

Access to Justice for Women in Brazil: The Role of Community Paralegals

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Cover photo: Entrance to SIM in Cruzeiro, Porto Alegre (photo by Samantha Misner)



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Research team with PLPs in Restinga, Porto Alegre (photo by Themis staff)

Executive Summary

In Brazil, access to justice remains deeply unequal, especially for women from marginalized communities. While legal protections for women have expanded in recent decades, systemic barriers such as socioeconomic inequality, structural inequalities, institutional shortcomings, and discrimination continue to prevent many women from meaningfully exercising their rights. Gender-based violence is one of the most urgent and visible manifestations of this injustice, but it is compounded by a broader landscape of legal exclusion that affects women's daily lives in countless ways.

Themis — Gender, Justice, and Human Rights, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization (NGO), was founded in 1993 to increase access to justice for women. They launched the *Promotoras Legais Populares* (Popular Legal Promoters or PLPs) program to train women as community paralegals, addressing gender-based violence. The program began in Porto Alegre, but through a decentralized implementation model and

partnerships with several organizations, including Geledés (an organization dedicated to the empowerment and protection of Black women) and União de Mulheres (“Women’s Union”), it expanded and adapted to diverse social, political, and institutional realities across the country. These are the three PLP programs we studied.

While the three programs share core principles, their distinct contexts have informed differences in design, delivery, and implementation. As a result, each program produces PLPs that support women’s access to justice in different ways — whether by multiplying knowledge, defending existing rights, or promoting new rights. Themis’s ability to sustain and scale the PLP program lies in four key strategies and operational characteristics: (1) decentralized leadership, specifically through Themis’s democratization of program design and implementation; (2) PLPs’ maintenance of self-sustaining community networks; (3) organizations’ commitment to horizontal relationships with PLPs; and (4) adaptability to varying community needs, political/social contexts, and crises through context-specific and locally driven design and decision making.

Context

Brazil has expanded legal protections and strengthened rule of law over the past several decades, but socioeconomic inequalities and institutional shortcomings continue to impede access to justice. As of 2017, only 50 per cent of Brazilians reported knowing how to access legal advice, and only slightly more believed that they could even hope for a fair outcome when seeking legal redress.¹ By 2022, these numbers had increased to 72 and 82 per cent, respectively.² While there is progress, lack of information or resources and other systemic challenges (e.g., corruption and judicial backlogs) have left many Brazilians without meaningful access to justice. Geographic isolation further impedes access to justice for those living in rural areas, where there may be limited state presence.

These challenges are particularly acute for marginalized groups, including Brazilian women who are subject to high levels of violence and social exclusion. In 2023 alone, there were 1,467 femicides and nearly 84,000 reported cases of rape. Other forms of gender-based violence — such as domestic assault, stalking, threats, psychological abuse, attempted murder, sexual harassment, and nonconsensual sharing of intimate images — also remain high and have increased significantly compared to previous years.³ Recognizing these persistent gaps, Themis, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization (NGO), founded in the city of Porto Alegre in 1993, set out to increase access to justice for women and promote legal empowerment. This is “a process of systemic change through which the ... excluded become able to use the law, the legal system,

and legal services to protect and advance their rights and interests as citizens and economic actors.”⁴ Legal empowerment efforts involve not only navigating formal legal systems but also leveraging social pressure, community organizing, and alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms to respond to injustices rooted in or beyond the law.

Themis’s operations centred on the *Promotoras Legais Populares* (PLP) program, which trains community leaders to access legal systems, mobilize their community, and use a broad range of tools for dispute resolution. The program began in Porto Alegre, the capital of the southernmost Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, home to 1.3 million people.

Themis’s PLP model draws inspiration from earlier legal-empowerment initiatives across Latin America, particularly in Peru. These initiatives equip community members to bridge the gap between underserved populations and formal legal systems, creating “community paralegals” (in Brazil, community paralegals are known as PLPs). Globally, community paralegal programs date back to at least the 1950s and have since gained prominence, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Oceania.⁵

Since its launch, Themis’s PLP program has been expanded and adapted to different contexts across Brazil and in Cape Verde (a Portuguese-speaking country). Its core curriculum focuses on teaching participants the formal role of the state and judiciary, the limits of different authorities’ jurisdictions, and the strength of civil society as a force for justice. This core curriculum is supplemented by specific, context-dependent information relevant to a particular cohort

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- 1 “Global Insights on Access to Justice: Findings from the World Justice Project General Population Poll in 101 Countries,” World Justice Project, 2019. [↗](#)
 - 2 “The Rule of Law in Brazil: Key Findings from the General Population Poll 2022,” World Justice Project, 2023. [↗](#)
 - 3 “Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2024” [18th Brazilian Public Security Yearbook: 2024], Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública [Brazilian Public Security Forum], 2024. [↗](#)
 - 4 UN Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor (CLEP), “Making the Law Work for Everyone,” vol. 1 (New York: UN CLEP and UNDP, 2008), 1.
 - 5 Vivek Maru and Varun Gauri, “Paralegals in Comparative Perspective: What Have We Learned Across These Six Countries?” in *Community Paralegals and the Pursuit of Justice*, edited by Vivek Maru and Varun Gauri, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.

of aspiring community paralegals based on community needs. We examine how Themis's PLP program has advanced legal empowerment for women in Brazil, and assess what lessons it may offer for scaling and sustaining similar initiatives elsewhere. Our analysis is cognizant of, but does not explore, the fact that despite these efforts, significant barriers to justice remain in Brazil, disproportionately affecting women and other marginalized groups. Studying the factors that have helped or hindered Themis in pursuing these goals may offer lessons that go beyond this particular case study.

RELEVANCE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Researching Themis's efforts to expand access to justice for women yields important insights for three United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including:



SDG 5 — “[achieving] gender equality and [empowering] all women and girls” because of Themis’s attempt to realize gender-transformative legal empowerment.



SDG 10 — “[reducing] inequality within and among countries,” because Themis’s paralegals can act as agents of broad sociopolitical empowerment, especially in marginalized communities in Brazil.



SDG 16 — which calls for “[providing] access to justice for all and [building] effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels,” because of Themis’s and the PLPs engagement with public officials at the municipal, state, and federal levels.

