

## POLITICS AND EDUCATION: women's political formation and action during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship

Politics and education: women formation and  
political action during the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship

Política y educación: formación y acción política  
de mujeres durante la dictadura civil-militar brasileña

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**Abstract:** Understanding the relationship between political action and women's formation, shaped under an authoritarian political regime, was the aim of this research. The study focused on the experiences of left-wing political activist women who were imprisoned in Pernambuco during the civil-military regime (1964–1985) under allegations of subversion. To conduct this study, bibliographical and documentary research was carried out. The analyses indicate that, in addition to schooling processes, political-party experiences, social class belonging, religious and social experiences, and, above all, participation in social movements were essential for forming an affective and moral consciousness that significantly resonated in the fight against the authoritarian regime established in the country.

**Keywords:** history of education; civil-military regime; Pernambuco.

**Resumo:** Entender a relação entre a ação política e a formação de mulheres, forjada em um regime político autoritário, foi o intento da pesquisa que teve como objeto de estudo experiências de mulheres militantes políticas de esquerda que foram presas em Pernambuco durante o regime civil-militar (1964-1985), sob a alegação de subversão. Para tal estudo, foram realizadas pesquisas bibliográfica e documental. As análises indicam que, além dos processos de escolarização, as experiências político-partidárias, o pertencimento a certos estratos sociais, as experiências religiosas e de sociabilidades e, sobretudo, a participação em movimentos sociais foram essenciais para a formação de uma consciência afetiva e moral que reverberou significativamente no combate ao regime autoritário instalado no país.

**Palavras-chave:** história da educação; regime civil-militar; Pernambuco.

**Resumen:** Comprender la relación entre la acción política y la formación de mujeres, forjada en un régimen político autoritario, fue el intento de la investigación que tuvo como objeto de estudio experiencias de mujeres militantes políticas de izquierda presas en Pernambuco durante el régimen civil-militar (1964-1985), bajo la alegación de subversión. Para dicho estudio, se realizaron investigaciones bibliográfica y documental. Los análisis indican que, además de los procesos de escolarización, las experiencias político-partidarias, la pertenencia a ciertos estratos sociales, las experiencias religiosas y de sociabilidad y, sobre todo, la participación en movimientos sociales fue esencial para la formación de una conciencia afectiva y moral que reverberó significativamente en el combate al régimen autoritario instalado en el País.

**Palabras clave:** historia de la educación; régimen civil-militar; Pernambuco.

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## INTRODUCTION

The 1964 civil-military coup is a subject addressed by many Brazilian historians, political scientists, and journalists, and its effects on education are also studied by historians of education. The reasons that led to the coup and the ways in which it was resisted are well-known. The restriction of freedom of thought, expression, and political action, U.S. influence, the MEC-USAID agreement, the privatization project of higher education, the 1967 university reform, and the 1971 reform of the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB) are all well-documented, as are the responses from civil society, left-wing party members, and social movements, such as those organized by rural and urban workers, students, Black people, Indigenous groups, LGBTQ individuals, and women.

To contribute to historiography and, above all, to discussions on the political context that marked this period of authoritarianism in Brazilian history, this article aims to provoke reflections on the theme of politics as education—an aspect still little explored from the perspective of the history of education in Brazil. The central question that motivated this investigation was understanding political action as an influential element in education shaped under an authoritarian political regime. To this end, the objective was to analyze education from a broader perspective, encompassing the (self-)formative experiences of political activists who were imprisoned and persecuted under allegations of subversion. The study focused on the experiences of left-wing women political activists during the civil-military regime (1964–1985), specifically those detained in the Pernambuco Women's Prison (not necessarily from Pernambuco).

The data sources—including criminal records, Political Amnesty Reparation Request Processes, oral interviews, and memoir books from the period—were analyzed from the perspective of History from Below (as proposed by Edward P. Thompson [1966, 1981, 1987] and Jim Sharpe [1992]), which considers history from the viewpoint of marginalized groups, and Women's History, as theorized by Michelle Perrot (2019, p. 15), who argues that women's history has shifted “from a history of the body and roles in private life to a history of women in the public sphere of the city, work, politics, war, and creation.”

The methodology was based on bibliographic and documentary research. According to Bauer and Gertz (2009, p. 181), analyzing sensitive sources and recent history requires researchers to understand their political uses, acknowledging both efforts to preserve these materials and their interpretation. The right to “[...] access existing data about any individual in the repression archives [...]” and the “[...] right to historical and scientific investigation [...]” go beyond “[...] identifying those responsible for human rights violations[...]”; they also serve as an essential “[...] education for ‘never again.’”

This article is structured in two parts: first, we discuss archives and sources, considering their production, preservation, and the sensitivities involved. Second, we analyze the relationship between women, the authoritarian political regime, and politics as education, focusing on key dimensions of political-party dynamics during that period.

