

25th Anniversary Issue on Mothering and Motherhood

Spring / Fall 2025

Vol. 15



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The University as a Place for Mothers: Reflections from the Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project in Brazil¹

The Mothering, Media and Childhood Extension Project explores the cultural meanings and social representations of motherhood in the media. Our work abides by the Brazilian higher education extension guidelines (i.e., inseparability of teaching, research, and extension; dialogical interactions; interdisciplinarity, interprofessional collaboration; student training; and social transformation) and falls within motherhood, childhood, and media studies. We aim to broaden the public discussion on mothering, media, and childhood from an interdisciplinary perspective. We seek to raise social awareness of the challenges mothers face in universities to encourage the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE) administration to develop policies to support academic mothers. Since 2021, we have produced five seasons of radio programs and podcasts for the Paulo Freire Radio Station at the UFPE, audiovisual material for social media, and published book chapters and papers in conference proceedings and academic journals. In December 2022, we met with mothers who were students, employees, and professors at UFPE. The insights raised in this meeting informed the development of an exhibition titled “The University as a Place for Mothers,” which was launched on March 8, 2023, at UFPE. The exhibition shed light on the challenges mothers face in our university. In 2023, we also organized five mother circles and discussed the need for new policy development concerning mothers’ demands in collaboration with the rector’s office and the governance committee in 2024. In 2025, we will participate in the UFPE Parenting Policy Working Group.

Introduction

This article presents the lessons learned from the Mothering, Media and Childhood Extension Project (known as @mmi.ufpe) held between 2021 and 2024. We start with the theoretical and methodological framework of the project: the three missions of higher education institutions in Brazil (i.e., teaching, research, and extension), the guidelines for extension in Brazilian universities, and how we have linked them to knowledge sharing and expansion in the fields of motherhood, media, and childhood studies. Next, we report our experience of the project, outlining how we have approached the academic community and management body and engaged in the debate on the difficulties and challenges faced by mothers at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE).

The Guidelines of Extension Activities in the Brazilian Higher Education Sector

The Brazilian higher education sector includes public and private institutions, such as universities, federal institutes, university centres, and colleges. There are over three hundred public higher education institutions (HEIs) divided into federal, state, and municipal institutions. The government is responsible for operating and maintaining public institutions, which provide free access to higher education. Federal, state, and municipal universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in several areas. Given their pivotal role in research, science, and innovation, the major federal agencies—CAPES (the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) and CNPq (the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development)—help fund public universities (Higher Education in Brazil, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

University extension is the third mission of Brazilian universities, as established by the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, which formally recognizes the inseparability of research, teaching, and extension as the three pillars for HEIs nationally. As stated in the Constitution: “Universities shall have didactic, scientific, administrative, financial and property management autonomy and shall comply with the principle of inseparability of teaching, research and extension activities” (The Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil, art. 207, ch. III, sec. I)

In the Brazilian context, academic extension activities contribute to a critical interpretation of the world, as they recognize sociocultural diversity, upend traditional teaching methods, expand research fields, and promote collective and community values training for participants (de Deus 624–33). Extension activities bridge teaching practices and knowledge sharing with different social groups beyond the university. Consequently, the teaching–research–

extension triad enables a shared space for mutual listening and learning, expanding knowledge exchange and dialogue between society and the public universities.

The work of @mmi.ufpe follows the guidelines for extension in higher education established by the Brazilian Ministry of Education in 2018: dialogical interaction, interdisciplinarity and interprofessionalism, inseparability between teaching, research and extension, student training impact, and social transformation impact. In this sense, Sandra de Deus points out that extension activities deal with sociocultural and ethnic-racial diversity and promote the formation of collegiate citizenship among students, professors, and staff and community members who participate in the everyday transformation of the university and society. She also emphasizes that the knowledge created through extension activities is based not only on daily experiences but also on the ability to narrate extension experiences involving objective and subjective aspects and the active participation of students, scholars, and listeners (631).

In this regard, our project has Rádio Paulo Freire as a partner, whose history began with initial experiences of extension, proposed by the Brazilian philosopher and pedagogue Paulo Freire, a professor at our university in the early 1960s. Freire became an important educator internationally. His groundbreaking work publications have been translated into more than forty languages, indicating the global impact of his ideas (Gadotti and Torres 1255–56).

