Towards a World Without Walls: Abolitionist Practice and Knowledge Production through Mothers of Prisoners, Families and Grassroots Organisers

A Situated Study of 'Associação de Familiares e Amigos/as de Presos/as e Internos/as da Fundação Casa' (AMPARAR) in Brazil



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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine how abolitionism is practised within the organising work of the Associação de Familiares e Amigos/as de Presos/as e Internos/as da Fundação Casa (AMPARAR), a Brazilian grassroots organisation led primarily by mothers and families affected by imprisonment and the carceral system. Drawing on seven semi-structured interviews with organisers, archival research, and the literature on prisoners' families and feminism, abolitionism, and critical studies, I ask how abolitionism is framed and enacted within AMPARAR. I argue that abolitionism is best understood not as a distant political horizon but as a set of concrete practices embedded in everyday organising. Through the concept of *praxis*, I show that abolitionist theory and practice develop in a dialectical relationship, producing forms of knowledge capable of shaping resistance to structures of oppression while building alternatives to them. Analytically, I distinguish between two interconnected dimensions of AMPARAR's work. The first, abolitionist 'absence', encompasses efforts to denounce, challenge and reduce the carceral system through campaigns, advocacy and political consciousness-raising. The second, abolitionist 'presence', involves building support networks, communities of care, and alternative ways of relating to one another that seek to address the harms produced by imprisonment, state abandonment and punitive logics. The findings also demonstrate that AMPARAR's abolitionist organising is profoundly shaped by the experiences of Black mothers, families of prisoners and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. In doing so, the organisation produces theoretical frameworks that both emerge from and shape its practices of resistance, producing knowledge towards change. Ultimately, this dissertation shows how abolitionist ideas and practices are enacted, contested and developed through the framework of mothers, families and grassroots organisers in Brazil's racialised, gendered and colonial carceral landscape.

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‘‘But where are the remedies, the practical reforms?’... It is a widespread but fatal trap — precisely, a trap of ‘liberal opinion’ — to split analysis from action, and to assign the first to the instance of the ‘long term’, which never comes, and reserve only the second to ‘what is practical and realistic in the short term’... So, if someone says to us: ‘Yes, but given the present conditions, what are we to do now?’, we can only reply ‘Do something about the present conditions’’

- Stuart Hall *et al.* (1978/2013: IX-X).

‘Abolitionism is not our horizon. Abolitionism is a daily political practice that we’ve been exercising for a long time’

- Fabinho da AMPARAR, Interview.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....2
Acknowledgments.....3
Table of Contents.....5
Background.....6
Methods and Ethics.....12
Interviews and Archives.....12
Ethics in Grassroots Movements: Mitigating Extractivism and Decolonising Academia? 14
Chapter One: Abolitionism - from Theory to Practice or from Practice to Theory? Knowledge Production through Abolitionist Praxis.....18
The Committees for Penal Reform and Scandinavian Abolitionism.....19
Mothers Reclaiming Our Children and American Abolitionism.....21
AMPARAR and Brazilian Abolitionism.....24
Chapter Two: To Abolish or to Create? Actually, to Aid, to Educate, to 'AMPARAR'.. 31
Abolitionist 'Absence': Denouncing the Carceral State and Raising Political Consciousness.....32
Abolitionist 'Presence': Building Support Networks, Communities and Organic Relations. 38
Chapter Three: 'Abolition is Not a Cake Recipe' - Abolitionism's Challenges, Limitations, 'Contradictions' and Alternatives.....49
Abolitionism's Complexities, Challenges, 'Contradictions' and Limitations.....49
Towards a World Without Walls: Abolitionist Alternatives.....56
Conclusion.....59
References.....61
Appendix A - Sample Interview Questions.....77
Appendix B - Other Relevant Archives.....78

Background

In 1998, under the scalding-hot sun, in the visitors' waiting lines for a youth justice imprisonment facility in São Paulo ('FEBEM-Imigrantes'), an imposing Black mother could have been spotted distributing handwritten flyers with contact details and her own name: 'Railda' (Silva, 2021). Railda's son was no longer incarcerated in the Brazilian Youth Justice Imprisonment System (FEBEM), but she decided to continue visiting the 'FEBEM Imigrantes' facility. Through the distribution of flyers in its visitors' queues, she sought to bring together other mothers of incarcerated children to provide mutual support and denounce the widespread violence that occurred within FEBEM (Klink, 2024). During the 1990s, reports documented routine torture and ill-treatment of kids and teens, while adult prisons were marked by overcrowding, interpersonal violence and abuse by prison guards (Rodley, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 1998; Dal Santo, 2022). Beyond prison walls, police brutality, state neglect, and unequal access to public services shaped everyday life in favelas and peripheral territories[1] (Mata, 2019; Cubas *et al.*, 2023; Pereira, 2024).

Overall, the realities of adult prisons, the youth detention system (FEBEM) and the favelas and territories were deeply interconnected, not only through the violence that permeated them, but also through racialised and gendered logics that structured these spaces (Godoi, 2015; Pereira, 2024; Klink, 2024). Many of these logics were arguably tied to a colonial past of slavery against the country's Black population, where systems of social control, such as prisons and the police, developed and operated as forms through which these groups were dominated and violated (Cacicedo, 2024a; Cacicedo, 2024b)–with a specific sexually violent dimension towards women (Alves, 2021). Furthermore, these contemporary interconnected realities were increasingly shaped by the dynamics of mass incarceration,

[1] In Portuguese, 'peripheries', 'territory/territories' and 'peripheral territories' are interchangeable terms often used to designate poor and marginalised neighbourhoods in Brazil, including but not restricted to favelas.

which, although distinct from the US case, similarly involved a colossal increase in imprisonment rates for poor Black and other ethnic minorities, especially men (Dal Santo, 2022). This period was also marked by the expansion of organised crime, namely the establishment of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), one of Latin America's largest criminal organisations, which reshaped governance and everyday life in both prisons and peripheral territories (Biondi, 2016; Feltran, 2018; Manso and Dias, 2018). Simultaneously, these dynamics severely burdened women and mothers, especially Black, who, inserted within the traditional gender roles and patriarchal logics of contemporary Brazilian society, had to sustain–both materially and emotionally–their family members within prison (Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024).

In the wake of this violence and these dynamics, a group of mothers–including Railda, Miriam Pereira, Cida and Bel–who had their children in the Youth Justice Imprisonment System (FEBEM) was formalised in 1998 under the name 'AMAR' (Pereira, 2024). In 2004, the group expanded to include the adult prison system and became known as 'AMPARAR' or 'Associação de Familiares e Amigos/as de Presos/as e Internos/as da Fundação Casa' (Silva, 2021). As their name–'Association of Families and Friends of Adult Prisoners and Youth Justice Inmates'–indicates, the group grew from the grassroots organising of families, mostly Black and poor mothers of prisoners and youth justice inmates from the peripheries. Building on the tradition of other Latin American groups of mothers resisting state violence (Silva, 2021; Klink, 2024), they essentially created a framework for denouncing human rights violations within confinement, conducting anti-prison and reform campaigns, and establishing forms of community support for those most affected by state neglect (Lago, 2019; Pereira, 2024; Diniz, 2026). Through these organising practices, AMPARAR defines itself as a penal

abolitionist organisation, although understanding the specific meaning of this abolitionism within their context remains largely unexplored.

Penal abolitionism and its ideas have been linked to certain activist and organiser movements fighting against the violence and logics of carceral systems in various forms throughout the world (Mathiesen, 1974; Gilmore, 2007; Diniz, 2026). Centred on the abolition of prisons, the police, criminal justice, or punitive systems more broadly (Passetti and Silva, 1997), these frameworks have often been dismissed as utopian, overly theoretical, and constituting unachievable ideals with little practical effect within criminal justice systems (Saleh-Hanna et al., 2008). Nevertheless, they are part of the guiding objectives of organisations such as AMPARAR, and, as I will explore in this dissertation, embedded in their practices (Lago, 2019; Pereira, 2024).

Brazil today has the world's third-largest prison population, with nearly 910,000 people incarcerated, disproportionately affecting Black Brazilians and reproducing cycles of racial inequality and social exclusion (Walmsley, 2025; Penal Reform International, 2025). At the same time, police violence, state abandonment, and unequal access to basic services continue to shape life in favelas and peripheral neighbourhoods, where most of these Black Brazilians live (FBSP, 2025; Cubas *et al.*, 2023; Mata, 2019; Pereira, 2024). Darke and Khan (2021) argue that Brazil's colonial past still manifests in how social and racial hierarchies are maintained through the understanding that Black and poor bodies are seen as disposable. These dynamics are also profoundly gendered. Women, especially Black mothers, families and partners of prisoners, remain responsible for sustaining incarcerated family members emotionally and materially, often bearing the burdens of imprisonment beyond prison walls (Silva, 2021; Kotova and Cacicedo, 2026). It is within this context of racialised, gendered and carceral violence that the mothers and grassroots organisers of AMPARAR continue to resist.

Hence, against this context and the largely unexplored meaning of what constitutes abolitionist work in it, I aim, in this research, to delve into AMPARAR's work to fundamentally answer the following questions: **How is abolitionism practised within AMPARAR's organising work? And what does this reveal about the political strategies and forms of knowledge production through which they resist carceral systems and imagine possible alternatives?**

To answer these questions, this dissertation will engage with scholarship on prisoners' families and feminism, abolitionism, and critical theory, with AMPARAR as its central empirical focus. Building on Miriam Pereira's (2024) account of AMPARAR's history and the effects of Brazilian carceral politics on prisoners' families, I draw from feminist literature that has examined the racial and gendered realities of imprisonment, including the activist and resistance role of mothers and women families of prisoners (Lago, 2019; Pereira *et al.*, 2024), the labour of care and solidarity performed by them (Silva, 2021; Kotova and Cacicedo, 2026), the ways imprisonment extends beyond prison walls into their everyday life (Klink, 2024), and the reciprocal harms imprisonment imposes on them (Condry and Minson, 2020). While this literature has been fundamental in documenting how families experience and resist imprisonment–and frequently references AMPARAR itself (Lago, 2019; Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2024; Klink, 2024)—it has rarely examined these practices through the lens of abolitionism. At the same time, abolitionist scholarship has developed rich theoretical traditions in Scandinavian, American and Latin American contexts (Christie, 2013; Mathiesen, 1974, 2016; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007, 2020, 2022; Herzing and Piché, 2024; Passetti and Silva, 1997; Passetti, 2004/2018, 2012; Diniz, 2026), yet it has often focused on tracing the history of broader movements, developing theoretical frameworks rather than delving deep in the everyday practices of a single grassroots organisation and how these daily

practices connect to abolitionism. Unlike previous studies of families and feminism, AMPARAR, and the abolitionist literature, this dissertation centres the organisation's own understandings of abolitionism, examining how abolitionist resistance and knowledge production emerge through the everyday practices of its mothers, families and organisers. I will also very occasionally engage with literature on prisons (Sykes, 1957; Goffman, 1968; Scott, 2013; Chamberlen, 2016; Warr, 2016; Bhui, 2024) and older literature on families of prisoners (Ferraro *et al.,* 1983; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999) when explaining how the frameworks of abolitionist grassroots organisers add to or contrast with this scholarship.

My core argument is that abolitionism is best understood not as an abstract, unachievable political horizon, but as a set of concrete practices embedded, in the case of AMPARAR, in the everyday work of their mothers, families and organisers. Drawing on Freire's (1968/2014) concept of *praxis*, I argue that abolitionist ideas emerge from practical experiences and struggles, while helping reshape them. Through this process, I explain how AMPARAR's abolitionist *praxis* produces transformative forms of knowledge grounded in lived experience that inform political action, sustain collective resistance, and help imagine alternatives to punitive systems.

