

## MOTHERS IN QUARANTINE: MOTHERHOOD IN TIMES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION DUE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** This study aimed to analyze the impacts of the social isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on family life, with emphasis on the experience of motherhood and the relationship with children. Twenty mothers from the middle social strata, from 29 to 45 years old, who kept working activities at a distance and were in social isolation, participated. In-depth individual interviews were conducted by digital means. The collected material was transcribed and submitted to thematic content analysis. The results showed that the changes imposed by the pandemic directly impacted family life, highlighting gender inequalities in routine organization, distribution of household tasks and parental care. An ambivalent relationship was observed between mothers and maternity and their social imperatives, which reverberated in the bond they establish with their children. The analysis reveals that emotional and physical burden contributes to exacerbate feelings of guilt and loneliness experienced in the relationship with motherhood, in addition to showing conflicts in the performance of the roles of mother, wife and professional. The women interviewed showed exhaustion with domestic and child care demands, in addition to conflicts related to the mismatch between expectations and social standards that regulate the exercise of motherhood and their personal experiences as mothers. The conclusions suggest the presence of an identity crisis due to the social ideals linked to the experiences of motherhood, which invites us to think about the urgency of looking at maternal suffering, seeking to understand the subjective dimensions of the transformations that this experience goes through in the times of social isolation.

**Keywords:** Motherhood; Covid-19; psychoanalysis.

## MÃES EM QUARENTENA: MATERNIDADE EM TEMPOS DE ISOLAMENTO SOCIAL DECORRENTE DA COVID-19

**RESUMO.** Este estudo teve por objetivo analisar o impacto do isolamento social decorrente da pandemia de Covid-19 sobre a vida familiar, com ênfase na vivência da maternidade e na relação com os filhos. Participaram 20 mães de camadas sociais médias, de 29 a 45 anos, que mantinham atividades laborais a distância e estavam em isolamento social. Foram realizadas entrevistas individuais em profundidade por meio digital. O material

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coletado foi transcrito e submetido à análise de conteúdo temática. Os resultados mostraram que as mudanças impostas pela pandemia impactaram diretamente a vida familiar, explicitando as desigualdades de gênero na organização da rotina, distribuição de tarefas domésticas e cuidados parentais. Observou-se uma relação ambivalente das mães com a maternidade e com seus imperativos sociais, que reverberam no vínculo que estabelecem com seus filhos. A análise revela que a sobrecarga emocional e física contribui para exacerbar sentimentos de culpa e solidão vivenciados na relação com a maternidade, além de evidenciar conflitos no desempenho dos papéis de mãe, esposa e profissional. As entrevistadas demonstraram exaustão com as demandas domésticas e de cuidados com os filhos, além de conflitos relacionados ao descompasso entre expectativas e padrões sociais que regulam o exercício da maternidade e suas experiências pessoais como mães. As conclusões sugerem a presença de uma crise identitária relacionada aos ideais sociais vinculados às vivências da maternidade, o que convida a pensar na urgência de se olhar para o sofrimento materno, buscando compreender as dimensões subjetivas das transformações que perpassam essa experiência na vigência do isolamento social.

**Palavras-chave:** Maternidade; Covid-19; psicanálise.

## **MADRES EN CUARENTENA: LA MATERNIDAD EN TIEMPOS DE AISLAMIENTO SOCIAL Y COVID-19**

**RESUMEN.** El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar los efectos del aislamiento social resultante de la pandemia de COVID-19 en la vida familiar, con énfasis en la experiencia de la maternidad y la relación con los niños. Participaron 20 madres de estratos sociales medios, de 29 a 45 años de edad, que mantenían actividades laborales a distancia y se encontraban en aislamiento social. Se realizaron entrevistas individuales exhaustivas por medios digitales. El material recopilado se transcribió y se sometió a un análisis de contenido temático. Los resultados mostraron que los cambios impuestos por la pandemia afectaban directamente a la vida familiar, lo que explicaba las desigualdades de género en la organización rutinaria, la distribución de las tareas domésticas y el cuidado de los niños. Se observó una relación ambivalente entre las madres y la maternidad y sus imperativos sociales, que reverberaban en el vínculo que establecen con sus hijos. El análisis revela que la sobrecarga emocional y física contribuye a exacerbar los sentimientos de culpa y soledad experimentados en la relación con la maternidad, además de mostrar conflictos en el desempeño de los papeles de madre, esposa y profesional. Las mujeres entrevistadas mostraron agotamiento con las demandas domésticas y el cuidado de sus hijos, además de conflictos relacionados con el desajuste entre las expectativas y las normas sociales que regulan el ejercicio de la maternidad y sus experiencias personales como madres. Las conclusiones sugieren la presencia de una crisis de identidad ligada a los ideales sociales vinculados a las experiencias de la maternidad, lo que invita a pensar en la urgencia de mirar el sufrimiento materno, tratando de comprender las dimensiones subjetivas de las transformaciones en tiempos de aislamiento social.

