



Articles

Female Empowerment of Amazonian Riverine Beneficiaries of the Bolsa Família Program

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Abstract

Today, policies of combat to poverty prioritize women as owners in programs of income transference, among them, Bolsa Família Program. Considering that women empowerment is influenced by this social policy, this research aimed to identify the dimensions of the process of empowerment achieved by riparian women, beneficiary of the program. The research was performed at Combú Island, Belém do Pará. Four riparian mothers took part in the study. For data collection, the Sociodemographic Inventory and semi structured interviews were used. As procedure of organization of information, content analysis was used. The categories, which appeared from the beneficiary perceptions were adapted from literature and defined as economic, family, social and psychological empowerment. The results showed that after the entrance in BFP the notion of a owned income and bigger control of resources were obtained by a parcel of the participants, providing a partial economic empowerment. The benefit increased the purchase power, and gave to these women grater management over family decision-making. The ownership of the program's card made them to feel benefited when following-up children, providing social visibility to these mothers, when not depending completely of the husbands' intermediation. Lastly, the benefit generated in the participants a feeling of stability, for having money, security for the family monthly needs. The empowerment that riparian women achieved shows that they passed to interfere in the dynamics and providing of the family before the lack or not of their husbands' income.

Keywords: empowerment, Bolsa Família, poverty, public policies

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The processes of globalization and economic restructuring, which happened starting in the 70s, produced unequal impacts in local, individual and community scales, with different consequences. According to Lisboa (2008), poverty and social exclusion has increased in countries with development in progress the predominance of women among the poor, strengthening the idea called feminization of poverty and inequality of gender.

The issue of equality between genders consists today as one of the eight objectives of United Nations (UN) for the millennium development. Based on that, one of the measures used by the State to decrease inequality between genders is to propose social policies, such as programs of income transference (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2010).

For those reasons, it is justified the fulfilling of the present study, because *Bolsa Família* might interfere in feminine empowerment and decrease of inequalities of gender, once women are priority in the ownership of the benefit. For that, this work aimed to identify the dimensions of the process of empowerment achieved by beneficiary riparian women from Combú Island, Belém do Pará.

The Gender Perspectives and Bolsa Família Program

For centuries, women live in inequality situation, with prevalence to a relation of subordination of women towards men. For that, gender has been one of the most used and studied concepts (Alvarez, 1990). Meetings has been being performed in order to put at debate women rights in society, cause defended by the feminist movement in conferences such as World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, World Conference on Women in 1995 (Farah, 2004).

In Brazil, we had the creation of *Secretaria Especial de Políticas para Mulheres* (Special Secretariat of Policies for Women) in 2003, where it is highlighted the empowerment as one of the main objectives to be achieved, involving greater autonomy, self-confidence and feminine participation in work market (Moreira, Lima, & Lopes, 2011). Until the mid-70s, the emphasis in public policies for women was in the promotion of welfare through reproductive functions, equality, combat to poverty favoring an increase of poor women's productivity also attached to a bigger economic participation.

From that, the programs of income transference appear as one of the policies of social protection, making available for poor families a basic income in several countries where there are deposited in women the expectations of a better use of the income transferred. For Cruz (2014), from this strategy, in which the woman is the main responsible for the family facing the policies, it has as assumption that this one carries functions attached to the private scope, bonded to home and care.

Today, in Brazil, *Bolsa Família* Program, implemented in 2004, gave continuity to other federal programs, integrating the group of policies of *Fome Zero* Program and is inserted in the actual Brazilian picture as a social policy (Santos, 2013). According to the *Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social and Combate à Fome* - Ministry of Social Development and Combat to Hunger (MDS, 2012), the monetary benefits from BFP are monthly granted to poor families (*per capita* income between R\$70,00 and R\$140,00) and extremely poor (*per capita* income lower than R\$70,00) from the entire country and vary according to the quantity of children, teenagers until 17 years old, pregnant women, nursing mothers and components of the family group. The receipt of the benefit occurs through the fulfilling of conditions in health, education and social assistance fields.

