


**"I'M STILL HERE" AND THE FAILURES OF THE STATE OF BRAZIL IN CASES OF  
DISAPPEARANCE: FROM PAST EUNICE TO PRESENT-DAY EUNICE**

**"AINDA ESTOU AQUI" E AS FALHAS DO ESTADO BRASILEIRO EM CASOS DE  
DESAPARECIMENTO: DA EUNICE DO PASSADO À EUNICE DO PRESENTE**

**"AÚN ESTOY AQUI" Y LOS ERRORES DEL ESTADO BRASILEÑO EN LOS CASOS DE  
DESAPARICIONES: DE EUNICE DEL PASADO A EUNICE DE PRESENTE**

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**ABSTRACT**

In Brazil, missing persons cases draw low public visibility, despite high rates of occurrence. However, in 2024, the matter gained traction following the widespread recognition of the Brazilian film "I'm Still Here." The film portrays Eunice Paiva's struggle after her husband Rubens Paiva's disappearance in 1971, during a period marked by Brazil's military dictatorship, and its impact encouraged families to denounce cases in which the Brazilian State's response to disappearance had been characterized by omission or negligence. Within this context, REDESPARC, a Brazilian research network focused on missing persons, conducted an interview with Eunice Santos, whose husband disappeared in 2015 due to mental health issues. Therefore, this article aims to compare the cases of Eunice Paiva and Eunice Santos, contributing to identify, through a gender perspective, the specific psychosocial and economic impacts faced by women, while also contributing to a broader understanding of the challenges the Brazilian State continues to face in cases of disappearance. The research was conducted, partly, through qualitative methods based on structured interviews, which produced primary data that were analyzed through an inductive approach. Additionally, comprehensive bibliographic and documentary research was conducted, employing a historical-comparative method for case comparison and a deductive approach for analyzing secondary data. The findings revealed that, despite the distinct causes of their husbands' disappearances, both "Eunices" experienced police inaction, governmental omission, bureaucratic impediments, psychological trauma and socioeconomic damage. The findings reflect a continuous policy of oblivion towards missing persons that remains intrinsic to the foundational structure of Brazilian society.

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**Keywords:** Missing Persons. Brazilian State Failures. I'm Still Here. Political Oblivion. Gender Perspective.

## RESUMO

No Brasil, o desaparecimento é um fenômeno de pouca visibilidade, apesar das altas taxas de ocorrência. Contudo, a partir da notoriedade do filme brasileiro "Ainda Estou Aqui", que retrata a luta de Eunice Paiva em face do desaparecimento de seu marido Rubens Paiva em 1971, ocorrido durante período de ditadura militar, o assunto ganhou destaque. Assim, famílias foram encorajadas a denunciar casos de desaparecimento em que a atuação do Estado brasileiro foi omissa ou negligente. Nesse contexto, a rede de pesquisa brasileira REDESPARC entrevistou Eunice Santos, cujo marido desapareceu em 2015 devido a problemas de saúde mental. Assim, o presente artigo tem como objetivo comparar os casos de Eunice Paiva e Eunice Santos, de forma a identificar, sob um recorte de gênero, os impactos psicossociais e econômicos enfrentados pelas mulheres, além de contribuir para a compreensão acerca das dificuldades que o Estado Brasileiro ainda enfrenta em casos de desaparecimento. A pesquisa foi realizada, em parte, através de pesquisa qualitativa baseada em entrevistas baseadas em roteiro estruturado, gerando dados primários, analisados através do método indutivo. Complementarmente, foi realizada pesquisa bibliográfica e documental, utilizando o método histórico-comparativo para a comparação dos casos e o método de abordagem dedutivo para análise dos dados secundários. A conclusão obtida revelou que, apesar das distintas causas de desaparecimento de seus maridos, ambas as "Eunices" experienciaram inércia policial, omissão governamental, impedimentos burocráticos, traumas psicológicos e danos socioeconômicos, o que reflete a contínua política de esquecimento de desaparecidos intrínseca à estrutura formadora da sociedade brasileira.

**Palavras-chave:** Desaparecimento de Pessoas. Falhas do Estado Brasileiro. Ainda Estou Aqui. Esquecimento Político. Recorte de Gênero.

