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JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: INTERACTIONS IN COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Instituições judiciais e movimentos sociais: Interações para o combate à violência contra a mulher

Instituciones judiciales y movimientos sociales: Interacciones para combatir la violencia contra las mujeres

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the interaction between feminist social movements and local political actors in efforts to combat domestic violence, as well as the role of these movements in the implementation of the Judicial Unit Specialized in Domestic Violence Against Women attached to the judiciary of the Brazilian municipality of Santo André, São Paulo (*Anexo de Violência Doméstica Contra a Mulher*), which is the object of the study. The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, theoretically grounded in the concept of political mobilization of justice by social movements. The analysis draws on documents such as laws, ordinances, provisions, agreements, and newspaper articles, complemented by interviews with two judges from the judicial unit, one judge from the Criminal Executions Court, four feminist activists from local social movements, and one city council member engaged in the issue. The findings reveal a strong link between social movements and local public authorities, which proved crucial to the establishment of the judicial unit, thereby contributing to the effective implementation of a judicial public policy.

Keywords: social movements, judicial institutions, combating violence against women, implementation of public policies, local power.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho analisa a interação dos movimentos sociais feministas e a política local voltada para o combate à violência doméstica, bem como a atuação desses movimentos para a implementação do Anexo de Violência Doméstica Contra a Mulher. O referencial teórico da pesquisa sustenta-se no conceito de mobilização política da justiça pelos movimentos sociais, e o objeto de estudo é o Anexo de Violência Doméstica de Santo André/SP. A análise deu-se por meio da pesquisa qualitativa, centrada na estratégia de estudo de caso. Foram analisados documentos, como leis, portarias, provimentos, convênios e notícias de jornal, pertinentes ao tema tratado, e realizadas entrevistas com dois juízes do Anexo de Violência Doméstica e um da Vara das Execuções Criminais, quatro militantes feministas integrantes dos movimentos sociais na região e com uma vereadora que atua na temática no município de Santo André/SP. Por meio desses procedimentos, foi possível verificar que

houve uma forte articulação dos movimentos sociais com os poderes públicos locais, o que foi central para a implementação do Anexo de Violência Doméstica, efetivando assim uma política pública judicial.

Palavras-chave: movimentos sociais, instituições judiciais, combate à violência contra a mulher, implementação de políticas públicas, poder local.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza la interacción entre los movimientos sociales feministas y la política local orientada al combate de la violencia doméstica, así como la actuación de dichos movimientos para la implementación de la Sala de Violencia Doméstica contra la Mujer. El marco teórico de la investigación se sustenta en el concepto de movilización política de la justicia por parte de los movimientos sociales, y el objeto de estudio es la Sala de Violencia Doméstica de Santo André (SP). El análisis se realizó mediante una investigación cualitativa, centrada en la estrategia de estudio de caso. Se analizaron documentos como leyes, ordenanzas, disposiciones, convenios y noticias periodísticas pertinentes al tema tratado, y se llevaron a cabo entrevistas con dos jueces de la Sala de Violencia Doméstica y uno del Juzgado de Ejecuciones Penales, cuatro militantes feministas integrantes de los movimientos sociales de la región y una concejala que trabaja en la temática en el municipio de Santo André (SP). A través de estos procedimientos, fue posible verificar que existía una fuerte articulación entre los movimientos sociales y los poderes públicos locales, lo cual fue fundamental para la implementación de la Sala de Violencia Doméstica, consolidando así una política pública judicial.

Palabras clave: movimientos sociales, instituciones judiciales, combate a la violencia contra la mujer, implementación de políticas públicas, poder local.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of the justice system have been directly involved in a wide range of public policies and have expanded their role across three distinct and complementary spheres: judicial review of the constitutionality of laws, aimed at preserving the rules governing the functioning of the democratic polity; oversight of the form and content of policies formulated and implemented by government authorities (policy); and oversight of public officeholders with respect to their public and administrative conduct, with notable impacts on politics (Arantes, 1999). This growing involvement of the justice system in public policymaking has attracted the attention of social movements, which have increasingly developed strategies of legal mobilization to advance their political agendas.

The interaction between social movements and law is not a recent phenomenon and has been studied for some time. During the 1950s and 1960s, studies were divided between those who defended the use of law by social movements, arguing that it could foster institutional and social change, and those who criticized this strategy, contending that institutions were unlikely to change through courts and that the most marginalized social groups lacked the resources necessary to pursue such strategies (Losekann, 2017).

