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School success of girls from poor communities: what is the role of family socialization? ¹

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Abstract

This article presents results of a qualitative study that sought to understand the processes of gender socialization within eight families from poor communities in the city of Sao Paulo. We focus on some aspects that seem relevant to understand the academic success of girls. Throughout 2011, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight mothers, two fathers and ten children, as well as conversations and observations in schools, involving 26 children and young people. We obtained evidence that gender socialization within families of urban poor communities encourage the girls, not the boys, to develop the behaviors mostly desired by schools, such as discipline, organization and obedience (or less visible forms of disruption). At the same time, this type of socialization makes school attendance have different meanings for girls and boys, since the girls are held responsible for housework and have far fewer opportunities for sociability. These restrictions seem to make them appreciate extracurricular activities under schooled forms and develop aspirations associated with schooling and skilled occupations. The very existence of such ambitious projects, whether realistic or not, may be driving girls' greater commitment to education, and may be feeding back their academic success, which seems to arise from the very gender subordination.

Keywords

School achievement – Gender – Family socialization – Poor urban communities – Girls.

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O sucesso escolar de meninas de camadas populares: qual o papel da socialização familiar?¹

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta resultados de um estudo qualitativo que procurou conhecer os processos de socialização de gênero no interior de oito famílias de setores populares na cidade de São Paulo. Aqui enfocamos alguns dos aspectos que nos pareceram relevantes na compreensão da trajetória escolar melhor sucedida das meninas. Ao longo de 2011, foram feitas entrevistas semiestruturadas com oito mães, dois pais e dez crianças, além de conversas e observações nas escolas, envolvendo ao todo 26 crianças e jovens. Obtivemos indicações de que: a socialização de gênero no âmbito das famílias de setores populares urbanos favorece nas meninas, e não nos meninos, o desenvolvimento de comportamentos frequentemente desejados pelas escolas, tais como a disciplina, a organização e a obediência (ou formas de desobediência menos visíveis); ao mesmo tempo, essa socialização faz com que a frequência à escola tenha significados diferentes para garotas e garotos, uma vez que elas são responsabilizadas pelo trabalho doméstico e têm muito menos oportunidades de sociabilidade. Essas mesmas restrições parecem fazê-las valorizar atividades extracurriculares com formatos próximos ao escolar e desenvolver aspirações ligadas a uma escolarização prolongada e a profissões qualificadas. A existência mesma desses planos ambiciosos, realistas ou não, pode ser impulsionadora de maior empenho nos estudos, realimentando a roda do sucesso escolar das meninas, que parece surgir de dentro da própria subordinação de gênero.

Palavras-chave

Desempenho escolar – Gênero – Socialização familiar – Setores populares urbanos – Meninas.

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School success of girls is no longer a novelty in Brazil. Pointed out by Rosemberg since the 1970's, the highest performance of women in their schooling has been the scope of both quantitative and qualitative studies (ROSEMBERG; MADSEN, 2011; FERRARO, 2010; CARVALHO, 2009).

However, the explanation of such phenomenon found in most Western countries has theoretical challenges because it means an inversion of the asymmetry between men and women in society as a whole, as well as it very easily induces generalizations of essentialist nature (ROSEMBERG, 2001). The most usual universal explanations are, for example, the assumption that family socialization of girls is more compatible with school requirements – associated with discipline, organization, carefulness, submission, and silence –, while boys are socialized to avoid introspection and sensitivity but are raised instead to cultivate rebelliousness and restlessness.

Brazilian research on the public basic education, conducted in different parts of the country, reiterate this kind of explanation (SOUZA, 2007; PALOMINO, 2004; CARVALHO, 2005; CAVALCANTI, 2002) and insist on the idea that behaviors valued by the school would be those cultivated by the families toward girls and not the boys. In another strand, studies of the relationships that families maintain with the schooling of their children point out the interdependency between social conditions of origin and the forms that such relationships take (NOGUEIRA; ROMANELLI; ZAGO, 2000 e 2013; ALMEIDA, 2009; BRANDÃO, 2010). Frequently supported on the studies by Bourdieu and his readers, such approaches, although attentive to several aspects of actions of the families and the individuals in their schooling, seldom look at the differences between the sexes¹.

This article results from a research that attempted to make progress in relation to this gap by getting to know, through a qualitative

study, the processes of gender socialization within eight families from poor communities in the city of São Paulo. Here we focus on some of the aspects that seemed outstanding in the effort to understand the schooling path of girls. In order to avoid generalistic conclusions, the study focused on families from urban popular sectors, taking into account that in different social layers or in the rural areas, it is possible that the highest female school achievement is the result of other factors.

In addition to the effort of avoiding essentialism, we have also tried to escape from a polarization that has permeated this field of studies. On one hand, the explanation mentioned above is based on what may be called “syndrome of the women’s subordinated status” (SILVA, 1993, p. 82) – analyses that see the girls’ school success as a mere reinforcement of their subordination. In the attempt to break with such victimization, some female researchers bring to the center of the stage the deliberate action of girls and young women seeking their academic success, which would be achieved by themselves. Silva (1993), for example, inverts the statement and shows that most female senior high-school students in *Colégio Pedro II*, were autonomous, active and involved with extracurricular activities, in a contrasting way to their male classmates, which resulted in better school achievement for the girls.

