

SOCIEDADE FEMININA DE PUERICULTURA: female protagonism in the promotion of care in São Paulo (1905-1920)

Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura:
female protagonism in the promotion of care in São Paulo (1905-1920)

Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura:
protagonismo femenino en la promoción de los cuidados en São Paulo (1905-1920)

CAROLINA MOSTARO*, KÁTIA SIQUEIRA GONÇALVES RODRIGUES

Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil. *Corresponding author. E-mail: carolmostaro@usp.br

Abstract: This article examines the early years of the Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura, an association founded in São Paulo in 1905 with the commitment to help mothers and children, especially the poor. It examines its organization, objectives and actions as possibilities for female action in the public sphere, at the interface with gender representations and male hegemony in the establishment of standards for health and education. The historiographical operation is based on the analysis of a diverse set of sources, including reports, enrollment books, cash books, records and minutes of meetings produced by the Society, and publications from the contemporary press. Using theoretical and methodological contributions from social history, it highlights people, their relationships and creative appropriations of the contemporaries discursive and practical repertoires. The confluence of women's actions in the fight against infant mortality, helplessness and poverty is observed, as well as the expansion of their activities outside the domestic sphere. The experiences of the Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura reveal the complexity of asymmetrical social relations in their connections with economic, social and gender aspects that crossed women's experiences at the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: social assistance; philanthropy; women; crèche.

Resumo: Este artigo aborda os primeiros anos de funcionamento da Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura, associação criada em São Paulo no ano de 1905, com o compromisso de promover auxílio a mães e a crianças, sobretudo, pobres. Examina a sua organização, seus objetivos e suas ações como possibilidades de atuação feminina em âmbito público, na interface com representações de gênero e com a hegemonia masculina no estabelecimento das normas para a saúde e a educação. A operação historiográfica se baseia na análise de um conjunto diverso de fontes, dentre as quais relatórios, livros de matrículas, livros-caixa, registros e atas de reunião, produzidos pela Sociedade, e publicações da imprensa contemporânea. Apropriando aportes teórico-metodológicos da história social, destacam-se as pessoas, suas relações e apropriações criativas dos repertórios discursivos e práticos da época. Observa-se a confluência entre a ação feminina no combate à mortalidade infantil, ao desamparo e à pobreza, bem como a ampliação de sua atuação fora do âmbito doméstico. As experiências da Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura revelam a complexidade de relações sociais assimétricas em suas conexões com aspectos econômicos, sociais e de gênero que atravessavam as experiências femininas no começo do XX.

Palavras-chave: assistência social; filantropia, mulheres; creche.

Resumen: Este artículo examina los primeros años de la Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura, una asociación creada en São Paulo en 1905 con el compromiso de ayudar a madres e hijos, especialmente a los pobres. Examina su organización, objetivos y acciones como posibilidades de actuación femenina en la esfera pública, en la interfaz con las representaciones de género y con la hegemonía masculina en el establecimiento de normas para la salud y la educación. La operación historiográfica se basa en el análisis de un conjunto diverso de fuentes, entre ellas informes, libros de matrícula, libros de caja, actas y minutas de reuniones producidas por la Sociedad, y publicaciones de la prensa contemporánea. A partir de las aportaciones teóricas y metodológicas de la historia social, se destacan las personas, sus relaciones y las apropiaciones creativas de los repertorios discursivos y prácticos de la época. Se observa la confluencia de las acciones de las mujeres en la lucha contra la mortalidad infantil, el desamparo y la pobreza, así como la expansión de sus actividades fuera del ámbito doméstico. Las experiencias de la Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura revelan la complejidad de las relaciones sociales asimétricas en sus conexiones con los aspectos económicos, sociales y de género que impregnaban las vivencias de las mujeres a principios del siglo XX.

Palabras clave: asistencia social; filantropía; mujeres; guardería.

INTRODUCTION

Between the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the city of São Paulo underwent an intense process of urbanization, extensively analyzed in historiography (Rolnik, 1997; Sevcenko, 1992; Segawa, 2004). During this period, the diversification of the São Paulo economy, driven by the coffee complex, created conditions for the development of commerce and industry, making life in the capital attractive to different social groups – from elites originating from the agrarian economy to workers, former slaves, or immigrants (Cano, 2007; Oliveira, 2019). The city was transformed. From 1886 to 1900, its population quintupled, going from 47,697 to 239,820 inhabitants (Scott et al., 2023, p. 18).

With its disorganized growth, urban improvements spread unevenly, establishing symbolic and effective limits on the use and occupation of spaces by the various social groups that inhabited the city. Amidst the reforms aimed at its improvement and beautification, in various parts of the city a large population contingent lived in precarious, unsanitary conditions, in the daily struggle for subsistence, frequently on the margins of the civilizing guidelines embraced by the elites and public authorities (Rosin, 2021).

Although the State was already beginning to assume some functions in the field of assistance, the promotion of aid to these people was mainly the responsibility of individuals or private groups, secular or religious. Men from the "productive classes"¹ and liberal professions, as well as women, ladies of high society, began to show increasing concern for poor people and their lives on the margins of civilization. The perception of poverty as a "social issue," resulting from the processes of urbanization and industrialization, spurred charitable actions in order to alleviate the hardships affecting the underprivileged (Sanglard, 2005; Sanglard & Ferreira, 2014).

