


## The frontiers have fallen and you are there at work: motherhood and the pandemic

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### Abstract

The present study aims to understand the work contexts of women, mothers and university professors from Federal Institutions in the Brazilian Northeast, during the period of social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. For the development of this production, we theoretically support the perspectives of decolonial and intersectional feminism and the Narrative Interview technique developed by Schutze (2013). The collection of empirical material took place from the narratives of four volunteer women who described the challenges and difficulties they faced in the development of their domestic, work and parental care activities during social isolation. Thus, the research on screen led to the understanding of the need to promote a discussion that allows reflection on the place of women, mothers in society, since they were severely impacted during the pandemic by gender oppression, from the labor overlap with academic, domestic and maternal activities.

**Keywords:** Maternity. Pandemic. Teaching. University.

### “As fronteiras caíram e você lá trabalhando”: maternidade e pandemia

### Resumo

O presente estudo tem como objetivo conhecer os contextos de trabalho de mulheres, mães e docentes universitárias de Instituições Federais do Nordeste brasileiro, durante o período de isolamento social decorrente da pandemia da Covid-19. Para o desenvolvimento desta produção, nos apoiamos teoricamente nas perspectivas do feminismo decolonial e interseccional e na técnica de Entrevista Narrativa elaborada por Schutze, (2013). A coleta do material empírico ocorreu a partir das narrativas de quatro mulheres voluntárias que descreveram os desafios e dificuldades que atravessaram no desenvolvimento das suas atividades domésticas, laborais e nos cuidados parentais durante o isolamento social. Destarte, a pesquisa em tela conduziu ao entendimento da necessidade de se promover uma discussão que possibilite a reflexão acerca do lugar da mulher, mãe na sociedade, visto que estas foram duramente impactadas durante a pandemia pelas opressões de gênero, a partir da sobreposição laboral com as atividades acadêmicas, domésticas e maternas.

**Palavras-chave:** Maternidade. Pandemia. Docência. Universidade.



## 1 Introduction

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The pandemic of COVID-19 disrupted the entire world, in its different instances, given the high rate of transmissivity and mortality of this disease. Living conditions changed for each social group, and the various sectors had to reconfigure their working conditions to fit the pandemic context, especially regarding the need for social isolation. We highlight here the educational reality that, here in our country, was one of the first to be affected with the closing of schools and universities.

Such reality has overburdened women, mothers, and teachers, since their diverse functions have been accumulated in time and space, making it impossible to organize and experience them separately, as is sometimes the case in the face-to-face setting. Thus, the mechanisms of gender oppression have intensified, at the same time that these women have lost their support networks. This context needs to be observed, discussed, reflected upon, and changed.

For this article, in face of this complex reality, we defined as a general objective to know the work contexts of women, mothers, and university professors from Federal Institutions in the Northeast of Brazil during the period of social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

This problem related to women, mothers and educators has been observed by the Gender, Intersectionality and Parenthood in Education Study Group - GIPE, through collaborating members of the Universidade Federal de Campina Grande - UFCG campus Cajazeiras and Universidade Federal do Ceará - UFC who have been developing research mainly on parenthood, maternity and work contexts during the pandemic.

## 2 Methodology

The work in question is an offshoot of the scientific initiation research entitled "Teaching work and parental work during the COVID-19 pandemic: repercussions of the pandemic on the work context of mother teachers", approved by to the Ethics Committee





and Pesquisa com Seres Humanos da Universidade Federal de Campina Grande (HUAC/UFCG) via Plataforma Brasil, with approval established in opinion no. 5.461.629 with Submission Certificate for Ethics Appreciation (CAAE) no. 57038522.5.0000.5182.

The selection of research participants comprises four women, mothers and higher education teachers, who were circumscribed to domestic isolation due to the pandemic of COVID-19 that imposed reconfigurations in the exercise of their domestic and professional work. The confidentiality and anonymity of the professors were preserved, in order to comply with Resolution 510/16, of the National Health Council. Thus, they will be identified as follows: Docent 1, Docent 2, Docent 3, Docent 4.

Teacher 1 is a single mother of three children and currently lives with her youngest son. She has a degree in Pedagogy and History, a Master's in Social History, a Ph.D. in Economic History, and two post-doctoral degrees in Political History. The second interviewee, Teacher 2, has a degree in Law and Pedagogy, a master's and a doctorate in Education, is the single mother of a 4 year old child and her main support network is the daycare center. Professor 3, has a degree in Journalism and a Master's in Public Policy Evaluation, is married, and is the mother of a 4 year old child. Finally, Professor 4, mother of a 9 year old child, is a biotechnologist, with a Master's and PhD in Translational Medicine.

