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Family, Households and Women's Empowerment through the Generations in Bahia, Brazil

Continuities or Change?

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Those who visit Plataforma today may not realize that, in the past, it was a *vila operária* (a workers' village), on the outskirts of the city of Salvador, Bahia, and home to Fábrica São Braz (a large factory). Nowadays, visitors are likely to arrive by bus or by car, taking the access road from Avenida Suburbana, which leads into the square where the Church of São Braz is located. Standing on the church steps, at the top of the hill, one has a view of the ocean peeking behind mango and banana trees that edge the alleyways going down to the Bay of All Saints. No spot on the square offers the slightest hint of the contours of the large buildings that once housed Fábrica São Braz. At the foot of the hill on the waterfront, the remains of the factory are now hidden away from the eyes of visitors. And in the absence of the well-known signs of factory activity – the tall chimneys puffing smoke up into the sky, the loud whistles sounding in the early morning calling people to work or sending them home in the afternoon – nothing here offers any clue to the visitor that Plataforma was once home to one of the largest textile mills in Bahia.

Until the late 1950s, first impressions of Plataforma were very different. Not only was the factory still in operation, but there was no Avenida Suburbana cutting across north-western Salvador, allowing cars and buses to manoeuvre their way into the Subúrbio Ferroviário area where Plataforma is located. Access to the neighbourhood was by train or by boat, and either way the incoming visitors disembarked at the gates of the old

factory. When I began my research in Plataforma, a newspaper article suggested the possibility of getting there by train, and I was thus able to see the community from a totally different angle. Dominating almost its entire front view, from side to side, rose Fábrica São Braz, its dirty yellowish façade framed by immense palm trees hovering along the waterfront. Everything else – the church, the school, the roofs on the rows of little houses encrusted in the hillside – crept behind the old factory, as if they were merely outgrowths on the upward slope of its backyard.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was often in and out of Plataforma conducting the research that formed the basis of my doctoral dissertation (Sardenberg 1997a). That research dealt with issues regarding gender, class, and power in Bahia that arose, in particular, from the testimonies of former factory workers, both women and men, and their memories of work in the factory, their families and everyday life in the neighbourhood in the past. Aware that the great majority of the labour force in the factory was represented by women, one of my major interests in that study was to learn more about gender, work and family-household organization, including women's participation in decision making. Plataforma and other similar *vilas operárias* were not simply places for people to find employment, but also settings in which 'men and women fell in love, married, reared their children, and retired in old age' (Hall *et al*. 1987: 114). Moreover, for those living or seeking factory-owned housing in such settings, a family labour system usually applied. Housing would be available so long as tenant families provided labour hands to the mill. But who and how many in these families should actually work in the mills to comply with these stipulations, or who would share in the fruits of their labour, taking care of the other needs of the household, was an arrangement that has varied considerably. It has depended not only on the whims and vagaries of global economies and how they reflect on local labour markets, but also on the composition of the households in question and on the needs, capabilities and preferences of their members (Parr 1990).

Bourgeois family morality sustains the basic principles of the patriarchal family model, with the husband/father as head of the household, assuming the role of the provider, while wife and children remain dependent and subordinate, sharing the fruits of his labour. Decision-making power and authority within the family household are invested in the patriarchal hierarchical structure. Men should have authority over women, elders over younger; husbands should have authority over their wives, fathers over daughters, brothers over sisters (Borges 1992: 47).