Around this time, "charity, philanthropy, and assistance constituted facets of a discourse that, aiming to alleviate the precarious situation of the poor population, gained strength among the wealthier sectors of society" (Camara, 2017, p. 201). Philanthropy, as a "gesture of public utility and instrument of social action," was recognized as an essential part of the culture of the urban elite, marked by its civic-patriotic character (Freire & Leony, 2011, p. 207). In this process, female participation in assistance grew, exercising in the public sphere the caregiving functions historically attributed to women in the domestic sphere (Martins, 2011). Philanthropy allowed them to leave their homes to promote activities associated with docility, sensitivity, and care, considered inherent to female nature². By intensifying their public actions

¹ The expression "productive class" was used in the period under study to refer to the groups directly involved with the world of production, mostly landowners and business owners (Silva, 2016).

² Sanglard and Gil (2014) present a synthesis of the conceptual discussion surrounding the term "philanthropy." For the authors, "philanthropy, or benevolence, is a neologism that emerged in

through charity, according to Ana Paula Martins (2023, p. 106), elite women put into practice the “politics of the heart,” that is, they acted politically “within a framework of conformity to class and gender norms, and sustained by the narrative of feelings and moral virtues.”

This article discusses the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* (or *Women's Society for Childcare*), an association of women from São Paulo, created in 1905, with the commitment to promote assistance to mothers and children, especially the poor. They were wealthy ladies whose genealogy still names the streets of the city of São Paulo: Cardoso de Almeida, Villaboim, Brotero, Lacerda Franco, Galvão Bueno, Souza Queiroz, Siqueira Campos, Prado, Guedes Penteado, among others. For these ladies, charitable and aware of the hardships faced by the poor population, humanitarian social actions, such as childcare and the support of mothers and children, were simultaneously a duty and proof of altruism and moral virtue.

This study examines the early years of the association's operation, between 1905 and 1920, examining its organization, objectives, and actions as possibilities for female engagement in the public sphere, intersecting with gender representations and male hegemony in establishing norms for health and education. We will analyze, in the actions of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, the confluence between the precepts of hygiene and education in combating infant mortality, destitution, and poverty. The historiographical approach is based on the analysis of a diverse set of sources, including reports, registration books, records, and meeting minutes produced by the Society, as well as publications from the contemporary press. Drawing on theoretical and methodological contributions from social history, we highlight the individuals, their relationships, and creative appropriations of the discursive and practical repertoires of the time (Delacroix, 2010; Revel, 1998).

More than thirty years ago, Joan Scott (1995[1986], p. 86) pointed to gender as “a constitutive element of social relations” and “a primary way of signifying power,” considering that its use in historical analysis could contribute to the understanding of inequalities and hierarchies – which, evidently, are not limited to sex and gender roles. About a decade later, Guacira Lopes Louro (1995) highlighted the articulation of “gender” with other categories, such as race and class, as a possibility for producing a more complex history of education, making visible subjects and processes that had been ignored. The analysis of the experiences of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* is a possibility for observing the complexity of asymmetrical relations and their intersections with the economic, social, and racial differences that permeated women's experiences at the beginning of the 20th century.

Enlightenment France and differs from charity by proposing to be detached from any vestige of piety, and having underlying it the idea of social utility” (Sanglard & Gil, 2014, p. 68).

THE CALL FOR ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN

At the time of its founding, the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* was presided over by Ana de Queirós Teles Tibiriçá, daughter of the Count of Parnaíba and wife of the State President, Jorge Tibiriçá. Alongside her was the Vice-President, Ana de Lacerda Penteado, daughter of the Baron of Araras and wife of Antônio Álvares Penteado. In addition, the board of directors was composed of the first secretary, Francisca de Souza Rezende de Almeida Mello, daughter of the Baron of Rezende and wife of Américo Brasiliense de Almeida Mello Filho, a renowned physician from São Paulo; the second secretary, Cornélia Prado de Mendonça, from the "powerful" Prado family; and the treasurer, Jessy de Souza Queiroz, daughter of the Viscount of Indaiatuba and widow of the politician Augusto de Souza Queiroz. Six women comprised the board of directors of the organization, which brought together figures very well placed in social networks defined by political and economic prestige.

Ninety-nine founding members pledged to contribute 5,000 *réis* monthly and to raise funds from relatives and friends for this noble cause. Over the years, the number of members varied. Between 1906 and 1908, there were 144; in subsequent years, it remained close to 100³. The amounts of contributions also varied, as not all members paid monthly. In addition to the contributing members, benefactors financially supported the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, helping to maintain and expand its activities.

The creation of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* responded to the call from doctors at the São Paulo Polyclinic, who daily encountered the harmful effects of misinformation, especially on children's bodies, where diseases caused the greatest damage (Alves, 2001). Infant mortality was, at the time, an internationally debated problem, ranking among the greatest concerns of doctors, hygienists, and philanthropists regarding childhood (Sanglard & Ferreira, 2014).

To address the situation in São Paulo, the pediatrician Francisco de Queirós Mattoso (1867-1910) proposed to the director of the Polyclinic, Sergio Florentino de Paiva Meira (1857-1917), the installation of the "*Drop of Milk*," inspired by the breastfeeding experiments developed by French doctors such as Léon Dufour (1856-1928), Gaston Variot (1855-1930), and Pierre Budin (1846-1907), pioneers of modern pediatrics. In the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, Queirós Mattoso, in defense of measures to combat infant mortality, explained:

[A] high mortality rate is primarily attributable to various gastrointestinal disorders, associated with improper breastfeeding practices, inadequate quality and selection of materials for mixed

³ Interestingly, in the first five years of its existence, although the entity maintained the name "feminine," the lists of "contributing members" recorded the names of men (Report, 1911-1912).

and artificial feeding, and, finally, the improper preparation and administration of such foods.

