

Family in the Bolsonaro administration: the State as the operator of a moral pedagogy

A Família no Governo Bolsonaro: o Estado como operador de uma pedagogia moral

La Familia en el Gobierno Bolsonaro: el Estado como operador de una pedagogía moral

Grin Debert, Guita ⁽ⁱ⁾

Mortara, Sofia ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

⁽ⁱ⁾ Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP, Departamento de Antropologia, Campinas, SP, Brasil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9096-3833>, ggdebert@uol.com.br.

⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ Universidade Estadual de Campinas – CEBRAP, São Paulo, SP, Brasil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3228-6985>, sofia.mortara@gmail.com.

Abstract

This article aims to examine how a conception of the State as operator of a moral pedagogy was implemented in the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022). There is a specific focus on the form that familism assumed during this period, particularly considering old age and how intergenerational family relations were addressed in the discourses that informed and characterized programs and initiatives carried out by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights (MMFDH). Employing a qualitative methodology—including interviews published in print and digital media, analysis of official documents released by the MMFDH, and press coverage—the research concentrates on two secretariats within the Ministry: the National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of Older Person, and the National Secretariat for the Family.

Keywords: Family, public policies, morality.

Resumo

O interesse do artigo é mostrar o modo como uma concepção do estado como operador de uma pedagogia moral foi acionado no governo Bolsonaro (2019-2022). Com o objetivo de explorar a forma específica que o familismo assume, com o foco principal na velhice, e no modo como as relações entre gerações adultas na família são tratadas nos discursos que definem e caracterizam os programas e ações levadas a cabo pelo Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos (MMFDH). Com base em uma metodologia qualitativa, envolvendo entrevistas veiculadas na mídia impressa e eletrônica, análise de documentos divulgados pelo MMFDH e de notícias na imprensa, a pesquisa se voltou particularmente para duas secretarias que compõem o MMFDH, a Secretaria Nacional de Promoção e Defesa dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa e a Secretaria Nacional da Família.

Palavras-chave: família, políticas públicas, moralidade.

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en mostrar cómo se ha producido una concepción del Estado como operador de una pedagogía moral en el Gobierno Bolsonaro (2019-2022). Su objetivo es explorar cómo asume el familismo con el foco principal en la vejez y cómo se tratan las relaciones discursivas entre las generaciones adultas en la familia que definen y caracterizan los programas y acciones llevadas a cabo por el Ministerio de la Mujer, de la Familia y de los Derechos Humanos (MMFDH). Con base en una metodología cualitativa, que involucró entrevistas publicadas en medios impresos y electrónicos, análisis de documentos publicados por el MMFDH y noticias en la prensa, esta investigación se enfocó particularmente en dos secretarías que conforman el MMFDH: la Secretaría Nacional de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos de las Personas Mayores y la Secretaría Nacional de la Familia.

Palabras clave: familia, políticas públicas, moralidad.

Introduction

In an interview given to the Brasil em Pauta TV show (CanalGov, 2022), Antonio Costa—National Secretary for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Person at the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights (MMFDH)—said: “Our family, from my point of view, given the amount of violence I am witnessing, is sick, and in need of treatment.”

The MMFDH was established in Brazil in 2019, under the President Jair Bolsonaro administration, with Pastor Damares Alves as minister, and was discontinued in 2023, with the new government administration. Analyses on the MMFDH have highlighted the centrality

assigned to the family in its internal structure, both in the initiatives implemented and in the discourses of the Minister and her secretaries.

In an article on Women and Family, sociologist Marília Moschkovich (2022) argues that the gender perspective was eradicated from the MMFDH, transforming the family into a tool for solving social issues. The author considers that the focus on the family was a tactic to implement the anti-gender policy by institutionally erasing inequalities that the Human Rights public policies of previous administrations would—in theory—seek to mitigate or resolve. Through an analysis of the Ministry’s use of YouTube, the author seeks to show that the conception that governs these practices considers campaigning or advertising to be public policies that can solve social issues formulated as moral issues. In this logic, moral solutions teaching people to behave in their daily private life, in the supposedly appropriate manner. That is, a conception in which the State would be the operator of a moral pedagogy.

In a similar vein, Teixeira and Brioli (2022) show how “gender ideology” restricted rights and barred public policies in the Chamber of Deputies. Legal scholars Campos and Bernardes (2022) show that “gender ideology” is an expression that marks the current conservative clash against the achievements and visibility of minority movements and a violent reaction to feminist and queer studies on gender. It is a “gender ideology of familistic nature,” spreading panic against feminisms and the LGBTIQ+ population. The authors consider that the MMFDH is the main disseminator of familistic ideology, strengthening policies to uphold the patriarchal family against feminisms and LGBTIQ+ movements, as a reaction to the democratic achievements that challenged some conservative structures of Brazilian society, in the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022).

The discourse of the Minister (Damares Alves) shows a manipulation of the concept of gender with the purpose of confusing public opinion and creating a climate of moral panic. Moral panic, resulting from the “violent reaction to gender,” is a strategy used in conjunction with sexual anxiety, (...) the concept of gender and the union of people of the same sex are used as threats to the identity of children and adolescents and to traditional marriage, and should therefore be combated. Gays, lesbians and transgender people threaten the fixed gender identity, the idea of marriage, reproduction and the family as the foundation of the patriarchal structure (Campos & Bernardes, 2022, p. 6).

The presence of the family in public policies is not new, and we know that public policies are active in recreating the family and its obligations. As pointed out by sociologist Donzelot (1980), since the nineteenth century the movement to normalize relations in the family was a process led by the rise and expansion of professions and institutions of social workers, which spread through the streets and courts, committed to governing families. However, as the above cited scholars show in detail and precision, the family seems to have risen to the forefront in the Bolsonaro administration.