## RESUMEN

En Brasil, la desaparición es un fenómeno poco visible a pesar de su alta incidencia. La película brasileña "Ainda Estou Aqui", que narra la lucha de Eunice Paiva por la desaparición de su esposo Rubens Paiva en 1971 durante la dictadura militar, ha contribuido significativamente a aumentar la conciencia pública sobre este tema. Algunas familias han tenido el coraje de denunciar casos de desaparición donde el Estado brasileño ha sido omiso o negligente. En este contexto, la red de investigación brasileña REDESPARC entrevistó a Eunice Santos, cuyo esposo desapareció en 2015 debido a problemas de salud mental. Este artículo tiene como objetivo comparar los casos de Eunice Paiva y Eunice Santos desde una perspectiva de género, analizando los impactos psicosociales y económicos enfrentados por estas mujeres, y contribuyendo a la comprensión de las dificultades continuas que enfrenta el Estado brasileño en casos de desaparición. La investigación se basó en entrevistas cualitativas utilizando un guión estructurado para generar datos primarios, analizados a través de un enfoque inductivo. Además, se realizó una investigación bibliográfica y documental utilizando el método histórico-comparativo para la comparación de casos y el método deductivo para el análisis de datos secundarios. La conclusión destaca que ambas "Eunices" enfrentaron inercia policial, omisión gubernamental, obstáculos burocráticos, traumas psicológicos y daños socioeconómicos, reflejando una persistente política de olvido hacia los desaparecidos en la estructura social brasileña.

**Palabras clave:** Desaparición de Personas. Fallas del Estado Brasileño. Aún Estoy Aquí. Olvido Político. Perspectiva de Género.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, the phenomenon of disappearances represents an enduring and often overlooked issue. According to the document "Map of Missing Persons" (*Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública*, 2023), over 200,000 individuals vanished nationwide between 2019 and 2021, averaging 183 disappearances daily. Despite this glaring problem, the matter often receives insufficient media attention, and both the Brazilian government and law enforcement struggle to effectively manage these occurrences.

However, in spite of the circumstances, the topic of missing persons gained significant prominence in 2024 with the release of the film "I'm Still Here" (Salles, 2024). The film depicted the true story of Rubens Paiva, who was detained by the Brazilian government and declared missing in January 1971, during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). The picture's widespread impact sparked public debate in Brazil, bringing much-needed visibility to the issue of missing persons.

The film adopts the perspective of Rubens Paiva's wife, Eunice Paiva, who relentlessly pursued justice for her husband and her family. Her story exemplifies resilience against an authoritarian and violent state that concealed information and provided false explanations regarding Rubens' whereabouts. The film also portrayed the profound psychological and socioeconomic impacts on the Paiva family, who grappled with uncertainty, oppression, grief, and a dramatically altered family dynamic.

Following its nominations for "Best Picture" and "Best International Feature Film" at the 2025 Academy Awards, and subsequent win in the latter category, "I'm Still Here" was re-released in 2025. This re-exposure led many families of missing persons to identify with the Paiva family's ordeal, empowering them to report the Brazilian state's omissions and failures in cases of disappearance, even after the country's redemocratization in 1985.

Prompted by these accounts, the Strategic Network for Combating the Disappearance of Children (REDESPARC), a Brazilian research network focused on missing persons, began investigating the differences and similarities between cases of disappearances during the military dictatorship and those which occurred after democracy was restored.

One study conducted by REDESPARC in collaboration with the NGO "Mothers of Sé" involved interviews with numerous women whose relatives had disappeared. Among the testimonies, another woman named Eunice, Mrs. Eunice Maria Prudêncio da Silva Santos,

shared her story: her husband, João Luiz dos Santos, disappeared in 2015 due to mental health issues.

After careful analysis, commonalities emerged between the narratives of both "Eunices." Such findings brought forth the present article, which aims to compare the cases of Eunice Paiva and Eunice Santos, identifying their differences and similarities. This comparison seeks to enhance understanding of the ongoing challenges faced by the Brazilian state in cases of disappearance and how these difficulties connect with the nation's historical roots.

To achieve these goals, a qualitative research approach was employed, based on interviews conducted through a structured script (Appendix I) approved by the Ethics in Research Committee of Universidade Estadual Paulista "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" (UNESP). The primary data obtained from these interviews were examined through inductive reasoning, drawing broader conclusions from specific case studies.

