

Theoretical-empirical Article

# Can Mothers Be Heroes? Maternity and Maternal Body Work in Military Firefighters



Mães Podem ser Heróis? Maternidade e *Maternal Body Work* nos Bombeiros Militares

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** the article analyzes the discursive practices related to maternity and maternal body work that circulate among military firefighters, through the cultural construction of the hero firefighter that affects simultaneously the construction of military women as ideal mothers and firefighters. **Theoretical framework:** to do so, we used studies on maternal body work and gender in military organizations. **Method:** we conducted semi-structured interviews with mothers and pregnant military firefighters, and data were analyzed using the Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). **Results:** the hero establishes conflicts between motherhood and work that reduce the status of women firefighters in the organization. To deal with these conflicts and contradictions, women firefighters engage in maternal body work, seeking to reconcile the demands of work and motherhood. **Conclusion:** the results of the article show that building the hero firefighter's imaginary represents an unwritten social norm, which establishes power relations that downgrade and push away simultaneously the maternal bodies from the possibility of being considered heroic and ideal bodies for the military firefighter work.

**Keywords:** maternity; maternal body work; heroes; women firefighter officers; military firefighters.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** o artigo analisa as práticas discursivas relacionadas à maternidade e ao *maternal body work* que circulam entre os bombeiros militares, por meio da construção cultural do bombeiro-herói, que afeta simultaneamente a construção das mulheres militares como mães e bombeiras ideais. **Marco teórico:** para tanto, foram utilizados os estudos sobre *maternal body work* e gênero nas organizações militares. **Método:** foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com bombeiras militares grávidas e mães, e os dados foram analisados através da análise foucaultiana do discurso (AFD). **Resultados:** o herói estabelece conflitos entre maternidade e trabalho, que reduzem o status das mulheres bombeiras na organização. Para lidar com tais conflitos e contradições, as mulheres bombeiras engajam-se em um *maternal body work*, buscando conciliar as demandas do trabalho com as demandas da maternidade. **Conclusão:** os resultados do artigo evidenciam que a construção do imaginário do bombeiro herói consiste em uma norma social não escrita, que estabelece relações de poder que inferiorizam e afastam, simultaneamente, os corpos maternos da possibilidade de serem considerados corpos heroicos e corpos ideais para o trabalho de bombeiro militar.

**Palavras-chave:** maternidade; *maternal body work*; heróis; mulheres oficiais bombeiras; bombeiros militares.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, there were scarce academic publications on maternity in the administration field (Gatrell, 2011; 2013; 2014), placing the topic of motherhood and maternal body work in a peripheral position. However, due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the reorganization of work processes, the theme of motherhood has recently appeared in a considerable number of articles that addressed mainly the impacts of the pandemic on excessive workload and household chores for women. In general, these papers show that the pandemic contributed to an excessive and disproportionate increase in domestic labor for working mothers, regarding children and home care, impairing negatively their well-being and emotions (Clark et al., 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020). It also caused a reduction in working hours and income for mothers with young children, compared to fathers (Collins, Landivar, Ruppner, & Scarborough, 2021), and affected the productivity of academic mothers (Clancy, 2020) and their feminist identities (Whiley, Sayer, & Juanchich, 2021). Therefore, in a neoliberal context, the pandemic has directly affected the unpaid domestic work and mothers' access to the labor market (Güney-Frahm, 2020), thus requiring their problematization and collective actions to value domestic tasks and care, in order to enable a professional adjustment between the demands of work and children's care (Miller, 2021).

In Brazil, women occupying public spaces is a modern phenomenon. The dissociation between productive and reproductive spaces is part of the Brazilian capitalist development that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Alves, 2013), and continued with contemporary advances. The articulation between productive and reproductive work is a great challenge for Brazilian women, since a sexual division of labor between men and women prevails, which reduces women's chances of professional growth (Rosa & Quirino, 2017); even present in public spaces, women keep the responsibility of taking care of their children (Scavone, 2001). Therefore, Brazilian executives claim that motherhood is an obstacle to their careers, given the huge conflict between working long hours and caring for their children (Carvalho, Tanure, & Andrade, 2010), which leads them to choose between career and motherhood (Almeida & Mota-Santos, 2018; Ceribeli & Silva, 2017). Furthermore, data on maternity in Brazil show a high number of cesarean deliveries, and a low rate of breastfeeding (Picheth & Crubellate, 2019).

Despite the increasing number of women in the labor market, and the relevance of maternity in society, the topic does not hold a central role in organizational studies, and few authors study the effects of maternity on

women in organizations (Gatrell, 2013; Clark et al., 2021; Haynes, 2008; Kugelberg, 2006; Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020). In addition, research on motherhood in extremely gendered and hypermasculine organizations is rare (Herman, Lewis, & Humbert, 2013; Karazi-Presler, 2020), especially in military institutions that build the image of their participants as heroes; there is a lack of studies that analyze how this image affects mothers and pregnant women in these organizations. Although there are studies on building the hero in fire departments (Collins, 2004; Perrott, 2019), the potential relationship between the heroic body and the maternal body remains unexplored. Hence, this article intends to contribute to the topic of motherhood, by analyzing the discursive practices that circulate among military firefighters, regarding motherhood and maternal body work, and their relationships with the extremely gendered and hypermasculine culture in the construction of the hero firefighter. Military firefighters are considered hypermasculine organizations (Karazi-Presler, 2020), where work tasks are extremely related to the physical capacity of bodies and the image of the firefighter as a hero. Therefore, this imaginary building of the hero acts as a social norm that establishes hierarchies and inequalities between men and women in the organization, affecting negatively the image construction of military women officers as ideal mothers and firefighters.