At Fábrica São Braz, these principles were observed in so far as the chain of command and the payment of lower wages to women and youngsters were concerned (Sardenberg 1997a). However, by relying primarily on the employment of women and youngsters, policies at Fábrica São Braz contradicted and undermined patriarchal authority in the domestic sphere. Because more women were likely to work at the mill than men, most company houses in Plataforma were rented out to women. Likewise, it was usually women who provided basic food staples acquired at the company store. In these households women assumed *de facto* positions as heads, particularly as men were more likely to have irregular incomes. Yet, while employment at the factory guaranteed more regular income for women, wages were never high enough to meet household needs. Children also had to seek employment. To borrow Karl Woortmann's words (1984: 35), workers' families then became 'true working families'. This contributed to the weakening of conjugal ties and to the formation of matrilocal extended households where women played a central role. Nevertheless, in Plataforma, the 'traditional' gender divide with its ensuing distinct roles for men and women – though often transgressed and/or redefined – was the basic principle in the organization of the family households, as well as for the socialization of children in the community (Sardenberg 1997a).

My original work in Plataforma focused on the testimonies of the older generations – the people who worked in the factory – and only on a small sample of families. Would these forms of

family and household organization be true for younger families as well? During 2004 and 2005, I had the opportunity to coordinate another study in the same neighbourhood, based on a survey of 259 families that, unlike my previous study, were headed by men and women of different age brackets (Sardenberg and Gonçalves 2005). Between 2007 and 2009, I coordinated a third project in the neighbourhood, in which 353 women of different generations were interviewed (Sardenberg *et al*. 2008). Many of these women were members of the same family households surveyed in the 2004–5 study, and some of them had also been part of my original research in Plataforma.

Although these three studies had distinct objectives, timelines and data bases, it is worth drawing some comparisons, particularly in so far as change and continuities in family-household organization and gender relations through the generations are concerned. This chapter seeks to do so, focusing in particular on identifying processes of women's empowerment – that is to say, the processes by which women gain autonomy and make important decisions concerning the course of their lives and those of their families (Kabeer 1999).

Family-household organization and female trans-generational solidarity

The records of the Fábrica São Braz reveal a predominant presence of women in the workplace. In 1945, women represented 85 per cent of all workers, rising to 91.2 per cent working on the production lines. The female contingent of workers in the factory was quite homogeneous: 84.5 per cent were black, 49.7 under 25, 82.8 resided in Plataforma, and 40.3 per cent were born in that neighbourhood (Sardenberg 1997b: 22–3). Successive generations of women – mothers and daughters – worked at Fábrica São Braz, sometimes side by side.

Interviewing former factory workers, women and men alike, it came to my attention that close to 80 per cent lived

in houses inherited from their mothers – some even from their grandmothers – who had taken possession of these homes at a time when only families working at the factory could inhabit them. It became evident that, in addition to homes, some women also inherited the position of head of household. When I met them in the 1990s, more than half were responsible for households that brought together two or more generations of mothers and daughters, whose partners and sexual mates passed through their lives, and who bonded to bring mutual help and support in raising their children and grandchildren.

In Plataforma, this type of household seems to have a long history among the families of the former factory workers interviewed, the ownership of the houses and responsibility for the families passing from mothers to daughters even when husbands and partners were integrated into the domestic groups involved. More important, from the information I was able to obtain from the testimonies, these groups could be characterized as *matrifocal extended families* of more than two generations, constituting what we may identify as informal *matrilineages*.

Given the importance of women's work in the factory and for the households in question, it would be fair to say that female-headed households, whether matrifocal or not, or with or without the presence of husbands and male partners, probably found significant expression throughout the history of the factory in the neighbourhood. As Katia Mattoso (1988) and other historians (Borges 1992; Santos 1993; Ferreira Filho 1994) focusing on Salvador have shown, female-headed households were already common in the poor parishes of the city back in the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries. In the case of Plataforma, these households were often formed by the desertion of mates, and expanded by children of their daughters' children, who remained at home and sometimes had their partners coming to live with them – thus becoming part of a female-headed extended household.

