Sexual Inequalities: A Queer Critique of Brazil's ‘Bolsa Familia’ Programme

Craig Bateman
MSc International Social and Public Policy
Class of 2019
London School of Economics and Political Science

Photo by Tanushree Rao on Unsplash
Photo cropped and modified to black and white
ABSTRACT

Conditional cash transfers, direct payments to families who meet government-specified conditions, are well-established policy tools in developing contexts. Brazil's Bolsa Familia family grant is arguably the world's largest such scheme. It is celebrated by the World Bank for helping to reduce urban poverty and teenage fertility. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that the assumptions which underpin the scheme perpetuate sexual inequalities. Indeed, same-sex couples were not admitted until after judicial review in 2011 and payments are disproportionately made to women in their perceived role as natural caretaker of the home. In identifying these sexual inequalities, this paper develops a queer critique of Bolsa Familia. It questions the utilitarian basis upon which social policies have been traditionally forged, and offers a more individualised alternative which rests in the notion of Universal Basic Income.
INTRODUCTION

Conditional cash transfers, payments to families who meet government-specified conditions, serve one fifth of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean (Cecchini & Atuesta, 2017, p. 7). Initiated in 2003, Brazil’s family grant, Bolsa Familia, is the region’s largest cash transfer scheme. It has reduced hunger by 80% and heavily decreased child mortality (Malta, 2018, p. 1578). The World Bank has celebrated the policy as a “remarkable success story” in economic development (Malta, 2018, p. 1578). Yet, Brazil remains a largely unequal society. The top 10% of earners absorb some 50% of national income (Itaborahy, 2014, p. 16). The scheme also tends to focus on traditional heterosexual nuclear families to the exclusion of other families; same-sex couples were not made eligible until 2011 (Itaborahy, 2014, p. 17) and payments are disproportionately made to women in their perceived role as “caretaker” of the home (Tebet, 2017, p. 637).

This paper develops a queer critique of Bolsa Familia. It finds that the scheme generates sexual inequalities. First, the ‘human rights’ frame shows that when notions of ‘sexual citizenship’ and ‘nationhood’ are inter-woven; they project state ideals of ‘respectable citizenship’ as ‘reproductive heterosexuality.’ The ‘pleasure frame’ then illustrates how states subsume sexual rights under reproductive rights and subjugate sexual desire within wider goals of national economic development. The paper finally unites these two initially contradictory frames in queer theory. This queer critique questions the utilitarian basis upon which social policies are traditionally forged, and then offers a more individualised alternative (Shildrick, 2007, p. 53).
Sexual Citizenship and Human Rights

To be eligible for Bolsa Familia, applicants must fall under one of two arrangements. Under the first, any family can apply, even childless couples and single persons. In the larger arrangement, families must have at least one pregnant or nursing woman, or an adolescent under 17 years old (Tebet, 2017, p. 635). Families must also satisfy government-specified criteria to receive the cash. This includes ensuring children regularly attend school and receive prescribed vaccinations (Mountain, 2014, p. 3). As families can apply to cover multiple children there is an incentive to have more (Olson, et al., 2019, p. 128). Equally, the scheme is proven to reduce teen fertility. This is because it increases the pressure families place on their daughters to continue education. Even then, these incentives disappear once they turn 17 years (Olson, et al., 2019).

Bolsa Familia is praised for empowering families to exercise rights related to health and education and its role in poverty alleviation, which is central to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Dorey, 2016, p. 1). The scheme is also endorsed for enhancing women’s status in the home. Indeed, women are recipients in 92% of cases and recognised in law as “preferred beneficiaries” (Bartholo, 2016, p. 1). While the scheme enhances women’s negotiating power in the household, it nevertheless entails the “reallocation” of women to the traditional role of motherhood (Tebet, 2017, p. 635). In so-doing, it recognises women only in light of their “motherly duties” (Bartholo, 2016, p. 1). This reinforces traditional ‘nuclear family’ models, which depict women as “caregivers” (Holmes, et al., 2010, p. 1). In turn, it has major knock-on effects for women’s autonomy since it precludes them from economic participation within wider society (Bartholo, 2016, p. 1).

