Between "Modern Women" and "Woman-Mothers": Reproduction and Gender Identity among Low-Income Brazilian Women

by

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a low-income urban community in Brazil, the author examines the impact of recent changes in Brazilian society for poor women's gender identity. Poverty in the context of a consumer society, male unemployment, and unstable marital relationships are all aspects of "modern life" that have provoked tensions between men and women and have made the ideals and requirements of traditional motherhood ever more difficult to achieve. On the other hand, these poor women also aspire to rights and consumption and see themselves as making progress in contrast to men. The ways Brazilian women find themselves between being "modern women" and "traditional mothers" illustrates the limits of this dichotomy. Using women's discussions of family planning and child rearing, their participation in the paid labor force, and their volunteer work in community associations, the author argues that some poor women, while not entirely resisting or escaping from traditional definitions of female gender roles, have refigured dominant gender ideologies in ways that destabilize those roles.

Biography

Gina Hunter de Bessa is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Illinois State University. Her research interests include women's reproductive health issues, gender, the body, and ethnomedicine. Her research in Brazil has focused on lay understandings of reproductive processes, contraceptive use, and the medicalization of reproductive health care.

BETWEEN "MODERN WOMEN" AND "WOMAN-MOTHERS": REPRODUCTION AND GENDER IDENTITY AMONG LOW-INCOME BRAZILIAN WOMEN

Josefina[1] is a seamstress and community leader who lives in a housing project (*conjunto habitacional*) on the urban periphery of Belo Horizonte, a city of over three million people in the southeast region of Brazil. The conjunto, called Taquaril, is one of the poorest regions of the city and was the location of my ethnographic fieldwork on women's experiences with reproduction and contraception. In our many conversations, Josefina told me about the women squatters who first occupied the Taquaril area and eventually convinced city officials to designate the land for low-income housing (*moradia popular*). We also talked about her common-law marriage, her struggle to raise three children and keep them "off the street," and the constant battle to make ends meet. One day, as she talked about her work in the community and the responsibilities of motherhood, she remarked:

> I have to prepare my kids for the future (*para os dias de amanha*) . . . it's because I am a mother. I am more sensitive, *né*? I'm between the two things. I'm between being a mother, being a woman, and being that up-to-date woman, that modern woman, you know? (*Eu sou entre ser mãe, ser mulher, e ser aquela mulher atualizada, moderna, né?*) So, I have to be informed in order to pass along information to my children to prepare them for the future. Because the way I see it, everything changes from one day to the next, you know? Things are changing very rapidly! [Gina: You said there's a modern woman and another kind of woman. What are these women? What are they like? I think you said you feel divided . . .] I feel divided because the characteristics of the modern woman are that woman, who besides working outside the home, né, she is dynamic, she travels, né? She leaves her kids with someone else, and she travels, she works, né? She's active everyday, and she's always well-informed and up-to-date and everything. There is that modern woman, né, who screams inside us. But this modern woman, she doesn't have much of a sexual life, you know? She has difficulty having a relationship with a partner, you know? It's hard for her to find a man with the same characteristics that she has. On the other hand, there is that woman who feels, the woman I'm talking about is that one who is more (pause) who needs to have someone, to have a companion, that woman who needs a man-friend, you know? That woman who feels the mother-side of her. [Who says,] "No, I'm a mother, I need to be with my children. I need to stay at home and take care of my house," you know? She is the woman-mother (*mulher-mãe*). [Josefina, 34, seamstress, married, three children]

Josefina's contrast between the modern, up-to-date, informed woman and the sensitive, sexual "woman-mother" (mulher-mãe) eloquently captured a particular vision of modernity and the tensions expressed more widely in the community about recent changes in women's lives. It pointed to both the centrality of motherhood to a woman's identity and the contradictions that modernity/modernization has entailed for poor mothers.

In this paper, I examine the ways that some women, residents of the urban periphery, have experienced social and economic processes, such as urbanization, the expansion of consumerism, and community development, and the significance of these for women's gender identity. In

particular, I examine how the meaning of children and notions of good motherhood have changed in the context of three decades of rapid fertility decline, women's work outside the home, and women's participation in social movements and community activities. I am interested not only in how women's lives have changed but also in what women have to say about those changes. While women's responses to these processes have been varied, one common theme involves conflicts and tensions between men and women. In Taquaril, a traditional ideology of female gender and sexuality continues to inform women's self-perception, yet some women find these traditional ideals increasingly untenable. I argue that these women, while not entirely resisting or escaping from traditional definitions of female gender roles, have refigured dominant gender ideologies in ways that destabilize those roles.

Field Site and Methods

Data for this paper come from fieldwork I conducted in 1996–1998 and again during the summer of 2002. During the earlier years, I lived in a middle-class neighborhood of Belo Horizonte and began visiting Taquaril and conducting semi-structured interviews with two dozen women for a study focused on contraceptive practices and the prevalence of female surgical sterilization. Interviews covered women's reproductive history, women's health issues, and their decisions regarding fertility and contraception. The women interviewed ranged in age from seventeen to fifty and had between two and eight years of formal education.[2] I also interviewed healthcare workers, physicians, and community leaders, and I conducted a brief household survey. I developed a close relationship with several women who looked after me, introduced me to their families, friends, and neighbors, and who became my "key informants." At the same time, I also participated in a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) focused on grassroots women's health education.

In 2002, I returned to Taquaril for an ethnomedical study of women's understanding of reproductive processes and lived for over two months in a rented room on the main road through the conjunto. I revisited previous interviewees and interviewed additional women about reproductive health topics and other issues regarding the community and gender roles. However, I am certain I learned the most from my co-madre[3] Eugênia, whose family I joined for lunch each day, and her neighbors, who seemed to enjoy sitting with me in the afternoons and evenings to *bater um papo* (shoot the breeze).[4]

In the mid-1980s, the original squatters successfully mobilized for land and building materials for 3,000 family dwellings. Over the next decade, more people arrived and purchased lots in the expanding "sectors" of the conjunto. Others "invaded" and occupied adjoining areas that have not yet been officially recognized as belonging to the conjunto, in part because they lie outside the official municipal limits. By 1996, Taquaril had well over 20,000 residents and had some of the worst socioeconomic and health indicators of Belo Horizonte. The sprawling sectors of the conjunto, however, encompass a large diversity of living conditions, with areas closer to the city resembling working-class neighborhoods and outlying sectors showing minimal urban infrastructure. The city has been especially reluctant to extend basic services to the most recently settled areas.