Therefore, it is essential to complexify the relation between the welfare state and the family, in order to explore the forms that biopower (Foucault, 1988) assumes when the issue of the older persons is at stake, taking into account the legal apparatus, specific public policies and the dilemmas involved in them. This article aims to explore the specific form that the familistic discourse assumes, particularly when it also concerns the issue of older people, in order to understand how the intergenerational relations in the family are addressed in the programs and initiatives implemented by the MMFDH.

Based on a qualitative methodology, involving interviews published in print and digital media, analysis of documents released by the MMFDH and press coverage¹, the research focused particularly on two secretariats that are part of the MMFDH: the *National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Persons* and the *National Secretariat for the Family*.

On one hand, this article seeks to present the meanings that family articulates in the formulation and characterization of public policies in this context. On the other hand, considering that the relation between family and anti-gender policies has already been explored precisely in the analyses on the MMFDH, we sought to consider the discursive practices that operate the combination between neoconservatism and neoliberalism and the rhetoric that legitimizes, in the national context, this junction between different ideologies that have been allied in different countries.

¹ The search and analysis was carried out through 2 main fronts: (1) Survey of pages on the gov.br portal containing 2019–2023 administration texts on public programs and policies of interest to the research; (2) Searches in electronic media with the names of public policies of interest and under the terms “Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights,” “Damares Alves,” “Angela Gandra,” and “Antonio Costa,” specially focusing on interviews given by the Minister and Secretaries to magazines, newspapers and YouTube channels of relevant public access.

According to Brown (2019) and Cooper (2017), the presence of familistic ideals would explain the alliance between neoliberalism and neoconservatism that has characterized public policies in different national contexts. The central thesis of the authors is that these seemingly contradictory ideologies are allied and the key to this alliance lies in the family and the exacerbation of familial responsibilities.

In other words, we know that it is characteristic of conservatism to uphold and value the family as the basis of society; however, in the case of liberalism, the defense of individual autonomy and the free market would conflict with the hierarchies of gender and generation that mark family life. However, according to the authors, neoliberals are convinced of the importance of the family, whose absence would increase the costs of the State with older persons, abandoned children, single mothers, and other social welfare costs.

This article aims to provide elements for understanding what family was being created in the MMFDH; how the distribution of responsibility is verbalized in it; and what is the type of rhetoric that legitimizes the constitution of this new political place for the family. The first part of the text is dedicated to presenting the structure of the MMFDH and the *National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Person* with emphasis on the changes in the relation with the National Council for the Defense of the Older Person and on the transformation of violence against older persons into family violence. Next, the focus is the *National Secretariat for the Family*. We seek to point out the type of rhetoric that legitimized the main programs conducted in these two secretariats, and how they are characterized by their secretaries and managers and other agents who discuss the initiatives and programs implemented in the MMFDH.

In the final considerations, we address the character of familism and the set of social issues that is expected that the family created by the MMFDH could solve, and we discuss the apparent success that the discursive and argumentative strategies may have attained beyond that political conjuncture, considering the plurality of meanings that the word family can articulate.

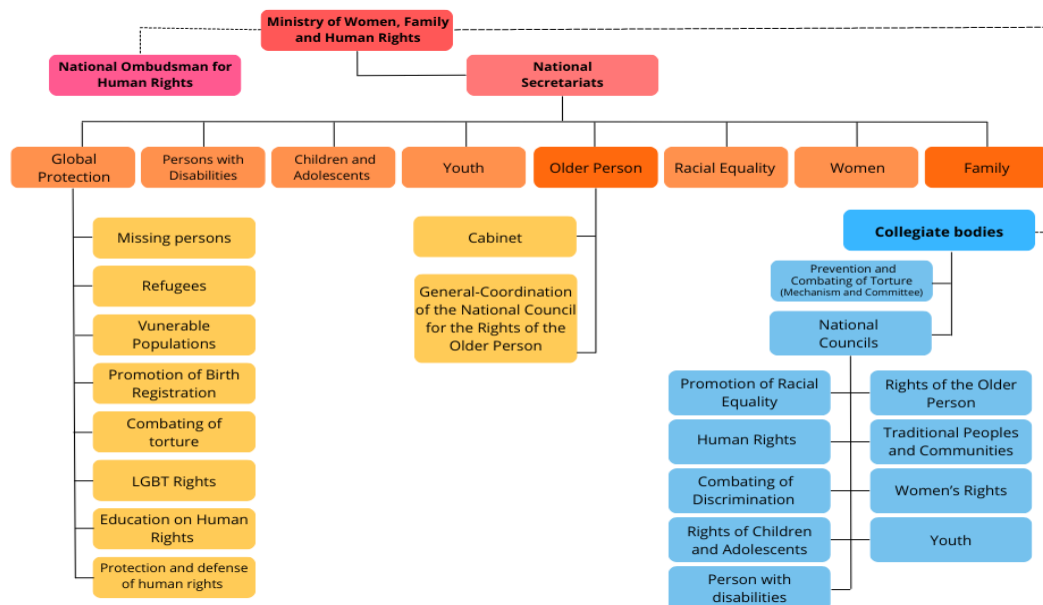
The MMFDH and the “sick family”

The MMFDH, established in 2019 and dissolved in 2023, was considered a “compound ministry” due to its structural configuration. It combined different secretariats that had their own budgets and enjoyed ministerial status: the Secretariat for Policies for Women and the Secretariat for Policies to Promote Racial Equality, both founded in 2003 during the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva administration, and the Secretariat for Human Rights, established in 1997 at the beginning of the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration. Its structure – which until then, in addition to the two secretariats, had the National Ombudsman for Human Rights and eleven collegiate bodies – included other secretariats: the National Secretariat for Global Protection; the National Secretariat for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Person; the National Secretariat for the Rights of Children and Adolescents; the National Secretariat for the Family and the National Secretariat for Youth.

Figure 1, presented below, provides a more complete visualization of the MMFDH.

Figure 1

Organizational chart of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights.



Adapted from Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos (2021).