The program puts as objectives: to reduce the poverty and extreme poverty; to promote the access to the network of public services, especially Health Care, Education and Assistance; to stimulate the sustained emancipation of families that live in poverty or extreme poverty situation, contributing basically for the reduction of poverty and minimization of social inequality (Haddad, 2008). Studies performed (Leitão & Inácio, 2014; Moreira et al., 2011; Pires, 2012; Santos, 2013; Soares, Ribas, & Osório, 2010) verified changes in the BFP beneficiaries' family dynamics in what concerns the increase of specific expenses with food, education, children cloths, appliances, perfumery, among other, wherein the mother is mainly the owner of the program and also the main manager of such expenses.

In the riparian zone, differently from urban centers, the division of roles is sustained in the differences of gender where men and women are subject to different activities, based in the family hierarchy (Freire, Silva, & Pontes,

2012). This way, the gender roles establish that men are providers and householder and women are responsible for the domestic environment, which involves house and adjacencies, as well as the responsible for the children education.

Given that there is the centrality in women for the functioning of the program, because in most of times they are the ones that receive the benefit, new issues are put at debate in what touches their reaches, deployment, accesses and possible social changing potentialities (Cruz, 2014), mainly, if we take in account the beneficiaries particularities of context.

One of the possible tensions announced by Cruz (2014) is that through the benefit of BFP, the beneficiary mothers have the possibility of achieving new potentialities in what concerns family negotiations and other forms of social participation, beyond their reproductive functions, pointing to a possible empowerment of these women.

This way, it follows that woman has a fundamental role for the functioning of such policies and the maintenance of her own family, so that to analyze this social policy in the focus of empowerment is primordial to evaluate such measures used by the State in what concerns equality and feminine autonomy.

Empowerment

We can say that empowerment is when individuals obtain power in their relations and control over their lives (Carloto & Mariano, 2012; Sen, 1997). According to Horochovski (2006), empowerment is almost synonym of autonomy, in that it refers to the capacity of individuals and groups being able to decide about issues concerning them, to choose between alternative courses of action in multiple spheres, such as politics, economy, culture, psychology, among other. This way, it is about an attribute, but also a process by which power and liberties are derived.

With regard to feminine empowerment, Moser (1991) stresses that to recognize the importance of increasing the power of women tends to identify power less in domination terms over others and more in terms of capacity of them in acquiring self-confidence and to make choices in their lives and to influence the ways, changes, through the ability of controlling material and non-material resources. Antunes (2002) highlights that the starting point in this process, without disregarding global fights, is the local, since domestic unities, in other words, the process of empowerment might initiate in the domestic unities and local communities, but, in long term, through politic action, it aims to change the relations of power in national and international level.

Some scholars (Iorio, 2002; Sen, 1997) affirm that through social policies, among them direct transference programs, it is initially allowed the access to consumer goods as well as the management over them and they act in the function of catalyzers allowing a favorable environment for the occurrence of empowerment.

For understanding that the processes do not guarantee empowerment, and as such, they assume several faces and degrees, it is necessary to introduce mechanisms of evaluation of the empowerment degree achieved (Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, & Wandersman, 1995). Some studies, such as the one by Moreira et al. (2011), were based in the view of Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002), in which empowerment is defined through the intermediation of five dimensions, resulting from individual and collective actions, according to Table 1:

Table 1

Dimensions of Empowerment

Dimensões do Empoderamento (Dimensions of Empowerment)	
<i>Econômica (Economic)</i>	A mulher controla os rendimentos e recursos da família. Acesso da mulher ao emprego e ao crédito. (The woman controls the income and the resources of the family. Access of the woman to job and credit.)
<i>Sociocultural (Sociocultural)</i>	Liberdade de movimento, visibilidade e acesso aos espaços sociais. (Liberty of movement, visibility and access to social spaces.)
<i>Familiar/Interpessoal (Family/Interpersonal)</i>	Tomadas de decisões domésticas, decisões sobre a gravidez, uso de métodos contraceptivos. (Making domestic decisions, decisions about pregnancy, use of contraceptive methods.)
<i>Psicológica (Psychological)</i>	Autoestima, autoeficiência, bem-estar psicológico, denúncia de injustiças e potencial de mobilização. (Self-esteem, self-efficiency, psychological well-being, denunciation of injustices and potential to mobilize.)

