

Mothers, protection and care amongst communities affected by torture and state violence in Brazil

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Abstract: This article examines the ways in which protection from torture and violence is understood and practiced by women in poor urban communities in Brazil. It demonstrates that despite a well-developed normative and institutional framework for the protection of survivors of torture and violence, such protection work grows from the notion of motherhood, which can be understood as an outlet for challenging various overlapping orders (race, class and gender) that legitimise torture and violence. Motherhood garners legitimacy in the fight for justice, for the truth and for restoring the positive memories related to the tortured, killed or imprisoned children and it generates moral and political capital that enable political participation for women. The article demonstrates that despite a well-developed institutional and normative framework for protection, everyday protection strategies respond to the perceptions and needs of survivors and their communities and can only be understood in the context of racial and gendered roles and performances of motherhood shaped by the historical enslavement of the Afro-Brazilian population.

Keywords: Torture prevention, Brazil, protection, gender, race, class, social movements.

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Introduction

Brazilian history is marked by high levels of state violence, including torture. This violence is rooted in colonial forms of slavery, it has continued during imperial (1822–1894) and early republican (1894–1945) rule into the military dictatorships of the second half of the twentieth century and the later period of democratisation (1984–), most recently under the authoritarian populism of President Bolsonaro. At the same time, the Federative Republic of Brazil and to various degrees the different member states have highly developed anti-torture frameworks, driven forward by active human rights communities at state and federal levels with a complex network of governmental and non-governmental organisations responsible for preventing torture and protecting survivors and witnesses under different jurisdictions.

However, the normative frameworks (at both state and federal level) and the organisations and institutions tasked with implementing these, are all too often ineffective in preventing state violence against the poor and marginalised given that the formal mechanisms of justice are not only inaccessible and slow but often also hostile. Responding (through documentation, protection or litigation) to the overlapping and endemic forms of violence faced by marginalised communities in their daily lives is therefore a complex undertaking. This article, which focuses on the protection of torture survivors and their communities among the urban poor, will explore the complexities and challenges in this work.

The human rights protection needs of survivors from poor and marginalised communities are complex and originate on many fronts. Recent literature on ‘human’ and ‘everyday’ security has improved our understanding of such concerns, showing how security issues are embedded in contested cultural and political contexts (Crawford & Hutchinson 2016; Goldstein 2016; Loader & Walker 2007). The multi-dimensional and contradictory scope of protection needs and practices must therefore be considered. This article examines the ways in which protection from torture and violence is understood and practiced by communities directly affected. Rather than starting with formal definitions and categories, it examines the sources of fear for people living in marginalised urban communities and describes how they respond. Such knowledge is crucial in enabling human rights actors to support and enable effective protection strategies that respond to the everyday needs of survivors and their communities and which at the same time are sustainable in political, social and financial terms.

A range of social movements, networks and actors have attempted to close the protection ‘gap’ and respond to the complex needs of victims and survivors living in poor urban communities. This article examines one type of group that operates in this gap, namely ‘mother activists’. These women participate in both formal and informal groups and organisations and are based in communities in the urban periphery affected by highly racialised and gendered forms of both police and gang violence.

By taking to the streets to protest, engaging with legal mechanisms, and providing advice and support, such ‘mother activists’ seek to provide some measure of protection for their off-spring, often young men who have been targeted by the police. In so doing, they move between the formal structures of the state, histories of racialised and gendered violence, and their own kinship relationships. These activists are simultaneously survivors, witnesses and human rights defenders. Their activities contribute to the general protection of their communities from police and gang violence but are initiated by issues and concerns related specifically to the protection of their own offspring from state violence.

The key argument in this article is that the protection work of groups of mother activists is rooted in gendered notions of care that go beyond formal legal rights and instead mobilise idioms of distress, obligation and sacrifice. Such protection is not only aimed at physical bodies, but also the reputation and memory of their children. This is a form of care that emerges out of intimate relations already marked by violence and compassion, exclusion and obligation (Jensen & Rodgers 2021). As such, these activities place a particular burden on already marginalised people, whilst simultaneously creating new possibilities for opposition to violence. Activist-Motherhood therefore represents an alternative model of protection from human rights mechanisms—one that works in complementarity and tension with this—but one that like formal human rights protection mechanisms offers no simple solutions.

The article is organised as follows. The first section outlines the methodology of the study. The second section examines the genealogy of current racialised and gendered violence in Brazil and the problems encountered when attempting to prevent torture and protect survivors and witnesses. The third section focuses on the specificity of motherhood as the grounds for political action. The subsequent two sections examine practices rooted in mourning, memory and claims of innocence. Finally, the conclusion shows that motherhood is a tool for facing oppression of varying degrees, particularly in an attempt to garner legitimacy to fight for justice, memory and truth in the cases of their own children.