My fieldwork was largely confined to "Sector C," an area of almost 900 residents according to a 1996 census. Despite its location on the main asphalt road midway into the conjunto, Sector C

has received few urban improvements because city engineers have determined that the topography and soil structure are unsuitable for habitation. Many areas in the sector are earmarked for "environmental preservation," and the city eventually plans to relocate the families who currently live there. Within the sector, socioeconomic conditions also vary, but the average household income in 1998 was about US$215/month, or two times the minimum wage.[5] Few, if any, people live beneath the canvas or cardboard shacks found in the most recent areas of settlement. Even the poorest residents, those living in *miséria* (miserable conditions), have a two room brick "embryo" of a house, with a metal or tile roof and cement floor. Most have running water and electricity, although the latter is often achieved through makeshift wiring that siphons electricity from a house with an authorized connection. While most houses have indoor plumbing, the community lacks an adequate sewage system.

Socio-economic Context of the Urban Poor

Although Brazil has one of the largest economies in the world, it is also a society marked by a highly unequal distribution of wealth. In 1996, some 45 percent of the population lived below the poverty line (Pio 2002). The poorest live in rural areas, with high concentrations of poverty in small and medium size towns and on the "peripheries" of large metropolitan areas (World Bank 2001). The southeast region (which includes Belo Horizonte) is the most industrialized and wealthy part of the country; the northeast region is the poorest. By the 1960s, the economic base of the nation had shifted from agriculture to manufacturing. Following a right-wing military coup in 1964, the government embarked on an accelerated industrialization program (by opening up investment opportunities for domestic and multinational capital, promoting capital goods industrialization, and expanding national markets) that set the stage for the "Brazilian economic miracle" of 1968–1974. Although vast inequities in land distribution, wages, and social benefits were in place prior to the regime, inequities increased during these years between different segments of society and regions of the country (Baer 1989).

Urbanization peaked in the 1970s as the increasing mechanization of agriculture and a state-led industrialization policy created a "push-pull" impetus for rural to urban migration. By the early 1980s, a worldwide recession, rampant inflation, an enormous foreign debt, and the growing strength of social movements and political opposition—which were strongly repressed during the regime—had weakened the regime. Civilian rule returned in 1985 but, with economic instability and stagnation, the 1980s came to be known as the "lost decade." The poor suffered disproportionately as adjustment programs required by global lending institutions cut education, health, and other social benefits. (For a brief introduction to Brazil's economic and political history, see Neuhouser 1999.)

Most of the original squatters who occupied the area that is now Taquaril had come to Belo Horizonte in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was in the context of the heightened grassroots mobilization and re-democratization of the mid-1980s that illegal squatters in Taquaril joined with members of the Homeless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto*). Rural migrants came to the city looking for work and a better life, and residents from other poor neighborhoods in Belo Horizonte came to Taquaril for a chance to own a house rather than renting or living with relatives. Despite their poverty, Taquaril residents are far from being the poorest in Brazil. This is not the desperate poverty and widespread starvation that Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) has so poignantly described in the Alto do Cruzeiro in the northeast of

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Brazil. Rather, most residents of Taquaril have experienced relative upward social mobility, and living conditions in the neighborhood have improved in recent years.

The stabilization of rampant inflation since 1994 has led to some economic stability, and families who have been able to secure steady employment have gradually completed and improved their homes. The neighborhood has also experienced some improvements from the city's urban development efforts, although less in Sector C than other areas. An active Community Association and the Participatory Budget program of the Workers' Party (PT), which has run the municipal administration since 1992, have helped community members obtain some improvements in the community infrastructure. Between 1998 and 2002, the city replaced several *becos* (dirt pathways) with cement stairways (one has over 600 steps) and extended the previously limited bus service to several different lines serving the entire conjunto.

Men in Taquaril have found jobs as construction assistants (*servente de pedreiro*), doormen (*porteiro*), and delivery persons. Better jobs include skilled positions, such as mechanics, electricians, and appliance repairmen. Unemployment and underemployment, however, plague Taquaril, and many men perform odd jobs (*biscate*) or work in the informal economy. Given a lack of opportunities for young people and the allure of quick money, many—especially young men—have become involved in gangs and the drug trade. Largely as a result of drug-related activities, Taquaril has become one of the most violent neighborhoods of Belo Horizonte, and the increasing violence is a major concern of the residents.

Even workers who receive the minimum wage, however, cannot begin to meet the survival needs of a family, so multiple family members contribute to household subsistence. Most women find jobs as domestic workers, but other service positions (such as restaurant and janitorial positions) also are common. Residents say it is easier for women to find work than men. However, women's paid work is sometimes sporadic, changing with marriage or raising a family. Social welfare programs that distribute food, milk, and cooking gas, and which provide income to families who keep their children in school, help many families survive. Several charitable organizations and NGOs also provide emergency assistance and youth programs.

Residents in the conjunto, as in other working-class neighborhoods and shantytowns (*favelas*) in Brazil, also rely on an ethic of reciprocity within family and on personal networks of interchange and mutual assistance (Giffin n.d.; Neuhouser 1989). Although Taquaril's rapid and extensive growth has provided a measure of urban anonymity, family, friends, and neighbors are still an important source for child-care, small loans, food, and labor for collective work. Some residents can access resources through employers and other members of more privileged classes by establishing patron-client relations. The centrality of these personal networks for securing resources is sometimes taken as an example of the working class's traditionalism, which I will explore in the following section.

As quality of life has improved, especially for those community members with jobs, the contradictions of poverty within a consumer society and the inequalities among residents have become more apparent. Although basic services—such as adequate sewage systems and garbage disposal—are lacking, telephone lines and satellite antennas have multiplied. Men walk home along steep dirt becos while talking on their cell phones. A sick child goes without the medicine

she needs, because it is not available at the public health center and is too expensive for her parents' meager income, yet she plays the neighbors' Nintendo games.

Brazilian Modernities

Despite its democratic state and capitalist economy, Brazil is often portrayed as a society that is not fully modern. Such interpretations tend to assume that economic *modernization* through capitalist industrial and technological development leads to a rational, secular, and bureaucratized social *modernity* and modern, individualist subjectivities. Pointing to the values that structure everyday interactions, authors note the specific ways that personal relationships in Brazil provide the basis for business, political, and everyday power, as well as the relative strength of people's claims to social recognition based on family name and social location over a relatively weak notion of individual claims to rights as anonymous citizens (Hess and DaMatta 1995). The working classes, especially, are often characterized as "traditional" and "hierarchical" (Duarte 1986), in contrast to the middle classes, in which modernist and individualist values and practices predominate (Velho 1986). Along with certain formal legal institutions, the prevalence of everyday hierarchical and traditional practices is seen to pose serious challenges to the formation of democratic institutions and the exercise of citizenship (Kant de Lima 1995).

Following Louis Dumont's (1980) characterization of traditional hierarchical and holistic societies versus modern, egalitarian, and individualistic societies, Roberto DaMatta (1991) has argued that Brazil is a "relational" society, where separate traditional and modern "codes" operate and coexist. He argues against the idea that traditional and modern values and practices characterize different social segments and against modernization theories that assume the gradual replacement of the traditional by the modern (Hess and DaMatta 1995). Specifically DaMatta argues that, in Brazil, hierarchical "personalism" encompasses modern, individualist, and egalitarian values.

