

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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The Termination of Parental Rights in Brazil from the Perspective of Matricentric Feminism

This article examines the process of terminating parental rights in Brazil, contrasting its legal foundation with its practical application, which disproportionately affects low-income families—particularly poor, Black single mothers. Matricentric feminism is presented as a theoretical and political framework for understanding the historical subjugation of mothers and for interrogating how labels such as “transgressive mother” are applied by sociolegal actors in practices and discourses to reinforce an exclusionary maternal ideal. The article reveals that the reasons for placing children and adolescents in state care are often interpreted in ways that blame and stigmatize mothers, ignoring their social vulnerability and the lack of effective public policies. This interpretation is influenced by idealized social constructions of motherhood and by power discourses that penalize any deviation from the normative model, thereby perpetuating social inequalities.

Introduction

Researcher: When you think about your children today? What do you feel?

Kauane [pseudonym]: I want them back. That’s why I am doing everything that I am doing. That’s why I asked for shelter. That’s why I’m getting treatment. That’s why I am going after everything they tell me to do. I do it. I am accepting the help. I am behaving myself in the house. I am doing this. I am going after the dentist, Pap smear, blood test, CREAS [specialized reference centre for social assistance, acronym in Portuguese]. It was the judge. Everything that I do, everything, goes to the judge. So I am following all the rules because my desire is to have them back, and I will have them because I have faith in God.¹

The opening epigraph reveals a mother's attempt to conform to regulatory mechanisms after being labelled as negligent and a violator of her children's rights. This is an excerpt from an interview conducted as part of my doctoral research in Brazil, in which I document, through fieldwork, the practices and discourses of the various agents involved in the network responsible for the social and legal processes of terminating parental rights.

Under Brazilian law, the termination of parental rights is defined as an exceptional measure applied in cases of failure to comply with inherent parental duties towards minor children, once all options for protection and intervention to keep the child or adolescent with their family of origin have been exhausted. In other words, it occurs when parents are deprived of the prerogatives that constitute their parental authority (Caminha).

However, there are significant gaps between the formal legal definition and practical reality. What becomes of motherhood for women who are judicially stripped of their role as mothers and lose custody of their children through the actions of state and societal agents? We know little about what it means to be a mother (O'Reilly and Green) and still less about what it is like to lose that role, to be prevented from exercising it, and how violent the processes are that lead a woman to be deprived of it. A deeper understanding of these experiences is crucial to humanizing lives that are often rendered invisible by institutions.

This article reflects on the oppression of mothers in situations of social fragility who have been separated from their children. These women are framed as violators of their children's rights and have their ability to exercise motherhood judicially curtailed. Using a qualitative, ethnographic method, this research also included a literature review, fieldwork, interviews, and data analysis. The project was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP/CONEP, acronym in Portuguese) via the Plataforma Brasil.

This article explores the following questions. Why does this form of punishment fall predominantly on mothers and not on men, who often evade their responsibilities in raising children? What actions and discourses criminalize and punish dissonant motherhood? Why are alternative, constructive paths towards maintaining ties with the family of origin discouraged?

To answer these questions, this article is divided into five sections: 1) The Legal Context of the Termination of Parental Rights and a Dialogue with Academic Research; 2) The Theoretical-Methodological Framework of Matricentric Feminism; 3) Social Formation and Inequalities in Brazil; 4) Methodological Paths; and 5) Concluding Remarks.

1. The Legal Context of the Termination of Parental Rights and a Dialogue with Academic Research

The institutional removal of children from their family environment by the state manifests in different forms in Brazil and around the world. International declarations have sought to curb such practices and establish minimum standards of protection, such as the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, which states: “A child of tender years shall not, save in exceptional circumstances, be separated from his mother. Society and the public authorities shall have the duty to extend particular care to children without a family and to those without adequate means of support. Payment of State and other assistance toward the maintenance of children of large families is desirable” (United Nations).

This declaration was a document of principles, succeeded by the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, an international treaty with the force of law for the countries that ratified it, including Brazil (Brasil, Decreto nº 99.710). These norms affected national legislation in Brazil. The Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brasil, Constituição) recognizes in Article 226 that the family “is the foundation of society and has special protection from the Brazilian State.” Similarly, according to Article 4 of the Child and Adolescent Statute, family life is a right (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 8.069).

The same law states in Article 19 that it is in the “best interest of the child” to remain with their birth family. This statement highlights the responsibility of public authorities and the interprofessional team overseeing each case to exhaust all possibilities to preserve family ties, treating placement in a substitute family as a strictly exceptional measure (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 8.069). Thus, Brazilian legislation stipulates the rights the state must guarantee to protect families, particularly children and women, recognizing their specific needs within the scope of human rights.

If a violation of a child’s rights is confirmed, the judiciary can invoke protective measures for their protection. Among the nine applicable protective measures, three involve separation from the family of origin: institutional sheltering, family sheltering, and placement in a substitute family. However, the legislation establishes in Article 23 that the lack or scarcity of material resources shall not constitute sufficient grounds for the loss or suspension of parental rights (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 8.069).

According to the Brazilian Civil Code, in Article 1,637, the judicial suspension of parental rights is permitted in response to abuse by a parental authority or guardian negligence. This measure, which can consequently lead to termination, should be implemented with support services for the parents, as the law’s primary goal is the child’s reintegration into their family. The termination of parental rights is a severe measure in response to a situation

that violates a child's rights (Brasil, Lei Federal nº 10.406).

