol* and didn't stop there. Not pleased with the child's transfer, the baby's mother, without Eugenia knowing, entered the house, picked up the little boy, and took him back to José Lobo's house, this time she left a letter. On paper, the anonymous mother clarified that she had chosen that house because she believed that “[...] he would be able to raise that son of error, and therefore, she begged him to take the baby back in his custody”. This opened a judicial inquiry. After back and forth and there again, little Luiz, who in the meantime had been baptized by his grandmother, remained with José Lobo. However, at the end of the question, the farmer had to pay the judicial fees and refund Eugenia the amount of 150 \$ 000 reis, amount attested by receipt and published in the newspaper *O Sol*, in issue 319, page 1, March 12, 1863.

The baby Luiz case is emblematic to understand the meanings of abandonment and its implications in the 19th century. In a study on the institutions for the collection of babies in the 18th and 19th centuries, Venâncio (1999) pointed out the dynamics of abandonment in the “rodas de expostos”² in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. After contextualizing the appearance of these institutions in Brazil, which were very common in Portugal since the Middle Ages, the author discussed not only the functioning of these places but also the emotions upon the donation of children. Little was known about the mothers, but there is evidence that minimally broke that silence. Sometimes, as demonstrated by Venâncio (1999), notes were deposited with the “foundling” children. Most indicated the newborn's baptism and the day of their birth, which, according to the author, reveals “[...] a subtle display of maternal affection” or the will to later recover the child (VENÂNCIO, 1999, p. 78).

Although the morals of the time often led to the donation of babies, since the illegitimacy of birth condemned these children and ruined the reputation of their mothers, this was not the main reason for abandonment. According to Marcílio (2006), poverty was the main cause of giving up children in Brazil. It's clear that this is not an isolated factor. As the author explained, structural conditions associated with the families' economic fragility are the key factor leading up to the donation. Marcílio disagreed with the idea that

² The “rodas de expostos” or foundling wheels were spaces, usually administered by religious orders, who received newborns left to the care of the charity. The mechanism of the wheel - sometimes just a basket or hatch open in the convent wall or the Holy House - allowed the anonymity of the people who left the babies.

a very high birth rate among young mothers or even prostitution would be among the first reasons for abandonment. One of the results of the research about foundling wheels was that the death of the mother and/or father, the helplessness of women left by their husbands, serious illnesses of newborns, or the birth of twins motivated giving up children born in more impoverished families (MARCÍLIO, 2006).

Therefore, it's necessary to relativize the idea of abandonment or maternal rejection when dealing with children given to adoption. As Fonseca (2012) noted, in the long history of fabricating the ideal motherhood, "abandoning mothers" had to live with severe judgments about their honor, honesty, and value. As the author explained, "[...] the word abandonment carries connotations of an emotional rejection, as if the delivery of the child was a conscious choice of the mothers in question" (FONSECA, 2012, p. 17). Luiz's mother, therefore, proved to be remarkably important in her son's future. Her determination to choose a family for the boy, who was seen as the result of a "mistake", revealed - in addition to the impossibility of raising him - concern for his happiness and his place in the world.

The place of children in the composition of poor urban families in the 19th century reveals the existence of structured assistance networks, not ran by the government and the ways to guarantee the survival of the little ones, not necessarily tied to their parents. For this reason, the circulation of children was well accepted and represented a common practice among the poor without this clashing with the idea of a family that they had.

During the 19th century, autonomy over children was often legally removed from single mothers, especially when the state interfered in the destiny of poor children. Many families have been separated by the interference of the law, the police, and abuses of authority in the interests of political or economic interests.

In the political clashes between conservatives and liberals, reciprocal accusations were recurring in newspapers directly linked to both parties. In one of these disputes, a judge of the Orphans' Court in Ipu, linked to the Liberal Party, exposed the excesses and schemes of his political opponents in that city. According to Judge José Liberato de Carvalho, Mr. Antônio de Melo Marinho was defaming him because he ordered him to return a little girl that he had rented through a contrato de soldada³ without, however,

³ The contratos de soldada they were legal mechanisms for renting the work of orphaned or destitute children, this practice happened throughout the 19th century. The Orphans' Court delivered the child to

having deposited the salary to the child. The girl was Maria Cândida's daughter and had been forced compulsorily to work as soon as she turned 7 years old. At the time, the mother, considered a harlot, was unable to stay with her daughter because of her indigence and her alleged moral inability to educate the child. Summing up the case, Carvalho (1884, p. 2) explained:

Maria Cândida was a harlot and today she is married, she complained that her daughter was mistreated and, since she was already married, she should raise her daughter. [...] That is how, realizing that this Antônio de Melo, who had the child in his service, turned his anger on me, which I think I didn't offend at all.