## ON THE DARK CORNERS, THE LAST BREATHS OF THE DICTATORSHIP, AND THE PRODUCTION OF SOURCES

Much has been written about the dark corners of the dictatorship and the voices that echo from within them. These are silenced or erased voices, cries of pain, expressions of despair, letters of hope, denunciation, and indignation. They evoke extreme human experiences, which is why the memory sites that preserve them are often called “sensitive archives.”

The sources mobilized in this research are sensitive in both their production and preservation, requiring an approach that explicitly acknowledges these sensitivities (Thiesen, 2014). The documents accessed, now transformed into research sources, were produced in situations where state repression and violence were the norm. Often, survival depended on the ability to simulate or, at the extreme, confess under torture. However, even the repression had its rituals, leaving behind traces and evidence that allow us to interrogate and understand part of the experience of those subjected to state arbitrariness.

Contradictorily, there are compelling sources that document the many cases of people who were imprisoned and disappeared — without visible traces left by the repressive apparatus. Much is known about these situations, yet, even today, little is factually documented. This reality explains the contemporary existence of movements seeking justice for those who were killed or disappeared during the dictatorship.

In other cases, whether directly or indirectly, both the repressive forces and, in recent decades, the *Comissões da Verdade* (Truth Commissions) have produced and preserved documents concerning individuals who were imprisoned and/or murdered by the regime. This is because, once officially detained, a person was registered by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS). That is, an Identification Record was created for them, a document that appears to have varied little across different states of the federation, likely due to the training received by civil and military forces involved in repression since the Vargas dictatorship (Nasser, 1947). These records, even considering that they are an updated version of similar documents previously used, provide consistent information about individuals deemed a concern to the repressive state and, therefore, requiring identification. These are the documents we engage with in this research (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 – Prisoner Record Template

Identificação em 4.4.1944, sob o n.º 35245

SECRETARIA DA SEGURANÇA PÚBLICA  
DELEGACIA AUXILIAR

REGISTO DE PRESO:

Nome: Maria Celeste Vidal Bastos  
 Nome de pai: José Alves de Freitas Vidal  
 Nome de mãe: Gertrudes de Oliveira Vidal  
 Nacionalidade: Paraguense Natural de: Paraguai  
 Profissão: Professora Estado civil: Casada  
 Idade: 76 Instrução: Secundária Cor:   
 Local onde trabalha: Município Vitoria de Santo Antão, PE  
 Residência: Rua João Pessoa N.º 107  
 Arrabalde de: Cidade de Vitoria  
 Local da prisão: Presidência da sua residência  
 Motivo: Subversão da ordem  
 A disposição de: Dr. Delegado Auxiliar  
 Data da prisão: 12 de Abril de 1964 Solto em:   
 Recolhido ao Presídio em:   
 Condutor: Detencioneiro da Polícia Militar Vitoria  
 Prontuário sob n.º  Identificado sob n.º   
 Permanente: Am. Leticia Gylmar  
 Observação: Recolhida à "Casa da Melancia"

Nota: Este documento não tem validade sem a rubrica do responsável pelo registro.

Assinatura:

Source: Arquivo Público Estadual Jordão Emerenciano [APEJE] (n.d.a).

Figure 2 – General Prisoner Record Template of the Pernambuco State Department of Public Security

Registo Geral Número

Nome: João Alfredo Lima  
 Nome de pai: João Alfredo Lima  
 Nome de mãe: João Alfredo Lima  
 Nacionalidade: Paraguense Natural de: Paraguai  
 Profissão: Professora Estado civil: Casada  
 Idade: 76 Instrução: Secundária Cor:   
 Local onde trabalha: Município Vitoria de Santo Antão, PE  
 Residência: Rua João Pessoa N.º 107  
 Arrabalde de: Cidade de Vitoria  
 Local da prisão: Presidência da sua residência  
 Motivo: Subversão da ordem  
 A disposição de: Dr. Delegado Auxiliar  
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 Recolhido ao Presídio em:   
 Condutor: Detencioneiro da Polícia Militar Vitoria  
 Prontuário sob n.º  Identificado sob n.º   
 Permanente: Am. Leticia Gylmar  
 Observação: Recolhida à "Casa da Melancia"

Nota: Este documento não tem validade sem a rubrica do responsável pelo registro.

Assinatura:

Source: APEJE (n.d.b).



The records were filled out with the person's civil data —name, parentage, place of birth—but also contained information that allowed locating the arrested person within a certain network of intelligibility of the repressive apparatus: skin color, educational level, workplace, among other aspects. In the documentation we analyzed, there are few records/files/processes where all fields are completed. These gaps, however, should not lead us to assume that they were insignificant in framing the registered person and the repressive action. This is because, in the researched universe, composed of 225 names of women imprisoned in Recife-PE, when we cross-referenced the information found in the Identification Records with those obtained from or contained in Political Amnesty Reparation Request Processes, we noticed that after parentage and place of birth, schooling is the most frequently appearing information. On the other hand, the least recorded information pertains to the skin color of the person.