Several factors seem to have been at play in the formation of these households. The basic one was the financial inability of

men to set up households of their own. Rental facilities were not easy. The company had ceased to build new housing for workers and the existing ones were usually occupied. Land was available for the building of houses, but this was a project to be accomplished over a period of many years, sometimes over a lifetime, and difficult for young couples to start. It was easier to build an extension – a room for instance – to an existing house, even a company house. This course of action also figured as a strategy for abiding by company rental policies. Moreover, these households had previously depended on the pooling of financial contributions of all able members – sons and daughters – and could not afford to do without them. This was increasingly so as the mothers aged and their productivity slowed, gradually drawing lower earnings. At the same time, daughters now had children of their own. If they were to continue working at the factory – as nearly all women like them did – and guarantee the company house and the wages to maintain it, they would need the help of their mothers in caring for house and children, establishing a trans-generational cycle of mutual help between mothers and daughters. While daughters often assumed their mothers' tasks so that these mothers could work at the factory, now it was the mothers who would fill in for the daughters. This mutual dependence of mothers and daughters contributed to the formation of matrilocal – and matrifocal – extended households.

While all these arrangements tended to the needs of the households and individuals involved, they were not immune to conflicts on gender and generational lines as related roles became muddled. The roles of *pai de familia* (husband, breadwinner, decision maker) and of *dona de casa* (housewife, home maker) figure as complementary roles, realized through the nuclear family household. In a situation of matrilocal extended households, however, there would be more than one individual to fulfil each of these roles, and thus a cause for dispute and conflicts. In Plataforma, mothers remained as heads of their households and the central figures of authority in their families. This strained relations between the conjugal pairs living under their authority

and affected household administration. Their daughters' mates could not fulfil the role of *pai de familia* expected of them, especially as their unstable jobs and meagre earnings did not enable them to become the sole providers. This contributed to the weakening of conjugal ties and the greater dependence of women on their female kin group.

Plataforma in the twenty-first century: women and families

As noted, my study in the early 1990s focused on former factory workers, and thus on the older population of Plataforma. Most of the homes I visited then were female-headed extended households. However, it was a very small sample on which to make generalizations regarding contemporary family life in Plataforma, and it centred primarily on workers' memories of family life, when the factory was still in operation. It was over a decade later that the opportunity arose to conduct a larger survey in the same neighbourhood (Sardenberg and Gonçalves 2005), with members of 259 dwellings. This permitted the identification of some trends regarding household composition and organization in Plataforma. All the dwellings surveyed consisted of private units. Only three of them included more than one family living within the same premises. All of them were 'family households'; they had kinship ties as their major organizing principle. However, households varied considerably in terms of their internal organization, from single-dweller households to those comprising three generations or collateral extended families.

Three-generation extended families were still very common in the neighbourhood, constituting 27.4 per cent of the households surveyed. Not surprisingly, we found some very large households in our sample. One of them, headed by a 69-year-old retired woman, was composed of 14 people, including her husband, eight children and three grandchildren. At the time, the household head's eldest son (39 years old) was unemployed, as were three of the couple's daughters, all of them forced to live with the parents because of financial need.

Although such large households were exceptions – households in our sample averaged only four to five people – close relatives, adult daughters and their families often lived in the same building, or in an extension. This is a common arrangement in poor neighbourhoods in Salvador; as children grow up and begin their own families, the houses 'grow' either up, with new floors being added, or 'out', that is, by extending the house into the backyard. The new additions eventually become independent dwellings. As a popular saying affirms, 'Those who marry want a home away from home' – even if, due to economic constraints, 'away' means just a different floor of the house (Sardenberg 1998). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the 'nuclear family household', composed of a heterosexual couple and their children, the traditional ideal model of the family in Brazil, corresponded to less than a quarter (24.3 per cent) of the households visited.