Candida was only able to recover her daughter four years after she was handed over to compulsory work, probably because the judge in the Orphans' Court wanted to target his political competitors. What stands out in this news item is the legal argument that the child could be returned to the mother, who went from being a “harlot” to a married woman. In this context, it's worth emphasizing that being a harlot didn't strictly mean the practice of prostitution. Any single mother was considered a harlot for committing dishonor, and this was widely used to extend the labor contracts of children and legally enjoy child labor in the 19th century (LIMA, 2019).

Insisting on a woman to marry as a testament to her honesty ended up stigmatizing single mothers and the plural types of families in the 19th century. Women who “lived” together, the concubinage, and those women separated from their husbands were marginalized not only by the force of Christian codes since the definitions of deviations were no longer exclusive to the Church and became legal mechanisms for criminalization and limitation of rights over the family in 19th-century legislation (PAPALI, 2009).

Despite all the oppressions and condemnations that single mothers suffered, many women were the head of their households, that is, they were responsible for supporting the household, revealing autonomy in the family groups that didn't match the bourgeois and Christian standards (RODARTE, 2012). Brief information extracted from the Arrolamento da População de Fortaleza - a nominal list of city residents drawn up

the care of an adult, who was to provide shelter and professional instruction, being obliged to deposit a salary in the child's name.

by the Police Chief in 1887 - offers clues about the toil of single mothers to care for their children, often without any assistance, other than from their supportive neighborhood.

In the Arrolamento of 1887, it's possible to find the address of Luiza Ferreira de Sá, Joana Cândida de Oliveira and Rosalina de França. These women had a lot in common: they were neighbors; they lived on Rua Formosa, next to each other; they were single and in their homes, there was no adult male. Luiza had a 3-year-old daughter and lived with Tereza da Conceição (60 years old), a family friend, and Tereza's daughter. Joana lived with her two children, a 13-year-old girl, and a 6-year-old boy, as well as Rosalina, who also had a 15-year-old son - who worked as a construction worker - and a 7-year-old girl. The three women were seamstresses (CEARÁ, 1887).

In general, the space of professional activity built by women in this period was strongly linked tied to the neighborhood these women lived in, which indicates that a lot of jobs were between relatives and friends, job offers, trade of goods, and orders made by neighbors. In the case of seamstresses, their clientele was likely made of people close to them, people with who they interacted daily. Of course, not all seamstresses worked at home, as the price of sewing machines wasn't insignificant. The hiring of seamstresses began to grow in the last decades of the 19th century, a time when fashion magazines and stores for trims and fabrics also multiplied. In this sense, job vacancies were filled by women and girls who belonged to the network of the interaction of modistas (owners of ateliers who made tailor-made clothes).

It's not possible to say whether Luiza, Joana, and Rosalina worked on their own or if they were employed in some atelier, but they demonstrate the female performance as heads of family, indicating that many women couldn't be defined by the imposition of domestic confinement and obedience to the husband. Even with the insistence of an education focused on modesty, the government didn't provide schooling and better living conditions for women. This reality, even though it underwent a subtle change in the first decades of the Republic - when the possibilities of formal employment for the female public increased in the country -, persisted in the inequalities in salaries between men and women or the interiorization of activities practiced by women, like the example of teaching in the initial grades, as observed by Oliveira and Martiniak (2018).

Poor women and single mothers built their experiences, revealing daily behaviors and traits very different from those advised by their contemporary press and insistently

reaffirmed in the spaces of female education, as demonstrated by Vasconcelos and Paiva (2018).