If, on the one hand, for the repressive apparatus, skin color did not seem to pose a major 'red danger,' perhaps due to the supposed 'racial democracy' widely propagated in works like those of Gilberto Freyre, even leading to the suppression of race as an element in the 1970 census (Camargo, 2009), on the other hand, they seemed convinced that scrutinizing the educational background of imprisoned individuals was a valuable source of information for their classification as 'subversives' by the repressive organization.

Although 'readings' are included as one of the items in the mentioned Record, this information rarely appears filled out (just as this requirement is not present in all records). Nevertheless, this is undoubtedly one of those sensitive pieces of data that repression sought to gather to determine the level of dangerousness or suspicion of the investigated individual. At the same time, it was one of the pieces of information most susceptible to lying or dissimulation. This is because no one, unless under torture—which was frequent—would confess to their oppressor that they were reading a 'forbidden' book or author. However, when this item is filled out, even considering possible dissimulation, the reported readings allow us to perceive that the individual managed to access books and authors, even under conditions of constraint and danger.

Once officially registered by the repressive apparatus, many of these individuals had a Process compiled against them, which could consist of a few pages or dozens. These processes included information from interrogations, police investigations, anonymous reports, and sometimes judicial sentences. Such documents contain a collection of data that allow us to follow the history, real or fabricated by the repressive apparatus, of the entry and permanence in political militancy and, often, the death of the individuals they refer to.

Another set of sources we worked with consists of documentation compiled by the Dom Helder Câmara Truth Commissions, established in 2012 by the Government of the State of Pernambuco. This commission was part of broader efforts to investigate

crimes committed by the State during the civil-military dictatorship. This collection includes, in large part, some of the previously mentioned documents, but especially those produced as part of the commission's investigations, such as testimonies from people imprisoned for political reasons, their relatives, friends, public officials, and authorities who helped clarify the conditions of imprisonment, trial, death, or disappearance of these individuals under the responsibility of repressive agencies. It also includes documents requested from state agencies such as Security Secretariats, the National Intelligence Service, the Armed Forces, and Ministries regarding specific cases of imprisoned, deceased, or missing individuals (Pernambuco, 2017).

As a result of Brazil's policies on Memory, Truth, Justice, and Reparations concerning individuals persecuted by the dictatorship and society as a whole, the documentation produced and/or gathered by Truth Commissions (Brazil, 2014) allows us to engage, in an organized and official manner, with the voices of those silenced by the civil-military regime. Moreover, through an intense effort of remembrance, these documents bring to light stories that were erased or never even had the chance to be told. The extensive documentary material produced by both National and state Truth Commissions constitutes an unparalleled source for establishing the profiles, educational trajectories, and actions of individuals who resisted the regime and fell into the clutches of its repressive apparatus.

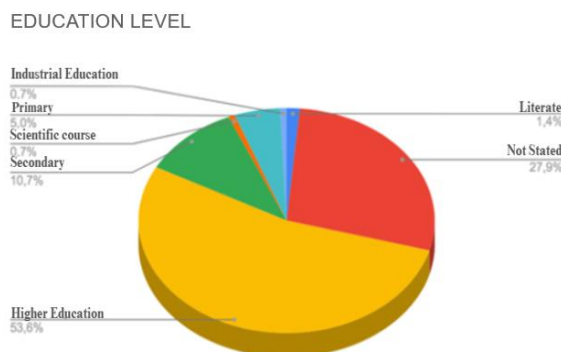
Finally, another set of documents we worked with concerns those inventoried by private individuals seeking reparations from the State in the form of financial compensation for having been victims of the repressive apparatus or other public institutions actions during the dictatorship. Commonly titled as Political Amnesty Reparation Request Processes, these cases often contain information found in the previously discussed collections and documents produced or commissioned by the claimants, whether regarding themselves or their relatives. These materials are presented to state agencies in pursuit of truth, justice, and appropriate financial reparations.

## **WOMEN: ENGAGEMENT IN THE STRUGGLE AND THE BODY AS A TARGET**

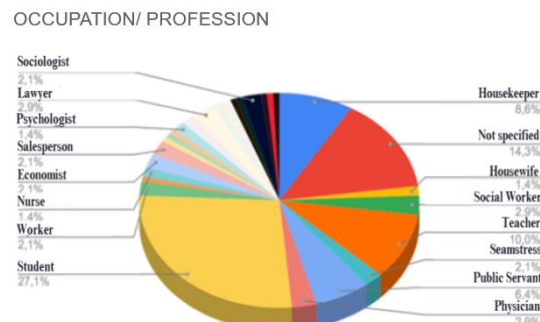
Among the hundreds of people persecuted, imprisoned, and/or disappeared during Brazil's civil-military dictatorship, our research focused on understanding the educational process, political action, and social networks of 225 women imprisoned in Recife-PE (Barreto et al., 2024). In this regard, it is noteworthy that the women analyzed come from diverse backgrounds. They were political prisoners with different levels of education, professions, and racial identities, affiliated with different political organizations. However, they shared the common experience of being persecuted and imprisoned, accused of subversion for challenging the authoritarian regime of the

dictatorship. The distinctions mentioned are illustrated in the following charts (1, 2, 3, and 4)<sup>1</sup>.