In the 1990s, the Legal Mobilization Theory (LMT) sought to balance and broaden debates on the interaction between social movements and law, with Gerald Rosenberg and Michael McCann emerging as its most influential theorists. Rosenberg (1991) argued that law matters to social

movements only insofar as judicial decisions produce direct and immediate effects on the claims advanced, and that the judiciary alone is incapable of promoting social change, as it depends on the cooperation of other institutional actors. By contrast, [McCann \(1994, 2006\)](#) conceptualized law not merely as a formal legal instrument, but also as a set of meanings that mediates social relations and practices and is constituted through them.

In Brazil, few studies have examined the interaction between social movements and law from an LMT perspective. Notable contributions include [MacDowell Santos \(2007\)](#), on legal mobilization and transnational social activism; [Maciel \(2011\)](#), on the mobilization of law by the feminist movement during the Campaign for the Maria da Penha Law (legislation on domestic and family violence); [Losekann \(2013\)](#), on legal mobilization as a repertoire of action in the Brazilian environmental field; [Fanti \(2016\)](#), on the mobilization of law in the struggle for abortion rights; and [Oliveira et al. \(2021\)](#), who address the political mobilization of justice in efforts to combat violence against women.

This article engages with this body of literature by seeking to understand the interaction between feminist social movements and local public policies aimed at combating domestic violence, as well as the role of these movements in the process leading to the creation of the Judicial Unit Specialized in Domestic Violence Against Women attached to the judiciary of the Brazilian municipality of Santo André, São Paulo (*Anexo de Violência Doméstica Contra a Mulher – AVDCM/ Santo André*).

To this end, the study adopts the concept of the political mobilization of justice ([Oliveira et al., 2021](#)), defined as a process of political struggle and the explicit demonstration of the relevance of agendas advanced by social movements, with the aim of reshaping how actors within the justice system perceive the issues being advocated. Methodologically, the research relies on qualitative documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews conducted with key actors involved in this process.

The documentary analysis examined laws, decrees, cooperation agreements, and reports related to the creation of the AVDCM/Santo André. For the interviews, a relevance-based criterion was used to select participants. Interviews were conducted with two criminal court judges working in the AVDCM/ Santo André and one judge from the Criminal Executions Court, four feminist activists affiliated with social movements, and one city councilor, all of whom were actively involved at the time of negotiations surrounding the implementation of this judicial unit.

The article is structured into six sections, including this introduction. The following section discusses interactions between social movements and judicial institutions in the guarantee of rights. The third section reviews the literature on feminist movements and their engagement with judicial institutions. The fourth section describes the actions of social movements in the formulation of public policies in the municipality of Santo André. The fifth section analyzes the process through which the AVDCM/Santo André was created and examines the legal mobilization strategies employed by the feminist movement. The final section presents the conclusion.

INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE GUARANTEE OF RIGHTS

The relationship between law and social and political life has been studied since the 1950s and has contributed to the incorporation of judicial institutions as an analytical object within political science. Since then, an intense debate has emerged regarding the effectiveness of law-based strategies employed by social movements to promote social change. One of the foundational contributions to this debate is [Scheingold's \(1974\)](#) work, which characterizes litigation as a conservative and even naïve strategy, given that legal professionals have traditionally represented dominant elites and would therefore be unlikely to commit to the transformative changes sought by social movements.

This critique helped create the conditions for the subsequent development of the Legal Mobilization Theory (LMT). Particularly during the 1990s, the publication of further studies emphasized many of the ideological, organizational, and financial constraints initially identified by Scheingold ([Barcarollo, 2020](#)). Among these contributions, the works of Gerald Rosenberg and Michael McCann stand out as central to the formulation of LMT. For [Rosenberg \(1991\)](#), law matters to social movements only insofar as judicial decisions generate direct and immediate effects on the claims advanced; the judiciary, by itself, is incapable of promoting social change and depends on the cooperation of other institutions. Drawing on extensive empirical evidence, Rosenberg argues that litigation strategies constitute an “empty hope” when their objective is to produce substantive public policy reform. As one of the most critical scholars of legal strategies used by social movements, Rosenberg adopts a top-down approach centered on courts and on the formal relationships between legal institutions and social movements, grounded in a positivist conception of law that views it primarily as a set of legal institutions and rules ([Fanti, 2016](#)).