**Palabras clave:** Maternidad; Covid-19; psicoanálisis.

### **Introduction**

The scenario in which this study was designed is marked by the global health emergency that affected millions of people around the world: the COVID-19 pandemic, a

disease caused by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which exposed families to an unprecedented experience of prolonged home confinement (Oliveira, Oliveira-Cardoso, Silva, & Santos, 2020a). By July 19, 2021, 4,088,281 deaths and 189,921,964 confirmed cases of COVID-19 had been recorded worldwide; 3,430,051,539 vaccine doses had been administered (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). By that date, 542,214 cumulative deaths and 19,376,574 confirmed cases had been notified in Brazil (Brasil, 2021). These figures place the country as one of the world's epicenters of the pandemic. Around 122.7 million people in Brazil had received at least one dose of the vaccine; the number of fully immunized individuals, which includes those who took the second dose or the single-dose vaccine against the new coronavirus, reached 15.98% of the population.

Staying at home is one of the health authorities' prescriptions as part of social distancing measures. Physical isolation, combined with other non-pharmacological strategies, such as wearing a mask and regular hand hygiene, has been considered crucial in the policy to combat the spread of the disease (Oliveira-Cardoso et al., 2020).

The measures to restrict circulation, adopted to curb the gathering of people – recognized as one of the most significant routes of contagion – have, on the other hand, direct impacts on the well-being of the population, disorganizing the various sectors of productive life, such as the economy, work, commerce, education, leisure and entertainment, imposing numerous challenges on managers and health authorities (Oliveira et al., 2021; Santos, Oliveira, & Oliveira-Cardoso, 2020). The harmful effects unfold at the individual level – anxiety, depression, stress, hopelessness, loneliness and discouragement for those who live alone – and at the family level, both in marriage and parenthood. There are impacts on the organization of domestic activities and the family economy (Oliveira et al., 2021), and losses and grief have become part of families' daily lives (Oliveira-Cardoso et al., 2020).

Considering the complexity of the highlighted scenario, several concerns arise regarding the impacts of the confinement experience in almost the entire world, on the economies of nations, work environments and family relationships, with its serious repercussions on mental health. The devastating effects, especially on the most vulnerable populations, raise reflections regarding the emotional health of families, children and parents. In this context of extreme vulnerability, a key element in family organization has aroused increasing interest: the maternal figure. How have mothers experienced home confinement? How do they perceive and feel about physical isolation and other social distancing measures that the epidemiological scenario requires? How do they experience the limits and possibilities of exercising their maternal role during this period?

Countless questions emerge when looking at motherhood and the mental health of families. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the meanings of being a mother in times of pandemic, providing a space for speaking and listening so that women can narrate, in their voice, the impacts of this experience on their lives and their families, especially in the current socio-political context of total neglect and disdain for life.

Motherhood, as we know it today, as an experience associated with a supposed feminine 'essence', began to take shape historically around the 18th and mid-19th centuries, with the rise of the bourgeoisie, when it became socially rooted as personal and social values, supporting the belief that a woman's path to fulfillment and satisfaction was fundamentally linked to the experience of having children. Badinter (1985, 2010) argues that this process of constructing maternal love as a value linked to the feminine was due to a naturalistic tendency to tie this affection to the female body and its physiological property of

harboring procreation and gestation. However, it is necessary to consider also that it is a form of control over women's desire and sexuality and of maintaining the social place delegated to them: the family space. The woman is 'crowned' as the 'queen of the home', sovereign of her small domestic empire.

The socio-historical context in which the sacralization of motherhood occurred elected a specific family arrangement, the nuclear and conjugal model, in which the child became a prestigious figure. Maternal love began to be venerated, and theories were created to validate a supposed 'maternal instinct' to ensure its survival in a high infant mortality scenario (Oliveira & Marques, 2020). The atavistic connection between women and motherhood was part of a societal project in which the role of the mother was reserved for her.

For Badinter (2010), the construction of this link between femininity and motherhood still reverberates in the glances cast on women in contemporary times. Kehl (2008) points out that, in the contemporary scene, even the paths of transformation of the female social role – the possibility of controlling fertility with the advent of the contraceptive pill, massive insertion in the job market, increased education and achievement of the right to divorce – they failed to deconstruct the automatic connection between being a woman and being a mother. Even with so many important achievements to reduce gender inequities, this association remains unscathed in the collective imagination about women. For Badinter (2010), this experience is crossed, over time, by conflicts related to women's desire, control and capture that this deep-rooted bond promotes.