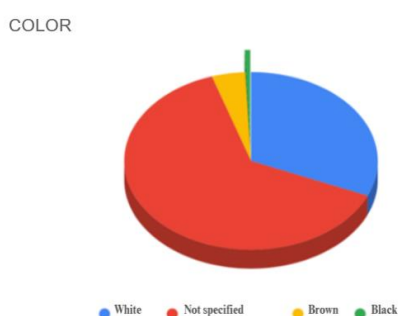
**Graphic 1 – Women's Education**



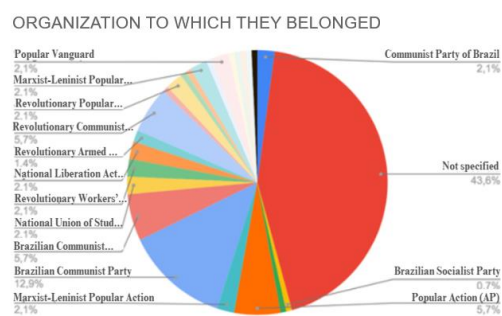
**Graphic 2 – Women's Occupation**



**Graphic 3 – Skin Color**



**Graphic 4 – Political Affiliation**



Source: Charts created based on the mapping, which utilized sources such as police records, political prisoners' amnesty processes, and the report from the Dom Hélder Câmara Truth Commission (Pernambuco, 2017).

Their testimonies, as previously mentioned, are documented among hundreds of police records from the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) and compensation cases for amnesty-seeking individuals. Their stories stand out for several reasons. First, the gender perspective; second, despite their shared experiences, the women who resisted the regime had diverse educational backgrounds; third, they experienced imprisonment in different ways; fourth, they were politically shaped within leftist microcosms; and fifth and finally, they do not

<sup>1</sup> We are aware of the lack of consensus regarding how to name this period—for some, it is referred to as a military regime; for others, a military dictatorship; still for others, a civil-military dictatorship or even a civil, military, and corporate dictatorship. However, for the purposes of this article, we refer to the regime of government and its characteristics, and therefore adopt the term **civil-military authoritarian regime**, as we understand it encompasses all the actors involved in this period of Brazilian political history marked by authoritarianism.

represent the entire female demographic of that era, as many women supported and militated for the conservative movement known as the 'March of the Family with God for Freedom.'

This research aims not only to highlight the participation of women in the public sphere, their resistance strategies, and confrontations but also to analyze how these women, in their militant experiences, perceived politics as education. Once that we understand it just as an educational process that is not limited to formal schooling but also include learning experiences within the family and other socialization spaces, such as politically oriented collectives.

Débora Rocha (2017), based on Ridenti's study (1990), enumerates four reasons for women's engagement in left-wing militancy during the period: participation in Christian (progressive) movements; higher education, particularly in the state of Minas Gerais, where Social Work courses played a significant role; professional activity, especially in teaching; and finally, the "[...] contradictions that the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) presented regarding women's issues" [sic]. According to the author, drawing on Betzaida Tavares' (2003) studies, while some party members held conservative values towards women at the time, others were more sensitive to women's issues and social and political transformations, particularly in the late 1960s. This contributed to an increase in female political participation, especially among those involved in the student movement.

This sensitivity is evident in the sources analyzed, as well as in how women's networks, political microcosms, and direct and indirect engagements with social movements, associations, and political parties played a crucial role in their education. Here, education is understood as the lifelong formation process of individuals, whether or not it includes formal schooling (Brandão, 1983). These elements led to a series of political and contestatory actions and formations that were considered subversive and fell under the National Security Law, specifically designed to uphold the authoritarian dictatorial regime.

Throughout the research, we reaffirmed the spaces and times that shaped or enabled women's political actions. Whether within the family, school, student movements, work, or organized political groups, these institutions served as points of contact. Through these connections, ideas were shared, national projects were proposed, socio-cultural and political repertoires were mobilized, and strategies for action and engagement were developed. Rather than prioritizing one particular space-time over another, our aim is to highlight the fundamental role these environments played in shaping and sustaining political action. It is also important to note that, more often than not, these spaces were intertwined.

The case of Ana Rita de Castro Almeida, representing a collective of many women in similar situations, helped us understand the role of family in political formation. When she was a Social Work student in Campina Grande, she completed



her coursework but did not submit her final thesis on time because she was arrested in 1969 in Recife. Her story, documented in her Political Amnesty Reparation Request Process, illustrates the crucial role her family played in her introduction to the movement and continued support even after she joined politically persecuted organizations. According to the case records, Ana Rita was detained for engaging in subversive activities linked to Popular Action (AP)<sup>2</sup>.