Methods

The research presented in this article entailed two phases. Phase one consisted of surveying state and non-state institutions and organisations (n=25) in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to identify and describe current protection practices among state and non-state actors. Based on the survey, we identified the participation of victims’ mothers as crucial for actually existing protection at community level. Phase two of the research involved, first systematically reviewing existing studies in Brazil regarding the actions of mothers of victims of state violence. Subsequently, through contacts with NGOs

and snowball sampling, we identified subjects for additional interviews. Finally, since interlocutors who do not participate in the movements were difficult to access, we mobilised personal networks to reach them, unfortunately a relatively simple task, given the prevalence of violence in Brazil.

A total of ten interviews were conducted, five with people from Rio de Janeiro and five with interviewees from São Paulo. Amongst them, two people said they were not involved with social movements, four were leaders of groups of mothers, and the remainder participated in political actions, without, however, taking a position of status. The interviewees have an average age between 40 and 50 years. Five of them have completed higher education, the others have completed at least elementary school. Some work in the area of health, others in the area of education. It is also interesting to point out that some interviewees mentioned that they attended college after the violence suffered by their children, as they felt the need to better know the laws and public policies.

The research also aimed at understanding more thoroughly the trajectory of existing studies on the subject. Interviews were therefore conducted with five researchers who had dedicated part of their professional careers to understanding the political participation of mothers.

The conversations, both with mothers and researchers, were based on scripts of semi-structured interviews (one aimed at each type of actor) and were conducted through digital means, via the Google Meet platform. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, methodological procedures were adopted that avoided personal contact with our interlocutors. However, distance did not prevent people from sharing their experiences (Jesus *et al.* 2021). When a subject, especially this was the case for the mothers, engaged in painful memory work which overwhelmed the interviewee emotionally as well as physically, the interviewers broke out of the interview until the subject had recovered and was comfortable to continue with the dialogue or abort it.

Based on a rapid appraisal of the interviews six domains of meaning were identified that guided the analysis. These were: 1. Meanings of motherhood, 2. 'From mourning to struggle'—from individual suffering to collective struggle, 3. Moral cleansing speeches, 4. Reports of illness, 5. Reasons for mothers' non-engagement in social movements, and 6. Nuances between narratives. However, in this analysis, we focus on the first three categories, leaving the remainder for subsequent publications.

Torture, violence and inequality in Brazil

At a formal level, Brazil has strong anti-torture laws. The 1988 Constitution, in Article 5 III, expressly emphasises that 'no one will be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment'. In addition, in 1989, the country ratified the Inter-American

Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture (1985), and in 1991, ratified the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984) (Rosenn 2011: 1048). In the 1997 Federal Law 9,455, torture was specifically criminalised, with torture defined as:

embarrassing someone with the use of violence or serious threat, causing them physical or mental suffering in order to a) obtain information, a statement or confession from the victim or third parties; b) to provoke criminal action or omission; c) due to racial or religious discrimination (Brazil, 1997).

It is important to note that unlike in international law, torture in Brazilian Federal Law is a common crime; that is, anyone can be accused of this crime. For this reason, more than 90 per cent of convictions in torture cases target parents, mothers, caregivers, stepfathers and stepmothers, while state agents, such as police or correctional officers (Jesus 2010; Calderoni *et al.* 2015; Salla *et al.* 2016) are convicted only on rare occasions.

In formal and normative terms, Brazil is often considered an exemplary case in relation to protection against and prevention of torture. However, realities in marginal spaces of Brazilian society differ radically. The violence used to police communities that have descended from enslaved or indigenous people may best be understood as what we may call ‘stigmatising torture’. That is, when an act of torture committed against torturable bodies goes unpunished. This impunity legitimises not only the torture itself, but also the rightfulness and superior moral and social value of the torturer. Class, race and gender distinctions are policed through the right to torture with impunity, thus recreating a patriarchal, racist and class-based society through each act of torture and state violence. This conundrum is reflected in many of the strategies pursued by community-based organisations in their work on protection against torture and care for survivors and it provides an initial answer to why advocacy, care and protection are often closely linked in the work of Brazilian organisations.

Any effort to analyse the violence perpetrated by the state in Brazil requires reflecting on dimensions of power related to aspects of gender, class and race. In 2020, 98.4 per cent of the victims of police interventions resulting in death was male, 78.9 per cent were black and among these, most inhabited marginal spaces (Bueno *et al.* 2021). Those usually denouncing violent state practices are mothers who are also black, poor and peripheral (Leite 2004, 2013; Farias *et al.* 2020).