According to Visitin and Aiello-Vaisberg (2017), an idealization of motherhood was constructed based on the premise that children, under adequate protection from their mothers, have the potential to develop fully. The mother began to be perceived as a perfect caregiver, to whom the child becomes attached in a 'natural' way. Donath (2017) ponders that this idealization has produced a social 'demand' for women to meet the requirements of being a mother and to strive to match this ideal with care, giving their utmost, and even sacrificing other dimensions of their lives.

In studies of human development, subjectivation processes and discussions on family care and health, the place allocated to the maternal is central. Badinter (1985) states that, in the modern family, the handing over of the house keys to the bourgeois woman granted her the power to control the domestic space but also positioned her as the one who maintains the practices and rules of conduct recommended by a medical order which regulates family life. Costa (2004) argues that the figure of the woman in this context is that of the hygienic mother, manager of the home and responsible for caring for the education and health of her offspring.

Development theorists focused on the issue of the maternal. So, they became interested in studying the mother-child relationship, confirming the importance of maternal care in the subjective constitution of the human being. The experts drew attention to the vicissitudes of the bond and its relevance for physical and mental health. Nevertheless, they also reaffirmed the central place historically attributed to mothers by reinforcing the importance of ensuring women can exercise 'quality' mothering.

It is important to highlight that these theories contributed to the production of parameters regarding mothering, even when they protected a broader view that incorporated the pluralities of this experience. The circulation of these ideas – about what a 'good mother' would be, for example – was linked to the social imperatives that shaped the experiences of motherhood, constituting prescriptions and manuals of 'good practices'. These regulations

can be either informal, transmitted from generation to generation, or formalized through practices disseminated by childcare manuals or guidelines recommended by pediatricians.

From these considerations, it is clear that scientific knowledge created a scenario of reaffirmation of the mother's place in society, setting parameters that standardize and imprison the imagination of mothers in the incessant effort to achieve certain ideal standards of quality in search of social recognition. To do so, the woman needs to meet the requirements of the 'good mother' model. Thus, the experience of motherhood, especially in the contemporary world, requires negotiation with other desires and life goals that permeate the woman's existence as a subject.

Santos, Miranda and Belo (2020) point out a multiplicity of stories that women live, connected to the social, cultural, family, economic and ethnic context to which they belong, composing a panel of plural experiences concerning mothering. For this reason, issues relating to female subjectivation processes must be considered in contemporary studies on redescriptions of the maternal.

Therefore, it is necessary to be clear about the circumscription of the maternal in its socio-historical context. After all, which 'mother' is discussed at each historical moment? When considering the scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to highlight that these are women from the beginning of the 21st century who build and, simultaneously, are the product of a specific historical and social path. According to data from the Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua (Continuous National Household Sample Survey) - PNAD (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2018), women represent 44% of formal employment in the labor market and 40% of informal work; they head 28.9 million Brazilian families, of which 11.6 million are single parents; they add care for the home and children to their professional duties; have an average of two children and rely on schools and daycare centers as institutions to support childcare, and use these institutions beyond their immediate educational purposes, since the support and care they receive is seen as essential for them to be able to exercise professional activities outside the home.

The dynamics of contemporary families are marked by a busy daily life with the accumulation of roles and responsibilities inherent to managing family life (Gabardo-Martins, Ferreira, & Valentini, 2017). Regardless of the specific configuration of the family nucleus, the maternal figure commonly concentrates a greater number of role assignments and finds herself involved in countless demands, which add paid work outside the home to the functions of daily care for children and the home, leaving little time to dedicate to self-care and personal interests.

The double working day is a reality for most Brazilian women who unfold multiple tasks (Birman, 2019). With limited time to dedicate to caring for their children and hardly being able to share this responsibility with their partner, when he or she is part of the family arrangement, mothers need the support of institutions, such as schools and daycare centers, where children spend a substantial part of the day and also resort, when they can, to other adults such as grandparents, uncles and nannies, who collaborate in supervising the children.

From the perspective of bonding psychoanalysis, a pact is established between women/mothers and the groups to which they belong: family, work and institutions that support the care and education of their children. This agreement establishes a contract that governs the groups' basic unconscious laws and binds each subject to the group to which they belong based on this contract. According to Käes (2011), unconscious alliances are the

guarantors of psychic life, structuring and organizing the intersubjective relationships woven between the subject and the group, in which each person has his defined place and function. When they become mothers, women occupy the place secured by family and social groups, which have not yet broken with the ideology and subjectivizing place established for the maternal role.