She and her husband, Simão de Almeida Neto, lived in Campina Grande, where he worked as a teacher. Invited to move to Recife to serve as an assistant for the National Union of Students (UNE), Simão relocated first. A few months later, Ana Rita joined him in Pernambuco's capital, where they both lived and were politically active, sustaining themselves on Simão's salary and financial aid from her parents, who "[...] when they came to visit her, which happened three times a month, they always brought the couple some provisions, such as meat, eggs, vegetables, cheese, etc." (APEJE, n.d.d)

In 2002, in her Political Amnesty Reparation Request Processes, a right provided by Pernambuco State Law No. 11.773/2001 and regulated by Decree No. 22.597/2000, it is recorded that Ana Rita de Castro Almeida

[...] was arrest by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) officers on February 26, 1969, at her home at Alto do Benjamim Street, 197, Fundão, in Recife, along with her friend Rosa Maria. At the time, she was eight months pregnant. She was taken to the Public Security Secretariat and subjected to interrogations under Moacir Sales and Luiz Miranda, infamous for their violent tactics. "Due to her mother's intervention, fearing for her safety and that of her unborn child, Ana Rita was transferred on March 01, 1969, to the Military Brigade Hospital's maternity ward, in Recife, where she remained under police custody. Her family covered all hospital and medical expenses, even hiring a private physician, Dr. Paulo Neto, recommended by the hospital, who monitored the entire pregnancy period during which she remained at that Military Institution. Later, she was transferred to the Hospital Português, still under police supervision, until after her child was born, when she was granted house arrest at a relative's home, Mr. José Emídio Fernandes, at Leonardo Cavalcante Street, 698, in Casa Forte. Eventually, her house arrest was revoked, and she returned to Campina Grande, where her parents lived". (APEJE, n.d.d, author's emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> The Popular Action (AP) was a left-wing movement advocating socialism, which originated from the more politicized segment of the Catholic University Youth. This group, in turn, included several individuals who shaped history through left-wing political actions, particularly those related to the student movement. In 1969, the year of Ana Rita's arrest, the Popular Action was still struggling with accusations of attempting to assassinate General Costa e Silva at the Guararapes airport in Recife, an attack that led to the death of two of his political supporters in 1966.

Ana Rita moved from Campina Grande to Recife to reunite with her husband—her new family—becoming involved in resistance efforts. However, her family of origin, her parents, remained crucial for her and her newborn baby girl well-being and protection, also to welcome them upon their return to Campina Grande. Her husband's relocation to Recife was directly linked to his involvement in student activism, demonstrating the interconnectedness of social life's spheres in sustaining political action.

What did this political action against the regime entail? According to Pernambuco's political prisoner case files, the main reasons for arrests included pamphlets production and distribution advocating for public education, freedom of expression, university autonomy, academic freedom, reduced U.S. influence over Brazil's economy and education, and the protection of national oil resources, among other reasons that contradicted the objectives of the established government. These activities took various forms: flash rallies, pamphleteering, graffiti, speeches at unions and student congresses, newspaper articles, and other actions that, beyond illustrating how left-wing militants taught, revealed what and how the militants learn.

The Identification Records and Political Amnesty Reparation Request Processes also reveal the ways in which women participated. They organized and took part in protests, produced and distributed pamphlets, mobilized rural workers, and led student movements. Among them were the sociologist Tereza Cristina de Albuquerque, the nutritionist Yara Brayner, and the high school student Ana Maria Medeiros da Fonseca. In other words, under the scrutiny of the repressive apparatus, they were participating in and organizing subversive practices. These practices required readings, discussions, and a network of social relationships that fell within a microcosm characterized by a leftist atmosphere and embraced a Marxist-Leninist repertoire, as evidenced by the imprisonment of women affiliated with the Communist Party of Brazil and its offshoots: Brazilian Communist Part (PCB), Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR), Brazilian Revolutionary Communist Party (PCBR); Revolutionary Marxist Workers' Political Organization (POLOP), Revolutionary Workers' Party (POR), and Communist Workers' Party (POC), among other organizations whose defining feature was a leftist ideology grounded in a project for the nation based on communist principles.

The analysis of the police records makes it clear that texts were the primary means used to disseminate the ideas feared by the government. Whether in the form of books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, or booklets, the text had the power to resonate. Thus, its authors—meaning the intellectual mentors and their mediators and disseminators—had to be silenced, which is why imprisonments and tortures were carried out. Many were arrested and tortured to extract information about family members, spouses, friends, and colleagues involved in leftist movements. Women like the civil servant Carmela Pezzutti (Virginia), the physician Sônia Montenegro, and the university student Yara Cecy Falcon Lins were among those detained for this purpose.