DaMatta's oft-cited analysis of the social categories of *rua* (street) / *casa* (house) illustrates the ways modern and traditional institutions coexist in distinct moral realms of attitudes, values, and practices. Rua and casa differentiate not only between the masculine, public world of the "street" and the feminine, private world of the "home," they also correspond to systems based on equality/hierarchy and individualism/personhood. Within networks of kinship and friendship that characterize the casa, one is a *person*, a relational being whose social existence is legitimized by social ties, exchanges, and favors. Furthermore, this realm of personal relations and hierarchy is valued positively over the space of the street, where one's ties and origins may go unrecognized and where one is subject to laws and duties:

> In the sphere of the street . . . I am also subject to the impersonal laws of the market and of citizenship that frequently say that I "am no one." Thus, I am at the mercy of whoever is manipulating the social order at that moment. I also know that in the impersonal universe of the street, the logic is one of a systematic attempt to destroy privileges. Thus I understand that universal law is a weapon against groups and webs of relations, making it so that they can be controlled legally and politically (DaMatta 1991:100, my translation).

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As complementary modes of thought and practice that order different spheres, the "traditional" and "modern" are not confined to specific sectors or segments of society but are rather shared aspects of a framework of meaning that orders social life. While DaMatta's analysis is noted for challenging the teleological aspects of common modernization narratives, it remains marked by a Western traditional/modern binary.

Anthropologists working in other contexts have attempted to escape such binaries by showing that there are non-Western forms of modernity and multiple, "alternative" modernities formed out of the ways dominant versions of modernity are engaged, refigured, and resisted in specific local contexts (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1998; Appadurai 1996; Ong 1987). Thus, Dorothy Hodgson (2001:7) speaks of the "production of modernities" to refer to "the multiplicity of forms of modernity that emerge through the interaction of local/global processes, as well as the centrality of people's agency in creatively and actively engaging these processes to produce new and distinct ways of 'being modern,' within shifting structural (such as historical, political, economic, and social) constraints and opportunities." The advantage of this perspective is that it does not assume the content of modernity a priori, and it calls attention to the ways dominant ideas of modernity may be resisted, embraced, or reconstructed. Hodgson also focuses on the ways modernity is gendered—not only because men and women experience it differently but also in the ways it is discursively constructed.

Around the world, economic modernization impacts men and women differently and frequently entails dramatic changes in family structure and gender relations. Especially important for the analysis below are the ways parenthood, and specifically motherhood, is redefined and experienced. Based on his fieldwork in a working-class neighborhood in Mexico City, Matthew Gutmann (2001) describes how children are said to suffer from the folk diagnosis *mamitis* ("mom-itis") when they are separated for too long from their mothers, who increasingly work outside the home. Mamitis is usually mentioned tongue-in-cheek and, Gutmann argues, "represents as much a form of political malaise among adults in response to 'the modern family' as it does a somatic and emotional distress signal from the children themselves" (2001:168). Maila Stivens (1998) finds middle-class Malay women confronted with divergent narratives of modern motherhood. One stresses the need to replace older, collective (and indulgent) forms of mothering with disciplined, individualized mothering in the context of increasingly nuclear, urban families. An alternative Islamic narrative constructs the "traditional" family as especially vulnerable to "Westoxification" and social decline. In contemporary Greece, motherhood is described as a woman's "choice" rather than her obligation; yet, Athenian women who aspire to motherhood find it an increasingly difficult choice to make (Paxson 2004).

In Brazil, gender roles and expectations related to motherhood and the family are changing, despite the noted tenacity of traditional values and hierarchies within the patriarchal family. Traditional gender relations throughout Latin America have been characterized through the complementary ideologies of *machismo* and *marianismo*, where male superiority in the public sphere is countered with female moral superiority within family life (Stevens 1973). Although identified as an outgrowth of a shame/honor complex common across Mediterranean societies (Pitt-Rivers 1965), this ideology developed among elites within colonial Brazil and remains important for understanding gender relations in contemporary Brazil (Parker 1991; Rebhun 1999).

Within this traditional construction of gender/sexuality, a woman's primary identification comes from her role as mother and caretaker of the family in the home (casa), whereas a man's identity is linked to being the provider and protector of the family and the mediator between the household and the impersonal world of the street (rua). Ideally, an adolescent girl (*moça*) "stays at home" and remains a virgin until marriage. A woman's status, as well as the honor of her male family members, is dependent on her sexual purity and passivity. Men, however, are expected to be promiscuous and sexually assertive. After sexual initiation, a girl becomes a woman (*vira mulher*) and, upon marriage, her sexual purity and honor are signified by her fidelity to her husband and her confinement to the house and familial duties.

While aspects of this traditional gender construction remain important for understanding contemporary gender relations, much of this ideology has been challenged. Media images, social movements, women's participation in the paid labor force, and increasing education are all "modernizing" arenas that have provoked shifts in gender norms, even for low-income women. Transformations in working-class women's lives can be traced by looking at changes in the kinds of activities in which women are engaged and examining what women say about those activities. In Taquaril, women's work includes domestic responsibilities and housework (*trabalho de casa*), paid work outside the home (*trabalho fora*), and, to a lesser degree, volunteer work performed in community organizations, church groups, or social movements (*trabalho comunitário*). The rapid decline in average fertility rates, the shifting socioeconomic context of women's paid work, and the local history of community work have changed the meanings associated with these arenas of women's lives.

Gendered Modernities in Brazil

In a single generation, from 1970 to 1991, average fertility rates in Brazil declined from 6 to 2.5 children per woman (Berquó 1993). Fertility decline began earlier in the upper-income and urban groups and has spread through all social strata and regions. However, important regional and social differences exist. The total fertility rates range from 5 children per woman for those women with no formal education to 1.5 for women with twelve or more years of education (BEMFAM 1996). Fertility rates would likely decline further if women had greater access to a wide variety of family planning methods (WHO/HRP/ITT 1994). Much of the initial decline in fertility has been attributed to illegal and clandestine abortion (Martine 1998). Birth control methods were not officially provided by public healthcare facilities, which serve the majority of the population, until the late 1980s, although pharmacies and some private family planning agencies began selling oral contraceptives in the 1960s. However, female surgical sterilization has been the most significant proximate determinant of fertility decline. Between 1986 and 1996, female sterilization rose from 27 to 40 percent among married women. A 1996 survey showed that, while an estimated 70 percent of married Brazilian women used some modern contraceptive method, 40 percent had been surgically sterilized and 21 percent used oral contraceptives (BEMFAM 1996).