We must also add that educational institutions and family members constitute metapsychic support (Käes, 2011), offering mothers the support they need to share the care and education of their children. When the pandemic took hold, with the compulsory closure of schools and the migration of face-to-face classes to remote learning, this support collapsed. Mothers suddenly felt lonely and overwhelmed by the daily tasks of caring for their children and the domestic environment. The indefinite extension of the pandemic period has exacerbated feelings and the perception that there is no free space to invest in themselves and their self-care, precisely when this is essential, given the moment of widespread threat to the continuity of life.

Considering the impacts of COVID-19, social isolation can lead to high levels of stress and compromise the mental health of individuals, with a radical reduction in face-to-face social interactions, less access to support from a significant personal network and institutions, as well as relationships tensioned in the domestic context (Moraes, 2020). For the woman who has fought to gain her place in the labor market as a way of accessing a social position unbound from the traditional role - which imprisoned her to undervalued domestic tasks - the pandemic has implied an overload of work based on work activities that have started to be performed in the *home office* (Braga, Oliveira, & Santos, 2020; Macêdo, 2020). Remote work was added to the multiple activities that women already had in caring for their families, which left them more vulnerable to stressful situations resulting from the deprivation of social contact, the accumulation of professional activities, and their overlap with 'home' tasks. This experience added to the emotional overload to which the women had already been subjected in their family relationships, not to mention the continuous exposure to intimate partner violence (Bhona, Gebara, Noto, & Lourenço, 2020), which was aggravated by the domestic confinement (Oliveira et al., 2020b).

The possibility of working remotely, seen as a privilege that few workers in the formal market have access to due to the country's occupational structure, for women involves working in overlapping roles, generating stress and increased concerns. As a result of this unpredictable scenario and the effects of social isolation, for those who can effectively practice it, it is necessary to consider the psychological effects of this experience of liberty deprivation, as it can cause psychological suffering, as the altered routine requires giving up pleasurable and free-choice activities, conditions for maintaining mental health and satisfaction with life (Silva, Santos, & Oliveira, 2020).

Given the above, this study aimed to analyze the impacts of social isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on family life, emphasizing the experience of motherhood and relationships with children from the perspective of working women.

## **Method**

This study is a cross-sectional, descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach.

## **Participants**

The study included 20 women, mothers of children, living in the interior of the state of São Paulo, who performed paid professional activity and who, from April to July 2020, were working in the *home office* in compliance with social distancing measures. The inclusion criteria in the study were: being a mother of a child aged 0 to 10 years, living in municipalities in different regions of the state of São Paulo, being under social confinement as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, avoiding leaving home or receive visitors, and maintain teleworking activities.

These criteria were established considering the Brazilian reality and the 'pandemic interiorization' phenomenon, which characterized the first wave of the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in the Brazilian context. The selection of participants was specifically restricted to the state of São Paulo since it is one of the first and most affected by the disease due to its high population density and because it was one of the first federative entities that established well-defined criteria for controlling the pandemic. (the São Paulo Plan, which provides a classification based on a combination of epidemiological indicators and hospital capacity in each region of the State).

To meet the scope of the research, a stratum of the population was recruited who were objectively able to adhere to the recommendations of health protocols, such as the 'Stay at Home' campaign, and who were able to continue to realize their professional activities at home. Women who belong to the middle social classes fit into this profile.

The women interviewed were between 29 and 45 years old, performing professional activities outside the home and working in a *home office* at the time of the interview. Thirteen participants were married and living with their partners. Two were single and lived in their parents' house. Moreover, five were divorced and responsible for full-time childcare. The average family income varied between three and 25 thousand reais. The number of children varied from one to three; the majority studied in private schools (16), and all had *online* classes during quarantine. Considering the profile outlined, it can be said that they are working mothers, professionally active and belonging to the middle classes. The interviews were conducted from April to July 2020, between the second and fourth months of the first wave of the pandemic.

## Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to support the in-depth interview, containing sociodemographic information to characterize the research participants, a guiding question (Tell me about your family experiences with social isolation) and some in-depth questions. These questions were designed to facilitate the exploration of points of interest but were used flexibly to encourage fluid dialogue (Bleger, 1998). The questions formulated sought to delve deeper into aspects that emerged in the reports, exploring perceptions, motivations, choices, possibilities, and possible ease and difficulties encountered by mothers in the simultaneous exercise of activities and in reconciling their different roles.

## Procedure

Contact with the interviewees was made by 'Snowball' based on an initial referral from a third party. In keeping with the rules of social distancing, the interviews were conducted by video or audio call (at the interviewee's discretion) via the WhatsApp app. Therefore, conducting the interviews remotely aligned with the period of social isolation, maintaining a secure communication channel with the interviewees. The virtual meetings lasted an

average of an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed in full. It is important to highlight that the recording was authorized by the participants, and the data was used exclusively to meet the study's objectives, following ethical precepts and safeguarding the identity of the participants and their right to secrecy and confidentiality.