The volunteers were selected to participate in the study for the convenience of working as teachers in federal institutions of higher education in the Northeast region of Brazil and for actively participating in discussions about the multiple possibilities of thinking about the construction of motherhood, gender equality policies and parenting in the academic field.

The collection of empirical material occurred through the use of the Google Meet platform. The interviews were scheduled according to the availability of each volunteer, occurring in synchronous moments, with an average duration of one hour. This adaptation occurred due to the impossibility of conducting these interviews in a synchronous way in person, in order to comply with the norms and procedures in force to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.





The technique of data collection instrument used was the Narrative Interview (NES) idealized by Schutze (2013) and that is configured from the perspective of understanding social reality, through intersubjectivities and individual memories of the subjects involved in the research, in order to achieve the proposed objectives (NATANSON, 1974, apud WELLER and ZARDO, 2013).

Thus, the use of this technique helped to break with the traditional systems of conducting interviews, as well as led the researchers to perform an active and empathetic listening, in order to understand the perspectives described in their narratives from the memories and contexts in which the volunteers were inserted in the pandemic period.

The narratives were structured in 03 axes or topics of narration/exmanent questions. Thus, the axes of analysis are: 1. Contexts and routines of remote work; 2. Academic productivity during the pandemic; 3. Perceptions about federal policies of support to parenthood and maternity during COVID-19. All these axes were thought, having in mind, the possibilities of reflection about the devices that arise in the constituent contexts of motherhood for these women.

Both interviewees pointed out that the pandemic context of COVID-19 caused significant ruptures in their domestic and work functions, at the moment in which they lost their support networks and had to face multitasking in their daily lives. However, they affirmed that this is not an impediment and made themselves available to participate in the research, while recognizing its relevance. The teachers, after the interview and the reading of the transcript of their narratives, signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, authorizing the materialization and publication of the material collected.

### 3 Results and Discussion

We rely on the perspectives posed by decolonial and intersectional feminism, considering that these two perspectives expand the possibilities of thinking about women's narratives without categorizing them and breaking with Eurocentric norms. For this article, we propose to highlight the context and the work routine remote from





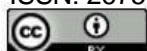
research volunteers, in the pandemic period of the spread of COVID-19, from their narratives.

In the pandemic of COVID-19, with the social isolation, part of the women, mothers, and teachers lost their support networks and were faced with an overload of work. In their homes, in addition to domestic and parental care, many of them also had to transfer work activities to their domestic context. With this, the already existing inequalities were significantly accentuated, since, with the accumulation of chores and the lack of support networks, mothers and working women had to face the effects of these disparities (ROLIM et al., 2021).

In the empirical material collected, the research participants showed in their narratives the experiences, perspectives and subjectivations around the routines that were circumscribed in their daily lives, in which it is possible to identify the effects of the pandemic, as well as the sexist, sexist and colonial structure already existing, before this new scenario.

In this direction, we seek throughout our production to establish a permanent dialogue with the narratives, because we understand that the challenges experienced by them, move the epistemological curiosity to understand their social productions and the rupture of traditional ways of conceiving the differences and overlaps, in view of the factors that determine the living conditions and the identity construction of women in the various contexts in which they are inserted. Thus, we start from the perspective "[...] of critical dialogue about a text or a moment of society, we try to penetrate it, unravel it, see the reasons why it is the way it is, the political and historical context in which it is inserted" (FREIRE and SHOR, 1986, p. 16).

The interviewees experienced this complex moment in their own way. We don't want to generalize their experiences, but bring them, from the singularity of each one, similarities that go through them and place them in levels of discrimination and inequalities for being women, mothers, and workers. It is from their narratives that we find significant references to point out how it was the social isolation, for women in an society





to which "domestic work and other types of service activities are especially devalued in patriarchal capitalism." (HOOKS, 2019, p. 157).

When we propose to reflect on the work context during the social isolation caused by the pandemic, the volunteers describe in their narratives that they continued their academic activities in home office in the space of their homes and that the pandemic moment interfered significantly in their emotions, in the ways they performed their domestic and work demands. In their speeches it is evident the fatigue and the increase of the work day:

*[...]So, I worked in the same place as I rested. That no break from the world of work to the world of rest, it no longer exists [...]. (Faculty 1, 2022).*

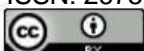
*[...]To teach a class, right? Online or doing online orientation with a child together and he was still breastfeeding, so this is something extremely difficult, because first you don't have concentration, you don't have the separation between the work space and the care space right? Everything happens at the same time [...]. (Faculty 2, 2022).*

*(...)Then everyone who followed me closely said, "but don't you look back and see what you went through? It was a lot of things, a pandemic, remote work, everything, right? The frontiers fell and you were there working on your master's degree with your daughter, dealing with grief". (Faculty 3, 2022).*

*(...)So, it was a difficult period for me, because I had to review the whole structure that I had set up during these years to be able to reconcile, you know? Work and motherhood and marriage and the house too [...]. (Faculty 4, 2022).*

It is possible to understand that in their narratives there is a common ideal, both volunteers highlight the "no break" between the space of work and home, which led to a reconfiguration of their routines, due to not having an organization of time and space in their personal and professional contexts. Thus, there is an accumulation of demands and demands, and at the same time they lose their support networks. Confined, they extend the care of their children and end up working a triple workday, causing emotional, physical, and psychological problems.