The collegiate bodies included the Councils, focused on the defense of the rights of specific segments of society, which became subordinated to the MMFDH. According to Gohn (2001) and Almeida and Tatagiba (2012), the Councils were introduced in the 1970s, guided by the principle of parity between representatives of the State and civil society, with the task of formulating, supervising and assessing public policies aimed at ensuring the rights of different segments of society.

One of the first decrees of the Bolsonaro administration was the extinction or dismantling of 75% of the Councils, which was viewed by different analysts as an assault on the popular participation in public policies debates. According to political scientist Carla Bezerra:

The losses we have are a reduction in transparency. Organizations that supervise, that control the proper use of public resources no longer have access to data, they are no longer able to monitor how public policy is being executed. We have a loss in the quality of policies and a weakening, a deterioration of the very Brazilian democracy (Jornal Nacional, 2021).

A decision of the Supreme Court in 2019 limited the scope of the decree, preventing the dismantling of the councils that were created by law. However, Constitutional Law Professor Claudio Souza Neto said that the government began to find other means to restrict social participation. “He has employed other subterfuges to avoid the operation of the councils, has changed their composition, excluded members of civil society, changed procedures. Strictly speaking, the government removes effectiveness, authenticity, integrity from these bodies” (Jornal Nacional, 2021).

The situation of the National Council for the Rights of the Older Persons (CNDI) is significant. Established on May 13, 2002, Decree 5,109 of 2004 classified the council as a deliberative body, part of the regimental structure of the Special Secretariat for Human Rights of the Presidency of the Republic (SEDH/PR). The CNDI was composed of 28 members equally divided between representatives of government institutions and organized civil society institutions. Among the responsibilities of the CNDI, the following can be noted in its bylaws:

- Contribute to the improvement of legislation relevant to the National Policy for the Older Person (PNI) and ensure compliance with international agreements and conventions relating to older people and the aging of the population;

- Support state, municipal and Federal District councils that defend the rights of older people and foster the establishment of new councils of such kind at different levels;
- Promote educational campaigns on the rights of older people;
- Supervise the preparation and execution of the budget proposals of the Federal Government indicating relevant modifications so the rights of older people are respected; (...)
- Promote studies, debates and research on the application and results of programs and projects geared toward the older population developed by SDH/PR.
- Foster social participation and control mechanisms aimed at the guarantee and effectiveness of the rights of older people. (Ipea, 2012, pp. 14–15).

Maria Lucia Secoti Filizola, who was president of the CNDPI for the 2018–2020 biennium, showed that with the 2019 normative act (decree 9893), at the time, the Federal Government drastically reduced the number of council members, inserting only those directly linked to the MMFDH. In practice, the amendment removed from civil society institutions with recognized representativeness the possibility of discussing, working and deliberating on issues related to the older population. The Council was reduced to just six members: three representatives of the MMFDH and three of civil society. The decree determined that the president would always be the holder of the National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Person of the MMFDH, appointed by the minister.

In a public statement issued by the National Council for the Rights of the Older Person (2019), Filizola commented on Decree 9,893/2019:

It is undisputed that the national situation indicates the need to work in the opposite direction to that constructed by the aforementioned normative act. There is total disregard for the increase in the older population and the need to implement public policies that ensure this population the prevention and repression of daily human rights violations to which Brazilian older adults are subjected.

The CNDI was created by law, not by decree, and therefore it could not be formally dissolved. However, as shown by Bezerra et al. (2024), in addition to the dismissal of the president and the reduction of the representation of the Council, decisions-making over the management of the Older Person Fund resources were, in practice, concentrated on the figure

of the Secretary, who executes the Fund's budgets. The change meant that the government concentrated the ability to decide which projects would be financed with the Fund's resources.

The initiatives implemented in the National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Person (SNDPI) show the centrality of the family, particularly in combating violence against older persons, with emphasis on the context of the pandemic.

National Secretariat for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of the Older Person (SNDPI)

The SNDPI was headed by Antonio Fernandes Toninho Costa, an evangelical Baptist pastor and dentist. A specialist in indigenous health, his résumé – made available by the Ministry itself – lacks any experience or training on the subject of the rights of older persons. In 2017, he served for four months as president of FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), appointed by the PSC, President Jair Bolsonaro's political party at the time. Before that, he was a parliamentary advisor in the Chamber of Deputies between 2012 and 2016.

The responsibilities of the SNDPI, according to the MMFDH page on the government website, include “formulate, support, articulate and evaluate public policies to promote the rights of older persons based on the perspective of the family, the strengthening of family bonds and intergenerational solidarity².”

In an interview given to the Brasil em Pauta TV show (CanalGov) held on February 20, 2022, Costa commented on the work of the SNDPI, considering that there was an effort by the Secretariat to “recover the time lost in public policies on aging, as we have been resuming since a year of 2019,” a resumption to “prepare Brazil for population aging,” with the goal of taking the National Policy for the Older Person to the states and municipalities.

According to Costa, the central challenge faced by the Secretariat was the issue of violence against older people. To address this, the Ministry emphasized the expansion and promotion of Dial 100, a government hotline for reporting human rights violations, and implemented *Operation Vetus*. As Costa explained:

² The excerpt was obtained from the gov.br page on “older person” when it was still administered by the MMFDH, on Oct 18, 2022. After the administration transition in 2022 and the change of the Ministry, the texts were altered.

The previous Dial 100 did not show a faithful representation of these reports. (...) Reports and violence have always occurred, but during the pandemic period, because older people are more in their homes (...) the number of reports has increased (...) most, unfortunately, occur within the family, so we have to work on the family (...) We will not see any older person, with rare exceptions, suffering violence on the streets, because the community does not allow it, the community today has a different feeling of protection. This is the major challenge of the secretariat, and for that we are creating a specific program, which is the National Protection Network for the Older Person (...) we are convening the state council presidents, the public attorney's office, the civil police, so that we can organize this protection network in each municipality. Because it is not enough only that dial 100 records the report, it is necessary that it be investigated (...) this is the goal of the secretariat: in the face of violence, organize municipalities that really, effectively want to combat this violence, and we need to do this, because the scenes we have of violence (...) it is very sad, we see the situation that the elderly Brazilians are being treated. We can't allow that. (CanalGov, 2022)

Violence against older persons was also one of the topics discussed by Minister Damares Alves at the Public Hearing of the Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Older Person in the Chamber of Deputies held on April 8, 2021, when she was invited to present the objectives and goals of the MMFDH contingency plan for older persons during the pandemic. "In our Dial 100, Deputies, there were several reports of children stealing from the elderly, grandchildren stealing from the elderly (...) tied up elderly people, in chains, being tortured" (p. 7-8).