This dissertation is built around three main chapters. Chapter One situates AMPARAR within broader abolitionist traditions in Scandinavia, the United States and Brazil, arguing that abolitionist ideas have simultaneously emerged from and shaped grassroots organising and practical struggles against punitive systems rather than appearing from abstract theorising alone. Through this discussion, I develop a set of frameworks for understanding abolitionism as a form of *praxis* in which theoretical analysis, political action and transformative knowledge production are mutually constitutive. In this regard, it is not my objective to precisely define what knowledge is and how to exactly measure transformation, but I will

explain how these elements, in the cases of the US and Brazil, developed racialised and gendered frameworks centred on mothers, which allowed for various ways of resistance and opposition against carceral systems. Chapter Two goes deeper into how abolitionism is practised within AMPARAR's organising work. Here, I distinguish between two interconnected dimensions of their abolitionist practice. The first, which I call abolitionist 'absence', consists of efforts to directly confront, challenge, denounce and resist the violence of the Brazilian carceral system while raising political consciousness. The second, abolitionist 'presence', encompasses the creation of support networks and alternative ways of building relationships and communities that seek to address the harms produced by imprisonment, state abandonment and punitive logics. Although analytically distinct for the purposes of this dissertation, in practice the two sides often overlap. I also explain how each dimension is framed under racialised and gendered forms of resistance, producing knowledge capable of opposing structures of oppression and helping shape alternatives. Chapter Three explores the challenges, implications, limitations and possibilities of these practices. It examines the tensions, constraints and contradictions involved in conducting abolitionist work and pursuing abolitionist alternatives within the broader structures of contemporary Brazilian society. Together, these chapters demonstrate how abolitionism can function as a concrete set of political and epistemological practices through which mothers, families and grassroots organisers seek to challenge carceral systems and forge alternatives.

Methods and Ethics

Interviews and Archives

In this study, I employed qualitative methodologies to investigate AMPARAR's work, namely semi-structured interviews and archival research. First, I interviewed seven AMPARAR organisers, of whom four are the original founders or have been there since the beginning: Railda, Miriam Pereira[2], Cida and Bel. Hence, interviewing organisers with varying lengths and periods of involvement in AMPARAR provided access to distinct experiences and forms of organisational knowledge, offering a nuanced understanding of the movement's history, practices and internal understandings of abolitionism. All participants were contacted via WhatsApp, as it is the primary communication platform many organisations and organisers use (Silva, 2021; AMPARAR, n.d.-a). The first four were people I already knew from my time working with them as a Law Student at the University of São Paulo; I reached out to the rest through organisers I knew, using snowball sampling (Gobo, 2007). For all participants, I explained the research, sent the participant information sheet and consent forms, and then set the interview date. Informed consent was obtained either through written consent forms or orally before the interviews in line with CUREC's guidelines (University of Oxford, 2026). Interviews were then conducted online in Portuguese via TEAMS, with audio recorded and later transcribed utilising transcription software. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility while maintaining analytical comparability (Crow and Semmens, 2007). Transcripts were then sent to participants to verify any factual inaccuracies. Six out of seven participants authorised the use of their names in research outputs and direct citations, and one

[2] Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to her as either Miriam (when citing her interview, as that is how people usually call her), Pereira (when citing her work, considering how referencing guidelines stipulate surnames as the citing criteria) or Miriam Pereira (when I want to remind the reader they are the same person).

authorised direct citations not attributable to their name. Nevertheless, I have anonymised direct quotations whenever deemed appropriate.

Using NVIVO, I conducted a theoretically informed thematic analysis inspired by Grounded Theory (Urquhart, 2013; Mitchell, 2014). I began by coding themes I identified in my literature review and based on my theoretical frameworks. After an initial review of the interview transcripts, I revised some codes to better reflect emerging themes and merged others that were more meaningful when analysed together. This process resulted in ten core codes grouped under four overarching categories. Once the coding framework was finalised, relevant parts of the interview data were allocated to the relevant codes. To deepen the analysis, I then created a document summarising the main arguments and themes associated with each code. This helped identify recurring and contrasting patterns across interviews, enabling a more detailed engagement with the data using my frameworks and informing the final chapter structure and organisation of the dissertation. The analysis was conducted entirely in Portuguese to adequately understand and interrogate AMPARAR's context, but ideas and quotes were translated into English.

For the archival research, I accessed AMPARAR's publicly available digital archives from their old blog website (which ran from 2012 to 2015) (AMPARAR, 2012-2015), their 'new' website (created and utilised since 2015) (AMPARAR, n.d.-b), and their social media pages on Facebook (operated since 2014) (AMPARAR, n.d.-c) and Instagram (operated since 2020) (AMPARAR, n.d.-d). These archives were available in two formats: first, as visual and multimedia documents, including flyers, pictures, and videos related to their campaigns, organising work or political commentary; second, as written documents consisting of blog posts and articles detailing their campaigns, what their work is about, and information and opinions about the carceral system.

Archives were selected and analysed for their content, form, and political and emotional dimensions (Biber and Luker, 2017), with particular attention paid to materials that illuminated themes emerging from the interviews. Overall, archives were utilised to cross-reference interview data, provide a more detailed framework for contextualising AMPARAR's work, and identify continuities and tensions between participants' narratives and AMPARAR's public representations of their work. With their permission, images were utilised to illustrate the points being argued, engaging with the realities in which they were produced (Banks, 2001; Carrabine, 2012). Since my focus is on understanding their work from their abolitionist perspective, perceptions, and the documents they have produced, interviews and archival research were the most appropriate methods.

Ethics in Grassroots Movements: Mitigating Extractivism and Decolonising Academia?

Academic research poses challenges and ethical dilemmas when engaging with communities or participants from marginalised backgrounds. Engaging with this within her work on the context of anticarceral feminist organisers, Tapia Tapia (2026) argues that academic research has historically been shaped by colonial and extractive dynamics, whereby researchers, often occupying privileged positions, extract knowledge from marginalised communities for professional gain while offering little in return, misrepresenting participants' realities and abandoning them once projects conclude. While acknowledging that academia often remains entangled with these structures, she proposes practices to mitigate them, including centring the knowledge and perspectives of researched communities, involving participants throughout the research process, crediting the people and communities involved, maintaining relationships and commitments to the communities they work with beyond the formal end of a research project–what she calls 'acompañamiento'–and ensuring research addresses a problem

related to their needs or reality. These approaches require reflexivity and recognition that knowledge production is shaped by the researcher's positionality in myriad ways (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020; Earle and Phillips, 2015). This also aligns with Mathiesen's (2016) notion of 'action research', which seeks to produce knowledge that can be critically put at the service of the communities the researcher has worked with while remaining transparent about methods and potential biases.

Throughout this research, I attempted to address these dynamics and follow the steps suggested by Tapia Tapia (2026). First, I remained attentive to the implications of my positionality as a Brazilian researcher working within a Global North institution. My previous involvement with AMPARAR facilitated access to participants, many of whom readily agreed to participate because they already knew me and my work with the organisation. At the same time, as a White middle-class Brazilian man, I have not experienced the same forms of systemic violence as many of the participants. Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, I sought to minimise the risk of retraumatisation by making clear that participants could pause, stop, or skip questions at any time. This positional difference also required an effort to centre participants' perspectives while avoiding the imposition of my own frameworks. To mitigate this risk, I sought participants' feedback on my interpretations and emerging arguments.

At the same time, centring participants' perspectives does not entail treating their accounts as representations of reality or reproducing them uncritically. Rather, it requires engaging with them as situated forms of knowledge produced within specific social and political contexts. My role, therefore, was not only to represent participants faithfully but also to analyse, contextualise and interpret their accounts critically (Borland, 1991; Denzin, 2003) while remaining attentive to the power relations and positionalities that shaped both their accounts and my engagement with them. This occurs especially when considering

positionality as context-dependent, relational, and dynamic rather than static (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020; Earle and Phillips, 2015).

As such, I considered how these dynamics and relationships shaped the research process. For instance, participants who already knew me may have felt more comfortable sharing their views, but they may also have assumed shared understandings that remained implicit during interviews. Conversely, those who did not know me were interacting with a White male researcher from a foreign institution via an unfamiliar digital platform (Teams for Interviews[3]). These differences may have influenced the ways participants engaged with the interviews, and I have sought to remain attentive to how they may have shaped both the content and form of participants' accounts. Regarding archives, a researcher's engagement with them is not neutral and shows their allegiances and biases to some extent (Bosworth, 2001). As such, I have attempted to balance a faithful description of their reality and work with critical analysis by comparing different archives with the interviews, all while grounding it in available literature.

Finally, as an abolitionist myself, I found that my political commitments shaped the kinds of questions I asked and the assumptions embedded in them (e.g., that there is such a thing as abolitionist practice). They also shaped the interpretations I made through my own abolitionist worldview. Nonetheless, these commitments allowed me to understand and contextualise the research findings within a broader discussion of abolitionism that I was already somewhat familiar with, while adding new insights from AMPARAR. I have tried to avoid merely confirming my prior commitments by cross-analysing interview data with archives and grounding it in the literature, identifying what was coherent and what differed from my expectations of what abolitionism and abolitionist practice were. Finally, following

[3] TEAMs is not a common tool used by organisers. It did, in fact, pose challenges to some participants in accessing the platform, which could have created a possible estrangement or potential distrust of my intentions with this research or my questions while interviewing them.

Mathiesen's (2016) notion of 'action research' and Tapia Tapia's (2026) emphasis on maintaining commitments beyond the research process, I have proposed producing a collaborative output with interested participants, potentially as a co-authored piece in Portuguese and English. Participants agreed that such an initiative would help disseminate their work and enhance the visibility of both the organisation and individual organisers. Having reflected on the ethical challenges of this research, I now turn to contextualising AMPARAR's abolitionism within broader abolitionist and critical frameworks.

Chapter One: Abolitionism - from Theory to Practice or from Practice to Theory? Knowledge Production through Abolitionist *Praxis*.

In this chapter, I will discuss the development of abolitionist ideals at specific historical moments across three contexts – Scandinavia, the United States and Brazil. I will explain the dynamics through which these ideas developed in these three contexts using a process that Paulo Freire[4] (1968/2014) called *praxis*. I will show that *praxis* (Freire, 1968/2014), in the context of abolitionist organising, means understanding that abolitionism is a concrete political practice; that theory emerges from this practice; and that this theory interacts with practice, in a constant dialectical motion–with no clear beginning or end–in order to produce knowledge capable of resisting and transforming structures of oppression in various ways. Using the examples of KROM (Norway), Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (United States) and AMPARAR (Brazil), I do not seek to trace a definitive history of abolitionism or to attribute social change solely to these movements[5]. Instead, I will use these cases to establish the conceptual foundations, frameworks and analytical lenses of my dissertation. I will also engage with them to illustrate how organisers–specifically the mothers and families of AMPARAR–can be understood as producers of political knowledge, collective strategies, and forms of resistance. Hence, this chapter is not merely a literature review or theoretical section, but also a genealogy of abolitionist knowledge production that already introduces some of AMPARAR's empirical work.

[4] Paulo Freire was a Brazilian pedagogue and one of the most important critical scholars from the Global South. His ideas around knowledge production and revolutionary *praxis* are fundamental to understanding processes of resistance against oppressive structures. Hence, why I chose his frameworks for my dissertation.

[5] Unfortunately, to precisely trace a history of abolitionism throughout the three contexts was too hard a task for this dissertation. As such, I am not positing these three examples are 'origin stories' for abolitionism or abolitionist ideals, but rather three specifically historically situated examples where an abolitionist *praxis* can be examined.