As can be seen, these causes can and should be reduced to a minimum, provided that here in São Paulo associations for the protection and assistance of children are organized, encompassing the promotion and practice of complex childcare measures (O Estado de S. Paulo, February 27, 1905, p. 1).

The model chosen by Mattoso was based on the work initiated by Dufour in the French region of Fécamp. The French physician, in seeking the causes of high infant mortality, found that gastroenteritis, diseases related to inflammation of the stomach and intestines, caused more than half of the deaths of children under one year old – although diseases such as rubella, scarlet fever, and measles contributed significantly to these results. According to Dufour, the main source of problems was nutrition, often inadequate, with food stored in aseptic containers. In response, he created a program for infant care, which he named *Goutte de Lait* (Sautereau, 1991).

With quite satisfactory results, the *Goutte de Lait* spread throughout France and, soon after, throughout the world. In 1902, Dufour published the manual *Comment on crée une Goutte de lait* (or *Comment on creating a Drop of Milk*), aimed at doctors and politicians interested in combating infant mortality. In Brazil, the Institute for the Protection and Assistance of Children (IPAI), created by Arthur Moncorvo Filho (1871-1944) in Rio de Janeiro, established the *Drop of Milk* in 1901 (Moncorvo Filho, 1905). Queirós Mattoso, like Moncorvo Filho, was part of a network of hygienist doctors engaged in initiatives that were simultaneously clinical, political, and social, to reduce infant mortality and protect childhood (Freire & Leony, 2011)⁴. Like them, many health and education professionals shared the fear that neglected and poorly educated children would grow into delinquent adults, and maintained that proper care should begin in the earliest moments of life.

According to pediatrician Queirós Mattoso, the *Drop of Milk* program encompassed medical and educational actions aimed at encouraging mothers to promote natural breastfeeding, disseminating its benefits and assisting them in the practice. However, in cases in which natural feeding was impossible, mothers were provided with sterilized milk, along with instructions for consumption (São Paulo Medical Journal, February 15, 1906). In addition, information on childcare and consultations for children were offered, monitoring their growth and weight gain⁵. In

⁴ Sanglard and Ferreira (2014, p. 80), examining the trajectory of the physician Fernandes Figueira at the beginning of the 20th century, observe that there was disagreement about how to solve problems related to infant breastfeeding. Figueira, for example, believed that "institutions based on the example of the Drop of Milk encouraged artificial feeding (cow's milk), which he considered extremely harmful."

⁵ Freire (2006) points to the emergence, at the end of the 19th century, of a motherhood anchored in scientific bases, the object of specific educational practices and medical supervision.

the São Paulo *Drop of Milk* program, doctors were responsible for the technical and scientific aspects, while the women were responsible for the caregiving actions.

The idea of creating the *Drop of Milk* program in São Paulo was materialized on February 15, 1905. In the first week, six children were enrolled. The news, publicized by the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, featured Mattoso emphasizing the importance of civil society participation and urging the ladies of São Paulo's elite to support the program.

In the operation of Drop of Milk, there is a part of the service in which the doctors should only act as technical consultants, guiding on all the minutiae of the execution that they cannot perform under the same conditions as the women.

It is therefore necessary that the ladies of São Paulo, always full of enthusiasm for charitable works, come together, organize an association, and assist the polyclinic in the great step of charity and humanity it has just taken, founding in São Paulo the Drop of Milk to protect little children in danger of death due to hunger, misery, and parental ignorance.

The Polyclinic does not ask for grand services; it only hopes that an association of ladies from São Paulo will organize itself in order to honor the Drop of Milk with their maternal affections and to take charge of the supervision and direction of the preparation and distribution of milk or other foods, according to the indications of the doctors of Drop of Milk (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, February 27, 1905, p. 1).

In the article, Mattoso also mentioned that Adelaide do Amaral Meira, wife of the physician Dr. Sergio Meira, had taken on the task of organizing a “society of ladies that protected the Drop of Milk”. The female role in the new section of the Polyclinic, embraced by the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, included covering the services of “motherly affections”, then considered inherent to women – as Freire and Cosati (2015) observed in relation to the *Associação das Damas da Assistência*, linked to Ipai.

With the *Drop of Milk* program, doctors in São Paulo envisioned the possibility of developing educational and assistance programs focused on childhood and motherhood in partnership with women. The roles of men and women in the elite were defined and hierarchically organized, with functions assigned to each group according to their gender. Thus, the services of the *Drop of Milk* program were to be organized and overseen by women – as Moncorvo Filho stated at the International Congress of Drop of Milk in Paris in 1905. Their responsibilities included receiving the infants, weighing them, supervising sterilization procedures and milk distribution, among other duties—activities through which relationships were typically formed among women, namely between the service providers and the mothers in need.

The connection between scientific precepts for childcare, based on notions of hygiene and childcare under medical guidance, and the defense of women's preponderance in childcare, due to a supposed nature oriented towards motherhood,

was expressed. Thus, in the São Paulo *Drop of Milk* program, all the preparation of sterilized milk, curd, and vegetable broth offered was carried out by women, who also worked in organizing its distribution, regularly weighing the babies, and disseminating information about breastfeeding and hygiene to mothers. Doctors provided clinical care and some lectures. In the encounter among doctors, benefactors, and poor mothers, the aim was to establish scientific methods of childcare, in a movement that went beyond the limits of the São Paulo capital and Brazil, being identified in Europe and the United States (Freire, 2006).

