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*Consumo e moralidade em contextos de vulnerabilidade: histórias de mulheres*

**Renata Menasche, Carmen Janaina Machado e Gabriela Richter Lamas**

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### Edição electrónica

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/aa/9725>

DOI: 10.4000/aa.9725

ISSN: 2357-738X

### Editora

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Antropologia Social (UnB)

### Edição impressa

Paginação: 244-262

ISSN: 0102-4302

### Referência eletrónica

Renata Menasche, Carmen Janaina Machado e Gabriela Richter Lamas, «Stories of women on consumption and morality in contexts of vulnerability», *Anuário Antropológico* [Online], v.47 n.2 | 2022, posto online no dia 28 julho 2022, consultado o 31 julho 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/aa/9725> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/aa.9725>

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Este documento foi criado de forma automática no dia 31 julho 2022.



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# Stories of women on consumption and morality in contexts of vulnerability

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## NOTA DO EDITOR

Recebido em 25/01/2022

Aprovado para publicação em 25/01/2022 pela editora Alberto Fidalgo Castro

## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> Boleto+1, a "network of affective & financial support in times of coronavirus", was founded in March 2020. According to reports from two admins<sup>1</sup>, the initiative was launched by a group of women from Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, most of them working in artistic fields – especially cinema and theater – who sought to tackle, with a solidarity-based approach, the crisis that hit self-employed workers since the beginning of the pandemic: "if you can, help a struggling woman by paying one of her bills". With a rapid and massive support from women and the multiplicity of demands, the group soon lost its primary focus on the payment of bills and included countless other ways of sorority support.
- <sup>2</sup> In December 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil had been going on for nine months and had recorded 190,000 deaths, the Facebook group Boleto+1 (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Boleto1>), aimed at raising donations, had over 55 thousand members. According to the group's nine-month accountability report, disclosed on

January 5, 2021, more than two thousand requests were met, reaching one thousand families with donations that added to around R\$ 220 thousand<sup>2</sup>. It said:

(...) what really matters is that we know that this group has helped thousands of women and their families. Our fellow group members know that this help reaches far beyond what numbers can show. Because this group is about paying bills, yes, but it is also about carpooling, advice, a bed to sleep. How many times has someone won food supplies and shared it with the group? Or received a donation and shared some of it? There have also been medical advice, legal assistance, visual identity to leverage businesses, private lessons.

- 3 Meanwhile, in that very December 2020, more than 14 million families were beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* Program (BFP), then falling within the scope of the Emergency Aid, a financial assistance granted by the Brazilian government, set out by Law No. 13982, dated April 2, 2020. This law introduced non-standard social protection measures during the public health emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Bolsa Família* was created in 2004 to promote social inclusion for low-income families<sup>3</sup>, encouraging compliance with some health and education requirements (Campello and Neri 2013). As a direct income transfer program, BFP is aimed at families in situations of extreme poverty and poverty, with monthly *per capita* income of up to R\$ 89.00 and between R\$ 89.01 and R\$ 178.00, respectively.
- 4 What both initiatives, *Boleto+1* and *Bolsa Família* — so different in terms of nature, genesis, and history — have in common is the fact that they are targeted at vulnerable segments of the population and are especially designed for women. *Boleto+1* is conceived from a “feminist and politically engaged” approach. The grant is preferably paid to women, a choice that has been made since the inception of the Program in order to contribute to female empowerment and autonomy. That is why, based on the impact such programs have on the lives of vulnerable women and taking as a point of observation the contexts in which some of them are embedded, we chose to place two strikingly different initiatives side by side.
- 5 We have asked to which kind of resource allocation constraint women are subject in both initiatives at issue. Which are the legitimate uses of the cash transferred, either from public policies or charity efforts?
- 6 To ponder on the matter, we have looked at consumption strategies and related perceptions among women situated in two different research contexts.
- 7 Some of the leading figures of the stories told here are female beneficiaries of land settlement and cash transfer programs. These women were heard during the ethnographic research conducted between August 2016 and April 2018, in a city located in the Southern part of Rio Grande do Sul, during the doctoral thesis writing of one of the authors of this paper (Machado 2019). Ethnography was first introduced within the institutional space where the program beneficiaries forge and strengthen their bonds with the program: the division, within the Local Social Welfare Office, that handles the Single Registry for the federal government’s social programs (CadÚnico). Leaving the CadÚnico Office, ethnography was then applied to the houses of female rural workers, living in three land reform settlements. This field entry was conducted with three interlocutors that had participated in previous research to be later extended to their neighbors and other acquaintances who were also beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família*. While the field diary notes regarding the CadÚnico Office entry sought to apprehend aspects related to how the program worked, by sharing the women’s daily lives, we sought to observe their relationship with the program and their consumption practices.