In 2022, the National Council of Justice (CNJ, acronym in Portuguese) published the results of its quantitative and qualitative research concerning the termination of parental rights and the adoption of children. The research acknowledges that available statistics on the phenomenon of termination have considerable limitations, as the implementation of the unified information registration system only dates to 2016. Data that came from previous systems lacked the level of detail required by the current system; it was fragmented and nonstandardized. Each court or district recorded information in its own way, making any comparative analysis or the creation of a reliable national diagnosis impossible. Even under these conditions, the report revealed that nearly 27,500 children were included in the National Adoption and Sheltering System (SNA, acronym in Portuguese) due to being involved in the termination of parental rights processes (CNJ).

Today, the reliability of these numbers fundamentally depends on the input of accurate information by courts across the country at each stage of the process, from the child's placement in a shelter to the termination sentence and subsequent inclusion for adoption. To this end, the CNJ has been enforcing the standardization of the information flow, ensuring that the registration of a termination of parental rights in any district follows the same parameters. However, weaknesses persist; control over procedural deadlines for termination and the length of time children spend in shelters, for example, is only possible through systematic analysis of the collected data. Monitoring them is central to the policy of guaranteeing the right to family and community life.

The qualitative research of the report covers districts from all five regions of Brazil, totalling 143 interviews, and captures the impressions and practices of each agent in the justice system and other bodies, according to their area of expertise and experience. The results reveal how the moral values and individual convictions of these professionals defined the scope of state initiatives aimed at managing the lives of children between birth and six years of age (CNJ).

According to the research, the justifications for terminations involve the agents' worldviews and idealized standards of conduct within the rights-guarantee system, including moralizing conceptions that indiscriminately label families and mothers as negligent. Furthermore, they reveal the imprecision of these agents, showing the difficulty magistrates and other professionals have in assessing whether the situation presented to them in the process involves severe abuse and parental negligence or if the family is in a situation of social vulnerability (CNJ). This is a topic with several layers of complexity. Various researchers have investigated Termination cases in the country, and they have identified the selectivity of these processes against certain families, especially women in situations of social vulnerability, whose basic rights were also violated, just like those of their children.

The reflections presented here build on the work of Simone Becker, Daniele Santa Barbara, Isabela Nadal, Janaína Gomes, Andrea de Souza, Ellen Pereira, and Mariana Schorn, just a few of the scholars who have contributed to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the processes of terminating parental rights in Brazil. These studies, conducted in different Brazilian states, present a critical and convergent analysis of how the termination of parental rights is a measure that disproportionately affects women in situations of vulnerability—mostly poor and Black—blaming them individually for the state’s structural failings. Mariana da Costa Schorn demonstrates that poverty is the cause behind most termination cases, but it is frequently masked in legal discourse by terms like “negligence” or by the construction of a “judicial truth” (Becker) that ignores the families’ social context. In her thesis, Simone Becker critiques the concept of “judicial truth,” arguing that it is not an objective fact to be discovered, but rather a social and ritualistic construct produced by power relations that emerges at the conclusion of a legal process. She defines this truth as the winning version in a dispute.

Daniele Santa Bárbara describes the system as paradoxical, noting that the same state that fails to provide support policies acts in a punitive and controlling manner. Previous studies have denounced that this process reproduces exclusionary and discriminatory logic, treating the motherhood of marginalized women as incapable and transforming termination into a tool of social control (Gomes; Pereira; Souza).

The Theoretical and Methodological Framework of Matricentric Feminism

Matricentric feminism (O’Reilly and Green) has uncovered and revealed the historical realities of the subjugation of mothers’ social position through practices—such as the sterilization of women and high rates of maternal mortality, especially among racialized women—which determine how women are permitted or forbidden to become mothers. This past is not over, however; it constantly reasserts itself. Collective practices and discourses take on contemporary forms but remain supported by patriarchal ideology, now articulated in new terms.

The way Adrienne Rich, in her classic *Of Woman Born*, discusses the veiled and explicit violence of institutionalized motherhood is provocative. Rich presents the case of Joanne Michulski, a thirty-eight-year-old mother suffering from mental distress and overburdened with the care of eight children, who was convicted of murdering the two youngest. Rich uses this crime, which surprised her husband and community—both enveloped in patriarchal logic and its privileges—to launch a critical and assertive historical examination of the illness-inducing conditions in which women have performed the maternal

role. Instead of finding support, mothers face profound indifference and violence in a society programmed to overwhelm them. Rich contributes to understanding and problematizing this situation by identifying motherhood as a patriarchal social institution. This institution extends far beyond social representations and is concretely constituted by laws, secular and religious.

In this sense, Rich helps us realize that throughout history, in both the most mundane and the most extraordinary circumstances, there are tensions surrounding motherhood as a patriarchal institution, which violates women's relationships and ways of life, silences them, and privileges the masculine perspective. Among its multiple forms of violence is the fact that patriarchal motherhood is an imposition—sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant—on women's lives (Rich).

As a way forward, Rich establishes the notion of mothering—a perspective that emphasizes experiences by and for mothers. It is understood as the lived experience of mothering and of real, everyday practices, revealing its inherent contradictions and calling for a redefinition of motherhood that empowers women and recognizes the totality of their experiences.

In this vein, Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey, in their essay “It’s Only Natural,” also problematize scientific facts that have been consolidated as truth to reveal them as narratives. The authors show how these facts are socially, politically, and historically constructed with regulatory and oppressive effects on the lives of women and mothers, especially when contrasting the experiences of women from different social classes—to which we add ethnicities and races, geographical location, marital status, appearance, ability, religion, and many other social markers of difference (Saggese et al.). By adjusting this critical lens to analyze cases of mothers who lose custody of their children in court, we highlight how the narratives of motherhood, disguised as scientific and natural truths, also influence judicial decisions. These narratives carry specific expectations about the behaviour and role of mothers, perpetuating gender, class, and racial inequalities in the lives of women who lack social guarantees for their basic rights.