By contrast, [McCann \(1994\)](#) approaches the relationship between social movements and law from a different perspective, combining socio-legal studies focused on courts with research on social movements, broadening the scope of the debate ([Losekann, 2017](#)). McCann conceptualizes law not merely as a formal legal instrument, but also as a set of meanings that mediates social relations and practices and is constituted through them ([McCann, 1994, 2006](#)). From this perspective, judicial decisions should not be assessed solely in terms of their direct effects on specific cases, but also in terms of the indirect effects they produce within social movements. This expanded understanding of law changed the discussion about the effectiveness of law-based movement strategies by introducing a bottom-up approach, in which the analytical focus shifts from courts and legal institutions to social actors and movements ([McCann, 1994](#)). Litigation and other legal strategies are thus understood as components of broader repertoires through which movements pursue the rights for which they struggle. Nevertheless, the outcomes of such mobilization are not predictable, as they depend on context and on the ways in which legal strategies are deployed, rendering the results of legal mobilization inherently uncertain.

In this vein, [McCann \(2006\)](#) observed tactics aimed at law or the judiciary as one among several possible tools available to social movements, emphasizing the importance of analyzing contextual factors to better understand the diverse outcomes produced by these tactics ([Fanti, 2016](#)).

In Brazil, the process of redemocratization not only expanded rights and mechanisms of access to justice, but also provided the conditions necessary for collective action, fostering the emergence and diffusion of social movements and their engagement with judicial institutions. Such engagement did not occur exclusively through the judicialization of politics and public policies, but also through a process of political struggle and the explicit demonstration of the relevance of the agendas advanced by social movements, aimed at reshaping how actors within the justice system perceive the issues at stake (Oliveira et al., 2021).

This effort to transform prevailing patterns of action among justice system actors has sought not only to influence decisions in cases already brought before the courts, but also to shape judicial practices in future cases. This has occurred through the institutionalization of judicial interpretations favorable to movement agendas; through changes in the internal organization of judicial institutions, such as the creation of specialized units, groups, or divisions to address specific demands; through networking with existing services; and through the incorporation of these agendas into institutional planning and priority actions, including the organization of thematic seminars and the development of public campaigns. This process, called political mobilization of justice, constitutes a mechanism through which social movements seek to make the justice system more permeable to their agendas and, in doing so, to ensure the appropriate interpretation and practice of law in accordance with existing legal frameworks (Oliveira et al., 2021).

Finally, the political mobilization of justice can be another instrument of struggle available to social movements. Through this mechanism, movements not only judicialize their demands (Oliveira & Couto, 2019), but also seek to sensitize legal professionals to the importance of adequately understanding these demands and rights—an understanding that is essential both for the adjudication of judicialized cases and for the dissemination of rights-based interpretations aligned with movement claims.

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS

Feminist social movements began to exert pressure on the state to advance their agendas following the establishment of the National Council for Women's Rights (CNDM) in 1985, which led to the formulation of policies aimed at addressing gender inequalities. Among these initiatives, the creation of Specialized Police Stations for Women (*Delegacias Especializadas de Atendimento à Mulher* – DEAMs) and women's shelters stands out.

The CNDM was a *sui generis* body, as it was formally part of the government while being led by representatives of the social movement itself. It was affiliated with the Ministry of Justice and enjoyed administrative and financial autonomy, with the mandate to promote, at the national level, policies aimed at eliminating discrimination against women, ensuring equal rights, and fostering women's full participation in the country's political, economic, and cultural life (Medeiros, 2016).

This model of public policy governance introduced a largely unprecedented arrangement: the participation of a social movement within the state apparatus without subordination to it. Thus, a new form of social control over public administration was established (Barsted, 1994).

In 1989, however, in contrast to the participatory ideals embedded in the 1988 Federal Constitution, the CNDM was stripped of its autonomy and of part of its human and technical resources. Consequently, from the 1990s through the early 2000s, the development of public policies targeting women largely stagnated. In the area of combating violence against women, initiatives during this period were isolated and sporadic, mainly focused on the establishment and training of DEAMs and the maintenance of women's shelters (Medeiros, 2016).