This precipitous decline in fertility was not the result of an explicit population policy or family planning program. Until the 1970s, the government's position was explicitly pronatalist. Since then, the state has been supportive of a couple's right to determine their family size but has provided limited support for family planning services, due in part to the influence of the Catholic Church. Foreign and domestic family planning agencies and healthcare professionals, however,

have played important roles in providing birth control and promoting concern about population growth (Martine 1998).

Brazil's demographic transition has been explained as the result of various structural factors, including an increase in women's education levels, the massive female entry into the paid labor market, and urbanization. One of the most influential interpretations, however, posits that fertility decline was largely the unintended consequence of specific development policies implemented during the military regime, including: the extension of consumer credit to low-income urban populations; heavy investment in telecommunications and especially the spread of television; the medicalization of health and curative medicine; and the expansion of social security coverage (Faria 1989). All of these have worked against large families by making them unnecessary for social support and by increasing people's expectations in terms of consumption or gender roles. Although none of the policies had population control as the objective, each component accompanied urbanization and contributed to Brazil's fertility transition (Martine 1998). Only belatedly has the demand for fertility control been met with the provision of safe and adequate services in the public sphere. The lack of contraceptive options, separation of fertility control from women's healthcare, and reliance on sterilization has had deleterious effects for women's health (Corrêa and Ávila 1989; Giffin 1994).

Although its impact on fertility decline is ambiguous, massive entry into the paid labor force by Brazilian women has significantly altered their lives. From 1970 to the early 1990s, the number of women active in the labor market increased from 7 to 25 million; however, women occupy lower service positions—such as domestic work—and receive wages over 50 percent lower than those received by men (Pitanguy and Mello e Souza 1997).

Some have argued that participation in the paid labor force and the widespread use of modern contraceptive methods provide the basis for greater female autonomy and a transformation in gender roles, at least among the middle class. Paid work supposedly provides the possibility of individual affirmation, economic independence, and a challenge to male authority (Rosen 1991). Yet, given wage disparities, the channeling of women into certain occupational positions, and women's continued responsibility for reproductive labor, it is disputable that women's increasing participation in the paid labor force necessarily brings about greater autonomy or independence. This is especially true among poor Brazilian women, for whom paid work does not represent a recent trend and whose low-paying jobs provide little opportunity for personal affirmation or independence.

In her research with low-income families in São Paulo, Cynthia Sarti (1997) found that while a poor woman's paid work is valued by both men and women, it is mediated by her role as mother; paid work does not relieve her of domestic and family obligations, and it does not represent a break from patriarchal gender relations. Similarly, Karen Giffin argues that female earnings and fewer children, "have brought neither 'equality' nor 'liberation.' Rather, the consolidation of these new social patterns represents a redistribution of gender responsibilities in which the assumption by women of a 'double burden' has failed to bring about the end of the sexual 'double standard'" (1994:359). Instead, Giffin contends that women's work and smaller family size are complementary survival strategies of low-income women, who have been increasingly marginalized by economic policies that reduced minimum wages and increased food and service costs throughout the 1980s. At best, it seems, poor women's participation in the paid labor force

may make it possible for single or abandoned women to survive without the presence of a male breadwinner; indeed, female-headed households increased substantially from the 1970s to the 1990s (Neuhouser 1999).

It is clear that recent demographic and economic changes in women's lives have not freed them from patriarchal gender relations and have come at a substantial cost to their health and well-being. There is, however, evidence that gender norms and identities are changing. Using interviews with low-income women in Rio de Janeiro, Jeni Vaitsman (1997) makes a compelling argument that poor women inhabit "plural worlds" in which traditional and modern subjectivities interpenetrate. Extending DaMatta's symbolic analyses, she examines the extent to which egalitarian (modern) or hierarchical (traditional) cultural values are evident in the women's gender identity. Vaitsman finds, even in the context of poverty, the existence of individualist or modern aspirations and notions of autonomy, self-improvement, and equality in these women's investments in the future of their children. Women's discussions about paid labor express ambivalence but affirm that women's identities are not constructed through exclusive reference to reproductive roles within the family. On the contrary, women see work as a means to independence and an identity beyond the domestic ideal. On the other hand, the women indicated that housework was indeed "women's work." Values that could be seen as belonging to different (traditional or modern) universes coexist without great conflict. Thus, Vaitsman argues that the modern and the traditional interpenetrate in ways that are difficult to express in the dualistic sociological frameworks posited by a vocabulary of traditional/modern, personalism/individualism, hierarchy/egalitarianism. She argues that recourse to these classifications means:

> relying on a classification far too broad and universalizing to take account of, not only the diversity which exists between different social classes, but also of the content of the socio-cultural changes that recent developments in Brazilian society have produced: people's simultaneous participation in different symbolic and institutional worlds, and the coexistence of their exclusion and aspirations for goods and rights (1997:303–304).

In my interviews with women in Taquaril, I found women's participation in these plural worlds to be fraught with tensions, so eloquently expressed by Josefina's distinction between the modern woman and the woman-mother. In the following sections, I explore how traditional gender ideologies are lived and reproduced in Taquaril but also how women are confronting and remolding those gender norms in the areas of family planning, women's paid work, and women's participation in community service and development. Much has been written on each of these topics; I focus on women's own understandings and interpretations of their changing roles and responsibilities in one local context. While motherhood remains central to women's gender identities, women redefine "good motherhood" in ways that allow them to undertake actions that are sometimes seen to threaten traditional gender arrangements. Poor women are rarely portrayed as active agents of social change. Rather, in both popular and academic accounts, these women are more often portrayed as passive and submissive subjects of patriarchal gender relations and an oppressive class system. I hope to highlight their struggles and the ways many women have embraced notions of "progress" and "improvement," especially through education, work, and community development, despite the burdens that "modernity" presents.

The Woman-Mother: Gender and Sexuality in Taquaril

While working-class women are held, to varying degrees, to a traditional construction of Brazilian female sexuality—one emphasizing female chastity and fidelity—this traditional evaluation of femininity has weakened. Highly sexually-charged media images, advertising, and television programs showing relatively liberal sexual mores exist alongside some deeply rooted manifestations of the traditional ideologies. In Brazil, television is a major leisure activity, especially for women, and it has played an important role in influencing sexual and reproductive behavior (Faria and Potter 1999). Its effects are not direct, however, as poor women understand that their own realities are rarely shown on the popular soap operas (*novellas*) (Barsted and Pitanguy 1999).

