



## Maternity within a Community

*Gaia Sanvicente Traverso*

My story is a journey of learning from the community — be it in the absence of one, or as a part of it. It began with my becoming a mother, where I found myself relearning life's processes by my eventual seclusion from a community.

For the sake of financial security, my life partner and I had to make many changes in our lives. We had to move away from the community we had been living in, contributed to and found support in. I saw myself in need of building a new community that would bring my family and me, physical and emotional balance.

This occurrence is common for many women in Brazil and in the world, initiating reflections on maternity, the relationship with formal paid work environment, schooling processes and education in early childhood as well as some of the challenges imposed on contemporary Brazilian families within the realm of urban communities.

When I got pregnant, I was unemployed. Before that, I was working in a government environmental project. I lived near my community which comprised of several social groups (family, neighbors, friends and work mates). Our future with a baby was worrying and that was when my partner — my daughter's father, was offered an opportunity that would give us financial stability and a good quality life within a crisis scenario that was affecting everyone around us. For him to take up the new post we would have to move to a periphery area in the city of Rio de Janeiro, far away from everyone we knew. With this move, I ended up losing or being automatically alienated from all social groups I used to share with and had built my life around.

During the gestation period, I decided not to look for a full-time job because paid formal work environment is not favorable to



women, mothers and less so to mothers-to-be. Rarely will someone offer a job to a pregnant woman and, even employed women sometimes end up being fired after their maternity leave. Women with young children are not offered employment too.

In Brazil, there are no incentives from the State for women to contract or rejoin work or find dedicated care for the newly born and toddlers — the future generations, in suitable work conditions.

According to the current law, women have the right only to four months of maternity leave. The father has the right to only five days. That is, in four months, working parents are forced to outsource a caretaker for their children. In this way, they go to formal institutions — nurseries and day care centres. The public ones rarely have vacancies; the private ones are unaffordable to the majority of the population. Both public and private institutions have the problem of following very hierarchical, standardized and market logical operations, besides being distanced from nature.

In many cases, the pedagogy put in practice responds to the market more than to the real developmental needs of children, such as, offering suitable meals to children. In the early food-offering phase, giving them industrial, processed food known to cause cancer (sausage, margarine) is harmful. Even simply excluding the community from the construction of pedagogical content and also childcare that involves the local community in all its needs and potentials lead to skewed priorities. This creates social imbalance. What's best for babies, at least in the first year, would be to be in their family environment, being fed by their mothers and under the care of another adult who belongs to their community, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles and friends, besides, being in touch with nature and with the freedom to play in order to fully develop naturally.

In this scenario, where the paid and formal workplace does not favor mothers and where schools are not the most appropriate alternatives for children, I dedicated myself to the care of my daughter during her first two years, without the urgency to get back to work and without the need to put her in a nursery. However, this choice became a very lonely experience.

It was then, in this moment, caring for my daughter, far from my familiar social groups, friends, families and other mothers that I realized the profound need to again belong to a community, forming new networks. When I was away from this community that is when I understood the old African saying: 'It takes a village to raise a child'.

According to an educator and a professor Severino Antônio apud Carpegiani, in an interview for the documentary 'O Começo da Vida' (2016): 'One of the great loneliness' in the contemporary

world is losing a community'. However, creating a support network is not so simple, families are not as big as they used to be, neither are they close as before, with grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins living nearby. Not to mention that the routine in great metropolis can be a barrier to looking at others with compassion."<sup>1</sup>

In the place where we moved, there were not many public spaces that would welcome mothers and babies. There are no parks; squares are not cared for and one of the few options is going to highly priced shopping centers to engage in offered activities and a constructed way of life that is not what I consider a model.

Little by little, I started to realize that maternal loneliness affected lots of other contemporary women too. By being entirely dedicated to the exclusive care of children, the woman is also overloaded with un-paid domestic work. Tired, I missed living together with people and the desire to be with people grew again. As a mother, as the matriarch of the family, I feel, think and notice that the community is a vital need.

That is why I decided no longer to live motherhood in such a lonely way. By then, my daughter was already one year old and I already felt the wish to go back to work and find a school for my daughter where I wouldn't have to worry about her safety; which had a community proposal, connected to nature and committed to healthy meals and uncontrolled playtime.