Regarding the maternal ideal and the characteristics that a so-called good mother must exhibit, Andrea O'Reilly discusses the ideals a mother must fulfill to avoid being labelled a “bad mother”: essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticization. A mother who deviates from any of these ideals is considered bad.

To unmask the institution of patriarchal motherhood, it is essential to recognize and embrace the complexity of the maternal experience. As Sarah Lachance Adams argues in “Maternal Ambivalence,” instead of pursuing the unattainable ideal of the perfect mother, embracing the contradictory attitudes and feelings inherent in childrearing has constructive potential. It allows for

the recognition of the distinct needs, desires, and perspectives of the mother and the children (Adams).

On the totality of the mothering experience, O'Reilly also discusses the importance of recognizing and vocalizing maternal regret, noting its enormous potential to deconstruct the mandates of compulsory motherhood, which are based on the prerogatives of essentialization, naturalization, and idealization. These frameworks combine to a need for self-knowledge and self-indulgence in the face of the eventual guilt that the maternal institution imposes (Adams; O'Reilly, "Maternal Regret").

A mother who strays from the maternal ideal produces the weapons used against her. She begins to face accusations of being incapable of caring for her children and even being threatening. In a judicial context, this subjectification manifests in arguments that also disqualify her maternal capacity—and in various ways, agents of the state and society manipulate this image of deviance from the maternal ideal.

A prime example of this ideological pressure is the popularization of the word "neglect." As Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels recall, during the world wars, women were strongly encouraged to enter the workforce and occupied a wide variety of positions. At the end of the conflict, these same women were encouraged to return to their kitchens and domestic routines. At that moment, an ideological campaign, both fierce and subtle, was established to redomesticate women through motherhood, and it was then that the term "neglect" rose to common use in the Western vocabulary. This process occurred concurrently with, and in reinforcement of, the ideals of intensive motherhood, which were established in the mid-1970s and 1980s to consolidate this redomestication of women, including by curtailing the achievements of the feminist movement (Douglas and Michaels).

Since then, society has cultivated—though not without criticism and resistance—a growing emphasis on the wellbeing, development, and safety of children, which requires the figure of a mother who is altruistic, dedicated, and devoted to her children (Douglas and Michaels). Within this logic, since the 1980s, "motherhood has become a psychological police state" (Douglas and Michaels 341), a phrase that captures the intensity of the varied forms of daily and constant surveillance in an ideology that ensnares all who engage in maternal practices. The authors state that the central issue is not about which path women have chosen, what is considered right, or what is considered wrong. The question they pose, and with which my reflection engages, is the exercise of elucidating why a reactionary and normative ideology, dissonant with the lives of most women, continues to prevail and find fertile ground for serving as a basic support for discriminatory and oppressive practices (Douglas and Michaels). If these naturalized constructions of motherhood are not questioned, they inadvertently reinforce these stereotypes.

Adapting the Theory to Reflect on the Brazilian Reality

A matricentric feminist analysis shifts the focus to mother narratives, based on the premise that their rights must be guaranteed and on the need to expose the realities these mothers—especially those practicing dissident motherhoods—experience in their daily lives. According to Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Green, matricentric feminism is committed to justice and social change; therefore, it considers motherhood a socially engaged endeavour and a locus of power.

In “Empowered and Feminist Mothering,” O'Reilly clarifies that her theory of empowered mothering is available to both marginalized and privileged women, and it also applies to all nonnormative mothers. By operating outside the norm, or even in opposition to it, these mothers, in their perceived social inadequacy, can demonstrate empowering ways of mothering. This reflection leads me to the theoretical-analytical exercise of bridging these theoretical contributions with my research. Women and mothers are exposed to countless situations of violence. When intersected with race, vulnerability, insecurity, and dehumanization become even more dramatic for poor, single, Black mothers. Simultaneously, patriarchal culture allows men to evade fatherhood with impunity and overburdens mothers with caregiving. My research field deals with these mechanisms of surveillance, especially among those practising deviant motherhoods, who are socially treated as negative examples of how mothers should not act. In other words, I examine how stereotypes of dissident mothers are exploited to emphasize what a so-called good mother must not do, seeking evidence to justify official reports without providing effective means to address the underlying reality.

Particularly within Brazil's network of social and legal actors, there are mechanisms of action and discourse, in a tangle of relationships, that hinder and even prevent women from exercising their mothering practices. This dynamic occurs because they are extremely distant from any possibility of achieving the maternal ideal. Structurally, they lack the real-world conditions to meet their children's demands exclusively and face multiple and repeated circumstances that affix the stigmatizing label (Goffman) of inadequacy upon them. Lorraine Greaves et al., for example, expose the complex and critical views conveyed by dominant social discourses. These discourses influence and shape public perception, state policies, and legal frameworks regarding mothers facing extreme adversity—that is, mothers under duress, such as those dealing with substance use, domestic violence, or mental health issues—and how they are portrayed through systemic biases that reinforce the pressures and oppression they face.

Social expectations, legal implications, and media representations have a direct impact on the judgment of these women's abilities to be effective mothers. Greaves et al. debate the tension between such discourses and the

rights and safety of the children and mothers involved, highlighting how policies often prioritize the child's wellbeing, potentially at the expense of supporting the mother-child relationship. Ultimately, they underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of the interdependencies between their rights for the wellbeing of the woman and child and to strengthen this relationship.

In parallel, Michelle Hughes Miller examines the influence of experts in family law decisions, particularly how these experts evaluate mothers based on entrenched ideologies of motherhood. The overvaluation granted to these professionals in legal settings often marginalizes the mothers' own experiences and perceptions, effectively silencing their voices in critical decisions that affect their families. The author explores the criteria by which these experts are deemed credible by courts, the supposed objectivity with which they present their assessments, and the implications for judicial outcomes. In summary, Miller identifies that the courts' reliance on these expert opinions reflects and reinforces broader cultural assumptions about motherhood that can lead to biased and unjust legal decisions.

