

FREEDOM, MONEY AND AUTONOMY: THE CASE OF BOLSA FAMÍLIA

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We conducted an investigation, from 2006 to 2011, to capture moral and political changes observed in poor women as a result of receiving the benefit of the Bolsa Família Program (BFP). People from the worst social situations were heard: those living in extreme poverty and inhabiting regions traditionally underserved by the State. They are citizens often deprived of minimum public services such as lack of schools, roads, hospitals, cultural centers and meeting spaces. Their voices must be heard, to capture a non-tangible dimension to other forms of research. We sought to evaluate the impact on the “subjectivity” of people, grasp the degree of autonomy achieved and the degree of those enhanced by monetary income, however small, as is the case of the BFP. We did not resort to a statistical or quantitative research, but to a qualitative research with the use of open interviews that were composed of only few questions, allowing the interviewee to communicate as freely as possible. For moral and political changes to be understood, repeated conversations were held with frequent returns to the field and a close relationship was established which promoted a “contract of confidence”. The experience of regular income offered by the BFP is still new to a vast majority of the women interviewed. This income impacted their lives, even if it has not ensured full access to other rights. It takes time for more complex changes to be revealed, in particular those relating to moral decisions, such as marital separations or the desire to seek them. The gain of personal freedom and the acquisition of greater respectability in their local lives are subjects of more concern to those interviewed. Beneficiaries were interviewed in rural or small-town areas in the following regions: parts of the Alto Sertão of Alagoas, as well as the Coastal Zone of this state; Jequitinhonha Valley (MG); some locations in the interior of the states of Piauí and Maranhão; and very poor neighborhoods in the outskirts of São Luís (MA) and Recife (PE). We attempted to ascertain to what extent the new income impacts everyday life, particularly for women, who in their great majority claimed to feel more “comfortable” and less distressed over the ability to acquire primary goods for their families. All of them reported relevant changes in material life, although a significant number complained of the low value of the benefit, often defined as an “aid”, and almost all declared their preference for a regular job. Among the 150 interviewees, only two said they had quit working to live from the BFP’s benefits. Almost all of them said that it is best when the card is in their own name. The predominant reason was that women take better care of the money, know better what the family needs and make more economical purchases.

1. Summary of Chapter 23 from the book Programa Bolsa Família: uma década de inclusão e cidadania, MDS/Ipea (Bolsa Família Program: a decade of inclusion and citizenship).
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Executive Summary CHAPTER 23 60 Executive Summary Nearly 75% said that the BFP is a favor from the government or stems from the fact that President Lula was poor and therefore better understands this situation than his predecessors. Few said that the government has a duty to help them and only five used the word “right”, of which only two, when asked, had an adequate understanding of this concept. Just over half said they vote only out of obligation, but almost all of them acknowledged that they had voted for Lula in the last election and that the fact that he was elected had changed their lives. Our fundamental hypothesis rested on the idea that monetary income can create and expand opportunities for personal freedoms of individuals, opening up more possibilities for empowering life in general. After five years of interviews, it can be stated that the BFP produces significant changes in people’s lives. One of them being the beginning of the fight to overcome the culture of resignation, the surrendering to death by starvation and diseases related to it. The approval rate of the program by the interviewees is high, but they emphasize its failure to achieve further improvements in life and more freedom in the choice of consumer goods, given the almost complete lack of perspective of regular jobs. For the vast majority, the BFP is their only monetary income,

and in many cases, their first experience of regular income in life. In the words of Dona Inês (fictitious name), 30 years old, two sons aged 12 and 8 years old, resident of the city of Demerval Lobão in the interior of Piauí, who says she sees the government giving back with the BFP what “we paid in taxes” and that the program’s benefit was the only thing that gave her “credit in life”: Everything you want to do in life needs money, and paying [the grant money], does not silence those who are in need. Necessity isn’t only not having food to eat. It is to want to eat something better and not have it, not be able to. It is to want to dress better and not be able to, to go to the ice-cream shop with your son and not be able to, to see a toy from the store and not be able to buy it for your child. [A poor person has to have someone on her side to help her, because] one must be supported by he who is able to provide this support. That’s how it is. That’s how it is in society, in our home, at school, at church. In the case of women, their liberation from the dictatorship of poverty and from male domination over their destinies allows a minimum of planning and the beginning of the empowerment in their moral lives. Even by only providing basic assistance, the BFP is able to transform itself in a public policy that substantially strengthens democracy.