Since we understand torture as one of several instruments for managing economically and socially vulnerable and marginal groups,¹ composed of poor, black people

¹ Other instruments include continued official support to contestation of occupancy and ‘tenure rights of residents’ in marginal urban zones, ‘delivery of public services’ based on support for specific municipal authorities, militarised police ‘transit control’, beneficiary status in ‘cash-transfer programs’ linked to compliance with health, schooling and other forms of ‘human resource investment policies’.

and those living in urban and rural margins, torture is not a practice located in a delineated time (interrogation during pre-trial periods) and place (lockups and detention centres). Instead, it is distributed across different spatio-temporal contexts where it affects select social groups and actors (Jesus 2010; Gomes 2017; Prison Pastoral 2016). For this reason alone, the work of assisting torture victims in Brazil, by implication, becomes an extremely challenging task. Rather than focusing on an individual victimised in police custody during pre-trial detention, civil society and government organisations must focus on heterogeneous contexts, unclear circumstances and ambiguous actors. This practice is reflected in the ways in which practitioners working in Rio de Janeiro's and São Paulo's civil society talk about torture. As one interlocutor stated:

In short, one often tends to think that torture is a crime committed in a specific situation because of the evil nature of a person who wants to punish another one. But no, torture is something very diffuse, and it is something systematic; it is within the structures of the prison space, it is within all the social structures in a certain way. (Interviewee 9—civil society)

Such a pragmatic critique of legal doctrine and popular notions of what torture is builds on observations and experiences shared by the interlocutors, stressing that many poor urban neighbourhoods are sites of quotidian police brutality and even lethality that could be understood and classified as torture. In Rio de Janeiro, the military and civil police operations guided by the metaphor of the 'war on drugs' (Leite 2012) epitomises this. In São Paulo informants from civil society highlight the persecutions of suspects of theft and trafficking carried out by military police in the peripheries of the capital, as well as recurring cases of home invasion without judicial authorisation, involving physical and psychological violence and abusive police tactics. The pragmatic critique of our interlocutors draws direct lines of connection between such militarised and lethal police tactics, the mass incarceration of poor men and the racial structure of Brazilian society, and to the extent that it explains what people that move within and between these different spaces are exposed to, we subscribe to this pragmatic critique.

It would therefore not be an exaggeration to claim that in communities systematically subjected to the above-described circumstances, violence becomes a kind of life condition, with life trajectories shaped by a permanent 'fear of being afraid' (Araújo 2019). That is, groups of socially and economically vulnerable individuals tend to live with instability and the expectation that, at any moment, a shootout or violent police intervention may disrupt their lives, rob them of their savings and potentially lead to death.

In addition, the narratives collected seem to extend our interlocutor's pragmatic critique of 'the rotten apple theory' suggesting that 'the crime of omission to provide' also encompass structural relationships, and just as 'omission to provide' is specified during specific *situations* of violence, the 'crime of omission to provide' could and

should be extended to the realm of social structure and its mechanisms of reproduction. This omission includes non-implementation of basic public policies in marginal territories, whereby such omissions ultimately not only perpetuate, but with a high degree of probability, also increase inequalities. The presence of criminal organisations, such as those related to drug trafficking and militias, would be one effect of this practice of omission, since they take the place of state institutions providing different types of assistance to residents (food, medicine, leisure, etc.) (Ramalho 2008; Dias 2011; Cano & Duarte 2012; Manso 2020; Feltran 2018; Misse 2007; Barbosa 2005; Biondi 2010).

In support of this pragmatic critique our interlocutors from São Paulo highlighted the state-like practices of the First Command of the Capital (PCC), which dominate a large part of São Paulo's drug market (Dias 2011; Feltran 2018; Biondi 2010). Their punitive practices, the so-called 'PCC courts', have substantially reduced homicide rates in São Paulo by developing their own means of resolving violent but non-lethal conflicts by practicing punitive torture, thus making examples of those considered violators of the codes of conduct for preventing crime, at the same time as they fill the void left by the rule-of-law and the presence of the Brazilian state.

The most impoverished population therefore sees itself as 'under siege' (Machado da Silva 2008). While subject to arbitrariness by state agents, it is under the control of criminal groups who enforce rules that are unpredictable and applied differentially depending on the characteristics of the persons involved in a situation. As a result, torture is an everyday event.

Despite the strong formal legal architecture promising the prohibition of torture, access to formal legal protection is all too often unavailable to the poor and marginalised. The legal system is largely unwilling or unable to provide justice and security. The slow processing of criminal cases against state-perpetrators of torture is widely identified as a major obstacle in the fight against torture. However, many organs of the justice system also avoid recognising victims as such, assuming instead that victims are responsible for the violence they have suffered. This assumption is so widespread that convincing victims' relatives to seek justice is sometimes a challenge. Even the victims have difficulty seeing themselves as such. Many do not even recognise the violations as torture when the violation does not 'leave [physical] marks', and 'it is also very common for victims to naturalise treatments (...) that do not leave marks' (Interviewee 2).