## **Data analysis**

The interviews transcribed in full were analyzed based on the articulation with scientific production on the topic of motherhood in contemporary times, seeking to reflect on the experience of social isolation and its potential impacts on family life from the perspective of mothers with children in the early stages of development.

The examination of the research *corpus* was based on the proposal of thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2010). After being transcribed, the interviews were read and re-read exhaustively in search of recurrences, symbols and codes. After this exploratory stage, the data were organized into units of meaning, which gave rise to the analysis categories. The analysis took place through the articulation between the data obtained and the studies undertaken on the topic of motherhood at the confluence of psychological, sociological and anthropological perspectives, with studies in the field of Psychoanalysis of Binding Configurations as the guiding axis (Kâes, 2011).

## **Ethical considerations**

The Research Ethics Committee approved this research under CAEE protocol number 30248920.8.0000.5401. All necessary ethical precautions were followed, guaranteeing the anonymity of the interviewees, who preliminarily received the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) by *email* and returned it signed.

## **Results and discussion**

Two categories of analysis were organized: The experience of the pandemic and the organization of family life and About being a mother during the pandemic.

### **The experience of the pandemic and the organization of family life**

When asked about how they were experiencing the pandemic and social isolation, mothers raised interesting questions about the impacts of restrictions on their subjectivity and the organization of family life. Diffuse feelings such as apprehension, fear and insecurity, as well as symptoms of anxiety and increased tension, were present in the reports of all mothers. These physical and psychological manifestations were associated both with the threat of contagion by the new coronavirus, as well as with the losses resulting from this extreme situation and the uncertainties regarding the future. "I feel very worried, in several aspects, about the virus, about the family and about the fact that we live far from our family" (Eliana); "I'm very afraid of losing people, I've already lost so many, I'm afraid of leaving my children too, I feel tired and disorganized, it's difficult to organize, the children don't have a schedule, and I always find myself lost in household chores" (Joana).

Maternal reports, which described fear, insecurity, anxiety and stress as a common substrate of the experience of domestic confinement, are in line with studies that address the impacts and need to provide mental health care in this context of vulnerability (Silva et al., 2020). The subjective impacts of losses on the lives of family members are also highlighted, whether material, related to income, employment, housing, or immaterial, linked

to the illness and/or death of loved ones, which leave families facing mourning that barely can be experienced, amidst so many other setbacks resulting from the anomalous period created by the pandemic (Oliveira-Cardoso et al., 2020). In addition to unauthorized mourning, the interviewees' speeches point to the idea that the family is undergoing changes that reactivate intense emotions, destabilizing family homeostasis. On the other hand, the mothers' discourse also emphasized that it is necessary to remain firm to spare their children from any other discomforts and traumas beyond those that are inevitable. Mothers feel they must 'provide security' for their children during such instability. "I understand that I'm the pillar of the family, especially emotionally, and that I have to organize all the logistics of the house, so I feel very tired" (Laura).

The reports highlight how mothers feel like guardians and responsible for preserving an idealized image of family happiness. It is as if, in the turbulent context of the biggest health crisis in the last 100 years, they felt a duty to guarantee the stability of the family and sustain the cohesion of the group. This feeling results from their extra care concerning their home, food, education and health, which many call 'home management'. The interviewees showed that they identified with emotional support in the family and tried to play the role of protagonists of care. As caregivers responsible for the well-being of all family members, they understand that the harmony of the whole depends on their actions, even in moments of crisis in which they also feel affected by paradoxical emotions awakened by the unstable and unpredictable scenario. These results are consistent with the literature (Braga et al., 2020).

Occupying the place of support of the family organization points to the maintenance of an unconscious alliance based on the narcissistic contract defined by Aulagnier (Käes, 2011), which designates how the group ensures investment in the subject, but in a way that perpetuates group narcissism. This operation links the child to the group by exercising maternal and paternal roles in his dimension of openness to otherness and through how fraternal bonds are established. The statements clarify how exhausting the effort is to sustain this defense over time ("I feel very tired", says Laura). Trapped in the historically configured role of emotional support for the family, mothers avoid breaking with this *script* that grants them a hypertrophied place in the family's libidinal economy.

When asked about the organization of family life and the division of domestic activities in the pandemic scenario, one thing that drew attention in the reports was the delicate period in which the interviews were conducted: mothers, without any exception, highlighted that they feel tired, exhausted and overwhelmed. However, it was clear that those who were interviewed in April 2020, despite reporting the impact ('shock') they suffered with the sudden change in their daily lives, presented a more optimistic perspective, unlike those who were approached in July, who gave much more emphasis to the issue of activity overload that results in exhaustion and chronic fatigue. They also reported more intense emotions, confiding that they were 'on the edge' and 'under the skin' and that they often looked for ways to calm themselves so they could continue their exhausting domestic routine. Bruna and Paula declared they had resorted to meditation and yoga to relax and feel calmer. Eliana reported increasing her sugar intake, as high-calorie foods, such as sweets, gave "[...] a feeling of pleasure amid chaos". Joana and Ana highlighted that they used anxiolytics and muscle relaxants as a way to alleviate the chronic tension they felt. This data suggests that the defenses women use and the paths to restore their emotional balance range from activities linked to the search for inner peace to the medicalization of suffering, explaining fundamental questions to be debated regarding motherhood burdens

in contemporary society and how the burden becomes even more exacerbated in the context of the pandemic.