The Committees for Penal Reform and Scandinavian Abolitionism

Before the high standards of 'exceptionalism' for which Scandinavian prisons are known today (Reiter *et al.*, 2018), prisons in countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland faced severe problems of overcrowding and legitimacy (Christie, 2013; Mathiesen, 2016). In response, a series of penal reform organisations emerged across the region, including KRUM in Sweden (1966), KRIM in Denmark (1967), and KROM in Norway (1968) (Mathiesen, 1974). These organisations were grassroots in nature because they brought together prisoners, former prisoners and families (those with lived experience, direct or indirect) along with academics, practitioners and other members of civil society around a shared critique of imprisonment and, eventually, an explicitly abolitionist orientation (Mathiesen, 2016). More importantly, their frameworks for opposing prisons were based on organising practices and theoretical reflections developed in dialectical interaction with one another.

Specifically, Norwegian KROM's activities included campaigning, policy advocacy, public meetings and collaborative research (Christie, 2013; Mathiesen, 2016). Through these activities, organising practices and theoretical reflection developed in constant interaction. Mathiesen's (2016) work on the concepts of the 'unfinished' and 'action research' emerged from this process. The former one framed abolitionism as an ongoing project without predetermined solutions, while the latter understood research as inseparable from efforts to transform the structures under investigation. As Mathiesen (2016: 28-29) explains, participation in KROM led organisers to understand political work as 'unfinished business' and researchers to define their engagement as 'action research', through which learning experiences were transformed into strategic and analytical knowledge towards policy change.

This dialectical relationship can be better understood through Freire's (1968/2014: 51) concept of *praxis*, defined as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it'. Rather than viewing theory (generally understood as forms of reflection) and practice (generally understood as forms of action) as separate, Freire (1968/2014) argues that both are mutually constitutive and together generate knowledge capable of change, which in the context of his work meant resisting and transforming structures of oppression.

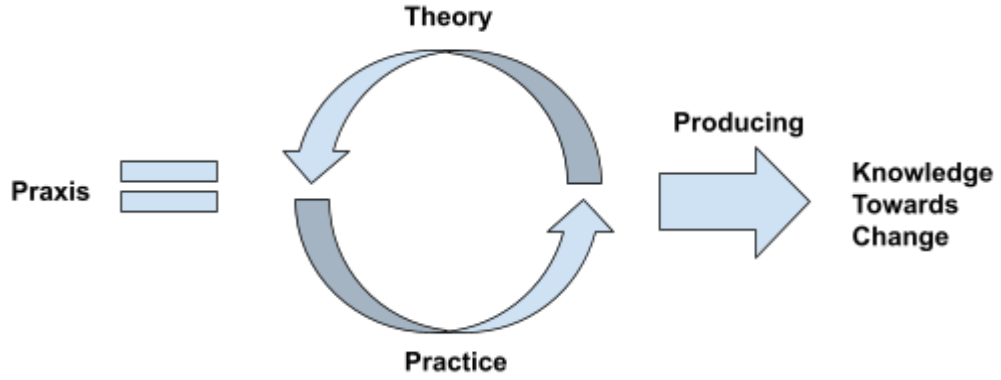


Diagram built based on my interpretation of Freire's (1968/2014) work.

For KROM, this *praxis* produced knowledge in the form of analytical frameworks and organising strategies that contributed to change through prison reform and decarceration in Norway (Christie, 2013; Mathiesen, 1974, 2016). This is not to say that abolitionist organisers and KROM were the only ones responsible for this change, especially because these dynamics are being described through the eyes of one of its founders (Mathiesen, 1974). Rather, I contend that, within the increasingly liberal political landscape of Norwegian society, which had developed a critical outlook on how prisoners were being treated (Mathiesen, 2016), KROM's *praxis* arguably contributed to the production of knowledge that was useful in influencing carceral policies and shaping understandings around punishment in the country. It also developed relevant frameworks for understanding abolitionism and abolitionist research, such as 'the unfinished' and 'action research'. This is also not to suggest similar concepts or

frameworks did not exist before KROM (Mathiesen, 2016), but rather that their work helped develop them within the context of abolitionist struggle.

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children and American Abolitionism

Meanwhile, in the United States, the rapid expansion of imprisonment during the 1980s and 1990s disproportionately affected poor Black, Latino and other racialised communities, particularly in states such as California (Gilmore, 2007; Davis, 2003). This expansion was accompanied by aggressive policing, prison construction and broader processes of social and economic disinvestment that concentrated violence and punishment within marginalised communities (Gilmore, 2007, 2022). In response, grassroots movements emerged to challenge both imprisonment and the conditions that produced it.

One of the most influential of these was Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (ROC), founded in Los Angeles after the police killing of George Noyes and led primarily by poor women of colour directly affected by state violence and incarceration (Gilmore, 2007, 2022). Beginning as a self-help and support network, ROC evolved into a broader movement that organised against prisons, policing and the racialised and gendered inequalities shaping the lives of their families and communities. As Gilmore (2022: 293) argues, these women transformed the experiences and responsibilities associated with motherhood into a basis for collective abolitionist political action, a process she describes as the ‘conscientisation of motherhood’. This dynamic is particularly relevant to the present study, as it demonstrates how mothers affected by punitive systems can become producers of political knowledge and organisers of resistance (Gilmore, 2022). It challenges dominant approaches to prisoners' families, which have often focused on the harms of imprisonment while paying less attention

to how families organise politically in response to those harms (Ferraro *et al.,* 1983; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999).

More importantly, similar to the Norwegian case, the relationship between abolitionist theory and practice within these movements was dialectical rather than one-directional. ROC's organising practice drew on existing radical, feminist and anti-racist traditions while simultaneously generating new forms of analysis grounded in lived experience. Organisers such as Francie Arbol connected critiques of capitalism, racism and punishment to practical campaigns against prison expansion and state violence, helping develop strategies that linked everyday experiences to broader structural conditions (Gilmore, 2007, 2022). As a result, political analysis shaped organising practices, while organising practices generated new forms of political analysis.

Through their organising work and that of later movements in the country (Herzing and Piché, 2024), concepts such as racial capitalism, the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and its connections to the legacies of slavery in the US were further developed and popularised. These concepts provided abolitionist analytical frameworks that made critical contributions to older frameworks on prisons and carceral systems. Prison scholars traditionally focused mainly on understanding the realities of the prison system through what happened inside (Sykes, 1957/2007; Goffman, 1968). Although those older scholars were significantly influential in shedding light on the neglected perspectives of prisoners, they did not highlight connections between punishment, political economy, race and gender, overlooking the historical continuities of colonial processes and taking the existence of prisons as a given. Hence, American abolitionist scholarship (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Herzing and Piché, 2024) that emerged from the practices of groups such as ROC, in tandem with other critical scholarship (e.g. Rusche, G. *et al.,* 1939/2004; Garland, 1993; Bosworth, 2004; Wacquant,

2009), began critically engaging with some of these matters and, most importantly, the possibility of a world without prison walls and carceral logics.

These frameworks, in turn, shaped subsequent successful abolitionist organising and campaigns. While prison expansion in California was influenced by a range of political, legal and economic factors, Gilmore (2020) and Herzing and Piché (2024) argue that abolitionist movements such as ROC played an important role in challenging further prison construction and reshaping public debates about punishment. Although many of these accounts come through the 'partial' retrospective reflections of organisers who later became scholars (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2022; Herzing and Piché, 2024), they do not point to abolitionists being the only deciding factor in containing the carceral system. They operated within the diverse geopolitical landscape of the country at the time, which included many other political actors (Gilmore, 2007). These accounts nevertheless illustrate that, as in the Scandinavian case, abolitionism can be understood as a form of *praxis* in which theory and practice continually informed one another. Furthermore, this dialectical process within the American context produced–through the work of mothers of prisoners, families and women organisers–forms of knowledge capable of enacting change, namely influencing, to a certain degree, both political action and broader understandings of punishment. Of particular relevance is how, based on previous critical frameworks, the goal towards the 'abolition' of punitive systems was framed as a continuity of the 'abolition' of slavery, which, similarly to Brazil, has had interconnected dimensions of racialised and gendered oppression towards a Black population (Davis, 2003; Darke and Khan, 2021; Gilmore, 2022).

AMPARAR and Brazilian Abolitionism

In Brazil, the extreme violence in the peripheries, the prison system and the youth justice system since the 1990s has produced a myriad of resistance movements emerging from mothers, families and those most affected (Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024; Klink, 2024). Furthermore, many of these movements–in Brazil as well as in Latin America–have involved similar practices of organising or seeking justice, with varying degrees of arguably abolitionist work, even though they might not define it as such (Diniz, 2026). In this regard, determining exactly when AMPARAR adopted an explicitly abolitionist label is difficult. Few documents from before 2012 are available (Diniz, 2026), and organisers provided only broad estimates, generally placing their adoption between six and ten years ago.

Nevertheless, before AMPARAR explicitly called themselves an abolitionist movement, they had a long history of what could be understood as abolitionist practice, rooted in the organising work of mothers and families. This abolitionist practice consisted of traditional anti-prison and decarceral campaigns, but it was most importantly centred on building support networks between mothers with incarcerated children and people with lived experience to resist state violence, racialised police brutality and mass imprisonment (Lago, 2019; Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024). This practice was compounded by an abolitionist stance they have also had for a while. Mathiesen (2016: 54-55) defines abolitionism as a 'stance' insofar as it represents the 'attitude of saying no', or 'a constant and deeply critical attitude to prisons and penal systems as human (and inhumane) solutions'. In this regard, one of the organisers mentioned in their interview that *'AMPARAR is a recognisable abolitionist organisation because, since the nineties, they haven't been demanding more humane prisons and punishment... They have been demanding an end to prisons and punishment'*. On their old blog, the first piece of writing they ever published–in March 2012 (AMPARAR, 2012)–called

for the ‘end of the carceral state’, criticising the way criminal justice systems and the judiciary function as interconnected systems of class control. They end the blog post by saying ‘To face prisons we must prepare to face this carceral state in all its dimensions, that is the role of AMPARAR’ (AMPARAR, 2012). Furthermore, in December 2014, they published a video titled ‘For a World Without Prisons’, in which they criticise the racialised and gendered structure and logics of the Brazilian Prison system, with one of the mother organisers arguing that ‘prison is a failed institution: there is no ‘good’ prison, there is no system that incarcerates and enables a human being to be better’ (AMPARAR, 2014/2024). As such, even though it is hard to determine exactly when the explicit abolitionist ‘label’ appeared, AMPARAR has been conducting abolitionist practice shaped by an abolitionist stance, both based on the work and perspectives of their mothers, families and organisers.

Their abolitionist practice and stance have enabled the emergence of analytical concepts and theoretical political positions that, in turn, have shaped how that practice is conducted. This dialectical relationship can be observed, for instance, in their defence of the position that ‘every prisoner is a political prisoner’. In a 2014 political statement titled ‘The Politics of Prison and the Prison of Politics’, AMPARAR’s organisers argue that the prison system does not exist, as it claims, to fight crime (AMPARAR, 2014a, see appendix). Instead, they explain that it serves to control and divide the Black population within Brazil’s capitalist society. As such, they argue that, within capitalist societies overall, prisons function as political instruments for the containment of racialised and marginalised populations, making ‘every prisoner a political prisoner’ (AMPARAR, 2014a). The development of this criticism–closely resembling Gilmore’s (2007, 2022) and Davis’ (2003) ideas on the role of prisons within racial capitalism–has been accompanied by the use of the political position of ‘every prisoner is a political prisoner’ as part of their identity and within organising strategies.

Since then, it has been used on banners for protests and campaigns (AMPARAR, n.d.-e; AMPARAR, 2018, 2024, see appendix). Despite not being the first to utilise this political jargon (Silva, 2021), over the years, AMPARAR has adopted and developed, within its practice, the analytical category of positioning every prisoner as a political prisoner. This positioning, in turn, has framed their political identity and organising practice.