Other female scholars highlight the contradictory aspects of women’s insertion in housework, which not only facilitates the continuity of schooling, in terms of hours and flexibility, but also leads girls, by contrast, to a positive and agreeable perception of the school. Both Madeira (1997) and Rosemberg, Piza and Montenegro (1990) emphasized the idea that the school appears to many girls and young women as an expression of some liberty of circulation and a place where they expand their social conviviality in comparison to the quasi-reclusion they have to live with – reinforced by the family control over their circulation and leisure. Girls see school as a “breather”,

¹- Gloria's (2009) doctoral research is an exception.

in the words of Madeira (1997), a place where they have time for themselves, out of the strict family control and away from the household chores. Duque-Arrazola (1997) even found girls from the city of Recife ²who considered the school shift a moment of rest.

We sought to break with dichotomous approaches and thus apprehend the contradictory dimensions of power relations associated with gender, which are at the same time forms of subordination and autonomy. And, with the purpose of not reiterating taken-for-granted assumptions, we sought to grasp in our analysis the dimensions of both rupture and maintenance of the subordinate positions of women.

Characterization of the subjects

The major individuals focused by the research are parents whose children were students at three public schools in the West area of the city of São Paulo. In each school, a questionnaire for characterization of the family group of students was responded by the “persons in charge” of a child, and based on such questionnaire families were selected if they had at least one child of each sex attending school and who were willing to participate in the study.

The first question to be clarified, which is revealed in the quotation marks for the term “*persons in charge*” has to do with whom we consider to be the family of the child. Given the difficulty of defining the concept of family – as, for example, pointed out by Romanelli (2013) –, we kept our focus in the empirical dimension of the family groups, in line with critical studies such as those by Fonseca (2005) and by Meyer and cooperators (2012). Thus, we attempted to avoid the assumptions of a complete nuclear family, consisting of father, mother, and children, living in a single household and sharing the same income; at the

same time, we paid attention to the different dynamics of family groups, as we expanded our contacts with them.

In the questionnaires of the eight families researched, there is both the father’s and the mother’s name and the blank space for “other persons in charge” was not utilized, which may indicate a search for compliance with the model of a complete nuclear family, as it is a written document sent by the school. However, when paying visits and conducting the interviews, we identified the presence of two grandmothers that were the regular caretakers of the children and two mono-parental families. In one of them, a female baby lived in the house who was the child of one of the sisters, 15 years old at the time. But the cohabitation of three family generations was not sometimes evident, as they lived in combined or overlapped houses in the same backyard.

Thus, we have considered as a family or family group the set of people that took care or shared the same care of children and with them we started the research, regardless of the fact that these people lived in the same household and their degree of kinship. Yet, our interviews almost always involved just the mothers, who attended the school meetings or who made themselves available for an interview. In two families, the fathers were interviewed too and, in one of them, the grandmother took part in it.

From the socioeconomic perspective, we can say that the eight families included in the study were very homogeneous: they declared a monthly income between R\$ 950.00 e R\$ 2.500.00³; the schooling of the couples did not go further than junior high-school, and either complete or incomplete elementary school was prevalent; professions were of those requiring low qualification, most women were housemaids and most men were construction workers; and the majority of people had a job in the informal labor market. In six families, the offspring consisted of three or more children

2- City in the Northeast area of Brazil.

3- Equivalent to approximately US\$ 426.00 and US\$ 1,123.00.

and seven households looked much alike: small houses of masonry, built by the own residents in a slum. They had electricity, running water and a bathroom, but sewage and garbage collection were precarious or non-existent. There were frequent accounts of police violence. However, the houses had brand-new furniture, HD televisions with a wide screen, computers and videogames, brand-new electric appliances and cell phones. Four of the family groups had a car and almost all had had an increase in their capacity of consumption in recent years, with access to credit and durable goods.

Along 2011, semi-structured interviews with eight mothers, two fathers, and ten children from six⁴ houses were taped. In five visits, children participated in different moments of the conversation, both besides and separately from the adults. We searched information about the achievements of these children at the school, both through documents and by talking with their teachers, and we have also conducted observations and informal conversations with such children.

Thus, the research involved 14 boys and 12 girls, between 6 and 18 years old⁵. Out of the amount consisting 26 children and young people, just the following were out of school: Jeferson⁶, 18 years old, who dropped out of junior high one year before the research, against his mother's will; and Silvana, 15 years old, who was pregnant and had completed elementary school being "pushed", according to the teaching coordinator of the school, and at the time of the interview, she dedicated herself to the care of her baby. All of them went to public schools. Concerning 19 of such students, we obtained information about their academic achievement from the school, and in the other cases, we asked their families.

Among the 12 girls, eight were good students, ranging from "excellent" to "medium",

and four "had difficulties" to learn, but never with discipline. Among the 14 male students, only five were characterized as "medium" or "no problem", none was excellent and the other nine "had difficulties" to learn and/or with discipline, a history of failures, and parents were repeatedly summoned to school. Although formed at random, it is therefore a group that matches the characteristics of school achievement we have been finding in our studies (CARVALHO, 2009), as well as in several other studies in Brazil and abroad.

