

## **Cape Verdean Migrants and Extended Mothering**

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### **Introduction**

This paper explores the concept of *empowered mothering*, defined by O'Reilly (2007:798) as “a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood”, in Cape Verde. It examines how Cape Verdean transnational family relations, profoundly marked by poverty and emigration, call for a rethinking of the concept of *patriarchy*. Building on this approach, the paper explores a more nuanced interpretation of *empowered mothering*. It takes into account, not only the particularities of the Cape Verdean context, but also the significance of the women's phenomenology, analyzed in terms of the *inner conversation* (Archer 2000). Based on anthropological fieldwork (2008-2010) amidst student Cape Verdean mothers in Porto, Portugal, the chapter demonstrates how, by focusing on the interplay between external influences and subjectivities, the difficulties the women encounter and the ways in which they deal with them, cannot easily be pigeon holed into dichotomous classifications of “empowered” versus “disempowered” mothering.

### **Patriarchy and *Extended Mothering* in Cape Verde**

To research Cape Verdean student migrant mothering in Portugal requires viewing the students as daughters as well as mothers. It requires examining Cape Verdean notions of

masculinity and femininity, gender relations and patriarchy, all of which have been profoundly influenced by poverty and migration.

When Cape Verde became independent from Portugal in 1975 it was an underdeveloped nation. Used primarily as an entrepôt in the slave trade, the colonial authorities had never invested much in the infrastructures of the archipelago. When drought and famine scourged the islands, mass migration was the main escape route. Following independence, migration continues to constitute an important survival strategy. As a result, conjugal relations are unstable and the bonds between mothers and children are much stronger than those between couples. That women refer to their sexual partners with whom they have children as “pai di fidju” (father of my child), elucidates the centrality of the mother-child relationship. If we focus on this relationship as the “glue” of Cape Verdean family relations, then the concept of “patriarchy” also needs to be de-centred (Rodrigues 2007).

It is common, particularly in rural areas, for men to maintain several sexual relations at the same time. Rodrigues (2007:138-140) argues that Cape Verdean masculinity is socially constructed through sexuality: the more women they have relations with, the more masculine they are considered to be. Male promiscuity is reproduced in the socialisation of young boys whose mothers give them far more freedom than their female siblings who are tied to the domestic sphere. Rodrigues views this as a defence mechanism of deprived Cape Verdean mothers against economic vulnerability: the economic autonomy of men is more likely to be encouraged if they are given freedom from an early age. This contrasts with the restrictions placed upon girls: the more partners they have, the less desirable they become. Whilst these conceptions of femininity and masculinity may be interpreted as an expression of patriarchy, Rodrigues

(2007: 132-8) argues that male sexual freedom does not always lead to increased control over women. Participation in the informal economy, as well as increased female migration, reduces the women's economic dependence upon their sexual partners. With a high percentage of female-headed households, women are often sole providers for their children. In contrast to traditional conceptions of patriarchy, many women are thus not economically dependent upon men, although this dependence may be reproduced at an ideological level. The following popular saying, cited to me by an old woman in rural Santiago (fieldwork in 2005), testifies to this: *Mãe é manta pai é papa*. (Mother is a blanket, father is breadwinner). Yet, another version proffered by younger women, *pai é papaya* (father is papaya), conceals a deeper significance (fieldwork 2007). The shadow of the very tall papaya tree is cast far away from its trunk and hence symbolizes the lack of responsibility of men towards their own children, as their attention is diverted away to other women.

Whilst economic vulnerability may lead mothers to reproduce the ideology of patriarchy, this other version suggests that they are also critical of men's behaviour and proud of the self-sufficiency of their own survival strategies. Seen from this perspective, the vital role that women play in sustaining extended family survival, through poverty and migration, offers a broader view of the concept of *empowered mothering*. Although a parallel could be drawn with the concept of *intensive mothering*, employed in western feminist literature to critique the unequal burden of mothering responsibilities shouldered by women, the differences of context cannot be ignored. Western feminists focus on mothers' rights to be women, professionals, as well as mothers; the focus is thus on the individual. This is not the case for Cape Verdean women, who are unable to separate their struggle for survival from that of the survival of extended family. In her study of Somali women in Australia, Hernandez (2007:206) argues that whilst they feel

vulnerable and fragile in their host country, commitment to and caring for family is also a source of strength for Somali women. It may be more appropriate in these contexts, to talk of *extended mothering* which is not totally disempowering to women.