In Taquaril, the historically dominant ideology of female gender and sexuality, expressed through the idiom of casa/rua, provides the terms through which women construct their gender and sexual identities. To insult a woman, for example, one only has to suggest that she spends too much time "in the street," because good women, especially if they are married, "stay at home." In Taquaril, few women actually stay at home as housewives, and such comments do not refer literally to women's use of the street. The main asphalt street through town is, in fact, well traveled by women throughout the day as they accompany small children to school, shop at vegetable stands, wait for the city bus, or stop to visit with neighbors. However, talking to men in the street, walking alone after dark, and, above all, hanging around the *botecos* (neighborhood bars) are behaviors that make a woman's sexual purity or fidelity suspect. One nineteen-year-old mother of two said, "It's ugly to see a woman in a boteco. I won't go into one, even for a Coca-Cola. I'd rather go into the bread store, or a restaurant. When you see a woman in a boteco*,* you know that she has no respect for herself." Although recognized by some as unfair or outmoded, women in Taquaril reproduce sexual double standards in a number of ways. For instance, when I asked Eugênia whether she talked to her adolescent son about sex, she said, "Yes, I always tell him, 'There are *girls* [i.e. virgins], and there are *women*, you have to respect the girls.'" By this, she meant that only virgins were appropriate for marriage and honor. Eugênia upheld the value of "virginity," despite the fact that she was not a virgin at the time of her marriage. She says that when she and her husband fight, he always brings this up as the ultimate accusation of her flaws.

Despite the ideal of virginity until marriage, legal marriage is often delayed and sexual relations are acceptable for couples engaged to be married. In fact, most women "married" or became "engaged" because they were pregnant. Although virginity upon marriage is a cultural ideal rather than a reflection of women's actual behavior, women's early sexual experiences hold several consequences for their later status and reproductive trajectory. Georgia Kaufmann's (1998) study of marriage, family formation, and fertility in the poor community Alto Vera Cruz, which neighbors Taquaril, showed that virginity was a key factor in whether women married. In her comparison of married, cohabitating, and single women, Kaufmann found that married women had initiated their sexual lives at older ages than women in the other two groups. Given that marriage was the desired life course for women, Kaufmann argues that cohabitating and single women made a strategic mistake by having sex with men who had not committed to marrying them. "Cohabitating and married women have distinct life courses. In the case of married women, marriage leads to procreation. Cohabitation, however, is more commonly the outcome of sexual relations that result in procreation" (1998:253). Furthermore, women who already had a child by a man who left found it difficult to legally marry another man; they were

more likely to enter into a series of temporary unions or to cohabitate in a stable relationship. Kaufmann found that legally married women were significantly better off than either cohabitating or single women; more married women worked outside the home and enjoyed greater respect from other women and from their partners. Although the average fertility of cohabitating women and married women did not differ in Kaufmann's study, other research in Brazil indicates that fertility is higher in consensual than formal unions (Verdugo Lazo 1994).

Most marriages in Taquaril are common law marriages rather than official unions registered "on paper." A couple is considered married if they reside together or the man provides some support for the household, even if he is often absent. For both a man and a woman, marriage implies "responsibility" and fulfillment of complementary roles. Given high unemployment, many men find it difficult to fulfill their role as "family provider" and so women's income often supports the families. For some women, changing gender relations are experienced as a breakdown in the respective responsibilities of men and women.

> Men don't value women these days, you know, Gina? A husband doesn't value a wife. A wife does everything, you know? And then he is violent with us in the house, with the kids. You see it everywhere in Taquaril. And the other problem is that if a woman wants something, she has to go out and fight for it herself, because husbands don't provide, not these days. They don't give anything. They don't help women with anything, there's no dialogue in the marriage anymore. [Gina: And why do you think that is . . . why is there no more dialogue?] It's machismo . . . and it's because a man always wants to be right, he doesn't want to listen to a woman. [Tânia, 31, separated, domestic, five children]

This work arrangement does not necessarily challenge the dominant gender ideology. In her study of sexuality among low-income women in Recife, Brazil, Jessica Gregg (2003) notes that even when women earned the principal support for the family, they themselves undermined any breaks with the dominant ideology that this might engender by expecting and demanding male contributions to household maintenance and symbolically demarcating those as the principal, "providing" contributions. Some working women in Taquaril affirmed, however, that everyone needs to work to support the family (not only women but also adolescents) and likewise that everyone should help out with housework. Still, they considered men's work around the house to be "help" rather than an obligation.

Women, more so than men, were expected to be faithful in marriage, although women said this was changing:

> Most people have [extramarital] affairs these days, but it's not normal for me to have an affair. In the old days, society taught a young woman that she had to remain a virgin until her wedding, to sleep with just one man, and to be his wife forever, even if she didn't like him. And that isn't right. But on the other hand, today we have "separation" and before we didn't. Our grandparents didn't know that word. They weren't happy but they didn't know it. They just stayed together and maybe the life they had was better than the one we have today. Because today we have an ideal behind things, but we don't know if it's true or if it's a dream. [Araçí, 34, married, janitor, four children]

Companionate marriage, held together by mutual love and attraction, is an illusive ideal (see also Rebhun 1999). From the perspective of women in Taquaril, the main threats to a household are "other women" and alcohol. While male infidelity is considered wrong, it is most threatening when it means that a man is diverting money from the household. Some women accepted male infidelity and simply said that what was "in the street, should stay in the street." When I asked her to define a "good man," one woman said that a good man "keeps his affairs with other women separate from his family." He is a good husband because he protects his family, even though he may have other women in the *street*.

Jessica Gregg (2003) found that poor women in Recife, Brazil, used their sexuality as an economic resource to pursue different sexual strategies. Some women followed dominant constructions of appropriate female sexuality and chose a path Gregg called "security," that is, marriage to one man, who provided economic contributions to the household. In the context of poverty and unstable relationships, however, other women found this arrangement impossible and chose instead a path of *liberdade* (liberty) through which they might engage in multiple sexual relationships for short-term or partial economic support. Gregg argues that both sets of women negotiated the terms associated with honor and respectability in ways that widened the array of behaviors available to them. Many women retained conservative sexual ideology of honor and shame, even though their behaviors did not fit within the conservative ideal of sexual constraint. Thus, Gregg argues that women maintained a superficial acceptance of dominant sexual norms while at the same time redefining their roles and/or defiantly resisting male double standards.

In the conjunto, the cost of deviating from the norm and having several sexual partners was higher than Gregg's findings imply, although she recognizes that "liberty" is an alternative, less preferred strategy. I found that women who openly disregarded sexual mores lost considerable social status and might not be considered worthy of other women's help and social support. Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes a similar situation for "widows" and abandoned women on the Alto do Cruziero, where they depend for survival on the help and sharing of other residents:

> The majority of Alto women are unmarried in the eyes of church and state, but most strive to be married someday. About a fifth of the women live in less regular arrangements, frequently changing partners and mothering children by two or more different men. These "loose" arrangements are not condoned by the women of the Alto, who continue to draw firm distinctions between "moral" and "immoral" sexual behavior. Although economic difficulties often delay formal marriage for many years, Alto women expect one another to live "in friendship" with the man who is the father of their children and to do so honorably. That is, man and woman should act towards each other as if they were, for all practical purposes, a married couple. . . . A prostitute or a woman perceived to be "promiscuous" can never claim for herself the social status of an "abandoned" or "widowed" woman. And she cannot make claims on her neighbors for help as a right (1992:102).