It is necessary to point out that during the pandemic there was a significant loss in relation to support networks, which are composed of family members, housekeepers, and educational institutions; however, with the policy of isolation and social distancing,



there has been the removal of family members, domestic workers, the closing of universities, day care centers, and schools, leading to a rupture in these networks which, according to the volunteers, are important for the construction of relations between teaching work, parental work, and motherhood. In this sense, they reflect on the presence and/or absence of these networks:

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*[...]confined with the children, with all these anxieties that I mentioned, with an insane demand for productivity [...]. (Faculty 1, 2022).*

*É (...)in the pandemic I had several problems, so, the first one is that my only support network was the daycare center [...]it was the day care center that sustained me in terms of organizing my day to day and everything else, to be able to perform my professional activities in a fluid, organized way, right? And then, with the pandemic, I no longer had this support network, so, it was very difficult [...]. (Faculty 2, 2022).*

*[...]because I wasn't just working at home and researching at home with my daughter. I was afraid of contaminating my mother who, also, was not going to help me. (Faculty 3, 2022).*

*[...]I found myself from one moment to another without being able to do this and put it in the hands of a person I didn't even know, it had to be this way, so abruptly, there was no adaptation period or anything [...] because it's my support network, it's the person who stays at home with me, it's the private teacher [...]. (Faculty 4, 2022).*

With different lines of production and training, the teachers went through numerous difficulties in their daily lives during this pandemic period and its restrictions. However, we do not want to state that the norms and procedures in place to combat the pandemic in COVID-19 were not significant. We understand that the antagonism of the state and federal institutions in relation to the development of public and institutional policies to support gender equality, motherhood and parenting significantly impacts the ways of viewing women and motherhood (ROCHA, 2022). On this issue that arises, Docent 1 (2022), states that: "[...] there was not a concern with this cutout of parenting [...] I find it very sad right? We didn't have this concern of the institutions about caring, right? [...]".

Broadly speaking, in their narratives we note the impossibility of the right to choices to experience their motherhood and their work fully. It is also necessary to stress



that social impositions anchored to patriarchy and training based on human capital limit and make vulnerable their ways of being and being in society. Concerning these perspectives, Vergès (2020, p. 25) highlights that "[...] capitalism inevitably produces invisible jobs and disposable lives."

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This is why it is so necessary to have information about what women mothers, in various situations and contexts, need so that they do not have to make a cruel and unfair choice between their academic, professional and intellectual development and the exercise of motherhood (ROCHA, 2022, p. 151).

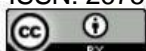
Through the narratives and the theoretical framework that supported the development of this work, it became possible to understand the need to promote a discussion that enables reflection about the place of women, mothers in society.

## 4 Final considerations

Based on the speeches of the research participants, we were able to understand the work contexts of these women, mothers and university professors at Federal Institutions in the Northeast of Brazil, during the period of social isolation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The analytical movement of the speeches of these professors allowed us to see that their work routines intensified significantly, as they were overlapped by work activities with teaching and domestic chores (which were eminently under their responsibility in times of social isolation and consequent loss of their support networks, as well as due to gender oppressions that already cross women from previous contexts) directly impacting the experience of motherhood.

This reality also had an impact on academic productivity during the pandemic, given the context of exhaustion experienced by these women and the feelings of fear, anguish, helplessness, and demand, among others. It is worth pointing out, however, that this is not an individual difficulty of these women, but rather the collective and structural







situation, related to the lack (absence in some cases) of policies to support parenting and mothering, functions that have once again been neglected by society.

Disregarding women's living conditions and the time they spend living with and caring for their children are ways of oppressing and placing, once again, women in unequal conditions in society. This reality imposes itself in the opposite direction of the conquests of rights by women, impacting on their participation in scientific and social experiences that are relevant and indispensable.

The work context of these women, mothers and university professors, was severely impacted during the pandemic, not only by the disease, the mourning and the losses, in themselves, but especially by the macho and patriarchal structures of our society that, in many ways, sustained and intensified gender inequalities.

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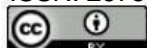
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