Each organization's culture affects how women experience motherhood at work (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Herman et al., 2013; Kang, Park, & Park, 2020). In this sense, firefighters' hypermasculine discursive practices make up a culture that inserts hypermasculine body attributes for building the hero firefighter, thus establishing this hero as the ideal firefighter. Therefore, this article also addresses motherhood in organizations, by analyzing the relationship between motherhood and the image of the hero, since there is a gap in organizational studies on how the image of the hypermasculine hero present in the culture of military firefighters affects mothers and pregnant women at work. The cultural construction of the hypermasculine hero works as an unwritten discursive norm that affects negatively the status of mothers and pregnant women in the organization, by conceiving the maternal body as a reproductive body, rather than a productive one. This creates an oppositional dualism that undermines, separates, and ranks the bodies of mothers and pregnant women, dissociating them from the image of the ideal firefighter. In response, women officers do maternal body work to survive this reality and its hypermasculine hero ideal. Mothers and pregnant women firefighters carry out maternal body work, seeking to reconcile the conflicting demands between the private life of motherhood and the public life of work. Hence, they (a) do dangerous operational tasks; (b) accept promotions to work in cities far from their homes and children; and (c)

do not breastfeed during working hours, showing that the place and time have specific implications for maternal body work (Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020).

First, we discuss the concept of maternal body work and the effects of motherhood on women in organizations. Next, we explain gender relations that pervade military organizations, focusing on the cultural specificities of firefighters and the construction of the hero. Then, we present the research methodology, data analysis, and the conclusion.

## Maternal body work, maternity, and organizations

Gatrell (2013) defines maternal body work as the dichotomy that women experience when social norms compel them to be both good mothers and excellent workers, highlighting the contradictions between the private world of reproduction and the public world of labor and organizations. While society values the maternal body (Brian, 2011; Gatrell, 2014), organizations do not welcome it, seeing it as an abject body at the workplace, because it violates the boundaries between public and private life (Gatrell, 2014). Thus, maternal body destroys organizational rationality, by breaking the boundaries between the public world of organizations, which must be rational, and the private world of motherhood, with its fluids, affections, and emotions (Longhurst, 2001). In this sense, maternal body work means an “intensive body work undertaken by women who cope simultaneously with the conflicting demands of maternity ... and employment” (Gatrell, 2013, p. 622), highlighting the dichotomies and contradictions that mothers face in organizations (Gatrell, 2014). Companies generally require working mothers to establish strict limits that separate the mother from the professional (Turner & Norwood, 2013).

Although there is a social demand for women to prioritize motherhood as the great mission of their lives, which expresses the desire of procreation (Brewis & Warren, 2001) and values maternal bodies, there is an impermeable threshold between the private sphere of reproduction and the public world of labor, where their bodies are seen as disturbing the organizational order (Gatrell, 2014). During pregnancy and breastfeeding, organizations perceive the maternal body as something out of control, the Other out of his/her place, which would be the private world of the home, mainly due to the production of fluids and milk (van Amsterdam, 2015). This leads women to manage the conflicting demands of work and breastfeeding (Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020), and many mothers avoid breastfeeding their children at work to keep the image of good professionals, according to the standards (Turner & Norwood, 2013).

Maternity establishes a dichotomy regarding the woman's body. While society values maternity and the capacity of the maternal body to give birth to a child and care for it by breastfeeding, in the public world of labor motherhood is inconvenient, by producing disorder, disrupting the boundaries of normality and rationality of organizations and their routines, and fostering abjection and disgust for maternal bodies (Gatrell, 2014).

Motherhood devaluates female bodies at work (Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020), associating maternal bodies with absenteeism, low performance, lack of focus and reliability on the tasks performed. In addition, women have great difficulties in reconciling maternal care with work when they return to the organization after maternity leave, being seen as less committed to work by their male colleagues (Hennekam, Syed, Ali, & Dumazert, 2019), even if they have their income reduced (Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020). Maternity is seen by employers as inconvenient and disruptive (Gatrell, 2014), which directly affects women's careers (Collinson, 2000; Gatrell, 2013), causing them to act according to the expectations of their organizational environment. The maternal body is not welcome in organizations (Haynes, 2008), and mothers are considered as the Other at the workplace (Young, 2005). As a result, many organizations offer little support to pregnant women and mothers (Gatrell, 2013).

Therefore, maternal bodies are considered abject bodies in organizations, bodies that destabilize social norms and borders between public and private worlds, harming the status of women at work, and creating subtle forms of exclusion, either implicitly, by social isolation in the organizational space, or explicitly, by banning breastfeeding at the workplace (Gatrell, 2013). Motherhood generates negative work stereotypes of women (Kugelberg, 2006), who feel undervalued and marginalized (Gatrell, 2013), and adopt the maternal body work to avoid being disqualified (Hennekam et al., 2019). In this article, maternal body work means the physical and emotional attributes that mothers adopt to be able to reconcile simultaneously the demands of motherhood and labor, in order to keep intact their image of good professionals as military firefighters, faced with the ideal of a hypermasculine hero.