Likewise in Taquaril, women perceived to be "loose" or promiscuous were not respected and could be denied resources and help that they otherwise might receive.

Traditional marriage and family practices are seen to be breaking down, yet "modern" relationships and roles are unattainable. Women in Taquaril find themselves somewhere "in between." By affirming their mothering roles and responsibilities, women could fashion a morally respectable way to confront some patriarchal sexual norms in order to negotiate relationships with men. Women's experiences with family planning, paid work, and community development are three areas where conflicts between men and women, as well as new definitions of appropriate womanhood, have emerged.

Motherhood and Family Planning: "You have to have something to give them"

While neither a state family planning policy nor the actions of family planning agencies may be directly responsible for Brazil's rapid fertility transition, neo-Malthusian ideas linking poverty to large family size are widespread. While some media reports focus on the "high" fertility and fatalism of the urban poor, low-income women in Taquaril have largely accepted family planning discourses and declare that they can afford to have few children.

In my interviews with women about fertility, birth control, and childrearing, women emphasized the importance of having children. Children, especially young ones, are valued for bringing joy into the house and for their company:

> I'd even have more [children] if I could. I know kids get involved with a lot of things, like drugs. So if I were to think about that, I'd only want two. But really for me, I'd like to have eight, because even with all the trouble-making of my children, I love them so much. . . . One child isn't enough to make a house joyful, even with all the work they give you, I think one has to have at least two children. [Léa, 30, married, housewife, four children]

> I think that just one child is good. It's good and it's bad, because children grow up, but for me two is good. [Patricia, 18, married, two children]

While motherhood is desirable and central to womanhood, women also argued that mothers had to be concerned with "quality" and one's *condiçoes* (literally "conditions," living conditions, quality of life). "In the old days," they say, people had to accept "however many God sends"; whereas today, people must think about what *kind* of life their children will have. Thus, all the women I interviewed declared that they needed to limit fertility because they could not afford to have more children than they already had (*não tenho condições*). They clearly specified, however, that they were not referring to basic necessities, such as food. Sometimes women echoed a popular saying, "Where one eats, ten eat," meaning that food could be stretched, whereas other material objects and education could not be. The primary problem, they stated, was one of "raising children properly" and providing them with an education.

> If you put a child into the world, then you have to take full responsibility to raise him. Because it's not so difficult to give a kid some rice and beans, what's difficult is to teach him how to behave out there [in life]. [Helena, 38, married, crafts vendor, four children]

> Life is so hard!. . . Because . . . to eat, they will eat. But school? Nobody manages to help us educate our children. I have a son in the 5th grade, and I know how much each pad of paper costs. The money my husband makes is enough for food, but not enough for school supplies, and I never ask him for it. So that's why I think that people should use birth control if at all possible. [Araci]

To provide for one's children, women are expected to sacrifice themselves and give emotional care and guidance. To this was added the need to work to provide material goods for their children. As Araci again noted:

> I gave up every opportunity in life that I had to be a mother, to take care of my kids, everything that they need that is within my reach, I try to do. . . . So I think I'm a marvelous mother. I keep them in school; I buy what they need. If they need me to fight with them, I fight. If they need affection, I give it. I think that being a mother is this.

The key feature then of "modern" motherhood is not only limiting one's family size but also the provisioning of schooling and other needs. These statements reflect the discourse of family planners, circulated widely in Brazil as elsewhere, that women should limit fertility in order to be "better mothers" to the children they already have. The focus on education also reflects the state's recent interest in promoting basic education through a federal government program (*Bolsa-escola*) that pays a stipend to parents whose children regularly attend school. In this way, the discourse of schooling as a means to social mobility has been bolstered by real, material benefits.

Parenthood is ideally the work of both father and mother; both should accept responsibility for raising children and limiting family size. As one woman in Taquaril told me, "When a woman really loves a man and a man really loves a woman, they don't fill the house with kids." A good father is someone who provides for the house, and "leaves nothing for want" (*deixa nada faltar*). Many women, however, complained that men do not share their concerns, that men have not "kept up" with the increasing importance of the quality of life a parent must offer children, as measured in material goods and opportunities for schooling and employment. Repeatedly women told me that their partners were not interested in birth control. Men accrue status by having many offspring and therefore do not favor contraception (Kauffmann 1998). Men also feared that women using contraception would be able to "sleep with any man." Husbands' resistance created significant obstacles to women's use of contraceptive methods and limited access to female surgical sterilization (husbands must provide written consent). Not surprisingly, women in Taquaril reported that they had gotten pregnant sooner or had more children than they wanted.

Women did not question that they were solely responsible for birth control and childcare. But, precisely because of this, women reasoned that they must ultimately decide how many children a family should have. Araci lamented that her husband had never worried about how they would manage to raise their children and therefore did not worry about birth control:

> I imagined that I'd have four children. When I joked around, I always said I was going to have four: two boys and two girls. I thought it sounded cute. But after I

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had my second child, I saw that life was too complicated, and I didn't want any more children. We didn't own our house; we paid rent. [José] never worried about school. He thought that we could have ten kids—or however many God decided to send us—he never thought about using birth control (*evitar de jeito nenhum*)! But I went over his orders, and I underwent sterilization.

She later commented that:

We [women] decide what to do with our own bodies. A man doesn't feel the pain of childbirth; he doesn't breastfeed, which is a big responsibility.

Despite the ideal of joint decision-making, men's difficulties in supporting their families and, from many women's perspective, men's lack of concern for the new exigencies of education and information provided women with room to assert their own desires. Women frequently depended on other women for information about contraceptives, resources—including money to pay for surgical sterilization—and childcare. The perception that children have new needs regarding information and education and that women are responsible for raising children in "today's world" led several women I interviewed to attend adult reading and math classes held at night at the local grade school, even though their husbands did not approve. Some hoped to gain information that they could pass on to their children or information to help themselves "accompany" their children in the world. Others hoped that the classes might help qualify them for jobs other than domestic work.

Getting by in Taquaril: Women and Work

Given low wages and high unemployment, often men cannot fulfill the role of provider; women's work outside the home is not only acceptable and necessary, but also desirable. While employed men provided the basic household necessities, women were responsible for providing for their children's "extra" needs, such as school supplies and clothes for special occasions. So even "housewives" did what they could to raise extra money.

Eugênia could be a housewife because her husband, a crew chief in charge of janitorial services at the state courthouse, had a good job. In order to earn a take-home pay of R$500 (about US$200) per month, he put in as many as thirty hours of overtime each month. Needing a bit of "change" of her own and for her children's occasional expenses, Eugênia raised thirty chickens in her small walled lot and sold the eggs. She also babysat for her neighbor and occasionally took in laundry. Another housewife, Léa, knitted doilies and children's clothes, which she sold to other women. Although time-consuming, the knitting was sometimes very profitable. In 2002, skirts, tops, purses, and hair ties made from aluminum can pop-tops crocheted together had become a novelty fashion and could be found at some of the finer stores downtown.