Victims also fear reporting violations, as they fear reprisals and 'being in the hands of a state that has violated them'. Civil society actors assist in providing information to victims, especially those working in marginal spaces. However, human rights defenders are widely persecuted, threatened and incriminated by the state as a way to neutralise them. As one interviewee said, 'these defenders also end up becoming victims of political violence'.

In response to the problem of protection of persons who report incidents of torture, a government programme known as PROVITA (Federal Program for Assistance to Victims and Witnesses under Threat) collaborates with civil society organisations to provide protection and support at arm's length of the federal state. However, when protection is provided through the programme, the lives of beneficiaries is radically altered, creating major resistance to inclusion, as victims-beneficiaries are afraid to sever bonds of affection and mutual obligations, including those with work and school. Entry criteria are also prohibitive, the programme focuses on providing protection only for witnesses engaged in judicial processes. In addition PROVITA has experienced a series of budgetary and personnel problems for some years.

Conversely, civil organisations are reluctant to guarantee formal protection for victims and witnesses, arguing this is a state obligation. Some interlocutors stressed that civil society organisations are not created to carry out actions—such as protection—which are attributes of the state. ‘We always take great care that ... we do not want to take the place of the state’ (Interviewee 11). The task of non-governmental groups, according to our interlocutors, is therefore to encourage the state to welcome, investigate and seek accountability from public actors involved in violations, as well as ensuring state protection for victims. However, and despite this political and philosophical position regarding the respective roles of state and civil society, activists in formal and informal ways do provide some measure of protection in the cases of ineffective legal protection and state omission. One way in which this takes place is through the ‘mother activists’ which we will focus on in the remainder of this article.

Motherhood: an outlet for oppression and protection?

Organisations comprising the mothers of victims have been a significant feature in activism against state violence in Brazil, as they have elsewhere in Latin America (Maier 2010). Particularly common in the urban periphery of Brazil, this category includes groups such as ‘Mothers of Manguinhos’, ‘Mothers of Acari’, ‘Mothers of Candelária’, ‘Mothers of May’, and ‘Mothers in Mourning from the East [of the city]’.

The historical context of violence perpetrated against women, black women in particular, has influenced the growth of such groups and how they have responded. As black communities were subjected to particularly intense forms of violence, black women were and are the subjects of triple discrimination, generated by sexualised, racialised and class-based forms of violence (Gonzalez 2020). To offset the vulnerabilities associated with such predicaments, black women historically emulated the conduct

of white women and acquired status by association, that is, by joining white households as workers (*ibid*). However, under certain circumstances, black women have managed to garner an alternative social and economic status by mobilising images of themselves that are understood as positive, usually those portraying resignation and religiosity, who's most captivating characteristics are self-effacement and sacrifice for those they love. As [hooks \(2020\)](#) argued in the case of the United States, black women attempt to shift the focus from the derogatory representations surrounding them by emphasising their commitment to motherhood. They strive to prove their worth and dignity by demonstrating that their lives are strongly linked to family ties, caring for relatives, in particular their children, with incredible selflessness. In other words, black women reinforce and recirculate images related to their socialising role, with the intention of abandoning the position of purely racialised subalternation. We do not want to argue that this is the only form of motherhood available, or that our account contradicts other forms of Brazilian motherhood in the margins ([Jesus 1962](#); [Scheper-Hughes 1992](#)), what we address in this article is how motherhood is used by relatives in the protection of victims, dead or alive, from torture and lethal state violence.

This article presents the argument that representations associated with motherhood and family care shapes a position, whence moral and emotional content for political performances that denounce state violence emerge. This form of politics has been identified in numerous contexts, from the public resistance of mothers in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires to more subtle forms of everyday resistance by Guatemalan mothers and widows documented by Linda Green and Judith Zur ([Green 1999](#); [Zur 1998](#)).

However, before presenting the argument, we must map the spaces in which such representations of motherhood are produced and circulated, including the wider institutional and organisational environment. The following section will therefore discuss how motherhood is socially signified in different contexts of individual performance, and how notions of motherhood transcend female care, ultimately designating both action and the resignification of experiences, e.g. experiences of pain.

In Brazil, as elsewhere, motherhood has historically been linked to the 'greater good of society', associated with the idea of a suffering mother, the mother who cries, who sacrifices herself, who forgives everything, and who loves her children above all else and who must do everything to protect them ([Araújo 2007](#); [Freitas 2002](#); [Santiago 2019](#)). Interestingly, in all the interviews conducted for this research, mothers appear to be considered from a biological perspective, as if motherhood is not the product of a social construction that holds women accountable for care but is determined by nature ([Quintela 2017](#)). In addition, motherhood is considered to be divine, as described below:

Look, being a mother is a very divine thing, you know? It's protection, it's love, it's affection, it's complicity. (...) Being a mother is that it's protection, it's being divine. It's protecting your son. (Interviewee F)

In this sense, while indicating personal ‘fulfilment’ linked to motherhood, women also alluded to the extreme poverty related to this role, especially when a ‘loss’ occurs. The excerpt below expresses the kind of ambivalence that, although superficially expressing ‘extremes’, in reality, describes an ambiguity of identity that can represent a simultaneous combination of many aspects, such as pain and achievement, sadness and happiness.