- 8 The other protagonists of the stories told here are women living in urban areas across the country, especially in the outskirts of Porto Alegre and São Paulo, who joined the Boletto+1 Facebook group after losing income because of lockdown measures in place during COVID-19 pandemic. The viable research approach, conducted by one of the authors of this article, was the one allowed by the context: in times of social isolation, research could only be conducted via digital media. Initially, from a mutual acquaintance, it was possible to get in touch and interview, via a WhatsApp call, one of the group's admins. Afterwards, by following up and observing posts made in the group, we have tracked women whose cases aroused attention and/or showed greater engagement in the group. They were then contacted via the Facebook group, and private messages were sent to them, some of them developing into interviews that were conducted via WhatsApp video calls. The analysis corpus is therefore made up of posts and comments from women who, in 2020, during the first months of the pandemic, requested or made donations through the Boletto+1 Facebook group, complemented by conversations and interviews with some of these women and group admins.
- 9 Following this introduction, the paper comprises three other parts, in addition to a brief overview of the main findings at the end. In the next item, we will introduce some operating parameters of the initiatives at issue. Then, we will look at images used in promotional materials for the *Bolsa Família* Program and in donation requests published in Boletto+1. In these two items, we will introduce elements that allow us to understand how these vulnerable women under analysis are constrained by a moralistic consumption perspective, which will also be observed in report excerpts of five of them, two beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família* and three members of the Boletto+1 group. The amassed data will then be analyzed in light of a reflection on poverty, vulnerability, and women.

## The rules

- 10 To qualify for the *Bolsa Família* Program, applicants must be enrolled in CadÚnico, keep their data up to date, and report any address, telephone number or family constitution (birth, adoption, death, marriage, separation) change.
- 11 The Program sets health and education requirements that must be met by the benefiting families, including the monitoring of the vaccination status, growth and development of children under 7; prenatal care for pregnant women; monitoring of nursing mothers. Likewise, they are required to enroll children in school and comply with a minimum monthly attendance of 85% for the 6-15 age group and 75% for adolescents aged 16 and 17 who receive the Youth Variable (*Variável Jovem*) benefit. Modalities and amounts received vary according to the family composition – number of members, age group, pregnancy status, and family income.
- 12 To have their request posted on Boletto+1, women must also complete an application, where their data is checked and validated by the group's admins. Such measure was only implemented in August 2020, as part of a growing set of anti-fraud and organization measures, and to avoid disrespectful comments.
- 13 At the beginning of Boletto+1's activities, the admins would only ban any offensive post or requests/service offers that would not be directly related to the pandemic context.

They would also discourage impersonal posts, suggesting that the request should include a narrative about the situation experienced by the woman. Since its foundation in March until December 2020, the Boletto+1 group was closed for reorganization and then reopened at least five times, always bringing new rules regarding the maximum value per request – set at R\$ 300 in May; minimum interval between two requests – initially it was one week, then extended to ten days; prohibition of private requests, which would then be interpreted as personal harassment against admins or other members. Penalties for violating these rules were the blocking or banishment from the group.

- 14 Given the impact of images and to avoid that member would use them to shock, right after Boletto+1 started operating, the group admins limited it to two images per post; then they explained that photos that showed pain and suffering would not be accepted and, finally, after what one admin described as “the emptiest refrigerator contest”, the use of images was completely banned.
- 15 It should also be noted that, in this type of Facebook group, when you click on the photo of a member, you will see the interactions, posts and comments they made in the group. The group also provides guidelines to avoid any self-righteousness assumption: “We don’t judge the substance of the request, please don’t judge”, “Didn’t like a post? Found the request strange? Don’t judge”.
- 16 Having outlined the rules that restrict the members’ interactions in the two initiatives under analysis, we have observed other constraints to which these women are submitted in images snapped on posters publicizing *Bolsa Família*, as well as on posts made in the Boletto+1 group, as found below.

## What do posters and refrigerators say?



IMAGE 1 - POSTER PUBLICIZING THE *BOLSA FAMÍLIA* PROGRAM.  
SOURCE: FACEBOOK – *BOLSA FAMÍLIA*, 2018.

- 17 The image is part of the promotional material for the *Bolsa Família* Program on Facebook, in which the hashtag #FicaADica suggests that beneficiaries might purchase school supplies. The picture shows fruits and vegetables, foods that are usually classified as healthy. By observing the images on Facebook, one can see repeated posts that suggest the consumption of food, school supplies and clothes, particularly focusing on children. This is what can be seen in Image 2, which shows the use of cash transfers under the scope of *Bolsa Família* in 2008 – food as the main expense, followed by school supplies –; in the motto “*Bolsa família* is about putting food on the table for our children” (Figure 3); in the post on the readjustment of the amount bringing an image of a mother and her children buying food (Figure 4); in the post calling people to “pay more attention to what you eat” (Figure 5) or even in the “Elastimom”, a superhero that helps *Bolsa Família* “fight hunger and make children grow” (Figure 6).



Image 2 - Use of *Bolsa Família* transfers Image 3 - Linking *Bolsa Família*, food and children  
 Source: Facebook – *Bolsa Família*, 2008. Source: Facebook – *Bolsa Família*, 2016.



Image 4 - Readjustment and reference to food Image 5 - Healthy eating campaign  
 Source: Facebook – *Bolsa Família*, 2016.



Image 6 - Supermothers Campaign

Source: Facebook – Bolsa Família, 2016.