Likewise, records are not uncommon—especially in amnesty proceedings and memorial accounts—describing the nature of the inquiries, the brutality and criminality of the interrogation sessions, the violence of the methods of imprisonment, and the vile forms of persecution and treatment of those suspected of subversion. Sylvia Montarroyos, a filmmaker, at the time a student and in a relationship with a leftist political activist, recalled one such episode from her imprisonment during the dictatorship:

I was naked beneath a raincoat—far too large for me, as it wasn't even mine—and confined in a cage filled with excrement, swarming with flies that crawled across my body, a body I no longer recognized as my own: emaciated, filthy, and repulsive, and I wasn't even permitted to wash it. The cage was revolting and reeked of filth. A vulture perched on the iron bars above my head stood as a stark symbol of the decay I was living in. The entire experience was deeply degrading. They had called me a "whore's daughter" so many times that, eventually, I began to believe it myself—that I was, in fact, the daughter of a prostitute, enduring punishment "by proxy" for her, as though held hostage in her place, atoning for her sins. Perhaps that was why I had been left nearly naked, exposed before everyone, shamed, as if to pay for what they believed were my mother's transgressions. (Montarroyos, 2013, pp. 322-323, author's emphasis).

As demonstrated by the abundant literature and by recent Brazilian experience, in authoritarian regimes like the one established in Brazil in 1964, simply being leftist, participating in anti-regime activities, or publicly disagreeing with the government could lead a person to be considered as a State Enemy. Such actions were enough to subject individuals to a range of atrocities, from the daily stress triggered by reports of arrests to forced disappearances, including imprisonment and both physical and psychological torture.

In response to such degradation, tactics were devised not only to evade the repressive apparatus—such as the Department of Information Operations - Internal Defense Operations Center (DOI-CODI)—but, mainly, to build a repertoire of political action grounded in both theoretical and practical elements, thus revealing a clear communist ascendancy. A housewife at the time, Alexina Crespo exemplifies one of the many paths by which a militant could be forged. She was among the numerous women who joined the Brazilian Revolutionary Communist Party (PCBR), through which she engaged in resistance efforts and expanded her network of relationships by interacting—at varying levels—with prominent communist leaders such as Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, and Che Guevara.

Regarding the question of gender, it is important to note that, at the time—at least within the Brazilian left—concerning women's essential representation, the cause demanded a “universal figure of the militant,” as Elisabeth Ferreira (1996) explained. And despite the various feminist achievements since the 1920s—including the fight for suffrage, which was secured in 1932 through the Electoral Code—Ferreira also notes that, for the agents of repression, female militants represented a “[...] doubly transgressive role: as political agents (rising up against the regime) and as a gender (breaking with the prevailing norm)” (Ferreira, 1996, p. 152).

From the perspective of Women's History, although this period was marked by women's active participation, one can observe the absence of explicitly feminist agendas, as broader political issues were prioritized. Nevertheless, the repressive apparatus did not ignore the specificities of female bodies and minds. On the contrary, it targeted them with violence and suffering inherent to being a woman in a time when bodies were routinely threatened and violated—as is made evident in the case of Ana Maria Rolllemberg Côrtes, who was arrested while pregnant and held for 55 days, during which she endured numerous forms of torture, including electric shocks. This is stated in her Political Amnesty Reparation Request Process:

Handcuffed and hooded, the claimant was placed on the floor of the vehicle and transported to the Department of Information Operations - Internal Defense Operations Center (DOI-CODI) facility in Recife. Upon arrival, she was subjected to repeated torture sessions, including being suspended by metal rings in a way that prevented her feet from touching the ground for extended periods, while also receiving countless electric shocks to her ears and hands. In that same facility, she was held in a dark and solitary cell for fifty-five days. And, due to her pregnancy, she suffered a threat of miscarriage, which, fortunately, did not come to pass (APEJE, n.d.c).

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that female bodies only became targets of repression and violations during the intensification of the regime in the late 1960s. On the contrary, from the very first months of the dictatorship, the presence of women in political struggle was noticed—and acted upon—by the repressive apparatus. Such is the case of Maria Celeste Vidal, a primary school teacher and one of the leaders of the Peasant Leagues in Vitória de Santo Antão, who was arrested on April 1, 1964, for attempting, via a local radio broadcast, to mobilize the population in defense of the deposed governor Miguel Arares. Her experience is recounted by the lawyer Mércia Albuquerque (n.d., author's emphasis):

[...] transported in the back of a truck, where she was repeatedly raped, then handed over to the Fourth Army, where she was tortured and brought before “Gregorio Bezerra” while being mocked. Later, she was taken to the Department of Public Security, where her genitals were burned with lit cigarette ends, and her thighs were pierced with crochet needles. When I went to visit her, she had just been slapped by “Moacir Sales.” Upon my arrival, she embraced me, and I patiently listened to the threats that “Moacir” directed at me. With the support of Appellate Judge “Agamenon Duarte,” “Celeste” was eventually transferred to the Bom Pastor Women’s Penal Colony.<sup>3</sup>

Such testimonies reveal not only the violence perpetrated by the political police acting on behalf of a dictatorial government, but also—and especially—the representative potential of these women, who operated within their own microcosms, mobilizing elements that defied political, social, and gender expectations. This is evidenced in case file no. 9621 (APEJE, n.d.b, author’s emphasis), concerning the physician Nicanor Teodósio, who, according to the police, “Worked for the Communist Party, certainly inspired by his wife, ‘Naíde Regueira Teodósio,’ who has leadership capabilities, unlike him.”