BRAZILIAN WOMEN: THE HARDLY REACHED

Brazilian women face some of the most severe and persistent barriers to justice in Latin America. Roughly 40 per cent of women in Brazil have experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence at least once in their lives, with over 83 per cent of violent deaths in the country occurring within domestic or intimate settings. Despite legal advances, including Brazil’s ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the passage of key legislation like the Feminicide Law, violence against women remains widespread and systemic. In 2023 alone, 1,467 women were victims of femicide — the highest number recorded since the law was enacted in 2015 — with Black women accounting for over 63 per cent of those killed.⁶ The existing legal protections are not effective because of weak enforcement of the law, chronic underfunding of women’s protection services — such as the 27 per cent budget cut to the Secretariat of Policies for Women in 2019 — and lingering legal inequalities, including the fact that Brazilian law recognized only men as heads of households until as recently as 1988. In addition to facing the highest rate of child marriage in South America, with 36 per cent of girls married before the age of 18, Brazilian women continue to experience gender-based exclusion in employment, political participation, and access to public services.

Women in Brazil face deeply entrenched legal and structural barriers that limit their access to justice. Economic precarity prevents many from affording legal representation, while institutional failures mean that even when legal protections exist, they can be poorly enforced. Geographic isolation further limits access for those in rural and Indigenous communities, where police stations, courts, and legal aid services are scarce. Survivors of domestic violence struggle to access protection as a result of societal norms, and systemic failures

6 “Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2024” [Brazilian Public Security Yearbook, 2024].

in law enforcement and the judiciary. These overlapping challenges leave many women without meaningful legal recourse, reinforcing cycles of inequality and exclusion.

While these challenges affect women broadly, certain groups face heightened vulnerabilities as a result of intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization.

Historical inequalities, shaped by patriarchal norms and racial discrimination, continue to marginalize women, particularly Black and Indigenous women.

Domestic workers, the majority of whom are Black women,

experience exploitative labour conditions and are routinely denied legal protections. Indigenous women, facing both cultural and geographic exclusion, are often unable to access legal support and are disproportionately targeted in land disputes and gender-based violence. These groups, in particular, remain among the hardest to reach in Brazil's legal system.

SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO PROTECTION

Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence in Brazil. National surveys show that one-third of women aged 16 and older (33.4%) have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner or ex-partner — above the global average of 27 per cent. When psychological violence is also included, the figure rises to 43 per cent, affecting an estimated 27.6 million women.⁷

Roughly 40 per cent of women in Brazil have experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence at least once in their lives, with over 83 per cent of violent deaths in the country occurring within domestic or intimate settings.

A statute known as the “Maria da Penha Law” (MDP) provides an important source of legal protections.⁸ Themis was a part of the consortium of feminist organizations that created this statute in 2006. The MDP was a landmark piece of legislation in Brazil, the first of its kind to designate domestic abuse as a form of gendered violence and mandate special protections for affected

women.⁹ It introduced “urgent protective measures” aimed at isolating victims from the perpetrators of violence, mandated the establishment of women’s police stations, and called for the creation of specialized judicial benches with both

criminal and family law expertise to deal with domestic violence cases.

However, many Brazilian women seeking legal protection and redress face obstacles in cultural norms and social attitudes. For instance, in many circles, domestic violence is considered a private family matter, and those involved, especially victims, are discouraged from using formal legal channels. In rural areas, community pressures often discourage women from seeking divorce. Economic dependence on their male partner and lack of family support if they end their marriage can prevent other women from accessing legal protection against violence. Women who do not have access to financial resources, housing, or employment alternatives may be unable to seek legal protection or relocate to safety. The financial, social, and emotional burdens associated with legal action make this path prohibitively costly for many women, especially those from marginalized groups.

7 “Gender-Based Violence Country Profile: Brazil, 2023,” The World Bank. [↗](#)

8 The MDP’s namesake is Maria da Penha Maia Fernandes, a bio-pharmacist who became paraplegic after surviving two attempted murders by her husband in 1983. Many years after the incidents, da Penha’s husband was subject to relatively lenient penalties. In response, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ruled in 2001 that Brazil was responsible for failing to adequately protect da Penha, lending support to a push by civil society organizations — including the Conference of Brazilian Women of which Themis was a member — that eventually culminated in the statute.

9 Federal Brazilian Law n. 11340.

Despite the landmark MDP, for those who try to resort to legal channels, significant administrative barriers result in further exclusion. When women consider accessing justice, a key obstacle is law enforcement's failure to take domestic violence seriously. Women who report abuse frequently encounter skepticism or outright refusal from police officers to register their cases.¹⁰ In many regions, long delays in judicial processes often leave women without timely protective measures. For Black and Indigenous women, these barriers are even greater — racial discrimination within the justice system means their cases are more likely to be dismissed or deprioritized. Moreover, many women remain trapped in cycles of abuse because even government officials in charge of enforcing the law often view domestic violence as a domestic/family matter, and they typically prioritize preservation of the family unit over the protection of victims.

Our Research

We examined the implementation of PLP programs in three distinct contexts: the Themis-led initiative in Porto Alegre; the PLP program coordinated by Geledés, an NGO in São Paulo; and the program run by another organization, União de Mulheres, also in São Paulo and in the ABC Region, a metropolitan cluster of seven municipalities directly connected to the state capital.¹¹ This multi-sited approach enables us to explore the dynamics and challenges of implementing PLP programs both in major urban centres and in smaller cities. It also offers a rare opportunity to analyze the coexistence of two distinct PLP initiatives within São Paulo — a city of over 11 million inhabitants — each initiative shaped by different institutional frameworks, strategic priorities, and operational modalities.

While our aim is not to draw comparative judgments between the various programs, the coexistence of multiple iterations of the PLP model across such diverse contexts provides an opportunity to analyze mechanisms that allow for the program's successful diffusion and adaptability. At the same time, specificities of each case provide important insights into how divergent institutional paths, agendas, and organizational capacities shape program design and implementation. These variations also provide an opportunity to reflect on the different ways that organizations navigate the social, political, and logistical challenges specific to their local contexts.

Themis — Gender, Justice, and Human Rights is a mid-sized NGO based in Porto Alegre whose mission is deeply rooted in legal empowerment and the development of the PLP program, which it has played a central role in disseminating nationally. Its activities are organized around two primary programmatic axes: the PLP program and a program focused on domestic workers' rights. The PLP initiative is staffed by one full-time employee and one intern who are responsible for organizing training courses, maintaining continuous engagement with PLPs operating in the field, offering legal support in cases of severe gender-based violence requiring litigation, and overseeing a preventive arm of the program, which includes youth training and public awareness campaigns. The current president of the PLP Association of the State of Rio Grande do Sul is employed by Themis within the domestic workers' program and plays a pivotal role in bridging communication between grassroots PLPs and the organization.