Being a mother is an achievement, because when you’re a teenager, you dream about being a mother. I was a mother too much, I’m a mother of 10. I have to thank God for the opportunity he gave me to be a mother, it’s very good, you understand? We give birth, to give another life, a life from within us. It’s very good, very good. A great happiness, only unfortunately, I did not want to have this loss. (Interviewee A)

Mum’s everything, isn’t she? Mothers back you up in everything, carry you in their womb, seek to educate, seek to direct and hope that such a situation could never happen, that my son would go off to school, and what happened next would happen. (Interviewee D)

These representations index a moral-religious cosmology based on a Christian symbolic construction (Leite 2004). The idea of motherhood founded on ‘maternal love’ is reproduced as something extraordinary and sacred. Similarly, essentialised motherhood institutes the female body as a maternal body that speaks for its child and feels the child’s pain (Santiago 2019).

This mother thing is very strong. It’s a very strong life bond. We’re Mums, we have that feeling of pain for our kids. One glance, take a glance. You see the one that hurts your son. It’s something like that that stirs mums a lot. It’s the life connection. (Interviewee B)

The mother rises in the morning praying for her son or daughter. She lives 24 hours for her children, she organises herself with what she earns to make sure the family survives, the mother is willing to introduce rules into her home. She always tries to keep a smile on her lips so that the home is happy. Being the mother, she passes things, feelings on to her son or daughter, so that this son or daughter takes something from the mother. (Interviewee B)

The mother category therefore has an ontological weight that entitles the owner to make claims and demand answers (Freitas 2002; Santiago 2019). And her figure includes an ‘empathy’ that no one else can foster (Efrem 2017). The activation of the condition of mother reaffirms a ‘moral authority’ (Vianna e Farias 2011), and motherhood is the element that makes women as subjects visible, forming new meanings and allowing their inclusion in the public world (Freitas 2002). According to the interviewees, mothers are taught to be strong and omnipotent. Precisely these characteristics place women in the position of authority to demand for their children their rights, including the dignified treatment by the state.

We were taught to show our children that we are strong, omnipotent. So, when I’m sad, when I see danger approaching, when the police put a rifle to my son’s head, it’s not for him that I’ll cry, because I have to show him that I’m strong, I’m there, I have to protect him. (Interviewee H)

However, it is necessary to consider that the issue of motherhood intersects other variables, especially in a context such as Brazil. The above account would not be given by any ‘mother’, especially if we think of non-black, middle-class women. In this sense, there is a specificity in the motherhood of black women in societies marked by racism. Unlike non-black mothers, women living and raising their children in marginal urban space perform protection and resistance daily, since their children’s lives are constantly at risk (Leite 2018; Leite & Marinho 2020; Vianna & Farias 2011; Quintela 2017; Rocha 2020) and as our interlocutor above puts it: ‘to show him that I’m strong’.

My family is black, north-eastern, [[my son was the]] grandson of a north-easterner, I’m the daughter of north easterners, I’m the daughter of the North-east. Prejudice. Sometimes I feel as if they choose the family they’re going to destroy. That’s how it feels sometimes, you know. (Interviewee B)

Some women then engage in practices to demand a better future for their children and for the children of other mothers. The motherly position indicates that ‘motherhood remains a symbol of hope for many of the black and poor women’ (Collins 2020: 198).

I am informed by black feminist thinking and its considerations about the experience of motherhood from a subaltern social position. I also assume that, for many women, especially non-white and/or poor women, motherhood not only awakens the moral issue of caregiving, but also very strongly the moral issue of justice. This presents the possibility that both configure their political engagement. These are the mothers who live in a reality where fighting for the survival of their children is an urgent requirement. And they do so politically, claiming rights, justice and democracy. (Quintela 2017: 8)

In other words, resorting to the category ‘mother’ and reinforcing elements of gender related to motherhood is an important strategy in the everyday protective practices as well as in the fight for justice and rights for poor urban Brazilians. The relationship between motherhood and a sense of ‘female power’ occupies a central position in these actions of resistance, especially for black women (Quintela 2017). In poor families, female authority is linked to the valorisation of the condition of mothers because society in general appreciates when low-status groups perform this role (Sarti 1996).

Mothers’ struggles become legitimate and make a difference because the mother will speak to the soul and the maternal feeling, whether of biological sons or daughters or not. What drives all this is love. Mum may not speak well, but she knows what she’s talking about. Because you feel the strong connection of life with the son or daughter. (Interviewee B)

Therefore, many women, when experiencing a situation of state violence, say they turn ‘mourning into struggle’, in a process whereby experiences of pain, suffering and fear are resignified and recontextualised, thus leaving narratives of loss and entering narratives of hope and resistance.