It was only in 2002 that feminist movements succeeded in reactivating state-led policies to combat violence against women. A key development in this process was the creation of the State Secretariat for Women's Rights (*Secretaria de Estado dos Direitos da Mulher* – SEDIM), which, in January 2003, was replaced by the Secretariat for Policies for Women (*Secretaria de Políticas para Mulheres* – SPM). The creation of the SPM at the national level encouraged the establishment of similar bodies at the state and municipal levels, including secretariats, coordinating offices, and superintendencies. Some of these bodies operated with limited autonomy, often attached to other policy areas—most commonly social assistance or human rights—while others enjoyed greater autonomy, either as full secretariats or as agencies with equivalent status (Medeiros, 2016).

In 2004, the First National Plan of Public Policies to Combat Violence against Women (*I Plano Nacional de Políticas Públicas de Combate à Violência Contra a Mulher* – I PNPM) was launched, emerging from the First National Conference on Policies for Women (*I Conferência Nacional de Políticas para as Mulheres* – I CNPM). This conference marked a milestone in affirming women's rights, mobilizing approximately 120,000 women nationwide (Barsted & Pitanguy, 2011). The I PNPM called for the creation of a comprehensive national policy.

In 2005, through the coordination of feminist movements participating in the I CNPM, the Second National Plan of Policies for Women (*II Plano Nacional de Políticas para Mulheres* – II PNPM) was instituted by Decree No. 5,390. This plan represented an innovation in public administration by introducing gender mainstreaming as a guiding principle for the formulation and implementation of public policies, thereby serving as a reference framework for public administrations at different levels of government.

Feminist mobilization continued in dialogue with the executive branch, and in 2007, during the Second National Conference on Policies for Women (II CNPM), the Federal Government launched the National Pact to Combat Violence against Women. This pact established targets to be implemented by various federal agencies between 2008 and 2011.

In December 2011, the Third National Conference on Policies for Women (III CNPM) was held, resulting in the Third National Plan of Policies for Women (III PNPM) for the period 2013–2015, formalized by Decree No. 7,959 of 2013. These policy instruments consolidated the understanding of violence against women as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, thus requiring integrated and coordinated actions to address it effectively.

Within this framework, the idea of confronting the problem gained a broader meaning, extending beyond repression and encompassing the construction of a coordinated intersectoral network. This network includes governmental and non-governmental institutions, women's policy organizations and women's rights councils, feminist nonprofits, universities, and federal, state, and municipal agencies in areas such as housing, education, labor, and culture. Together, these actors correspond to the structuring axes of the National Policy for Addressing Violence against Women: prevention; assistance; confrontation and combat; and access to and guarantee of rights.

In 2016, following a change in the federal government, the ministry responsible for women's policies was downgraded to the status of a secretariat and, in 2018, incorporated into the Ministry of Human Rights.

On November 5, 2019, all decrees governing the PNPM were revoked, leading to a dismantling of public policies directed at women, particularly those aimed at combating domestic violence. In 2023, with the return of left-wing forces to the executive branch, the Ministry of Women was reestablished, accompanied by commitments to create new policies and to strengthen existing ones.

With regard to the justice system, the judiciary, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the Public Defender's Office gained prominence during the redemocratization period, marked by the constitutionalization of social rights and public policies and the expansion of access to justice. These institutions—especially the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Public Defender's Office—assumed a central social role by engaging in public policies through the judicialization of public policy (Oliveira, 2019). As this process expanded, often driven by feminist social movements, these institutions adapted internally to respond to emerging demands, including feminist agendas.

In 2007, the National Council of Justice (*Conselho Nacional de Justiça* – CNJ) issued Recommendation No. 9/2007, encouraging the judiciary to establish Specialized Courts for Domestic Violence Against Women in both state capitals and interior regions.

Since then, the CNJ has promoted a series of judicial conferences bringing together justice system professionals to foster debate, exchange experiences, and provide training, guidelines, and directives aimed at the application of Law No. 11,340/2006 (the Maria da Penha Law). At the Third Conference, held in 2009, the National Forum of Judges on Domestic and Family Violence against Women (*Fórum Nacional de Juízes e Juízas de Violência Doméstica e Familiar contra a Mulher* – FONAVID) was established to institutionalize ongoing debate within the judiciary and to promote the standardization of procedures across Specialized Courts for Domestic Violence Against Women.

Both the conferences and the forums produced recommendations on a range of issues related to violence against women, including the strengthening of specific public policies; the integration of the judicial system with service and protection networks; the production of statistical data on judicial performance; the development of informational materials on violence against women; and the organization of training courses and lectures.