The organization of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* was therefore in line with contemporary initiatives to address infant mortality, associated with industrialization and urbanization in Western countries, in which it was linked, to varying degrees, "to demographic, sanitary or patriotic elements and also to maternalism – a worldwide phenomenon that advocated the preponderance of women in childcare, by virtue of the specific nature of women for motherhood" (Freire & Leony, 2011, p. 200).

In its first year, the *Drop of Milk* program was sought out by mothers who did not produce milk or who did not have enough to adequately nourish their babies. In cases of insufficiency, doctors opted for mixed feeding, combined with modified cow's milk. According to Mattoso, mothers who entered the *Drop of Milk* program needing to supplement their babies' nutrition managed to reverse the situation and began to exclusively nourish them with their own milk. The doctor celebrated having "managed to get some mothers to entrust their children to relatives or friends to breastfeed them, thus freeing them from the risks of artificial feeding" (Revista Médica de São Paulo, February 15, 1906, p. 54).

In 1906, the service admitted 106 infants, many of whom were in fragile health. Upon enrollment, each child's weight, age, and parentage were carefully recorded. Within the first few months, the institution also began to accept children who paid, with fees set according to each family's financial means. Although it affected the poorer classes more intensely, both the lack of information and the difficulty of accessing properly diluted and sterilized milk also affected mothers and babies from wealthier families. Charging for this milk became a source of income to maintain its supply to people who could not afford it.

Even during this period, it was noted that, in addition to contributions from members of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, *Drop of Milk* received public aid and contributions from private individuals, allowing it to maintain a financial life almost independent of the Polyclinic. For example, on the occasion of its first anniversary, Ana de Lacerda Penteado made a donation of 500\$000, which corresponded to ten months of contributions from the members (Correio Paulistano, August 17, 1906).

According to physician Haroldo Schutel, in 1907, the institution occupied three rooms in the Polyclinic: one for consultations, one for milk sterilization, and a storeroom. The sterilization area had modern resources, as described by the physician: “In the sterilization area, zinc-coated shelves were installed on all its walls, a sink, a Pasteur filter, and a gas installation” (*Revista Médica de São Paulo*, July 31, 1907, p. 290).

Drop of Milk established itself as a benchmark in infant care and in combating mortality. Within thirty months of operation, it had cared for more than 330 children, maintaining a mortality rate consistently below the average for the capital city. Deaths resulting from gastrointestinal diseases represented 3% of the total number of children, while in São Paulo, it exceeded 30%. It became evident that nutritional care and information were important weapons in the fight against infant mortality (*Revista Médica de São Paulo*, November 30, 1907).

Observing, however, that the needs of mothers and children, especially poor ones, were not limited to nutrition and hygiene information, the “ladies” of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* embraced the desire to expand their activities and, in 1911, led by Paulina de Souza Queiroz (1859-1936), opened a new section⁶. The Baroneza de Limeira Daycare Center was born, operating along with the *Drop of Milk* in a building rented by the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*. Although separate from the Polyclinic, the association remained committed to the field of health, working alongside medical and nursing professionals. However, a step was being taken in the recomposition of the hierarchy between men and women that was seen in the early years of the society's activity.

WORK AMONG WOMEN

When the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* opened its daycare center, this type of institution was still rare in Brazil, even in the country's largest city. Since the 19th century, there had been scattered initiatives to care for babies and young children in institutions such as kindergartens, nursery schools, asylums, or daycare centers, whose projects or models differed from one another. Their social, medical, and pedagogical objectives, as well as their principles of action, were not clearly defined, and the State was rarely involved in their management and promotion (Kuhlmann Junior, 1998, 2005).

⁶ Paulina was a religious and wealthy woman, daughter of the Baron and Baroness of Limeira, granddaughter of Brigadier Luiz Antônio, and was already involved in various social activities when she became a member of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* in 1910.

According to its 1912 registration, the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* intended to operate on several fronts⁷. The daycare center would receive younger children up to four years old during the day while their mothers worked outside the home, as well as the sons and daughters of widows. The association aimed to promote the "foundation of women's mutual aid societies, especially maternal mutual aid societies," giving them a rational and scientific organization. Also, it carried out "the most complete investigations possible into the living conditions of poor children, investigations concerning food, clothing, housing, instruction, education, etc., in order to offer them adequate protection" (Registro no livro de inscrição de associações, 1912, n.p.).

The document also included the objectives of founding a children's hospital; assuming guardianship of abused, endangered, or impoverished children; encouraging the creation of other child protection societies; and promoting the legal regulation of female and child labor in industry. Furthermore, the original objectives of the *Drop of Milk* program were maintained: to promote breastfeeding and basic notions of infant hygiene. This broad program of actions succinctly expressed the beliefs of the association's members regarding the social role of the organization and what they understood to be the needs of poor mothers and children.

Although most of the objectives were consistent with the philanthropic expectations of the elites, aspects such as investigations into the living conditions of the poor population and the regulation of labor went beyond what was commonly expected of women from wealthy classes, precisely because they encompassed issues based on technical and political aspects, considered as undeniable dimensions of male actions. Perhaps that is why these areas of action were not materialized⁸.

It is thus noticeable that the acceptance of feminine roles linked to childcare and motherhood did not limit women's actions to what was traditionally expected of "ladies of society." Through philanthropy, the women of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* expanded their spheres of action, constructing other meanings and possibilities outside the domestic sphere – an aspect observed in investigations such as those by Martins (2023), on conservative women in philanthropy, and Câmara (2017), on the Ladies of Assistance at Ipaí. It was, therefore, a matter of assuming a repertoire of action within the expectations of gender and class, whose plasticity allowed them to reconfigure the relationships, spaces, and power dynamics between elite men and women.