Geledés — Black Women's Institute is a large São Paulo-based NGO committed to eradicating racism and sexism in Brazilian society. Its multifaceted work spans the fields of education, public policy, and human rights, including the provision of legal assistance in cases of racial

10 Brazil Institute and Jaret Waters, "Fighting Gender-Based Violence in Brazil: Challenges and Paths Forward," Wilson Center, 2 December 2021. [↗](#)

11 The greater ABC region includes the municipalities of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, São Caetano do Sul, Diadema, Mauá, Ribeirão Pires, and Rio Grande da Serra.

discrimination and the pursuit of strategic litigation at both national and international levels. The PLP program constitutes one of many initiatives under its broad institutional umbrella.

União de Mulheres, by contrast, identifies not as a formal NGO but as a feminist social movement rooted in São Paulo. Its organizational structure is less institutionalized, reflecting its identity as a grassroots feminist actor. The organization has been instrumental in advancing the PLP model in both São Paulo and the surrounding ABC Region, adapting the program to align with its political commitments and local engagement strategies.

We initiated this research in June 2024, developing it through a co-creation process in close partnership with Themis — Gender, Justice, and Human Rights. From the outset, we were in regular contact with one of the founders of both the NGO and the PLP program, who is currently a member of Themis's board. Through monthly meetings, we gained a deeper understanding of Themis's institutional trajectory, the operational structure of the PLP program, and the day-to-day work of the PLPs in the territories. Together, we defined the goals and expected outcomes of this research, aligning our interests with Themis's internal inquiries about their program and its evolution.

This process of co-creation extended beyond logistical and thematic coordination. It allowed us to formulate a set of research questions that both addressed gaps and themes relevant to the international literature on community paralegals and responded to practical concerns that Themis and its partners identified. We collaboratively identified dimensions of the PLP model that might account for its effectiveness (that we eventually explored through fieldwork) and incorporated Themis's own reflections and questions — particularly regarding the judiciary's responsiveness to gender issues, and how different partner organizations interpret and adapt the core elements of the PLP program. As a result, our research design emerged as a shared effort, grounded in mutual

interests and built to generate knowledge that would be both analytically valuable and directly useful to Themis and its network.

Importantly, this co-creation approach did not end with the design phase but came to define the ethos of our fieldwork as well, where the adaptability and dialogical nature of our research process proved essential. The co-creation approach evolved into a genuine collaborative engagement not only with Themis's leadership but with the PLPs themselves, who actively shaped how we conducted research. This was important not only because their choices embodied the core values of the PLP program — horizontal exchange, community-based practice, and trust — but also because the formats they proposed — talking circles — revealed, in each context, what was most meaningful to understand. The talking circles, in particular, proved to be a powerful method for generating rich, nuanced material because these collective settings allowed for the emergence of shared narratives, emotional resonance, and a deeper sense of the PLPs' relational work within their communities. This experience reaffirmed the value of grounding research in participatory, context-sensitive methodologies that respect and adapt to the knowledge and practices of those directly involved.

THE PLP PROGRAM

The PLP program fosters the democratization of rights knowledge and delivers a popular education program that equips women — domestic workers, Black, and Indigenous women alike — to help other women to act in defence of violated rights. By engaging in dialogue with local community organizations, raising awareness of the program among community groups, and receiving feedback from community leaders, Themis iteratively formulates an appropriate curriculum that adapts to the specific needs of each implementation context. In addition to community-driven program design, Themis also offers the program's core curriculum.



FIGURE 1. Talking circles in Restinga, Porto Alegre (top); at União de Mulheres in São Paulo (bottom left); and in Santo André with PLPs from the ABC region, São Paulo (bottom right) (photos by Themis and União de Mulheres staff)

Over the past three decades, the program has evolved from a localized initiative in Porto Alegre into a nationwide effort spanning the state of Rio Grande do Sul and beyond. Rather than centralizing implementation, Themis strategically developed a decentralized model that not only trains cohorts of PLPs directly, but also empowers external organizations — primarily NGOs and, in some cases, public institutions such as the Public Defender’s Office — to deliver PLP training and coordinate programs within their own states and communities. This approach was intentionally designed to promote the program’s scalability while ensuring its responsiveness to diverse local contexts. Themis’s foundational methodology serves as a flexible framework that allows partner organizations to adapt and apply it in accordance with the specific social, cultural, and institutional dynamics of their territories.

Serving as the foundation for the program’s overarching goals — fostering knowledge of rights and strengthening PLPs’ capacity for intervention and change — the core curriculum for the training course is delivered across all cohorts nationwide. It includes modules on how the state is organized and how the justice system functions when it comes to legal services, race, domestic violence, and sexual violence. This core curriculum is reinforced by a charter of principles that must guide all local adaptations of the PLP program.

The charter’s principles include:

- **Generating a legal consciousness** in women, raising awareness of their rights-bearing status
- **Developing critical consciousness** of the law to combat sexism and elitism
- **Democratizing legal knowledge**, particularly

in areas pertaining to gender relationships and women's situation in society

- **Equipping women to recognize** rights violations and legal mechanisms for reparation
- **Fostering conditions** where participants can educate other women
- **Inspiring participants** to relate knowledge to other social movements
- **Enabling educators** to relate legal teachings to gender perspectives
- **Building capacity for the promotion** and defence of rights.

In practice, when these principles are upheld, the PLP program produces community paralegals who are equipped with the agency and knowledge to address injustices in their communities.

Types of Themis Promotoras Legais Populares (PLP) Models

The PLP program Themis spearheaded in Porto Alegre in 1993 expanded to São Paulo shortly thereafter. Two São Paulo-based initiatives — Geledés and União de Mulheres — adapted Themis's model and initiated long-lasting PLP programs. While all three programs share a methodology and core principles, the different social, political, and institutional contexts in which they operate resulted in varied designs, delivery methods, and implementation strategies.

Here we outline three distinct PLP program models, based on field research conducted in Porto Alegre and São Paulo. The models differ in how PLPs are selected, how graduates organize after training, and how they engage with local state services and institutions. We conceived of these differences in how PLPs are cultivated and mobilized across Brazil as a strength of the program. The variability in features by city and

community testify to the training program's adaptability and how local needs and conditions shape legal empowerment.