Our 2004–5 survey confirmed some socio-demographic trends that have been observed for Brazil as a whole among the working classes: (1) a significant proportion of female-headed households and their greater vulnerability; (2) the tendency for female household heads to live without partners, and to be older and have fewer years of formal education than their male counterparts; (3) the sizeable percentages of these women who are retired or receiving pensions; and (4) the equally considerable proportion of these women who have to support unemployed adult children and their spouses as well as grandchildren, out of their meagre retirement and pension benefits. Within the past three decades, the marked increase in the percentage of households headed by women represents one of the major changes that have been observed in census data as well as in official household surveys (PNAD) in Brazil. For instance, whereas in 1992 these households represented only 19.3 per cent of the total, by 2002 this percentage had risen to 25.5, an increase in the order of 32.1 per cent. This increase was much more pronounced in urban areas, and particularly marked in metropolitan areas in the north-east and north regions, where the proportion of women-headed households was 35.1 per cent

and 35.2 per cent, respectively. Among the metropolitan regions surveyed, the RMS – Metropolitan Region of Salvador – showed the highest proportions: 32.9 per cent (IBGE 2002). Similar studies have shown that even though increases are to be found in all strata of the urban population, these proportions tend to be even higher among the poor population (DIEESE 2004). Our 2004 survey of Plataforma confirmed this trend. Women-headed households represented 44 per cent of the sample, a figure much higher than the national average of 25.5 per cent (IBGE 2002), even for Salvador (32.9 per cent).

Our survey included a set of questions about such arrangements as division of labour, distribution of financial responsibilities, and decision-making authority within the family households – who decides about children's education, where to live, who should work within the group, how should the earnings of household members be spent? The results obtained indicated that, whereas financial responsibilities and decision making were commonly shared almost equally by women and men, even in those households that had a 'male head', domestic tasks – including caring for children, those ill, and the aged – were still treated as women's responsibility. These trends remain. However, women are now complaining about this unfair situation.

Women's empowerment?

During 2007–9 we conducted a new study in Plataforma as part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (RPC). This study aimed to identify and analyse changes in women's lives over the past three generations, and how these changes relate to processes of women's empowerment, looking at educational opportunities, paid employment, political participation, family relations, and exercise of sexuality, as well as how changes in each of these aspects of women's lives may bring changes to the others. We went back to our sample of households surveyed in the 2004–5 study, but instead of taking households as our basic unit of analysis, we interviewed only the women,

working with a sample of 353 women of all ages, ranging from 15 to over 90 years old.

Of these women, 25.8 per cent were identified as household heads without a partner, 36 per cent as spouses, 30 per cent as mothers or daughters, 6.7 per cent as other relatives, and 1.4 per cent as non-kin-related members. Among those identified as 'spouses or partners', nearly 66 per cent affirmed that in their homes they and their husbands/partners shared the position of being heads. These findings gain greater relevance when we consider that, until 2003, it was still stipulated in the Civil Code (sanctioned in 1916) that the husband/father was the head of the household.[1] The new Civil Code, sanctioned in 2003, establishes the possibility of shared household leadership. Were the women interviewed simply responding to the change in legislation, or is the Code merely catching up with a change of values and attitudes regarding women's roles in the family?

Our survey also included sets of questions regarding distribution of financial responsibility and authority within the households. Our findings indicated that the women interviewed are not only sharing decision making within their households, particularly with husbands/partners, but also seem to exercise a high degree of 'autonomy' regarding the course of their own lives. Although 15.3 per cent affirmed that they faced resistance on the part of family members (48 per cent of them from husbands and partners) when they decided to find work outside of the home, they did it anyway. In addition, 70 per cent stated that their economic contribution to their families is highly regarded, and 58.9 per cent believe that this contribution has made a difference in the way other household members regard them. Moreover, over half of the respondents (50.4 per cent) believe that their financial responsibilities to their families have earned them respect within their communities.

A significant proportion – 54.4 per cent – of the respondents stated categorically that they have 'total control' over their lives, while 34.4 per cent affirmed that they had 'considerable control'. For the majority (59.5 per cent) of the interviewed women,

marriage is no longer a 'safe port', 98.3 per cent affirming that it is very important for women to have economic independence. Yet, while nearly 60 per cent believe that work does not affect a marital relationship or may have a positive effect on it, an equally high proportion (60.1 per cent) are ambivalent in so far as relationships between 'working mothers' and their children are concerned, thus expressing traditional beliefs regarding work and motherhood.