Image 1. Railda and Miriam are holding a banner with the words 'Every Prisoner is a Political Prisoner' written above AMPARAR's logo. Available on AMPARAR's (n.d.-e) website.

Furthermore, similar to Mothers Reclaiming Our Children in the US (Gilmore, 2007), this dialectical relationship is also shaped by how AMPARAR developed specifically through the organising of mothers–many of whom were Black–for their children (Lago, 2019; Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024). As Fabinho explained in his interview, AMPARAR was born from the fact that *'these mothers came together… that Railda believed a movement of mothers could change the paradigm of human rights violations, of torture against their kids'*. Fabinho went on to say that this belief '*formed a relationship between these mothers that produced a movement and as a result an organisation with such potency was born'*. In this regard,

throughout the interviews I conducted, many organisers–and especially Miriam, Railda, Cida and Bel–consistently reinforced how what built and maintained AMPARAR were the relationships developed among mothers–and more broadly families as well–to resist the racialised and gendered forms of oppression they were subject to. Based on these relationships and forms of organisation, they became sensitive to the continuity of colonial logics that structured these forms of oppression. In their open letter (AMPARAR, 2017; Pereira, 2024: 20; see appendix), AMPARAR officially recognises the continuity of these legacies by stating that 'Freedom for a prisoner reminds us of a part of history slaves were 'freed' but had nowhere to go… The same happens to prisoners today, they go on without direction and dreams'. As Railda said in her interview, *'we are in the 21st Century, and we still see the slave houses, just in a different shape'*. Hence, overall, the practice of their bonding as mostly racialised mothers resisting for their children formed the movement that became AMPARAR, developing the critical frameworks through which their organising would operate and would later be framed as abolitionist.

This organising was not only built from the suffering of their children, but also from the oppression that these mothers and families would directly face. In her thesis, Silva (2021) explores how the burden and maintenance of the Brazilian prison system falls upon the labour of these women of colour: to visit their relatives (children, partners or other family members), offer them basic material support which Brazilian prisons do not provide–such as enough food, clothes and hygiene items–as well as perform an emotional support role. Furthermore, Pereira (2024) and Lago (2019) also add that the bodies of these women were violated through an assortment of practices that occurred within prisons and youth imprisonment facilities, such as invasive and humiliating intimate searches that would have them strip naked, crouch down and have prison guards search their genitalia. This practice was widely

considered a form of institutional gendered violence and torture towards women visitors (ITTC, 2017). Similar to literature elsewhere, families of prisoners, many of whom are mothers and women, often suffer many harms and violations that come directly from imprisonment (Condry and Minson, 2020) and carry the burden of sustaining the dynamics of the prison system (Kotova and Cacicedo, 2026). Silva (2021) argues that the solidarity networks formed in the visitors' waiting lines had the potential to create forms of resistance against these burdens and violations, as was the case with AMPARAR.

Then, for AMPARAR, a dialectical relationship between theory and practice, as well as between oppression and resistance, has carved out an abolitionist *praxis* through which knowledge has been produced towards policy change. Their long-practised abolitionist strategies, based on the recognition of the Brazilian prison system as tied to capitalist and colonial structures of inequality, as well as on positions such as 'every prisoner is a political prisoner', have allowed them to mobilise other collectives towards similar goals and effect reforms. Miriam and Camila explain that AMPARAR were successful in mobilising public institutions and numerous other major civil society organisations, many of which shared their abolitionist goals and premises, to pursue campaigns. As examples, they mentioned AMPARAR engaging in a reform campaign that culminated in the right for certain prisoners to vote, and initiating another that prohibited the humiliating intimate search of visitors. Indeed, as various authors explain (Diniz, 2019; Lago, 2019; Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024), AMPARAR were central to the development and success of some of these campaigns. On their old blog, the campaign leaflet they have produced to end humiliating intimate searches is still available (AMPARAR, 2014b). It shows a woman covering her face, presumably from the humiliation of the practice, with the phrase 'Being family (of prisoners) is not a crime. No to humiliating searches in prisons'.



Image 2. Leaflet for the campaign to end violating intimate searches. Available on their old blog (AMPARAR, 2014b).

Hence, AMPARAR's abolitionist *praxis*–or the dialectical relationship between theory and practice within the context of their organising work–has enabled the development of knowledge with transformative capacity. This knowledge was produced by mothers, families and grassroots organisers as a response to the oppression and violence the Brazilian carceral system subjected them to.

Overall, in this chapter, I have explained how abolitionism is a concrete political practice from which theory, analytical concepts, and frameworks emerge by reconstituting the trajectory of three grassroots organising movements in Norway, the US and Brazil. These frameworks then feed back into practice in a dialectical manner, without a clear beginning or end, producing knowledge based on grassroots organisers and, specifically, in the latter two contexts, mothers of prisoners. This knowledge was capable of influencing and transforming, to varying degrees, the realities in which this abolitionist *praxis* has developed. So far, I have only generally touched upon AMPARAR's abolitionist work and this process of *praxis* and

transformative knowledge production. I have framed this knowledge vaguely as ‘analytical frameworks’ and ‘organising strategies’ towards ‘transformation’. I have also only measured this ‘transformation’ in terms of reform and policy change. Although my objective is not to precisely define those terms, in the next chapter, I will dive deeper into exactly what sort of work they do and how it constitutes an abolitionist *praxis* grounded in various types of knowledge production geared towards distinct forms of transformation: from breaking punitive practices and logics, to generating care infrastructures based on community-building and organic relationships. I will also continue to refer to some of the ideas and frameworks established in this chapter in order to analyse AMPARAR’s work.

Chapter Two: To Abolish or to Create? Actually, to Aid, to Educate, to 'AMPARAR'

In this chapter, I will explore AMPARAR's abolitionist work by analytically separating it into two core axes, based on Gilmore and Lambert's (2018) postulation that:

> 'Abolition is not absence, it is presence… those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can'.

Drawing on this statement, I will first talk about the elements of AMPARAR's work that may fall within the realm of 'absence'–or what I frame as a direct anti-prison abolishing struggle to 'tear down the walls', denounce and dismantle the Brazilian carceral system. Second, I will explore the aspects that operate within the realm of 'presence', or the ways in which AMPARAR build communities and support networks, develop organic ways of relating to one another in order to fill the gaps of state abandonment, break with individual punitive logics and deal with conflict in more productive manners. I will, in fact, argue that they both dismantle, abolish and create in their own right, because while analytically distinct, these dimensions frequently overlap in practice, as efforts to resist carceral systems are often inseparable from efforts to build alternatives to them. I will also engage with how the *praxis* of both axes produces knowledge capable of, on the one hand, dismantling punitive practices and logics, and, on the other, establishing new ways of understanding collective action, freedom, and an ethics of life for conflict resolution and for relating to other people.

Abolitionist 'Absence': Denouncing the Carceral State and Raising Political Consciousness

One of AMPARAR's core aspects of its organising work is to denounce. First, to denounce human rights violations and mistreatment occurring within prisons. They do that through the information gathered by families and visitors about what is happening in certain penal establishments (Pereira, 2024). They gather this information either from families who come to their headquarters in São Paulo (Lago, 2019) or families who contact their numbers available on their website (AMPARAR, n.d.-a)–and, as Fabinho told me, *'gets passed around the communities'*. They are also present in and engage with families in visitors' waiting lines (Silva, 2021; AMPARAR, n.d.-f). The next step is to forward the complaints gathered to the authorities. They do so by establishing connections with institutions such as the Public Defender's Office, particularly its Specialised Centre for Prison Surveillance (NESC), through which complaints can be formally pursued in court (Lago, 2019). One of the mothers who was there from the early beginnings, Bel, summarises it as *AMPARAR can't go inside prisons, but since it works through the mothers and families of people in prison, they can gather their complaints and forward them to the public authorities responsible for prison oversight*. By operating as a mediator between information gathered on prison violations by families and organisations capable of taking action against these problems, AMPARAR develops tangible action in denouncing the systemic violence present in the prison system. Hence, they themselves become an informal body for prison oversight (Pereira *et al.*, 2024).

In fact, it is mainly through this mediating work that they have acted to dismantle. First, by establishing an informal oversight body, they become primary articulators and initiators of important reform campaigns to reduce the prison system. Miriam and Camila talked about how the campaign against intimate searches for visitors in adult prisons and FEBEM was initiated around the 2010s by the gathering of complaints of visitor mothers

going through those humiliating procedures. These complaints formed the basis for a network of civil society organisations, called ‘Rede Justiça Criminal’ (Network Criminal Justice), to organise this campaign (Silva, 2021). This culminated in a decision by the Brazilian Supreme Court (‘STF’) to prohibit such practices (Lopes, 2025). Furthermore, AMPARAR also acts within the decarceral framework because they help take action on individual cases. Part of their work involves connecting mothers and families with lawyers and public defenders to inform them about their loved ones' criminal proceedings and to help get them out of prison or guarantee their access to certain rights or material needs while incarcerated (e.g. health care) (Lago, 2019; Klink, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2024). As such, AMPARAR’s anti-prison work has been and remains responsible for addressing individual cases as well as denouncing structural problems in the Brazilian prison system.

Nevertheless, this sort of work could be argued not necessarily to entail, by itself, abolitionist work, as reform groups could be engaged in similar endeavours (Mathiesen, 2016). In this regard, AMPARAR’s work distinguishes itself from purely reformist groups or other forms of families’ solidarity groups because it is also concentrated on denouncing the carceral state more broadly. Their guiding principles are that ‘the evils generated by prisons are so great that prisons simply shouldn’t exist!’, having always had as a core objective ‘to denounce this criminal genocidal state’ (AMPARAR, n.d.-g). They incorporate these principles into their work through efforts to raise political consciousness. Railda explains that this abolitionist political consciousness-raising first emerged through the distribution of informational flyers to visitors at FEBEM and in adult prison queues, detailing prison conditions, the structural panorama of the Brazilian carceral system, and its effects on the peripheries. She said, *’when I was distributing flyers to Miriam, Bel, Cida and the other mothers… I didn’t know it yet, but it was abolitionism’*. Camila told me this later expanded

more systematically around 2015 into formative discussion groups with families to talk about what carceral systems represented overall and why they should be abolished. She told me *'those discussion groups–still happening today–make people connect the scenario of misery they live in, and the rising unemployment and violence rates, with how mass incarceration operates'*. This connection, as she points out, *'makes them see prisons as another part of the horizon of systemic violence and state abandonment that affects the racialised poor'*. Furthermore, Pereira (2024) explains that families often help develop and shape the topics to be discussed in those groups, in a manner that allows for horizontal critical engagement. One of the organisers argued that mothers' and families' involvement in shaping discussions and debates on these topics led to changes. They said it *'transformed them from passive observers to active subjects in this struggle'*. Thus, AMPARAR (2024a) develops activities that more broadly question the dynamics and logics of incarceration and punitive systems. Through abolitionist political consciousness-raising, they also help empower the people they work with into active agents in a struggle and resistance against the carceral state.