With the beginning of the confinement period, the necessary reorganization of activities occurred differently for mothers: some were left without support and were completely absorbed in caring for the home and children during this period, while others said that their partners became closer to domestic activities, and others, also brought an equal division of tasks with partners. Even among those who indicated their partner's active participation in domestic activities, this sharing was limited to the distribution of practical tasks, as the planning and organization of the children's routine and school activities were exclusively under the women's responsibility, causing them an increase in overload (Braga et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021).

In their reports, some mothers named themselves 'home managers', establishing an analogy with a managerial position insofar as they understand themselves as responsible for organizing family life. Some used this term to show satisfaction, while others argued that this role burdened them even more, as in addition to these demands, they needed to handle their *online* work, now entirely performed at home, besides dealing with personal issues that afflicted them during confinement days. Bruna's speech summarizes several aspects present in the maternal reports.

I feel confused. I feel calmer because I can be at home, but at the same time, I work twice as hard because I'm demanding too much, and I end up paying less attention to my children, who, despite seeing me all day, need quality attention. My husband adapted his store and works normally, as his activity is essential. As a lawyer, I could work in the *home office*, hearings and deadlines continue normally in the virtual world. I'm stressed, it's a mix of feelings. I'm scared, and I'm grateful for our privileges. I can stay with them, but at the same time, I want to go to work to get some rest [laughs]. It's funny, isn't it? However, I rest at my work. I feel guilty about it, but it's the truth. My husband takes care of the business, I manage the entire household, and I feel exhausted, but that has been since before the pandemic. It only got worse (Bruna).

Alongside persistent gender inequalities and overload in the domestic environment, the non-egalitarian division of roles and tasks in managing domestic life places women faced with the need to accumulate different functions and roles, which contributes to overload, aggravated by the imperative of reconciling motherhood with a professional career (Macêdo, 2020). Bruna's report reveals that, despite all the emancipatory struggles waged by women throughout the 20th century, the narcissistic contract remains as established and reveals the place of the third party. In other words, the relationship between the couple and the child bears the trace of gender inequality and inequities. The places established and granted to subjects to register did not achieve the expected transformations, which could resize the place traditionally occupied by women and other family actors in the social environment in which they are inserted.

The mothers interviewed report stress that gender inequalities, the crystallization of the maternal experience as a place of care and home management, as well as the burden imposed on women when they are compelled to undertake the eternal search for conciliation of roles, are phenomena prior to the pandemic. However, social isolation contributed to exposing gender inequities (Braga et al., 2020). In this troubled context, remaining functional requires intense dedication and energy investment, resulting in personal exhaustion. The inflection point brought by the pandemic moment made the patriarchal culture of privileges clear to be reviewed and debated since its maintenance in times of humanitarian crisis has direct impacts on women's health, accentuating the suffering resulting from exhaustion and loneliness, so present in the reports of all participants.

## About being a mother in times of pandemic

When asked about the meaning of being a mother in times of pandemic and how they felt about this journey, considering the bond established with their children, they all reaffirmed the love they feel and how isolation could bring them even closer. They mentioned common issues that they learned to value. They highlighted the emotional connection they had been establishing with their children. However, all of them, at some point during the interview, also reported missing time to take care of themselves, 'a time alone', whether to rest, meditate, reflect, or even to 'break down' when they feel exhausted, as Virgínia pointed out, referring to the possibility of crying over the pain caused by the pandemic.

Conciliating the pleasure of motherhood with the other possibilities of obtaining gratification with life requires breaking, to a certain extent, with the pacts discussed earlier, dealing with the painful guilt they experience simply because they want to have an exclusive time for themselves, which demonstrates the difficulties of celebrating other agreements and detaching themselves from the place consecrated to the mother by the patriarchal culture embedded in these women's subjectivity (Käes, 2011).

The desire to have time reserved solely for themselves, to invest in some pleasurable activity that they enjoy without being interrupted, appeared in the reports of all the participants, who explained how much they missed having a reserved space and time devoted solely to satisfying their own needs. "The lack of free time to be me and not just a mother, a wife, or a professional bothers me" (Lívia). As Käes (2011) stresses, the family, as an institution, structures each member's identity but, at the same time, prevents the uniqueness of each subject from appearing.