‘From mourning to struggle’: from individual suffering to collective struggle

The expression ‘the mourning struggle’ was used repeatedly by our interlocutors, especially those participating in social movements. Likewise, the term is mentioned in research literature (Araujo 2007; Farias *et al.* 2020; Leite 2004; Vianna 2011). It refers to a process of resignifying pain and suffering, which was previously confined to the private sphere but has gradually spread to public spaces. This transformation starts with the engagement of women: some more, others less. However, the fact that their losses are verbalised and exposed constitutes a significant political configuration, which impacts not only on their personal but collective lives.

The major marker for these women is the loss of children to violence. They strive to know exactly the ‘how’, ‘why’, ‘where’ and ‘who’, among so many other questions that haunt them and motivate them to visit public agencies they previously did not even know existed. In this pilgrimage, they usually come to know human rights groups and social movements that welcome, accompany and motivate them to transform the pain of mourning into strength for the struggle. Some continue in these spaces, others do not. After the death of her son at the hands of the police, interviewee A never stopped seeking justice. When she encountered other mothers experiencing the same suffering, she understood that together they could be stronger. It was not only the mutual acknowledgement of pain that united them, but also their similar stories, their shared places of residence and community life, where precariousness and adversity are part of personal routines. The struggles converge and women begin to seek justice not only for their own dead children, but for those of other mothers like them. In fact, some women leave the secluded spaces of home or workplace to advocate publicly for justice for their children (or their memories).

In general, this involvement of new mothers in social movements occurs on the initiative of older militants who initiate the contact. During this initial contact, mothers who are more experienced in political practices instruct the new arrival about the legal procedures associated with investigating the death of a child and invite her to support the fight (Quintela 2017: 169). Nevertheless, some interviewees told us that participating in movements meant ‘awakening an awareness’ of reality:

And then, I begin my trajectory in militancy and only after I start to join the social movement and know other movements, do I come to understand that everything that happens inside the favela is a process of genocide of black youth, which has been occurring for many years. Because, until then, you think that ... as the sensationalist media usually put it: they are all specific cases, it was a coincidence, it was a stray bullet. Today, even the understanding of the supposed stray bullet has changed. Today, a stray bullet only strays when it ends in the asphalt. In the favela, a bullet is found every day. To gain the knowledge I have today, I had to participate in social movements, and unfortunately it had to happen to my son so that I could understand this practice of the state against black youth. (Interviewee H)

Among our interlocutors, mothers participating in the movements all reflected on this transformation, through reshaped perceptions and knowledge of everyday life and social history they acquire what they themselves refer to as ‘awareness’. As these mothers through their activism question the reality in which they live, they also provide a continuous care for their child, showing that these children have someone who looks after them and will not abandon them. The child is still protected, even in death. Militancy is then conceived as a continuation of maternal functions (Lacerda 2014; Quintela 2017). Caring also means fighting for and protecting the memory of the child, for a dignified burial, for a fairer society (Freitas 2001: 67).

Some mothers begin to play a strong role in movement activities. They acquire skills for engaging in dialogue with various audiences as well as for using resources and implementing performance strategies. They elaborate narratives that bring out not only the account of the loss of their children, but also the way in which the state is directly responsible for the violence perpetrated against this segment of the population. In fact, repertoires follow ‘relatively regular scripts, more or less explicitly passed from older to more recent participants’ (Vianna & Farias 2011: 87). Efrem (2017) called this performance ‘collective weeping of loss’ (Efrem 2017: 41).

Mothers and families of victims who are not linked to any movement do not necessarily stop fighting or seeking justice. Being in activist spaces enables individual experiences to be explored in more detail, shared and linked with common experiences, which transforms them into a struggle. However, alternate places of resignification of pain and suffering also exist, notably religious spaces such as catholic and evangelical churches, and *terreiros* (Afro-Brazilian religious space). Religious spaces enable some women to share and survive. Others seek support in their studies, investing in training, as was the case for interviewees B, G and H. In fact, these places are not exclusive, but intersect, connect and together produce meaningful experiences.

Moral cleansing speeches

One initiative of mothers, regardless of whether they are associated with movements or not, is to address the texts and reports produced by the press, police and institutions in the criminal justice system, such as the Public Prosecutor’s Office. These actors overwhelmingly frame the children of these women as ‘criminals’ who resisted apprehension by state agents and therefore died during confrontations, in which the state agents’ use of force were proportional and legitimate.