Faced with the unpredictable earnings, many poor women in the 1800s improvised, every day, the livelihood of their families, which is why it was so important to consolidate, expand and modify protection and information networks. Who bought, who offered, who could be of assistance, how and where to earn more were issues that permeated the conversations of the seamstresses. For Dias (1995), the circulation of knowledge about the city, about the rich and poor people, and the authorities was an essential tool for the survival of women, which involved the exchange of personal favors, patronage, concubinage, in addition to much furor and stubbornness. Precisely because it's a fundamental feature of these women's livelihoods, these knowledges and their ways of acting are so difficult to find. Therefore, reconstructing the performance of single mothers in 19th century society imposes an exercise in articulating unintended records about their lives, such as newspaper notes and census data. In the words of the author, "[...] a kaleidoscope of sparse little references [...] attests to their ostensible presence, but in a segmented way, only finding glimpses about their lives and insertion in the society of the time" (DIAS, 1995, p. 26).

3 Infanticide: denial or impossibility of motherhood

In the 19th century, infanticide and the denial of motherhood were widely reported in the press, a period in which, as we have seen, the idea of maternal love gained new representations. Direct associations were built between the woman who committed infanticide and evil, shown almost always in the Manichaeic perspective of Christianity. In 19th century periodicals, texts on female "atrocities", especially when dealing with women trying to escape the role of mother, were abundant and often used emphatic and severe language.

In 1865, in a space dedicated to literature in newspaper *A Constituição*, a text entitled "Woman or monster" was printed, which addressed the deviations (sins) of women who forgot or rejected their formal conditioning roles, that is, daughter, sister, wife, mother, and grandmother. Women who "[...] curse everyone and everything, even the most delicate chastities, even their own children", according to the text, these women

have “[...] printed on the forehead the stigma of the guilty”. On the subject of maternity, the journal reiterated:

In all animals in the Creation, a mother's heart is a sublime thing. [...] But we can point with our finger the women who forget that a mother's heart must be full of love [...]. These have more evil in their hearts than stars in the sky. They only have the form of a woman, inside they are harpies. For them, remorse, without shame, to whom Satan marked their forehead with the stigma of opprobrium, the execration of men, and the righteousness of the Creator. (*A Constituição*, July, 16th, 1865, p. 3).

The message of the previous text was part of a set of speeches that disregarded all social and sentimental scenarios, granting violent treatment and stigmatization of transgressive women, valued motherhood above all, and automatically condemned mothers who rejected their babies. Santos and Tfouni (2016), analyzing the mediatization of the practice of infanticide today, discussed the effects of these productions on the classification and repercussion of the “woman-mother-monster”. When problematizing the role of the media as a vehicle for the production of truth, using concepts formulated by Foucault, the authors indicated that the homogeneity of the definition of “mother” reproduces a logic of categorization of its opposite (monster), which cannot be relativized, since it serves to confirm the knowledge-power that sustains it as “normal”.

Even with new scientific parameters surrounding the physical, psychic, and cultural aspects of pregnancy and childbirth, historical continuities are evident linked to the denial of the plurality of female behaviors, used to exclude women as subjects of the motherhood. As a result, the infanticide practiced by mothers it's an uncomfortable truth to deconstruct due to the arguments that support the naturalization of maternal love.

In the 19th century press, infanticide appeared in the police sections as well as in the opinion articles, since this crime had a greater repulsion and moral affectation. How infanticide crimes were reported and represented had, in addition to the clear execration, a pedagogical function to inflict fear. In other words, it was intended to echo among women the fear of becoming a “monster” or a criminal.

At this point, it's important to understand the formative dimension of the press, especially dealing with the consolidation of practices, behaviors, and opinions reflected and/or arising from the religious and judicial fields. The reproduction of these images of “deformed” women and mothers had a great influence on discrimination in the lives of poor and disruptive women. Those ideas had an intense inference in the lives of wealthy

women, who needed to adhere to and reflect hegemonic ideals of characterization of the feminine. As pointed out by Barros (2007), the press and advertisement have a significant role in the definition of sexist models, articulating hierarchies, norms, and impositions about gender relations.

In the depiction of abortions and infanticides, it's worth noting an important aspect addressed by Pedro (2003) about the writing produced by men about the female body. In the position of dominance of the public space (press), male speech defined what was or should be the female body, justifying the women's social existence in its function of having children, a function that, treated as natural, couldn't escape the norm and morals. Thus, the women's body was always under suspicion; any changes could indicate her misfortune.