I started to look for mother's groups and alternative ways of education for early childhood. In this research I found a series of initiatives and one that caught my attention the most was the so called Parental Nursery, also called Collective Care Network or Care Parental Collective. Fernanda Carpegiani, a journalist, in her article to Crescer magazine explains that it is a model inspired by the French experience that began in the mid-70s, from an organized movement of families that couldn't find places in public nurseries or that looked for a greater parental involvement in early childhood. Each family must dedicate a minimum amount of time — from one to four months, in shifts.

In Rio de Janeiro, these parental collectives have established their own organizational form, each with a different configuration. What they have in common is the families' collective management. In Brazil, there is no government incentive as in France; only a minor movement that is moving for its recognition and a growing demand for regulation. The experience that was closest to me was Parental Collective Cria-Mundo<sup>2</sup> (and by 'close', I mean something located

approximately 50 minutes from my house, in another district). This was the initiative I was and still am in contact with. It is an initiative that has been working for about 2 years, in which more than 15 families have taken part and, currently, only 3 (besides my own) are active. Children live in a familiar environment and enjoy unrestricted



playing time in permanent contact with nature (and far away from sterile classrooms and industrialized products).

Going to this collective was the strongest re-connection experience to a community that I had since my daughter was born. It represents to me a community of families, especially women, mothers, children, educators and activists that fight to guarantee women's rights, children's rights and quality education. It was there, even if I wasn't there too often, that I was welcomed and felt appreciated, shared joys and sadness of parenthood and, most importantly, strengthening myself as a mother, woman and educator.

This and all other initiatives that I have experienced have inspired me to promote an initiative like these ones in my locality — both to have a support network and as well as to allow support to other women.

I started to organize meetings in order to map possible interested people in the building of community educational proposals. I created the PráBrincá Creative Lab<sup>3</sup>, a space dedicated to pedagogical experiences for children with creative workshops, incentives to uninhibited playing and support for families. I also perform activities in squares and parks, which are underutilized and conduct various kinds of events. Although I have not managed to create a family group, to form a collective care network, which is more consistent, and frequent, this experience has permitted me to know educators, parents and mothers who today I can say are a part of my community and form a critical support network. To be able to reach out and connect with these people has allowed me to participate in the collective building of creative and artistic actions in my locality that welcome collective upbringing of children and families – which, as I have mentioned, here are almost non-existent.

It is a social movement made by the ingenuity of families and communities in the construction of a pedagogical proposal based on community cooperation, environmental friendly and equality principles for early childhood. It is a social movement aimed at guaranteeing basic childhood rights: life and health; freedom, respect and dignity; education, culture, sports and leisure.

Collective caring spaces are therefore a movement opposed to the maximum individualization of modern patriarchal society that gives the nuclear family, more specifically the woman the responsibility to care for children. It takes away the meaning of communal care for children which is very powerful since

that redefines social relations and the meanings given to early childhood that are beyond school walls. It is a proposal that aims at mapping other existing potentialities, which are important to child development.

This entire journey has only confirmed the potency of what it is to be in a community, and how through the community it is possible to do what we cannot do alone. After all, as social beings, we need one another to survive.

I hope that with this story, I can inspire other initiatives that move towards this same path and continue to widen the possibilities of fostering spaces such as these to new generations, that will be the foundation of a world — another possible world, based on cooperation, solidarity, welcome and collectiveness.

### References

1. Fernanda Carpegiani. 2017. "Creche parental: como as famílias se organizam para cuidar das crianças", *Revista Crescer*: Editora Globo <<https://revistacrescer.globo.com/Familia/Rotina/noticia/2017/06/creche-parental-como-familias-se-organizam-para-cuidar-das-criancas.html>>, Accessed January 2018.
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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Gaia Sanvicente Traverso* was born and raised in the Brazilian country side, among the mountains, bathing in rivers and climbing on trees. Her first school was built by parents in their community, and then she went to public and private schools. All of that has inspired her to go to the big city and study Education, searching for new ways to educate.