In 2016, a working group was created through Ordinance No. 54/2016 to conduct studies aimed at establishing State Coordination Offices for Women in Situations of Domestic and

Family Violence within the courts of justice of the states and the federal district, as provided for by Resolution No. 128/2016.

On International Women's Day in 2017, the CNJ issued Ordinance No. 15, instituting the National Judicial Policy for Combating Violence against Women. This normative framework consolidated the "Justice for Peace at Home" campaign, demonstrating the institutional strength of the gender agenda and seeking to promote a culture of peace and violence prevention. A national registry of pregnant and breastfeeding incarcerated women was also created.

In August 2018, the Twelfth Maria da Penha Law Conference, focused on femicide, proposed actions to support the implementation of the National Judicial Policy for Combating Violence against Women (Resolution No. 254/2018) and the National Guidelines for the Investigation, Prosecution, and Adjudication of Femicide Cases with a Gender Perspective. These actions included urging courts, public prosecutor's offices, public defender's offices, and investigative and state police forces to train their personnel in a gender-sensitive and intersectional perspective—encompassing race, color, regional origin, sexuality, religion, disability, among others—in accordance with the protocols established in the national guidelines.

In September 2018, the CNJ updated the Manual of Routines and Structure of Domestic and Family Violence Courts against Women, aiming to standardize procedures and enhance the quality and effectiveness of judicial services and victim protection. Data on the performance of these courts have been made available through the Monitoring Panel of the Policy for Combating Domestic Violence, with information reported by courts since 2015—the same year the Femicide Law was enacted. This information system forms part of the National Policy for Combating Domestic Violence within the Judiciary, established by Resolution No. 254/2018.

Also noteworthy is the protocol for gender-sensitive adjudication launched by the CNJ in 2021, which seeks to guide judges in conducting proceedings grounded in impartiality and equity, aimed at eliminating discrimination, prejudice, and stereotype-based assessments that contribute to injustice and violations of women's fundamental rights.

Significant institutional developments can also be observed within the Public Defender's Office, including the creation of the Special Commission for the Promotion and Defense of Women's Rights in 2007 by decision of the National Council of Public Defenders General (*Conselho Nacional dos Defensores Públicos Gerais* – CONDEGE). This commission aims to bring together public defenders committed to the promotion and defense of women's rights—particularly in the fight against domestic violence—and to support CONDEGE in strengthening institutional action and formulating a shared policy framework.

In addition, Women's Defense Centers or Specialized Public Defender Offices for Women – known as NUDEMs or NEAMs – were established within state-level Public Defender's Offices to assist women victims of violence. These units provide legal assistance and coordinate with other services that contribute, directly or indirectly, to women's empowerment and the realization of citizenship. Present in nearly all Brazilian states, these centers are staffed by public defenders, civil servants, and interns trained to provide legal counseling, file legal actions, and guide victims of violence.

Within the Public Prosecutor's Office, the First National Meeting of State and Federal Prosecutors on the implementation of the Maria da Penha Law was held in 2009. This meeting emphasized the need to incorporate domestic and family violence into the agenda of the National Human Rights Group (*Grupo Nacional de Direitos Humanos* – GNDH). That same year, during a meeting of the Permanent Commission on Human Rights (*Comissão Permanente de Direitos Humanos* – COPEDH), the creation of a subcommittee on domestic and family violence was proposed to mobilize prosecutors in establishing case registries and forming gender-focused units. In 2011, this subcommittee evolved into the Permanent Commission of Prosecutors on Domestic and Family Violence against Women (*Comissão Permanente de Promotores da Violência Doméstica e Familiar contra a Mulher* – COPEVID), reflecting the need for institutional policies and intervention strategies to strengthen the National Policy for Combating Gender-Based Violence and enhance the visibility of the issue.

COPEVID is part of the National Council of Attorneys General (*Conselho Nacional de Procuradores Gerais* – CNPG) and comprises members from state and federal public prosecutor's offices, the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Federal District and Territories, the Military Public Prosecutor's Office, and the Labor Public Prosecutor's Office. Its responsibilities include providing guidance on the drafting of legislation to protect women, issuing interpretative guidelines for legal practitioners, and developing or adapting international protocols.

Furthermore, state-level working groups known as GEVIDs were created to combat violence against women, serving as mechanisms to safeguard women's rights by monitoring the enforcement of laws aimed at addressing gender inequalities and violence.