In the mid-1870s, the crimes of young Januária were exposed in one of the most widely circulated newspapers in Fortaleza. "Being pregnant and wanting to hide her dishonor from her parents", the 17-year-old girl left in the scrub of Alagadiço Novo her newborn baby, who, according to the investigations, died asphyxiated by the umbilical cord. For the crime of infanticide, Januária was arrested (*O Cearense*, 1874).

In the practice of infanticide, which is tied to preserving the female honor, there was a whole contentious trajectory that involved the mother's loneliness, the concealment of the pregnancy, the concern with the burden of social exclusion and her survival, the possible eviction from home, the helplessness or the family's violent reaction. But these aspects were little approached in the newspapers and underwent slow changes in the legal field.

In 1861, the conviction of sisters Ana and Quitéria shows the insignificance of women's defense and the little space for mitigating how infanticide was treated. Among the notes of the Police Chief, was the arrest of Antônio Luiz Pereira and his two daughters, Ana and Quitéria Pereira. Residents of Pacatuba, the three were sent to the prison in Fortaleza. Antônio was arrested for deflowering his daughter. One of them got pregnant - the note didn't say which one - and, after giving birth, the girls killed the baby and tried to hide the corpse (*O Cearense*, 1861). The violence committed by the father wasn't enough to free the sisters from the penalty of imprisonment. This suggests that, in the legal understanding, motherhood was above all circumstances. Also, the perception that women were inferior and that their value was reflected in chastity made rape be

linked with how women behaved as if they were guilty of being victims of that crime. Thus, the crime of defloration practiced by the father was observed from the dominant perspective of the man. Women and girls, although in a domestic environment, were seen as facilitators of the sexual drives of the offender.

Infanticide when treated as a crime, especially with the consolidation of forensic science, gained even more attention. The austerity in the condemnation of the infanticide mothers was involved in disputes and reverberations in the legal practices and the medical knowledge. As Ciochetto (2017) analyzed, forensic physicians had great importance in the judicial sphere, emphasizing the clinical dimension and establishing, based on their expertise, the idea of conclusive proof of “truth” in criminal investigations. In the Penal Code of 1890, the crime of infanticide could be punished with imprisonment for 6 to 24 years but introduced mitigating circumstances for mothers who, driven by the fear of showing their dishonor, killed their babies. However, the recognition of these mitigating factors was the result of the great recurrence of the infanticide practices throughout the 19th century, which caused exposure, pain, and mockery for many women. Faced with the almost absolute moral disapproval of infanticide, women expressed the impossibility of a single sexual pattern which resulted in subtle changes in the legislation. The crime was so recurrent that it had to be reconsidered or, at least, punished in other ways, although it never lost the effect of stigmatization.

Another case of infanticide reported in the Ceará newspapers drew attention for its repercussions and its outcome. At the back of the priest's house, the body of a newborn girl was found. The child was thrown by her mother in the Pajeú creek, whose waters took her to the priest's house. Maria Adelina da Silva was at the time the same age as Januária when she had been arrested 13 years earlier for the same act. Adelina was interrogated, confessed to having the baby in the backyard and throwing the corpse into the creek. Two days before the mother's arrest, the autopsy report was published in full in the Libertador newspaper, containing a detailed description of her body. The doctor Aphonso de Luna Freire seemed interested in explaining the cause of death and the proof of infanticide that were found:

[...] the lungs floated, so there was air in their vesicles; it could only be the atmospheric air introduced in the act of breathing [...] the absence of meconium in the abdominal wall constitutes very valuable evidence that there was life preceding the real death. The beginning stages of healing in the umbilical cord reveals an extrauterine life [...] Death was caused by asphyxiation by suffocation, hands or cloths brought to the nose and mouth [...] Death was caused by criminal means. (*Libertador*, May 3rd, 1887, p. 2).

The doctor concluded that the child lived 36 hours before being suffocated. Among Dr. Freire's observations is the recording of signs of nutrition. The report seemed to reconstruct the first hours of the relationship between the mother/monster/infanticide and the white girl found in the creek. The coroner's narrative with scientific content detailed how Adelina would have covered the baby's mouth and nose until she died. It shows the possibility of Adelina having breastfed her daughter as a way to prevent the child from crying and not being discovered. Such an act would prove the crime and ended up suggesting that the girl still had time to plan the child's death.