I'm almost collapsing. I wanted, you know, to spend a day alone, but, in parallel, I wanted to be surrounded by people. I even miss the school entrance, conversations with mothers, going out one afternoon and eating a sweet treat alone. Even the cake I eat here at home seems to have them together and wants a piece. I cry because I feel imprisoned, absorbed by it all (Bruna).

Lívia and Bruna's speeches reflect the desire – and simultaneously the impossibility – of setting aside time just for themselves and connect this desire to the need to 'get rid of these maternity clothes a little' and then be able to return to being women reconnecting themselves with their erogenous body. Although there have been substantial changes in gender relations, the connection between female desire for motherhood persists, and women's satisfaction is still expected to be fully associated with exercising the maternal role (Nunes, 2011).

Emidio and Gigeck (2019) highlight that, even though in recent decades there have been transformations in the roles attributed to the female gender, there is still pressure for women to be mothers, so much so that those who choose other trajectories are viewed with strangeness and even stigmatized. It is still expected that women can trace individual paths that are versatile and unfoldable, but also that they continue to cherish the desire to be mothers, even if work, studies and social life are increasingly legitimized as potential sources of fulfillment, development and personal autonomy. In this sense, the mothers' statements reflect in a certain way the scenario of contradictions in which female identity was historically constructed based on the automatic bond that was established between being a woman and being a mother. This simplistic and essentialist equation captures female desire and places a mark of strangeness on those women's developmental itineraries that do not include the desire to be a mother.

It is pleasurable and anguishing. It's a pleasure to participate in their day, to be able to spend more time together, to see them grow and mature [...] Regarding the baby, I feel very fulfilled not having to take him to the nursery, being able to teach him how to crawl, how to communicate and start the first meals. I'm sorry I couldn't have done the same for his older sister. Anxiety arises in moments when I realize that I cannot give the necessary attention nor have so much time available to face so many tasks. I feel guilty about the eldest daughter since the baby's demands are much greater and require much more availability. Motherhood has always been an incredible and rewarding experience. I feel very happy to be able to be with my children fully. At the same time, I feel tired and overwhelmed by motherhood, as if my other 'faces' as woman, professional have disappeared, which causes me much anguish since I don't feel fully happy and complete only in the mother position. [...] Perhaps what bothers me most is being in the position of a full-time mother (Paula).

Paula's report adds important points to the debate on the experience of motherhood, which is taken up by Parker (1997) when she deals with the maternal place as the origin of a bond that initiates the child into his original experience of being in the world. Paula reveals her pleasure in no longer taking her son to daycare every morning and being able to dedicate herself intensely to his care. The participant also declares her regret at not being able to do the same for her daughter due to the end of her maternity leave. In her speech, she links the experience of monitoring her children's development to the pleasure of motherhood, highlighting how gratified she feels by seeing them grow and develop well. However, when reflecting on her maternal role, she also pays attention to the demands of her work and the satisfaction she finds in her work. This reflection leads her to conflict with issues of personal gratification, citing her discomfort in living the role of a full-time mother. This condition was accentuated and brought to a paroxysm by domestic isolation.

When looking at the maternal role in times of pandemic, it is necessary to consider that it is a multifaceted experience permeated by challenges. However, it is also necessary to admit that the ambivalence surrounding mothering, under any circumstances, also allows for the necessary absences during children's development (Parker, 1997). This is because when the mother finds satisfaction in objects other than the baby, she can promote changes in her libidinal investment, presenting the child with a reliable and safe world that she must explore and with which she can relate.

In this sense, although the values linked to maternal love create a connection with what is erected as a model of an ideal mother, in which 'maternal love' would be a peaceful, naturalized and unquestionable element, Badinter (2010) argues that the loving bond socially constructed is subjectivized as a sophisticated experience from an emotional point of view, in which ambivalent feelings converge towards the same object. Mothers end up captured by a univocal discourse of love, which imputes guilt and other dysphoric feelings that overwhelm them emotionally, reinforcing the notion that they must pursue an ideal of maternal self that, in truth, is unattainable. She is the renowned model of the mother available full-time, an incarnation of the purest love and benevolence, a deified woman willing to renounce herself to dedicate herself exclusively to caring for her child (Emidio, 2011).

Badinter (2010) and Donath (2017) consider that the conflicts inherent to the experience of motherhood are inevitable. Nevertheless, they can be understood as a way for women to revisit their traditional roles and open themselves up to the possibility of creating new meanings based on the changes that impact society and family life. When comparing the statements of some interviewees, it is possible to identify a reflection on ambivalence, the questioning about the multiple social places to which they are called and the need to take the place of the maternal ideal that they inherited from the previous generation, seeking to be recognized with devoted mothers. However, the reports are also

permeated by anguish, guilt and excessive self-demands, which result from the impossibility of achieving the ideal of narcissistic perfection. Such findings suggest the need for qualified listening to this discourse to reverberate in new emotional meanings that promote transformations, even if modest and gradual.