Rádio Paulo Freire’s Mission Is Based on Freirean Philosophy

Rádio Universitária AM 820 was established in 1962 under Paulo Freire, who was director of the Cultural Extension Service at the University of Recife (the former name of UFPE) (Lima et al. 65–66). It was a pioneering extension experiment and participated in Freire’s educational project, *Cultura Popular e Alfabetização* (*Popular Culture and Literacy*). The project aimed to empower vulnerable social groups through literacy and educational initiatives. Freire’s early extension activities in Recife inspired concepts in Freirean pedagogy, which formed the theoretical foundation of the Brazilian university extension guidelines. Due to the 1964 military coup in Brazil, Freire was arrested and exiled to Chile (Gadotti and Torres 1255–1267).

In 2018, the radio station was renamed “Rádio Paulo Freire,” thus aligning its mission with Freirean philosophy. The radio station is now part of the UFPE University Television and Radio Hub and is managed by faculty members from the Department of Social Communication. The objectives are to provide more inclusive and transformative public broadcasting services and stimulate public debate on topics often silenced by mainstream media, such as

respect for human rights and gender and racial diversity, among other relevant issues. The radio school operates as a research, innovation, and experimentation laboratory, producing innovative programs and fostering interdisciplinary learning while connecting students, scholars, and society through media production and extension projects.

As Freire's philosophy emphasizes dialogue and the active participation of students and the community in the learning process, the radio station team produces programs of public interest, fostering democracy, and diversity of voices. The radio school serves as a training platform for students and encourages their autonomy, following Freirean pedagogy based on freedom, autonomy, and critical thinking (Lima et al). Furthermore, it promotes popular culture to create collective knowledge, also expressed in its slogan 'the radio station we create together' (66, translated by the authors).

The Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project's Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The @mmi.ufpe project's theoretical basis encompasses motherhood, media, and childhood studies. As defined by Andrea O'Reilly, motherhood studies is interdisciplinary and interprofessional. Its scope is broad and involves a variety of disciplines, including communication, social sciences, humanities, gender studies, feminism, and women's studies. Three main themes predominate in this field: the critical discussion of public policies, laws, ideologies, and images that sustain maternal oppression by reinforcing patriarchal values; the study of daily experiences associated with mothering and motherwork; and the repercussions that becoming a mother has on women's identities, subjectivities, self-esteem, and self-image (O'Reilly, "Twenty-First" 1-3).

This article reports our journey and highlights our current concerns. It is important to mention the collective character of our trajectory, which involves conversations with many individuals and groups, both nationally and internationally. Our project aims to deconstruct the ten ideological assumptions of patriarchal motherhood (O'Reilly, "It Saved" 187), and we understand the term "mother" as a verb (Ruddick). We are also actively working to raise awareness of the importance of policies to support academic mothers among our audiences.

In this context, we understand that although the media influences the everyday experiences of mothers and children—often reinforcing patriarchal, consumerist and neoliberal values—social media can also create spaces for a new collective debate and raise awareness of the relevance of policies to support academic mothers. Therefore, we have been connecting with research groups and collectives of university mothers and mothers who are artists and activists to discuss maternal issues across Brazil and internationally.

Media and childhood studies form an interdisciplinary and interprofessional field that investigates children's and teenagers' interactions with the media. This field is currently under consolidation internationally, bringing together academia, the private sector, civil society, government, and other social actors in constant dialogue with communication studies, education, social sciences, and law (Buckingham; Guedes and Covaleski).

The Launching of @mmi.ufpe during Social Distancing in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The experiences of pandemic mothering (O'Reilly and Green) motivated the first edition of @mmi.ufpe. In the early stages of the pandemic, mothers, more than everyone else, were forced to prioritize the survival of their children and families within a social context that pressured them to perform under the unreasonable new normal rules because they had to perform carework both inside and outside their homes (Collier de Mendonça and Oliveira-Cruz, "The Challenges" 287–308).