- 18 The posters suggest items that should be consumed using the cash transfer, suggesting guidelines that would be related to the program requirements, such as children's weight and measurements follow-up or school attendance. Therefore, even though the law laying down *Bolsa Família* does not contain any provision on how the cash transferred by the Program should be used, these images show what kind of consumption would be considered legitimate and, accordingly, show the profile of what would be deemed a "good" mother and housekeeper - as shown in the righthand top corner of Figure 6, a Super Mother.
- 19 Still regarding the images, but now looking at the Boletto+1 group, it is worth recalling the aforementioned changes in the group rules. As reported by the admins, first - when there were no restrictions on image use -, the images usually showed people in a situation of extreme vulnerability, exposing children with skin diseases, children crying to ask for food, elderly people wasting away.
- First, we asked people not to post images of pain and suffering, leaving out sick children and elderly people in a state of degradation. Because what was going on there was very demeaning. But then came the images of empty fridges, or of a person cooking on a small stove on a dirt floor. Then we started to search for these images on the Internet and they were not actually of those people making requests, but rather taken [from some image bank] on the Internet. Then we started to think that those images were being used to arouse pity and compassion and that people used it to have their requests met, as many posts arrive on a daily basis and not all of them are granted. So, this was how some people made their posts more appealing. It does not mean that the person does not need the money, does not need help, but resorting to it just to have its request met seems to harm people who were complying with all the group rules. We set out some rules: what they could ask, to be honest, to be brief, to tell their stories quickly... and there were many people who respected it, and these people were being harmed by the little act of a minority. And that is why we banned it, to cut the drama. (Excerpt from a testimonial from a Boletto+1 admin, via audio message on WhatsApp).
- 20 As reported, at the time when the pain and suffering images were banned, many photos of empty refrigerators and pantries began to appear. One of the admins referred to this

phenomenon as an “emptiest refrigerator contest”, as illustrated by the sequence of photos reproduced below, taken from different posts dated July 2020.

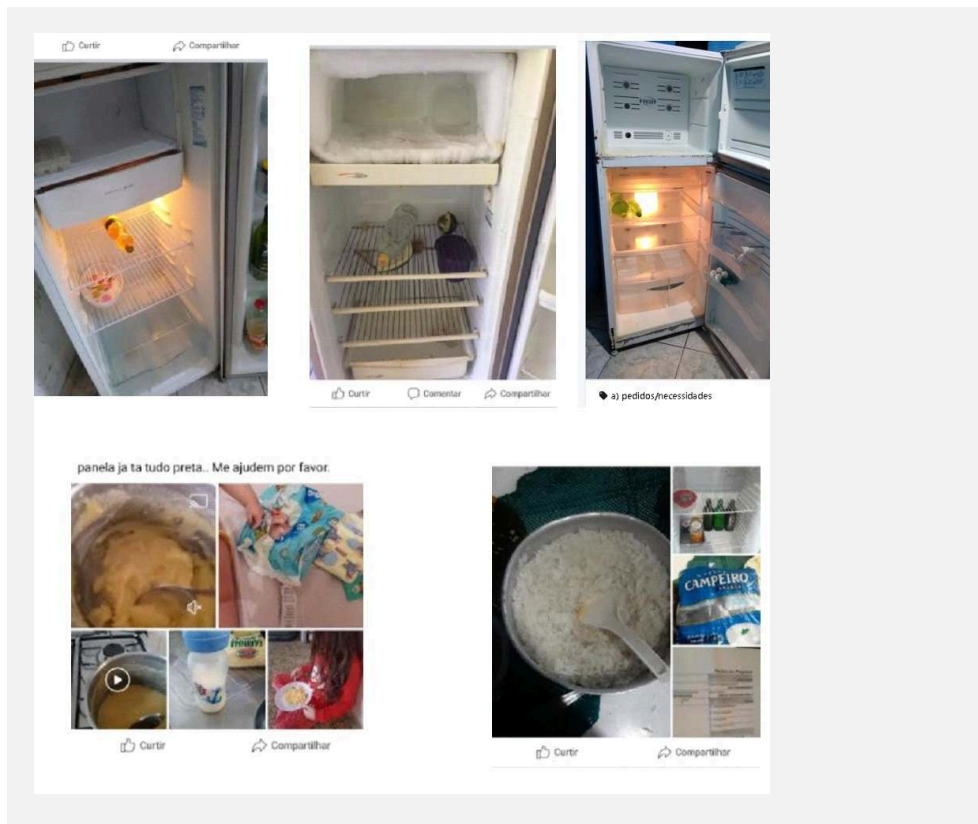


Image 7 - Empty refrigerators and other images suggesting food shortages.  
Source: Facebook, Boleto+1 Group, July 2020.