Minister Damares Alves reported at the hearing that to combat financial abuse, a partnership was made with the National Council of Justice, recommending that notaries be careful with the number of powers of attorney granted by older persons. As she explained: "Grandchildren and children would say the following: 'You can't leave the house. So, you give me power of attorney' (...). We saw family members, caregivers, children transferring the properties of the elderly in times of pandemic, fraudulently" (p. 8).

Still in the fight against violence, the so-called Operation Vetus is characterized, in the words of the former Secretary, in the same interview for the Brasil em Pauta TV show, as a State program. It is a partnership of the MMFDH with the Ministry of Justice, Civil Police and Military Police.

We started in 2021, almost 600 people were apprehended on the same day, who were practicing violence against these elderly people, the scenes are degrading, they are scenes that you can cry about what they are doing to the elderly, and now in 2021 we repeated the operation, almost 18,000 elderly people were aided in a situation of violence and over 400 arrests were made during this period of Operation Vetus. But we do not want arrests, we want people to be sensitized and made aware of giving a more dignified treatment to the older people (CanalGov, 2022).

For the former minister, Operation Vetus resulted in the largest police operation in the world to arrest aggressors of older people. At the Hearing, she complained that the press did not give the due press coverage to the action undertaken.

That day, early in the morning, I was already on the street with the police hunting down criminals (...). We reached, at the same time, Deputies, to 1,400 Municipalities. There were 14,000 police officers on the streets. The scenes were harrowing. I would very much like the Committee to watch our video. We found elderly people chained in pigsty. We freed elderly people from captivity. We saw scenes of the police officers arriving at the houses, and the old ladies, dear elderly, raised their hands and shouted: “Get me out of here.” There were elderly people who hadn’t been bathed for a month, tortured elderly people, raped elderly women (Audiência Pública da Comissão de Defesa dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa, 2022, p. 8).

Still regarding the fight against violence toward older people, Costa mentioned a partnership with Febraban to raise awareness about these scams. And concluded by opposing the “sick family” to the “desired family”:

We need to foster intergenerational coexistence: family, child, young person with this public, who has already provided so many services to the Brazilian nation, through their teachings, their experience... And the elderly do not want much, they want to be embraced, they want love, that’s what we need to give, that’s what we need to change in this situation so that violence is no longer newspaper or television news in our country (CanalGov, 2022).

The Secretary also highlighted other initiatives. The National Pact for the Rights of the Older Person, which aimed to sensitize states and municipalities to establish councils for the defense of older people and train counselors for this task; the Viver Program: Active and Healthy Aging, which aimed to “be a program for the inclusion of older people in the computer age” and consisted of “the donation of computers with webcams, printers and televisions to selected municipalities or states” (CanalGov, 2022); and the Solidarity program, which provided

help for long-term care institutions in the context of the pandemic (for more details on the programs, see Debert and Mortara, 2023).

In the analysis of the MMFDH's use of *twitter* during the beginning of the pandemic, Moschkovich (2022) points out that:

When the pandemic intensified in Brazil and the quarantine began, the MMFDH tweets focused on disseminating existing services for reporting human rights violations (Dial 100) and related services (such as Dial 180 for reporting domestic violence), implying that only the family and household context – and not the hospital, health care and other contexts – would be a point of attention in relation to human rights. Major human rights violations such as lack of access to vaccination, predictable oxygen shortages and abusive care in hospitals (e.g. the Prevent Senior scandal) and by physicians (as in the cases of the developments of the “Covid kit” of medicines, including chloroquine) received no attention in the ministry's tweets (p. 15).

The centrality of the family, particularly with regard to old age, is surprising. As shown by Andreas Hoff, Susan Feldman and Lucie Vidovicova (2011) in the presentation of a special issue of the *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, the contemporary discussion on old age can be characterized by the combination of two discourses: one that discusses the difficulties involved in the increase of the elderly population, and another that deals with the issues related to the decline of the traditional family structure. Two contrasting solutions, these authors indicate, are given to the dilemma involved in the reduction of the supply of care that the combination of these discourses attests. The first considers that the provision of care is a task of society, and the main responsibility lies with the State, which, through taxes, would cover the expenses involved in the policies adopted. The second advocates the traditional role of the family in the care of its dependent members. The authors tend to see the viability of the second solution progressively hampered, particularly when it is verified that the household income increasingly relies on the combined work of both partners.

However, the issue of the new forms that the family assumes — as shown by Debert and Simões (2013), Fonseca (2016), Finamori and Ferreira (2018) — and the centrality of the family in the proposals and validation of public policies show that the family, this “well-founded illusion,” in the words of Bourdieu (1996), has a much more vigorous presence in the proposed solutions of public policies for the care of vulnerable sectors.

Accordingly, Wendy Brown (2019) and Melinda Cooper (2017) reiterate that welfare states, particularly after World War II, assumed much of what was considered the responsibility of the family in the process of universalizing education, the right to health and in combating poverty through redistributive policies. The new aspect, which marks neoliberalism for the authors, would be in the criticism of what is seen as excessive State intervention, combined with the return and recrudescence of familistic responsibilities and values. From this perspective, the commitment to the well-being of older persons should fall on the family, not on social security. Similarly, the poverty of single mothers should be combated by their husbands, and that of children by their biological parents. Based on the recent history of the United States, Cooper (2017) shows that the 1960s is marked by this perspective, with strong developments in the following decades, leading to the dismantling of State obligations and making the family a constitutive part of neoliberalism.