Furthermore, bibliographic and documentary research was conducted to gather information on Eunice Paiva's history and on the relevant Brazilian legislation applicable to both disappearance cases. To facilitate comparison, the comparative historical method was applied, involving a survey of the historical and legal contexts surrounding both occurrences. The insights gained from this survey were then analyzed through a deductive approach.

This article will examine the impacts of Rubens Paiva's disappearance on his wife, Eunice Paiva, and the impact on Eunice Santos from her husband João dos Santos' disappearance. This investigation will adopt a gender perspective, focusing on the unique female experience concerning missing persons. Subsequently, the cases will be juxtaposed, considering their respective historical contexts and applicable legislation. This comparative analysis aims to elucidate the persistent challenges confronting the Brazilian State regarding missing persons.

## **2 THE IMPACT OF RUBENS PAIVA'S DISAPPEARANCE ON EUNICE PAIVA'S LIFE**

Rubens Paiva's disappearance took place during the Brazilian military dictatorship, specifically under one of its most oppressive and authoritarian periods: the administration of General Emílio Médici (1969–1974). At the time, under the pretext of national security and the so-called "war against communism", the regime enforced strict press censorship and systematic political persecution, routinely employing violence and torture to maintain control. Within this context, Rubens Paiva was considered a person of interest, given his past tenure

as a federal deputy affiliated with the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB), a political party often associated with communist ideals (Piva, 2016).

On January 20, 1971, a group of military officers arrested Rubens Paiva at his family home, in Rio de Janeiro, and led him to the headquarters of the Internal Defense Operations Center (DOI-CODI). Rubens Paiva was never seen by his family again. The following day, without providing any information about Rubens or explanations of any kind, the military also took Rubens' wife, Eunice Paiva, and his 15-year-old daughter Eliana to the headquarters of the Internal Defense Operations Center (DOI-CODI). Eliana was held for 24 hours, and Eunice for 12 days, during which both were interrogated with the use of violence (Piva, 2016).

At this point in the regime, disappearances were a common occurrence, with opponents being kidnapped and often tortured to death. No record of their imprisonment was ever kept; their bodies would later be disposed of or secretly buried. But since Rubens Paiva was a former congressman, who was arrested in his own home, seemingly healthy, and offering no resistance, the Army was compelled to report on his whereabouts and explain what had happened to him. Furthermore, Eunice Paiva's relentless inquiries and subsequent legal battles drew media attention, prompting the Army to falsely inform the family that Rubens had been rescued by opponents of the regime (Piva, 2016). Four decades later, this version was debunked by the National Truth Commission (2014).

Amidst several defeats during the search for her husband, Eunice realized the impossibility of staying in their Rio de Janeiro home, since Rubens had been their sole provider. Also, the lack of his death certificate prevented her from accessing funds, selling assets, or claiming his life insurance. Eunice was a homemaker and couldn't provide for her family at the time; so, in 1971, she returned with her children to Santos, São Paulo, where they could rely on the support of relatives (Piva, 2016). The film "I'm Still Here" poignantly captures this turning point in the Paiva family's life, with heartbreaking scenes of their move and the children's gradual understanding that their father is gone.

The emotional toll on the family was profound, as they attempted to grapple with the injustice, the violence, and the fact that, when it comes to disappearances, closure is hard to achieve, since hope for a return seems to linger, despite the odds. With her old life irrevocably shattered, Eunice Paiva channeled her grief and determination into earning a law degree, never ceasing to seek every institutional channel to demand answers about her husband's disappearance. She eventually became a lawyer and an activist for indigenous

communities, which were some of the most vulnerable and invisible victims of the military regime (Merces, 2023).

Only after the end of the military dictatorship, in 1986, did the Brazilian Federal Police initiate the first investigation into Rubens Paiva's disappearance. Eunice Paiva continued to fight for the family's right to a death certificate, which was finally issued in 1996, classifying Rubens as a missing person. In 2025, however, the certificate was rectified to state Rubens' cause of death as "non-natural, violent death caused by the Brazilian State during the systematic persecution of political dissidents under the 1964 dictatorial regime" (Leal, 2025, our translation).

In 2015, Eunice Paiva's life was chronicled by her son, Marcelo Rubens Paiva, in his book "I'm Still Here", which also told the story of her Alzheimer's diagnosis in the year 2004. The book serves as a testament against political oblivion, documenting past repression to prevent its recurrence; Marcelo Paiva's writing, therefore, functions as a powerful resistance against humanity's tendency to forget historical errors. In that sense, the author depicts that Eunice's fight against Alzheimer's mirrors the struggle against political oblivion, particularly concerning the Brazilian military dictatorship (Merces, 2023).