PORTO ALEGRE MODEL

In Porto Alegre, Themis selects PLP candidates based on demonstrated leadership in their communities. Many recruits are already active in local participatory councils, grassroots associations, or informal community organizing. Established leaders sport a greater capacity than other candidates to mobilize existing social bonds and push for needed change in legislation and governance. Community embeddedness and accountability are thus core criteria for enrolment in a PLP training course in Porto Alegre. To reduce barriers related to safety, cost, or distance, Themis delivers training courses directly where participants live. Often, potential PLPs initiate contact with Themis to push for a training course to be brought to their community.

Following their training, PLP graduates organize in strong, centralized units, most of which operate from permanent service centres known as *Serviço de Informação à Mulher* (SIMs — Women's Information Service). These physical hubs serve both as coordination points and as accessible spaces for women seeking support for rights violations, and their establishment was driven by the PLPs' demands. In the 1990s and early 2000s, PLPs working out of SIMs advocated for basic infrastructure, public health services, and new means of de-escalating gang violence.

Themis-trained PLPs in Porto Alegre operate with considerable autonomy from Themis. With strong connectedness to local networks, they can push for changes in how public services function and are entirely equipped to mobilize in response to local crises. One group in the city's southern periphery recounted mobilizing to remove a hostile local police chief without any involvement from Themis. The NGO learned about it only after the PLPs had succeeded in their efforts.



FIGURE 2. Entrance to SIM in Cruzeiro, Porto Alegre (photos by Samantha Misner)

Porto Alegre's PLPs frequently negotiate and engage with local state actors while maintaining their autonomy. Themis-trained PLPs, especially in the city's under-resourced peripheries, make use of their community embeddedness to hold municipal authorities accountable for public service delivery. Many PLPs, both prior to and following their training, serve as elected members of local policy councils in areas such as education, health, and public safety. Their relationships with public institutions often depend on key individuals: a PLP group's access to or influence over a service provider typically stems from an individual connection with a local official. Such ties foster close and flexible working relationships, but are vulnerable to disruption given electoral turnover, retirement, or administrative reshuffling. The relationship between PLPs and the police is different from that between PLPs and municipal service providers because they operate in marginalized communities that have historically faced systemic police violence. While PLPs in Porto Alegre, on account

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of their influence and community leadership, can leverage their status as a political force to engage with the police, levels of collaboration vary from community to community.

GELEDÉS MODEL

Geledés offers PLP training in peripheral neighbourhoods of São Paulo where participants live. This localized approach increases accessibility

for women with low socioeconomic backgrounds who may otherwise be excluded due to their geographical marginality in the city's urban sprawl. While many PLP candidates are leaders to some degree within their

communities, Geledés does not specifically seek such leaders but offers open courses to anyone interested.

Geledés-trained PLPs do not maintain physical posts for service provision. Instead, they respond to community needs wherever they are — whether in their workplaces or places of worship — drawing

on strong interpersonal bonds and informal support networks among PLPs. For instance, PLPs in Francisco Morato work in partnership with the local Afro-Brazilian religious spaces. Women often turn to them for support in situations of domestic violence. While they offer spiritual solace, they also empower women to take action and connect them with appropriate institutional resources or refer them to other PLPs who may be better positioned to help. In more complex or challenging situations, they generally consult the NGO's staff for guidance. Their ties to Geledés also connect them to a broader ecosystem of social justice organizations operating at both the regional and national levels.

While not maintaining physical posts for service provision, in some cases Geledés has established partnerships with state actors to place PLPs in locations where victims of domestic violence typically seek services. One such example would be a partnership with a hospital in which they worked to provide a space where victims of domestic violence could be separated from their abusers and assisted by a PLP upon arrival.

Geledés's PLPs sustain strong interpersonal bonds and often rely on informal networks of support. However, Geledés-trained PLPs report higher risks of hostility from public institutions and the general public as a result of the racialized and gendered violence they face as Black women. This context contributes to their general reluctance to engage directly with the state. Instead, many choose to act predominantly within civil society.

UNIÃO DE MULHERES MODEL

The União de Mulheres PLP model covers the entire São Paulo metropolitan area, including the greater ABC region. The organization holds PLP training courses in the city centre, drawing women from across the metropolitan area who commute to attend classes. In the peripheral municipalities, União de Mulheres partners with local NGOs to mobilize participation, such as the *Promotoras*

Legais Populares de Santo André (PROLEG, Popular Legal Promoters of Santo André). Hosting the program downtown makes it easier to engage facilitators such as judges, professors, and public officials, who might otherwise be unwilling or unable to travel to the cities' peripheries.

Since 1994, União de Mulheres' PLP program has reportedly trained several hundred women. The program casts a wide net, and participant recruitment is not based on prior leadership experience or socioeconomic status. As a result, cohorts are highly diverse, including women with minimal formal education as well as lawyers, academics, activists, and judges. PLPs trained by União de Mulheres tend to integrate what they learned into their existing roles as mothers, lawyers, or activists, etc.

Because participants often commute from dispersed locations, it seems that they are less likely to remain formally organized as a group. Instead, it appears that they apply the tools and principles they learned through the program to empower themselves and advocate for women within their own networks, roles, or organizations. In this way, the ethos of União de Mulheres' program seems to be oriented more toward direct training of individuals rather than the formation of an integrated team of PLPs who can then collaboratively act as agents of legal empowerment in their own communities.

While the NGO has agreements with the local government for training venues, their operation appears to be based on occasional and temporary partnerships, rather than sustained engagement with public service providers such as police departments or health centres. For example, one temporary partnership deployed PLPs in a women's police station in the ABC to help victims organize and structure their reports in a way that facilitated processing by the justice system. PLPs were given a space to meet with women who arrive at the police station — often distressed — and help them organize information in a way that highlights legally relevant issues for the police

report. The partnership initially relied on PLP volunteers and is now run by clinical psychology students conducting practicums as part of their courses at a local university.

Determining the Goals on Access to Justice

In an interview, a staff member from Themis offered a three-part framework as a way of understanding the roles that PLPs can play within communities. Drawing on her experience in Porto Alegre, she described PLP work as encompassing three broad goals: multiplying knowledge, defending existing rights, and promoting new rights. These categories reflect the varying ways that PLPs support women's access to justice — not only through legal information and service navigation, but also through political engagement and rights advocacy. Not every PLP contributes equally across all areas. Many find they are better suited to one dimension over another, and organizational support often shapes the direction of their involvement.

While this framework was articulated in the context of Themis's own model, it offers a useful lens to examine how the three models adapt PLP programming to their own institutional goals, political orientations, and community dynamics. In what follows we explore each of the three goals, beginning with how the framework functions in Themis's in-house model and then consider how it has been intentionally adapted or reframed in the models developed by Geledés and União de Mulheres.