Organizations generally consider the male body complete and appropriate for the public sphere, establishing it as the norm, while they see the female body as inferior, unstable, and limited (Shilling, 2012). Female bodies are not considered productive, but instead (re)productive bodies that threaten the symbolic and rational organization's male order (Godfrey, Lilley, & Brewis, 2012). The productive body is a combination of the biological physical body and its political power relations, which spread through speeches that turn it into a useful production factor for the organization, “through

examination, categorization, assessment, discipline, and representation that different technologies — both simple and complex — enhance” (Godfrey et al., 2012, p. 545).

These speeches disseminate power relations that reduce pregnant women to changing bodies deprived of intelligence, challenging their professional competence. They are seen as irrational in decision-making and devoid of intellectual competence to carry out tasks, since they do not have control of their own body and fluids, in constant change during pregnancy. In contrast, men are conceived as rational beings endowed with intelligence, with body and mind control, as they are not subject to body changes related to motherhood (Witz, 2000).

The hormones and fluids produced by motherhood in women’s bodies mark their behavior as emotional and unpredictable, in a constant maternal leakage of excess fluids, threatening social norms that define the boundaries between public and private spheres. This is the reason why many women keep maternal fluid leakage secret at the workplace (Gatrell, 2013). Maternal bodies find a hostile organizational environment for breastfeeding, as it produces an uncomfortable zone between the social ideal of being a good mother and a good worker (Gatrell, 2019). As we show next, the construction of the heroic body in the hypermasculine culture of military firefighters increases this discomfort.

### The construction of the hero in the military firefighters’ culture and the maternal body

The mainstream literature generally describes the culture of organizations as gender-neutral, assuming no relationship between culture and gender. Contrary to this belief, Cahusac and Kanji (2014) observe that many organizations have a hegemonic masculine culture that downgrades women. Fire departments are institutions with a highly male culture that values men and male bodies (Ainsworth, Batty, & Burchielli, 2014; Ericson & Mellström, 2016; Maleta, 2009; Perrott, 2019), and are considered extremely gendered (Tyler, Carson, & Reynolds, 2019), and hypermasculine (Karazi-Presler, 2020).

Authors define masculine organizations not only for having many men, but mainly because they are a major arena for building masculine identities, and “play a primary role in shaping an image of masculinity in society” (Sasson-Levy, 2008, p. 297). Karazi-Presler (2020) states that military organizations are hypermasculine, not only because “they rely on men, but also because they are a fertile ground for restructuring masculine identities, hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities, and women’s exclusion” (Karazi-Presler, 2020, p. 620) Throughout their origin and

history, military organizations execute military tasks, such as volunteer firefighters (Tyler et al., 2019).

Therefore, military organizations like firefighters highly value the masculine character (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018; Sasson-Levy, 2011; Tyler et al., 2019) and male characteristics, such as physical strength, discipline, and logical reasoning (Husain-Talero & Angulo, 2019). Firefighters are hypermasculine organizations, and gender identities are assessed and measured by a hypermasculinity bias (Sasson-Levy, 2011), through discursive norms that establish the appropriate body for the firefighter work (Godfrey et al., 2012), although these discursive norms are not written rules. The hero firefighter’s body is a way to discipline, measure, and standardize all firefighters’ bodies, and is defined as “a body capable of doing the work the organization requires,” that is, always ready for fight (Godfrey et al., 2012, p. 542).

Hence, military firefighters’ bodies constantly undergo examinations, evaluations, disciplines, and categorizations that organize them in that space (Godfrey et al., 2012). Military organizations are the key to understanding the masculinity and gender constructions related to gendered work division that permeate the social imagination, producing “dualisms that arise from the opposition between ‘men’ and ‘women,’ ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ such as hard-soft, rational-emotional, and analytical-intuitive” (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018, p. 207). This division establishes hierarchies that depreciate female bodies and their attributes. Masculine characteristics, such as strength, aggressiveness, and courage (Maleta, 2009) are highly valued in these organizations, and military firefighters seek a respectable masculinity through moral and physical aspects that confirm their self-image as heroes in society (Perrott, 2019).

In this process of opposition between male and female, where the construction of the image of firefighters as heroes takes place, courage, moral behavior, brotherhood with other firefighters, dexterity, youth, muscles, body strength, capacity for sacrifice, and a deep commitment to showing ‘hardness’ through discipline and physical exercise are the main attributes (Collins, 2004; Perrott, 2019). Perrott (2019) mentions that discipline and sacrifice were present in those who gave their lives to save people during the September 11 attacks in New York. This image of a hypermasculine hero excludes older people, who no longer have athletic and healthy bodies, from being heroes, but inferior firefighters, since their bodies are weak and substandard compared to the ideal hypermasculine heroic body. There is a hierarchy of bodies that favors those young, disciplined, and healthy, with athletic capacity and strength, over ageing, weak, sick, and non-athletic bodies (Perrott, 2019). Building the image of firefighters as protective heroes is one of the possible explanations why the Brazilian



population considers the fire department the most reliable institution, as measured by the Social Trust Index (ICS) of IBOPE Intelligence (IBOPE Inteligência, 2019).