- 21 Image 7 shows an attempt to trigger, in the requests, moral parameters that would point to what should be purchased with the donations, since food intended to alleviate hunger seems to be the most legitimate use.
- 22 Arguing over basic and superfluous needs, Livia Barbosa and Colin Campbell (2013, 39) mention that such distinction can “establish criteria of rights, moral stance, engagement and constitution across societies, other than allowing the observation of underlying power mechanisms”. According to these authors, behind the opposition between basic and superfluous needs is the possibility that some social and political groups might control how and what other groups should consume. Such control is exerted particularly over the most vulnerable classes, a context in which consumption aimed at meeting needs culturally defined as basic is considered dignified, while consumption aimed at supporting certain lifestyles is considered inadequate or even reckless, as they would fall above the so-called basic needs (Barbosa and Campbell, 2013). It is within this framework that we can understand that once certain social segments are classified as “poor”, the way they spend their money is established beforehand by third parties.
- 23 Before proceeding with the debate over our current moralities on consumption and public policies, we invite our readers to meet Bianca, Joana, Valquíria, Alessandra and Mercedes, women whose stories have added to the ongoing analysis.



## Stories of women

### • Bianca and the TV bill

- 24 Bianca does not explain much. She is a 15-year-old girl who lives with her mother and younger siblings and sought the Boleto+1 group to ask for help to pay a TV bill worth R\$ 164. In her post, in which she shows a photo of a TV featuring a cartoon animation for children, she says:

Could anyone pay this bill for my mother, because she doesn't have the money and me and my four brothers cannot go through lockdown without a TV to watch. It's bad enough without food, my mother is doing everything she can to get us food, and there's no way for us to pay this bill.

- 25 Reading the comments on Bianca's post, one of them, written by the group's admins, draws attention:

Friends, I have already removed some comments here. A LITTLE HEADS-UP: if you don't consider someone else's request important, leave it be, don't tell them how they should act or criticize a need that you don't quite understand.

- 26 Besides the comments that had already been deleted by the admin, there were at least another five dozen of them: advising Bianca to negotiate the bill with the TV provider or to hire Internet service and purchase a "box TV" (a device used to access channels without paying for the service); saying the TV provider could not cancel the service due to the pandemic; reinforced the girl's request for help; recalling that, according to the group rules, it is forbidden to pass judgments on any request.

- 27 Bianca managed to have her TV bill paid. After the first post, Bianca would once again ask for help to pay for their cable TV bill, and, on other occasions, to pay rent, buy food and gas, always putting the situation of the family in context. Every time, her requests were granted.

### • Joana and her boys: "I am not living on Bolsa Família"

- 28 While she was a kid, Joana came with her family from Northwestern Rio Grande do Sul to the settlement, in the southern portion of the state. Before that, her father had been living in a campsite for nine months. At the age of 28, she, her two children – aged ten and six – and her husband live on a land plot in the same settlement where her parents live. Joana has lived there for less than two years and says that she is still working on the lot, where they plant food for the family's consumption (sweet potatoes, cassava, chickens, geese, turkeys, pigs, dairy cows) and tobacco, which is intended for the market.

- 29 At the age of nine, Joana had left her parents' house to work as a nanny for two girls, in the house of a family that first lived in the countryside and later moved to the city. Later, she resumed her studies and, in exchange for work, she received house, food and some pieces of clothes, from a family with which she lived for approximately three years. After that, she went back to live with her parents in the settlement, working as a day laborer in tobacco farming. The money she received was used to buy her clothes and shoes. She got married at 16 and left home to live with her husband's family – only later would they have their own piece of land–, having her first child at 17 years old. The money she would then receive working in tobacco farming on neighboring properties was used for family expenses.

- 30 Joana believes that her family is going through a difficult moment, unable to make ends meet, as the only money they receive comes from *Bolsa Família*. During the conversation

at her home, when asked about the update of the CadÚnico registration, she claims to have been asked about how she used the money received from the Program. She then says that with

the cash transfer, I hold credit in Pompeia [a clothing and shoe store]. The kids grow fast, I buy them clothes, shoes, Nescau [powdered chocolate drink], which they like a lot, a pudding, a jelly.

- 31 Joana says that everything she and her mother buy with the cash from *Bolsa Família* is intended for the kids. She refutes what her sister, who lives and works in Porto Alegre, state capital of Rio Grande do Sul, says, suggesting that Joana would not be interested in looking for other sources of income, considering her lazy because she receives the *Bolsa Família* cash. Joan asks: “Who could live off R\$ 152? [Cash amount she receives from *Bolsa Família*]”, arguing “I don’t live off this cash, I work as a peasant!”. She also highlights that she gardens to produce food for her family, which represents significant savings, as she does not need to buy those food items in the supermarket.