In 2018, the National Risk and Life Protection Form (*Formulário Nacional de Risco e Proteção à Vida* – FRIDA) was introduced—an electronic tool developed by the Public Prosecutor's Office to enable professionals within the protection network to conduct more precise and objective risk assessments in cases of domestic violence, thereby supporting the implementation of the Maria da Penha Law and preventing crimes within domestic and family contexts.

In sum, Brazil has witnessed the establishment of a wide range of regulations, institutions, and actions aimed at combating violence against women. Nevertheless, these measures have proven insufficient to fully overcome the problem, and social movements continue to play a critical role in advocating for new rules, actions, and interpretative frameworks for existing laws.

FEMINIST SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND POLICIES FOR WOMEN IN SANTO ANDRÉ/SP

Feminist activism in Santo André dates back to the 1970s and emerged within neighborhood associations and church-based organizations, where women mobilized around demands for political and economic rights and gender equality. In the early 1980s, alongside the rise of the labor movement in the region, women expanded their agenda to include demands for improved working conditions. During this period, they organized the First Congress of Women Metalworkers of São Bernardo do Campo and Diadema, which addressed labor conditions in factories across the region (Souza, 2013).

With the intensification of workers' strikes, feminist activists engaged in the defense of protesting workers. Some feminists began working within labor unions and introduced discussions on women's rights into the labor movement, contributing to the creation of the Regional Commission on Working Women within the organizational structure of the workers' union *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) (Souza, 2013).

According to an interview with an activist from Santo André's feminist movement, the movement as a whole supported the candidacy of the representative of the left-wing Workers' Party (PT) Celso Daniel for mayor in the 1988 election, presenting feminist policy proposals for his prospective administration. Elected mayor in 1989 Daniel established the first municipal initiative to institutionalize public policies for women in the state of São Paulo: the Women's Rights Advisory Office (*Assessoria dos Direitos da Mulher – ADM*), in response to demands articulated by feminist movements.

The ADM addressed gender-related issues across several axes, including policies to confront gender inequalities; the social condition of women; women's rights; and education and participation. It also developed projects focused on combating violence, professional qualification, popular participation, and engagement with the legislative branch, and produced and distributed informational and educational materials (Costa, 2003). However, the ADM was dissolved in 1993 after PT's defeat in local elections.

After the dissolution of the ADM, women who remained active in social movements founded the *Fe-minina* movement, which played a crucial role in advancing public policies for women in the municipality. Through collective mobilization, the movement pressured the local executive branch to implement policies addressing gender inequalities and to expand services for women. As a result of this coordination, the Municipal Council for Women's Rights was established in 1995, composed of 22 council members and 22 alternates, evenly divided between representatives of the municipal government and civil society (Ruzzi, 2018).

In 1997, Celso Daniel returned to office as mayor, and with the renewed participation of feminist activists within the municipal administration, gender issues once again became a policy priority, leading to the reestablishment of the ADM (Souza, 2013). During this administration, policy priorities included combating violence against women and providing women's healthcare; strengthening the organizational capacity of the women's movement; professional training; employment and income generation; and the promotion of citizenship among public servants. This administration also inaugurated the Women's Reference Center for Women in Situations of Violence, known as Vem Maria.

According to the interviewed activists, despite the existence of local initiatives to address violence against women, the *Fe-minina* movement joined forces with other feminist groups in the region to establish the ABC Regional Front to Combat Violence against Women. The objective of this coalition was to address violence against women at the regional level, encompassing the seven municipalities of the Metropolitan area of ABC.

Through coordination with municipal governments, this front facilitated the creation of a Gender Working Group within the ABC Intermunicipal Consortium. The working group was established to implement gender mainstreaming across all consortium actions, fostering debate on gender issues, and

expanding service provision within municipalities—particularly through the structuring of a Regional Shelter Home, which was established in 2003 (Costa, 2003).

In 2001, Celso Daniel was re-elected mayor of Santo André, and the ADM continued its activities. According to the interviewees, during this administration, the coordination of public policies for women was entrusted to a feminist activist who later received an international award from UN-Habitat for the Gender and Citizenship Program, developed under the Santo André Mais Igual initiative. This municipal initiative was ranked among the ten best practices worldwide and was recognized for incorporating gender perspectives into the planning of social housing projects.