Thus, the ideal firefighter is based on the image of the heroic body, which acts in the organization's culture as a non-written rule, relating the male body to control, strength, discipline, and body stability, which maternal bodies cannot achieve (Warren & Brewis, 2004), thus leading to disadvantages for female firefighters. Therefore, in hypermasculine organizations such as firefighters, their culture, practices, and structures are highly gendered (Herman et al., 2013), creating the ideal firefighter as one who fully commits to the organization, who does not interrupt the career path with motherhood leaves, and does not prioritize duties unrelated to the organization's work, such as breastfeeding or caring for children.

In a hypermasculine culture, the presence of bodies that do not fit the model of the hero firefighter is seen as a risk to the execution of operational tasks, the organization's functioning, and its image. Therefore, this kind of culture disregards maternal and women bodies. The hero acts as an organizational rule that circulates through speeches, attributing to women a constant maternal body work to reconcile work and motherhood demands. Cahusac and Kanji (2014) explain that the experiences of motherhood in organizations that have a hegemonic masculine culture make women face a long workday, although they are authorized to lighten and reduce the workload. This makes them hide or distance motherhood from the organization's public life. However, even when they imitate masculine attitudes and behaviors, mothers end up occupying low social status in the hypermasculine organization.

Masculinity occupies a symbolic space in Brazilian society, in the formation and legitimization of subjects' behaviors, attitudes, and performance (Oliveira, 2004). This author states that even with all the contemporary challenges and changes related to masculinity, "this symbolic place is still highly valued, and is a guiding rule for building identities in various social segments" (Oliveira, 2004, p. 285). The process of disciplining the male body in military organizations is part of a broader strategy related to conquest and defense, consisting of a "subjective process present in the armed forces, in schools, in religious institutions, boarding schools, colleges, barracks, prisons, factories, hospitals, asylums, etc." (Oliveira, 2004, p. 63). This strategy establishes criteria for subjects occupying the public space of work, by merging the imagination of the warrior with that of the worker, in Brazilian patriarchal ideals.

Thus, gender meaning in the construction of men and women is always in a process of constant negotiation within these organizations (Woodward & Winter, 2004), and women's construction as the Other takes place through the

hypermasculine tradition of these institutions (Woodward & Winter, 2006).

## METHODOLOGY

To understand the discursive practices regarding the maternal body, we interviewed all mothers and pregnant military fire officers in the state of Espírito Santo, totaling 14 respondents. They held the positions of 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant, and captain, they were between 30 and 51 years old, and their time in the corporation varied between 9 and 22 years. The research was approved by the Research Ethical Committee, and it follows the Brazilian Health Council Resolution number 466/2012. We carried out the survey with formal authorization from the Espírito Santo Military Firefighter Commander, and all interviewees signed the Informed Consent Form<sup>1</sup>. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes each, and took place at the Central Fire Department. This article is the result of a broader research project on the leadership of women officers in military organizations, which initially did not intend to understand the effects of motherhood on women officers. However, in previous meetings held with corporation members, and during the semi-structured interviews, the topic of motherhood naturally emerged, which allowed us to deepen it during the process.

We transcribed the interviews according to standards, and read them several times. We gave fictitious names to interviewees in the analysis process, to preserve their identities. In these readings, several discursive themes emerged for analysis, including the topic of motherhood addressed in this article. To analyze data, we selected and read several times the transcribed interviews regarding maternity, to find potential themes related to the maternal body that often appeared in interviewees' speeches, seeking to understand the discursive norms that function as truth in military firefighters, establishing power relations applied to maternal bodies. We did the analyses by using the Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA), where the discourse is not a restricted domain of language or speech, but a non-deterministic social structure that produces meanings through power relations that regulate social practices. By connecting meaning to power, to understand the effects of power present in discursive practices related to motherhood, we show how this specific version of the reality is built as truth (Diaz-Bone et al., 2008; Powers, 2007). From this process emerged the centrality of the hypermasculine hero body in the culture of military firefighters, as an ideal firefighter, and the use of the hero image in daily practices to evaluate, compare, and rank the maternal body. In this sense, the truth produced by the hero's discursive practices related to the maternal body in that context establishes the hero as a discursive non-written rule. The association between

motherhood and the firefighter hero's body was done through critical reflection (Khan & MacEachen, 2021), from which emerged the relations between the hypermasculine firefighter hero and motherhood. Thus, the hypermasculine hero is a discursive norm that regulates practice and culture in military firefighters, producing statements and acting as an unwritten rule. From these analyses emerged two main topics: (a) the hypermasculine hero as the discursive norm, delegitimizing maternal bodies as ideal firefighters; and (b) the women's maternal body work.

Speeches spread power relations that establish practices and truths, creating and keeping social order; therefore, every speech is a social practice, as language "speaks of practices, and is itself a product of practices, as well as our thinking" (Lasta & Hillesheim, 2014, p. 141). In this sense, Lasta and Hillesheim (2014) observe that speech and language do not represent reality, but define and constitute it, enabling "to state that the subjects do not make up language, but, instead, they are formed by it, in a network of relationships marked by struggles and imposition of meanings" (Lasta & Hillesheim, 2014, p. 141). Speeches and truth games provide the meanings for organizations and subjects to acquire legitimacy and credibility in a given social context (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011), such as in military firefighters, by establishing the cultural practices that women must adopt to be good mothers and good firefighters. Thus, there is a whole regime of gendered truth (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011) that organizes motherhood and reduces the status of women in military firefighters, as the hero establishes "rules of conduct or of principles, which are, at the same time, truths and regulations" (Foucault, 1988, p. 5) in the games of truth about bodies, in the military fire departments.