From age thirteen to twenty, when she married, Eugênia had worked as a nanny and then a maid (*empregada doméstica*) in middle-class homes. She wanted to return to working as soon as her younger children were old enough to be left at home alone. Her husband did not forbid her from working but warned that his approval "depended on what kind of work" she found; it had to be something that did not interfere with her housework or with her children.

In Taquaril, women's judgments about the value of work varied depending on their marital status, their husbands' income, and the childcare arrangements they were able to make. With no publicly funded daycare available, women were constantly pulled between the necessities of working and of caring for children. Those who did this poorly were seen to be "letting their kids out loose into the street." Yet, to be a good mother, women also needed to find paid work to provide for their children. In an increasingly consumer-oriented society, mothers wanted to provide nice clothing, book bags, and tennis shoes for their children, although these goods were out of the reach of many in Taquaril.

A woman's "need" to work was viewed as relative and contingent. Married women with small children, whose husbands had steady employment, were most likely to be criticized if they could not keep up with domestic chores or "neglected" their children. It was said that these women did not really *need* to work—they worked for "vanity" or just to assert their independence. Other women with older children or with female family members to help with daycare would be criticized if they did not work. Eugênia purchased extra pasta each month to give to her neighbors when they ran short on food, but she said she only gave to those who deserved it. "Some women," she said, "are just lazy and do not want to work."

Despite the double burden of paid work and housework, many women said they enjoyed working outside the home. Work had positive connotations for most women, who said they were glad that they had "learned to work," had their own money, and could "get out of the house." One young woman, recovering from her second caesarian section in two and a half years, said:

> I want to work. My mother said it's not good for me to work now, because I'm still recovering. But I want to find work, if not this month then the next. . . . I can't be without work. [Fabiana, 19, married, has worked in snack shop, two children]

Another commented:

> All my life I've been a worker. My whole life I've liked to work. I'm strong, you understand? And he [her husband] never gave anything to my kids. I fought for it all on my own. [Elaine, 27, separated, domestic worker, three children]

Women in Taquaril often took pride in their work and had plans for future jobs. One woman hoped to be able to buy a larger stove and make packaged lunches (*marmite*) for workers in the community. Another was studying basic math in hopes of passing the test to become a ticket-taker on the city buses.

Women's paid work provided some measure of independence and pride but rarely autonomy. Households with several incomes were better off than those with one. So women often would withstand violent husbands and tolerate extramarital affairs from men who provided for the household. By working, women also took on the burden of the "double day," although not unquestioningly. They had little success in convincing men to take over housework; this was often left to adolescent daughters. While double standards have not disappeared, gender hierarchies are no longer naturalized and are weakening.

"Taquaril was conquered by women": Community Leaders and Volunteers

In recounting the history of the community, Josefina remarked, "It was the women who conquered Taquaril," and indeed women have been at the forefront of community mobilization and efforts to improve living conditions. Taquaril's current leaders are women. Given the "traditional" Brazilian construction of femininity that often excludes women from the public and political spheres, sociologist Kevin Neuhouser (1998) was initially perplexed to find that women became leaders in a squatter occupation he studied in the northeast of Brazil. Neuhouser later understood that "having a house" is central to "being a mother." He argued that poor women's commitment to the positive gender identity "mother," and their lack of alternative positive gender identities, motivated and provided social support for them to act "like men" by taking on authorities and mobilizing community action. Women "engaged in collective action because they were faced with a choice between mobilization and forfeiting their claim to be mothers. Men also lacked the resources to be fathers, but because acceptable alternative identities were available, they were less willing to pay the costs of mobilization" (Neuhouser 1998:334).

Josefina's discussion supports Neuhouser's interpretation that motherhood is central to women's strategies to obtain resources. She says that women were most involved because it was "women who needed housing for their children." But this has come at a price:

> So, women of Taquaril have that side to them—it's like a male living with
> another male (*como se fosse macho convivendo com outro macho, né?*). And
> when they go to bed together, this is important too, you know? [Gina: How so?]
> These are women of strength (*mulheres de garra*), working women, experienced
> women, you understand? It's like . . . sometimes I laugh with my friends, I tell
> them, "Gee, I think that my husband got scared of me and went away!" Of course
> that's it! With the kind of women there are in Taquaril, the men are really scared!
> It's because women, not only those in Taquaril, women in general today are
> making progress, making decisions, right? (*tocando para frente, decidindo, né?*)
> Women are deciding things, like me in my house. I make sure that the kids study,
> I work on the construction. I buy all the construction materials. I manage the
> budget for the house. You understand? And so, he's totally lost when he's near
> me. And I see how other men feel that way too. [Gina: You mean you think they
> feel threatened?] Sure they feel threatened, their pride is hurt, their *macho* side is
> totally threatened.

By acting like men, women are taking on authority in the household and in the public life of the community. Women in Taquaril have taken leadership roles in neighborhood associations, and in various forms of community development, such as the Participatory Budget, in which community members determine how public funds are spent in their communities. Women emphasized the material benefits of their participation within community projects. For example, the amount of resident participation was seen as the fairest way to determine the allocation of limited resources, such as funds for paving mud streets. Those streets with highest levels of resident attendance at meetings were paved first.

Women were also the principal volunteers at NGOs, church groups, and other community groups. These include activities such as the Catholic Church's *Pastoral da Criança*, in which

women from the community are trained as health agents to ensure that the neighborhood's children receive basic healthcare. Several NGOs also provide women with opportunities to get involved in community improvement. In 2002, one organization focused on the lack of adequate trash collection by providing an interface between the municipal sanitation department and community members and by finding creative ways to reuse and recycle trash materials. Other NGOs focused on women's health, environmental conservation, and youth development and recreation.

Women involved in community work in Taquaril did not have to mobilize or forfeit their claims to motherhood, as Neuhouser found. However, women, especially married women, did face resistance. Sometimes men disapproved of women's participation in community projects, especially if women engaged in door-to-door (*corpo a corpo*) educational or mobilization efforts. They also questioned women's whereabouts and fidelity when meetings were held in the evenings and women had to walk home after dark. At one meeting of a women's health NGO, members told of the obstacles they overcame in order to participate in the group. The greatest of these was their husbands' opposition. Women were willing to confront this opposition and participate, however, because they earned friendship and respect from other women, could expand their social networks, and had access to information and education that would otherwise be out of reach. In addition, some women were paid for their activities. Other women said that community work saved them from depression because they got out and walked a lot and could help their neighbors.