In August 2021, we launched @mmi.ufpe while working remotely. Our team included undergraduate and postgraduate students, professors from the Department of Communication at UFPE and collaborators from other universities across Brazil. We produced monthly live discussions, broadcasted on YouTube, and the first season of programs and podcasts for Rádio Paulo Freire, which were recorded from home. At the same time, we created the project profile @mmi.ufpe on Instagram.

The pandemic resulted in a substantial decline in the academic productivity of students, researchers, and professors who are mothers (Staniscuaski et al.). At that time, the Brazilian federal government was governed by an extreme far-right party, which caused significant damage to public universities and Brazilian research and science funding. Despite all these difficulties and challenges, in 2022, mothers were required to return to campus and resume their lives and academic work (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo, "Lugar de Mãe").

From Active Listening to Visibility and Spatial Occupation of the Campus in the Second Year of @mmi.ufpe Activities

In September 2022, we started live broadcasting from the Paulo Freire radio station. As we expanded our networking with collectives of university mothers and motherhood scholars in the second season, we discussed the challenges faced by academic mothers across Brazil. During this process, we identified the need to organize the first in-person meeting of academic mothers at UFPE, which took place on December 14, 2022. The meeting brought together professors, students, and researchers who shared their experiences of

being mothers at UFPE. It was a touching moment in which the participants expressed their difficulties, challenges, and hopes. They felt exhausted, lonely, and unsupported at the university. They suffered from physical and psychological stress, insecurity, and anxiety.

An undergraduate student who was a visual artist highlighted the invisibility of maternal issues on campus and emphasized that mothers were not recognized as part of the academic environment. Colleagues agreed the university was an unwelcoming environment that did not have empathy for their constant juggling of mothering, studying, as well as domestic and paid work. As we understood how demanding the routines of student mothers were at UFPE, we decided to engage with the academic community, appealing to their aesthetic and emotional sensitivities.

At the time, the number of collectives of university mothers and research networks was growing in Brazil. We approached Marta Mencarini, professor and visual artist at the University of Brasília, whose work with the collectives *Arte e Maternagem* and *Matriz* helped us develop the creative insights for designing the exhibition *The University as a Place for Mothers*. The objective was to visually express maternal narratives, collectively constructed by mothers, and to question the individualization and depoliticization of patriarchal motherhood in the exhibition's design. The production of contemporary mother artists is characterized by narratives that question dominant artistic representations of motherhood (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo). Utilizing autobiographical narratives and collective works, these artists give materiality and visibility to maternal ambivalences and their lived experiences, using their maternal bodies as supports and inspirations to create everyday performances of mothering and question patriarchal motherhood (Collier de Mendonça, Leão, and de Carlos 188–89).

In this perspective, Mencarini explored collective strategies employed by artist mothers to reconcile artistic production with mothering experience in the challenging scenario of the pandemic in her doctoral research:

Exhausted, yet we persist in our struggle, forming coalitions and self-improving along on this journey that we never take alone. It is imperative to address the daily challenges faced by women who bear children, give birth, nurture, raise, and sustain life on Earth. The valorisation of reproductive labour and the demand for better living conditions for all people can be regarded as an act of resistance against the contemporary necropolitics of the contemporary, patriarchal, and neoliberal colonial system. The question of motherhood, in our understanding, encompasses the collective human experience. (Mencarini and Medeiros 121)

The exhibition “The University as a Place for Mothers” was launched on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2023, at Capibaribe Gallery in UFPE’s Arts and Communication Centre. It was paramount to name the exhibition with a striking title to express the issue under debate clearly and affirm the belonging of mothers in the academy. Feminist and egalitarian theoretical references also inspired the title. According to Djamila Ribeiro, the expression “lugar de fala” (“place of speech”) possibly emerged from debates on diversity, critical race theory, and decolonial thinking. In this sense, Patricia Hill Collins clarifies the following:

The feminist standpoint theory must be discussed from the perspective of groups within power relations. It would also be recommendable to understand the categories of race, gender, class and sexuality as elements of the social structure that emerge as fundamental devices that favour inequalities and create groups, rather than thinking of these categories as writings of identity applied to individuals. (qtd. in Ribeiro 60–61)

As O’Reilly argues, mothers face specific problems that affect their subjectivities and identities in psychological, social, economic, political and cultural realms (“Matricentric Feminism” 13–26). Mothers suffer overlapping oppressions by patriarchy because they are women and because they are mothers. Maternal oppression also persists in universities because motherhood is intertwined with gender, race, ethnicity, geographical location, and socio-economic factors that restrict academic opportunities for women. Hence, through our initiatives, we advocate for developing policies to support mothers so that universities can offer equal opportunities for them.