The physician, university professor, and political militant Naíde Regueira Teodósio, who is said to have inspired her husband to enter the political struggle, was also arrested, along with the worker Encarnación Lopes Peres and the former housewife, later nurse, Jovelina Tonello do Nascimento, both members of the Palmares Revolutionary Armed Vanguard (VAR), the most extreme faction of the resistance, as they believed that violence should be combated more effectively, including with the use of weapons, as evidenced in their respective police records.

Not without reason, we find in the universe of incarcerated women (mapped in Chart 4), several who were linked to the National Liberation Action (ALN), the Marxist-Leninist Popular Action (AP), the Revolutionary Movement of October 8 (MR 8), the Marxist Revolutionary Workers’ Political Organization (POLOP), the Communist Workers’ Party (POC), in addition to the Revolutionary Armed Vanguard (VAR). These organizations, all of which had women involved, were responsible for some of the most significant episodes of resistance to the dictatorship, such as: the kidnapping of U.S. Ambassador Charles Elbrick; the assassination of businessman Henning Boilesen and the militant deemed a traitor for his collaboration with the regime, Márcio Toledo; the robbery of the payroll train in São Paulo; and the kidnapping of Swiss Ambassador Giovanni Enrico Bucher, as recorded in the police files of the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) accessed during the research.

<sup>3</sup> Statement given by Mércia de Albuquerque Ferreira, undated, at the time Maria Celeste Vidal’s attorney. [http://www.dhnet.org.br/memoria/mercia/juridica/declaracoes/09\\_mariaceleste.htm](http://www.dhnet.org.br/memoria/mercia/juridica/declaracoes/09_mariaceleste.htm).



## THE FORMATIVE PROCESSES OF WOMEN: WHAT THE DOCUMENTS REVEAL

The analyzed documents allow us to ascertain that the often-prolonged process of engaging in political struggle was profoundly educational for women, whether through the sensitivity built over a lifetime by the causes they embraced, the readings they undertook, the closeness to partners involved in the struggle, or through numerous other means and reasons for their involvement in movements opposing the regime. These women developed not only an intellectual consciousness but also an emotional and moral one, which drove them to the struggle. In this sense, they participated in educational experiences, similar to those analyzed by Edward P. Thompson when discussing the English labor movement:

[...] people do not experience their own experience merely as ideas, within the realm of thought and its procedures, or (as some theoretical practitioners suppose) as proletarian instinct, etc. They experience their experience as feeling and engage with these feelings within culture, as norms, family and kinship obligations, and reciprocity, as values, or (through more elaborate forms) in art or religious convictions. This half of culture (and it is a complete half) can be described as "affective and moral consciousness" (Thompson, 1981, p. 189, [sic], emphasis added).

The experiences of ideological affiliation and systematic involvement, when combined with domestic education and institutional schooling processes, reveal a series of elements and feelings that weigh on the political formation of each of these women in particular, but, above all, as a gender collective. This is because, at the time in question, as Ana Maria Colling (2017) reports, who studied the role of women during the dictatorship, several stereotypes added to those that traditionally burdened them. Thus, the process of engaging in the public sphere through left-wing political involvement was “[...] marked not only by a dynamic of forces and determinations but also by internal conflicts, disagreements, anxieties, and concerns” (Rocha, 2017, p. 148, [sic]), as the researcher attests while studying women's participation in Popular Action (AP) in Minas Gerais.

It was precisely in the gaps left by the Brazilian left that a specific profile of women emerged. Driven more by confronting the prevailing political situation and less by the needs of their own gender, they entered politics and were forged within its webs. It is through this investment that we can understand politics as education, as investments were made in the name of what they believed to be best for the country. Thompson himself, when analyzing his own formation, concluded as follows:

I think this practice [researching], more the discussions with two or three people, and my participation in the Communist Party Historians Group, where we engaged in theoretical discussions all the time, made me a historian. The formal and informal exchange with socialist comrades helped me more than anything I had found in Cambridge. This is not to say I don't value the university, but to emphasize the need not to depend on it, but on ourselves, and always helping each other (Thompson 1979 apud Fenelon, 2014, p. 42).