About rules, control and fear

The equalitarian treatment between the sexes within the couple and in sons' and daughters' education is one of the ideals associated with the contemporary models of family, together with the appreciation of childhood, affection and intimacy, as well as the presence of non-hierarchical relations between the age groups and the primacy of the individual over the collective level (DE SINGLY, 1996). In a study conducted among children living in slums in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the early 1990's, Heilborn (1997) highlights that, if this model is "capital in the contemporary society, it is far however from being a universalized fact", since the process that propagates individualism "has primarily targeted the middle and higher layers of modern society" (p. 297). Thus, the author found distinct logics in the organization of social relations and practices in the families she investigated and pointed out, in consonance with other studies about the culture of Brazilian urban workers in 1980-90, the prevalence of group over the individual, the presence of hierarchical relations between the sexes and the categories of age, in addition to the strength of values associated with the family and labor.

If, on one hand, we must not have the illusion that there were, in the 1990 as today, equalitarian and non-violent relations within the middle- and higher-class families, the two decades that separate Heilborn's empirical

4- Two families were interviewed at their respective schools.

5- The families also included two babies under 2 years of age and two children who were 4 years old.

6- All names are aliases.

research from ours seem to have contributed to a greater diffusion in the poor sectors of the egalitarian ideals, of the family model as a support for individual fulfillment and the respect to the particularities of each child. The comparison, mentioned by one of our female interviewees, between how she raised her own children in São Paulo and the upbringing she got (which still happens today to her nephews) in a little town in the state of Bahia, leaves no doubt about the changes in the hierarchy between age categories and about its dimension that is not only temporal, but also spatial (rural/urban):

When my mother came here, she was horrified. We had a different upbringing up North; and my nephews still get it. There, children pray before going to bed, they pray before the meals, they ask father and mother for their blessing. Here children backtalk to their father, their mother. There, children go to mass. Here, children yell, make a fuss. There, if adults are talking, they don't even get close so they will not disturb them. (Marinete, 32 years old, four daughters and three sons)

This new ideology seems to also delegitimize the explicit statement of difference in the treatment according to the sex of a person and to value a customized education, adjusted to the needs of each child. Thus, in all interviews we heard an initial talk that reiterated the equality of rules and requirements to all the offspring: "What is good for one has to be good for all" (Edinalva, one daughter and three sons); "at home, rules are the same for both" (Aldilene, one son and one daughter); "back home, it is like this, I just care that Daniel wears underpants, and the girls wear panties, but concerning all the rest, the rule here is the same for everyone" (Keila, one son and three daughters). This proclaimed idea of equality, however, was denied both as the interviews followed and by what the children told us.

For example, Livia, upon listening to her mother (Aldilene) says that the rules were the same at home, told in a low voice to the assistant researcher that she was not allowed to use the computer until late, but the same restriction was not imposed to her brother who, according to her, would be up using the computer until late in the night. Keila instead, a mother mentioned above, soon after saying that the only difference she saw in her son and daughters was in their intimate underwear, said: "I think girls make us busier".

Likewise Keila, almost all parents said they had more concerns about the girls, seen as more fragile and vulnerable: "I think that the kid who is a male is more... brings you no trouble, right, in kid that is a male. In a kid who is a female, instead, you have more... you have to be more careful" (Marinete, four daughters and three sons).

It was evident that these mothers were concerned with teenage pregnancy, faced by six of themselves, when they were between 14 and 17 years old. But there appear also concerns with the boys, either because they might "get a child" or due to the risk of being involved with drugs and violence: "I am afraid and I am more worried, because of the way things are today. I'm harsher with him because he is a boy and I have more concerns about him" (Alice, one son and two daughters). However, girls were much more watched and had hours and spaces of circulation much more restricted than their brothers.

In a very similar way, Barroso, when she interviewed young Portuguese people who had at least one sibling of the opposite sex, found that "you face a proclaimed equality, but it is denied by the facts" (2008, p. 8). The accounts she obtained allowed her to say that the sex and order of birth continue to be "the main criteria in the construction and de-construction of equal rights and duties among brothers and sisters" and "in the cases where such inequality of treatment is not assumed, it appears in an implicit manner" (2008, p. 8).

We cannot neglect the context of the interview, as asymmetric relationship, and the fact that the individuals who not necessarily believed in egalitarian upbringing for both sexes would easily deduce that this where the interviewer(s) stood, as a consequence of the very matter the research was dealing with, which had been explained to them. Thus, Evonete, for example, the mother of two boys and a girl, a housemaid who completed high-school when she was already an adult two years before, avoided as much as she could to make generalizations about men and women and tried to bypass the idea that the rules for her daughter and for her sons were different. But, in an interview that was conducted separately, her son Luciano (9 years old) said that his 7-year-old sister was not allow to play with toy cars because their mother did not want her to – “Yeah, toy cars are for boys” – in the same way that he was not allowed to play with a doll.

Maybe because she was less concerned about showing a speech that would be agreeable to the researcher(s), Marta, (the grandmother of three girls and a boy), said:

A man can do everything [...]. I think that all the girls are held with more responsibilities, as we see around, in general [...]. So this is my opinion, that a woman takes more responsibility for everything, and she has to do it, she has to study; she has to do the household chores – but not the boy. Daniel spends the whole day in the computer.

Most parents tried to explain the differences in the way they treated boys and girls based on each child’s individual features, recurring to the ideals of a customized education: “Because they are four and none of them has the same mind, none of them shares the same thinking. As any other human being...” (Edimara, one daughter and three sons). Our attention was drawn to how often such speech was mentioned, as well as the description of the characteristics or history of

every child – diseases, period he or she had lived away from the mother, the grandma’s influence etc. –, which indicate the spread of this model of customized education.