This is consistent with the finding that 96.6 per cent of respondents affirmed they were responsible for performing domestic tasks in their homes, including caring for the children. Although an equally high proportion stated that they share the responsibilities for these tasks with members of their families, the overwhelming majority (90.4 per cent) of them do so with other women, with mothers and daughters in particular. As in the case of the former factory workers, so too the women interviewed more recently are closely bonded to mothers and daughters for mutual help and support in accomplishing chores, caring for children and the elderly, and finding assistance in moments of need.

Three generations of women and their pathways to empowerment

Although it is possible to find a significant correlation between age and values in that the younger generations tend to express more 'progressive' values and attitudes regarding women's empowerment, this is not necessarily always the case. 'Dona' Nora constitutes such an example.[2] At 63 and now retired, she is still very vocal about women's rights and has sought a college education for her daughter and the means for her 14-year-old granddaughter to continue a successful career in international karate competitions.

A native of Plataforma, daughter of a canoe boatsman (*canoeiro)* and a laundry woman (*lavadeira),* she was raised in a family that included factory workers. She started work young, helping her mother with the voluminous weekly wash. She earned pocket

money carrying lunch meals to factory workers from their homes, some of them leaving her leftovers in the pots. 'We were very poor,' she states, and 'sometimes I went to bed on an empty stomach'. Dona Nora went to live with her older sister who worked at the factory to care for her children. This allowed her to witness her sister falling victim to constant acts of domestic violence at the hands of her brother-in-law, a situation that, she claims, made her never want to be married herself. And she never was. But she loved children, she says, and eventually adopted as her own daughter her brother's little girl – now a grown woman with a daughter of her own – with whom Dona Nora lives.

Although she barely completed elementary school, Dona Nora took over a pre-school formerly founded by one of her elder sisters, staying as head of this school for nearly 40 years. She says that in spite of the fact that she could barely make ends meet (and could not even buy a house for herself with her meagre earnings), she is proud to have been able to give her daughter a college education, and thus the means for her daughter's empowerment. Nevertheless, unlike her adopted mother, Lara, the 36-year-old daughter, married young and lived in an abusive relationship. When her own daughter 'Dora' was seven, she finally decided to walk out. By then, she had finished college with her mother's support, earned more than her husband, and could not find any reason to remain by his side. She left, carrying only her clothes and her daughter's, and went back to live at her mother's home. At present, she supports her mother, ever since Dona Nora was forced to close the school. Dona Nora and her daughter Lara are both now directing all their energies towards finding sponsors for Dora. 'She is going places,' affirms Dona Nora, 'she will be an Olympic champion.'

Change or continuity?

In considering changes in women's lives in Plataforma over three generations, it must be stressed that what we found here was not unique to this area – not at present, nor in the past. Despite

the absence of systematic studies of working-class families in Bahia during the first half of the twentieth century, there is much to indicate that home life among the populace departed in many important ways from the model of the family upheld by the local elites. Contrary to the general principles of this model, for instance, 'illegitimate' births resulting from consensual unions predominated among the working classes of Salvador. Consensual unions were the rule, not the exception among the working classes (Borges 1992). The precariousness of men's jobs made it difficult for them to establish their own households and/or to assume the role of sole providers. Women's contribution to the domestic budget thus became fundamental, granting them greater economic independence, which laid the basis for a more symmetrical relationship (Chalhoub 1986: 137–44). Studies of working-class families in Rio, for instance, have shown that women there also contested the authority of the husband/father (Besse 1989), often counting on the support of other women in their families in staging their insubordination (Chalhoub 1986: 150). And, as in Plataforma, this situation was more common in those instances in which the young couples were forced by economic need to live with relatives. As Claudia Fonseca observed, 'the nuclear units were diluted in these consanguineous groups where strong, long-lasting loyalties contrasted sharply with the precariousness of conjugal ties' (1989: 105, my translation).