Marcelo Paiva's book was also the inspiration for the acclaimed film "I'm Still Here", which earned 2025 Oscar nominations for Best Actress and Best Picture and won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. The film powerfully illustrates the perils of authoritarian rhetoric and the devastating emotional and socioeconomic consequences of uninvestigated disappearances upon families.

In response to this powerful depiction, "*Mothers of Sé*", a Brazilian non-profit organization (NGO) dedicated to locating missing persons and supporting their families, issued an open letter to the film's cast and crew, expressing gratitude for highlighting the issue of lack of investigation and support from the state in disappearance cases, a reality that continues even after the military regime (*Mothers of Sé*, 2025).

It is safe to say that Eunice Paiva's privileged position as upper middle class, coupled with her family's support, proved vital in allowing her to return to school, pursue justice for her husband, and achieve financial recovery. In stark contrast, most families of missing persons during the military regime lacked such advantages, a disparity that persists for most families of the disappeared even under democratic rule.



### **3 THE IMPACT OF JOÃO DOS SANTOS'S DISAPPEARANCE ON EUNICE SANTOS'S LIFE**

To further illustrate the persistent reality of inadequate investigation and support from the Brazilian State in cases of disappearance, this analysis will examine the testimony of another woman named Eunice, who is a present-day individual. Mirroring Eunice Paiva's story, present-day Eunice Maria Prudêncio da Silva Santos is also a mother and homemaker whose husband, João Luiz dos Santos, disappeared as well, resulting in devastating consequences for her family. However, the circumstances surrounding her husband's disappearance were very different than those from Eunice Paiva's.

Considering her situation, Eunice Santos was interviewed by researchers from REDESPARC as part of their academic outreach project during a visit to the headquarters of the Brazilian NGO "*Mothers of Sé*" on November 11, 2023. To facilitate these interviews, a structured questionnaire, developed in collaboration with the NGO's president, Ivanise Esperidião, was employed to collect detailed accounts of the challenges encountered by families of missing persons (Annex I). Despite the emotional distress of recounting her experiences, Eunice shared her narrative with the researchers, expressing hope that her story would be acknowledged and understood.

According to Eunice's interview (Annex II), her husband João Luiz dos Santos' disappearance took place on March 4, 2015, in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. The circumstances surrounding his disappearance starkly contrasted with those of Rubens Paiva: while Rubens was a political target during the military regime, João lived under a democratic government and disappeared due to mental health conditions.

Prior to his disappearance, João had been managing depression and schizophrenia for years with medication and a stable routine. However, after discontinuing his medication due to severe side effects, his mental health rapidly declined. He began experiencing insomnia and, one day, left home without notice, prompting his daughters to initiate a search. Although João returned home that day, and despite the family securing an emergency psychiatric appointment for him, he vanished before the consultation could take place.

On the day João vanished, his family's attempt to file a police report was initially refused; the police cited insufficient time since his last sighting as the reason. Only later that night were they able to file, but police did not request a photograph or a detailed description of João, leaving his wife Eunice feeling like the report was a mere formality. Frustrated, she questioned, "how can they look for someone they don't even know or know what they look



like?" (Annex II). In addition, regarding the process of registering the disappearance complaint in the police department, Eunice stated: "they do it just for the sake of it, because they don't really investigate" (Annex II).

Despite police assurances that João would return, he never came back. Faced with the inertia of the police investigations, the couple's daughters independently looked for their father in shelters, forensic institutes and hospitals. During that time, Eunice recounts that whenever an unidentified body was reported, the family went to the morgue to verify, plunging everyone into a cycle of endless pain. One particularly traumatic experience involved navigating a forensic institute overflowing with violently mutilated corpses after a mass killing. The event remains etched in her memory as one of the most agonizing, as they were forced to confront each body, hoping that João wasn't among the victims (Annex II).

The family travelled to numerous cities without obtaining concrete information. Eunice felt abandoned by the public authorities, having to endure, with her family, a long and arduous path in search of her husband. During that time, she put herself at risk and was the victim of numerous prank calls from people who lied about João's whereabouts. The search, she explains, was a journey of immense pain, amplified by the lack of results, leading to overwhelming anguish from the unknown (Annex II).