Although these studies focus on different regions and their specificities, a comparative analysis reveals several analogous dimensions. For instance, Luciana Braga, Alzira de Oliveira, and Jorge Mônica Pontes explore the conceptual fissures between motherhood as a patriarchal institution and the lived experience of motherhood, investigating how repeated violence occurs in the compulsory separation of mothers and children in situations of vulnerability in Belo Horizonte. They analyze legal provisions that authorize primary healthcare agents, maternity ward staff, and other legal agents to report women based on conditions of poverty, precarious housing, and dependency on alcohol and/or drugs. The women in these reports do not fit the socially conventional standard of a good mother. Based on the evidence used by these agents, the women are interpreted as a threat and a risk to the child's integrity—even while still pregnant, during prenatal exams, or in the immediate postpartum period (Braga; Jorge; Pontes).

In this work, Braga, Jorge, and Pontes reveal that the legal provisions supposedly intended to protect the wellbeing and dignity of newborns disregard the consequences of separation for both the mother and the child. By grounding legal measures that are weak in creating dialogue and alternative possibilities, they end up reinforcing processes of exclusion, prejudice, racism, sexism, vulnerability, and social injustice. The newborns are denied the possibility of living with their biological family, especially their mother, reinforcing a framework of stigmatization upon her (Braga; Jorge; Pontes).

The cases terminating parental rights, separating mothers and children, involve women who, despite being socially overburdened as the primary—if not sole—caregivers for their children, do not abdicate their role as mothers

but are systematically removed from it. Although their mothering practices over the children they bore have been terminated, these women do not cease to be mothers. This identity, which is neither fixed nor homogeneous (Hall), accompanies them throughout their lives, even though many flee from it to avoid pain and suffering. Nevertheless, memories of their children erupt at unforeseen moments throughout their lives, as the ethnographic data in this research captured.

Social Formation and Inequalities in Brazil

Brazilian society is marked by unequal power relations, violence, and intense cultural and phenotypic mixing, which was far from a harmonious encounter. Brazil's constitution is founded upon the hierarchical interaction of three fundamental matrices: the Indigenous peoples, the original inhabitants; the Portuguese colonizers, who imposed their political and economic project; and the African peoples, forcibly brought over under the regime of slavery (Schwarcz and Starling).

In "Casa-Grande & Senzala," Gilberto Freyre analyzes the genesis of this society from the perspective of the sugar plantation. He describes a patriarchal social organization centred on the figure of the plantation owner, whose authority extended over his family, dependents, and the enslaved population. Freyre argues that the physical proximity between the master's house (*casa-grande*) and the slave quarters (*senzala*) promoted intense cultural exchange and miscegenation that supposedly softened antagonisms, giving rise to the idea of a racial democracy. However, this view is widely criticized for romanticizing the extreme violence and power asymmetry that characterized slavery (Freyre).

In parallel, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, in "Raízes do Brasil" (Roots of Brazil), introduces the concept of the "cordial man." For him, Brazilian society was structured on the primacy of personal, emotional, and family relationships to the detriment of impersonal norms and the public sphere. The cordial man acts from the heart, blurring the public and private spheres and hindering the consolidation of a fully republican state bureaucracy. This trait, known as *patrimonialism*, explains the persistence of practices like nepotism and corruption (Holanda).

In "Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo" (The Formation of Contemporary Brazil), Caio Prado Júnior offers a fundamental economic perspective. He argues that Brazil was forged not as a nation with its own internal project but as an exploitative colony whose very meaning or purpose was to supply products for the European market. This external orientation consolidated a structure based on large, landed estates (*latifúndios*), monoculture, and slave labour, generating a profound and lasting social inequality that has become

one of the country's structural features (Prado Júnior).

The abolition of slavery in 1888 was also incomplete. The Black population was freed but left without access to land, education, or any form of reparation. They were marginalized in a competitive capitalist society that, simultaneously, encouraged European immigration to replace them in the labour market. Thus, racial prejudice did not disappear but was reconfigured, perpetuating inequality under the veil of the myth of racial democracy (Fernandes). Unlike the classic European model, such as the French Revolution, where the bourgeoisie destroyed the old aristocratic order to create a democratic and liberal society, Brazil's national bourgeoisie developed in a dependent relationship with international capital and in alliance with the old agrarian elites. Consequently, Brazil's capitalist modernization did not lead to democracy but to a model of dependent and autocratic capitalism. The result was a form of development that maintained and deepened social inequalities. The state became the primary instrument of this bourgeoisie, not to guarantee universal rights, but to ensure capital accumulation and contain popular pressures, often resorting to authoritarian regimes, such as the 1964 military dictatorship (Fernandes).

The primary challenges of contemporary Brazilian society are revealed as structural phenomena, deeply rooted in this historical and social formation. They are manifestations of a patriarchal system in constant interaction with racism and class inequality, which continues to organize power relations, institutions, and daily life. Throughout 2024, the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety (FBSP) registered 1,492 female victims of femicide, an average of four deaths per day, representing a 0.7 per cent increase from the previous year. Attempted femicides resulted in 3,870 victims, a considerable increase of 19 per cent compared to 2023. Of the femicide victims, a significant majority of 63.6 per cent were Black women. In 97 per cent of all cases, the murderers were men, with eight out of ten women killed by their partners or ex-partners (FBSP). Also in 2024, there were 51,866 recorded cases of psychological violence, 6.3 per cent more than in 2023. The number of threats reached 747,683. The military police registered 1,067,556 calls for domestic violence via the 190 emergency number, averaging two calls per minute. Data on rape show there were 87,545 victims, of whom 87.7 per cent were women, and of these, 55.6 per cent were Black (FBSP). Regarding the sexual division of labour, the burden of unpaid domestic work and care is a key indicator. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) show that in 2022, women dedicated an average of 21.4 hours per week to domestic tasks, while men dedicated only eleven hours (IBGE, *Estatísticas*). This "double shift" acts as a major obstacle to women's professional advancement, political participation, and time for leisure and rest.