⁷ This refers to the enrollment in the register of associations for religious, moral, scientific, artistic, political, or simply recreational purposes, signed by the Registro Geral e de Hipotecas da Comarca da Capital do Estado of São Paulo.

⁸ Other initiatives, such as the creation of women's mutual aid societies and children's hospitals, also never got off the ground.

With the creation of the daycare center, the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* changed its name to “Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura Gottas de Leite e Crèches”, which, according to the official record, committed itself to “employing all measures of protection and assistance to children compatible with its means and the resources of its budget,” seeking to combine private charity and public assistance, which led it to request subsidies from various instances of the State (Registro no livro de inscrição de associações, 1912, n.p.). To this end, the “ladies and young ladies” made use of their social networks, which included important political figures, pressuring, through private relationships, for a public financial commitment to assistance. In the 1911 and 1912 report, it is expressed that the state governor had granted an annual aid of 6,000\$000 (six contos de réis), and the Municipal Chamber, an amount corresponding to half of that value.

Regarding the organization of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, the record confirms the composition of a board of directors, with a president, secretary, and treasurer elected in general assemblies for five-year terms, without any details about their respective responsibilities⁹. The reports and meeting minutes from those years indicate that the board was directly involved in the administration of both entities, although there was a doctor in the clinical management of the *Drop of Milk* program and in the pediatric care of the children at the daycare center.

According to the precepts of the time, the welcoming and care provided in the daycare center required technical supervision, for which the doctor was considered the most suitable professional. These professionals provided guidance and made decisions related to health and hygiene within the institution. They proposed, for example, the installation of an infirmary to prevent the spread of diseases within the daycare center. For the same reason, they established a rigorous clinical examination for newly enrolled babies and children. There were attempts to offer advanced nutritional and health treatments. In 1917, the minutes recorded the construction of a “laboratory” where minor surgeries could be performed (Livro de atas, 1916-1918, n.p.). There is no precise information about the continuity of the project; however, the list of donations includes a cabinet for surgical instruments, glassware, and a vat for boiling instruments – donations made by doctors Raphael Sampaio and Felinto Brandão. Also in 1917, the doctors experimented with “a treatment using sunlight” at the end of a cradle; they produced and sold “albuminous milk”¹⁰.

The *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* established itself as the entity promoting the services of the *Drop of Milk* program and the Daycare Center. The doctors, although technically responsible, became employees of the association, which paid them a

⁹ According to the report for the years 1911 and 1912, the *Sociedade* had statutes, which, unfortunately, have not yet been located.

¹⁰ Developed by the German pediatrician Heinrich Finkelstein (1865-1942), the albuminous milk formula corrected cow's milk, reducing its lactose content per liter and thus combating fermentations that were harmful to infant nutrition. The entire milk correction process was carried out on the premises of the daycare center.

monthly salary for performing clinical services. A recomposition of relationships occurred, even though the medical discourse remained in a superior position of authority. At the beginning of 1918, however, the male exclusivity in medical services was broken with the hiring of Dr. Ângela de Mesquita as an assistant to the association's clinical director. Ângela, trained in the United States, wished to dedicate herself to "childhood illnesses." Although she worked for a short time at the institution, her presence may be an indication of a desire, nurtured by the members, for women to also occupy the more masculine space within the services they promoted.

In those early years, the directors of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* actively participated in the daily life of the daycare center, deciding on purchases and the hiring of employees. They were also responsible for publishing periodic reports for the members, clarifying the progress of the association's activities. Paulina de Souza Queiroz, as president of the *Sociedade* and founder of the daycare center, assumed many tasks. For example, she decided to accept "young children who will be breastfed by nurses admitted to the daycare center" and to hire "as nurses or employees of the establishment, women with young children who could not find employment while keeping their children with them" (Livro de atas, 1915-1916, n.p.).

Furthermore, the directors were directly involved in raising financial and material resources for the institution. Their social networks facilitated this endeavor. On one occasion, Eleonora Silveira and Zenaide Bodowski, vice-president and treasurer, toured neighborhoods in the capital seeking donations. On several occasions, they approached journalists, such as the renowned Nestor Rangel Pestana, editor-in-chief of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and requested the publication of advertisements and news. They managed to get large companies, such as *Indústrias Matarazzo* and *Casa Duchon Favila Lombardi & Cia.* to commit to periodic donations of essential products, such as wheat flour, biscuits, soap, and rice.

Since 1911, there was a section of "auxiliary members," responsible for organizing festivities and raising donations, for which they mobilized their social and family networks. The opening of the daycare center, for example, was preceded by a ball, organized by the young ladies of this section, which yielded 7:141\$000 (seven contos, one hundred and forty-one thousand réis), as recorded in the first cash book of the Baroneza de Limeira Daycare Center (Diário, 1911-1915, p. 1). At the same time, they established a sewing section for the production of children's clothing, in which the members participated (Report on the movement of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, 1915, p. 48). Their functions were similar to those of members of other women's associations that worked in the assistance and protection of poor children and brought together public and private resources to promote benevolence (Camara, 2017; Martins, 2023).

Despite its extensive program, the Society's activities were centered around the *Drop of Milk* program and the Baroneza de Limeira Daycare Center. Its services, however, were varied and expanded over the years, condensing some of the objectives

expressed in its official registration (1912). In the 1920s, an outpatient clinic was established in connection with the *Drop of Milk* program, initially providing pediatric care and later expanding its services to include prenatal care.