According to Eunice, authorities were negligent towards both her family and João, with support coming only from Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the families of missing persons. She believes the public authorities were entirely remiss in investigating her husband's disappearance but emphasizes that there is still hope within her family for a reunion with João (Annex II).

Beyond the emotional devastation, João was the family's primary source of income. Prior to his disappearance, Eunice was a homemaker, and their financial situation was just beginning to improve with their daughter starting a new job. However, João's absence reversed this progress, plunging the family into significant financial hardship. In this context, Eunice's history as a homemaker severely limited her job prospects after her husband's loss (Annex II).

Following the disappearance of João, Eunice attempted to claim survivor's pension from the National Social Security Institute (INSS); however, despite her economic dependence on her husband, her application was denied. The rationale provided was that João was legally registered as a legal entity, notwithstanding his continuous employment at the same company since 1988.

Regarding his employment, over the years, João's contractual status with the same company underwent several transformations. Initially, he was subject to the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), granting him formal employee status and associated labor rights. However, an economic shift in the job market prompted companies to seek strategies for labor cost reduction, leading to a change in João's employment arrangement. Consequently, he transitioned to an autonomous worker and subsequently established a legal entity to continue providing his services to the same company. According to their agreement, the company remained responsible for remitting contributions to the National Social Security Institute and for providing a life insurance policy. Despite these stipulations, Eunice's claims were dismissed.

As for the life insurance, it did not cover cases of disappearance, with the company arguing that João could return spontaneously, as he was not legally deceased. Due to the denial of these benefits and the absence of João's income, Eunice faced significant subsistence difficulties and accumulating debt. Considering her precarious financial situation, her daughters moved in with her and stepped in to provide for the household.

João's disappearance also had a detrimental impact on Eunice's health. Over an eight-year period following João's disappearance, Eunice reports developing depression and two distinct cancers: initially affecting the thyroid, and subsequently the endometrium. The latter malignancy necessitated a hysterectomy, alongside a treatment regimen that included chemotherapy and radiotherapy. She is currently undergoing follow-up care in remission.

Regarding the socioeconomic repercussions of João's disappearance, Eunice states: "I can't find employment at this stage, no one wants to hire me, and I lack qualifications. I spent my entire life as a homemaker; if I had worked, no one would have looked after the children. Now, here I am" (Annex II). This poignant reflection highlights that present-day Eunice is also "still here", just as Eunice Paiva once was, and that she similarly persists in her pursuit of justice and resolution for her husband and her family.

During a follow-up conversation with Eunice Santos, she was asked if she had watched the film "I'm Still Here", and answered that she was going to watch it, since the NGO "*Mothers of Sé*" was organizing an outing for the families of missing persons to watch the film. Several weeks later, Eunice reported that she had watched the film. She commented that while the circumstances leading to the disappearances were vastly

different, there were moments when she profoundly understood the pain Eunice Paiva experienced with her husband's disappearance (Annex III?).

Eunice Santos recounted that the film scene of when Rubens Paiva was taken mirrored her own feelings upon realizing her husband had left and not returned: "it felt like the world had crumbled, like an abyss had opened up before me, and I was on the verge of falling into it, not knowing where to go or what to do" (Annex III).

Continuing her account, Eunice recounted that her grandson was only six years old at the time of João's disappearance and would pray daily for his grandfather's return. However, after a year of praying, the boy announced he would no longer do so, feeling that "God was not listening" (Annex II?). Eunice expressed profound sadness upon hearing this. She also noted that, over time, some family members appeared to become emotionally numb as a way to cope with the ongoing pain.

Regarding their experiences with their children, Eunice Santos pointed out a key difference: the age range of the children significantly shaped their individual experiences. Her daughters were transitioning into adulthood, whereas Eunice Paiva's children were still very young. Despite this difference in their children's ages, Eunice Santos reported being deeply moved by the film, stating, "when we are mothers, we suffer more for our children than for ourselves" (Annex III).

Reflecting on these experiences, Eunice acknowledged that despite the different underlying causes of their husbands' disappearances, the pain she and Eunice Paiva felt was remarkably similar. Indeed, despite the divergent reasons for their husbands' disappearances, their stories have many points in common, including the fact that they share the same first name. When it comes to the disappearance of family members, many "Eunices" have already existed, and many "Eunices" continue to exist, trying to cope with the lack of investigation and support from the Brazilian State in the search for their loved ones.