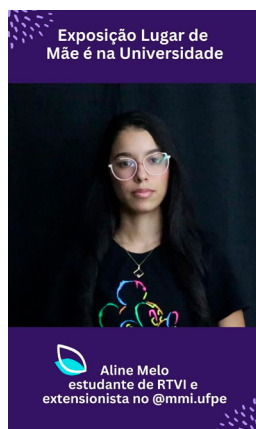
Communication Strategy

The exhibition was an invitation to start a new dialogue with the academic community. The initiative revealed the motivations, needs, and challenges shared by mothers at UFPE and presented a list of over thirty suggestions for policies to support academic mothers. Upon the exhibition’s inauguration, we delivered a learning report to the rector, Dr. Alfredo Gomes, and vice-rector, Dr. Moacyr Araújo (Collier de Mendonça et al. 2023).

According to the Brazilian Institute of Museums (IBRAM), planning an exhibition involves defining concepts and applying methods and techniques to choose physical spaces and objects that express ideas and images and build a narrative to sensitize its audience. The exhibition concept brought together design and communication planning skills that created a narrative combining Instagram and Facebook posts, news on campus newspapers, an exhibition of artwork by mothers, a report delivered to the rector’s office, and episodes of

our radio programs (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo, “Lugar de Mãe”).

Using the visual arts as powerful media resources, we raised identity awareness to arouse feelings and engage the academic community in listening to powerful maternal testimonies. We included artwork by undergraduate mothers from the graphic expression and visual arts programmes of UFPE and the collectives Matriz and Arte e Maternagem (made up of artist mothers from Brazilian Universities) and maternal narratives gathered in the December meeting and the findings presented by the academic movement Parent in Science’s² quantitative research (Staniscuaski et al.). We also created a campaign with fifteen videos, including the video *Being a Mother at the University*, for the @mmi.ufpe social networks (Figure 1).



Aline Melo (journalism student and

@mmi.ufpe extension project member): “Being a mother in the university is challenging, chaotic, tiring, productivity reducing, and a constant reminder that not everything will be 100 per cent accomplished.”

Aline: “These were some of the testimonies from UFPE mothers! Among the challenges and difficulties, hopes and joys, being a mom in the university means to learn that equal opportunities are not yet a reality.”



Marília Félix (journalism student and

@mmi.ufpe extension member): “But it [being a mother] is also a trigger for hope, a desire for revolution, the will to fight barriers and be able to offer children a prosperous environment. It’s a source of pride!”

Marília: “The testimonies are important because they gather all the perceptions of what it’s like to be a mother at UFPE. Understanding these perceptions is the first step towards starting a dialogue about what it’s like to be a mother with the academic community and university management.”

Figure 1: *Being a Mother at the University* video. Testimonies from participants

TODA CRISE SOCIAL ATINGE MAIS AS MULHERES

Home office
atividades escolares das crianças
cuidados com os idosos

TRABALHO DOMÉSTICO

PANDE (MÃE)NICAS

*** AUMENTO DA VIOLÊNCIA DE GÊNERO, O ISOLAMENTO FÍSICO INTENSIFICA A MASCULINIDADE TÓXICA E UMA RESPOSTA VIOLENTA AO CONFLITO**

AUMENTO DE 22% NOS CASOS DE FEMINICÍDIO NO BRASIL

***36%**
das mães deixam de procurar emprego na crise e 16% das mães topam trocar por empregos menos demandantes para cuidarem dos filhos sendo que só **9%** dos pais consideram a opção

***METADE DAS MULHERES NO BRASIL PASSOU A CUIDAR DE ALGUÉM DURANTE A PANDEMIA**

***39%**
das mães apresentam exaustão e estresse pós traumático

*** 7 MILHÕES**
de mulheres deixaram seus postos de trabalho no início da pandemia

2 milhões a mais do que o número de homens na mesma situação

O QUE VOCE FAZ PARA MELHORAR A EXISTÊNCIA DAS MÃES ?