And one of the barriers that we face the most is that, in addition to them (state agencies) executing young people in their houses, they still tarnish that person’s image and reputation. Because, in the mainstream media, the person is portrayed as marginal, as an addict, as an offender. (Interviewee E)

My son was portrayed as a bandit (...) to this day there are many unanswered questions. (...) With the last jury that I had, I thought, right, now my son will be recognised as innocent but that's not what happened. The prosecution came in and it was as if my son, who was a victim, was passed off like he was a bandit. (Interviewee D)

Another interviewee said that her son was killed twice: first the state agencies killed his flesh and then they killed his reputation. Several studies have analysed this 'moral cleansing' (Leite 2004, 2013), which refers to mothers gathering documents that prove the righteousness of their children.² Such disputes involve refuting accounts and narratives circulated by state agencies and the press to establish that the victim was innocent and recognised as such (Efrem 2017).

My son was leaving for work at 5:00 a.m. and was shot. For the state, any young black man who leaves in the morning, early for any trade, is ... if he is a young slum man, identified as a target (...) He used to talk to me like this: Mum, I got arrested for a crime I didn't commit. I was shot for a crime I didn't commit. I see people coming in and out of prisons and I'm still here. (Interviewee H)

In addition to presenting 'moral proof' that their children were not 'bandits', mothers also feel compelled to demonstrate that they fulfilled their role as mothers and were loved for this. This is mainly because they are usually socially portrayed as 'mothers of traffickers', 'mothers of criminals', and they need, to the same extent, to fight to be recognised as mothers in search of justice. Therefore, showing photos in which their children appear smiling and happy has the purpose of showing that they were good people, that they were cared for and that they cared for their families (Rocha 2020). As highlighted by Vianna:

The 'mother's pain' is thus mixed with the production of a moral career, even more valuable because it is permeated by all the sacrifices made to 'create right' children in the midst of multiple material difficulties and the absence of quality public equipment (Vianna 2014: 229).

The mother's effort to prove that her son was the victim of extermination can also be mobilised during court proceedings.

Among mothers who recognised their child's involvement in the 'world of crime' (Ramalho 2008), a different narrative is formed, but not totally out of touch with women who reinforce the 'purity' of their family members. Words such as 'unfortunately' appear along with the explanation that the son was related to illegal dynamics.

Because my son, unfortunately, was a young author of infractions. Regardless of what he did, he paid for his mistake. He had left the prison 15 days earlier. (...) It's just that there are many cases like this, that he was killed by the police. Unfortunately, my son had passed through the system. The fact that he had passed through the system does not make him a bandit. He was not a bandit. (Interviewee A)

² Mothers 'produce' the so-called 'moral tests' of their children, presenting work cards that shows their sons were employed, their school reports to show that they were studying, teachers' statements, and reports from neighbours and colleagues (Leite 2013).

In other words, she recognises that her child had some involvement with illicit transactions. However, there is always the option of a gradation in the narratives of mothers describing individuals who can ultimately be categorised as ‘bandits’ and those who may even have passed through the justice system, but should not, effectively, be considered criminals. According to our interviewees, the mothers of the ‘non-bandits’ are the ones who must fight, as if the ‘innocence’ of the child were the passport to search for justice and reparation, in addition to ensuring the legitimacy of suffering.

For me it’s like this, if my son isn’t shooting back, he’s been killed unfairly. I must be in the fight, regardless of who he is or ceases to be. He was not exchanging shots; he had already surrendered. Cases of sons surrendering and being shot at close range happen frequently, you understand? So, these mothers must join in the fight, yes, for their sons. (Interviewee A)

One mother criticised the above position, indicating that all mothers, despite the behaviour of their children, should feel empowered to denounce the state for its actions. However, she acknowledged that many mothers blame themselves, as if it were their personal obligation to teach their child to be a ‘good citizen’ and thus keep him oblivious to the world of crime (Ramalho 2008). This structure of emotions is reinforced by the actors of the justice system and by the general public, who tend not only to criminalise and discriminate against the child, but also the mother and other close family members. Each act of torture that goes unpunished validates the moral righteousness of the stigma that was inflicted on the torture victim and, by implication, on the victim’s family and kin.

I’ve heard up to several mean comments that I didn’t know how to address. That we only hear at the station when they go to jail.

‘You didn’t know how to educate; (...) and you’ve got to catch up really. Understand?’

And sometimes, we even listen. One time when we were distributing flyers at the prison door, someone said to the mother that her child was there because he deserved it. That notion was put into her head. You see how the system is very perverse? You put it into her head that her son had to be there and that he had to catch up, be quiet and it’s over. (...) The family itself excludes the son from everything. If there’s a party, you’re invited, but your son isn’t. So, it’s pretty hard, and then you also have your neighbours making some comments too. It’s very sad that we talk and have this hypocritical society, because I’m a part of it too, and people forget that. So, it’s very painful for us as mothers, as I’ve heard:

‘Now you will spend what you have and what you don’t have getting the little bandit out of jail.’ So that’s very painful for a mother. (Interviewee F)

It is important to recognise, however, that not all mothers of victims become publicly involved in social movements. The reasons for mothers’ non-engagement in social movements may be diverse, but this is not examined extensively in the literature. Few studies seek to understand why some mothers do not participate in the struggles taking place in public spaces. Likewise, is not possible to say that they do not mobilise their efforts for their children just because they are not part of political groups.