The blanket category of *empowered mothering*, understood as a unidirectional practice that resists patriarchy, also overlooks the aspects of Cape Verdean women's lives which are beyond the control of men. Cape Verdean mothering is a multidirectional process. By reproducing gender ideologies, Cape Verdean mothers appear to submit themselves to patriarchy. Yet, in their criticisms of "partial men" (Rodrigues 2007:132) and irresponsible male partners (Akesson 2004:108) they appear to resist patriarchy. Cape Verdean mothering may be likened to the swinging of a pendulum between differing degrees of power, dictated, to some degree, by the external factors of poverty and migration.

There is a danger here of adopting an over-deterministic conception of the workings of larger forces upon Cape Verdean mothering practices. A contextually situated understanding of *empowered mothering* also needs to pay attention to the meanings that the women themselves attribute to events. The ethnography of unexpected migrant motherhood, discussed below, reveals a constant oscillating between a sense of helplessness and a sense of delight in a new found agency. This moving back and forth between feelings of powerlessness and of personal empowerment may also be likened to the swinging of a pendulum and is analysed below in the light the role of the *inner conversation*.

The individual, according to Archer (2000:295), possesses "the powers of ongoing reflexive monitoring of both self and society which enables the subject to make commitments..." It is through what Archer calls the *inner conversation* that we test "our

potential or ongoing commitments which tell us whether we are up to the enterprise of living this rather than that committed life”. The commentaries are not unanimous so the conversation involves evaluating them and making choices even though the circumstances may not always be of our choosing. (Archer 2000:228). The experience of migration provides a compelling example of how wider structures influence the decision-making process.

Becoming a first-time mother within the context of immigration is a “double transition” akin to “travelling to two foreign countries at once” (Liamputtong and Spitzer 2007:233). Apart from having to adjust to their new identity as mothers, migrant women also have to situate themselves in a foreign cultural context as an ethnic minority.

### **Cape Verdean Student Mothers in Porto**

Life in Porto is difficult for young Cape Verdean students who have left home, with limited financial resources. In the vocational colleges, for example, they receive a modest European Union funded grant, but the colleges do not provide accommodation. So, each year, when a new group of students arrives, the older students put them up temporarily. One woman told me that, in the beginning, she shared a room that had two single beds with four other girls. The concept of *extended mothering* may consequently also be applied to the experiences of these Cape Verdean women. Even before they become biological mothers, they mother each other.

Students in the vocational colleges in Porto whose parents can't afford to pay for their studies often suffer more financial difficulties, exacerbated by the frequent delays in the payments of their grants. It is within this general context of economic vulnerability and lack of extended family support that unexpected student pregnancy poses a tremendous

challenge. The women's accounts of their experiences reveal how the pendulum swings from experiencing disorientation, loss of control and isolation, towards discovering the potential to make their own choices, to exercise power. Several women in the study were supported by the fathers of their babies. The cases discussed below focus on the personal power of single mothering. Names have been changed in order to safeguard their anonymity.

### **I Want You, I Want You Not**

Whether to proceed with or terminate the pregnancy is the first issue to be addressed. The involvement of family in women's decision making processes is evident in many of the experiences related to me. Several women openly declared that they considered abortion and were persuaded otherwise by relatives or friends. Others resisted the pressure placed upon them by relatives and boyfriends to have an abortion.

Seventeen year old Luna had come to join her mother in Porto to complete her secondary school education. When she became pregnant at the age of nineteen she had not yet completed her schooling. "It was a shock", she tells me (16 September 2008):

I felt as if most of my dreams had instantly been washed away. My dream was to study, to go to university, get a job and then have children. I always dreamed of having children, but later...then, as time went on I got used to the idea. There was a child inside me and what had happened wasn't its fault.

Luna's mother reacted very badly and suggested that she have an abortion. From that moment onwards, Luna says their relationship changed; there was a loss of trust and Luna felt isolated. The father of her child lived in another town, her own father,

estranged from her mother, was in Lisbon and she recalls the first weeks after baby was born as being the hardest.

My mother worked all day and I was alone in the house. And, well, it was a caesarean so at the beginning it was harder. I had to put up with the pain and make a bit of an effort. I had to bath him, iron his clothes, to be honest I didn't have anybody to help me.

Elizabeth: What about when your mother came home from work?

I wasn't going to wait for her! I prepared myself mentally, from the moment that I knew I was pregnant, that I had a child and that I had to care for him.

Luna, did, nonetheless benefit from "extended mothering". Susana, a neighbour and friend of her own mother, (who eventually moved to France leaving daughter and grandson behind), provided advice and became godmother to the child.

Another example of "extended mothering" is evident in how some of the student mothers' flatmates babysat and ran errands for them. A number of women also refer to the isolation experienced in Porto, far from home, not having anybody to help them after birth. Yet, like Luna, they also express pride in their ability to cope on their own. Maria (4 October 2008) spoke of how she lost many friends because she was no longer available to go out with them at night and so they eventually stopped ringing. "The older we are", she told me, "the lonelier we become". Yet, the sacrifices Maria made for her son contributed towards an expanded and consolidated sense of self bringing more order to her life. "Now, I know the true value of life. Now, I really live life. There is more sacrifice and I give more of myself. Everything is more organized, I have rules".