Note. Source: [Moreira et al. \(2011\)](#), based on [Malhotra et al. \(2002\)](#).

For [Barlett \(2004\)](#), empowerment has stages. The beginning consists in the access to resources, rights and opportunities; the process is given through decision and individual or group action, having as result a bigger control of resources and materials available. This process might be reinitiated in other personal spheres of a persons' life, until it reaches every dimension fully.

Based in the exposed, it is noticed that it is not possible to find an exclusive definition for the term empowerment, because it involves certain complexity and, many times, it occupies a “common place” in literature. For that, in this study, the priority was besides the search for a definition, to understand how and how much BFP beneficiary women empowerment could be favored, taking in consideration such possibilities from the contact with object investigated.

Method

Delimitation

It is a qualitative research, exploratory-descriptive that aimed to identify the process of feminine empowerment of the *Bolsa Família Program* (BFP) beneficiaries, through multiple holistic cases ([Yin, 2010](#)).

Participants

In this study four riparian mothers living in the Combú Island – Belém (PA) took part, they are beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família Program*. After the investigation of family information contained in the database from *Laboratório de Ecologia do Desenvolvimento Humano* of Universidade Federal do Pará (LED/UFPA), the mothers were chosen. The main criterion for the choice of participants was the receptivity and the disposition of the beneficiaries in participating in the research, being privileged the ones that had been interviewed by the researcher in charge for the study at the first moment of data collection, performed in 2011.

Environment

The research was performed at Combú Island, insular part of Belém do Pará. The Island presents a typical formation of the Amazon estuary, composed of lowland, with floristic composition varied, predominating açai palm tree (Dergan, 2006). The residences are made of wood, located at the edges of rivers, being that the defining item of the riparian identity.

Instruments of Collection

For data collection, the Bio-sociodemographic Inventory was applied in order to characterize the participants' families interviewed and to know the profile of the beneficiaries, and a semi structured and individual interview was applied containing 19 open questions. The guiding questions of the semi-structured interview were: "1. How was life before entering the BFP? 2. How is life today?". To answer these questions, topics were organized emphasizing the changes, which happened in the family life after the insertion in the benefit.

Procedure of Analysis

The data analysis happened through content analysis (Bardin, 1977) after the application and transcription of every instrument, categories appearing from the beneficiaries' perception were established and were adapted from the literature and defined in this study according to the organization in Table 2.

Table 2

Categories, Concepts and Subcategories of Empowerment.

Categories	Concepts	Subcategories
Economic Empowerment	The woman controls the income and the resources of the family.	General income Resources Control
Family Empowerment	The woman exerts domestic decisions that influence the family dynamics.	Decision-making in the family
Social Empowerment	It happens when the woman becomes visible before the family and the community.	Social visibility
Psychological Empowerment	Better quality of life (personal and family) and sense of stability, resulting in psychological well-being.	Life Quality Stability Feeling

Note. Source: Adapted from theory / provided by the study.

In order to maintain preserved the identities of the participants, all the names used in this work were substituted by the letter M followed by the number corresponding to the family. In Table 2, it is possible to observe the delimitation of categories, its definition and consequent subcategories:

Results and Discussion

Economic Empowerment

This category deals with the identification of *Economic Empowerment* of the BFP participants. It is organized in two subcategories identified in the answers about *General Income* and *Resources Control*.