It must be highlighted, however, that these personal features were invoked to justify gender inequalities in the rules and tasks assigned, with a heavier burden onto the girls. Sometimes they needed to be under more strict control because they were younger, sometimes because they were older; sometimes because they seem delicate or because they were rebellious and bold; sometimes they were supposed to do most of the household chores because they were first-born, sometimes because they were helpful, or because their brothers were clumsy; one was described as fragile, the other as “*songa-monga*”⁷, a third one as conceited and all these features justified a firmer control or concern.

In short, the educative models we found had a dialogue in different degrees with the prescriptions of childhood, egalitarianism and individuality present in the contemporary family ideals, but they did not break with gender inequality: through a more strict parental surveillance, very early the daughters seemed to learn some characteristics that the female teachers acknowledge as feminine and are frequently valued by them, such as organization, obedience, silence and calmness. Such learning probably includes even the ways to cross the line in a discreet manner and which mean a lesser direct confrontation, already described for example by Bernardes (1989). These features appeared to parents as spontaneous, natural and resulting from the mere fact that they were girls.

The labor division between father and mother

In our society, parents engage in the care of the offspring and in the household chores in

⁷- Brazilian slang for a person who is silly and stupid.

a very unbalanced way in terms of the time they spend and the type of task they make, an issue that has already been explored in the literature (PINHEIRO et al., 2008; BRUSCHINI, 2006).

Even when they had a job, mothers continued to be the person mainly in charge of the domestic chores. When they said they share this workload, the tasks performed by the fathers were considered some kind of help: "It is my duty and he helps me" (Evonete, family 6). When present in the interviews, fathers sometimes were proud to mention the chores they had taken care of recently, which only emphasized that they were in fact exceptional: "We share the load. [...] I do the dishes... I put the house in order. Just yesterday I cleaned everything up, I washed the bathroom" (Wilson).

Bruschini and Ricoldi (2012) found in a qualitative research with groups of working-class men in São Paulo that they participated more in the care of their children and in the cleaning up of the house, in relation both to previous studies and to the early perception of their own that these matters concerned the women only. Thus, although their female partners spent more hours than they did in the domestic chores, when detailing their routine, men revealed to be somehow involved. The same happened in the families we talked to, as most fathers who cohabitated with children described themselves or were described by their partners as participatory and helpful in at least some of the tasks involving care for the others.

In general, fathers were in charge to taking children to school when the family had a car, and some of them attended school meeting, especially when they had a higher level of education than the mother or if they had more flexible working hours. But the mothers were the ones taking the burden of checking on homework and raising the children, which resulted in little availability by the fathers to take part in the research interviews.

These were also territories of negotiation between the couple, as Romanelli highlighted (2013) by pointing a quasi-omnipresence of

mothers as subjects in the studies about the relationship between families and schools: "this issue leads to the asymmetry and inequality in gender relations and cannot be accepted as natural in domestic life" (p. 53). The author emphasizes the power relations between men and women, besides the attempts by mothers to control the domestic ambience and the raising of children. This became evident to us, for example, when we tried to access the residence of Regina and André so that we could interview their children. When he heard our request, the husband said: "Now, you have to arrange it with the wife. Because, in this matter, the wife is the boss."

Thus, although we made an effort to include the fathers, only two were interviewed, which led us to pay attention to possible bias in the mothers' speech, which could be marked by their effort to keep their power over this sphere of life. Brugeilles and Sebille (2009), when analyzing the outcome of questionnaires about the participation of parents in the care and raising of their children in France, found remarkable differences depending on whether the answer was given by the fathers or by the mothers. "Each one of them valued their own role" (p. 21), say the authors, who interpret such differences as the product of power relations, but also as a result of different ways to define each task and as a consequence of the legitimacy of the discourses on the egalitarian labor division between the sexes. Some of the women we interviewed, on the contrary, probably due to same egalitarian values, tended to overrate their partners' performance: "Actually, the one who doesn't do much around here it's me" (Keila). Or, when interviewed by two women, they looked for our complicity: "André cooperates. (laughter) You know the feeling, men help, right?" (Regina).

Anyway, it seems crucial for us to highlight that these are power relations under masculine supremacy (and here we will not see in detail, for example, the cases of alcoholic fathers and of domestic violence), these relations

are source of everyday learning for sons and daughters about where they stand in terms of gender. No doubt, the example of parental activities is a decisive source in the gender socialization of children, even stronger than the explicit raising process (BRUGEILLES; SEBILLE, 2009; OCTOBRE, 2010). That is, if girls and boys learn on a daily basis that they must respect hierarchies, and they also learn about passivity, obedience and self-control or, on the contrary, power, action and rebelliousness, the power relations between their father and mother has a tremendous weight in this learning process, as well as the division of the workload between them. Such implicit learning also includes breakdowns, questioning, ways of overcoming these hierarchies and of gaining power in the interstices of domination.