• *Valquíria: the expensive stove*

- 32 Valquíria lives in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, and posted in the Boletto+1 group in August 2020 introducing herself as the “single mom of a 1-year-old girl, day laborer, lost both of her parents in childhood and is a happy, peaceful and hopeful woman”.
- 33 Valquíria’s profile includes some of the characteristics commonly found among women who make requests in Boletto+1: mostly self-employed women who see themselves unable to work due to the pandemic or who, in this context, are unemployed; often black; single moms, who raise their children on their own and, as childcare centers and schools shut down, had to stay at home all the time.
- 34 Valquíria explains that she is appealing to the group to ask for help to start a small business, because she needs to purchase a better stove to prepare the food that she intends to sell – such as chicken wings and “turbo potatoes” – as her current stove is rusty and only two burners are working. She also says that she even bought a credit card terminal, which will be useful for her new business.
- 35 In her post, Valquíria mentions details of her personal and financial life, reporting that she is paying the mortgage for her house, bought under the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* program – a Brazilian government housing subsidy program. She says that she found the perfect stove on the Internet and that she is procuring the money to make the purchase, in the amount of R\$ 500. Valquíria posts some photos of the stove she wants to buy and of her current stove, which is quite damaged, as well as a photo of her daughter, a small girl dressed as a princess, with the caption: “I ask for your help to buy more than just a stove, but rather my autonomy and financial independence”.
- 36 Comments in the posts diverge. There are those who believe that the stove she wants is too expensive, saying that Valquíria could find a used one for up to R\$ 200. There are those who understand that, to make fried food, what she needs is a fryer, while for others, the stove is a good and wise choice. Valquíria responds to the comments, explaining her choice based on previous work experience in a restaurant, commenting on the power and brand of the desired stove, weighing that the price might vary across regions and presenting the search results she made to support her choice for that type of stove. Finally, she asks exasperatedly: “if I could only get anything at all, right? Because everyone is talking about the price, and this is not helping me at all [...] May

good people understand my needs right now and hold my hands." From what can be seen from the posts, it seems that she did not have her request met by the group.

• *Alessandra: Get a one-room flat!*

- 37 Alessandra, a black woman from São Paulo upstate, begins her request in the Boleto+1 group apologizing for asking, saying that she cannot believe she reached that point. Many of the women who ask for help in the group start by apologizing. Alessandra says that she lives with her two daughters and her wife and receives a R\$ 230 alimony from the biological father of her daughters. In a post dated April 2020, she says that she has not been able to find work, but that she is available for any job referrals, adding that her wife, who is at elevated risk for COVID-19 because she suffers from cardiac arrhythmia and bronchitis, cannot work during the pandemic. She also says that she cannot file for unemployment insurance relief, because, according to her, to be entitled to the relief again, she would have to wait for 16 months since the last time she received it. Even being the breadwinner of the family, Alessandra was granted only a R\$ 600 Emergency Aid.
- 38 Threatened with eviction for not paying the R\$ 900 rent, Alessandra is looking for a cheaper house, but, in the meantime, she must pay the monthly fee. She has saved R\$ 500 and is looking for the remaining R\$ 400.
- 39 It is in this context that she seeks help from the Boleto+1 group, explaining her situation and posting screenshots of the WhatsApp conversation with the landlady, who refuses to reduce the rent fee. Alessandra says she is very ashamed to ask for help, saying that she has always worked as a cook and always managed to pay for her rent. She adds that, finding herself in this situation, she even attempted suicide.
- 40 In the group, the first comment addressed to Alessandra, in response to her request, advises her to not get desperate:
- Don't think about killing yourself, everything will be fine, if you kill yourself the situation will get worse. Turn on your TV on channel 21 to hear words of faith and comfort. You'll come through it, you must trust God.
- 41 In the next comment, a woman says she can help with everything she has: "Man, no kidding, I have R\$ 8.84 in my bank account, will that do?"
- 42 In the following comments, group members comment on the attitude of the landlady, saying that, on the one hand, it must also be difficult for her – "Things are hard for anyone" – and, on the other hand, that she is heartless for not lowering the price, "wow, that is so ridiculous of her".
- 43 Soon many women brought their contributions, telling Alessandra that the amount she pays for rent is expensive and advising her to get out of there and move somewhere that she can afford with the Emergency Aid cash. Some women tell Alessandra that she should look for a cheaper place, while others comment that her situation is still better than theirs. Alessandra argues that she is indeed trying to find a cheaper place to live: "I've been looking, the problem is the tenancy deposit, landlords are asking too much in advance, "Yes, I'm looking for it, if I found a house for R\$ 600 a month would be perfect. Then I would be able to pay for transportation and food because I'm not ashamed to ask for help and work. I am looking for it".
- 44 After dealing with repeated comments that she should move to a cheaper place, Alessandra seems to get annoyed and explains that she has always managed to pay her

rent and bills, as she works since she was 12, adding the personal reasons that hinder the possibility of moving to a smaller place:

Ok, so I leave the place and where do I go with my family? My daughters, my wife with her health conditions? Do you think I wanted to be here going through this, exposing myself like this? No, never, for me this is humiliating, but as you said, "everyone is going through their own problems". May God bless your life.

45 To a comment suggesting that Alessandra should rent a one-room flat, she replies that "a one-room flat wouldn't do, I have 2 daughters, there are 4 of us here, and we don't have those [referring to one-room flats] around here, if I could, I would, really". Retorting, the woman says: "Girlfriend, in times of crisis, we can live in two rooms even [laughs]" .