#### **4 FAILURES OF THE STATE OF BRAZIL IN CASES OF DISAPPEARANCE: THE IMPACTS OF AN ONGOING REALITY**

In order to provide an accurate comparison between the cases of Eunice Paiva and Eunice Santos, it is essential to analyze the procedures available for addressing missing persons cases during the Brazilian military dictatorship, and to contrast those with current

protocols. Furthermore, it is imperative to ascertain if past procedures were effectively implemented, considering the authoritarian backdrop.

A brief overview of Brazil's constitutional history reveals that following the 1964 civil-military coup that deposed President João Goulart, the nation, previously democratic, transitioned into a military dictatorship. This regime subsequently governed through a series of "Institutional Acts." These were legal norms of constitutional nature issued by the Brazilian military government between 1964 and 1969, totaling 17 acts, all aimed at legitimizing and solidifying military rule (Gaspari, 2002).

In 1967, the Federal Constitution of 1967 was enacted. This charter did not originate from a free and democratic constituent assembly; rather, it represented an adaptation of the legal order to serve the interests of the military regime that seized power in 1964. Thus, the military government was formally and constitutionally institutionalized in Brazil. However, while this Constitution formally retained certain individual rights and guarantees, its core purpose was to legitimize and consolidate the authoritarian regime. Consequently, it remained subordinate to the Institutional Acts and National Security Laws, which permitted the suppression of rights and arbitrary state action (Gaspari, 2002).

Under the Federal Constitution of 1967, rights to life, liberty, security, and property were formally guaranteed, as were due process and broad defense. Nevertheless, all these rights and guarantees were systematically violated through the state's practice of maintaining political prisoners and their subsequent enforced disappearance. In this context, as highlighted in a report from the National Truth Commission (2014), detentions were illegal, information regarding prisoners' locations and status was consistently denied or fabricated, and their fates were concealed from the public.

After the end of the military dictatorship and the onset of Brazil's redemocratization process, the nation entered a period of transitional justice. During this time, the legal framework sought strategic mechanisms to adapt to democracy and address the remnants of the authoritarian period. This democratic process, however, began by granting amnesty for political and related crimes committed between 1961 and 1979 through Amnesty Law (Brazilian Law 6.683/1979).

Commenting on Amnesty Law, Sabadell and Dimoulis (2014) characterize Brazil's transitional process as a "justice of oblivion". The authors highlight deficiencies in actualizing the right to memory and truth concerning events of the post-1964 dictatorial regime. The term "oblivion" further signifies that transitional justice in Brazil generally opted to overlook

the atrocities and severe human rights violations of that period, particularly regarding criminal accountability (Sabadell and Dimoulis, 2014).

Despite this rhetoric of oblivion in the process of restoring democracy, a new Brazilian Federal Constitution was freely and democratically promulgated in 1988, which is in effect to this day. It not only guarantees fundamental rights to life, liberty, equality, security, and property, but also prohibits torture and inhumane treatments, while establishing effective mechanisms for realizing the guarantees of due process and broad defense (Brazilian Federal Constitution, 1988).

In alignment with the new constitutional order, Brazilian Law N° 9.140/1995 established the Special Commission on Political Deaths and Disappearances to analyze cases of disappearance and death during the military dictatorship. However, despite acknowledging state violence, the Brazilian legal system's focus on combating authoritarianism unfortunately neglected crucial mechanisms for investigating and holding the state accountable for disappearances, even democratically (Gaspari, 2002).

To address this omission, Brazilian Law N° 13.812/2019 was enacted in 2019, establishing a National Policy for the Search for Missing Persons and the National Registry of Missing Persons. In article 15, State responsibility for locating missing persons and providing psychosocial support to their families was determined, which includes referring families to existing social programs and benefits. However, in practical reality, unless there is legal recognition of presumed death, it is difficult for families to gain access to pensions and inheritances; this was observed in the previously analyzed case of Eunice Santos, who was unable to access survivor's pension after the disappearance of her husband João dos Santos.

Furthermore, in the Brazilian legal system, legal impediments further exacerbate the families' financial precarity, since the status of "missing person" can lead to frozen bank accounts, blocking family access to salaries, savings, or pensions (Dewhirst, Kapur, 2015). Therefore, in light of all the bureaucratic and legal challenges, it becomes clear that the mandated guarantee of psychosocial care for the families of missing persons in Brazil fails to achieve its goal.