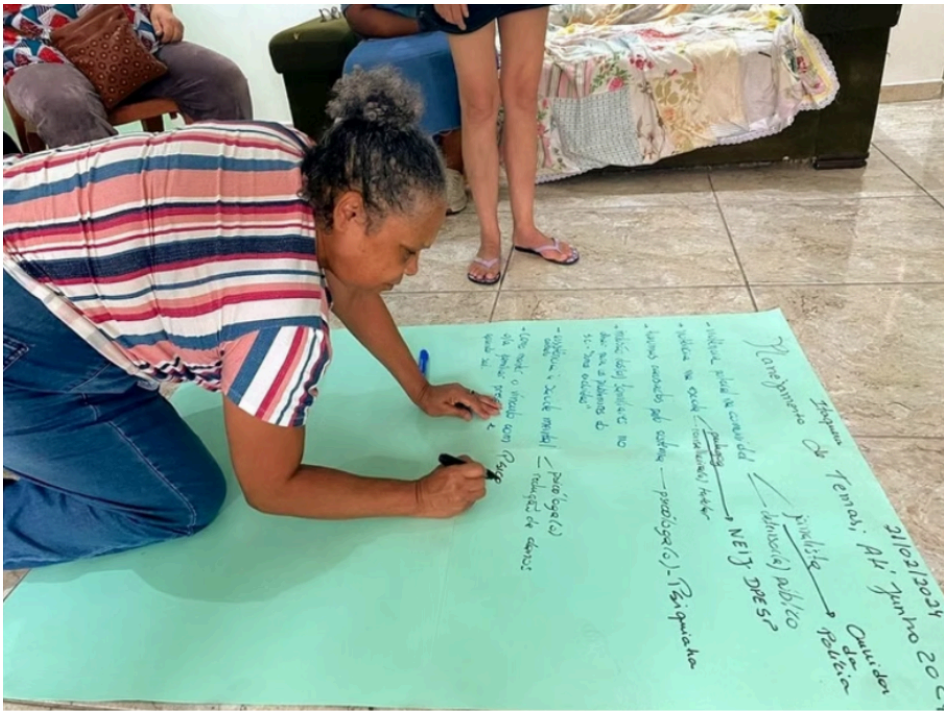


Image 3. Miriam writing down ideas and topics during one of the families' discussion groups. Available on their website (AMPARAR, 2024a).

Furthermore, this active abolitionist resistance and political empowerment is centred in a racialised and gendered framework surrounding motherhood. AMPARAR begins their open letter by saying 'we are women–Black, poor and from the peripheries', framing their resistance around the claim to the right of motherhood, as they say, 'we just want to be mothers! We have the right to life, the right to be mothers and the right to see our children live!' (AMPARAR, 2017; Pereira, 2024: 20; see appendix). Lago (2019) explains that this framework is compounded by the refusal of the mother organisers of AMPARAR to be seen as mothers to be pitied, instead referring to themselves as 'lionesses'. By referring to themselves as 'lionesses', Silva (2021: 170) argues that these mothers embody values such as strength, courage and leadership, turning away from the passive image of the 'Virgin Mary'. This mirrors Condry and Minson's (2020) understanding of prisoners' families as having

agency to negotiate, to some extent, the harms of the punishment process. It also challenges older scholarship on families of prisoners (Ferraro *et al.,* 1983; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999), which focuses on their suffering without highlighting how they may also organise resistance against it. A resistance that was developed as a direct response to the racialised and gendered violences these mothers were subjected to (Pereira, 2024), as well as the family maintenance labour they had to undertake within the patriarchal logics of carceral systems (Silva, 2021; Kotova and Cacicedo, 2026). This resistance also closely resembles how the activists of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children invoked the idea of mothering as a collective action to organise, claiming no one was disposable while also including those who were not mothers or Black within the movement (Gilmore, 2022). Similarly, AMPARAR, despite having many Black mothers and women involved, also incorporates the work of those who are not women, with Fabinho being an active part of the movement, and those who do not identify as Black–as is the case with Camila. As such, despite engaging with organisers from various backgrounds, resistance to carceral systems through the racial and gendered imagery of motherhood–creating active agents of transformation–is brought to the forefront as part of AMPARAR's work.

Finally, this abolitionist 'absence' work AMPARAR conducts, based on the politically empowering resistance framework of motherhood, develops a *praxis* which produces transformative knowledge. Camila explained it by telling me how: *'AMPARAR, through its mothers and organisers, is capable of noticing changes in the dynamics within the processes of control and punishment in the country'*. She said that *'when families and visitors tell them how things operate within the walls of confinement, AMPARAR can develop a strong structural analysis of how people are punished in the country'*. This goes beyond merely documenting experiences of suffering, moving into a systematic, analytical undertaking

grounded in these experiences. This structural analysis, anchored in the notion of the mothers and families of AMPARAR constituting this informal oversight body (Pereira *et al.*, 2024), informed research reports that AMPARAR has co-authored over the years. They, for instance, have written about the forms of 'invisible violences', rights violations and stigmatisation that families of prisoners have to go through (AMPARAR and Conectas, 2023), how the effects of prison remain with those leaving the system and their families (AMPARAR *et al.*, 2022) and how the pandemic has affected prisoners and their families (Magri *et al*., 2020). These reports and analyses are then fed back into practice. Lago (2019) and Klink (2024: 218) describe this process of *praxis* as transforming the 'suffering narratives' gathered by AMPARAR into analytical tools for influencing public debate and policy, as exemplified by their work on the prohibition of intimate searches. As such, these mothers and families produce knowledge capable of change, namely dismantling some of the violating practices of the carceral state. Furthermore, the political consciousness-raising aspect of AMPARAR, which frames mothers who would otherwise be seen as pitiable as 'lionesses' (Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024)–capable of structuring their own resistance to the carceral system–is also a form of transformative knowledge production. It dismantles notions of mothers of prisoners as mere passive subjects of harm and builds more empowering frameworks in its wake, shaping these women into activists and organisers towards change. Hence, AMPARAR's abolitionist 'absence' work fundamentally develops a *praxis* from its mothers, families and organisers that produces knowledge capable of dismantling some of the practices and logics of the Brazilian carceral system.

However, this is not the only side of AMPARAR's work. Despite mentioning multiple aspects that, in my view, constitute forms of resistance to abolishing prisons in a more confrontational, direct sense, many of the organisers I interviewed insisted on focusing the

conversation on parts of their work that establish something in the wake of this confrontation. As Miriam puts it, *'I don't want to just talk about tearing down walls, no, I want to build, so that when we do leave these walls, we will never look back'*. As such, I now turn to the aspects of AMPARAR's work which are, according to the organisers, more prevalent in their daily abolitionist practice: taking families in and aiding them, building support networks and communities, and developing organic non-punitive ways of relating to one another.

Abolitionist 'Presence': Building Support Networks, Communities and Organic Relations

To start, AMPARAR's work is centred on the idea of 'acolhimento'–a Portuguese word which means the 'reception of someone', 'to take someone in and welcome them'. AMPARAR's own acronym plays with the Portuguese word 'amparar', which means 'to support', 'to aid', 'to shelter' and 'to give strength to' (Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2026). Lago (2019) and Pereira (2024) explain that this sheltering and support occur in the ways AMPARAR's organisers listen to the struggles of those who come to them with their troubles surrounding the criminal justice system in non-judgemental ways. They explain that this adds a significant affective dimension to what they do, usually attributed to mothers, based on building relationships. Miriam Pereira, Railda, Cida and Bel are the organisers that I interviewed who founded AMPARAR, and all of them had their children or family members incarcerated, while some of them were killed by direct state violence or indirect state neglect, or a combination of both. Pereira (2024) argues that AMPARAR's work was shaped by the organisers' own experiences as mothers who had endured many of the same forms of violence affecting the families they now support. She explains this shared experience enabled them to listen to people's stories with care and provide forms of support and sheltering (to 'amparar'). She argues that this is helpful, particularly because they often listen to the stories of

abandonment that the women they work with feel from the State and the discrimination they have to go through by their own family members, and how they feel prison structures their lives. This is not to say that organisers who are not mothers can't practice these forms of 'acolhimento', but rather that the strategies and tools for doing so were developed through the experience of AMPARAR's mothers. For instance, Fabinho told me that this 'acolhimento' and sheltering are practised through simple gestures such as *'hugging them and telling them it's not their fault that they are in this condition'*. He says *'these women often come with no support from their own family members, and with an 'Euro-Christian view' that they failed as mothers, grandmothers and partners'*.

In response, AMPARAR's 'acolhimento' work is abolitionist because it is centred on deconstructing the image of women relatives, partners and mothers of prisoners who allegedly failed their kin. Fabinho says this is done, for example, *'by never asking what crime was committed, and by not reducing the process they are going through to a statutory offence, because prisons are never about the crime'*. This is aligned with abolitionist perspectives that attempt to deconstruct and denaturalise a necessary relationship between crime and punishment, instead indicating that punishment constitutes a form of class and racial control, structured by gendered dimensions (Davis, 2003; Scott, 2013). Furthermore, Pereira (2024: 50) explains that these women, when participating in AMPARAR's activities, change their ways of thinking, realising that this perception and 'weight of failure' are tied to the construction of an unequal capitalist society derived from coloniality, slavery's legacies, patriarchy and whiteness–with punishment at its centre. Hence, AMPARAR's support work of 'acolhimento' is centred on breaking the moral ties between crime and punishment, understanding the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist origins of a sensation and 'burden of failure' while caring for families from a racial and gendered perspective. This could also be

understood as another form of abolitionist consciousness-raising, enacting a certain dismantling.

Nevertheless, this breakage of moral ties and the dismantling of the colonial, racialised, gendered belief in the 'burden of failure' is simultaneously accompanied by the building of relationships, namely in the form of communities and organic ways of relating to one another. This relationship and community-building centres on solidarity as a guiding principle. In this regard, AMPARAR (Fundo Brasil, n.d.) defines itself as a 'solidarity and reference group to the exercise of citizenship'. Klink (2024) argues that AMPARAR builds solidarity by developing informal and community ties grounded in an ethics of care. Pereira (2024) explains that this is done through the development of a politics of proximity and the building of support networks for families from marginalised territories. In my interview with her, Miriam says that *'I walk throughout the territories, meeting their residents, visiting their homes and identifying the problems of these places and the families that live in them'*. In her thesis, Miriam Pereira (2024) clarifies that this process of walking the territory develops relationships of trust between AMPARAR and prisoners' families, establishes networks of support that connect different families, while also forming female and mother leaders in these territories capable of channelling prison complaints to AMPARAR. She argues that it particularly equips those leaders with the tools to address emerging problems related to criminal justice in tandem with the organisation. In this regard, Railda said *the families we work with become 'multipliers' as they then go on to help each other through the WhatsApp groups we have*. Additionally, one of the singular ways AMPARAR helps create these connections and build relationships is through their end-of-the-year 'Solidarity Christmas'. In this event, they gather donations and gift Christmas bags to children whose parent(s) are

incarcerated, engaging the communities they work with in a day of celebrations and building relationships (AMPARAR, n.d.-h; AMPARAR, 2023).



Image 4. Leaflet for a donation campaign for Solidarity Christmas 2023 with 'Christmas Bags 2023' written in it. Available on AMPARAR's (2023) Instagram page.

Hence, initiatives such as this Solidarity Christmas, along with their 'acolhimento' and walking practices, help establish organic, mutually supportive relationships and networks. Not only do they work with pre-established communities, but they also build them. These forms of solidarity and community building in response to the harms of imprisonment go beyond what Condry and Minson (2020: 15) described as families 'negotiating the process of punishment harms'. It shows how, in the case of AMPARAR, they don't merely negotiate but rather channel these harms and processes into an active movement by articulating communities and support networks.

This community-building through support networks is hampered by the connections formed with multiple other organisations, institutions (public or private) and movements. These groups engage with the debate around, or directly offer, services in legal assistance, education, housing, health, mental health and food subsistence, just to name a few (Pereira, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2024; Klink, 2024). They allow AMPARAR to offer, directly or indirectly, a variety of cross-sectional services to families, addressing many of their material needs. Cida, Fabinho and Railda explain that some of these partners and services include the public defender's office and law students from the University of São Paulo (USP)[6] (for legal assistance and developing research projects), psychology students from the University Paulista (UNIP), municipal health and social assistance services (SUS, CREAS and CRAS) and other social movements to fight for the right to housing, education, etc. In this regard, Miriam says that *'I fight thinking about housing, health, and so many things I want to bring closer to AMPARAR'*. She says she establishes connections with organisations and institutions that offer these things by *'knocking on their door… introducing myself and AMPARAR's work'*, which essentially brings their communities' problems directly to those who can help.