*** Dados ONU Mulher, PNAD Continua, FBSP e revista TPM.**

COLTIVO MATRIZ **ARTE**

Figure 2: Collective Work by Artist-Mothers

Pande(mãe)nicas, Lambe-Lambe, various formats. Author and source: Collective Matriz, 2021. Image courtesy of Professor Marta Mencarini (UnB), member of Collective Matriz, Brasilia.

On March 9, 2023, UFPE's press office (ASCOM) published an article about the exhibition on the university's website, endorsing the positive reaction of the exhibition at UFPE (Figure 3).

Notícias

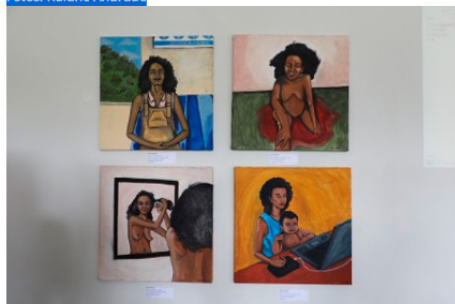
Exposição “Lugar de mãe é na Universidade” é inaugurada no Centro de Artes e Comunicação

O objetivo é mostrar adversidades enfrentadas por mães universitárias, docentes e técnicas, incluindo falta de apoio acadêmico e dificuldade em alinhar estudos e cuidados maternos

📅 09/03/2023 ⌚ 15:55

Ascom

Fotos: Raiane Andrade



Obras mostram dia a dia das mães que estudam e trabalham

A exposição “Lugar de mãe é na Universidade” começou ontem (8), no Centro de Artes e Comunicação (CAC) da UFPE, numa promoção do projeto de extensão Maternagem, Mídia e Infância (MMI), contando com cartazes, obras de arte e propostas de debates relacionadas à maternidade na Universidade. Na abertura do evento, estiveram presentes o

Figure 3: The Exhibition “The University as a Place for Mothers” Inaugurated at the Centre for Arts and Communication Source: ASCOM UFPE, 2023.

The article emphasizes that the exhibition aimed to expose the challenges faced by students, professors and staff members who are mothers, including the lack of academic support and the struggle to balance studies and carework. Over 150 people signed the exhibition visitors' book. In addition to the presence of the rector and vice-rector, staff from different centres and departments, professors, and students attended the exhibition's opening (Figure 4). The rector, Dr. Alfredo Gomes, emphasized the need for the university to address gender asymmetries by incorporating the needs of women who are mothers into its policies. Historically, these women have been adversely affected by the lack of adequate policies, resulting in their withdrawal from the academic environment and difficulties for staff and professors in advancing their careers.

Incorporating visual arts into the exhibition and social media communication was an effective and relevant method to introduce this dialogue.



Figure 4: Opening of the Exhibition “The University as a Place for Mothers”
Photo by Raiane Andrade. Source: ASCOM UFPE, 2023.

The Rector’s Interview in Season Three and the Project’s Next Steps

After the positive outcome of the exhibition, we produced the third season of the radio program and included interviews with specific groups of mothers at UFPE, such as undergraduate students, postgraduate students, professors and university staff. The interview with Gomes took place in the last episode of the season—titled “Support Policies for Mothers at UFPE: Where to Start?” and broadcast on May 10, 2023—after our understanding of the consensual and specific needs of each group of mothers had improved.

Maria Collier de Mendonça, coordinator of @mmi.ufpe, and Camila Infanger Almeida, a doctoral student in political science at the University of São Paulo and researcher at Parent in Science Movement, participated in the program. The general needs related to the university infrastructure were discussed, including breastfeeding/lactation rooms and changing tables in washroom facilities, access for children to the university restaurant, and other child-friendly facilities. The following discussion addressed developing policies to encourage the retention of undergraduate student mothers. We emphasized the importance of financial resources for retention grants and childcare provisions and highlighted the need for a maternity leave policy to prevent university drop out among undergraduate student mothers.