In summation, it is currently undisputed that the Brazilian state is responsible for searching for missing persons and for supporting their families, regardless of the cause of their disappearance. However, despite this being a well-established legal duty, Brazil's handling of such cases still shows many failures in practice.

Testimonies from affected families consistently highlight the state's lack of assistance and the negligence of public security officials, noting their insensitivity and inability to handle disappearances. They report that public authorities fail to fulfill their responsibility to locate missing individuals; instead, administrative conduct often re-victimizes families (Ferreira, 2018).

Analyzing the issue, Graham Willis (2023) introduces the concept of “mundane disappearance”, asserting that disappearances in Brazil are characterized by an approach of “shrugging shoulders”. He argues that disappearances have a deep political imprint on the nation's formation, enduring for centuries as a political instrument of domination. Willis further notes that, in contemporary Brazil, missing individuals are predominantly those deemed socially undesirable. In such cases, whether through state action or omission, he contends that mundane disappearances are actually convenient:

Disappearance offers the political order the ability to step back from, on the one hand, having to account for direct lethal violence on these bodies, and, on the other, from the minimalist but costly techniques of maintaining the condition of ‘being disturbed. Power doesn’t have to kill, nor bear the price tag of cumulative hospital stays or an ‘Indian Residential School’ if people cease to be known. Mundane disappearance is convenient. (Willis, p.11).

Thus, beyond structural and procedural challenges, Brazil grapples with a pervasive culture of oblivion when it comes to missing persons, a phenomenon deeply embedded in the fabric of Brazilian society. This neglect leads to ineffective public policies, failing to provide adequate psychosocial and financial support to the relatives of those who have disappeared. Consequently, the harm inflicted upon these families is further exacerbated.

For the missing person’s family, material consequences can be substantial, since search efforts incur substantial costs, including extensive travel for information. This is compounded by the time spent searching - a task predominantly performed by women - which reduces availability for work hours. In addition, bank accounts may be frozen, depriving families of access to salaries, savings, or pensions (Dewhirst, Kapur, 2015).

Furthermore, it is necessary to note that a person’s disappearance does not affect individuals equally. Those with fewer economic, political, cultural, and social resources are predictably more impacted and, consequently, more vulnerable to the consequences of such an event. Also, inequalities based on gender, social class, and ethnicity demand consideration when discussing the effects of disappearances on families, as the conditions



leading up to the event directly influence how this type of violence is addressed (Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras, 2008).

A report by International Red Cross (2021) containing interviews with 27 families reveals the profound financial impact of a loved one's disappearance: approximately three-quarters of interviewees reported a deterioration in their economic circumstances following the event. At the time of the interviews, 59% lived on less than two minimum wages; also, the compelling urgency to locate a loved one often drives families into debt. In that regard, a third sold assets to settle search-related debts, and nearly two-thirds relied on third-party donations to cover associated costs. This dire reality is vividly illustrated by the following account:

The mother of a disappeared man, for instance, recounted selling her cooking pots to afford leaflets with her son's photo to publicize his disappearance. Her entire time became dedicated to searching for him. She stopped making coconut sweets and curtains for sale, as she used to (International Red Cross, 2021, p.112).

In many instances, the missing person's income constitutes a substantial portion of the family's total earnings; consequently, their disappearance leads to an abrupt reduction in household revenues. Economically, when the missing person is a breadwinner husband, stay-at-home mothers are forced into low-wage, insecure jobs, often far from their families, thereby increasing the risk of exploitation and compromising their children's well-being and access to education.

Within the scope of gender analysis, it is crucial to emphasize that women are disproportionately affected by the disappearance of a child, father, or husband. This disparity is intensified by pre-existing gender inequalities, which are further exacerbated by social indicators such as class, race, and culture (Dewhirst and Kapur, 2015).

According to Rita Freitas (2002), the consequences of disappearances on women can also be understood in light of the socially ascribed role of motherhood. The historical process of attributing gender roles to the concepts of marriage, family and children, from the 18th century onwards, established a clear rupture between the private and public spheres. In this context, women were assigned the role of caregivers, while men assumed responsibility for the family's material sustenance. Consequently, in cases of disappearance, women typically bear the burden of responsibility, which exacerbates their suffering (Freitas, 2002).