The opposition between the real family and the family that the MMFDH intended to create through initiatives oriented toward a moral pedagogy is a central—and priority—element in the public policies advocated and outlined by the National Secretariat for the Family.

The National Secretariat for the Family (SNF)

“We have, unfortunately, a hypersexualized culture, a culture of little education, and zero parenting, zero parenting skills”

The quote that opens this section is from Angela Vidal Gandra da Silva Martins, who served as National Secretary for the Family at MMFDH, in an interview given to Bruno Magalhães in the Contraponto show (Brasil Paralelo), on March 14, 2022.

Angela Vidal Gandra da Silva Martins is a jurist, lawyer, professor at Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie. In this interview she is introduced as the person “invited to the government, by Damares Alves, after her defense of the unborn child, in the Federal Supreme Court, in 2018, against the legalization of abortion in Brazil.” She begins by saying:

It is unprecedented in Brazil that we have a Ministry of the Family, a National Secretariat for the Family, and what is the objective of a National Secretariat for the Family: undertaking public policies for the family (...) the only goal of a family public policy, which sometimes we are unaware of, is the strengthening of family bonds. It is to achieve the improvement of the quality of family relationships, and in this way manage to prevent risky behavior, eradicate poverty, achieve a more peaceful society, and promote better work outcomes, because a structured family performs better. The focus is on strengthening bonds and there would be no incompatibility with the State (...) because the State will strengthen the autonomy of the family. But we're not used to that. It is always the State that takes care of education, the State that takes care of women, the State that takes care of the elderly, the child, the adolescent, the young. Then what happens? We are in a transition in the way of viewing the family, strengthening these bonds. We want, in fact, is for there to be respect and a projection of this autonomy. (Brasil Paralelo, 2022)

To exemplify the work carried out, she noted two programs that would illustrate how the Ministry implemented this pedagogy to promote this new means of involving the family in public policies. *Homeschooling*, which she claims to be a special goal of her term and that of Minister Damares Alves: “we have been fighting for parents to be the first protagonists of their children’s education.” (Brasil Paralelo, 2022). The idea was, in addition to promoting the participation of parents in the education of their children, as with the Family at School Program, to provide legal security for families who wish to apply *homeschooling*, so parents have the freedom and the “human right” to decide on the education of their children. The other example is the government’s campaign on teenage pregnancy. “Previously, campaigns indicated that adolescents should seek the Ministry of Health and information on contraceptive methods, condoms, prophylactics.” The focus of the MMFDH campaign is: “think about your project, everything has its time, talk to your family, we are also providing education to parents about sexuality and affectivity, because they are the ones primarily responsible.” (Brasil Paralelo, 2022).

According to the former Secretary Angela Martins, this transition was necessary because the Universal Declaration on Human Rights recognizes the family as the main protagonist of society and notes, in the same interview, three axes of SNF initiative: Strong Families, Work-Family Balance and Reconnect.

The first, *Strong Families*, aimed to strengthen family bonds in order to prevent drug use by training parental skills. It consisted of 7 weekly in-person meetings lasting 2 hours each. In the first hour, parents or guardians and adolescents (aged 10 to 14 years) participated separately in structured workshops. In the second hour, they got together for family activities.

The second program mentioned in the interview is the *Work-Family Balance*, which would promote educational actions, awards and recognition of organizational practices in companies and municipalities with the purpose of “fostering the balance between familial and professional responsibilities” (Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, 2020).

Reconnect is the third program, it dealt with the impact of technologies on the family and aimed to raise awareness of risky behaviors, “necessary because of the harmful content that instigates suicide and self-harm,” in the words of the Secretary in the aforementioned interview. According to the presentation of the program, its specific objectives were: to inform the impacts of the inappropriate use of technology on family relationships; to raise awareness of the smart use of technological resources; to initiate a discussion in the most diverse social segments about the role of technology in human relations; and to awaken an understanding of the family role in promoting an intelligent use of technology. In the words of the Secretary during an event of the program:

Eye contact continues to make a difference in marital relationships and also in the relationship between parents and children. Currently, we see children who are always looking at their cell phones, parents who do not pay attention to children, health and family problems due to technological dependence, and an increase in cybercrime. Reconnect has the objective of facing these problems (...), we need to reconnect with family, society and ourselves. May the real world be brought back. May small actions be done, such as not picking up the cell phone at dinner time. Things like that, small things, can make a difference. We must control technology and not let it control us (Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, 2022).

The rhetoric through which each of these programs was described seeks to operate a combination between the scientific character of the methodology involved with the success of programs carried out in different countries and an appeal to the defense of the family in which the former Secretary replaces the religious perspective with a humanism that distances itself from theocratic conceptions, as shown below.

Strong Families, for example, was presented by Martins as a program based on a methodology developed by *Oxford Brookes University* in the United Kingdom that has been applied in 26 countries and has been able to combat teenage pregnancy, drugs, alcoholism, school dropout and domestic violence. The evaluation of the program conducted in different municipalities was carried out by two Brazilian universities UNIFESP and UFC (2022), at the request of SNF, and concluded that the program demonstrated to:

- Reduce by 60% the chance of parents having a neglectful parenting style;
- Double the chance of parents displaying responsiveness parenting behaviors (parents who support and show affection for their children);
- Increase on average by 10% the educational practices of non-violent discipline compared to the control group;
- Reduce the increase in conflict score compared to the control group by 5%;
- The program showed a statistically significant tendency to increase by 90% the chance of parents demonstrating demanding skills (parents who establish rules and supervise their children's behaviors);
- At 6 months of follow-up, no results were found in changing the adolescents' drug use (p. 6).