Basing payments on performing ‘motherly duties’ not only valorises nuclear family units, it arguably appears to
disproportionately ‘responsibilise’ women as primary mediators between the state and household in economic development (Bartholo, 2016, p. 1). Conditionalities, or ‘co-responsibilities’, which form the basis of such schemes, initiate “social contracts” that bind families to development projects (Holmes, et al., 2010, p. 4). Incentives attached to such schemes as *Bolsa Familia* are reminiscent of the “perceived need” to control bodies during the industrial revolution (Brickell, 2009, p. 63). For sociologist Jeffrey Weeks, as “health” and “hygiene” were considered “keys to progress”, sexuality became the ground upon which states controlled their populations (Brickell, 2009, p. 63). Those that prioritised economic growth constructed discourses of respectable and legitimate citizenship as “reproductive heterosexuality” (Amuchástegui, 2007, p. 6). To reinforce this, they provide incentives to citizens that abide by the norm of heterosexuality (Anarfi & Yaa, 2011, p. 5). While *Bolsa Familia* is often presented as a rights-enhancing tool, this criticism also reveals that the scheme can undermine universal access to them. This is because it projects non-normative sexualities such as homosexuality and disabled sex as “anomic to the nation” (Wahab, 2012, p. 484), and “potential points of societal breakdown” (Shildrick, 2007, p. 53). Unable to fulfil these state-sanctioned contracts, sexual minorities are exiled to potent zones of exclusion between state and household.

In constructing discourses of respectable citizenship, states integrate largely heterosexual populations into projects of “national self-fashioning” oriented toward “national salvation” (Wahab, 2012, pp. 484 - 487). Here, ‘national salvation’ can be considered to rest in national economic development, essential to which it is deemed is social reproduction via heterosexual procreation. Conceived as unable to reproduce, sexual minorities are discarded as “inappropriate or inconsequential” in economic development (Thoreson, 2011, p. 494). Conversely,
institutionalised discourses of heterosexual “socio-familial conformity” operate to stigmatise sexual minorities as reckless saboteurs of national economic success (Engebretsen, 2009, p. 4).

While Brazil has developed a reputation as one of the region’s most progressive nations and legalised same-sex unions as early as 2004, there remains significant homophobic sentiment in Brazilian culture (Malta, 2018, p. 1579). Over 13 LGBT people become victims of hate crime every day, and at least one LGBT person is killed every 28 hours (Malta, 2018, p. 1580). Since 2016, Brazil has been governed by two right-leaning conservative governments, the first of which was the first government since 1970 without a woman in its top cabinet. It was also revealed that the former government planned to reduce funding of available via Bolsa Familia and introduce a ‘gay cure’ bill that would have entailed treating homosexuality as a ‘disease’ (Malta, 2018, p. 1580). More recently, President Jair Bolsonaro, who gained power in January 2019, announced a major expansion of Brazil’s social security including Bolsa Familia (Ribeiro, 2019). Not much detail has been announced as to how the expansion might affect sexual minorities. However, Bolsonaro’s decision in his first week in office to dissolve the Ministry of Culture, which had worked to celebrate social diversity in Brazil, has been branded as the pretext for an unfolding ‘assault on difference’ (Loftin, 2019).

Brazil’s marginalisation of LGBT people is not entirely new (Mountain, 2014, p. 8). Same-sex couples were precluded from social security schemes such as Bolsa Familia until 2011 when they were recognised as “family units” after judicial review begun in 2008 (Itaborahy, 2014, p. 17). Until then, they constituted a missing dimension in development policy as silence regarding their status was deployed by state agencies controlling eligibility (Jolly, 2010, p. 8). For Glenn, silence is an “absence with a function” (Brown, 2009, p. 66). Nonetheless, Brickell (2009, p. 62) argues, “regulatory forms of power” including silence “leave
gaps” out of which resistance can grow. Just as activists used the court as “platform for rights gains” in the initial Bolsa Familia case (Wahab, 2012, p. 495), it might well be expected that sexual rights activists will continue to use such judicial processes to defend and extend these rights, especially if they are threatened.