In fact, this 'knocking on the door' approach is a crucial element of the work of the organisers at AMPARAR. Fabinho, Railda and another organiser, when telling me what role they have in AMPARAR, said they are 'political articulators' insofar as they articulate connections with these other movements, services and institutions. This political articulation for providing essential services, which are scarce in the favelas, aligns with the abolitionist perspective of abolishing prisons as well as the conditions that lead to them (Davis, 2003; Ilea, 2018; Gilmore, 2022). Within this framework, AMPARAR's abolitionist work is centred

[6] This partnership occurs primarily through a research group that I partook in called 'Centro de Estudos Punição e Estrutura Social' (Punishment and Social Structure Study Centre), which currently studies and researches matters of punishment such as the prison conditions in the prison system of the State of Sao Paulo. It is also how I first got in contact with AMPARAR's work. For more, see Freitas *et al.* (2024).

on providing the material conditions of subsistence that have been withheld from the people who live in the favelas and peripheries. When asked what she wanted to abolish, Miriam answered that: *'to abolish, you have to educate, but to educate you have to abolish: abolish what's established in the judiciary, in the education system, in the health system, cultural opportunities, etc'*. Miriam gives the example of one of the mothers they work with going to university through the partnerships they establish: *'she is making her dreams come true… and, when that happens, she's abolishing something'*.

Furthermore, they also articulate connections with international movements. AMPARAR promotes many events, including an international seminar of their own (AMPARAR, n.d.-i) and were involved in the creation of an international collective of families of prisoners in Latin America and Spain, RIMUF (Red Internacional de Mujeres Familiares de Personas Privadas de su Libertad) (Diniz, 2026). According to their website, this internationalisation helps build a 'global network for the end of prisons and punishment' (AMPARAR, n.d.-i). As such, AMPARAR constitutes strong support networks in multi-sectional and multi-geographical forms, with concrete, tangible implications and forms of assistance for the families they work with. Fabinho frames it as: *Railda and Miriam are great spiderwomen, spanning great webs that connect and add up.*

From these woven webs, networks established and communities built, as well as through the practices of 'acolhimento' and walking the territory, an abolitionist *praxis* is developed with the emergence of transformative knowledge. This transformation brings three key elements: an understanding of knowledge production as a collective endeavour; alternative understandings of freedom with practical implications; and an abolitionist ethics of living. First, it rests on an understanding of knowledge production as a collective endeavour. AMPARAR builds networks through which analytical frameworks and theoretical discussions

emerge, in which people's rights (and their violations) are discussed, shaping their organising practice and empowering the women they work with (Silva, 2021). One of the organisers talked, for instance, about how AMPARAR establishes dialogue and conversations with broader feminist movements, incorporates those frameworks into their work, and helps frame their organising practice through the lens of motherhood. Conversely, they explained how AMPARAR develops, along with these movements, discussions about non-punitive and non-carceral ways of attempting to work through feminist discussions around gender violence. In this regard, Cida notes that *'knowledge is produced when we bring people from diverse fields, such as law and health sciences, to engage with our work or participate in discussion groups'*. She explains this occurs by raising awareness and sharing knowledge while helping to build a broader conversation around these topics collectively. In one of the organisers' words, AMPARAR *'teaches by learning and learns by teaching'*.

Furthermore, a traditional fallacious divide in knowledge production between academia, those from the ivory tower who 'think' and theorise, versus the organisers who 'do' practice (Mathiesen, 2016), is even less clear-cut in AMPARAR's context. Many of AMPARAR's organisers, including those I interviewed, are directly or indirectly involved in academia: Miriam Pereira (2024) has completed her 3-year research Master's in Public Policy, Camila (2021) holds a PhD in Anthropology, and another is in the process of completing their 3-year research master's in Sociology. Those organisers who are not involved in academia nonetheless move through those spaces as active voices and speakers at events, sharing their own non-academic theoretical frameworks and forms of analysis (AMPARAR, n.d.-b). As Cida, who never went to university, puts it: *I don't have academia, but I have lived experience*.

Meanwhile, academics and researchers become heavily involved in the organisers' work as part of AMPARAR's philosophy around collective knowledge production (Lago, 2019; Klink, 2024). Fabinho explained this as rooted in the idea of– *'what is your knowledge for?'* –from which AMPARAR establishes mutually productive relationships with researchers. In this regard, he says: *'AMPARAR is not at the service of academia itself, but of people who come to AMPARAR–whether academics or not–who want to strengthen AMPARAR's work'*. He explains, *'this ultimately and collectively produces knowledge at the service of concretely changing the lives of people'*. Similar to the process of *praxis* (Freire, 1968/2014) and the concept of 'action research' (Mathiesen, 2016), Fabinho argues that *'practice is not above theory, nor is theory above practice, and that researchers should offer something in return'*. Lago (2019: 212) further explains that this perspective is based on the refusal of AMPARAR's organisers to be mere 'lab rats' or objects of knowledge without researchers getting involved in their work. She explains this is requested not as a mere exchange rate but as a way to collectively develop forms of producing knowledge towards transformation. She also argues that this centres the mothers, families and organisers of AMPARAR as co-producers of knowledge rather than mere objects of study. Hence, overall, collective knowledge production through an abolitionist *praxis* of developing networks and relationships is central to AMPARAR's work; it allows the mothers, families and organisers of AMPARAR, along with their partnerships, to collectively produce knowledge towards resisting carceral systems, mirroring Freire's (1968/2014: 126) notion that 'If they are truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others'.

The second element of AMPARAR's 'presence' *praxis* and its transformative knowledge production is materialised in how they see the notion of 'freedom' and practise it. For Camila, AMPARAR's abolitionism works within the perspective that freedom is not

generic or abstract, but rather corresponds to: *'the possibility of us being and existing within our concrete, real, objective necessities–a freedom concept that has to do with different types of social relations and constructions'*. In addition, Fabinho said AMPARAR thinks through an analytical lens that sees freedom *'not as an individual, liberal, legal-based fetish of my freedom ends where your freedom begins and everyone respects each other's freedom because we don't trespass'*, but rather understanding freedom as *'a collective communitarian space: a land where we plant and everyone can harvest'*. These frameworks align with Gilmore's (2022: 67) notion that 'freedom is a place', or that concrete social *praxis* can build geographical-political spaces where freedom is practised, sought for, and change is brought about. They are imbued in AMPARAR's *praxis* in how they create physical locations–their 'headquarters'[7] in the neighbourhoods of Itaquera and Sapopemba in São Paulo (Pereira, 2024)–where this freedom is practised in relation to the constraints of punishment and the Brazilian carceral system weighing upon them (Klink, 2024). For instance, by providing 'acolhimento' in these spaces, they attempt to break the shackles of the colonial racialised and gendered logics of the 'burden of failure', strengthening and supporting the women they work with (Pereira, 2024). Through the collective knowledge produced by its mothers, families and organisers, and through practices such as 'acolhimento', the movement has changed traditional understandings of freedom, developing instead distinct frameworks for understanding and practising freedom.

The third element of AMPARAR's *praxis* and transformative knowledge production is the development of an abolitionist ethics of living. As Fabinho puts it, *'I'm an abolitionist from the moment I wake up to the moment I sleep, and then I have abolitionist dreams'*. This ethics begins by, as another organiser defines it, *'recognising the punitive logics present in our*

[7] The official headquarters for AMPARAR is in Itaquera (AMPARAR, no name), but because Miriam lives in Sapopemba and has developed a lot of her work there throughout her life (Pereira, 2024)–as well as based on what the organisers have told me–they consider Sapopemba as another headquarters of sorts.

everyday lives and social imaginary, and by attempting to practice non-punitive ways and solutions in our daily lives to address our personal problems'. They exemplify it in how to deal with a child. They explain that our tendency is to punish kids' misbehaviour, but instead we should collectively think and develop ways to educate without relying on this punitive toolkit. In this regard, Lamble (2021) works with a similar concept of Practicising Everyday Abolition, or working individually and in a communitarian fashion to break the logics of punishment present in our own lives. This abolitionist ethics is developed through the solidarity frameworks of AMPARAR's work and through the networks and organic relationships they develop. It is perhaps better exemplified by the practice of walking the territories and developing relations of care with families who live in them (Pereira, 2024). It is also based on a tradition in Black feminist movements to centre care and 'love' in their liberation struggle and the organic relationships they developed, opposing forceful domination–a typical element of how punishment is hierarchically distributed and enforced (Hooks, 2015: 164; Gilmore, 2022). In Bel's words, *the mothers who come to AMPARAR receive a lot of love,* and, as Fabinho puts it, *these organic relationships (built on love) are what produce the movement AMPARAR is creating*. Hence, AMPARAR's 'presence' *praxis* produces knowledge from its mothers and organisers with transformative capabilities. Be it as a collective endeavour, through developing new conceptions and practises of freedom or through an abolitionist feminist and anti-racist ethics of non-punitive care and 'love', AMPARAR attempts to resist carceral logics while building alternative frameworks and strategies for relating to one another and living in communities.

Overall, this chapter has argued that AMPARAR's abolitionist work operates through two interconnected dimensions: an abolitionist politics of 'absence', centred on challenging and reducing the harms of the carceral system through denunciation, decarceration and

political consciousness-raising; and an abolitionist politics of ‘presence’, centred on building support networks, communities and alternative social relations. Together, these dimensions constitute a *praxis* through which mothers of prisoners, families and organisers produce forms of knowledge that enable both resistance and alternative possibilities. Rather than simply dismantling punitive institutions or constructing alternatives in isolation, AMPARAR’s work seeks to do both simultaneously, challenging carceral systems while developing practices, relationships and forms of collective action that attempt to sustain life beyond their logics.

Chapter Three: 'Abolition is Not a Cake Recipe' - Abolitionism's Challenges, Limitations, 'Contradictions' and Alternatives.

So far, I have covered AMPARAR's abolitionist work and its relation to a *praxis* through which various ways of transformative knowledge are produced. In this final chapter, I now turn to the complexities, challenges, limitations, and contradictions of abolitionism and AMPARAR's work. Here, I will foreground how this work, rather than confirming an idealised view of abolitionism, demonstrates the problems of practising abolitionism within the constraints of the Brazilian carceral system. Nonetheless, I will explain how, working within these constraints, they attempt to shape possible alternatives to a better world.

Abolitionism's Complexities, Challenges, 'Contradictions' and Limitations

AMPARAR's *praxis* and practising abolition more generally involves taking into consideration the enormous complexity of what it involves and proposes, as well as its challenges (Passetti *et al.*, 2012; Mathiesen, 2016; Gilmore, 2022). First, how conflict, divergence, and social harm can be addressed. To begin, I asked each organiser how AMPARAR deals with conflict internally–within their organisation–with varying answers. Railda said *'when there is a problem, we sit down and talk with one another respectfully, trying not to hurt each other's feelings'*. Miriam remarked that *'organisations are full of problems and flaws, and that conflict is part of it, from which growth can be derived'*, noting that it can nevertheless *'be tiresome to mediate those internal conflicts when they arise'*. Cida mentioned that they *'communicate constantly, which helps align expectations and solve conflicts'*. Most remarked that there is barely any conflict, if at all, which, despite seeming hard to believe, reveals perhaps their tendency towards solving many of their internal conflicts in a rather collective horizontal manner.