Studies focused on the relation between family and anti-gender policies in the MMFDH, such as those of Moschkovich (2022), reasonably show that gender is a scientific concept while family is a common-sense polysemic term. However, it is interesting to observe how Angela Vidal Gandra da Silva Martins seeks to give a scientific character, supported by a methodology considered to be widely recognized, to the initiatives implemented in the SNF, which were also positively evaluated by academically renowned federal academic institutions.

The scientific stamp was combined with the presence — and success — of international public policy programs to foster families, such as the affiliation of the SNF proposals to the *Partnership for Families* (United Nations) and Brazil's international leading role in this initiative — as noted by the Secretary in the aforementioned interview — and also with the Secretary's successful access to international institutions and organizations. Notably, the visit of Brazil to the pro-family congress in Guatemala for the opening of a monument to the unborn child. Angela Martins résumé includes a period as a visiting professor and researcher in Philosophical-

Legal Anthropology at *Harvard University*, the fact that she is a Member of the Brazilian Academy of Philosophy and the São Paulo Academy of Legal Letters, a professor at CEU *Law School*, among other mentions, in addition to her contacts with national and international institutions, particularly the fact that she worked in the process in which the Supreme Court of the United States reviewed the legal prerogative that enabled regulated abortion in the country (see Estadão Conteúdo, 2022).

Despite her prestige in the scientific world, the demonstration of feelings and emotions is not absent, because when instigated by the interviewer of the Brasil Paralelo channel (2022) about possible problems related to the strengthening of family bonds, she answers: “I have been working a lot on intergenerational solidarity, which I don’t even like that word ‘solidarity,’ I think it had to be ‘love,’ love, gratitude to grandparents.” With that, she explains that a family bond, according to her view, would be a bond that projects you forward, even professionally, and that “will never be undone, never.”

Her fight against the legalization of abortion and her defense of the unborn child in the same interview is not semanticized from a religious perspective, but “as a jurist and even as a human being”: “The human being does not need to believe to defend life, because we share a nature and this is something natural to the human being, to defend their own life and to defend the lives of others.”

In an interview with Marie Claire magazine in May 2020, the then Secretary answered the question about how she began her work as a pro-life activist by stating:

I don’t know if I can say I’m an activist. I am a teacher and have always fought for my students to reflect on human rights. Today I can fight in a more active way and I have been fighting internationally, but through reflection, so that we think about what kind of society we want. (...) In the campaign we did on teenage pregnancy (...) the slogans were “inform yourself,” “reflect,” “think about your life project,” “talk to your family.” You see? There is a human exercise that you do through reflection. I think my activism goes that way. If the human being is autonomous, it goes deeper, beyond pragmatism. If that’s called activism, I’m an activist for human reflection.

In the same interview, when asked about what the concept of family of the SNF is, she replied:

AG. We have no concept. I said it from the first moment, we do not work conceptually.

MC. *But if the concept does not exist, how will the government see families with two mothers and two fathers, for example?*

AG. We have tried not to get into that because it complicates our end, which is strengthening (bonds). There is also the constitutional concept, which is the family and the common-law marriage. Legally, a common-law marriage is a man and a woman. As we also have the decision of the STF [Brazilian Federal Supreme Court], we have to be within the country's legislation, because we work within a democratic rule of law, right? But, in principle, the family is the natural family. In principle. Now, as natural family we can consider all these families that are conceived through a relationship of love. Can you understand?

MC. *Are same-sex families also included in that?*

AG. Look, we're dealing with families, okay? But, in the ministry, all the LGBT part is not under the responsibility of our secretariat, there is a specific secretariat for that, which is in the global protection [National Secretariat for Global Protection, which is under the umbrella of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights].

The rhetoric in defense of the family contrasts with how the Brazilian family is characterized. The statement of “zero parenting,” of “zero parental skills” in the sentence of the former Secretary who served as the epigraph of this item is added with considerations such as: “We perceived that the major agents of family dramas are parents who do not pay due attention to their children because they are in an intense virtual and work life” (Gazeta do Povo, 2023); “the child is there with the cell phone and the pedophile after them (...) the enemy is inside the house” (Brasil Paralelo, 2022). According to her, parents, who are themselves too connected on their cell phones and do not listen to their children, do not realize the severity of cell phone content, such as exploitative child labor in games, pedophilia, intimate photos of adolescents, self-harm, and “risky behaviors such as drugs, depression, suicides could be more monitored if parents were set themselves free from WhatsApp and had the real world more present” (Brasil Paralelo, 2022).

The discourse of family neglect reached its peak with the representation that is offered of families on Marajó Island:

We are going to Marajó Island [Pará state, Brazil] with the “Strong Families” program. It is to strengthen the family regime because the highest rate of pedophilia in Brazil is found there. Fathers initiate daughters. It was really an insight from Minister Damares. What shocked her: families live on it, from giving girls to boatmen. Damares wants to make an economic revolution there, so the families do not have to resort to it (Marie Clare, 2020).

These comments were also followed with considerations that enthusiastically affirm that “The family is the hope of the Brazilian,” or that “Everyone wants to reconcile and live well with the family.”

Final considerations

This article has been intentionally full in direct quotations, and phrases said by secretaries and other agents linked to the MMFDH because it is important to consider the discursive and argumentative strategies that characterize the rhetoric used in upholding the family. The real family is the “sick family,” and the duty of the State is to create the family capable of solving social issues that go far beyond gender issues that were so well analyzed by the authors mentioned in the introduction to this article.

What is at stake is creating a model family capable of combating violence against older persons; hypersexualized culture; teenage pregnancy; and drug use. The State should strengthen family bonds by offering parenting skills education to eradicate risky behaviors and poverty; improve conditions in the labor market, engage the family in school and enable schooling through homeschooling; raise the family’s awareness of the intelligent use of digital technologies.

The moral pedagogy of the Bolsonaro government strove to convince that something very simple can be done to solve issues that worry society. Social problems are reframed as moral problems, as the result of the lack of communication in the family, and the duty of the State is to promote this communication, teaching parents and children how to behave and assume their obligations and responsibilities across the life course. Ultimately, this was a Ministry that had the term family in its very name, marking the centrality of the theme within a government body that never shied away from expressing its position in the social debate.