**Mother’s “Assumed Altruism”**

While Bolsa Familia pays no explicit attention to sexual pleasure, its conditionalities arguably ordain “legible forms of sociability” – that is, state-sanctioned patterns of socially acceptable behaviour (Weiner & Young, 2011, p. 222). As aforementioned, an overwhelming majority of recipients are women who receive funds on the grounds of their perceived role as “socially educated” for motherhood (Tebet, 2017, p. 635). Since a condition of receiving the grant is regular contact with healthcare professionals, it can also act as a space in which parents acquire “sexual literacy” vital for safer – and perhaps more pleasurable – sex (Anarfi & Yaa, 2011, p. 2). UNICEF (2015, p. 14) finds that conditional cash transfers help increase the age of sexual debut and reduce HIV-transmission. Still, such initiatives arguably only serve utilitarian goals: to create a healthy population that will constitute the nation’s workforce (Holmes, et al., 2010, p. 3).

Underlying Bolsa Familia is an ‘assumed altruism’ of women toward family, the assumption that all women are uniquely endowed to be caretaker of the home. Yet, this assumption might not always hold true (Jolly, 2010, p. 23). Some women might feel compelled to leave the family due to abusive relationships or become ostracised due to a desire to alter their sexual identity. Although Bolsa Familia supports women in families, it offers little help to those outside it. On the same token, the scheme improves access to reproductive rights, but does little to help women exercise sexual rights that form the enabling conditions for sexual
pleasure (Amuchástegui, 2007, p. 9). On the contrary, the scheme may pressurise minorities to suppress their sexual desires and remain inside traditional family units (Jolly, 2010, p. 22). Like the ‘contract marriages’ common among China’s lala women, tacit manipulation of marital norms enables non-heterosexuals to seek sexual pleasure and still gain material benefits that accompany cash transfers schemes (Engebretsen, 2009, p. 4).

In entering contract marriages, beneficiaries exercise a form of “subtle agency” that enables them to gain material advantages without rejecting societal norms (Bell, 2012, p. 285). It relieves “psychological distress” non-heterosexuals may face due to their failure to conform with social expectations (Meyer, et al., 2011; Rubio & Green, 2009). As in China, adoption might absolve couples from procreative duties (Hildebrandt, 2018, p. 600). Protected by such contracts, sexual minorities can then fulfil erotic desires and enjoy financial security. However, such practices form a large gap between the institutional norm and lived experience of recipients (Tebet, 2017, p. 237). A rift occurs between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ identities of beneficiaries and obscures state knowledge of its population. In concealing their sexual identity, sexual minorities avoid but do not confront societal prejudice (Herrera, 2009, p. 39). Even then, as Engebretsen (2009, p. 11) notes, private funds are often necessary to make contract marriages successful. Without a shift in cultural values, impoverished sexual minorities may never be released from stigma society attaches to non-heterosexuality.

Queer Theory: Individualising Social Policy

As suggested, 

Bolsa Familia  

promotes a strong utilitarian ethic of motherhood. It reproduces an engrained “cultural imaginary” that conceives long-term monogamous relationships as the cradle of all life and vitality (Shildrick, 2007, p. 53). It also views female-headed households as failed efforts to maintain
heterosexual relationships and depicts non-heterosexuals as uncontrollably promiscuous (Jolly, 2010, p. 10). Yet, Brown (2009) posits, it overlooks the significant yet unacknowledged caring responsibilities LGBT people possess for relatives and other sexual minorities. The decision to grant same-sex couples child adoption rights in 2010 and marriage equality in 2013 might be viewed as partial recognition of LGBT people’s contribution to Brazilian development (Malta, 2018, p. 1579). In granting such rights, the state however only cultivates “additive citizenship”, an idealised notion of national belonging that remains wedded to hegemonic ideals of social reproduction, whether achieved through procreation or adoption (Wahab, 2012, p. 499). Rather than deconstructing reproductive ideals on which Bolsa Familia is founded, it merely shifts society’s zones of exclusion. This entails further marginalisation for those, such as disabled people, for whom child-rearing remains arduous. For Weiner and Young (2011, p. 229), the ascension of same-sex couples to this esteemed “realm of national privilege” only creates new categories of marginality for those outside this reconstituted definition of ‘respectable citizenship’ beyond just the aforementioned ramifications to sexual minorities.