46 In the end, some women draw attention to the fact that, despite so many comments, Alessandra still had not got the help she needed, to which she responds:

I know there are many requests for help here, I know that many of you say that my post is not about any need, but only I know what I'm going through, the nights where I can't sleep knowing that at any moment, I will not have a roof over my head. I don't know what do.

47 In a conversation with Alessandra via Messenger (Facebook private messaging app), after hearing the explanation about the research on the group, she asked for help, reporting that she had been banned from the group, so she no longer had access to it and could not ask for help, even though she still needed it. She reported that she could not stay in the old house, that she was currently living in a smaller place and that she was still going through trouble and had to send her daughters to their father's house – "which they hate" – and offer for sale on her Facebook page some domestic appliances that she owns. Alessandra revealed that, at first, she had some requests met by the group, including in the post mentioned above. Help came from people who did not say anything. However, she was soon blocked and no longer had access to the group, apparently as a punishment for having sent a request via private message.

• Mercedes, the wanderer and settler

48 Mercedes, 48, comes from the northwest portion of Rio Grande do Sul, having lived her childhood on farms with five other siblings. At the age of twelve, she moved to the city to work as a maid. For eight years she worked in the house of the first family that employed her, taking care of four children, and carrying out household chores. The money she received was spent on clothes. Mercedes says that when she was little, "I didn't even like to go to school, because I didn't have any clothes" and that, when she moved to the city, "I didn't have any winter outerwear, my brother would lend me his coat, the only one he had".

49 She married at the age of 19 and stayed married for nine months. She got divorced while she was pregnant because her husband was an alcoholic. She went back to work as a maid, but her salary was not enough for her expenses, so she returned to her parents' house. From her parents' house, she moved to a farm to work as a cook. That is where she lived until her son completed eighteen months, when she went back to live in the city, where she rented a house and enrolled her son in day care. Once again, she worked as a maid.

50 After a while, she was reunited with a teenage sweetheart, Lauro. They soon got married and went to live with Mercedes' brother, in a settlement in the municipality of Jóia. The brother convinced them to set up a camp so they could get their own land.

They camped in Santo Antônio das Missões, along with five thousand other families. In December 1989, after about a year and eight months living in the camp – when her son Vitor was five years old, Márcio was one year old and she was pregnant with Violeta – Mercedes and her family arrived at the settlement in which they live today, in the Southern part of Rio Grande do Sul.

- 51 Mercedes says that they spent over a year living in a shack tent and working on the land, until they built their house. “Lauro would walk to the grocery shop”, she recalls, saying that the distance he covered was 12 kilometers. Since she arrived at the settlement, Mercedes became an activist in the Movement [of the Landless Rural Workers, the MST], and soon took over the role of coordinator. Recalling that her youngest daughter, Vitória, was born during this period, she reports that for “six years I devoted myself entirely to the Movement, I even went to Brasília”. Currently, Mercedes works as a craft worker – crochet and painting – and she hardly leaves the house, saying that she misses when she *wandered around* with the Movement.
- 52 Mercedes underlines the importance of *Bolsa Família* for her family and neighbors, “our struggle was real before *Bolsa Família*, the program took many people out of poverty”. She remembers that, when she became a beneficiary, she used the cash for food:
- By the time she left the program, they were building the ranch and were no longer struggling. I raised my children with *Bolsa Família*, I would buy staples with it. I’d always raised pork and chicken. I’d also plant beans. I would buy some flour, rice, sugar. Then the entire month went well.
- 53 Over the years, the cash I received from *Bolsa Família* was primarily intended for food: “My *Bolsa Família* cash is set apart for Ivone [owner of a nearby grocery store], that is where I would buy [food], last month there was R\$ 100 left over and I used it to buy gasoline”. Saying that “last year I bought shoes for Márcio and Cristina, sometimes I buy sewing thread [for handicrafts]”. Mercedes reports that she also uses part of the money for her children and her art and craft work: “last month I bought corn for the chicken”. She makes a point: “When my children were young, *Bolsa Família* changed my life!”.
- 54 Just as the women posting requests in the Boleto+1 group – seeking to highlight how much their families need help to sensitize potential donors by sharing stories of their lives, as shown in the photos of empty refrigerators – *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries must repeatedly convince Program managers that they need the cash. In addition to submitting and updating the documents required by the Program, they are subject to receiving on-site visits from the program managers, if they suspect anything reported in the CadÚnico Office.
- 55 She recalls how embarrassed she felt on one occasion in which she had to update her data: “Another thing I don’t like about those girls is that when you answer something, they keep looking at each other... I feel like asking if I stink or something”. When asked to talk more about it, she confides: “it is like we are a lazy scumbag type, like we are not entitled to it!”. And she adds: “There at *Primeira Dama* [Social Welfare Office], that is how I feel, it makes me want to cry, I feel bad, it seems like I’m begging for it”. Mercedes associates the stigma with her status of settled farmer: “When I get there, it is like ‘oh, you’re from the settlement, right?’, they look at each other, ‘so you’re here to ask for something, right?’”.