It is difficult to assess whether this rhetoric was successful. The fact is that Minister Damares Alves left the MMFDH in March 2022 to be a candidate in the elections of that year

and was elected senator for the Federal District, obtaining 714,562 votes (44.98% of the valid votes). It is also a fact that the MMFDH was discontinued by the new administration committed to combating the neoliberal policies of the previous administration. However, the term family became part of the title of one of the most important ministries of the current administration: the Ministério do Desenvolvimento e Assistência Social, Família e Combate à Fome (Ministry of Development, Social Assistance, Family and Fight Against Hunger) (MDS).

Therefore, it is necessary to review the argument of Brown (2019) and Cooper (2017) that the family is the key to the alliance established between neoconservatism and neoliberalism that has characterized, at present, social policies in different national contexts.

The arguments of Wendy Brown on neoliberal rationality and Melinda Cooper on the place occupied by the family as a moral principle and normative pillar within that rationality provide important insights for reflection on the data presented here, offering analytical keys for understanding the dissemination of a political culture and forms of subjectivation that promote the replacement of the State with the family in the provision of well-being and care, as shown to occur in the MMFDH.

However, thinking about the MDS requires recognizing that the term family may be building other types of alliances, given the plurality of meanings that the term is able to articulate.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the international research project called Who Cares? Rebuilding Care in a Post-pandemic World (CEBRAP, FAPESP, CNPq, Arymax Foundation), of which they are part, for the team's comments that contributed to the reflection on the theme of this article. Further information about the project is available at: www.cuidado.cebrap.org.br.

References

- Alcântara, A. O., Camarano, A. A., & Giacomini, K. C. (Orgs.). (2016). *Política Nacional do Idoso: velhas e novas questões*. Ipea. <https://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/handle/11058/7253>
- Almeida, C., & Tatagiba, L. (2012). Os conselhos gestores sob o crivo da política: balanços e perspectivas. *Serviço Social & Sociedade*, (109), 68-92. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-66282012000100005>
- Bezerra, C. P., Almeida, D. R. D., Lavallo, A. G., & Dowbor, M. (2024). Entre a Desinstitucionalização e a Resiliência: Participação Institucional no Governo Bolsonaro. *Dados Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 67 (4), e20220118. <https://doi.org/10.1590/dados.2024.67.4.339>
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). O espírito da Família. In *Razões práticas: sobre a teoria da ação*. Papirus editora.
- Brasil Paralelo. (2022, 14 de março). *Angela Gandra Martins | Contraponto*. [Vídeo]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCSwXI5ke5k>
- Brown, W. (2019). *Nas ruínas do neoliberalismo: a ascensão da política antidemocrática no Ocidente*. Editora Filosófica Politeia.
- Câmara dos Deputados. (2021, 8 de abril). 3ª sessão legislativa ordinária da 56ª legislatura. *Comissão de Defesa dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa*. [Notas taquigráficas da Audiência Pública Extraordinária]. <https://escriba.camara.leg.br/escriba-servicosweb/pdf/60801>
- Campos, C. H. D., & Bernardes, M. N. (2022). Ideologia de gênero e o Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 30, e73882. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1806-9584-2022v30n373882>
- CanalGov. (2022, 20 de fevereiro). *Brasil em Pauta, Antonio Costa, sec. Nacional de Promoção e Defesa dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa*. [Vídeo]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S0Dda7GIrE>
- Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa. (2019, 29 de junho). Nota Pública do Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Pessoa Idosa – CNDI sobre a publicação do Decreto 9.893/2019. *Red Latinoamericana de Gerontología*. https://www.gerontologia.org/portal/archivosUpload/uploadManual/Nota_Publica_CNDI_Decreto_9893-2019.pdf

- Cooper, M. (2017). *Family values: Between neoliberalism and the new social conservatism*. MIT Press.
- Cortêz, N. (2020, 3 de abril). Angela Gandra, secretária da família de Bolsonaro, defende a vida desde a concepção e diz que “governo não é conservador, mas humano”. *Marie Claire*. <https://revistamarieclaire.globo.com/Mulheres-do-Mundo/noticia/2020/04/angela-gandra-secretaria-da-familia-de-bolsonaro-defende-vida-desde-concepcao-e-diz-que-governo-nao-e-conservador-mas-humano.html>
- Debert, G. G., & Mortara, S. (2023). *A velhice e a família no período do Ministério da Mulher, Família e Direitos Humanos*. Seminários Cartas na Mesa, Sessão 5, 2º semestre de 2023. [Gravação de seminário virtual]. <https://cuidado.cebrap.org.br/evento/cartas-na-mesa-sessao-5-2osemestre-de-2023-a-velhice-e-a-familia-no-periodo-do-ministerio-da-mulher-familia-e-direitos-humanos/>
- Debert, G. G., & Simões, J. A. (2013). Envelhecimento e velhice na família contemporânea. In E. V. Freitas, & L. Py. (Eds.), *Tratado de geriatria e gerontologia* (3a. ed., pp. 2165-2174 1366-1373). Guanabara Koogan.
- Decreto nº 5.109 de 17 de junho de 2004. (2004). Dispõe sobre a composição, estruturação, competências e funcionamento do Conselho Nacional dos Direitos do Idoso - CNDI, e dá outras providências. Presidência da República. *Casa Civil, Subchefia para Assuntos Jurídicos*. https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2004-2006/2004/decreto/d5109.htm
- Donzelot, J. (1980). *A polícia das famílias*. Editora Graal.
- Estadão Conteúdo. (2022, 27 de junho). *Secretária da Família do governo Bolsonaro atuou em decisão contra o aborto nos EUA*. Exame. <https://exame.com/brasil/secretaria-da-familia-do-governo-bolsonaro-atuou-em-decisao-contra-aborto-nos-eua/>
- Finamori, S., & Ferreira, F. R. F. (2018). Gênero, cuidado e famílias: tramas e interseções. *Mediações-Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 23, 11-42. <https://doi.org/10.5433/2176-6665.2018v23n3p11>
- Fonseca, C. (2016). Deslocando o gene: o DNA entre outras tecnologias de identificação familiar. *Mana*, 22, 133-156. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0104-93132016v22n1p133>
- Foulcault, M. (1988). *História da Sexualidade I, II e III*. Edições Graal.