Therefore, the article analyzes the speeches that spread in the daily practices of firefighter's power relations, which establish, in the truth games, the hypermasculine hero as the ideal body. These speeches comprise regimes of truth that form the subjects and body meanings related to motherhood that delegitimize maternity, as we present in the next topic. Because their maternal bodies are delegitimized, women officers employ maternal body work to reconcile the conflicts between motherhood and work, as we describe in a later section.

### The culture of military firefighters: The hypermasculine hero as the discursive norm

In firefighters, the hero works according to a norm that establishes gender hierarchies between men and women. This norm disseminates in speeches among the members of the organization, in their daily practices and socialization,

establishing the male body as ideal for carrying out their work and the rule to compare the various bodies present in the organization (Godfrey et al., 2012), among them the maternal body. On this, Josefa says that "here, at the Fire Department, there is the vision of the hero firefighter, the operational firefighter. The one who swims well, runs well, who is stronger, who gets a ten in the physical fitness test; so, these characteristics are more valued." She shows that the heroic body gets the maximum score in the Physical Aptitude Test (PAT), done every six months by all firefighters; a hero idealized as having physical strength and exceptional athletic abilities that make firefighters fit and efficient for executing operational tasks. Therefore, firefighters have a culture that values hypermasculine body attributes (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018; Husain-Talero & Angulo, 2019; Sasson-Levy, 2011; Tyler et al., 2019), expressed by physical strength, athletic and healthy bodies, as Fabíola mentions. "Without a doubt, [the organization values] male culture. First, because it is mostly a male corporation, right? Our female staff does not reach 12% yet. ... the middle and the top positions of the organization belong to men. [They think] they have this attribute more than women, which is something that is overrated: physical strength. As if it were more important than all the other features and aspects ... So, the issue of physical strength is not a capacity, a skill that is so important, right?" (Fabíola).

In a hypermasculine organization such as firefighters, all bodies and gender identities are evaluated and measured using hypermasculinity as a reference (Sasson-Levy, 2011). It is also a rule of the imagery of the hero firefighter, which circulates in the firefighters' culture as a discursive norm that establishes hierarchies between the genders, defining which body is suitable or not for a firefighter. Josiane observes that, "among firefighters, the masculine gender is more valued, mainly due to physical strength, the superior physical condition. The military firefighter's activity is much linked to physical conditioning" (Josiane). Rogéria adds, "They think we [women] are a little fragile, as if we were a vase that is going to break, a more delicate thing. And militarism ... [is] a man's profession .... We feel that just being a man imposes more respect" (Rogéria). This masculine image of the firefighter hero explains why military firefighters' bodies are constantly subject to physical examinations and tests, such as the PAT, and to assessments and categorizations that rank them in the local space through discursive gender norms (Godfrey et al., 2012). This establishes in the social imaginary that the firefighter activity is a naturally male profession (Godfrey, 2009), and only appropriate for men. This makes women firefighters claim that the firefighter organization is "... an environment where you are under a lot of pressure, you know? It is about results, under pressure. About showing that you have competence, about having to work well because the population has a very heroic image of

the firefighter. For example, when you do a firefighter task, it has to work. Because the firefighter is always an example of things that work” (Carolina).

Since heroes do not make mistakes, the existence of the hypermasculine hero in the firefighters’ culture makes women feel pressured to achieve a high performance in all physical and operational tasks, so they can be considered heroes, and, therefore, ideal firefighters for operational work. At the same time, as seen above, the construction of the hero establishes the masculine body as the appropriate body for the firefighter’s labor, showing that hero building acts as a norm that establishes the female body as inferior, weak, unstable, and limited (Shilling, 2012) for that work. In this context, pregnancy and motherhood contribute even more to define women as weak, unstable, and delicate, characteristics opposite to those valued by the firefighters’ culture and that should be present in heroes, such as physical strength, an athletic and healthy body, able to do any operational activity successfully. This can be seen also in promotions, where puerperal women must pass the PAT to get a place in courses aimed to improve operational tasks that affect their careers directly. Even being puerperal, women do the PAT, which affects negatively their performance, distancing them from the hero’s image. “... when I was still on maternity leave from my son, there was a PAT for promotion. My name was published in our newsletter, so I had to come and take the test. I was on leave. So, imagine, I was barely out of childbirth when this publication came out, this test was important for me, for my career, because I was going to advance one more position. And I was summoned to come. I was lost, I just had a cesarean delivery. I had to come here to ask about the rules, and they did not specify anything about puerperal, they referred only to pregnant women. But I was not pregnant, the baby was already born. So, I got the test. It was complicated” (Sabrina).