The attempt to remain anonymous was futile and “Maria Adelina was taken to jail, accompanied by a large crowd of onlookers” (*Libertador*, 3 May 1887, p. 2). News of the crime spread throughout the week in the newspaper. The girl was a member of José Antônio Moreira da Rocha household - colonel of the National Guard and a representative of the province -, where she had arrived in her early childhood - “the cute offspring of a slave woman”, as noted by the *Libertador* newspaper. Being very feverish and anemic, she had her prison revoked by the 1st Court and left jail after having confirmed the child's paternity, attributed to a young man named Raimundo, who had departed for Pará. Also according to the newspaper, a laundress would have helped her at the time of childbirth, getting rid of bloody clothes afterward (*Libertador*, 6 May 1887, p. 2). It's not known what happened to Maria Adelina after that. However, it's possible that the influence of José Antônio, an important local politician, guaranteed her freedom. Adelina received different treatment than many other young women who couldn't count on any defense.

Infanticide cases aren't ruled out as a way of maintaining employment and housing, as demonstrated by Atayde (2007). Some single women were already mothers and having more children would cause eviction from the house where they worked, considering the upkeep of another person and the change in the mother's work rhythm. Investigating criminal cases, the author pointed to an almost nullity in the defense

of these women. The sentencing of women was based on the real status of experts and judges, leaving little room for them to express themselves. However, as the author discussed, they learned how to manipulate values and behaviors assimilated from normative discourses and, when appropriate, used the pleas of fragility and abandonment in their favor, trying to establish extenuating circumstances (ATAYDE, 2007).

The fear of being considered dishonest and the lack of support in the face of a pregnancy before marriage marginalized women and their families, which could be the lead factor causing infanticide. But reducing the practice of infanticide to the fear of being considered a harlot is also sedimenting a stereotyped view of women as if they were always the victim of moral circumstances. As we have seen, women were (are) historical subjects in the shaping of the family image, raising their children despite the male dominance or deciding on the moment to be or not to be a mother.

4 Final considerations

Many women have been described as criminals, monsters, or soulless. Many others lived without any help from the State, working alone or alongside their children to ensure their existence. What can be noted is that, in the conduct of their lives, a big part of the poor single mothers starred in life stories repeatedly silenced and/or depreciated by public authorities, intellectuals, and religious figures. Much energy was spent on condemning women who didn't fit or couldn't accept the exclusive rule of chastity and maternity conditioned by marriage. However, throughout the 19th century, there were few actions to assist poor women, marginalized in the remodeling of urban spaces and stigmatized in hegemonic discourses on honesty, education, and work.

Infanticide was treated as deviation and sin even before the legal constitution of infanticide as a crime, which incorporated, in the legal practices and forms of condemnation, the punishment of women without understanding their existence, and it took a long time to recognize mitigating factors. The female honor was linked to the role of wife and the discursive effects of the construction of ideal motherhood generated almost automatic condemnations of single mothers and women who committed infanticide - these women were exposed whenever that crime was discovered, linked to evil, moved by the demons and seem as more susceptible to the devil for being women.

These narratives don't belong exclusively to the past. When there is a mobilization of the press, representatives of the government and society in general to try to prevent the abortion of a child who was raped, as it happened in August 2020, it means that we don't discuss enough motherhood, the right to the body and the social status of women nowadays. In different opinions on this case, there was talk of setbacks, of going back to the past where such conservative arguments justified latent violence. These aren't setbacks; they are demonstrations of historical continuities, indicating the need to instrumentalize our analysis of gender dominance.

In these pages, the intention was to contribute to the debate on symbolic and structural violence built around motherhood and the denial of different behavioral practices in the face of a crystallized idea of families and mothers. It was noticed that there are historical situations in the definition of maternal love and childcare attributed to women, who denied, dealt with, and evidenced the plurality of meanings and feelings about their bodies, their honor, and their children. In the composition of family groups in the 1800s, poor single mothers appeared who tried to free from the control of the State their children, women who ran their homes with a lot of work, ingrained in networks of solidarity and daily insubordinations. In the pursuit of feminine deviations, infanticidal women were noted in the transgression of feminine nature, as defined by the male dominance. In the fragments of trajectories collected in this study, women's struggles and pains were evidenced in the construction of their own history.

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