Families thus tended to be organized primarily around a mother and her children. 'The mother was the centre of this family, though the father might visit, or even live with them in the household' (Borges 1992: 48).[3] Matricentrality and matrilocal residence were mutually reinforcing, giving rise to matrifocal families and granting women greater relative autonomy and independence than women of the elites. The relatively high frequency at which they seemed to occur among the urban working classes all over Brazil has engendered speculations concerning the socio-cultural dimensions of the observed patterns. Even if, on the one hand, they can be seen as adaptations to socio-economic conditions (or as 'strategies for survival'), the regularity with which they seemed

to occur suggests, on the other hand, that some principles for organization were in play. Dain Borges (1992: 48), for example, suggested that these arrangements constituted a distinct model of the family that 'had a long tradition in Brazil' – one that has been especially strongly associated with the Afro-Brazilian population (Landes 1947). But he is not clear as to what kind of 'model' it would be: a simply statistical model or a normative model – that is, a recognized, conscientiously upheld set of principles for family-household organization?

Claudia Fonseca reflects: 'Where [one finds] certain practices which are regular, renewable, and frequently pre-visited by the members of a group, there is [always] a logic guiding these practices and granting them specific meanings' (1989: 96, my translation). That being the case, she continues, one would be dealing with a 'reasonably coherent symbolic universe, resulting from experiences accumulated through (different) generations' (1989: 97, my translation).

One could say, then, that among the urban working classes, an alternative model of family-household organization was at play. Yet this model needed not be 'normative' but instead a *modus operandi* – or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977: 72) – of urban working-class families in Brazil. In this case, this 'alternative model' would not imply a rejection on the part of the working classes of family ideals (and the ensuing gender roles) espoused by the elites. As Maria Clementina P. Cunha suggests: 'It is more likely … that the same claustrophobic role of the bourgeois woman operated as a parameter of aspiration and of vindication for the popular classes, earmarking a horizon of rights to be conquered' (1989: 144, my translation).

Indeed, evidence to that effect is to be found in the discourse and struggles of organized labour. From the late nineteenth century onwards, for instance, labour unions in Brazil and other spokesmen for the working classes – whether actually espousing these ideals or instead putting them to work in their service – have consistently fought for a family wage, thus claiming the right to constitute stable, conjugal families organized around

the gender divide instilled by the bourgeois model. Of course, the thesis that the 'alternative' model of the family put to work among the working classes in Brazil represented in the past a conscious rejection of bourgeois ideals is certainly enticing to socialist feminists (such as myself). Nevertheless, as Eunice Durham poignantly indicates, all available studies and records suggest that, to the frustration of Brazilian radical intellectuals, workers in Brazil have been not only 'extremely attached to the family', but also

> express a generalized preference for a sexual division of labour on traditional modes, that is, that which subordinates women to men and tends to restrict female activities to the domestic sphere. At the same time, they also tend to appreciate the traditional virtues of respect and obedience of children towards their parents. (Durham 1980: 201–2, my translation)

From the perspective of women workers, the non-fulfilment of bourgeois gender role ideals has often been translated into the burden of a double day. For these women, in particular, the constitution of matrifocal families, without a stable male provider, has represented 'a result of poverty, an overload of misery, the impossibility to achieve a minimally decent life instead of a sign of better and freer forms of relations between the sexes' (Durham 1980: 203, my translation).

This seems to have been the case of the women of Plataforma in the past. Among the factory workers I interviewed back in the 1990s, even those women who were raised in and constituted their own matrilocal extended households and assumed the role of heads as major providers, enjoying a certain independence, were still betrayed in their discourse, which revealed unfulfilled aspirations for the realization of those ideals. They were not unaware of the contradictions between these ideals and their own life experiences. Indeed, when women asked, 'Why do I need a man that can't even bring me a bag of flour?' they were justifying the 'alternative' paths their lives have taken, precisely in terms of the gender roles intrinsic to bourgeois family ideals.