In the economic sphere, gender inequality is persistent. The Continuous

National Household Sample Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua, or PNAD Contínua), released by the IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística), shows that in 2022, women earned, on average, 77.7 per cent of men's income. The labour force participation rate for women is also lower than for men (53.3 per cent for women versus 73.2 per cent for men), and the unemployment rate is consistently higher for women. According to the *Social Inequalities by Colour or Race Report* (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE), this inequality is more pronounced for Black women, who earn, on average, 46 per cent of the salary of white men. The field of education also reveals a paradox. On average, Brazilian women have surpassed men in years of schooling, reaching 10.3 years in 2024, compared to 9.9 years for men, among the population aged twenty-five and over. Although the difference is slight, this rate consolidates recent trends of women pursuing more education. Women also constitute the majority of graduates from university programs in the country, according to the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP). However, despite these qualifications, such indicators do not translate into equal opportunities, wages, or occupation of leadership positions. Gender inequality is not the result of a supposed lack of preparation on the part of women but rather of discriminatory barriers within society.

Methodological Paths

The methodological steps for this article involved a literature review, fieldwork, interviews, and data analysis. Regarding the fieldwork, I initially wondered how I would gain access to these mothers and the professionals who, directly and indirectly, carry out the termination of parental rights. As a complex research subject situated within a network of various institutions and agencies, there were multiple possible points of entry into the field.

In response, I combined two of my commitments: the fieldwork for my ongoing doctoral thesis in sociology and the completion of the mandatory curricular internship for my second undergraduate degree in social work. This synergy was not merely a practical matter but a methodological distinction that added value to my field experience in the collection of ethnographic data and in my second academic training.

The first phase of the fieldwork occurred in Londrina, Paraná, Brazil, my hometown, from September to December 2023 and consisted of observations I conducted at a men's transitional shelter (MMA, acronym in Portuguese). This is an emergency, short-term institutional shelter for homeless men, allowing them to access basic, dignified living conditions while having their needs identified and being referred to other services. Among my observations, I noted the scarcity of mentions of family by the service users and, even rarer,

references to fatherhood as an element of their identity. This silence reveals the patriarchal norm of the absent or secondary father in processes involving the family and child (Bernardi). Generally, fatherhood was only discussed when a staff member briefly inquired about it with a sheltered user, suggesting that this family tie is not necessarily a foundational dimension of these men's self-perception.

My next research locus was the female population, which presented a different methodological challenge. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the research, which delved into topics such as their mothering experiences, this phase required building close ties from the outset to foster a strong foundation of trust. This approach allowed us to collaborate, relate, and coexist. The site was the "Missão Casa Verde" Women's Transitional and Welcoming House, an institution offering free, permanent services for women over eighteen. Its goal is to guarantee comprehensive protection in situations of helplessness, vulnerability, and personal and social risk, in addition to securing their fundamental rights. The house occasionally shelters mothers undergoing sociolegal proceedings for the suspension or termination of their parental rights.

I followed the daily routine of this institution between January and August 2024, during which time I was able to get closer to the various professionals working there and, most importantly, speak with mothers who became my research interlocutors. I recorded aspects related to observation and experiences in my field journal (Minayo).

The choice of open-ended interviews, also called "conversations with a purpose" (Minayo 264), was made because it is compatible with ethnographic research and does not limit the interlocutors' speech. Fifteen interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with mothers and sociolegal professionals. Two of these were discarded because, though important for shaping the overall research landscape, they were not directly connected to the proposed theme. Thus, thirteen interviews were added to the empirical data: four mothers and nine sociolegal professional agents. These conversations resulted in twelve hours and sixteen minutes of recordings, in addition to the ethnographic data.

The selection of interviewees was guided by the snowball sampling technique, which is common in qualitative research. In this technique, strategic participants recommend other relevant, diverse participants to interview and so on (Lima). An essential criterion for participation was the willingness to discuss the topic. It was not intentional that all the people I spoke with were women; rather, it was a direct reflection of the gendered social structure organizing the field of investigation. The "feminization of care" phenomenon is strikingly evident in the social assistance context and the family justice system, where mothers are the primary subjects of state

intervention, and the professionals working on the front lines (e.g., social workers, psychologists, and child protective services counsellors) are also predominantly female (Santos de Jesus).

The invitation for the mothers to participate was made in person, and the interviews were conducted at Missão Casa Verde in a private workspace. For the other agents, the invitation was mostly sent via text message, and a time for the in-person interview was scheduled at their workplace, according to their preference. I always went to meet each of them.

The interaction with the participants was based on ethical principles and due respect for human dignity. At the beginning of each conversation, participants were presented with an informed consent form, guaranteeing their anonymity and confidentiality. A recorder was used to record the conversations, which allowed me to focus on the face-to-face interaction, using the field journal only to make some notes.

At the beginning of the dialogue, each participant provided their gender identity, age, race/colour, education level, occupation, marital status, and number of children. Next, I asked them to briefly tell their story and introduce themselves. We then moved on to talk about motherhood and, finally, about the paths that led to the termination of their parental rights. The interviews were later transcribed, and as the researcher, I am also responsible for safeguarding the digital files, which will be kept confidential for five years after the publication of the thesis.