Discussions on Debates surrounding public policies to combat violence against women continued to expand within the city's feminist social movements. In 2001, the Popular Legal Promoters Project was established by the feminist organization Proleg, as highlighted by one of the interviewees. The initiative had been operating in São Paulo since 1994, with the objective of empowering women to access justice and recognize their human rights, as well as transforming the perspectives of legal professionals and related practitioners so that gender issues would be addressed with equity and respect for diversity (Teles, 1993).

Between 2009 and 2012, following changes in the municipal governing coalition, some public policies targeting women were maintained, including the Vem Maria program. Activists who had previously held positions within the municipal administration returned to their roles within social movements, from which they continued to demand the preservation of existing policies and the development of new initiatives.

In 2013, with the return of the PT to municipal government, the Secretary for Women was created—the first of its kind in the region. The Secretariat was coordinated by a feminist activist from Santo André, who was interviewed for this study. She reported the implementation of violence prevention campaigns, the creation of a unified database on domestic violence, the guarantee of priority access to housing for women in situations of violence, and the expansion of the specialized service network.

The secretariat was dissolved in 2017, following the PT's exit from municipal administration. Nevertheless, feminist social movements continued to monitor public policies for women in Santo André and to advocate for new initiatives, such as the establishment of a transitional shelter.

Currently, the most active organizations advocating for women's rights in the region are Proleg and the Regional Front, both of which played a significant role in the creation of the Judicial Unit Specialized in Domestic Violence Against Women attached to the judiciary of the Brazilian municipality of Santo André, São Paulo (*Anexo de Violência Doméstica Contra a Mulher – AVDCM/Santo André*).

THE CREATION OF THE AVDCM/SANTO ANDRÉ

As discussed above, feminist movements in Santo André have historically played a strong role in engaging with the Executive branch to promote the creation of public policies for women. In the case of the Judicial Unit Specialized in Domestic Violence Against Women attached to the municipality's judiciary (AVDCM/

Santo André), however, interviews with key actors reveal that feminist movements deliberately pursued political strategies directed at the local judiciary to ensure the unit's implementation.

According to one interviewee, it was only with the arrival of a new judge in the Criminal Court of the district—who held a more expansive understanding of gender and domestic violence—that dialogue with the local judiciary became viable regarding the possibility of establishing a specialized court for domestic violence in the municipality.

This initial engagement with the judiciary was undertaken by activists who coordinated the Secretary for Women between 2013 and 2017 and who had the creation of such a judicial body as a central item on their political agenda. They interpreted the new criminal judge's openness to discussion as a political opportunity. As one interviewee stated:

“We learned that a new judge had been appointed to the Criminal Court and that, with her, we would have the opportunity to discuss the implementation of a specialized court in the municipality. So we went to talk to her.” (Interviewee #1)

Meetings were subsequently held between the activists and the criminal judge, who then facilitated contact with the coordinator of the Coordinating Agency for Women in Situations of Domestic and Family Violence of the judiciary of the state of São Paulo (*Coordenadoria da Mulher em Situação de Violência Doméstica e Familiar* – COMESP), of which she was a member. This coordination led to a meeting with the President of the Court of Justice of the State of São Paulo (TJ/SP). Participants included a representative of the municipal executive branch, the secretary responsible for the Secretary for Women of Santo André at the time, the local criminal judge, the coordinator of COMESP, and the court's president. At this meeting, studies documenting the situation of violence against women in Santo André were presented, substantiating the demand for the creation of a specialized judicial unit.

This process resulted in the signing of a technical cooperation agreement between the municipality of Santo André and the TJ/SP, aimed at promoting actions to implement public policies established under the Maria da Penha Law. The agreement was in force from 2013 to 2015. Notably, the agreement did not expressly mandate the creation of a specialized court in the municipality; the AVDCM/Santo André was established later, in 2019, two years after the dissolution of the Secretary for Women in 2017.

This episode represents the first mobilization strategy employed by the feminist movement. Activists positioned within the executive branch leveraged their institutional roles to coordinate with the judiciary in order to advance the creation of the judicial unit, reflecting the logic of “activists in the state” as analyzed by [Abers and Von Bülow \(2011\)](#).