General Income

About the subcategory *General Income*, the question asked made reference to the total income of the family and not only to the specific income of the participants. However, the participants concluded that they started to obtain income after the benefit, showing that to be an eminently feminine income:

“I did not receive... Who received was he, right, who worked... I did not receive anything, he worked, then he sold... it was with açai too.” (M1)

“I did not have income. I worked alone at home, right. I did not have anything like that...” (M2)

“I, in particular, did not receive anything. (Laughs) Only what Ian gave to me, in that case.” (Silence). (M3)

The perception of M1, M2 and M3, of not obtaining income before the *Bolsa Família* Program denotes that the money obtained through the benefit is seen as belonging to the wife (Pires, 2012, p. 4). Among the participants, only M2 works with sporadic services (painting and hair straightening) and the others only have domestic service. With this, it is observed that the access of the participants M1 and M3 to this right and resource, drives them economically, making them to initiate the process of empowerment proposed by Barlett (2004) and the economic empowerment of M2 to be optimized.

Resources Control

In subcategory *Resources Control*, referring to the actual control of entire money of the family, all the participants affirmed that the money obtained by the family is controlled both by husband and wife, the participants' answers were the following:

“It is I and he.” (M1)

“I control mine and he controls what he works, right?” (M2)

“It is he. Only the money from Bolsa he does not see.” (M4)

The study performed by Stange, Oyster, and Sloan (2013), which aimed to evaluate the women empowerment in 58 countries, pointed as one of existent disparities between genders, the feminine non-participation in family context economy. On the other hand, the participants M2 and M4 indicate in their answers that the existence of different incomes at home, one being perceived as belonging to the wife, which is the benefit from BFP (M4), and the other would be the husband's income, provided from the açai extraction. Malhotra et al. (2002) and Barlett (2004) affirm that economic empowerment occurs when a woman starts to have control over the money.

For that, the perception revealed by the participants M2 and M4 is essential, because the woman when in control of the income provided by the program becomes economic empowered, which will result in a better development for family and community (Moreira et al., 2011). It is possible to notice that after the entrance in BFP, a parcel of the participants obtained the notion of an owned income and resources control, becoming a gain to these women to exert a role more active economically.

Family Empowerment

In this category, *Family Empowerment* of the participants is found in the subcategory *Decision-making in the family*, which regards a bigger purchase power for women, obtained after the entrance in the program.

Decision-Making in the Family

In this study, the results show that the participants used the money from the benefit to provide basic resources for home and for the children, modifying therefore the family hierarchy in what concerns decision-making. The results showed, in distinct manner for each participant, the acquisition of furniture and appliances:

“Look, I had only one mattress, right? After I received *Bolsa Família*, I bought another one.” (M1)

“The TV and the DVD. I did not have it.” (M3)

Participant M2 used the money from BFP benefit to buy a wardrobe for the child. [Rosinke, Heck, Dalfovo, and Ruscheinsky \(2011\)](#) observed an increase in the acquisition of some appliances, such as freezer, microwave oven and cellphones after the insertion of families in BFP. In the Combú Island community, more basic goods were obtained, such as mattress and wardrobe, which is a specificity of an extreme poor condition.

Another relevant aspect was the bigger variety of food, such as the insertion of “*danone, cracker, juices, soft-drink*” (M1), “*cheese, ham, toddynho*” (M3), besides the purchase of basic food for the family such as “*coffee, sugar, milk*” (M1) and “*beans, rice, pasta, food*” (M3). These results contrast with the studies performed ([Leitão & Inácio, 2014](#); [Pires, 2012](#)), which results showed that the program favors an adding not only quantitative, but also qualitative in the food life of the beneficiaries. However, such change provided by the diversity of food consume, as yogurt, chocolate, cheese, ham, cookies, juices and soft-drinks might bring negative consequences like overweight and obesity for the low income population ([Silva, 2011](#)).

The results also showed consume of perfumery articles (M1 and M2), the increase in the purchase of clothes for children (M1, M2 and M4), school expenses and purchase of medicine (M1). Among the participants, only M2 demonstrates certain financial autonomy from before the program, for working painting nails and straightening hair, given that she also uses the income from her work for these expenses.