For data analysis, the interviews were categorized according to my interlocutors' roles in the research, either as "mothers" or "agents," a distinction justified by the search for the matrilocality (O'Reilly and Green) of dissident motherhoods. The agents were differentiated by the institutions where they work or the positions they hold.

Empirical Results

This research included four dissident mothers: Kauane, Tainá, Maiara, and Iara.² Additionally, nine professionals involved in the processes of terminating parental rights were interviewed: Julia, Simone, Cecília, Emilia, Cassia, Sonia, Lucia, Rosana, and Madalena, as shown in Table 1. In the following section, each mother's situation is briefly contextualized within the various paths that led to the separation from their children. Subsequently, insights gathered from the state agents are presented thematically, using excerpts from their statements as illustrations.

	Pseudonym	Age	Race/Color	Children	Role Research	Education	Occupation
1	Kauane	about 30	Black	2	Mother	High school	Unemployed
2	Tainá	about 30	Black	4	Mother	High school	Unemployed
3	Iara	about 40	Black	3	Mother	Middle School	Unemployed
4	Maiara	about 30	Black	1	Mother	Middle School	Unemployed
5	Julia	47	White	2	Institutional Agent	Doctoral Degree	Social Worker
6	Simone	37	Black	1	Institutional Agent	Postgraduate Certificate	Guardian Counselor
7	Cecília	57	White	2	Institutional Agent	Master's Degree	Guardian Counselor
8	Emília	39	White	2	Institutional Agent	Master's Degree	Psychologist
9	Cassia	56	White	2	Institutional Agent	Master's Degree	Social Worker
10	Sonia	36	Black	1	Institutional Agent	High school	General services
11	Lucia	27	White	0	Institutional Agent	Bachelor's Degree	Psychologist
12	Rosana	49	White	3	Institutional Agent	Bachelor's Degree	Judge
13	Madalena	45	White	2	Institutional Agent	Postgraduate Certificate	Judge

Table 1: Interviews Conducted. Author's elaboration 2024–2025.

Kauane's trajectory as a Black single mother is emblematic of the interaction between maternal agency and the rigidity of the sociolegal system. Her mothering manifests in her conscious decision to request institutional care for her children as a strategy of radical care, aiming for her own recovery so she could regain custody. Despite her explicit compliance with multiple judicial demands—treatment for chemical dependency, psychosocial support, health exams—her journey reveals the failures of a support system that operates in a homogenizing and punitive manner. The lack of individualized psychological support to deal with past traumas (e.g., rejection by her family of origin and domestic violence) and the application of a disproportionate sanction (e.g., removal from a shelter for being late) triggered her collapse, culminating in the termination of her parental rights and the internalization of a discourse of incapacity, which contradicts her initial fight, a fight driven by a profound affection for her children.

Tainá's case, in contrast, illustrates how the absence of a structured family nucleus and the search for belonging can generate complex relational dynamics that ultimately trigger state intervention. Having grown up in institutional care, her adult life is marked by a series of romantic (and sexual) choices within the same family web, culminating in a structure where her children are simultaneously siblings and cousins. She perceives the report that leads to the suspension of her parental rights as an act of revenge by a relative involved in this plot of betrayals and resentments. Substance use emerges not as the primary cause but as a response to the anger and pain of being separated from her children. Tainá's story exposes the fragility of bonds, the moral complexity of human decisions in contexts of deprivation, and the way private conflicts are adjudicated and penalized by the public sphere.

Maiara's life, also that of a Black woman, highlights the brutal intersection of gender-based violence, structural racism, and the precarity of life as determining factors in the termination of parental rights. The loss of custody of her son stems not from a process of continued negligence but from a single,

violent event in which she was the victim. The police intervention on that occasion penalized her vulnerability. The subsequent death of her mother and the refusal of support from her extended family annihilated her support network, plunging her into a spiral of extreme marginalization, including sex work and homelessness. Her motherhood persists in the realm of desire and memory, in the will to rectify the narrative of abandonment imposed upon her—a desire obstructed by the fear of her ex-partner and by the social and racial distance that now separates her from her son, who is being raised by an affluent white family.

Finally, Iara's story is marked by family secrets, an initial maternal rejection, and the use of patriarchal power as a tool of punishment, resulting in the successive loss of her children. The late discovery of her true parentage triggers an insubordinate posture in her, which is punished by the removal of her first child through an act of power by her father. This traumatic event establishes a pattern of separation and instability that repeats in her adult life. The loss of custody of her two younger children to her extended family is rationalized by her in retrospect as a protective choice—a discourse that merges the internalization of guilt with a pragmatic assessment of her circumstances. Her trajectory demonstrates how intergenerational traumas and family violence shape the material and subjective conditions for the practice of mothering, leading to a form of dissent that is largely a consequence of imposed ruptures.

Turning to the reflection on how terms like “negligence,” “the child’s best interest,” and “abandonment” appear in the discourses of the agents, this study “brackets” these terms—that is, they are held up for analysis. This is not to question their validity but to problematize the field of symbolic forces they evoke, as they are not neutral words.

