

Inside Brazil's hidden daycare economy ^[1]

Author: Walker, Ian

Source: BBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Mar 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Lindassi Pereira spends long days as a key player in Brazil's informal childcare economy. As a 'community mother', she looks after infants and toddlers shut out of daycare centres by the deficient public system.

"It's as if I am their mum really," says Pereira, a 44-year-old from Embu das Artes in Sao Paulo state. "I help the child's development in all ways, based on what they need."

Pereira is qualified in early childhood education but hasn't yet found a formal job. So every day she looks after five or six children, making meals, changing clothes, playing, reading and tucking her tired young charges in for naps.

She's not a recognised member of the childcare community, as her work is neither licensed nor regulated. The Brazilian government turns a blind eye to the practice; Pereira can work but receives no job-related assistance or supervision.

It's unclear how many community mothers like Pereira there are nationwide, but they fill a substantial gap left by the shortfall in public daycare places.

Education inequality

In Brazil, access to education is near-universal for children between the ages of four and 17. But the picture changes when it comes to infants and toddlers. Just one third spend time in nursery, well short of the 50% the National Education Plan envisages reaching by 2024.

Public daycare is free but waiting lists are long and provision is patchy: it is estimated that 1.8 million infants and toddlers are shut out of daycare by a lack of places or excessive commutes.

This is a problem on two levels. Firstly, it impacts on parents' ability to work. But there's also increasing understanding of the role that good early childhood education plays in development, learning and well-being – and awareness that those who do not have access are missing out.

In Brazil, it is poorer children who fall into this category: 33.9% of the poorest children are affected by the shortage of places, compared to 6.9% of wealthy children.

"School inequality in Brazil begins in the cradle and tends to be for life," says Daniel Cara, general coordinator of the National Campaign for the Right to Education. "Poorer families have less access to daycare centres and, if they have, it is of worse quality."

Thaiane Pereira, project coordinator at NGO All for Education, says poor planning is part of the problem. "Daycare funding is diverse, they can be built by federal, municipal and even state government resources, so it's not a question of funding, but rather a matter of a lack of planning and targeting daycare for those who need it most," she says.

But Claudia Costin points to the fact that legal requirements make establishing nurseries expensive. "Everyone working with a group of babies and young children, even helpers, must be certified teachers," says Costin, director of the Getulio Vargas Foundation's Centre for Excellence and Innovation in Education Policies. "This makes the model very expensive and unscalable, particularly for rural areas or poorer municipalities."

An unregulated care system

Private daycares are one solution that have helped in well-off areas. But most are out of reach for those struggling to get by, often costing between R\$700-3,000 (£140-600, \$185-795) per month; compared to the monthly minimum wage of R\$998. Daycares also do not accommodate the long or irregular working hours of many low earners.

Without childcare, parents can be forced to stop working until their children are ready for school. Yet for many families, and especially single parents, losing precious income is not an option. As a result, community mothers have become a lifeline. They typically charge between R\$100-350 per child per month.

"In my suburb there are just two daycares but there are lots and lots of children," says Pereira. "If there isn't someone in the family to take care of them, then the daycares don't help because there are so few and the waiting list is really, really big."

Luana Andrade leaves her three-year-old daughter with Pereira because she works hours that don't fit with daycare.

"Daycares would be good with hours where we could leave and pick up children outside of business hours but unfortunately it's not like that," she says. "We have to search and adapt. [Pereira is] a great person; I just have thanks to her and her family for helping me."

"Daycare cannot and should not be understood as a place to 'leave' the child while the adults in the family work" – Thaiane Pereira

Pereira says parents come to her via word-of-mouth and because she takes pride in caring well for the children entrusted to her. "Like all other professions, I believe that you have those who are more relaxed, some who just care for the money, but I have love for the children," she says.

Daniel dos Santos, an economist at the University of São Paulo in Ribeirão Preto who specialises in policies for children, says creating good daycare depends on multiple factors, like smaller classes, rooms with toys available, spaces for different activities and teachers who know how to divide children's time well between play, stimulation and rest.

Proper childcare centres must be places where professionals are trained in everything from food preparation to educational development, Thaiane Pereira says. "Daycare cannot and should not be understood as a place to 'leave' the child while the adults in the family work."

And in some cases, experts say, the community mothers don't reach the standards of trained daycare professionals. Unregulated care can, when done poorly, consist of large groups of children watching television or staring at the ceiling in the absence of positive stimulus, according to Thaiane Pereira.

A time for action

In Colombia, the government tackled the issue of daycare waiting lists by creating a system of trained and certified community mothers. In Brazil no such system has emerged.

Newly-elected Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has proposed increasing the budget for early childhood education at the expense of higher education, saying "the sooner our children learn to enjoy studying, the greater their success". His party has proposed expanding daycare vacancies by giving vouchers to minimum wage families which can be used for private daycare centres. There has been no mention of working with community mothers.

Yet there are some signs of change. Rio de Janeiro social entrepreneur Elisa Mansur, 27, has made it her mission to address these problems. Her startup Mopi, a network of home-based Brazilian daycare centres, was the winner of last year's World Bank Youth Summit project competition.

"Just knowing that there are people moving to help is enough of a reason to feel motivated" – Lindassi Pereira

"I saw that there's this informal system where women in their own houses charge to look after one, two, three, four, 10 or 15 children," she says. "So I said these women are making a difference but the government doesn't look at them and the work they're doing and aren't giving them any support, and that they were completely ignored on the edges of society."

Mopi is changing that by professionalising the work of community mothers, who she refers to as guerreiras or 'warriors'. It has a vetting and selection process, a four-day training course, a standard model for teaching activities, space organisation, safety, daily routine, health and hygiene, and a rating system based on family feedback.

Pereira supports the initiative, saying any help is welcome in the sector. "Just knowing that there are people moving to help is enough of a reason to feel motivated," she says.

Experts, meanwhile, are united behind the idea that Brazil's poor need better access to high-quality daycare.

"We need to formalise the system of community mothers," says Claudia Costin, who is also former Senior Director for Education at the World Bank. "I believe it would be helpful to at the same time expand vacancies in daycares, including through hiring additional teachers and prioritising the population below the poverty line in the lottery that most public daycares have for allocating vacancies to families."

Pereira of All for Education also says more research is needed so daycare facilities can be allocated based on areas of greatest need, while Cara says councils need to build more daycares on the outskirts of big cities and get communities more involved.

As for Lindassi Pereira, she'd like it if there was some formal recognition of the role she's playing in raising the next generation of Brazilians – and she knows there will always be work.

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