Girls and boys in regard of household chores

All the girls participated more intensely than their brothers in the domestic tasks, even when the cooperation of children was secondary: Lívia (10 years old) told that her 17-year-old brother made a mess in the room they shared. Aldilene, their mother, asked him to put things in order, “but he doesn’t do it, I have to do it myself”. In André’s family (father, one son and one daughter) he set a clear difference in assigning the tasks, running against the ideas of his partner, Regina:

The mother tries to force them, “you have to do this, you have to do that”. I’m against this attitude. She says I’m kind of chauvinist, I reply: “look, household work is to be done by the woman, the woman!” There are some things that a man does, but you cannot force him, and teaching him to cook rice and all, no. You teach the girl, you teach her, because when she grows up, she will cook [...]. But the boy will not. I don’t force him to do it. He doesn’t need to do it. (André)

In other five families, the girls played a crucial even exclusive role in performing the household work and in the care of the younger siblings. Emily, 10 years old, who was the first-born of Wilson and Edimara, in an offspring with three boys more, since very young took the burden of taking care of them while the mother had a job outside the home. The ease the girl showed during the interview, conducted at her home, both towards the care of her youngest brother, a year and seven months old, and in making coffee for us, was a proof of that. She said that even her 8-year-old brother did not help in practically anything: “He is lazy”.

In the home of mothers Alice, Keila and Marinete, the girls were mainly in charge of the household chores, a burden that was not shared by the brothers:

I say: “Daughters, iron the clothes because mommy has a lot of clothes, iron a little and when I get home I’ll iron the rest”. And they do it, they clean the house, Francimary [11 years old] you have to see, she puts the house in order as a grown-up, she cleans everything. [...] (Alice, one son and two daughters).

They do everything. I get home and everything is tidy, food is ready, and the youngest [Leila, 4 years old] has already taken her bath and had been changed. [Who cooks?] Luciane [11 years old], and Valentine [14 years] takes care of the house. She does the laundry, she doesn’t iron, but she does the laundry and cleans up. [...] Daniel [16 years old] doesn’t do anything, he doesn’t wash a glass, but I don’t let him do anything, because if he does he will break everything. (Keila, one son and three daughters).

Yes, as I have a job outside, when I get home dinner is ready, lunch is ready, the laundry had been done, the clothes were ironed. [Who does all that?] Silvana [15

years old] and Alaide [18 years old]. Sirlene [14] doesn't help with anything.⁸ [...] Boys don't either. They say household tasks are for women.

Silvana and Alaide told that sometimes the boys (all under 13 years) said "we command and you obey", and the girls would reply: "we're not housemaids and we won't do what you tell us to do". This dialogue seemed especially revealing of the power relations occurring in household work division and of the challenges made by the girls of the place of subordination that is assigned to them.

In Edinalva's family (three sons and a daughter), one of the boys, Vicente, 13 years old, shared with equity the tasks with his sister Giovana, 12 years old, with some participation of the youngest brother. Only the male first-born did not take part in it, according to their mother's account, confirmed by Giovana and Vicente when we talked later:

The oldest says: "I have a job, I can't do it!" Then I say: "I have a job, I cook for you and I do the laundry!" But he doesn't like to hear that. But Vicente doesn't complain about that, if I ask him he'll help me. (Edinalva).

Despite the exception of Vicente, once more the direct words of Marta, the grandmother of a boy and three girls, synthesize the big picture:

What I see is that we, mothers, put more things for the girls to do than for the boys, I mean, things related with the household routine. I don't know about other places, but here the girls are real housewives, they are, but Daniel stays more... [gesture of freedom] because he's a man.

8 - Sirlene was rated by her mother and sisters as a "songa-monga" (see footnote 8). She had serious learning problems at school (she attended 4th grade and was still illiterate) and had also speech handicaps.

Quantitative data confirm the huge inequality in the division of domestic work: according to the National Research based on Household Sample - PNAD 2006, 56% of the boys and 78% of the girls between 10 and 14 years old performed domestic chores, and in this groups, 32% of girls and just 8% of boys spend more than 11 hours per week in this activity (ARTES, 2009, p, 104). However, it is interesting to highlight that in much of the speech in our interviews there is criticism to this unequal division of tasks, which does not appear naturalized and unquestionable as Heilborn found it (1997) in the families she studied in the 1990's. Taking into account the criticism of Marta, the responses given by Alaide and Silvana to their brothers, the accusations of chauvinism by Regina to her spouse, Vicente's active participation in the household chores, among other accounts and situations, it would be no longer possible to synthesize what we heard with the same terms of Heilborn, whose interviewees did not question "why women perform the totality of domestic work" (HEILBORN, 1997, p. 324).

What consequences does holding girls from poor urban communities responsible for the household chores have upon their academic achievement? The already quoted study by Artes (2009) concluded that the domestic tasks seem to have some negative effect on the girls' schooling only when they take more than 11 hours a week, certainly because this requires time and efforts from them. But it also seems to us that the meanings assigned to the household work, as well as the fact of being performed in an isolated manner within everyone's home are very relevant to understand the girls' attitudes towards school. Other authors (ROSEMBERG et al., 1990; HEILBORN, 1997; MADEIRA, 1997; DUQUE-ARRAZOLA, 1997) have already stressed that the poor urban girls are almost confined at home, both because of the domestic workload, and because, while they are raised, their families restrict their circulation. This context would lead girls to perceive school in

a more positive way, as a place for sociability, freedom, personal fulfillment and even entertainment.