- Fraser, N. (2009). O feminismo, o capitalismo e a astúcia da história. *Mediações-Revista de Ciências Sociais* 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.5433/2176-6665.2009v14n2p11>
- Gazeta do Povo. (2023, 18 de março). *Ex-secretária nacional da Família quer replicar plataforma de governo em São Paulo*. [Entrevista]. <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/sao-paulo/ex-secretaria-quer-replicar-defesa-da-familia-em-sao-paulo/>
- Gohn, M. G. M. (2001). *Conselhos gestores e participação sociopolítica* (Vol. 84). Cortez.
- Hoff, A., Feldman, S., & Vidovicova, L. (2010). Migrant home care workers caring for older people: fictive kin, substitute, and complementary family caregivers in an ethnically diverse environment. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 5(2), 7-16.
- Ipea. (2012). *O Conselho Nacional dos Direitos do Idoso na Visão de seus Conselheiros*. Relatório de Pesquisa. Projeto Conselhos Nacionais: perfil e atuação dos conselheiros. https://ipea.gov.br/participacao/images/pdfs/relatoriosconselhos/120409_relatorio_direitos_idoso.pdf
- Jornal Nacional. (2021, 25 de outubro). *Pesquisa mostra que 75% dos conselhos e comitês nacionais foram extintos ou esvaziados no governo Bolsonaro*. Globo. <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2021/10/25/pesquisa-mostra-que-75percent-dos-conselhos-e-comites-nacionais-foram-extintos-ou-esvaziados-no-governo-bolsonaro.ghtml>
- Marie Claire. (2020, 30 de abril). *Angela Gandra, secretária da Família de Bolsonaro, defende a vida desde a concepção e diz que “governo não é conservador, mas humano*. [Entrevista]. <https://revistamarieclaire.globo.com/Mulheres-do-Mundo/noticia/2020/04/angela-gandra-secretaria-da-familia-de-bolsonaro-defende-vida-desde-concepcao-e-diz-que-governo-nao-e-conservador-mas-humano.html>
- Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. (2021). Organograma do Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/institucional/OrganogramaMMFDH_DEC.10.8832021.pdf
- Ministério dos Direitos Humanos e da Cidadania. (2022, 12 de abril). *Projeto Reconecte beneficiará mais 855 famílias brasileiras*. <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2022/abril/projeto-reconecte-beneficiara-mais-855-familias-brasileiras>

- Moschkovich, M. (2022). Senso-comum como política de Estado: “mulher” e “família” na política pública anti-gênero e a nova gramática dos direitos humanos no governo de Jair Bolsonaro. *46º Encontro Anual da Anpocs*.
- Moschkovich, M. (2023). “Família” e a nova gramática dos Direitos Humanos no governo de Jair Bolsonaro:(2019-2021). Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America (Mecila). <https://mecila.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WP-Moschkovich-Online.pdf>
- Oliveira Alcântara de, A., & Giacomini, K. C. (2013). Fundo Nacional do Idoso: um instrumento de fortalecimento dos Conselhos e de garantia de direitos da pessoa idosa. *Revista Kairós-Gerontologia*, 16(1), 143-166. <https://doi.org/10.23925/2176-901X.2013v16i1p143-166>
- Purchio, L. (2023, 18 de março). Ex-secretária nacional da Família quer replicar plataforma de governo em São Paulo. *Gazeta do Povo*. <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/sao-paulo/ex-secretaria-quer-replicar-defesa-da-familia-em-sao-paulo/>
- Teixeira, R. P., & Biroli, F. (2022). Contra o gênero: a “ideologia de gênero” na Câmara dos Deputados brasileira. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, e248884. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-3352.2022.38.248884>
- UNIFESP; UFC. (2022, novembro). *Avaliação da efetividade do programa Famílias Fortes*. [Livreto informativo]. https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2022/dezembro/estudo-revela-potencial-de-reducao-de-60-no-estilo-parental-negligente-em-participantes-do-programa-familias-fortes/Brochura_ilustrada_FamiliasFortes_6_meses_vf.pdf

Notes

Submission data:

Submitted to evaluation on November 4, 2024; revised on May 8, 2025; accepted for publication on July 14, 2025.

Corresponding author:

Mortara, Sofia – Rua Morgado de Matheus, nº 615, Vila Mariana, 04015-902

Authors' contributions:

Grin Debert, Guita – Conceptualization (Equal), Data Curation (Equal), Formal Analysis (Equal), Funding Acquisition (Leadership), Research (Equal), Methodology (Equal), Project Administration (Leadership), Supervision (Leadership), Validation (Equal), Visualization (Equal), Writing - original draft (Equal), Writing - review and editing (Equal).

Mortara, Sofia – Data curation (Equal), Formal analysis (Equal), Investigation (Equal), Methodology (Equal), Validation (Equal), Visualization (Equal), Writing - original draft (Equal), Writing - review and editing (Equal).

Support and funding:

National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, (Grant / Award Number: '305585/2021-5','372454/2022-4').

Research data availability:

The contents underlying the research text are contained in the manuscript.

Copy Editing services:

Copy editing and standardization of citations and bibliographical references (7th Edition APA) in Portuguese version: Maria Thereza Sampaio Lucínio, thesampaio@uol.com.br

English translation: Roberto Candido Francisco <traducao@tikinet.com.br>

Copy editing in English version: authors

Responsible editors:

Associate Editor: Alice Sarcinelli <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1074-2417>>

Editor-in-Chief: Helena Sampaio <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1759-4875>>