On this, almost all of the organisers I interviewed indicated that AMPARAR's structure is highly horizontal, with organisers having a say in the organisation's direction and activities, while the mothers and families they work with are often integrated into the discussions they develop and the campaigns they run. In fact, the distinction between organisers and the mothers or families who only 'receive' their services seemed hard to establish. Since many of them also directly help build on AMPARAR's work, it may be that this division does not really exist or is difficult to fully determine. However, one of the organisers told me that there is a certain hierarchy: four of them are part of a 'board of directors'–Miriam, Railda, Cida and Fabinho–and that these receive a small allowance[8] to be able to dedicate more of their time to the organisation. Another organiser said that there is indeed a formal organisational structure because they constitute, juridically, an 'association', which, under Brazilian law, requires 'administrators' to operate (Brazilian Civil Law Code 2002). In practice, however, they mentioned that decisions are made horizontally, while conflicts are resolved through conversation–respecting the experience of those who came before, such as Railda and Miriam. Overall, this tension suggests that horizontality within AMPARAR is not necessarily the absence of hierarchy, but an ongoing practice through which authority, responsibility and decision-making are negotiated collectively. Organisers consistently emphasised efforts to resolve conflicts and organise in a communitarian manner.

A point of interest regarding internal conflict is how divergent opinions, specifically around abolitionism, are treated within the organisation. One of the organisers said that *'everyone in AMPARAR is an abolitionist, but each has a different opinion on the strategies of how to go about pursuing this abolition'*. They said that *'AMPARAR works with dissensus and they face adverse opinions through discussions and debates, not to build a total consensus but*

[8] In portuguese, 'ajuda de custo', usually meant as a small financial help, not a salary. One of these organisers of the 'board of directors' mentioned having a job or profession on the side since the amount would not allow them to sustain the living costs at São Paulo.

to reinforce partnerships, establishing a middle ground to move ahead'. Camila said that at the time she was most active in the organisation, around the 2010s onwards, a consensus around identifying what abolition was or meant was not relevant; instead, the preoccupation was, in her words, *'thinking about how to mitigate the violence that happened within penal establishments and how to minimise the suffering of the families they worked with, politically empowering them so they could protect themselves and their communities'*. In fact, one of the organisers I interviewed, when asked what they thought about prisons, actually said they were not against them, only against the mistreatment that went on inside. Despite being critical of the conditions of the prison system, their position on it still retained the perspective that, in their words, *'if you commit a mistake, you have to pay'*. Nevertheless, this organiser conducted much of the same work as the rest and, as such, reveals that AMPARAR, despite being an abolitionist organisation with abolitionist goals and strategies, is capable of integrating a variety of perspectives within its bosom. It also perhaps reveals how, similar to other contexts such as Scandinavia and the US (Mathiesen, 2016; Gilmore, 2007; Herzing and Piché, 2024), abolitionism in practice functions as a coalition of people with differing views on the matter–some more radical, some less–working towards decarceration. On this, Camila later remarked that *'through the perspective of each member, syntheses are produced'*. Hence, AMPARAR's integration of people with varying levels of abolitionist repertoire or involvement in more or less radical organising is part of their coalition and efforts to produce a movement collectively.

On the other hand, dealing with external conflicts seemed to be where the biggest challenges and limitations in their abolitionist work surfaced. Thinking about the conundrum of 'what about the 'sex offenders'?' (Ilea, 2018) often used to attempt to disarm abolitionist rhetoric, I asked AMPARAR's organisers how they deal with complex forms of conflict and

social harm with the communities they worked with, especially in cases related to sexual and gender-based violence. What they told me can be summarised in a few key points. First, in line with abolitionist strategies employed elsewhere (Herzing and Piché, 2024), they recognise the limitations and problems of formal criminal justice institutions themselves. In one of many cases, one of the organisers told me the woman in question had been beaten by her male partner and already had a restraining order against him in place. When this partner escalated to be even more violent, she went to the police and, on arrival, was told to 'solve things at home' because there was nothing they could do. Multiple organisers clarified that inside the favelas, when police arrive, it is usually not to help, but rather to enact more violence. This perspective aligns with literature on police action in the peripheries being not only extremely violent, but focused mostly on drug-related offences, namely the imprisonment and extermination of the would-be committers of said drug offences (Zaccone, 2013; Ilea, 2018; Mata, 2019; Cruz *et al.*, 2026). Furthermore, even if the police managed to imprison someone responsible for this sexual and/or gender-based violence, extensive research on prisons identifies their ineffectiveness in dealing with harm or its causes (Scott, 2013; Chamberlen, 2016; Warr, 2016; Bhui, 2024). As Fabinho puts it, *'you incarcerate someone, and then they learn, right? From this punishment, they 'rehabilitate' and they come back after and never do it again, right?… we know that is a big fallacy'*. Hence, by definition, AMPARAR starts by working within the frameworks where the police and formal criminal justice institutions might not be an option to begin with.

After recognising the limitations of criminal justice institutions, the second strategy AMPARAR employs in dealing with such complex matters is to identify, on a case-by-case basis, with the family involved, which solutions are feasible. In this regard, Miriam explains that their work centres on exploring possibilities, legal-based or not, with the victimised

women (most of the time, the only involved party they have access to). She says that in AMPARAR, *'we educate her on her rights, offer personal support and connections with organisations and institutions that deal with social assistance, welfare support, gender violence victimisation, explaining the consequences of each pathway'*. Ultimately, she said, *'we don't decide one way or the other how she is going to move things forward'*. Furthermore, Cida, Fabinho and another organiser explained they also offer support in terms of reallocation to another territory in order to make her feel safer and perhaps maintain a distance between this victim and whoever is being violent towards her. Overall, Camila explains that *'every case is a case'* or that there is no single *'cake recipe'* or general rule for treating cases, and each case is addressed based on the concrete avenues available to address each individual's concerns, following certain principles (e.g. non-punitiveness). This 'every case is a case' closely follows general abolitionist principles of conflict-solving within non-punitive approaches, while acknowledging the impossibility of establishing a defined structure or plan for resolving conflict (Passetti, 2004/2018; Mathiesen, 2016; Gilmore, 2022). As such, they try, within the realm of possibilities, to offer solutions to these women, recognising the limitations of formal criminal justice apparatuses.

Despite the possibilities, one of the biggest challenges in these cases is AMPARAR's finite capacity to accommodate and support everyone. As Railda explains, *'we are limited, so many things are out of our reach'*. Geographically, AMPARAR, despite having connections throughout the country, is based in São Paulo (Lago, 2019; Pereira, 2024). For one, it challenges views that abolitionism is not practicable within big urban centres (Drake and Scott, 2017), as São Paulo is one of the ten most populous cities in the world (UN, 2025). On the other hand, it naturally limits their work to mostly certain territories of the city, specifically Itaquera and Sapopemba (Pereira, 2024). This doesn't mean they don't conduct

work outside of them, especially because AMPARAR's organisers often participate in many activities and also work throughout the city and beyond (around the country and internationally) (Pereira *et al*, 2024; AMPARAR, 2025), but it does mean some of their practices are centred on these two neighbourhoods. It also explains one reason they develop networks: to expand their reach (Lago, 2019; Klink, 2024).

Furthermore, because the tools available to address complex forms of social harm are also incredibly limited, AMPARAR's organising work does not deny contact with formal institutions in a totalising manner, nor does it put itself as a barrier between these women and those institutions. Cida explains that *'many already come with a police report in hand'*. When they don't, one organiser said *'we, when possible, tell people involved about the problems and limitations of involving the police or the law, but I can't ethically oppose accessing those avenues, if that's all they have'*. In fact, Miriam and Bel mentioned that they can even assist those women, if they want, in accessing legal support or going to the police station, so they don't have to do it alone. Camila says that *'because we lack the tools, strategies, and resources to adequately address certain types of conflicts, we may resort to judicial or state-based solutions'*. All these constraints are tied to the fact that the problems underlying complex forms of social harm, such as gender-based violence, are not individual or pathological, but rather structural, societal and based on racial and social hierarchies, as well as ingrained forms of oppression, such as patriarchy and racism (Davis, 2003; Ilea, 2018). Hence, insofar as AMPARAR operates within, rather than outside of, these wider systems of domination and exclusion, its repertoire of responses to complex forms of social harm remains inherently constrained.

They are also limited in that they either fail to be heard by certain institutions or are criminalised by them. Bel says *'our proposals and projects sent to public institutions, such as*

the prosecutor's office, get archived'. Cida says that *'they often don't care about us. They turn a blind eye because to them we are nothing'*. When they are not ignored, they are in fact criminalised. Miriam recounted how, once, when bringing a consolidated report with denunciations of violations within prisons during the pandemic to the prosecutor's office, they questioned the veracity and legitimacy of the claims, insinuating they are criminals, asking *'How do you know these things?'*. Lago (2019) explains how it's common for families of prisoners to be automatically associated with being criminals–especially tied to or assisting criminal organisations such as Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). In this regard, multiple authors (Lago, 2019; Silva, 2021; Pereira, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2024; Klink, 2024) argue that this criminalisation of families of prisoners by association with the prisoners and crime themselves has a necessary racialised and gendered undertone. Pereira (2024: 52) says that this materialises into a perception that these Black women have 'rotten uteruses'. Klink (2024) further explains that this connects to the colonial logics that have denied basic rights to the recently freed slaves while historically criminalising them and the activities they are involved with. Nevertheless, for AMPARAR's work to succeed, it must seek to be completely disconnected, both materially and symbolically, from criminal organisations such as PCC. This is done not only to avoid state persecution but also because AMPARAR aids families and prisoners, irrespective of the crime or affiliation with such organisations (which they never ask about), while maintaining partnerships with public institutions for support (Lago, 2019). Hence, AMPARAR's work is, in the eyes of the government and the carceral state, at best ignored, at worst criminalised based on accusations of involvement with criminal activities, tied to racialised and gendered logics originated in colonial domination.

All these challenges and limitations, in turn, sometimes lead to disillusionment within the organisers. In response to my question of 'do you think there will be an ideal world where

these things (punitive systems and the problems that arise from it) don't exist?', Miriam said that *'this ideal world where this happens doesn't exist'*. She told me the world that abolitionists want is *'unreal. It's not real because inequality is there, power is there. And these cultures will not disappear from the world. Ever since the world has existed, they have existed, the kings and queens, right?'*. Cida said that *'we live in a world where there is no more hope… things will not get better'*. And yet, Miriam also said that they *'can still be trying to build other systems to bring about this change'*. Thus, despite the disillusionment, they continue to work, attempting to forge alternatives.

Towards a World Without Walls: Abolitionist Alternatives

So what alternatives are those, and what steps can we take to get there? First, it is important to recognise that, much in the same way AMPARAR conducts their work in the face of conflict and social harm, there is no single alternative or a defined set of alternatives. As proposed by Mathiesen (2016), abolition is inherently an ongoing production, an 'unfinished project'. This means that structurally abolitionist 'alternatives' do not exist as ready-made; they are built. Built from the concrete practical realities from which conflict and social harm arise, on a case-by-case analysis (Passetti, 2004/2018; Drake and Scott, 2017). As Fabinho explains how they conduct 'acolhimento' with the people they work with: *'every situation is new from the moment it occurs. So, in light of the situation, of said reality, we deal with the matter'*. Within this case-by-case analysis, Camila mentioned that non-punitive principles need to be applied *'within a certain disposition to be immersed in conflict'*. From this disposition to be immersed in conflict, she explains they *'look for a solution with the people who are involved, from the people who are there'*. As Miriam puts it, when AMPARAR deals with conflict internally: *'where there is conflict, there is growth'*.

However, for these conflicts to be dealt with, for the people involved to accept participating in a joint solution (and when that's not possible, to look for a solution elsewhere), there must first be relationships established from an organic, non-punitive outlook. In this regard, Fabinho says, *'perhaps AMPARAR is not composed of activists and organisers, but rather of people who relate to one another and are affected by the relationships they build with one another and those they work with'*. He argues this is what produces an active movement and organisation, beyond the walls of prison. The development of this sort of organic movement was a response to the violence and constraining reach of punishment and the carceral system against the poor, Black mothers and families of prisoners of AMPARAR (Klink, 2024; Pereira, 2024). As forms of resistance to these dynamics, they developed practices such as 'acolhimento', walking the territory and Solidarity Christmas, helping create organic relationships that break punitive logics and, to a certain degree, facilitate alternative forms of conflict resolution in the communities they work with and build.