MULTIPLYING KNOWLEDGE

In all three models, multiplying knowledge is described as a direct outcome of PLP training, though how and where this knowledge gets

shared can vary significantly. In the Themis model, knowledge dissemination is highly structured and deliberately organized through SIMs (women's information centres). PLPs in Porto Alegre are trained to facilitate legal education sessions in schools, health posts, and community spaces, using consistent formats tailored to the local population. Their ability to deliver this content is supported by ongoing training, mentorship, and access to physical infrastructure. The work tends to be visible, recurring, and embedded within Themis's broader institutional relationships. This setup allows legal knowledge to be shared not just as abstract rights but in ways directly linked to available services and local needs.

In the Geledés model, multiplying knowledge is also direct, but it operates through a different kind of strategy. Rather than channeling PLPs into centralized service points, Geledés's main knowledge dissemination points are through the women themselves and within the women's own social environments — as neighbours, caregivers, cultural organizers, or members of religious or spiritual communities. This reflects a commitment to flexibility and autonomy, grounded in the organization's connection to the Black movements. This may mean knowledge is shared informally — through conversations at a community gathering, a workplace, or a space of spiritual practices or religious ceremonies. It is still direct, but more diffused across social roles and less dependent on visibility or physical space. The choice not to formalize this work seems to be intentional: it may protect PLPs from potential risks associated with their visibility, while preserving the racial justice grounding of the program.

In the União de Mulheres model, direct knowledge multiplication appears to function more as a byproduct of personal interest and prior commitments. The makeup of the training cohorts is often very different, with participants typically including professors, librarians, university students, and professionals who seem to self-select into the course because of a specific issue they care about, such as LGBTQ rights, disability, missing

children, or domestic violence. The course acts as an educational tool, equipping these women with legal frameworks they can apply in their daily lives, workplaces, or personal advocacy. Rather than through further education, knowledge spreads when and how individual participants choose to integrate it into their existing roles.

DEFENDING EXISTING RIGHTS

In the Themis model, defending rights is direct and standardized, although that standardization is adapted to each territory. In one community, PLPs might collaborate with a strong Maria da Penha patrol unit; in another, police relationships may be weaker, or even antagonistic, requiring different tactics. One example of collaboration is the Maria da Penha patrols in Eixo Baltazar, where PLPs help identify high-risk cases of domestic violence and coordinate responses with state actors.¹²

Still, the goal remains consistent: to provide *acolhimento* (safe space reception and emotional support), active listening, and guidance to women facing violence.

One PLP explained that the “hug, listen, refer” sequence is part of their regular protocol, a method developed to build trust and respond to trauma before jumping to legal procedures. The standardized approach also appears to help integrate PLPs into service networks and maintain consistency in how women are supported. Victims of violence seek support by either physically going to the SIMs or by approaching PLPs in the community, who then refer them to the SIMs. The SIMs also provide professional training opportunities for women, such as sewing and

cooking, and in many cases, PLPs identify victims through informal conversations during these educational sessions.

In Geledés, defending rights seems to be indirect. Except for the partnerships mentioned earlier, the organization does not focus on creating formal structures for victim support. Instead, it prioritizes equipping women with knowledge that allows them to recognize rights violations and intervene — if they choose to — in their own lives and social networks. This indirect model may reflect how many PLPs are survivors themselves or operate in contexts where direct public-facing roles could pose risks. One participant noted that after taking the course, she felt empowered to speak up when she overheard a coworker describing a violent

relationship. Another shared that in her religious community, she had become an informal resource for women unsure of what was legally permissible or available. In these cases, PLPs may not identify as such

in public, but they carry the knowledge into relational, situational forms of defence.

In the União de Mulheres model, defending rights also appears to be indirect, and with less formal association to the PLP role. Because there is no structured follow-up, whether and how participants apply what they’ve learned seems to vary widely. Some might support others informally — correcting misinformation, guiding someone toward a service, or recognizing abuse in a friend’s or colleague’s situation. However, this can occur without referring back to the PLP identity. Instead, they act as individuals who have gained legal literacy, not as members of an ongoing program or a coordinated team. Without structured action post-training, women trained by

One PLP explained that the “hug, listen, refer” sequence is part of their regular protocol, a method developed to build trust and respond to trauma before jumping to legal procedures.

12 The Maria da Penha patrol (*Patrulha Maria da Penha*) are specialized units within the military police tasked with enforcing court-issued protective measures for victims of domestic violence. These teams conduct regular visits to survivors and ensure compliance with restraining orders issued against abusers.



FIGURE 3. (Left to right) Co-op kitchen in the SIM in Canoas, Porto Alegre; Sewing workshop in the SIM in Cruzeiro, Porto Alegre (photos by Luke Lee)

União de Mulheres have independently formed informal local associations beyond São Paulo proper, including in the ABC municipalities and in the nearby city of Campinas. These seem to serve as forums for PLP graduates to exchange insights about their individual initiatives, and not necessarily as forums to plan coordinated action as a group of PLPs. The lack of structure in the União de Mulheres model appears to be intentional: the course seems designed to empower women to use knowledge and their PLP connections how and where it best fits within their lives and professions.

PROMOTING NEW RIGHTS

Themis promotes new rights through a model integrated with a network of public services. PLPs are trained not just to educate and support, but to participate in formal governance spaces. Many take seats on municipal councils, local oversight committees, and community planning boards, especially those focused on education, health, and gender-based violence. In such positions, they are able to promote new systems of rights protection, either because there are no systems in place or because the existing systems do not work. This

strategy reflects Themis's aim to embed women in institutional decision making and shape systems from within.

In the Geledés model, promoting rights appears to be integrated with a network of social movements, rather than formal state infrastructure. This aligns with Geledés's identity as part of Brazil's Black movements and their long-standing alliances with grassroots struggles. In this case, PLPs often operate through dispersed and decentralized networks — leveraging partnerships with community-based organizations. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Geledés collaborated with the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) to distribute food baskets.¹³ MST produced and provided the grains and vegetables, while the PLPs facilitated their delivery, ensuring the initiative had the necessary capacity to effectively reach vulnerable community members, and demonstrating how social movement infrastructure can be mobilized for both basic support and rights-based action. Geledés supports engagement through solidaristic, horizontal networks rooted in shared struggle.