## Poverty, vulnerability, and women

56 By analyzing the above images displayed in the promotional poster for *Bolsa Família* and in the posts requesting donations in the Boletto+1 group, we can notice, inspired by Barbosa and Campbell (2013), the moral control exerted over how the Poor spend their money. Also in the words of the cited authors:

The aspect of moral and/or political control over the consumption profile of the underprivileged led, until recently, both academia and the business world to ignore the working classes as consumers. Not only were their consumption preferences ignored, but also their acquisition, enjoyment, reframing strategies, and social mediating objects remain largely unknown by scholars who study these segments (Barbosa and Campbell 2013, 39).

57 The same approach is adopted here to shed light on the stories told above: the action of group admins seeking to restrain questions regarding Bianca's request for a donation to pay her cable TV bill – who substantiates her request by saying that her mother gives priority to feeding her children –; the emphasis with which Joana and Mercedes explain their *Bolsa Família* cash allocation strategies (always to their children); the reprimands – wouldn't they be asking for too much? – when Valquíria and Alessandra, respectively, sought help to improve or maintain appropriate working or housing conditions. Like so many other women – *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries or else, members of Boletto+1 or else –, the leading characters of the stories told here are faced with moral control mechanisms that put them under scrutiny, whether by society and/or by the State. In this scenario, the question that Mercedes "listens" – without ever having been asked – when feeling the look with which she is received in the CadÚnico Office becomes iconic: "You're here to ask for something, aren't you?".

58 In his analysis on government techniques in Latin America, Bruno Lautier (2014) makes it clear that the State makes a distinction between the "good poor" and the "bad poor". The "good poor" would be those who accept any question about their income, way of life while easily admitting that they should be re-educated and be humble. On the other hand, the "bad poor" would be sly and full of addictions, in addition to taking any cash transfer for granted, to which they would owe nothing in return.

59 It is also worth mentioning that, analyzing public policies, the author observes a relevant change in the first decade of the 21st century, in which the "fight against poverty" would have been replaced with the "fight against vulnerability". For Lautier (2014, 468), both terms, poverty, and vulnerability, are heirs of Christian morality, whereas:

On the one hand, the poor that receives the compassion of the rich is also their mean of salvation, achieved through the giving of alms. On the other hand, the phrase "help yourself and heaven will help you" – an old version of the slogan of the fight against vulnerability – has been a constant religious and lay motto since the end of the Middle Ages.

60 With regard to the field of studies on women and poverty – which landmark is the International Year of Women, proclaimed in 1975 by the United Nations – Luciana Cruz (2013, 81) points out that back then there was a "feminization of poverty", based in the understanding that "a home without a male presence would be an incomplete home and vulnerable to poverty". This perception would later gain more complexity by the

incorporation of other variables and the idea that poverty does not depend on the gender of the family breadwinner.

- 61 The 1997 UN Development Report – UNDP presents women’s empowerment as one of the priorities for the eradication of poverty. As Marins argues (2017, 110, emphasis added by the author), women’s empowerment – as in the case of *Bolsa Família* beneficiaries – is connected to a strategy of choosing cash recipients, in a scenario in which international organizations suggest that women are more capable of fighting poverty. Women “[...] thus become, under different rationales, the *target* and *main agent* of cash transfer policies [...] cash transfer programs clearly rely on gender capital to meet their goals”. This approach is supported by the images that illustrate the *Bolsa Família* campaign, like the poster reproduced in Image 8, which brings the message “Over three million breadwinning women have started to receive the Emergency Aid”.



Image 8 – Emphasis on women as breadwinners and beneficiaries  
Source: Facebook – Bolsa Família, 2020.

- 62 But, according to the same author, even though some studies suggest that *Bolsa Família* is a program that promotes women’s autonomy, they also suggest that this preferable ownership of the program’s card can be interpreted otherwise, as it “reinforces the image of women as caretakers and confirms the position of males as not responsible for looking after children” (Marins, 2017, 121).
- 63 In the same light, when reflecting on the preferable ownership of the *Bolsa Família* card by women, Cruz (2013) points out that this is what leads to women-oriented recommendations and regulations. In this way, women become the key figure of the Program, while men are exempted from any responsibility. According to the author, choosing women as *Bolsa Família* card holders can encourage the idea that women are the ones who should take care of the home, household chores and family obligations, which can reinforce the existing labor division inequalities. But, on the other hand, it also starts to shake up internal family hierarchies.
- 64 Shifting the focus back to the pandemic context, it is worth looking into the debate proposed by Denise Pimenta (2020), who points out that, in such circumstances, social structures are increasingly evidenced and that, in addition to the fact that every pandemic is racialized – not only because more blacks than whites die, but also because

female caretakers are mostly brown and black than white – the pandemic has the face of a woman. This is not only to the fact that women are the majority of health care workers, but also because they are those who take care in the domestic environment, being responsible for managing food, water and also cash transfers and donations of food and cleaning supplies, among others, in order to highlight the physical and psychological burden to which they are exposed.

- 65 Going back to the stories of women mentioned above, if we understand, as Pimenta (2020), that every pandemic is marked by class, gender, and race, we see the most common profile of women who seek help in the Boleto+1 group. And if we think about the women's role in income distribution programs, we can almost picture Mercedes and Joana on a *Bolsa Família* poster.