“Our involvement as activists in the Secretary for Women helped us bring the demand for the unit to the judiciary.” (Interviewee #2)

Following the dissolution of the Secretary for Women, feminist organizations in Santo André—particularly Proleg and the ABC Regional Front—continued negotiations with the local judiciary, especially with the criminal judge, while simultaneously expanding dialogue with the municipal

legislative branch. At that time, the City Council included a councilwoman strongly aligned with gender-related agendas, particularly the fight against violence against women. After coordination with feminist movements, this councilwoman formally petitioned the President of the Court of Justice of São Paulo on several occasions, requesting the creation of a specialized court for domestic violence. After multiple attempts, a new meeting was eventually scheduled, this time under the presidency of a different appellate judge.

“I contacted the President of the Court of Justice of São Paulo several times, requesting a meeting to discuss the creation of a domestic violence court in Santo André, following conversations and requests from feminist movements in the city.” (Interviewee #3)

This meeting brought together representatives of Proleg, the local criminal judge, the coordinator of COMESP, the city councilwoman, and the President of the TJ/SP. On this occasion, the President received a petition containing more than one million signatures from women in the region calling for the creation of the court, as well as updated studies on domestic violence in the municipality. This episode illustrates the feminist movement’s second legal mobilization strategy: incorporating the local legislative branch into negotiations with the judiciary.

The issue was subsequently taken up by the TJ/SP, which forwarded the request to its internal agencies. These agencies proposed the establishment of a judicial unit rather than a Specialized Court for Domestic and Family Violence. This proposal was submitted to the local criminal judges. Although the creation of a judicial unit attached to the judiciary of Santo André did not fully correspond to the original demand of the feminist movements, they agreed to its implementation as a necessary institutional step. Of the four criminal judges in the district, three expressed support for the unit’s establishment.

“We then spoke with the judges who would form the unit to persuade them of the need to establish the body. We encountered resistance from some, but we managed to convince the majority.” (Interviewee #5)

Accordingly, on July 4, 2019, the AVDCM/Santo André was formally established by the TJ/SP through Provision CSM No. 2,515/2019.

This trajectory makes clear that social movements were crucial to the implementation of the AVDCM/Santo André, as emphasized by one interviewee:

“The involvement of civil society was extremely important to the creation of the unit. Without it, it would not have existed.” (Interviewee #1)

Moreover, the mobilization undertaken by feminist movements contributed to changes in the orientations of judicial actors themselves. One of the interviewed judges highlighted that his understanding of gender issues evolved after working within the AVDCM/Santo André:

“At first, I was not very supportive of creating the judicial unit. However, after I began working there, I realized how important a specialized body is in combating violence against women. My

understanding of gender equality also changed significantly. Today, I consider it fundamental.” (Interviewee #6)

This testimony reinforces the argument that social movements can transform not only policies but also institutional actors, as observed by Oliveira (2019) in analyses of the judicialization of public policies, a process that generates changes within justice institutions.

Finally, the actions of feminist movements did not merely influence institutional arrangements; they also contributed to the politicization of judicial actors by reshaping their patterns of action and promoting the proper application of rights guaranteed by law. This dynamic corresponds to what Oliveira et al. (2021) conceptualize as the political mobilization of justice, a process clearly evidenced in the creation of the AVDCM/Santo André.

In sum, feminist movements acted persistently and strategically across local executive, legislative, and judicial branches to secure the implementation of the unit. This process exemplifies the logic of mutual constitution: social movements shape public policies, while public policies, in turn, influence the emergence, development, and effectiveness of social movements.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The case analysis demonstrates that social movements politically mobilized local government authorities—the executive, legislative, and judiciary—to implement a public policy to combat domestic violence, generating effects on both institutions and individual actors. Although all three branches of government played relevant roles in this process, the creation of the Judicial Unit Specialized in Domestic Violence Against Women attached to the municipality’s judiciary (AVDCM/Santo André) would not have occurred without the political mobilization of the judiciary, since its establishment depended on a decision taken within the judiciary itself. The involvement of actors from the executive and legislative branches was also significant, particularly due to the pressure they exerted.

The political mobilization of justice emerges as a central mechanism for the realization of rights that are already formally recognized in law but still require concrete institutional action, such as the fight against violence against women. This process highlights the fundamental role played by social movements in the effective implementation of public policies across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Nevertheless, rates of femicide and other forms of violence against women continue to rise in Brazil, indicating that substantial challenges remain. Understanding the available strategies to confront this problem therefore constitutes a powerful tool in this ongoing struggle.

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NOTE

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset supporting the results of this study is not publicly available to protect the interviewees' anonymity.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Alessandra Pereira da Silva: Conceptualization; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Vanessa Elias de Oliveira: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing – review & editing.