In the União de Mulheres model, promoting rights is not systematically integrated into the program's design. Its training seems to function more as an educational tool than a coordinated strategy for political engagement. Because participants often have specific advocacy interests or are already embedded in other professional spheres, the course becomes a resource they can draw on as needed. Some may go on to influence policy, push for institutional change, run for office, or become active in social movements, but these outcomes seem to depend entirely on individual initiative. Although informal associations of PLP graduates exist, there is no collective infrastructure guiding their engagement. In this model, PLP training appears to be a tool that women incorporate into their existing pathways and therefore a different kind of social movement than one centred on

being a "PLP" and operating in collaboration with an active community of other PLPs.

Lessons Learned

Unlike most other community paralegal initiatives encountered in the literature, Themis's PLP model not only endured but expanded. Today, the program is implemented by a wide range of organizations and women's groups across Brazil, most often independently of Themis. Each iteration of the program analyzed here adapted Themis's original methodology to meet its community's specific needs and context.

For decades, PLP programs in Brazil have empowered women to realize change, both personal and collective. Given the PLP program's scalability, sustainability, and effectiveness in Brazil, there are lessons we can draw for other community paralegal programs worldwide.

DECENTRALIZED LEADERSHIP

From the beginning, Themis decided that its role was not to expand the PLP program across Brazil on its own. Instead, it took a supportive, behind-the-scenes approach. When its first partners, União de Mulheres and Geledés, launched their own PLP programs in 1998 and 1999, Themis provided guidance but never imposed its model. These two organizations were already deeply embedded in São Paulo's feminist and Black movements and had an intimate understanding of their communities.

In the same spirit that the PLP program seeks to democratize legal knowledge for women, Themis democratized the program design and implementation itself. It made its methodology public and accessible, inviting other NGOs and women's collectives to adapt it according to

13 Landless Workers' Movement, widely considered one of the world's largest social movements.

their own political, institutional, and community contexts. This contrasts with many paralegal models elsewhere in the world, which are often tightly coordinated by an international aid organization or by a central government agency.

By decentralizing leadership over the PLP program, Themis allowed its model to take root in different regions on its own terms. While our research focuses on three initiatives in just two cities, the program's reach is far wider. One Themis executive recalled meeting a PLP by chance in Rio de Janeiro and being surprised to learn that she had been trained by a local NGO entirely unknown to Themis. A quick online search revealed hundreds of PLP programs across Brazil that had evolved independently. This decentralized network of NGO-to-NGO leadership has enabled the program to scale nationally without losing its local focus.

CREATING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT: SELF-SUSTAINING COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Through the PLP program, Themis helped catalyze a movement for legal empowerment throughout Brazil. As Denise Dora has noted, the women trained as PLPs have come to constitute a social movement in their own right, forming self-sustaining community networks that operate within and across regions, independent of the organizations that initially trained them.

In every version of the program we encountered, PLPs remained active long after completing the course, including graduates from the earliest cohorts. While each PLP group evolved differently depending on their local context, a sense of continuity and commitment was present throughout. In Porto Alegre, the model was formalized, with a physical hub and organized volunteering through SIM offices. The Geledés model in São Paulo emphasized a diffuse network of PLPs dispersed across peripheral neighbourhoods. In União de Mulheres' more individualized model, PLPs applied the training to

their existing activism, bringing legal knowledge into a range of ongoing initiatives. These PLPs initiate and lead activities on their own, independent of any direction from the NGOs that trained them.

The size and institutional context of Porto Alegre allowed Themis to support the early development of such networks through targeted participant recruitment. Themis identified women who were already leaders in their communities, whether formally through municipal councils, or informally, through neighbourhood associations and grassroots collectives. Once trained, many women returned to these roles with new tools, and some assumed additional responsibilities as active PLPs, including volunteering at SIMs. Their prior leadership experiences supported their ability to continue organizing autonomously. Similarly, the União de Mulheres model draws on the participants' existing involvement in activism, with the course serving to complement their ongoing efforts.

In Porto Alegre, Themis also fostered self-sustaining networks among PLPs by emphasizing a cohort experience and opportunities for them to interact after graduating. Themis's methodology encourages each cohort of PLP trainees to connect with one another. Throughout the course, the participants share personal, often traumatic stories, creating affective bonds that endure beyond completion of the course. One PLP in Restinga shared, "These women are my family. I rely on them." For many participants, especially survivors of domestic violence, the PLP course became an emancipatory exercise where they built both legal knowledge and a strong support system outside of their domestic life. Many participants internalized the notion of being a PLP. As one participant in Cruzeiro put it, "Once you graduate as a PLP, you are a PLP for life."

Over time, these strong bonds have translated into new forms of collective organization. In Porto Alegre, PLPs created a regional independent collective separate from Themis. More recently,

PLPs from across Brazil have formed a national organization, through which PLPs from a majority of states convene online. One participant reflected how “PLPs learning from one another creates new bonds that are separate from Themis.” This signals a pivotal shift that diverges from previous literature on paralegal programs: while the NGO was crucial in launching the PLP program, it is no longer essential to its survival. The movement sustains itself through the initiative of PLPs themselves.

This evolution is rooted in Brazil’s long-standing tradition of strong and organized social movements. Since the colonial period, Brazilian society has been shaped by resistance to domination and social exclusion, with popular struggles taking diverse forms across different historical moments. From the 1990s onward, the emergence of a robust third sector, made up of NGOs, grassroots associations, and other civil society organizations, further reinforced the strength and reach of these movements.¹⁴ In this context, the emergence of subnational and national PLP movements should not be considered unique within Brazil.

HORIZONTAL PLP-NGO RELATIONSHIP

In Porto Alegre, the relationship between PLPs and the NGOs that train and support them stands out among global community paralegal initiatives. Rather than being passive recipients of top-down support, PLPs often hold just as much influence as the NGO itself. In this horizontal, peer-like relationship, PLPs have meaningful autonomy and decision-making power which have contributed to the program’s effectiveness and longevity.

From the beginning of each cohort, participants are invited to co-create the course. Themis’s methodology emphasizes collaborative, participant-led learning, with trainees actively shaping the curriculum by identifying the issues most relevant to their lives and communities. This approach, which is consistent across all three models, makes the course responsive and impactful. Sessions are structured as dialogues rather than lectures, fostering an environment where women learn as much from one another as they do from the session’s facilitators. These facilitators include NGO staff, public servants, professors, and judges — many of whom, in turn, learn from the lived experiences shared by the participants. For example, a judge facilitating a session met a woman she had previously ruled against in court, denying the woman’s request for a protective measure under the Maria da Penha Law (MDP). Now training to be a PLP, the woman openly shared her story, and at the end of the exchange between the two, the judge acknowledged she had made an error in her ruling.