From the perspective of the agents who operationalize the processes of terminating parental rights, with whom I was able to speak and observe, the most frequent reasons that lead to children and adolescents being placed in institutional care are associated with parental negligence, abandonment, alcohol and drug dependence, and physical or psychological abuse, as illustrated in the statements of my interlocutors:

I think that mental health issues have increased a lot... and drug use issues, too.... So, yeah, mental health problems are actually what cause families to abandon their children and teenagers. (Rosana, a judge)

The reasons for losing parental rights are serious. We're talking about serious violence against a child or teen's physical and sexual wellbeing.... It's not rare to see cases where the mother's new partner sexually abuses a daughter, and sometimes, the mom knows about it and does nothing. There are also situations of neglect and

mistreatment... the child isn't going to school, doesn't have enough food, is lacking basic care. (Madalena, a judge)

Nowadays, a lot of cases are because of drug abuse. The abuse of drugs has caused so many situations where mothers end up losing custody, where the family loses their parental rights. (Simone, a guardianship counsellor)

One of the things that really stands out to me is the number of women dealing with alcoholism and drug addiction, which makes them, quote-unquote, irresponsible when it comes to caring for their kids. So they don't provide care, they don't protect them, they just abandon the little ones to fend for themselves. So you have kids with no care, no protection, who are left home alone while their mothers go out to drink or use drugs ... once we confirm there's neglect, that a child has been abandoned, or that the home is unstable, unsanitary, or dangerous, these parents end up losing their parental rights over their children. (Cecília, guardianship counsellor)

Sexual violence, physical violence, neglect, abandonment, educational neglect.... It's usually never just one thing, you know? There's always more than one issue going on.... We see a lot of cases that involve sexual, psychological, and physical violence, too" (Emilia, psychologist)

These factors must be understood within the context of extreme social vulnerability, which blames and punishes mothers. The circumstances involve women who are objectified and reduced to their reproductive function. They are expected to conceive, give birth, and raise children, and then deal alone with the systematic separation from them if they deviate from the socially established role of good mothers (O'Reilly, "Normative Motherhood"), reinforcing the stigmatizing label of "incapable" upon them.

This analysis does not seek to relativize maternal practices that may risk a child's wellbeing. Rather, its purpose is, from a sociological standpoint, to suspend judgment on the discourses and actions of the sociolegal agents involved in the termination of parental rights. This approach allows for an analysis of the mechanisms of classification and judgment that, while supposedly neutral and impartial, actually reiterate profound processes of exclusion.

Multiple social circumstances, not just a single factor, lead to the dissolution of a family unit. The results show that removing children from their families frequently occurs because poverty is treated as an individual failing. The issue manifests at all social levels, but families with fewer resources face the greatest exposure because other groups have alternatives, such as therapeutic support

or help from relatives, to face the same difficulties. This understanding is reflected in the words of Emília, a psychologist at the Childhood and Youth Court of Londrina:

You can see that pretty much everyone, the great majority, like, 99 per cent of the cases are from low-income families. It's super rare to get a different case, mostly because it doesn't even reach the justice system, you know? I'm talking about situations from middle and upper-class families, right? For example, I worked at CREAS for a long time, back when it exclusively dealt with families, kids, and teens with suspected sexual violence. We know there are cases in the wealthier neighbourhoods, but those cases don't reach public services. So, they get hushed up; they're taken to private professionals.... It's just rarer, like, for reports to be made, for it to get to that point.... Not that it doesn't happen.

Although the reasons that lead to the termination of parental rights are common in families of all social classes, society tends to blame and judge individuals according to a standard that considers financial status, gender identity, and ethnic origin, among other markers. It should be noted that the families who lose custody of their children—mostly single, poor, and Black mothers—have their lives judged by state bureaucracy through a moral lens that is different from and detached from their own social environment. This lens of judgment is aggravated by the hostility with which these mothers are treated, as exemplified by the testimony of Tainá upon appearing before the judge to respond to the suspension of her parental rights:

At the hearing, it was just me and him [her partner]. I was still with him back then, going through it all—the fighting, the drama—but we were still together, me and Lucas. Anyways, I went into the courtroom, and the judge just started yelling. She said so much, and I answered what I could. The thing is, if someone is rough with me, I just shut down. I get quiet. I start crying. And she was just so harsh, you know? Then she was like, “You’re still with this guy? Have you no shame?” It’s just... I know she’s there to judge, but I really don’t know if that’s the way you’re supposed to do it. I don’t understand

The way these agents speak and exercise control functions by inverting the perception of these mothers. Instead of being understood as individuals failed by the state and deprived of their rights, they are seen through a moral lens that defines them as guilty or bad mothers, which, in turn, justifies the violation of their legal protections and the systematic elimination of their mothering practices.

Frequently, the father is not mentioned in the court records, does not appear before the judge at hearings, and does not participate in the children's upbringing—not even with child support—and is not held accountable for this. Many children and adolescents do not even have their father's name on their birth certificate. Sonia, a general services employee at a children's shelter, speaks about the standard discourse on the father's absence:

A kid is always seen as more of the mom's than the dad's. A woman has a child, and even if she goes on to start another family, she never stops having that first kid. That child will always be hers. But for him [the father], it's like that child doesn't even exist, so he can start his new family. So he'll say, "I take great care of my kids with this woman," but what about the kid with the other one [the ex]? Just forget about them? And that's how the child, a lot of the time, ends up in a shelter because the excuse is always, "Well, the mom couldn't handle it."

The greater burden of these processes falls on the mother—often Black women, for whom a historical legacy of colonial and ethnic-racial exclusion exacerbates the oppression they face. Given the unequal conditions that women confront in a patriarchal, colonial, classist, racist, heteronormative, and ableist society, it is the mother who bears the social responsibilities, expectations, and demands related to maintaining the family, the reproduction of life, and childrearing (Akotirene; González).

The lack of effective public policies to support vulnerable families, such as those dealing with alcohol or drug addiction, directly undermines their ability to care for their children. The following excerpts, from Simone, a child protection counsellor in Londrina, point out glaring gaps in the support network, such as the scarcity of psychological care and of places for children to stay while their mothers work:

Today we don't have a city psychology service that handles situations that need psychological support. Mental health in our city is a huge problem right now, and we just don't have that kind of care. CAPS [Community Psychosocial Attention Center, acronym in Portuguese] is totally not enough. We were just talking about a kid who's on a waiting list to be seen two years from now. How can a kid who tried to commit suicide today only get help in two years? ... We also have this gap for kids from four to six years old, where there's nowhere for them to go. From six years old and up, we have after-school programs. But for the four- and five-year-olds, there's nothing. So, a single mom has to work part-time. But how are you supposed to support a family on a part-time job? You just can't.