Next, we discussed the challenges faced by postgraduate students who need to balance the demands of mothering and family responsibilities with academic productivity, such as attending academic events and publishing articles.

We also mentioned the difficulties faced by researchers who are mothers when applying for international research internships. Considering professors, we stressed the importance of extending the submission deadlines for scholarship and research funding notices to ensure equal opportunities for women-mothers.

The rector stressed the impact of the resource cuts made during the Bolsonaro government, which continue to affect Brazilian universities and scientific funding. However, he also recognized the importance of supporting mothers through the development of institutional policies. At the end of the episode, Gomes invited us to continue talking to the UFPE governance committee, formed by eight pro-rectories (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate, extension, student affairs, research and innovation, administration, human resources and quality of life, budget planning and finance), representatives of the three campuses (located in Recife, Caruaru, and Vitória, and the eleven centres (i.e., arts and communication, biosciences, exact and natural sciences, law, health, medicine, applied social sciences, education, philosophy and humanities, IT, technology, and geosciences). We concluded by suggesting that the UFPE management could include maternal issues in the public debate through Gomes's participation in the rectors' forums and his connections with policymakers from the municipal, state, and federal governments, the Ministry of Education, and other institutions.

In July 2023, we organized five online mother circles to extend our dialogue with mothers in the academic community. In addition, we participated in a conversation circle at the UFPE Education Centre in August 2023 with thirty mothers (pedagogy students and professors) who founded the UFPE's Maternity Collective, currently comprising ninety-six members, including students, faculty, and staff. The collective is managed through WhatsApp and Instagram.

We continued the work of @mmi.upfe, producing the fourth and fifth seasons of the program throughout 2023 and 2024. On March 8, 2024, we presented the findings from the mother circles and key extension activities to the rector and the UFPE governance committee team.

In December 2024, the UFPE Parenting Working Group was established under the leadership of the pro-rector for student affairs, Dr. Cinthia Kalyne de Almeida Alves. The group's mission is to develop an institutional plan of actions to support students in mothering and parenting in the university environment. It aims to reduce dropout rates, foster academic development, and limit social inclusion. The group consists of representatives and directors from various disciplines (such as education, health sciences, IT, philosophy and human sciences, medical sciences, and nursing), as well as strategic university management departments (such as the pro-rectories of undergraduate studies, postgraduate studies, human resources, student affairs, and the central

library and the departments of infrastructure and finance). The group also includes coordinators of extension projects, such as Amamentar (focussed on breastfeeding support), Instituto Papai (focused on masculinity and gender equality issues), and Maternagem, Mídia e Infância (Mothering, Media, and Childhood).

Key Lessons of the Mother Circles from December 2022 and July and August 2023

The first face-to-face meeting took place on December 14, 2022, with sessions held in the morning and afternoon. The morning session had five participants, while the afternoon session had ten. The attendees ranged from undergraduate students from the performing arts, architecture and urbanism, information science, and social sciences programmes, as well as postgraduate students from the music, architecture and urbanism, and geography programs. The faculty members were from the social communication, architecture, and urbanism programs.

The meetings were facilitated by Maria Collier de Mendonça and Carolina Dantas de Figueiredo, who drew inspiration from Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric pedagogy, which encourages mothers to listen to each other and share their experiences. It aims to help them understand, criticize, question, and challenge patriarchal motherhood, as well as wider power structures and inequalities. The approach emphasises the importance of collective support in creating an encouraging environment where individuals can support each other and value different experiences, feelings, and ideas without judgment. It fosters connections, learning, and collective self-expression.