Despite significant socioeconomic hardships, women frequently organize politically in response to the disappearance of a family member. Driven by the need for sustenance and the pursuit of truth regarding their loved ones' whereabouts, they engage in civic organization, aiming to secure their rights and confront the multiple forms of violence they experience.

In Latin America, various women's organizations, predominantly composed of mothers, are active in social movements in the public sphere to denounce the disappearance of their children. A notable example of such social movements is the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo", in Argentina. This movement, organized by mothers, tirelessly sought answers from the State regarding the forced disappearances of their children during Argentina's antidemocratic and dictatorial regime (Leal, 2020, p. 608).

In Brazil, there has also been a rise in women's movements advocating for their missing children and/or relatives. These social mobilizations, emerging in capitals like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, also address urban and institutional violence. For instance, the "Mothers of Acari" movement comprises mothers who, through public protests, sought to spotlight their children's disappearances while denouncing police violence. They confronted public discredit, drawing attention to their triple vulnerability as poor women/mothers, who resided in favelas (Leal, 2020). The events tragically culminated in the 1993 assassination of the movement's leader, Edméia Euzébio.

Another significant Brazilian advocacy movement is the "Mothers of Cinelândia", popularly known as the "Mothers of Sé". Established in 1996 by Ivanise Esperidião, this organization comprises low-income women who have allied with other social movements to address cases of disappearance (Leal, 2020). Regarding those movements, Eduardo Leal (2020) interviewed involved mothers and revealed a common complaint: the unequal media coverage of disappearance cases, especially when compared to cases involving mothers from more affluent social strata.

Thus, when it comes to disappearances, women disproportionately bear burdens due to their socially constructed gender. This reality is evident in the cases of Eunice Paiva and Eunice Santos, both of whom were solely reliant on their husbands as family providers. Both women also faced aggravating factors specific to their situations: Eunice Paiva's husband disappeared at the hands of the violent and authoritarian military dictatorship, while Eunice Santos's social standing increased her vulnerability.

Despite the differing circumstances of their husbands' disappearances, both "Eunices" faced police inaction, a lack of governmental support, devastating financial impact, and profound emotional suffering. This highlights that the absence of state investigation and support is a continuous reality affecting families regardless of political context.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This article conducted a comparative study between the case of Eunice Paiva, whose husband disappeared in 1962 and whose life story was told in the film "I'm Still Here", and the case of another woman named Eunice: Eunice Maria Prudêncio da Silva Santos, who is, in fact, "still here", searching for her missing husband since 2015.

The two women experienced distinct historical and social contexts; while Eunice Paiva's husband was a victim of political repression during a military dictatorship, Eunice Santos' husband disappeared due to mental health issues in a democratic era. Despite the differences in their stories, both "Eunices" faced police inaction, bureaucratic impediments to their constitutionally guaranteed rights, psychological distress and socioeconomic damages.

Within the scope of gender analysis, it was verified that the task of searching for missing loved ones is predominantly performed by women, who are disproportionately affected by disappearances. Economically, women who previously didn't work outside the home are often forced into low-wage, precarious employment, thereby jeopardizing their children's education. Pre-existing gender inequalities amplify this disparity, with social indicators like socioeconomic status and race exacerbating it further.

Given the high rates of missing persons in Brazil, which persist to this day, a continuity in the Brazilian state's insufficient response to missing persons cases was observed. Tal constatação evidencia que, no Brasil, a falta de investigação e suporte estatal é uma realidade contínua que afeta famílias independentemente do contexto político, e que o trauma das perdas e a luta por respostas persistem, unindo essas mulheres em uma experiência de dor e resiliência compartilhada. In that sense, Eunice Paiva's and Eunice Santos' individual struggles mirror the collective claims of women's movements, such as the Mothers of Sé, who continue to demand visibility and state accountability.

Ultimately, this study ascertains that while the causes of disappearance may vary, the underlying structural deficiency in the Brazilian state's response remains an obstacle to

effective investigations and to justice. Addressing this ongoing reality of state negligence requires not only legal frameworks and police restructuring, but also more effective public policies of support to families and a shift in societal and governmental attitudes towards missing persons. Only by confronting these deep-seated historical legacies can Brazil hope to overcome the culture of oblivion when it comes to disappearances.

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