Maria clarifies that “when we get pregnant, we don’t participate [in physical examinations].” However, after the birth, no legislation mentions that puerperal women should not do the PAT to be promoted, or participate in any operational course. Motherhood establishes the pregnant women bodies and mothers as reproductive bodies (Godfrey et al., 2012), instead of productive bodies always available and ready for the PAT and operational tasks of the hero firefighter. This highlights the power relations that are present in the context of fire departments, demanding that bodies be constantly examined, compared, disciplined, and evaluated (Godfrey et al., 2012), having the hypermasculine heroic body as a parameter of a productive body, disregarding aspects related to motherhood in this process. The concept of the woman body as reproductive and the man body as productive creates an oppositional dualism that separates women from men in firefighters (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018), also building hierarchies that downgrade maternal bodies,

moving them away from the hero imagination in the corporation (Perrott, 2019). It is through this oppositional process that the firefighters’ culture builds the hero (Collins, 2004; Perrott, 2019), and maternal bodies are excluded from being heroic bodies.

In addition to being considered reproductive, and not productive bodies, pregnancy makes women’s bodies be treated as sick (Gatrell, 2013), therefore unable to do the operational tasks heroes carry out daily. Maternal bodies are not only built as reproductive, fragile, and weak, but also sick bodies that need constant medical care, thus removing pregnant women from any operational activity. Maria says, “When I got pregnant, I left the operational service, for medical reasons.” Women perceive that pregnancy affects negatively their status of hero and their careers (Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020). For them, this “is oriented, much demanding, and much evident. That the woman needs to go out, that she needs to take six months off, that she is ‘incapable’ during pregnancy. ... someone has to pay the price for bearing children for the nation” (Juliana). In addition to seeing pregnancy as a disease, the culture of firefighters, with their hypermasculine hero, conceives the ideal firefighter as one who does not interrupt his professional trajectory, and maternity leave is considered a career interruption, representing a lack of commitment to the organization, which affects negatively women’s status in the organization (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014).

Hypermasculine organizations, such as the military, consider women as non-adherent to the binary gender’s labor division (Rosa & Quirino, 2017), since they are doing tasks that do not follow the sexual division of labor established for the genders. In these spaces, women’s bodies are seen as abject bodies that perform below the standard required for the tasks. However, the analyses show that motherhood makes their bodies more abject, being seen as even more fragile and inappropriate for firefighters’ activities than the bodies of other women. This is due to the image of the hypermasculine hero firefighter, with his strong body, always fit and healthy, downgrading the status of maternal bodies in the organization. In addition, cesarean deliveries (Picheth & Crubellate, 2019) demand more time at the hospital and a longer recovery time, further distancing their bodies from the healthy hero’s discursive norm.

In masculine organizations and professions, men are valued over women. Activities related to engineering (Eccel & Grisci, 2011) and management positions (Auster & Prasad, 2016; Mavin & Grandy, 2016) are considered typically male, valuing mainly male characteristics linked to rationality in decision-making, lack of emotion, and logical and mathematical reasoning (Hassard, Hollyday, & Wilmott, 2000). The main aspect that distinguishes military firefighters from other masculine organizations is the high



value that firefighters place on masculine body characteristics, especially physical strength. Firefighters attribute much more importance to masculine body characteristics linked to physical fitness, strength, and health than other male organizations. Masculinity in military firefighters is a subjective process that combines the image of the warrior with patriarchal ideals, establishing criteria for the subjects that can occupy this public space (Oliveira, 2004).

Mother firefighters have great difficulty in reconciling maternal care with the demands of their job, as they are unable to dedicate themselves exclusively to work, thus being considered less committed to the organization (Hennekam et al., 2019). Mothers feel overloaded, stressed, and harmed by having to deal simultaneously with these conflicting demands (Gatrell, 2013; 2014). Women find it difficult to establish a clear boundary between motherhood and the professional life (Turner & Norwood, 2013), to dedicate themselves fully to work. This makes motherhood a paradox, where women cannot be simultaneously mothers and heroes (Herman et al., 2013). “Sometimes I say: I just don’t want to become general commander because I don’t have time, since the general commander must be 24 hours a firefighter [laughter]. A woman is not able to do this .... I have two small children. So, I see that we demand too much of ourselves, and society demands a lot from us, for these various firefighter tasks. We must be exceptionally good at service, even to prove to men who we are. We are always in a kind of competition, but they think we are good as a man, like they say. We must take care of the house, do you understand? As they say: the cortisol only increases. The stress only increases. So, it is a loss, because, sometimes, a woman is at a stage of her life that she is not available for that. And a man finds it easier to be always available for work” (Judite).

Milk production and breastfeeding also challenge the boundary between the professional public world of firefighters and the private world of motherhood. Breastfeeding during working hours brings disorder to the organization, as it addresses aspects related to the reproductive body, with its fluids and affections, and this should be limited to the private world of the home. Therefore, it disturbs the limits between the private and the public world, breaking organizational rationality (Gatrell, 2014; Longhurst, 2001). “There are these difficulties, and what about women who work in the countryside, when they get pregnant? My daughter is six months old, and she comes to the Fire Department to breastfeed, and must go back. ... There’s the issue of breastfeeding, which takes a year, ... and we can’t do that” (Josefa). This difficulty for breastfeeding at the workplace is one of the reasons of the low rate of this practice in Brazil (Picheth & Crubellate, 2019). Even with the right ensured by written rules to breastfeed their children at the Fire Department, mothers are unable to do so, as

the corporation’s hypermasculine environment does not favor the absence of women during working hours for this practice. Hence, it creates an uncomfortable zone between the ideal of being a good mother and, at the same time, a good firefighter (Gatrell, 2019). Milk production makes the maternal body undisciplined, dripping, and uncontrolled (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Gatrell, 2011), which is the antithesis of the hero within this hypermasculine culture. This makes women do maternal body work in order to reconcile the demands of firefighters and motherhood, as we show in the next section.