After graduation, this horizontal relationship continues. For instance, in Porto Alegre, the network of SIM offices originated from the dialogue between PLPs and Themis. Early PLP cohorts recognized the need for physical spaces to meet with community members and began setting up informal partnerships with schools, health units, and *Centro de Referência de Assistência Social* (CRAS, Social Assistance Reference Centres). Upon request from the PLPs, Themis later helped formalize these arrangements and provided support to establish permanent SIM locations. Themis listens to what PLPs ask for, understanding

The women trained as PLPs have come to constitute a social movement in their own right, forming self-sustaining community networks that operate within and across regions, independent of the organizations that initially trained them.

14 Maria da Glória Gohn, “500 Anos De Lutas Sociais No Brasil: Movimentos Sociais, ONGs E Terceiro Setor” [500 Years of Social Struggles in Brazil: Social Movements, NGOs and the Third Sector], *Mediações — Revista De Ciências Sociais*, 5, no. 1 (2000): 11–40. [↗](#)



FIGURE 4. (Left and top right) SIM located in a public elementary school in Restinga, Porto Alegre; (bottom right) SIM located in Vida Centro Humanístico, a state-run social centre in Eixo Baltazar, Porto Alegre (photos by Sofia Bordin Rolim, Luke Lee)

that each neighbourhood's needs are different. As one Themis staff member explained, their role is to help manage and fairly distribute limited resources across the city's many active PLP groups upon request.

In São Paulo, the horizontal dynamic plays out differently. Among PLPs trained by União de Mulheres, for example, graduates often take their legal knowledge into individualized or issue-based advocacy. They independently pursue causes they care about, such as disability justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and the Palestinian cause, while also pushing the organization itself to evolve. One of its leaders explained how PLP advocacy has pushed União de Mulheres to adopt a more inclusive, "multiple feminisms" approach. In other cases, informal local associations of PLPs trained by União de Mulheres organized among themselves to offer courses in their respective municipalities.

In several NGOs, PLPs also hold formal advisory and staff roles. At Themis, PLPs are embedded across various projects and programs, and one PLP always holds a seat on the organization's board. Their presence ensures that there is a constant PLP influence on Themis's strategy and decision making, not just with respect to the PLP program, but across the NGO's entire operation. Themis recognizes PLPs as subject-matter experts whose perspectives, rooted in both training and lived experience, are essential to the organization's evolution.

ADAPTABILITY

The enduring strength of Themis's PLP program lies in its adaptability. While grounded in a shared set of principles developed by Themis, each iteration of the program is context-specific, locally driven, and responsive to evolving needs.



FIGURE 5. (From left to right) PLPs in Restinga, Porto Alegre; PLPs in the ABC region, São Paulo with Reach team (photos by Mariana Prado, União de Mulheres staff)

This adaptability has been key to the program’s scalability, sustainability, and overall impact.

Adaptability to political and institutional context. The scope and scale of PLP work is shaped by the presence and strength of public services. In Porto Alegre, for example, PLPs initially stepped in to fill a vacuum in legal services, essentially playing the role of legal counsel for women facing human rights violations. However, following the establishment of the Public Defender’s Office (PDO), PLPs adapted. Rather than providing front-line legal support, they shifted to holding the PDO accountable, advocating for the consideration of women’s rights and ensuring that the institution fulfilled its mandate effectively.

Adaptability to social context. Both NGOs and PLPs regularly navigate shifting political and social climates, which can directly affect the safety and visibility of their work. In Porto Alegre, PLPs are widely recognized and enjoy a certain legitimacy in the view of public institutions and certain political actors. They wear bright orange shirts when acting in their role as PLPs, particularly while working in SIMs or when supporting women in the community. One PLP in Cruzeiro recounted meeting a woman in need of help, identifying herself, and putting on her orange shirt so others — including police and public officials — would understand who she was and take the situation seriously. This visibility has helped them gain quicker access and more responsive treatment

from police and other officials, who understand that PLPs are well aware of their rights. By contrast, in São Paulo, the social context presents different challenges. PLPs, especially Black women trained by Geledés, report facing greater risks and often work more discreetly. Visibility, in these contexts, can invite danger rather than protection.

Adaptability to community needs. Because PLPs are embedded in their communities, they are attuned to the specific, often shifting, needs of the people around them. They play a central role in shaping course content and outreach strategies. For instance, following the 2024 floods in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, PLPs requested a training module focused on climate emergencies. Themis responded quickly, working with PLPs to co-design new curriculum content — a second iteration of this new climate-focused course will be delivered later this year in the region most affected by the floods. This bottom-up responsiveness keeps the program grounded and relevant.

Adaptability to crises. The decentralized, autonomous structure of the PLP movement allows it to respond rapidly in times of crisis. For example, during the 2024 floods, the SIM in Canoas transformed into a soup kitchen, while the SIM in Eixo Baltazar played a key role in addressing women’s rights violations in shelters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Geledés-trained PLPs in São Paulo, in collaboration with the Landless Workers’ Movement, organized the delivery of emergency



FIGURE 6. SIM in Canoas, Porto Alegre, which ran a soup kitchen during the 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul (photo by Themis staff)

food baskets to families in need. The PLPs have demonstrated an ability to pivot quickly in urgent crises.

Continuing Challenges

Despite the enactment of the Maria da Penha Law (MDP), Brazil's leadership and institutions continue to pursue a regressive agenda that neglects women's rights and fails to enforce national legislation in this area. Although Themis and Geledés engage in significant lobbying and advocacy efforts, gaining the political leverage necessary to shift this trajectory remains a challenge too great for civil society organizations alone. This political landscape — combined with deep economic inequalities and enduring cultural barriers — presents Themis, Geledés, and União de Mulheres with many challenges to scaling their PLP programs and more broadly, advancing justice for Brazilian women.

SUSTAINABLE IMPACT AND SCALING

Themis's goal of extending access to justice encompasses multiplying knowledge as well as defending and promoting rights. PLPs most directly address these dimensions of access to justice by developing strategies based on partnerships with public service providers. However, these partnerships often hinge on individual and personal relationships with local or state officials, making them vulnerable to dissolution amid shifts in public policy, and creating barriers to scaling up and guaranteeing sustainable impact.