The results showed that after the entrance of the participants in the program, expenses like food and home resources (M1 and M3), clothes for the children (M1, M2 and M4), consume of perfumery (M1 and M2), school expenses and purchase of medicine (M1) were also performed by the mothers, showing that, the income of the benefit increased the feminine purchase power, giving these women bigger power of management over family decisions establishing a more equal role in the family dynamics, mainly for M1 and M3.

As affirmed by [Araújo and Scalon \(2005\)](#), the economic dimension is relevant for the determination of the degree of autonomy in the man/woman relations. As the authors argue:

Ter dinheiro e controle sobre ele pode significar maior margem de manobra e poder de escolha quanto a manter ou romper uma relação conjugal, ou ainda poder desempenhar outro papel na dinâmica do consumo, o que, embora questionável, confere significado de autonomia e inclusão num mundo orientado pelo mercado e pelo consumo¹. (p. 41).

This way, it is possible to reach one of the dimensions of empowerment of [Malhotra et al. \(2002\)](#), which might result in what [Mageste, Melo, and Ckagnazaroff \(2008\)](#) calls disempowerment of men. Thus, the *Bolsa Família Program* mad possible bigger family empowerment in beneficiary mothers, in individual, family or community terms ([Moreira, Ferreira, Lima, & Ckagnazaroff, 2012](#)).

Social Empowerment

In this category will be discussed the *Social Empowerment* of the participants under the perspective of the subcategory: *Social Visibility*.

Social Visibility

In this subcategory, it prioritized the ownership of women in the program. The results shows that, in following-up the children, mother also felt benefited, probably due to the fact of having their names registered in the program card.

“The money from *Bolsa*, he does not see. It is with me, because I am receiving it. I do not give it in his hands. Then, the card stays with me.” (M4)

In the countries that implemented income transference programs, the majority prioritizes the payment to women. For example, it is possible to quote the neoliberal policies introduced in Mozambique through the Economic Rehabilitation Program (ERP) more recently, the Plan of Action to Reduce Absolute Poverty, 2001-2005 (PARPA I) and 2006-2009 (PARPA II) (Casemiro, 2011, p. 4). In Brazil, according to recent data from *Secretaria Nacional de Renda de Cidadania* (Senarc), 93% of the cards ownership is with women.

For some scholar, the ownership is not considered a positive factor. One of the main critics is that this type of focus is based on a naturalized and traditional view of the women social role, related to their condition of maternity. In this perspective, the fulfillment of BFP condition favors the mentality of the so-called poverty feminization (Mageste et al., 2008). However, for the participants in this study, obtaining the magnetic card strengthened the idea of the benefit being of exclusive use of mothers and their children.

“I buy their stuff. First, stuff for them. (...) Then, I receive and take their part (...) Then, I buy, I make them small shopping. (...)” (M1)

“I buy things for me with him [son]. In the case it is only we both. Only we use” (M3)

“Then I buy what they need, right? (...) Then when I receive, I take them already. To buy what they are in need, right?” (M4)

For Pires (2012), the feminine ownership encourages the incursion in a “less or not known world” for women, beyond the spheres of consume and autonomy inside the house. We have then as meaningful result the feminine representation in front of the society, community, where these women passed not to depend completely of the masculine intermediation. This way, feminine economic empowerment is favored, and the social visibility is possible.

Psychological Empowerment

The aspects of this category *Psychological Empowerment* were found in the answers about the *changes occurred after the entrance in the BFP*. It is divided in the subcategories: *Life Quality* and *Stability Feeling*.

Life Quality

The participants M1 and M2 reported that after BFP, there was an *improvement in life quality of their families*. The main change highlighted in the speeches of the participants was the improvement in economic situation. The results revealed that despite still existing situation, in which there is no income to buy food, such situations are rarer.