## Maternal body work: Reconciling work and motherhood

Regarding motherhood, the hegemonic group of men downgrades women by considering incompatible the roles of mother and ideal firefighter at the same time (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014), disregarding the possibility of the maternal body being a heroic body. In contrast, women engage in maternal body work (Gatrell, 2013) to deal with the dichotomies and contradictions of these two requirements — being good mothers and good firefighters. The firefighters’ culture demands that mothers and pregnant women establish very well-defined boundaries to separate the maternal from the professional (Turner & Norwood, 2013), causing women to undertake intensive body work, in order to handle the conflicting demands of motherhood and work (Gatrell, 2013; 2014). They prioritize the professional demands to show commitment to the organization, and (re)establish the border between motherhood and work, searching to act according to the discursive norms imposed by the firefighter hero’s culture. As we will see, this maternal body work expresses itself in the following aspects: (a) when women, even pregnant, do dangerous operational tasks; (b) by promoting mothers to work in cities far from their homes; and (c) not breastfeeding during working hours.

As for the execution of operational tasks when pregnant, Eliane says, “Once, there was a warning about a fire, at a party where I was. One of the friends was pregnant, and she went there, putting her life at risk.” Therefore, one of the hero firefighter’s characteristics is to do dangerous operational tasks, showing capacity for sacrifice, toughness, discipline, and commitment, attributes that are part of the definition of hero (Collins, 2004; Perrott, 2019). Eliane reports that the firefighter colleague, even pregnant, decided to act in a dangerous fire, putting her and her child’s lives at risk, showing that she was capable of sacrifice, bravery, and commitment, acting as a hero against the fire. In addition, Eliane highlighted another characteristic of the hero, which is always being available for fight, for doing operational rather than administrative work, and not using pregnancy as an obstacle to these services. As a result, pregnant women



and mothers seek to carry out operational tasks, although aware of the risks. As Josefa says, “We have a serious problem with women; even pregnant, they are still doing operational tasks.” “See Vicky, for example. She is on duty at night, from 7:00 PM to 10:00 AM, she can’t sleep. How does a pregnant woman get a night shift? We are a minority, and if we complain to the man officer in charge, he says: You are very weak” (Josefa).

Requesting transfer to administrative tasks, when pregnant, means being weak and uncommitted to the organization, which is the opposite of the hypermasculine hero. Although there are written norms that exempt pregnant women from doing operational tasks, the hypermasculine hero acts as a discursive norm in firefighters’ culture, which leads them not to ask for it. The hero establishes the norm, according to which the ideal firefighter has a body capable of doing all the tasks the organization requires, and who is always ready for fight (Godfrey et al., 2012). Pregnant women could make such a request, but they prefer to separate the private world of reproduction from the public world of labor, keeping intact the boundaries between motherhood and work, in a maternal body work that deals with the contradictions between the two worlds.

However, society expects women firefighters to be good mothers and prioritize their children’s care. At the same time, the organization requires them to carry out their work heroically, not allowing motherhood to affect its execution. This paradox (Herman et al., 2013) makes mother and pregnant firefighters live in constant dissonance between motherhood and work. When they are promoted, they live this paradox intensely, because often this means working in a new squad, located in the interior of the state, far from their home and children. Mothers face a big dilemma, as they must decide whether to accept or reject the promotion, in order to take care of their children. “I accepted, I could have rejected the promotion, but I accepted it. So, I drive every day 120 km to work and another 120 km back home, because I had no way to transfer my children from school, they are studying. But why did I accept the promotion? Because of the weight I carry as a woman pioneer. I could take any job, anything, including the operational area, but I did not want to refuse this promotion precisely because I am a woman. People could point their fingers at me and say that women cannot do it” (Judite).

Judite accepted a promotion to work in the countryside. However, to take care of her schoolchildren, she travels 240 kilometers daily. She does this to reconcile maternity and firefighter work demands, trying to be a good mother and an ideal firefighter. She accepted this promotion so that men in the organization would not point their fingers at her and at other women, accusing them of always prioritizing children’s care to the detriment of their careers

(Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020). In her maternal body work, Judite accepted the promotion to show that she can separate the professional from the maternal, without neglecting her children, since “society still expects a lot from women, in various tasks. I get home and I continue my third journey. ... So, women have a greater commitment to the house, to raising children” (Judite). She highlights the maternal body work by being compelled to perform, at the same time, the role of an excellent mother and a heroic firefighter (Gatrell, 2013).

In addition, women firefighters had to fight for the right to breastfeed at the barracks; “a few years ago, there was a meeting for us, and some issues arose, such as the right to breastfeeding, reduced hours to allow breastfeeding, extended maternity leave, thank God it was approved” (Juliana). However, although they have acquired these rights through written rules, Josefa said that several times her daughter was taken to the fire department to be breastfed, but she was often attending an incident, and could not do that during working hours. She had to finish her shift to breastfeed her daughter at home, feeling pain in her breasts because they were full of milk. In maternal body work, Josefa breastfeeds her daughter at home because this procedure and milk leakage challenge the boundaries of the organization’s rationality and its hero’s hypermasculine routines. After all, as shown in the previous topic, milk production makes the maternal body the antithesis of the hero.