Although a parallel may be drawn here with the “new momism” critiqued by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (O’Reilly 2007:817) for its promotion of *intensive mothering* and self-sacrifice, this does not invalidate Maria’s interpretation of events in which she believes to have gained more, rather than less, control over her life. The case of Célia elucidates the importance of addressing issues of choice not only from a structural but also from a phenomenological perspective.

After arriving in Porto to study, Célia suspected that she might be pregnant. Prompted by her uncle, with whom she was staying, to take the test, she broke the news to her father in Lisbon:

It never crossed my mind to do anything to stop her from being born. But my father’s neighbors, they asked “How many months pregnant is she?” And my father said “Less than four months and they said “Well, she still has time”. But my father replied ‘She is not the first one to have a baby. There are many out there who are younger than her who had a baby. So she can have hers too’. My father didn’t listen to them; but if he had done, I think I would have had to follow his decision, because he was paying for everything...fortunately he reacted the way he did; he was an excellent father (09 July 2008).

Célia’s narrative elucidates the ways in which the issue of choice and individual control are inseparable from family relations. Yet, to take our informant’s subjectivities seriously is not the same thing as to take their narratives literally.

Célia contradicts the claim that abortion had never crossed her mind, months later, during a meeting of Cape Verdean mothers, when she recommended the counselling services, freely available at a local hospital, arguing that they had helped her to decide

against having an abortion. Since it was illegal at the time, the psychologist had suggested giving up the baby for adoption and Célia had concluded that if she proceeded with the pregnancy, then she would keep the baby.

Rather than view Célia's contradictory accounts as evidence of the unreliability of personal narratives, I propose that it offers a window into the workings of her mind. It may be seen as a sign of the swinging of the pendulum; the inner conversation at work, evaluating the pros and cons of different commentaries upon whether she should or should not go ahead with the pregnancy. Moreover, given that the inner conversation never comes to an end (Archer 2000:12) Célia's claim that abortion did not cross her mind should not be hastily dismissed as an untruth. The writer Virginia Woolf accounts for the contradictions in the way individuals make sense of their lives by referring to "moments of being" (Rapport and Overing 2000:86, 257). The intensity with which a given moment is experienced obliterates any contradictions. In the recorded interview (09 July 2008), in which Célia responded to my open-ended request "Tell me your story", Célia was celebrating her capacity to mother and to study at the same time: the pendulum of power was swinging towards claiming her autonomy. The mother's monthly meeting, six months later (31 January 2009) was a different "moment of being" which led Célia to attribute an alternative interpretation to events. I had asked the women to help me produce a list of what young pregnant students need to know, in order to help them stop the pendulum from swinging towards feelings of disorientation and powerlessness. At this moment, Célia had recommended a service, sharing one, among many, of the commentaries that had made up her *inner conversation* at a time when she was feeling disoriented after discovering that she was pregnant. That she had given some thought to abortion also suggests that there was a gap between discourse and practice in Célia's declared submission to patriarchal control.

### **Empowered from whose Perspective?**

Many of the women initially viewed their unplanned pregnancies as undesirable outcomes of a failure to manage their fertility. Access to birth control is easier in Porto than back at home in rural Cape Verde where, one mother tells me, neighbours gossip if a young, healthy woman is seen to go to the health centre: “she is no longer a virgin” they will say. Coming to Portugal thus signifies more sexual freedom for young women but also an increased risk of becoming pregnant. From the perspective of the social workers in Porto whom many young Cape Verdean mothers consult for financial assistance, the women constitute a perplexing category of “single mothers” who appear to become irresponsibly pregnant.

Maria told me that in Portugal, single mothers were “like monsters”. The following encounter between a social worker and a young student mother (24 May 2010) elucidates the differing perspectives on motherhood and mothering in the Portuguese and Cape Verdean contexts.

The social worker asked Cristina if she had not taken any precautions, “A child is a big responsibility.” Cristina replied that she had experience of looking after her own niece from the day she was born. “An older sister’s child?” asked the social worker. “No, a younger sister” she replied. “Ah! But it is one thing to look after somebody else’s child and quite another to look after your own child because you have to be there all the time for them and it is for life. Even when they are grown-up, we worry about our children.” “So you didn’t abort?” she asked rhetorically. Cristina shook her head. Commenting upon this later with me, she exclaimed:

They have abortions so easily here, young teenagers get pregnant, and they abort...It is normal, in Cape Verde, to have babies my age and younger. The Pulas (that's what how we call the Portuguese) have them a lot later. They take so much medicine that then they can't even have any children. That is why I like Socrates [Portugal's current Prime Minister]. He said it is thanks to Cape Verdeans, Angolans, Mozambicans...that the population is younger. It is us blacks who are helping to make the nation younger (24 May 2010).