## Research findings

- 66 What do these stories, of people from places as diverse as land reform settlements and urban centers, inserted in different social, cultural, and economic contexts, have in common?
- 67 First, these are stories of women in vulnerable situations, like so many others. It is certainly no coincidence that several researchers have formulated similar stories over the last years.
- 68 Talita Eger (2013) is one of these researchers that have been reflecting on moralities underlying the use of cash transferred via *Bolsa Família*, in a study carried out in the city of Alvorada, Rio Grande do Sul. She shows that the underlying debate concerns the subject's ability to properly manage their cash transfers, mainly criticizing their consumption of goods considered superfluous and the alleged misuse of money – suggesting that there would be more suitable uses for such resources. By highlighting that this cash is intended to a social group whose behavior is stigmatized and monitored, Eger (2013, 18) points out that such money "carries class, gender and generation marks" – and also by race marks, we would add – "and crossed by meanings, morales, classifications and socially constituted and permanently tensioned expectations".
- 69 Observing the daily lives of families participating in the *Bolsa Família* Program in two large urban centers – Porto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro – Michele de Lavra Pinto (2013, 2016) shows that there is a tacit judgment determining that beneficiaries should use the cash received from the program to acquire food that comply with certain nutritional parameters considered adequate by health care professionals – an analysis supported by a study conducted by Mattar (2019), carried out in a favela in Rio de Janeiro. Based on field evidence, Pinto (2013, 166) perceives a conformation of a morally accepted hierarchy of needs regarding the consumption profile of low-income populations, whereas: "the moral rhetoric on consumption affects particularly poor populations, as they face a social ethnocentrism that undermines their capacity, autonomy and freedom over their own choices".
- 70 The women's stories heard by those authors, as well as the ones we bring here from our two research universes, are stories that crisscross since they are considered, based on parameters established by State public policies or civil society, stories of women in situations of social vulnerability. Some are "beneficiaries" of the *Bolsa Família* Program,



others are members of the Facebook group Boletto+1, where they make requests. Their stories are also crossed because they are placed under the scrutiny and control aimed at the women's consumption strategies, by the moralism to which they are subject.

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## NOTAS

1. We are grateful to the female settled farmers and the Boletto+1 members which were our interlocutors – it is worth mentioning Dani Sousa here – and we would also like to thank Livia Pasqual and Priscilla Guerra, women who have been or are ahead of Boletto+1, with whom we had the opportunity to interact over the research process. We make it clear that, according to the interlocutors, with the exception of the names mentioned in this note, any names mentioned throughout this paper are fictitious – and were assigned by the researchers based on the interlocutors' trajectories or by association with their real names – and also that the term “admin” will be broadly used in reference to the creator and/or moderator and/or admin of Boletto+1.

2. After a one-month break, in a "reopening livestream" held on February 2, 2021, on the new Boletto+1 Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/boletto+1>), the admins presented the new approach, explaining that the group would work as a collective fundraising project, with different rules and a different mode of operation from what had been in force until then, and the perspective of creating an association. In a video posted on YouTube (available here: <https://youtu.be/ivcgg6Mtm0M>), the admins briefly introduced the changes. The disclosure of requests for help and fundraising efforts, as it had been done until then, was no longer the purpose of the group. This change thus creates a time limit to the analysis of the Boletto+1 experience in this paper, restricting it to the first period of its existence. It should be stressed that at the time (January 5, 2021), one US dollar was equivalent to about R\$ 5.44 (Brazilian reais). This conversion base can be used to understand the amounts mentioned throughout the text.

3. According to the Program (MDS 2015), *family* means a nuclear unit, eventually extended to other individuals with kinship or affinity ties, living together and mutually supported by the contribution of each member (Law No. 10836, of 2004).

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## RESUMOS

A partir de dados de pesquisa obtidos em dois distintos contextos de vulnerabilidade social, este artigo analisa estratégias de consumo e percepções a elas associadas. São protagonistas das histórias contadas mulheres agricultoras bolsistas do Programa Bolsa Família e mulheres moradoras de centros urbanos que, em situação de redução de renda ocorrida durante a pandemia de COVID-19, aderiram ao grupo de Facebook Boletto+1. Entre as agricultoras, a pesquisa etnográfica foi realizada entre 2016 e 2018, enquanto que junto às associadas do Boletto+1 foi conduzida, em 2020, nos primeiros meses da pandemia, através de mídias digitais.

Based on research data obtained from two different contexts of social vulnerability in Brazil, this paper will analyze consumption strategies and how they are perceived. The leading figures of these stories are female peasants, beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* Program and women living in urban areas who had their income reduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic and had therefore to join the Boletto+1 Facebook group. Among female farmers, the ethnographic research was conducted between 2016 and 2018, while the research with Boletto+1 members was carried out in 2020, in the first months of the pandemic, via digital platforms.

## ÍNDICE

**Keywords:** women, vulnerability, consumption, pandemic

**Palavras-chave:** mulheres, vulnerabilidade, consumo, pandemia

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