When the daycare center was about to open, the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* published an informative report publicizing the new institution:

The main purpose of this daycare center is to assist poor, destitute mothers who, wishing to work, can find shelter for their little children and someone to lovingly care for them, providing them with healthy food and the first rudiments of a good moral education, without exempting the mothers from their natural responsibilities and the most sacred duties towards their children (O Estado de S. Paulo, September 2, 1911, p. 3).

The news article mentioned the care of babies and children up to six years old, starting at 7:00 AM, with no set departure time, respecting when the mothers finished work. In newspaper advertisements, the *Sociedade* stated that it received "children of proletarian parents, factory workers, nurses, maids," who could not adequately care for their children (O Estado de S. Paulo, December 21, 1912, p. 8). Like the crèches that were then emerging in Europe, the Baroneza de Limeira Crèche was conceived as a day school, with the expectation of reconciling the demands of motherhood and work.

However, the particularities of São Paulo society soon began to impact the institution's operation. In its early days, the daycare center began to receive children, mainly babies, as boarding students, since mothers or guardians were unable to pick them up every day. In the report covering the years 1915 to 1920, seeking the support of elite ladies for the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, Paulina mentioned the issue:

If your attention is not drawn to this just aspiration, so many children, whose mothers are employed in private homes and forced to spend the night away from their residences, and those others whose mothers have died, leaving them at a tender age, will find themselves with one foot in the grave. (Report on the movement of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, 1920, p. 5)

The nursery school doctor, however, saw the issue differently. He believed that "the number of children seeking care at the daycare is zero, perhaps to relieve mothers of the work of picking up their children at night and bringing them back the following morning, as stipulated in the regulations" (Report on the movement of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, 1920, p. 67). While the doctor suggested that mothers would have the option of picking up their children after their workday, the president of the *Sociedade* explained the situation by the mothers' occupations. Do these different positions indicate differing sensitivities to the same issue? Are these sensitivities

constructed from gender markers, such that the difficulties of poor women are more visible to other women, even those of a different social class?

In practice, not only were the formally established schedules not followed, but the daycare center received children of all ages. Most lived at the institution, and cases of abandonment were frequent. This motivated the establishment, in 1915, of a special section for orphans and abandoned girls, from which a primary school, vocational courses, and a paid employment system for girls up to 15 years old were created. The *Sociedade* diversified its actions as demands arose from the public that sought it, even if these were not exactly in the direction of implementing the plan registered in 1912.

Since its establishment, the daycare center has served a diverse public in terms of nationality and race. Most of the enrolled children were born in Brazil, although there were many sons and daughters of foreign parents, which reflected the significant number of immigrants who came to live in the city of São Paulo from the 1880s onwards. According to enrollment records, in 1912, of the 80 children served by the institution, 18 were foreign and eight were children of immigrants. Between 1913 and 1920, the lowest percentage of children of immigrant parents was 35% and the highest was 68%. Portuguese families represented the largest contingent, followed by Italian, German, Spanish, and French families, but Japanese, German, Austrian, Russian, Syrian, and Polish families also attended (*Livros de matrículas*, 1911-1920). Some records mention the skin color of Brazilian children, with the majority classified as "white," followed by "brown" and, in smaller numbers, "black¹¹." Enrollment numbers varied each month, with the successive arrivals and departures of babies and children.

There were monthly fees, the amounts of which were set according to the families' financial means. It was common for women employed at the institution as cooks and laundresses to have the portion corresponding to the monthly fees deducted from their salaries when they enrolled their sons and daughters. The salary of the cook Leonor, for example, who worked at the daycare in 1916 and was the mother of two enrolled children, was equivalent to 30% of the salary of her predecessor in the position, who did not have children at the institution. The board, however, was flexible in cases of non-payment, and for most children no contribution was charged.

Besides caring for children, the daycare center offered work to women, especially those with young children, as cooks, laundresses, wet nurses, secretaries, and directors of the establishment. Some took care of the house, others of the children, in professions socially recognized as feminine. They represented the possibility of paid employment for women who had not had the same luck as the members of the association. They depended on the salary, generally low, but acceptable, as these were the "dignified" occupations for women of the working classes.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that color is an attribute indicated only in the records of Brazilian children, a group that probably had the greatest ethnic and racial diversity.

In this process, the female employees comprised the group of agents providing assistance and support services at the institution, along with ladies from the elite, creating the possibility of establishing more horizontal relationships with the people served. It is important to consider the subjective meanings of the assistance experience for the ladies from the elite who, as Martins (2023) points out, came to understand the social issue in a more complex way. With the *Drop of Milk* program, the members of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* certainly gained a deeper understanding of the demands and difficulties of poor women, both Brazilian and immigrant. Contact with different realities and needs may have affected their sensitivity, or at least that of the ladies who were most involved in the assistance work. Thus, over the years, they redefined the functions of the association and the assistance they offered.

Furthermore, in many cases, working women were served by the institution, either by having their sons and daughters admitted there, or by accessing its medical or educational services, for example. The participation of these women permeates the philanthropic activities developed by the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura*, being fundamental to the realization of its charitable actions, although it often disappears under the guise of the actions of wealthy women.

The turnover of employees was high. In the first three years, for example, at least six women were in charge of the daycare center. Between 1915 and 1920, 14 worked as cooks. The reasons that led them to leave the position were very diverse. Josephina left because they didn't like the food she prepared. Paula wanted to try her luck outside the daycare center. Maria José had disagreements with the management. One nanny left the daycare center after the death of her daughter and the baby she was feeding; another left at her husband's insistence (Livros de atas, 1915-1916; 1916-1918). Their personal trajectories intersect in their shared experience as impoverished women in need of paid work, striving to navigate the constraints of the moral expectations imposed upon their gender and social class. For them, there was no possibility of dedicating themselves voluntarily to charitable work, but they fulfilled a fundamental part of a system that allowed women from privileged classes to perform benevolent acts, which brought them prestige and social respectability.