This does not seem necessarily to be the case of women we have interviewed in our last survey. Women in our sample have chosen to end abusive relationships, and some not to marry at all. In the case of Dona Nora and her daughter (and granddaughter), for example, the formation of their female-headed household appears to be the result of gender resistance and rebellion. Professional, middle-class women in Salvador are exercising agency, both in ending unsatisfying relationships and in constituting female-headed (and matrifocal) families (Macêdo 2008), as well as in choosing to remain single and live alone (Tavares 2008). Our study in Plataforma suggests that similar trends may also be making their mark among working-class women.

However, in the case of Plataforma as well as in other poor neighbourhoods of Salvador, processes of women's empowerment regarding family relations are being slowed, if not entirely diverted, by the growth of evangelical churches. Over the past decade, much has changed in relation to religion. The 2000 Population Census showed Brazil as primarily a Catholic country – 73.8 per cent of the Brazilian population. Yet it is considerably less Catholic than it used to be. Along with Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian religions have lost much ground to Evangelical Christian churches, which – particularly among the poorer and dispossessed – have gathered a faithful flock especially among women (Prandi 2003; Bohn 2004). In the survey conducted in Plataforma in 2004, we found that 36.9 per cent of women heads of household, as opposed to 26.1 per cent of male heads, were Evangelical Christians. Among the women interviewed more recently, the figure had risen to close to 40 per cent. These religions tend to preach fundamentalist values and be much more conservative than the others, especially in so far as gender relations are concerned: most of them advocate women's obedience to their husbands and a traditional division of labour.

Final considerations

Taking into consideration the findings from the different studies

discussed here, it is possible to see some patterns continuing over time regarding women's empowerment in the sphere of gender relations within the family. The most obvious, of course, is the relevance of women's economic independence to their participation in decision making within the home, as well as in terms of autonomy. That is to say, both in the past as well as in the present, economic independence, particularly from partners, seems to have contributed significantly towards women gaining the *power to* assert control over their own lives, including in ending relationships that fall short of fulfilling the established ideals. To this end, female solidarity, particularly from women kin, has also played a special role: it has propitiated the growth of the exercise of *power with* to bring about the desired changes in one's lives, as witnessed in the case of Dona Nora's support to her daughter and granddaughter. However, despite their relevance, neither economic independence nor female solidarity alone seem to have led automatically to conscious 'gender rebellion' and a break with traditional roles in the family. I contend that this only becomes possible when new values and attitudes in favour of alternative models gain greater expression. Indeed, as indicated in the responses of the women we interviewed more recently, a new discourse – a feminist discourse – about women's roles and women's rights seems to be finding expression among working-class women in Brazil. This, we may say, is contributing to the growth of self-esteem and self-confidence – of the *power within* – among these women as well, of which Dora's Olympic aspirations are a good example. But only time will tell if this new discourse will stand its ground against the rise of religious fundamentalism in the form of Evangelical Christianity in the neighbourhood.

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Notes

1 This clause was maintained, even though the 'Statute of the Married Woman' passed in 1962 granted married women greater autonomy.
2 In order to preserve the privacy of everyone interviewed in the course of this research, their names and other identifying characteristics have been changed.
3 This was illustrated in a report prepared by a famous local paediatrician for the governor of the State of Bahia in 1924. The report indicated that among 3,091 youngsters registered with the agencies assisting poor children run by the Bureau of Child Hygiene of the City of Salvador, 54.28 per cent were illegitimate. In addition, 31.28 per cent had fathers who were either absent or unemployed, while the overwhelming majority – 94.17 per cent – had working mothers (Ferreira Filho 1994: 23–34).

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