By viewing her pregnancy as a contribution towards combating population decline in Portugal, Cristina transformed an unplanned pregnancy from a personal to a political project, asserting her self-worth in society.

After the initial shock and feelings of powerlessness, the decision to go ahead with unplanned pregnancy sets the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction. Despite the difficulties the women faced, several of them viewed becoming pregnant in Portugal to offer some advantages, such as receiving financial support from the state. Yet, the influence of external factors cannot be analysed as a unidirectional force with blanket effects.

### **From Phenomenology Back to Structures**

Establishing legal fatherhood is considered important by the majority of the Cape Verdean student mothers in order to guarantee their children's right to a father. The compulsory registration of paternity, discussed below, demonstrates how laws intended to promote paternal responsibility, may also send the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction, by undermining maternal autonomy.

The promotion of paternal responsibility in both Cape Verdean and Portuguese law is predicated on the patriarchal model of the centrality of heterosexual relations. All mothers are required to register the name of the baby's father on the birth certificate. If his name is missing, then the state automatically opens up a process of paternal enquiry. Once the father is legally registered, it is then up to the mother to take him to court if he fails to meet his legal obligations to contribute towards the child's well-being. The state does not automatically assist women in their struggle to secure economic support from the fathers of their children.

If compulsory paternal registration does not automatically increase the economic well-being of children, its practical effects serve to reinforce patriarchal control, by placing restrictions upon the mobility of single mothers. To travel abroad, they require the father's authorization to take their children with them. If they become estranged from the fathers of their children, the fathers sometimes refuse to grant the authorization. Such was the case for two mothers who discovered that they were pregnant upon arriving in Portugal, whose boyfriends remained in Cape Verde.

Célia had been unable to return to Cape Verde to visit her mother for three years because her former boyfriend would authorize their daughter to travel to Cape Verde, but would not authorize her to return to Portugal with her. Neither would he authorize her to travel to France to visit relatives. She finally took the decision to travel by bus to visit family in France. Thanks to the Schengen Convention, no documents were requested when the bus crossed borders.

Ana had decided that she wished to send her baby back to Cape Verde, to be cared for by her own mother because she was having difficulties reconciling study with childcare. It is a common practice for mothers to send their babies with friends who are travelling

to Cape Verde and she wanted to send her baby in this fashion. The boyfriend refused to authorize the journey. Ana was sure that he was jealous and worried that if she sent the baby to Cape Verde, she would be freer to involve herself with other men. After repeated attempts to persuade him, she took the decision to terminate their relationship, obtained his permission to travel with their baby for a holiday in Cape Verde and then returned to Portugal on her own. Both women later sought legal advice in Portugal which helped them to apply for and obtain single-custody for their children. This process takes many months to complete and in the meantime, mothers and babies cannot travel abroad together without the father's authorization.

Sara was considering applying for single-custody because her ex-partner, who had moved to Lisbon, refused to sign the authorization for her to travel to Cape Verde with their eleven month old son whom Sara's family had not yet met. She spoke about this on the phone with her own mother who decided to talk to the young father's mother, resident in Cape Verde, who then contacted Sara. She asked her on the phone not to take the matter to court, claiming that her son was a good person. A day later, he appeared early in the morning on Sara's doorstep offering to sign the authorization.

Although this case takes more twists and turns, the father's prompt appearance at her doorstep testifies to the strength of the mother-child tie, referred to above, as the "glue" of family relations. All three cases demonstrate how Cape Verdean patriarchy, empirically de-centred from stable heterosexual relations, with limited control over family life, is granted, by law, a central position of control over women's mobility, whilst, freed, in practice, from its paternal responsibilities. The cases also elucidate the ways in which the women resist and subvert these restrictions by taking recourse to the power of both the state and of the authority of their own mothers.

## **Conclusion**

The ethnography discussed in this paper shows how Cape Verdean mothering practices cannot be easily pigeon holed into autonomous versus dependent positions. Grasping the nuanced significance of *patriarchy* and of *empowered mothering*, within the Cape Verdean context, is facilitated by taking recourse to the metaphor of the swinging of a pendulum between differing degrees of power and powerlessness. I have tried to demonstrate how external analyses of power dynamics may not always be in synchronization with the swinging of the phenomenological pendulum. Capturing the interplay between the structural conditions and the subjective experiences of mothers also requires the analyst's eye to swing, like a pendulum, to and forth, between the workings of larger forces and the workings of the *inner conversation* of the women themselves.

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