For example, as a result of Geledés's relationship with the director of the São Mateus General Hospital, they were able to offer PLP training to nurses, nurse assistants, and technical staff at the hospital for 10 years. With endorsement from the director, PLPs at the hospital created Navid, a centre offering free care and assistance to female victims of domestic violence. Priding itself on creating a space for victims of domestic

violence, the centre practised strategies to distance the aggressor from the victim, allowing women to freely share their stories. Depending on the situation, PLPs then contacted the police to provide the women with legal advice or admitted them overnight to ensure temporary distance from the aggressor. Although the program was successful for five or six years, even gaining recognition from the Queen of Sweden, it was discontinued when a right-wing government was elected in São Paulo. The new government appointed a new hospital director and the Navid centre, despite its impressive performance, was dissolved.

This experience suggests that when partnerships are based on individual relationships, they become vulnerable to shifts in political will and changes in leadership. Without institutionalizing these programs, the lack of continuity in state policy will continue to undermine their sustainability and long-term impact. Themis and Geledés are aware of this challenge. While they view these initiatives as models the state should replicate at scale, they remain cautious of the risks of state co-optation that can accompany institutionalization.

Shortcomings in state policy also affect the ability to scale and functionally deepen the impact of PLP programs. When public service providers are unavailable, either because of unwillingness to cooperate or lack of coverage in remote areas, Themis, Geledés, and União de Mulheres must rely on partnerships with existing civil society organizations to expand. This dependence not only restricts where programs can expand but also limits the depth of their potential outcomes. For instance, in seeking to broaden their reach to more periphery communities, Geledés sent instructors to Francisco Morato, where they used an Afro-Brazilian religious space — known as *terreiros* — to gather and mobilize women for the training course. While PLPs in this context can still draw on their internal networks and support from Geledés to assist women in vulnerable situations, the absence of connections to public networks limits

the degree to which they can directly help women seeking their services.

SOCIETAL AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

PLPs navigate a complex landscape shaped by societal resistance, economic marginalization, and limited institutional capacity. These structural conditions not only place PLPs at risk but also constrain the broader impact their work can have in advancing access to justice for Brazilian women.

While PLPs in Porto Alegre benefit from an established reputation within civil society, their visibility within the community and embeddedness in public networks present them with significant challenges. The most extreme example of this is the 2020 death of a PLP, Jane Beatriz da Silva Nunes, during an altercation with police officers who illegally invaded her home in Cruzeiro. The police officers have been accused of being responsible for her death, but the case is still ongoing at the criminal court of Porto Alegre.¹⁵ PLPs in Restinga have also reported difficulties stemming from police chiefs who are unwilling to collaborate with them. These cases demonstrate the varying degrees of institutionalized societal resistance from the police — resistance that often mirrors broader societal norms and values upheld by a repressive state apparatus. Of course, exceptions exist. In Eixo Baltazar, for example, the police have developed productive relationships with PLPs.

PLPs also face cultural resistance. In São Paulo, one PLP recounted taking an Uber in which the driver asked about her work. Upon learning she had hosted a consultation session with survivors of domestic violence, the driver became very aggressive, expressing his hatred toward the MDP and frustration that men “can’t do anything anymore.” This incident is just one example of the safety risks and hostility that some PLPs encounter in the course of their work. It also reflects how

15 “Jane Beatriz da Silva Nunes,” Frontline Defenders. 

cultural norms continue to fall short of supporting women's rights and broader efforts to combat domestic and sexual violence.

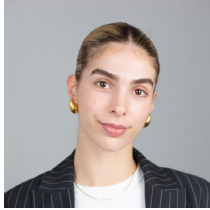
Despite these risks, PLPs consistently highlight the program's role in giving them a new sense of purpose, greater self-esteem, and, notably, a new pathway toward education. Many credited the program with inspiring them to return to school to become lawyers, teachers, or healthcare workers or pursue the qualifications needed to become social workers. However, opportunities for social mobility remain out of reach for many PLPs. This is especially true for women in precarious economic situations who, despite acquiring new knowledge, remain constrained by Brazil's deep structural inequalities — barriers that education alone cannot overcome. Geledés, for instance, notes that many women engaged in informal work in periphery communities struggle to even complete the course, given their need to prioritize securing an income. In this way, the transformative potential of education is often curtailed by the structural conditions that continue to limit upward mobility in highly impoverished peripheral communities.

The persistent underperformance of state institutions, combined with a lack of political will to address these institutional dysfunctions, also takes a significant toll on PLPs. While they approach their work with a deep commitment to aiding vulnerable women within their communities, the lack of state support leaves them relying primarily on internal resources and civil society networks — sometimes protecting women in place of the state, rather than alongside it. As women with legal consciousness and a will to demand social change, PLPs often face a sense of disillusionment when institutions fail to respond or deliver services fairly. For instance, in Canoas, PLPs often work in SIMs without compensation, stepping in to fill gaps left by the lack of police staff trained in women's rights. In the absence of state action to expand the number of specialized police stations and implement proper women's rights training, PLPs find themselves having to take full responsibility for women at risk around them. As one PLP noted,

many women in Canoas no longer believe in the effectiveness of the MDP, a reflection of how institutional failures continue to erode hopes of mitigating violence against women.

This frustration underscores how PLP programs operate in reaction to, rather than to prevent, injustices against women. By intervening during or after an act of violence, PLPs cannot compensate for the fundamental failures of state institutions to enforce national legislation designed to protect women. And Brazilian women are paying the price. According to the Brazilian Forum of Public Safety, the country has recorded the highest number of femicides for the second consecutive year since the criminal code has been amended (Law No.13,104/2015) to formally define and classify femicide as a crime. Recognizing that the prevention of violence against women lies beyond the scope of PLP programs, Themis has developed initiatives such as the *Jovens Multiplicadoras de Cidadania* (JMC — Young Citizenship Multipliers), aimed at educating youth on women's rights. Still, no matter how impactful, the efforts of Themis, Geledés, and União de Mulheres cannot replace the state's responsibility and reach in building institutions conducive to securing justice for women.

Research Team



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Themis – Gender, Justice, and Human Rights was founded in 1993 by a group of feminist lawyers and social scientists with the goal of confronting discrimination against women in the justice system. The history of Themis is intertwined with the struggles and achievements of Brazilian women. It is a civil society organization based in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

Its work is structured around three main strategies: strengthening women's knowledge about their rights and the justice system; engaging in dialogue with legal professionals about the institutional mechanisms that preserve and reproduce discrimination against women; and advocating in strategic cases to protect and advance women's rights nationally and internationally.

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