The difficulty in recruiting and retaining female employees led the Society's board to establish a partnership in 1914 with the *Irmãszinhas da Imaculada Conceição* (or "Little Sisters of the Immaculate Conception"), who then took on various tasks within the institution, such as sewing, administration, and childcare. Later, they assumed responsibility for teaching basic literacy to the older, seven-year-old girls who were residents. Whether religious or laywomen, it was still the women who were employed in caregiving roles; the few men were milk deliverers, gardeners, and caretakers.

FINAL REMARKS

In the daily care of babies and children, as well as in carrying out household tasks such as cooking, washing, and cleaning, or in administration, we find women with very distinct roles, depending on their position, whether as members of the association, as employees, or as nuns. Working women embraced the possibility of obtaining paid employment that allowed the presence of their sons and daughters, where they could even receive a "good education." Wealthy women had the opportunity to perform a function that conferred social distinctions upon them as dignified, virtuous, and charitable women. Nuns, in turn, fulfilled the charism of their orders through charity. To a certain extent, all three groups fulfilled their destiny in care and assistance, while at the same time weaving bonds of solidarity, new possibilities, and meanings for women's actions.

In their relationship with doctors, the ladies of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* accepted the call to develop educational and assistance programs focused on childhood and motherhood, appropriating scientific principles, notions of hygiene, and childcare. Through negotiations with these professionals, who possessed technical and specialized knowledge, they took over the administration of the *Drop of Milk* program and created the daycare center. From then on, these same men became employees of the women's association, with whom they established a work regime and salaries.

The experiences of the *Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura* reveal the complexity of asymmetrical social relations in their connections with economic, social, and gender aspects that permeated women's experiences at the beginning of the 20th century. Responding to an initial call from doctors at the Polyclinic, ladies from São Paulo's elite mobilized to fulfill a social function in philanthropy, assistance, and care. In action, and often responding to unforeseen demands, they redefined objectives, expanded their responsibilities, and undertook their own care project which, in accordance with scientific, educational, and moral precepts, expressed the interplay of feminine sensitivities and solidarities.

REFERENCES

- Alves, F. (2001). *A mortalidade infantil e as práticas sanitárias na cidade de São Paulo (1892–1920)* (Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade de São Paulo). Universidade de São Paulo.
- Camara, S. (2017). As damas da assistência à infância e as ações educativas, assistenciais e filantrópicas (Rio de Janeiro/RJ, 1906–1930). *História da Educação*, 21(53), 199–218. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-3459/66363>

Cano, W. (2007). *Raízes da concentração industrial em São Paulo*. Editora da Unicamp.

Correio Paulistano. (1906, 17 de agosto). São Paulo.

Delacroix, C. (2010). Histoire sociale. In C. Delacroix, F. Dosse, P. Garcia, & N. Offenstadt (Eds.), *Historiographies 1: Concepts et débats* (pp. 420–435). Gallimard.

Diário. (1911–1915). Documento manuscrito. Acervo da Creche Baroneza de Limeira.

Freire, M. M. (2006). *Mulheres, mães e médicos: Discurso maternalista em revistas femininas (Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo, década de 1920)* (Tese de doutorado, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz). <https://www.arca.fiocruz.br/handle/icict/19793>

Freire, M. M., & Cosati, L. C. (2015). Gênero e filantropia: As damas de assistência à infância do IPAI-RJ (1899–1930). *Gênero*, 15(2), 29–46. <https://doi.org/10.22409/rg.v15i2.653>

Freire, M. M., & Leony, V. S. (2011). A caridade científica: Moncorvo Filho e o Instituto de Proteção e Assistência à Infância do Rio de Janeiro (1899–1930). *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 18, 199–225. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702011000500011>

Kuhlmann Junior, M. (1998). *Infância e educação infantil: Uma abordagem histórica*. Mediação.

Kuhlmann Junior, M. (2005). A educação infantil no século XX. In M. Stephanou & M. H. C. Bastos (Eds.), *Histórias e memórias da educação no Brasil* (Vol. 3, pp. 182–194). Vozes.

Livro de atas. (1915–1916). Documento manuscrito. Acervo da Creche Baroneza de Limeira.

Livro de atas. (1916–1918). Documento manuscrito. Acervo da Creche Baroneza de Limeira.

Livros de matrículas. (1911–1920). Documentos manuscritos. Acervo da Creche Baroneza de Limeira.

- Louro, G. L. (1995). Gênero, história e educação: Construção e desconstrução. *Educação & Realidade*, 20(2), 101–132.
<https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/educacaoerealidade/article/view/71722>
- Martins, A. P. V. (2011). Gênero e assistência: Considerações histórico-conceituais sobre práticas e políticas assistenciais. *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 18, 15–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702011000500002>
- Martins, A. P. V. (2023). *Faces femininas do conservadorismo: Filantropas e feministas brasileiras do século XX*. Cancioneiro.
- Moncorvo Filho, A. (1905). *A gota de leite da “Assistência à Infância do Rio de Janeiro”*. Comunicação apresentada no Congresso Internacional das Gotas de Leite, Paris.
- O Estado de S. Paulo. (1905, 27 de fevereiro). São Paulo.
- O Estado de S. Paulo. (1911, 2 de setembro). São Paulo.
- O Estado de S. Paulo. (1912, 21 de dezembro). São Paulo.
- Oliveira, P. R. de. (2019). A diversificação do complexo cafeeiro paulista na Primeira República. *Projeto História*, 64, 246–276. <https://doi.org/10.23925/2176-2767.2019v64p246-276>
- Registro no livro de inscrição de associações para fins religiosos, morais, científicos, artísticos, políticos ou recreativos. (1912). Documento manuscrito. Acervo da Creche Baroneza de Limeira.
- Relatório sobre o movimento da Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura, 1912–1915. (1915). Oficinas d’O Estado de S. Paulo.
- Relatório sobre o movimento da Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura, 1915–1920. (1920). Typographia Garraux.
- Revista Médica de São Paulo. (1906, 15 de fevereiro). São Paulo.
- Revista Médica de São Paulo. (1907, 31 de julho). São Paulo.