This critique of inadequate social policies is a common point of convergence in the academic research on the termination of parental rights in Brazil. Tragically, even when love is present, these mothers are negatively affected by their failure to conform to the behavioural standards that the social order establishes and demands yet without offering effective material means of support. In this context, Julia, a social worker who closely followed Kauane's termination of parental rights case, participated in several meetings to coordinate referrals through the social protection network. She offers this assessment:

I think that the things I used to hear, you know, in those [work-related case] studies, in the very hearings I attended, are things that... it's not about being "Kauane"; it's about anyone. There are things you just shouldn't say about another human being. So, I saw a very biased, a really biased view of the situation. And then, I would talk a lot with Kauane herself about her situation. I always made her very aware of the difficulty of it all. She was very conscious of it. I'd say, "Kauane, they want this, this, and that from you." It was like, she had to start working. She had to go to CAPS every day. She had to do a whole list of things. And one slip-up from her was enough to put her desire and her will to have her kids back in check, her ability to have those kids back, that's what it was.

Thus, there is an overemphasis on the outcomes of terminating parental rights and subsequently placing children for adoption. In contrast, initiatives aimed at family reunification and preserving emotional bonds are devalued. This reality is reflected in the routine application of the suspension of parental rights and in the excessive number of institutional placements for children and adolescents. Such a tragic observation is evident in the following statement by Cassia, a social worker at the Childhood and Youth Court in Londrina: "There's this situation where, when kids are taken into care, the [social services] network just disappears. It should be the other way around, you know? That's exactly when the network needs to step in to strengthen the family and prepare them for the child's return. That's a real struggle we face."

In summary, the empirical findings demonstrate that the termination of parental rights, though legally justified, operates as a mechanism that selectively punishes dissonant forms of motherhood. The trajectories of Kauane, Tainá, Maiara, and Iara reveal that state intervention primarily targets women already affected by structural violence, such as poverty, racism, paternal absence, domestic violence, and substance abuse. As admitted by the system's own agents, this intervention is marked by a moralistic perspective that disregards the families' social context and is exacerbated by ineffective public support policies. By holding vulnerable mothers individually responsible

for collective and systemic failures, the termination process not only dissolves family bonds but also reinforces and perpetuates cycles of social, racial, and gender-based exclusion.

Concluding Remarks

Matricentric feminism urges us to develop a more militant, radical, direct, and defiant politics in our critique of patriarchal motherhood, which includes combating the burdens imposed on mothers, as well as their abandonment and blame. O'Reilly posits that childcare is intrinsically linked to maternal care ("Empowered"). Thus, if we are interested in providing the best for children, the most effective method is through laws and policies that support mothers and motherhood, beginning with ensuring their essential rights are met. A supported and valued mother is more likely to provide a healthy and stimulating environment for her child's development (Smith).

Matricentric feminism brings to the forefront the historical subjugation of mothers—marked by forced sterilization and high maternal mortality, especially among racialized women—which has influenced who is permitted to mother. This history is perpetuated in current discourses, such as the use of the term "negligence." By studying the trajectories of women who have been separated from their children, this article proposes the need for an epistemological and practical turn within Brazil's rights-guarantee system. Overcoming the cycle of criminalizing dissident motherhood and ensuring the comprehensive protection of children demand the development of a matricentric literacy among state agents—such as judges, prosecutors, public defenders, social workers, psychologists, and guardianship counsellors—as well as the promotion of public and private social policies across all sectors of human development.

The proposed matricentric literacy must transcend the mere notion of sensitivity training and establish a new framework for institutional interpretation and action. This framework is grounded in a shift from suspicion to structural understanding, which would move the judicial and technical focus away from individualized suspicion of the violating or negligent mother and towards a structural analysis of the material and symbolic conditions undermining the practice of motherhood. Implementing continuous training programs, workshops, and revising institutional protocols through the lens of matricentric feminism are concrete and urgent steps forward.

This article has briefly addressed the issue of the termination of parental rights in Brazil, highlighting the discrepancy between legislation defining it as an exceptional measure and the reality of its widespread use. The reflections gathered here clash with the way oppressive social structures predominantly affect low-income families—especially poor, Black single mothers—who have

historically suffered from exclusion under patriarchy, neoliberal capitalism, and colonialism.

Addressing this topic opens strategic possibilities for confronting the traps through which social institutions capture the daily lives of women and mothers. Whether in Rich's denunciatory reading of Michulski or in the daily reality of Kauane, the mother from the opening epigraph, there are many faces of the deliberate disrespect for women's lives. Even more specific is the blatant way these multiple forms of violence fall upon mothers, going as far as to label them mentally ill, condemn them in courts of law, or both.

Knowing women's stories and listening to their accounts of how they became mothers and what they have lived through on their journeys humanize institutionally invisible lives. This approach allows for a process of reflection to be established, making it possible to become sensitive to the pain of the other (LaPlantine) and to processes of collective oppression, especially against women and mothers. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to strip away filters, masks, and social conventions. The reluctance to engage in this reflective process is neither incidental nor random; it finds its explanation in the very purpose of matricentric feminism, or maternal theory, which examines and theorizes how and why normative motherhood endures (O'Reilly and Green).

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Endnotes

1. All translations from Portuguese are my own.
2. Names are pseudonyms.

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