Between July 24 and July 31, 2023, we facilitated five online mother circles, four sessions with participants from the Recife campus, and one session with women from the Caruaru campus. Twenty-seven mothers participated, including six university staff members, four professors, eleven undergraduate students, and six postgraduate students. The participants were enrolled in various programs, including pedagogy, mathematics, physiotherapy, social work, graphic expression, geography, literature, psychology, biological sciences, and information science. The professors came from communication, physiotherapy, mathematics, architecture and urbanism, and anatomy, while the university staff members belonged to technical and administrative services. We created a welcoming listening space based on shared solidarity, an experience that evoked intense emotions. We also took notes of the conversations with the participants' consent to produce reports on the lessons learned and to share the collectively built knowledge with the academic community and management team.

Key Lessons from the Mother Circles

Despite the varied areas of study, life stages, and careers among students, faculty members, and staff, shared challenges emerged. Consequently, we noted the growing mutual support among mothers across different academic levels, family structures, and socioeconomic backgrounds throughout the mother circles. From the outset of the meetings, the burden of managing domestic, maternal, professional, and academic responsibilities was particularly salient among the participants. The most prevalent topics included feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, distress, ambivalence, and guilt. But the participants also spoke about resilience, persistence, empowerment, the desire for belonging, as well as the need for support and solidarity in the university environment (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo, “Lugar de Mãe”; Collier de Mendonça et al., “Rodas de conversas”).

The conversations emphasized that the mother circles were the first opportunity they had to come together and share their maternal experiences at UFPE. Undergraduate student mothers reported facing more mental health issues, financial difficulties, and a greater need for general assistance in comparison to other groups of mothers. For instance, mothers attending evening classes were in a more vulnerable condition and more likely to drop out of their programs. Low-income sole mothers studying in Recife, particularly those from the countryside or living in neighbouring cities, away from campus, reported even greater challenges.

At the end of the meetings, we discussed policy recommendations to support mothers studying or working at the UFPE. Financial and psychological support recommendations were predominant, along with the need to build an adequate university infrastructure (including breastfeeding/lactation facilities, daycare centres, and changing tables in washrooms). In sum, our key takeaway was recognizing the significant lack of support—psychological, financial, infrastructural, and academic—available to mothers at UFPE (Collier de Mendonça et al., “Relatório de Aprendizados”).

Our team compiled a list of suggestions and grouped the problems highlighted into two themes in the report delivered to the rectory. The first encompasses human resources and institutional solutions, whereas the second requires financial resources for infrastructural solutions. The first group includes the following initiatives: creating support groups for student mothers; preparing guidelines for professors, advisors, program coordinators, and directors of centres to assist student mothers; extending deadlines in cases of child health issues; simplification of language in notices and communication of policies to support mothers; allowing maternity leave for undergraduate students; effectively communicating the right to maternity leave and extending defence deadlines for mothers in postgraduate programmes; encouraging the

academic potential of postgraduate students and professors upon their return to campus after maternity leave; creating policies to enable mothers to address asymmetries in academic productivity after childbirth, and having continuous dialogue between the UFPE management and university mothers' collective.

The following suggestions are included in the second group: collecting data to identify the number and needs of student mothers, administrative employees, and faculty members at UFPE; collecting data on student dropout due to pregnancy and motherhood at UFPE; constructing changing tables and family washrooms, breastfeeding/lactation rooms, and child-friendly facilities on campus (playgrounds and libraries); creating partnerships with daycare centres located near the campus, and other student support services (including financial aid and psychological counselling); developing protocols and inclusive policies in funding schemes; and increasing funding opportunities for mothers, considering such factors as race, disability, family formation, and income levels.

Current Scenario: Persistence and Resilience during the Fourth Year of Activities

We have been participating in several debates with collectives of university mothers, activists, and research networks at roundtables and events across Brazil. The collectives of university mothers are already showing the first results, both in local and national contexts. In 2024, a window was opened by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) for representatives of collectives to participate in a working group to identify ways to enhance the experiences of mothers in the universities and tackle the high dropout levels of student mothers. The working group organized five regional online forums, which resulted in formal guidelines for the national policy on maternal permanence in Brazilian higher education institutions.