Some women resented the notion that they should take on additional work in the community. Bianca, a paid community health agent for the local health center, argued that it was very hard to work all day, come home to housework, and then go out for meetings. She did not think it was right for women to disregard their responsibilities at home in order to attend community organization meetings:

> Sometimes you visit a neighbor's house and everything is dirty and the kids are naked and you ask, "Where's your mother?" and they tell you that she left with so-and-so and went to the meeting. I think one has to be responsible in the house before taking on other responsibilities, no? [Bianca, 21, married, community health agent, two children]

However, through their participation in volunteer associations, women were also building a network of social relations that could be utilized in times of need. Gifts, loans, and information circulate through extended social networks and are an important source of women's power and status in urban Brazil (Neuhouser 1989).

Josefina volunteers for many community groups and NGOs and often takes her children with her when she cannot find anyone to care for them. Her neighbors sometimes criticize her for "dragging her kids about." In 1997, her son began spending more and more time in the city center, sniffing glue, and did not return home at night. Josefina went out night after night, looking for him and bringing him home. Because she had worked for several community organizations, she knew many people in city government, and in the NGOs and social services directed at the problems of street children. Thus, she knew where to go to get help, eventually finding an organization that helped her place her son in a drug rehabilitation program.

Participation in community projects and social movements for healthcare, garbage disposal, and erosion control resulted in more than just practical benefits for the community and personal networks of support. Several authors have noted that through women's participation in non-institutional political spheres, they often were able to articulate new political identities and become active in formal politics (Barroso and Bruschini 1991; Corcoran-Nantes 1993). Community organizations and movements were arenas in which women said they learned about their rights and citizenship (*cidadania*). Citizenship, as developed within Brazilian social movements, implies not only guaranteeing people's rights to make decisions about their lives, but creating the social conditions so that people can take advantage of those rights (see, for example, Thayer 2000). Thus, when the municipal Secretary of Health proposed increased pay as an incentive for doctors willing to work in poor areas, Neide, a community leader, protested:

> SUS [the national health program] guarantees equal healthcare for all. The city needs to invert its priorities! The government should invest in improving the quality of life in this neighborhood, invest in jobs for the population, so that they don't have to pay doctors more just to treat us.

Between the Modern Woman and the Woman-Mother

In the quote that opens this article, Josefina describes information, up-to-dateness, travel, and work as the key elements of modernity. The modern woman works, is not bound to the home, does not need male companionship, and, in fact, does not get along well with men because she cannot find a "modern" man. The mother-woman, in contrast, depends on her husband, and her world revolves around her children. This woman has little trouble relating sexually to men. Josefina finds herself in the middle of these contradictory, unresolved identities.

Despite a cultural ideology that extols the virtues of women as caregivers and men as economic providers, poor women see themselves as increasingly taking on masculine roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities put them into conflict not only with men but also with themselves. On the one hand, they enjoy elements of independance and pride that paid work allows them. On the other hand, working women often endure a double work day and struggle to make ends meet. Women experience a tension between their aspirations and the loss of security that "traditional" ideals represent. My data also suggest that poor women's definitions of motherhood and womanhood are changing due to their participation in the paid labor force, in certain social programs, and in community development. Women strategically draw upon the requirements of good motherhood to *justify* their participation in community programs and activism, even when it threatens male definitions of appropriate female behavior.

In contrast to those who would argue that traditional frameworks predominate among low-income populations, I found that some women have incorporated into their domestic arrangements and intimate lives some of the discourses of individualism, rights, and progress often associated with modernity. To describe these women's attempts at family planning, their paid work, or their investment in their community as "survival strategies" ignores the extent to which women have taken up and perceive themselves through certain modernist discourses. I am not arguing that individualist and modern values are inherent to the process of urbanization and industrialization; rather, I see these women's discourses on the modern as a particular instance of the way modernities are produced through local cultural forms and shaped by people

operating from a specific structural position of power, knowledge, and identity (Hodgson 2001). I argue that the patriarchal family structure and gendered role division is present, but it has been destabilized.

Modern notions of family planning, a woman's rights to her body, and companionate marriage now permeate these women's everyday lives. The paradox, as Vaitsman notes, is that poor women have a very limited ability to exercise rights or to achieve social mobility:

> In a world ever more heteromorphic, although traditional values have not disappeared, individualism has decisively expanded beyond the boundaries of the urban middle classes, penetrating a universe where the coexistence of the traditional values and the modern is all the more paradoxical because that to which these women aspire is experienced at the same time as a lack—in relation to consumption and rights (1997:318).

Having accepted the discourses of modernity, poor women expect the promises of citizenship and the benefits of a consumer lifestyle that Brazilian society has yet to provide the vast majority of its people. Many women in Taquaril carry a "triple" workload, but this has not been enough to ensure that they have healthcare or the women's health services already guaranteed to them by law. Low wages and lack of job training make it difficult, if not impossible, for women in abusive and unsatisfactory relationships to leave. A lack of community daycare services makes it difficult for women to balance paid work and reproductive responsibilities.

The paradox is also that women's participation in the different arenas of work is based on diverse ideas of progress and improvement. In the less than two decades of existence, Taquaril has become an increasingly heterogeneous and stratified neighborhood. Those who can find work have been able to improve their homes and purchase consumer durables. It is relatively easier to blame the differences in quality of life on individual efforts, on "lazy women" and "uncaring men," than on structural problems. Yet, building a secure and healthy urban infrastructure and "*uma vida digna*," a life with dignity, for all residents will require their continued collective action and political mobilization.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. All names of interviewees used in this paper are pseudonyms, as is "Sector C," the name of the area where they lived. Taquaril is the actual name of the conjunto; I believe the area is sufficiently large and populous as not to warrant use of a pseudonym.

2. Core data come from interviews with women who had been surgically sterilized or who wanted to undergo surgical sterilization. This paper also draws on a larger number of women who I came to know through participant observation in the community. All interviewees were contacted through the "snowball" method, as women in the community introduced me to other willing participants. Interviewees reflected the diversity of socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the neighborhood in terms of age, marital status (single, cohabiting, and legally married), religion (mostly Catholic or Evangelical Protestant), and race. Most interviewees self-identified as either "white" or *morena,* a term that reflects a wide range of light- to dark-brown skin tones. Only one interviewee identified herself as *negra* (black), a reflection of her politics and involvement in social movements rather than any distinction in her physical attributes. (See Sheriff 2001 and Twine 1998 for recent studies of race and racism in Brazil.)

3. Eugênia asked me to be the godmother of her youngest daughter. After the baptism, she sometimes affectionately referred to me as her *co-madre*, or co-mother.

4. All direct quotes used in this paper come from tape-recorded, transcribed interviews or from notes taken down immediately following a conversation.

5. The minimum salary is a federally established monthly wage. In 1998, the minimum wage was R$130, which corresponded to approximately US$107. Income is usually referred to in terms of the number of minimum wages one receives; most households in Taquaril earned two minimum wages.

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