The words of Keila (mother, one son and three daughters) about the duties and punishments she assigned her daughters give a lot of clarification about these meanings:

Once in a while, they [the girls] skip [class] because they have something to do at home, because they didn't do what they were supposed to do at home, then I get back and make them do it, so they won't go to school on that day [...]. Because they spend the whole day looking at the wall while I'm working hard. And, when it's time to leave for school, they just leave without doing anything, and *go to school with their friends*. That's not possible. (Keila, our emphasis).

It must be stressed that Keila's oldest son, Daniel, 16 years old, did not take part in any domestic chore nor had a job, but he frequently missed school and almost failed due to absences in the year before the research. His mother said that she "forced him to go to school". While missing school was something bad for the girls, because they enjoyed being there "with friends", for the boy it was the opposite, a situation that possibly was a condition of and at the same time a result of different attitudes towards the boy and the girls in the everyday life of the classrooms. How many other children have been learning the same meanings and priorities, school as a prize or school as punishment?

Leisure, or the lack of it

On the weekends, free time was usually for family activities, involving both boys and girls, with no distinctions. Only the oldest children – especially the boys – would sometimes go out alone or did not accept to take part in some activity. In fact, the families seldom went out and, in general, they would visit relatives, go to

public parks or to church: "on weekend, we stay home" (Alice); "We go to church because it is our 'night'. It is true, there we can do everything we want to do – singing, barbecue, tours – but all in the right way" (Keila). Sometimes, we noticed that fathers and mothers felt they had to report leisure activities and recall an event that actually was exceptional, as was the case of Wilson, who had recently purchased a car and commented: "frequently we go out. When was that... two weeks ago, we went to the beach".

In fact, the time of mothers and the girls was only really free, even on the weekends, after they had completed their household chores and this seems to be the main difference in relation to gender:

I work every other Saturday. Sunday is the day when I do things very quickly we [mother and daughters] make lunch, lunch is ready in about an hour, we have lunch, then a friend of ours comes over, and then the day is gone, and I take a rest so I can face the incoming week. (Alice, two daughters and one son).

Houses were very small and we rarely saw toys in them, and even more rarely we saw books, while the streets – narrow, dirty, with no trees – were considered dangerous places that should generally be avoided. The only family whose house had a lot of toys and some children's books was that of a building caretaker and a housemaid; their children told us that most of it had been donated, second-hand, by their mother's employers and by a resident of the building. In the other interviews, the girls said they liked: to jump rope and jump elastics; play with dolls, play school using little blackboards, and play doctor. The soccer balls and kites were unanimous among the boys. In six families, we found dogs that the kids played with and were considered "company".

In most family cores, however, the main entertainment within the house was the computer, the videogame and TV. Brothers and

sisters would fight for the videogames and computers, but the interviews and observations showed that they were overwhelmingly used by the boys: “Daniel spends the entire day in front of the computer. [...] Everybody uses it a little, but he uses it longer because he is in the Facebook” (Keila, mãe).

Part of the families had internet access at home. Although we did not ask this question directly, the use of social networks and e-mails were mentioned and showed us this was not something rare. A research disclosed by the Internet Management Committee in Brazil (CGI.br)⁹, based on data collected in 2012, found that 71% of elementary and high-school students from the Southeast area of the country had a computer with internet access at home and the families we studied seemed to fit into this pattern.

The videogame was taken as equivalent to the computer and the latter was described as a toy and source of entertainment, not as a source of knowledge, related to school or work: “Cintia likes to play a veterinarian videogame in which she has to take care of the pets, and she is always playing that in laptop” (Regina, mother); “At home, Livia plays videogame, uses the computer or play with her dolls” (Aldilene, mother).

And, contrary to what was found by Octobre (2010) in France, almost always the computer had a specific owner, usually one of the boys:

There are little fights between them (brother and sister) for the computer. The computer is his, I gave it to him. As soon as he asked me I said “I’m going to give you a computer”. (André, father).

In French families, Octobre (2010) points a tendency of buying computers for the girls, as it is expensive and delicate equipment which they supposedly would take better care of, in addition to the fact that they will know how

9 - Available in: <<http://www.cetic.br/educacao/2012/alunos/B8.html>>. Accessed on May 29th 2013.

to withdraw more academic benefits from it. In the group we investigated, the association of computers with games seemed to ensure their masculinization, although they were also utilized by the girls, especially for non-violent games and access to social networks. Thus, the repercussions of owning and using the computers had an insignificant effect on school achievement or open new cultural horizons.

For the girls, as playing on the street was practically banned, there remained the option of watching TV and sometimes drawing or playing domino, always in the confinement of small rooms within their homes: “The girls watch TV, they make drawings, it is like this.” (Alice); “Yeah, what they like most is to watch TV, they like to watch soap-operas. It is really TV they like” (Marinete, mother).

Playing on the street

Along the week, outdoors leisure meant to talk at the door of neighbors, fly a kite on the street and play soccer in an improvised field in an empty lot of land, since the houses did not have a backyard and were located in districts where there are no squares or public sport centers. In the speech of almost all parents, only the boys were allowed to engage in these activities outside their homes.¹⁰

For example, in the family of Ernani (12 years old) and Cláudia (9 years old), according to their father (André), the boy was allowed to play on the street, with neighbor friends, where they played ball, rode a bicycle and flew a kite. In addition, Ernani walked alone to school and to the educational project he attended after class: “He is a boy, you have to let him loose” (André, father). Instead, he drove Cláudia to school and to the project. Regina, the mother, said clearly that she would rather “keep her daughter at home, because she’s a girl”, as

10- An exception was the family of the building caretaker as the building was located in an upmarket neighborhood; they had a different integration with the street and the neighbors.

she was allowed to invite female friends and occasionally go to a classmate's home.