Militancy can even be individual, in the sense of following on behind ‘alone’, without being engaged in collectives.

Still, becoming publicly active can come at a high cost. According to [Santiago \(2019\)](#), the engagement of these mothers takes place in settings in which they are responsible for supporting their families. They therefore cannot actively participate in acts, events, manifestations, etc. As [Lacerda \(2012\)](#) describes the cost of engagement by mothers and family members in militancy imposes difficulties. Our interlocutors emphasised that involvement with social movements is time consuming. As many women need to work to support their families, they cannot spare a moment for engaging in initiatives. ‘Often, single mothers who have to work, who are breadwinners every day, do not have this availability’. (Interviewee F)

Other questions influence the lack of collective engagement of mothers, such as discouragement at not obtaining effective answers about the case in the criminal justice system, discrimination suffered due to state action and, furthermore, reprisals.

Many of these mothers can’t cope with joining in the fight because we’re mistreated. The audience is always a bureaucracy, everything is engineered for us to give up. The hearing is too heavy ... So, a lot of mums can’t cope with engaging in this fight. (Interviewee A)

One [reason] is to believe, because you’ve already lost hope and you are trying to work it out and you can’t achieve it. Another [reason] is that this issue creates a feeling of suffering too and evokes a feeling of impotence. (Interviewee F)

Regarding the movement, we are still working, because many mothers do not want to join in the fight. They are not interested in knowing how the case is progressing, and do not want to be scarred. (Interviewee I)

One interlocutor indicated that the husbands of some women do not allow them to engage in social movements. They want their wives to dedicate themselves to the home or want to avoid systematically bringing to the fore feelings arising from political participation. Therefore, considering the many difficulties related to engaging with collectives, additional research should address why mothers remain involved in these activities and spaces, though, at first glance, they may not appear to ‘compensate’ individually for political participation.

Another aspect of interest is that mothers recognise the legitimacy of some motivations for women’s non-involvement in social movements. However, a kind of ‘moral judgement’ exists concerning those who do not ‘take the microphone’. There is an idea that these mothers are, in fact, ‘mothers of thugs’, and that is why they do not mourn their dead and could not legitimately seek justice ([Vianna & Farias 2011](#)). According to [Freitas \(2001\)](#) there is also a notion that some mothers do not develop a ‘maternal feeling’ that would urge them to campaign for the rights of their children. These factors result in marked differences in maternal initiatives, a theme of this article.

Conclusions

The composite case of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo which we have explored in this article, was built around a set of attributes which these two Brazilian states share. They both have well-developed normative frameworks and quite elaborate governmental infrastructures both at federal and state levels for the implementation of the Convention Against Torture and its Optional Protocol. Yet, at the same time both states have high levels of torture and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment of poor mostly Afro-Brazilian urban populations not only in custodial but also extra-custodial settings in an everyday life moulded by violence. Phrased differently, there is a high demand for protection, there is a fairly well-developed governmental supply of protection, yet the case reveals that the social sphere not the state is the starting point for providing protection to survivors of torture and state violence and their families. In this sense our case is paradigmatic because it enables us to question the assumption that the development of community-based or networked protection is an answer to the **absence** of state protection. This seems not to be the situation in the case of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

In the interviews upon which this article is based, motherhood shapes an outlet for challenging various overlapping orders (race, class and gender). Its first order effect is that it garners legitimacy in the fight for justice, for the truth, and for restoring the positive memories related to the children in question. By associating with the maternal identity, greater social acceptance for women with this profile is generated and consequently a public sphere of (human rights) action opens. Female selflessness towards a mother's family, especially her son, translates into powerful moral and political capital. Instead of being black and poor, motherhood constitutes a poignant, but strong, identity. The secondary order effects generated by this moral and political capital are multiple. The social movements run by mothers offer as a first step **emotional protection** to women who have lost their children. They encourage these mothers to join the fight to **end impunity**, members accompany each other on pilgrimages to **document cases** and generate press coverage seeking to hold the authors accountable in the eyes of the courts and the public. In addition, these social movements work to **prevent torture and extra-judicial killings**, by deploying the term **genocide** as the strategic descriptor of the violations they suffer in everyday life largely due to **crimes of omission**. This way motherhood creates both the form and the content of the agendas for participation in human rights work, as case workers, or as audiences and organisers of events. Motherhood offers a repertoire of political avenues for women to explore, one key question which must be addressed by the human rights movement is how to best support such work.

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