As previously emphasized, by taking the experiences of women in the left-wing movement as the object of analysis, we were able to understand how the formative processes leading them to the struggle were multiple and, at times, long. This is because the documents allowed us to map the instances they went through and to which elements of their formation are attributed. Lawyer Mércia Albuquerque, for example, when narrating an episode that shaped her, helps us understand formation through networks of relationships as well. She, who had been detained several times and defended hundreds of politicians, recalled an episode that was very common among those fighting against the established regime:

On that sad January 27th, I went to the Military Court of the 7th Military Regiment. Upon entering the military forum, I met Boris Trindade, a very dear colleague who always guided me in conducting the cases and taught me the cunning a lawyer should have. He immediately approached me: "What's bitten you?" I told him about my distress, my sadness about the violence in the prisons, the tortures, the deaths. He slammed his fist on the table: "Stop being dramatic; we are in a military dictatorship. Do you think the military are going to arrest communists while listening to violins? Look ahead, because not far away is amnesty, and this 'shit'—referring to the National Security Law—will be archived. I feel the same impact you do, and I'm not melting down. Mércia, we are the hope of the shipwrecked in this moment we are living; don't fold!" I stood up, embarrassed. I hugged and kissed my friend, my brother in legal struggle. I no longer felt the silent bitterness in my throat. A fierce strength was ignited in me. I abandoned the skeptical laughter of Sarah, Abraham's wife. The laughter of disbelief. Sarah, feeling old, and her husband, a centenarian, who had just been told by an angel that they would conceive a child (Genesis 18:12) (Albuquerque, n.d., author's emphasis).

Mércia's name, who was also a political prisoner, is added to that of many others who were part of this history. There is little doubt that their political formations were marked by debates, discussions, the creation and distribution of pamphlets, protests, critiques, and meetings, especially when we consider the degree of commitment and

organized engagement, even if not academic. It was within the context of the civil-military regime, marked by the dictatorship, that these women emerged, as Thompson would say when discussing the 'making of historical subjects.' It is Thompson's idea that social experience is the richest of historical possibilities. And when we reflect on the experience of each of these women, or even on the collective experiences, we recognize how left-wing political engagement through militancy was crucial for their reflections, for facing criticism of communism, and for their affective and moral consciousness in dedicating themselves to political work as an active component in the construction of a democratic perspective based on socialism/communism.

The discussions about the practices of the Communist Party and its dissidents, more or less radical regarding the issues faced in the post-coup period, seem to demonstrate that the major concerns of the left-wing militant group were their commitment to the most pressing issues of the country. And, if Thompson and his comrades in England contributed to "[...] the definitions and theories of a national-popular cultural politics that valued the people, the nation, and their historical struggle for democracy [...]", following the same paths, in Brazil, we had warriors who also left written "[...] the desire to break with economic reductionism, considered the vulgarization of Marxism, and were willing to engage in a battle of ideas to advance their positions" (Fenelon, 2014, p. 43). We are talking, among others, about the political prisoners who, as interpreted by Silvana Schmitt (2023, p. 22), in her study of Brazilian and Spanish female university students fighting against dictatorial regimes, concluded as follows:

However, the violence against university students was marked by their female condition, thus permeated by the hostility of sexual, physical, and emotional violence. Another important aspect relates to the engagement of many university students in feminist studies and, subsequently, their involvement in the struggles of this collective in both countries.

Finally, as we have seen throughout the text, during the studied period in Brazil, women actively participated in the main collectives fighting against the civil-military dictatorship and, through their (self)formative experiences, became one of the main forces of resistance and the struggle for democracy in the country. Understanding their movements and establishing their histories, as we have sought to do here, is a fundamental step in recognizing them once and for all as historical subjects who were forged, resisted, and politically active in the public sphere.

## FINAL REMARKS

Despite the abundance of sources and, today, a significant number of works revealing the intense participation of women in the fight against the dictatorship, the history and memories taught in schools and within the broader social context still predominantly highlight the male participation in those resistance movements. However, we know that the presence of women was so significant that, for the Northeast region, we find hundreds of cases related to many who were investigated, imprisoned, tortured, killed, and/or disappeared during the period marked in this writing.

This text aimed to present part of our investigation, reflecting less on the specificity of the feminine in relation to repression – the female body as a target of specific violence – and more on the various processes through which women entered political struggle and the educational experiences that forged them for this purpose.

We also sought to show how the paths and forces that lead to and sustain the persistence in political struggle are multiple. Family of origin or choice, school, church, peasant leagues, student movements... are instances that lead to the approach and/or entry into resistance movements and, in the same way, serve as supports to remain in them. They are places where networks of complicity, political and financial solidarity, emotional comfort are woven, and where formation and information are sought—vital elements for maintaining life and struggle in dark and violent times.

They are, moreover, educational institutions. After all, in Brazilian society, where education is often confused with school or schooling, it is important to highlight – as the sources of this research and the experiences analyzed here help to demonstrate – that the formation process for life and, specifically, for political action is much broader than that which occurs within a school institution, although attending it is a very important chapter of this formation. As we have sought to emphasize, the formation of an affective and moral consciousness, to recall Thompson's (1987) words, one that is outraged by arbitrariness and violence, a consciousness that mobilizes for struggle, is both constitutive and the result of a broader process that begins in childhood and accompanies individuals throughout their lives.

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