These rules are similar to those described by Alice, who supported and raised all by herself the three kids (Fernando, 15 years old; Fernanda, 13; and Francimary, 11): "Here on our street nobody sees my children walking around, just when they go to school. When I get home, I call them inside, they watch TV and then go to bed." Although this first speech involves them all, gradually we perceived that there is some flexibility, especially for the son:

The girls... nobody comes here to call them, except if they are going somewhere, the shopping mall around the corner, where Fernanda goes with her cousin, sometimes, to buy something. And they don't go out to any places. [...] They come back together from school, and I tell them that from school they must come straight home. [...] Fernando, when a friend comes to play ball, it depends on what time it is. Sometimes, his friend comes over in the evening and I don't like it, I'm scared. (Alice, mother)

Evonete seemed to be even more strict and would seldom allow her daughter, Ana Lúcia, 7 years old, to sleep at somebody else's home, even at the aunt's:

She doesn't go often because she is a girl and I don't like to let her sleep there. I think the girl has to be close at the sight of her mother's eyes. I don't like to let her stay out, but as it's my sister's, I make an exception, once in a while, but it is rare. (Evonete, mother)

This does not mean that the children did not break the rules and did not go out of their tight homes in search of sociability and entertainment. Regardless of their parents being aware or not, both boys and girls told us they went out to play soccer or to get together with male and female friends. A typical case

was Marinete's family, large and living under the worst conditions among all those we have interviewed. When we asked Marinete about the rules regarding places and hours of entertainment for the three sons and four daughters, who were between 7 and 18 years old (one of the girls, 15 years old, had already had a baby), she said that the boys, if they were not at school, they were "playing ball in the field. There is an empty lot around here", as was the case during the interview. Instead, about the daughters: "The girls are more inside the house. [Do you let them go out?] We never did. But you saw what happened, right?! Because we didn't let her go out, look at the outcome!" (points the baby at her daughter's lap, laughter).

If the worry about controlling the sexuality of girls is rather evident in the comments above, the outside spaces were perceived as a source of danger both for the girls and for the boys. In relation to the sons, the involvement with drugs and drug dealing seemed to be the major reason for concern, as for example described by Keila, mother of a young man and three girls:

People don't know but we are in a war, people are killing each other, the fear of a mother is this: losing their children to two things, to drugs and to the world. Because the world comes and kills, now this is the reality. If you get involved with drugs nowadays, you're on a tight spot because you're a drug addict. (Keila, mother)

Thus, children of both sexes were the object of concern and controls. The risks associated with masculinity had mainly to do with illegal activities, a possible way of earning income and exercising power (ZALUAR, 2010). But a gender difference was clear in relation to sexuality. As we have already indicated, most parents started talking about the equality of the rules they applied in raising their children, but almost always they would end up in some kind of distinction. Edimara, after saying she had

left a job so she could stay closer to her oldest daughter, Emily, 10 years old, due to dangerous situations outside the home, commented on the possibilities of her daughter or her sons becoming mother or fathers:

That's what I tell Alex (8 years old), the same thing: if you make a girl pregnant, no matter if she is black, white, poor, rich, you will have to take the responsibility. [...] Then, when you're old enough to go dancing, to drink, to get a chick here, other there, take a girl to the bush today, another to the bush tomorrow, you would be able to get to know the white, the black, the yellow, the pink (girl), but then you'll have to be there, with just one (girl). Everyday you will have to look at her face, in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening! (Edimara, mother).

Certainly, Edimara would not have left her job to look after her 10-year-old daughter if she saw the girl's sexuality the same way, that is, if she had expectancies that her daughter would be able to "get to know the white, the black, the yellow", in the "bushes", before getting married or engaging in a steady relationship. This is a good example of what we observed in the eight families: despite the rules being similar, the limitations to the circulation in the public space were stronger for the girls, who would find themselves practically confined to their homes. As Edinalva synthesized very clearly: "A man is free to go everywhere, as they say. A woman has no such freedom." Combined with the overloaded domestic work, this restriction forced girls to a rather limited life, as they had to spend a lot of hours closed within their homes.

As we said when discussing the girls' responsibility for the household chores, there are strong indications that the school is seen by the girls as a space of liberty, sociability and personal fulfillment. Yet, for the boys, school represents a pause in the collective leisure activities in the soccer improvised fields, in the streets and alleys.

Thus, it seems that the years that separate our own research from the studies included in the collection organized by Madeira (1997) did not bring significant changes for the children and youngsters from poor urban communities in regard to the role that the school may represent in the context of gender differences in their socialization. If access to education has been expanded in a remarkable ways along the period, the turbulent, interrupted and unsuccessful relationship between a great deal of these boys and the school seems to reiterate that, for them, this is a place of restrictions, contrary to the experience of their sisters.

Extra-school activities and plans for the future

One of our early assumptions, inspired by Silva's study (1993), was that the families provided boys and girls with different extra-school activities, the latter more involved in practices that contributed to their academic achievement, since the boys dedicated themselves mainly to the sports. This assumption was partly confirmed as even though the girls were more numerous in non-sportive activities, it seems important to consider their active choice and initiative in the search for these practices, rather than the mere offering of it by the adult(s).