Additionally, to break prison walls or perhaps more importantly, the invisible walls of punishment that go beyond, abolitionist *praxis* recognises that punishment and criminal justice systems are inherently problematic. They're problematic because they tend to take the conflict away from the people most directly affected (Christie, 1977); as Fabinho explains, *'they impede the readjustment of the relationship that should have been there previously, if not between the individuals involved, then between communities and groups'*. They are also intrinsically connected to the maintenance of inequalities, social, racial and gendered hierarchies at the onset of contemporary capitalist societies (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2022). Attempting to address the effects of these inequalities and hierarchies is incredibly challenging (Ilea, 2018), but the support networks AMPARAR builds may point to a way of mitigating them, even if ever so slightly. For instance, by directly or indirectly providing basic

material needs that have been neglected in those communities (Pereira, 2024), they attempt to cut many of the pathways that may also lead to prison itself (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2022). As one organiser explains, *'abolition is ultimately about what the word entails: the abolition of punishment and punitive solutions, and the inequalities which they reproduce'*. Conversely, recognising this perspective does not automatically imply having the solution, the 'cake recipe', as this organiser told me: *'abolition is beyond the traditional cognitive duality of criticism and synthesis; one can point to the systematic errors and problems with our current forms without having solutions on the go'*.

Recognising the complexities of abolitionism also allows us, with the tools we currently have, to act within our systems, 'building the future from the present in all the ways that we can' (Gilmore and Lambert, 2018). That could be, as AMPARAR does, through working within the realm of public policies, safeguarding people's rights and campaigning for reforms, though, in Fabinho's words, *'not stopping at that'*. Simultaneously, it could also be in how they produce knowledge collectively, understand and practise freedom, and develop an abolitionist ethics of living. Recognising the problems of punishment and punitive systems also allows us to fundamentally tie the fight for abolition to the fight against other pervasive structures of oppression and systems connected to it (Ilea, 2018; Gilmore, 2022)–as Camila explains, being constituted of *'racism, patriarchy and homophobia, to name a few'*.

Creating this connection is also complementary to the practises of walking the territory, community-building and 'acolhimento' being at the core or an initial step towards this abolitionist fight, listening to those most affected and attempting to build, as Miriam explains, *'other systems to bring about this change'*. While centring this kind of work is necessary within abolitionism's frameworks, it also enables its *praxis* to develop knowledge with transformative capacity. Namely, in the collective production of frameworks, strategies

and practices for resistance and building alternatives. As such, from this centrality and knowledge production built from the work of mothers, families, organisers and people committed to the fight against these oppressive structures (Lago, 2019; Silva, 2021; Klink, 2024; Pereira, 2024; Pereira *et al.*, 2024), we can, in turn, begin moving towards a world without walls.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I set out to examine how abolitionism is practised within AMPARAR and what this practice can reveal about ways of resisting carceral systems and imagining alternatives. Drawing on interviews with organisers and archival research, I have argued that abolitionism is best understood not as an abstract political horizon or a distant utopian project, but as a concrete set of practices embedded in everyday organising. Through comparative examples and frameworks from Scandinavian and American abolitionism, I have argued that AMPARAR's abolitionism emerges from the experiences, struggles, and organising practice developed by the mothers, families and communities they work with: those directly affected by imprisonment, state violence, and abandonment. However, rather than preceding practice, abolitionist ideas both emerge from this practice and help reshape it through a dialectical process (*praxis*).

Furthermore, through the analysis of AMPARAR's work, I identified two interconnected analytical dimensions of this abolitionist *praxis*. The first, abolitionist 'absence', consists of efforts to confront and reduce the violence and logics of prisons, youth detention facilities and broader punitive institutions through denunciation, decarceral reforms and political consciousness-raising. The second, abolitionist 'presence', centres on building support networks, communities of care and alternative social relations capable of addressing

the harms produced by imprisonment and state abandonment. In practice, these dimensions are inseparable: AMPARAR's work demonstrates that abolitionism involves both resisting oppressive institutions and creating the social conditions necessary to move past them.

More broadly, this dissertation has shown that abolitionism functions simultaneously as a political practice, a collective identity, an ethical orientation and a mode of knowledge production. Through their organising, AMPARAR's mothers and families generate situated forms of knowledge rooted in lived experience, developing political strategies, critiques of punishment and alternative ways of understanding freedom, care and social life. In doing so, they contribute to broader abolitionist traditions while grounding them in the specific realities of contemporary Brazil. They essentially produce a form of abolitionism shaped by the experiences, relationships and struggles of mothers and families affected by imprisonment

At the same time, the findings highlight the limitations and contradictions inherent in grassroots abolitionist organising. AMPARAR cannot, by itself, dismantle the racialised, gendered and classist structures that underpin imprisonment, police violence and social abandonment. Nor can it fully resolve the complex forms of conflict and social harm generated within the oppressive institutions of, for instance, racism and patriarchy. Nevertheless, these limitations should not be understood as evidence of abolitionism's failure. Rather, they reveal the structural scale of the problems abolitionist movements confront and the necessity of understanding abolition as an unfinished and ongoing process. As several organisers emphasised, abolition is not a fixed blueprint or a 'cake recipe', but a practice of experimentation, learning and collective struggle.

Ultimately, shaped by my own understandings of abolitionism and by engaging with the ideas present in my interviews with AMPARAR's organisers and in their archives, this dissertation contributes to abolitionist scholarship by shifting attention from abolitionism as a

set of abstract theoretical propositions to abolitionism as a lived and situated *praxis*. This *praxis* produces knowledge from the mothers and families of prisoners at AMPARAR. It also engages with scholarship on mothers and families of prisoners by framing them as active agents of change and producers of knowledge, rather than merely passive victims of harm. I have demonstrated how their grassroots movement can develop practical responses to carceral violence while simultaneously envisioning alternatives. In a context marked by mass incarceration, police violence and profound social inequalities tied to racialised, gendered and colonial logics, abolitionism emerges not as a distant future to be achieved, but as a set of practices already being developed in the present. The significance of organisations such as AMPARAR lies not in having solved the problem of punishment, but in showing that different ways of confronting harm, building solidarity and organising social life are already being imagined and practised, in all the ways that they can.

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Appendix A - Sample Interview Questions

The following questions were an outline or suggestion to guide the conversation. They were not strictly followed.

Organisation: history, daily activities

1. What led you to join/create AMPARAR and what does it represent for you?
2. What constitutes the work of AMPARAR?
3. Can you explain to me what a normal day/week/month is in AMPARAR?
4. What role do you have in AMPARAR?
5. How is work structured? (Division of tasks).
6. What values guide the work of AMPARAR?

Abolitionist ideals, identity, practice and knowledge production

7. Do you consider yourself an abolitionist? If yes, why?
8. How do you define 'abolitionism'?
9. What do you want to abolish?
10. Is AMPARAR abolitionist? If yes, why does it consider itself abolitionist?
11. How is the work of AMPARAR abolitionist?
12. Has the organisation always defined itself as abolitionist? If not, what changed?
13. What alternatives to prisons/police/criminal justice/punishment do you defend?
14. Can you imagine a world without these systems/punishment? If yes, What are the first steps to get there?
15. Does everyone in AMPARAR think alike? Are there disagreements about what abolitionism means and how to pursue it?
16. Do you think AMPARAR produces knowledge? If yes, how?
17. How do you deal with conflict? Internally (amongst organisers) vs. Externally (communities worked with).
18. What are the challenges and limitations of practicing abolition?
19. Were there moments where your activities did not entirely align with abolitionist values? Did you have to concede?
20. Has your work made a difference? Can you describe how?
21. Which relationships do you develop with other abolitionist movements?
22. Which people or organisations inspire your work?

Final Questions

23. Would you like to add anything else?
24. Are there others I should speak to about this topic?

Demographic Questions

Appendix B - Other Relevant Archives



Image 5. A protest that occurred in 2018 with a banner with 'AMPARAR' written on it, along with the words 'for a world without prisons, enough massacres' on the left and 'every prison is a political prison' on the right. Available on AMPARAR's Facebook page (AMPARAR, 2018) as well as in Pereira's (2024) and Silva's (2021) work.



Image 6. A protest that occurred in 2024, featuring the same banner as in image 2. Available on AMPARAR's Facebook page (AMPARAR, 2024b).

Political Statement: The Politics of Prison and the Prison of Politics (AMPARAR, 2014a), relevant section on the framing of every prisoner as a political prisoner:

'Prisons are a political instrument par excellence. One only has to look a little more closely at those who are sent there: the vast majority are imprisoned on charges of small-scale drug trafficking or so-called 'crimes against property.' In the first case, this is a direct consequence of a prohibitionist policy that derives its own profit from it. In the second, it is a concrete expression of the defence of private property, which, under capitalism, is worth more than the freedom of more than 200,000 'favela residents,' 'street kids', 'bad mothers' or 'indigents' who are currently deprived of their liberty for theft or robbery. If prison is a political strategy for the containment and physical elimination of people deemed undesirable by high society, then it is clear enough that every prison(er) is a political prison(er)'.

AMPARAR's (2017) Open Letter. Translation based on Pereira's (2024) work:

'We are women, Black, poor, and from the peripheries. We are Northeasterners or daughters of Northeasterners[11]. These characteristics alone are indicators of the racism, prejudice, and discrimination that persist in this country, which continues to marginalise and incarcerate us in ever greater numbers.

Our struggle began in 1998 when our children ended up in FEBEM-Imigrantes, a dreadful place where the lives of children and adolescents were treated with profound disrespect. There, we encountered an extremely high level of torture. These were painful moments: bruises were visible on the faces, arms, and legs of the young people, as were their broken teeth. Some boys lost their spleens as a result of torture; others died after being burned, stabbed, hanged, or subjected to countless other monstrous forms of violence.

[11] In Brazil, the Northeast is one of the poorerest regions in the country (IBGE, 2023).

It was amidst this horrific reality that the Mothers of FEBEM were born: mothers who did not fight individually, but collectively for equality. Our primary objective has always been to denounce this criminal and genocidal state. We were women who slept inside FEBEM units, and women who brought hope and peace to the boys and their families.

But the slave quarters remain full of cruelty, and the barbarity continues. FEBEM may have been renamed Fundação Casa, but the culture of incarceration and torture persists. We are confronted with a perverse system that perpetuates slavery in every sense for Black, poor, and peripheral populations. Freedom for a prisoner reminds us of a part of history slaves were 'freed' but had nowhere to go and were left to beg on the streets. The same happens to prisoners today. They go on without direction and dreams.

This is yet another demonstration of how genocide shapes life in the peripheries. Today, we are AMPARAR. We are mothers in mourning, mothers of prisoners, and mothers of people who use drugs.

We are human beings and have the right to live with dignity. We are mothers in mourning, like Maria, who lost three family members to violence: in 2000, her eldest son was shot in the back of the head at the age of seventeen; in 2003, her youngest son became a victim of the absence of public policies capable of meeting the needs of children and adolescents; and in 2016, her nephew, then twenty-one years old, was shot in the leg and, after falling to the ground, shot in the heart.

We are mothers of people who use drugs, like Maria, who cannot afford dignified treatment for her son, while the free services available are inadequate. We are Black, poor, peripheral mothers who protect our children through prayer.

We are mothers whose hearts are full of love for others and whose voices carry far.

Enough! We demand social equality! Enough of this ongoing genocide! Enough of mass incarceration! Enough, enough, enough!

A final outcry: ‘We just want to be mothers! We have the right to life, the right to be mothers and the right to see our children live!”