The maternal body is a vehicle used to show the non-compliance of certain bodies with the hero’s social norms, established for firefighters (Haynes, 2008). Breastfeeding does that, by breaking the boundaries between public and private, bringing elements of motherhood into the organization. Body changes caused by motherhood, with the production of fluids, are not part of the hero’s ideal hypermasculine body (van Amsterdam, 2015), and breastfeeding is associated to the lack of focus and reliability of the mother’s body for carrying out the tasks of the ideal firefighter (Gatrell, 2013). In their maternal body work, women firefighters work long hours daily, even when legally authorized to relax and reduce the workload for breastfeeding (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). They prioritize tasks during their working hours, seeking to rebuild the boundaries between the world of firefighters’ work and the private world of breastfeeding.

That is why Carolina considers relevant to abandon the hero’s culture in fire departments. For her, “the idea of the hero firefighter who does everything should be discarded, and replaced by the professional firefighter, who leaves his/her home to work, but is still concerned about something missing for his/her child, and who has to pay school fees.” The professional firefighter assumes and values tasks related to motherhood and care, as essential in the definition of the ideal firefighter. Rather than a heroic hypermasculine vision

based on physical strength and a healthy and athletic body, he/she is available any time, always committed to the work, showing full capacity and availability to do the operational tasks required. Carolina claims that firefighters should be reinterpreted as professionals, rather than heroes.

## CONCLUSION

Within the discursive practices of military firefighters, the hero image is a discursive norm that organizes their space, establishing gender hierarchies that exclude the maternal body from the ideal firefighter's meaning. In firefighters' gendered truth games, the hero is hypermasculine, and the ideal firefighter has a healthy, young, athletic, and strong body, always available and capable to do dangerous operational tasks. This provides a non-written norm for military firefighters that acquires legitimacy, respect, and credibility, establishing a regime of gendered truth that reduces the status of maternal bodies in that space, affecting negatively the construction of mothers and pregnant women as ideal firefighters. Therefore, maternal bodies are not appropriate for heroes; this gives mothers and pregnant women a disadvantage compared to male bodies in the organization, as theirs are associated with weakness, disease, disorder, and lack of commitment. They put at risk the borders that separate private maternity life from the public labor life, and break the rationality and masculine labor routine of firefighters, who conceive the maternal body as only a reproductive body.

Then, the hero acts as an organizational norm that leads women in military firefighters to engage in constant maternal body work, for not being excluded and downgraded at the workplace. Hence, among military firefighters, there are specific practices related to the maternal body, where work is not limited to reconciling the conflicts between the private life of motherhood and the public life of labor. Therefore, the maternal body work of mothers and pregnant firefighters creates new meanings for the heroic body in truth games, which allows their bodies to be seen as heroic when pregnant women carry out dangerous operational tasks. Mothers accept promotions for working in cities far from their home, and avoid breastfeeding during working hours.

Therefore, similarly to other masculine organizations and professions, motherhood is an obstacle to women

firefighters' career, placing them in a conflict between taking care of their children and being firefighters, between productive and reproductive work, expressed in the difficulty of breastfeeding at the workplace, and getting promotions that require them to work away from their children. However, there are some differences and specificities of firefighters compared to other masculine professions and military organizations in other countries. First, different from other male organizations and professions, the hypermasculine hero values athletic, strong, and healthy bodies. Second, specifically about other military organizations in developed countries, the high number of cesarean deliveries in Brazil contributes, even more, to move away maternal bodies from the image of the hero in the Brazilian patriarchal society, by associating the cesarean delivery to sick and weak bodies, far from the ideal hypermasculine hero, who is always fit and healthy.

Finally, there is a need to deepen studies on maternity in organizations, which are relevant not only for women, but also for building a fairer society for everyone. New studies would provide the problematization and deconstruction of gendered power relations that downgrade mothers and pregnant women, and other expressions of gender identity. Therefore, maternity is a theme that requires unveiling historical power relations that consider women as solely responsible for children's care, not associating these duties with men, which causes single men, who are dedicated to children's care, to have their identities re-signified in the organizational workplace. Hence, research on single men who take care of children, and non-cis-normative maternity, like transgender women, need to be studied, in order to address gender prejudices and hierarchies.

## NOTE

1. The research was approved by the Research Ethical Committee, and it follows the Brazilian Health Council Resolution number 466/2012 and we carried out the survey with formal authorization from the Espírito Santo Military Firefighter Commander, and all interviewees signed the Informed Consent Form. The Informed Consent Form guarantees that all data are strictly confidential and any risk related to interviewed privacy, image, and confidentiality of the information provided will be legally compensated, configuring the produced data as private and non-sharable.

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**1<sup>st</sup> author:** conceptualization (lead), formal analysis (lead), funding acquisition (lead), investigation (lead), methodology (lead), project administration (lead), supervision (lead), visualization (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review & editing (lead).

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## Data Availability

The author claim that the research was approved by the Research Ethical Committee, and it follows the Brazilian Health Council Resolution number 466/2012; the survey was carried out with formal authorization from the Espírito Santo Military Firefighter Commander, and all interviewees signed the Informed Consent Form. The Informed Consent Form guarantees that all data are strictly confidential and any risk related to interviewed privacy, image, and confidentiality of the information provided will be legally compensated, configuring the produced data as private and non-sharable.

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