In the families as a whole we found: four cases in which none of the children performed extra-school activities; one family in which all members participated in sport practices, although different for each sex (swimming for all, boys in soccer and the girl in artistic gymnastics); one family in which both kids – brother and sister – attended charity organizations after class to practice sports, have their homework supervised and were involved in the environment and civil projects; and two families in which only the girls took part in extra-activities provided by the school they went to (newspaper and drama). In addition, in one of these families, the girls were also

very involved with systematic practices in the churches they belonged to¹¹.

Therefore, it looks like the families providing extracurricular activities did it regardless of each child's sex, the difference only appears if the type of activity is considered. While boys were almost always involved with sports, five girls and just two boys attended other sorts of activity. We agree with Silva (1993) that sportive practices as they are offered today contribute little to better academic achievement. In relation to developing reading and writing skills or getting familiar with the literate world and other elements of schooled culture, the practices performed by the girls outside the school seemed to be more effective, from taking part in drama groups and making the school newspaper to classes and activities for younger children in the ambience of churches.

Even when involved in contexts similar to their brothers', the girls seemed to turn these activities into learning that would help them at school, as was the case of Ernani (12 years old) and Cláudia (9 years old), both attending charity associations¹². Cláudia always did her homework under the supervision of the association she attended, while her brother argued that the monitors did not allow him to do that, but this information was later contested by his father: "My wife went there the other day and the monitor said 'no, he can bring it, if he has homework to do we can help him with it". One of the complaints at Ernani's school, as reported by his mother, was precisely the fact that he did not do his homework. In the family of Francimary (11 years old), Fernanda (13) and Fernando (15), only the girls participated in the newspaper and in the drama group organized by the school before or after class, although all of them were students there. The same situation was seen in the case of Daniel (16 years old), Valentine (14) and Luciane (11), who

participated in school-related activities and in evangelical churches. The girls were involved in extra workshops provided by the school by their own decision: during the interview, their mother could not answer what the activities they took part in were. Their brother had been a student at the same school until the previous year and did not participate in any activity. In addition, Valentine and Luciane also made the choice of the churches they wished to "congregate in" and there they performed different practices, many of them similar to a school model, while their oldest brother, Daniel, was involved mainly with church music, an activity he shared with his father and which he intended to follow on a professional basis. Cláudia, Francimary, Fernanda, and Luciane was rated by their teachers as "excellent" or "brilliant", while Valentine was considered "medium"; yet, their brothers, Fernando, Daniel and Ernani, had constant problems of discipline and learning in their respective schools.

What we see, therefore, are active and partly independent choices on the part of the girls, within the narrow range of extra-school practices that were accessible to them. Those were options that led them to take advantage of such opportunities to improve their learning or sent them to activities that were closer to the academic model. It does not seem possible for us to say that this is the cause of the girls having better school achievement: we found in other families good students that did not practice extracurricular activities on a regular basis or who practice strictly sportive activities. Besides, one may wonder whether the fact of being very successful at school impelled the participation of girls like Luciane and Francimary in the newspaper or drama activities or, on the contrary, this extra participation fueled their academic achievement. Everything indicates that it was a virtuous circle of stimulus and active performance by the girls who, amidst scarce resources, enhanced their opportunities of accessing the culture of prestige. In parallel, their brothers seemed to consolidate a gradual

11- The family as a whole was quite inconstant in their ties with different evangelical churches and, at the time of the interview, the daughters did not go to the same churches as the other family members.

12- They attended different charity associations.

disengagement of activities close to the school model, and dedicated themselves to soccer and professional or entertainment activities far away from the school culture.

It was also surprising to find that the girls, no matter how old they were, more frequently than their brothers had professional dreams that were better defined and which required long-term schooling. A boy said he wanted to be a doctor and another boy wished to be a musician, while seven girls wanted to be a policewoman, a doctor, a veterinarian, a biologist, an actress, a Navy officer, a teacher. The same situation was described by Terrail (1992) about the French girls who, according to the 1988 national survey, showed to be more ambitious than the boys in regard to the level of education they intended to achieve as well as in relation to the profession they wanted to follow, regardless of their families' social means.¹³

This seems to be another virtuous circle: successful and feeling welcome at school, several girls that were only 9 years old dreamed of qualified professions and made ambitious plans that would get them rid of restrictions imposed by the domestic work. The existence of such

13- This topic deserves a much deeper discussion which will not be done here due to the lack of space.

aspirations, in turn, could possibly be impelling them to invest more in being a good student, to value the learning and to achieve positive results.

Conclusions

Therefore, regarding the poor urban sectors in Brazil, we have indications that gender socialization in the family context benefits the girls but not the boys in developing behaviors that are frequently desired by the schools, such as discipline, organization and obedience (or less visible forms of disobedience); at the same time, this socialization gives the fact of going to school different meaning for most girls and boys from such social extracts, since the girls have quite less opportunities of circulation, sociability and stimulus. These very restrictions seem to make the girls appreciate extracurricular activities with formats similar to the academic ones and to construct aspirations associated with a lengthy path of studies and with qualified professions. The very existence of such ambitious plans, no matter if realistic or not, may be propelling more efforts towards education, feeding back the wheel of school success among those girls, which seems to rise from within the very gender subordination.

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