The Brazilian collectives of university mothers have engaged in continuous debates on the rights of academic mothers to propose practical transformation (Silva). Brazilian activist mothers have been sharing challenges experienced in everyday life, building collective knowledge, including political action, within the university environment, and criticizing social, ethnic, race, and gender inequalities. These inequalities prevail in Brazil as barriers to accessing and completing higher education, thus sustaining the oppression of mothers. Most collectives are based in the Brazilian southeast and southern regions. To address these challenges, they have recently established the National Collective of University Mothers, an online support network through WhatsApp. This online community currently has 253 participants and has facilitated the discussion of maternal issues nationally.

In 2022, Vanessa Suany da Silva, a master's student at the Federal University of Santa Catarina and the leader of the AMPET (Association of Researchers, Students and Workers Mothers), and Dr. Fernanda Staniscuaski, a professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and the leader of the Parent in Science Movement, along with feminist political leaders and activists of maternal collectives from the five regions of Brazil, met with the Ministry of Education to establish the working group responsible for developing studies to support the future National Policy of Maternal Permanence in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions.

Final Remarks

In this article, we shared the key learnings from @mmi.ufpe, including repercussions beyond the UFPE's academic community. We aimed to share our experience by reflecting on how we have given materiality and visibility to the debate on maternal issues in Brazilian universities. Our experience with the Mothering, Media, and Childhood Extension Project is characterized by a wide range of emotions, concerns, and dialogues that cannot be fully encapsulated within the frames of an article. Nevertheless, we have endeavoured to summarize these aspects here.

Understanding the difficulties, challenges, and motivations associated with being a mother at UFPE was the initial step towards raising awareness within the academic community and initiating a dialogue about the inclusion, retention, and progression of mothers at UFPE. The trajectory of @mmi.ufpe over the past four years has been marked by consistent progress, evidenced by the acknowledgment by students, faculty members, university staff, the rector, and policymakers of UFPE.

Our communication strategies across social media, radio, and on-campus activities successfully achieved the goal of raising awareness within the academic community and among the UFPE management team. Since 2021, we have participated in regional, national, and international events; published texts in academic proceedings, journals, and book chapters; organized mother circles; and produced an exhibition and five seasons of radio programs for the Paulo Freire radio station. As the project has progressed, we have observed an engagement, evidenced by an increase in positive comments on social media. As of 19 January 2025, our Instagram following stood at 1,357; we have an average range of between twelve hundred to seven thousand views per reel post related to the fifth season, which aired in November and December 2024.

We acknowledge, however, that it will be a long journey of research, teaching, and extension activities to transform universities into supportive and inclusive environments for mothers. We hope that our experiences-based report may help the UFPE management body and contribute to other

associations, universities, and funding agencies in developing policies for the inclusion, retention, and progress of mothers in universities. As Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogia da Autonomia (Pedagogy of Freedom)*, there is an essential relationship between teaching activity and hope. He states: “the hope that teacher and students can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowering of our joy” (72). We agree with Freire that hope is an indispensable seasoning in our life experience. So, let us persist as academic mothers.

Acknowledgments

To the mothers who participated in the mother circles; the current and former members and collaborators of the Mothering, Media and Childhood Extension Project; the Paulo Freire radio team; Milena Freire de Oliveira-Cruz, Brenda Guedes, Rogério Covalleski, Cinthia Kalyne Alves, Alfredo Gomes, and Moacyr Araújo; the pro-rectory of extension; the Postgraduate Program in Communication and the Department of Communication at UFPE; the BIA/FACEPE Academic Incentive Scholarship Program.

Endnotes

1. This article is a translated and expanded version of three conference papers previously presented and published in Brazil (Collier de Mendonça and Figueiredo 2023 and 2024; Collier de Mendonça et al.). All Portuguese to English translations are done by the authors. We used the most frequent translation of the concept of “extensão universitária” from Portuguese into English, which is “university extension.”
2. Parent in Science is a group of parent scientists who work towards raising the discussion about parenthood within the universe of science in Brazil and Latin America. Their work includes academic research focussed on data collection and knowledge production concerning the impact of children on the scientific careers of women and men; the organization of the Motherhood and Science Symposium, currently in its fifth edition; and direct interaction with government science funding agencies. Further information available at: (<https://www.parentinscience.com/english>.)

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Journal of the Motherhood Initiative
25th Anniversary Issue