“There are days in which the money ends and it lacks something. Then I don not have a penny to buy, sometimes. But is difficult like that. It is rare, to lack, you know? (...) It is more extraordinary than before.” (M1)

“No, Thank God, it does not happen. (...) Much more *smooth* today.” (M2)

In Family 2, the participant affirmed that situation when there is lack of food in the house does not happen anymore. On of the objectives of BFP are the immediate changes in the life of poor families, such as obtaining food. According to [Malhotra et al. \(2002\)](#), one improvement in life quality favors psychological empowerment. The results reinforce studies performed, in which the benefit provided to the beneficiaries a greater personal and family welfare ([Moreira et al., 2011](#); [Pires, 2012](#)).

Stability Felling

Another aspect identified was *stability feeling* demonstrated by two participants:

“Then, I mean, there is not? But, hey... But then, suddenly, even if we have an installment payable, a debt like, of a need, from home yes... Then, sometimes we do not have that money, I mean, we already have a money there is for sure, right? Then, we can take half of it, something.” (M2)

In the speech M2, it is known that the money provided from the benefit was considered fixed money, from which it is allowed to make plans for the expenses. It is possible to notice the bigger stability feeling and financial control of the participant by the reference to the possibility of making purchases forward and having guarantee that it will be possible to pay the debt, because of the existence of a fixed income, which is the benefit of the program. This feeling might also be noted in the speech of another participant when glimpsing the possibility of acquiring goods with the money from BFP, in case it is saved:

“If I thought it well, we had the things ok here at the house. If I saved the money and took it, for example, two months, (...) it was already something to buy something better for him.” (M3)

In this sense, the income from the benefit started to be a generator of bigger tranquility and improvement in the life quality of these women, favoring the feeling of bigger stability, for having in the money, quoted as fixed, a security for eventual needs of the family. This process resulted in a sensation of greater welfare to these women, when talking about it, which they do in a positive and valued manner, as something that belongs to their domain, something related to the exercise of power, even towards to the consume of essential needs.

Final Considerations

When returning to the considerations listed in this study, the insertion of riparian mothers in the BFP optimized the empowerment of these women, in economic, family and social dimension, taking in consideration their differences. Before the insertion in the benefit, the participation of these wives in husbands' income was null, because they did not have control over this resource provided by the açai extraction. However, the ownership in the benefit made possible to them to exercise the mediation of their families with the community.

Regarding economic empowerment, despite partially achieved, the participants denoted greater management and decision-making in the family, also taking on the role of provider of home and children needs through the administration of the income from the benefit. With this, the sharing of powers happens in the family dynamics,

modifying the hierarchy in which the husband is the one in charge of such functions. This fact calls attention for two reasons: for favoring the egalitarian role of mothers in family scope, and for such changes, occurring not only with the women, but with their husbands as well, causing the so called masculine disempowerment.

Besides that, the favoring of self-perception and life quality happened, attached to a bigger stability feeling by the participants. The tranquility and stability that some participants demonstrated for the certainty of the income came attached to the priority use of the money by mothers and their children, both for buying basic utensils and food for home and purchases that the husband's income alone was not enough or destined to be obtained before.

The economic factor is primordial for the beginning of the process of empowerment if we take in account families in poverty conditions. However, for a factual existence of a process of individual and collective empowerment, not only punctual, complementary actions are necessary for the beneficiaries to leave the poverty and vulnerability situation where they are. This way, the participation in educational activities and community groups, which favor the capacity for work market, is of essential importance.

In view of the impacts caused by the empowerment in beneficiary women it is proposed for future investigations, the discussion and inquiry how it influences in the perception and consequently in the development of other beneficiary women family members. How the possible impacts of empowerment, positive or not, occur in other contexts and influence the relationships.

Notes

i) "To have Money and control over it may mean great margin for maneuver and power of choosing about maintaining or breaking the marital relationship, or also being able to perform another role in the consumption dynamics, which however questionable, gives meaning of autonomy and inclusion in a world guided by Market and consumption." (Translated by the author)

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