Following the sociologist Michel Foucault, state recognition of same-sex households also become new sites for “governmentality” and co-optation into state projects of national development (Shildrick, 2007, p. 54). The conditions that form the basis of Bolsa Familia permit the Brazilian state to maintain surveillance over same-sex households and govern its actions. It is also conceivable the government may impose additional conditionalities on same-sex couples. In turn, the sense of ‘governmentality’ which, following Foucault, Shildrick (2007, p. 54) identifies as key to such schemes expose the strongly collectivist principles that they promote. Individualism, which can be identified as the antithesis of policies that are oriented towards family resilience, consequently become perceived
by the state as a threat to societal stability (Blackwood, 2007, p. 304). The emergence of individualism might arguably fuel reactionary state efforts to reinforce the family orientation of social policies, ensuring that government power is maximised (Rubio & Green, 2009, p. 62).

Unable to acknowledge and cater to those individuals that are not members of traditional nuclear families, *Bolsa Familia* remains limited in its capacity to sponsor fully inclusive development. Excluded from the scheme, sexual minorities ostracised from their family also remain limited in their contribution towards national economic development. Any social responsibilities that they might have are left unremunerated. One policy that encapsulates *Bolsa Familia*’s dual objective of poverty alleviation and human development yet also embraces those who do not belong to nuclear families is the idea of Universal Basic Income. As a scheme in which individuals, not households, receive regular payments, it has radical potential to “revalue [these] unjustly devalued identities” (Rabelo, 2014, p. 62). Yet, for Tebet (2017, p. 637), “individualisation” is much more limited in Brazil than in many European countries, where the individual subject is replacing the family structure as the baseline for public intervention. Intent on family formation, basic income might only become a possibility when the Brazilian state ceases its incessant “praise of procreation” and begins to recognise different forms of social contribution that individuals can make (Amuchástegui, 2007, p. 10).

The preceding arguments foreground the queer critique that this paper aims to present. For Seidman (2009, p. 18), queer theory’s most significant contribution is its illumination of the “heteronormativity” implicit in social policies and cultural assumptions which underpin them. Queer theory can help underscore the “heterosexual assumption” which permeates projects tailored toward economic development, a prerequisite of which is often perceived social reproduction (Herrera, 2009,
p. 35). While it is wrapped in the promise of national economic salvation, queer theory illustrates how policies such as Bolsa Familia enable states to claim legitimacy to ordain acceptable forms of sociability, subjugate sexual desire, and then enforce familial conformity. As the terrain within which critical appraisal of human rights and sexual pleasure forms, it is clear queer theory offers fertile ground for the further critique of development policies.

Conclusion

This paper developed a queer critique of Brazil’s family grant, *Bolsa Familia*. While it is widely recognised as a significant policy in Brazil’s development success story, this paper underscored profound implications it has for sexual inequality. Conceived as those threads that unite individuals to wider political communities, it first argued that human rights have a deeply political twist, and fashion respectable forms of citizenship as ‘reproductive heterosexuality.’ It then argued that the policy subsumes sexual rights within reproductive rights and ordains ‘legible forms of sociability’ as those undergirded by a familial rather than hedonistic or sexual orientation. Concurrently, it demonstrated that such policies exclude sexual minorities, such as disabled people. Reconciling these contradictory rights and pleasure perspectives, queer theory exposed *Bolsa Familia’s* collectivist utilitarian tendencies. It finally argued that Universal Basic Income can provide an individualised, more inclusive alternative for national economic development. Yet, this requires major shifts in the cultural and political attitudes that underpin Brazil’s policies for its own successful enactment.
REFERENCES