Revista Médica de São Paulo. (1907, 30 de novembro). São Paulo.

Revel, J. (1998). Microanálise e construção social. In J. Revel, *Jogos de escala: A experiência da microanálise* (pp. 15–38). FGV.

Rolnik, R. (1997). *A cidade e a lei: Legislação, política urbana e territórios na cidade de São Paulo*. Studio Nobel.

Rosin, M. C. (2021). *Dos bêbados, das putas e dos que morrem de amor: Os marginais do embelezamento e dos melhoramentos urbanos (1905–1938)* (Tese de doutorado, Universidade de São Paulo). <https://doi.org/10.11606/T.16.2021.tde-07072021-215205>

Sanglard, G. (2005). *Entre os salões e o laboratório: Filantropia, mecenato e práticas científicas – Rio de Janeiro, 1920–1940* (Tese de doutorado, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz).

Sanglard, G., & Ferreira, L. O. (2014). Pobreza e filantropia: Fernandes Figueira e a assistência à infância no Rio de Janeiro (1900–1920). *Estudos Históricos*, 27(53), 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-21862014000100004>

Sanglard, G., & Gil, C. A. (2014). Assistência à infância: Filantropia e combate à mortalidade infantil no Rio de Janeiro (1889–1929). *Revista da ABPN*, 6(14), 63–90. <https://abpnrevista.org.br/site/article/view/130>

Sautereau, M. (1991). Aux origines de la pédiatrie moderne: Le docteur Léon Dufour et l'œuvre de la « Goutte de lait » (1894–1928). *Annales de Normandie*, 41(3), 217–233. https://www.persee.fr/doc/annor_0003-4134_1991_num_41_3_1889

Segawa, H. (2004). *Prelúdio da metrópole: Arquitetura e urbanismo em São Paulo na passagem do século XIX ao XX*. Ateliê Editorial.

Sevcenko, N. (1992). *Orfeu extático na metrópole: São Paulo, sociedade e cultura nos frementes anos 20*. Companhia das Letras.

Scott, A. S. V., Bassanezi, M. S. C. B., & Scott, D. (2023). Ilegítimos na transição entre o Império e a República: O caso do estado de São Paulo (1886–1900). *Revista Brasileira de Estudos de População*, 40, e0253. <https://doi.org/10.20947/S0102-3098a0253>

Scott, J. W. (1995). Gênero: Uma categoria útil de análise histórica. [Texto originalmente publicado em 1986]. *Educação & Realidade*, 20(2), 71–99.
<https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/educacaoerealidade/article/view/71721>

Silva, C. M. N. (2016). “*Para os grandes males, os grandes remédios*”: Propostas educacionais no Congresso Agrícola, Industrial e Comercial de Minas Gerais (1903) (Tese de doutorado, Universidade de São Paulo).
<http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/48/48134/tde-19102016-140237/>

CAROLINA MOSTARO: Professor of History of Education at the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo and advisor in the Graduate Program in Education (PPG-Educação), in the research line “History of Education and Historiography.” She is a historian and holds a Ph.D. in Education. Between 2020 and 2023, she carried out postdoctoral research in the FAPESP Thematic Project “Saberes em fronteiras: por uma história transnacional da educação,” coordinated by Diana Vidal and Carlota Boto. Her main research interests include women’s associations, assistance and education, the history of teacher education, and vocational education.

E-mail: carolmostaro@usp.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0853-6726>

KÁTIA SIQUEIRA GONÇALVES RODRIGUES: Holds a degree in Humanities Education from the SESI-SP Faculty of Education. She is currently a master’s student at the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo (FEUSP), developing a research project on institutionalized children in the city of São Paulo between 1969 and 1979.

E-mail: katiagoncalves@usp.br
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7652-2249>

Received on: 2025.02.07

Approved on: 2025.12.07

Published on: 2026.02.03 (original)

Published on: 2026.03.07 (English version)

RESPONSIBLE ASSOCIATE EDITOR:

Eduardo Lautaro Galak (UNLP, Argentina)

E-mail: eduardo.galak@unipe.edu.ar

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0684-121X>

PEER REVIEW ROUNDS:

R1: two invitations; two reviews received.

R2: two invitations; no reviews received.

R3: two invitations; no reviews received.

R4: two invitations; one review received.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mostaro, C. & Rodrigues, K. S. G. Sociedade Feminina de Puericultura: female protagonism in the promotion of care in São Paulo (1905-1920). *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação*, 26, e400. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.4025/rbhe.v26.2026.e400en>

FUNDING:

The RBHE has financial support from the Brazilian Society of History of Education (SBHE) and the Editorial Program (Call No. 30/2023) of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

LICENSING:

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY 4) license.

TRANSLATION:

This article was translated by Aline Uchida (lineuchida@gmail.com).

DATA AVAILABILITY:

All the data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the organization Acervo Creche Baroneza de Limeira.