Another aspect that drew attention in maternal reports is their bond with their children and their busy lives. The mothers described having a routine of commitments to fulfill, leading a fast-paced life that made it impossible for them to enjoy pleasant moments of family life. Thus, the physical isolation imposed by the pandemic acquired an unusual meaning, as a moment of 'mandatory stop' to meditate on the passage of time, the accelerated march of events and the meaning of their lives up to that point in their existence. A meaning that often fades away amid so many daily tribulations, requiring a new look, from a different point of view, for their families. The mothers said that the slowdown in life allowed them to take on small, everyday gestures that had previously gone unnoticed, such as valuing their children's feelings, 'working less', and 'leading a simpler life'.

The pandemic brought me something, you know? I started to think that we were all at a tremendous speed in routine activities, and suddenly, everything stopped. I feel like we can't plan to live the way we think or want. This feeling isn't good, but at the same time, it is good. Slowing down was nice so I could calm down, be closer to my children, not have parties every weekend, and we could do something together. [...] Here at home, it's just me and them. Their father and I are separated, so they stay with me. We organize the tasks like this: I do everything, I get tired, stressed, I scream, but everything is fine; so much has changed for them that I don't want to generate more conflicts (Ana).

You know, I wanted to say one more thing. I think this pandemic is a calling, something that calls me made me look at some things in life. I work a lot, I have a comfortable life, and we travel on vacation, but day-to-day life is practically work. My children are at school nine hours a day, and from there, we go to extracurricular activities. I run around telling them to change their clothes before we get home so they can sleep on time and follow their routine. I hardly see them and don't know what they feel. We enjoy being together during vacation, but I don't want to be a mother on vacation, nor does my husband. We are rethinking life, so I name the pandemic a call in the sense of connecting, looking at each other and seeing what is a priority, you know? We are reviewing, after all, despite all the sadness of the pandemic, the deaths, the fear, and the demands of working from home; we are happy together, and so are they. Maybe we can work less and have a simpler life. These are reflections that remain (Patricia).

Ana and Patrícia's speeches illuminate an issue that permeates the interviewees' reports about the desire to take advantage of adversity to transform their lives. According to Birman (2019), we live in a context in which the acceleration of life and time, together with societal transformations, has emptied the experiences of feeling and the narratives of these experiences, which feeds the feeling of futility. In the process of subjective constitution, the contemporary subject is linked to a condition of existence marked by the imperative of narcissism and consumer ideals.

The pandemic imposed a radical rupture in the production chains of life and subjectivity. However, it also provided an opportunity to give new meaning to automated habits and reinvigorate the bonds that connect human beings. By equating the threat of the virus with a 'call' to life, which allowed her to (re)know and (re)close to her children in an entirely new way, Patrícia discovered that there are different ways of experiencing the maternal bond. This participant presents a relevant question to be considered when considering the impacts of social distancing on people's lives and health to support the planning of mental health strategies. The results also encourage reflection on the possibility that motherhood, in times of pandemic, can also be experienced as a space for building new meanings for being a mother in the contemporary world.

## Final considerations

The pandemic situation revealed a maternal scenario marked by identity conflict prior to the health catastrophe situation, permeated by ambivalence and guilt. Such painful feelings emerged in the reports of mothers under social isolation. The narratives revealed that, despite the subjectivation of women in the 21st century having occurred from the echo of the ruptures caused by the revolutions and emancipatory movements of the previous century, the social place granted to the female gender remains covered by a pact with the traditional social world, which perpetuates the sacralization of a mother fully identified and gratified with the exercise of her maternal and domestic role.

The analyses revealed that mothers need to find a space to experience such transformations in a more integrated way, articulating the roles of professional and family caregivers to incorporate such dimensions into the maternal role. When they realize that exercising this role does not fully fulfill their desires in life, they experience anguish resulting from guilt since the valorization of an image of a mother-woman remains strongly rooted in the social imagination. This superegoic imperative keeps women imprisoned in the place guaranteed by patriarchal society, leaving little room for the subjective changes that would result in a new female protagonism, in which the maternal can be relocated in transit with the professional and other facets of the feminine.

As we pointed out initially, the sacralized and exclusively feminine place attributed to motherhood contributes to keeping women in a position of subalternity, resulting in the other facets of femininity, such as intellectual and professional training, sexual and social life, becoming secondary to motherhood, in an attempt to meet this social imperative. This is relevant in the current scenario of a resurgence of naturalistic discourse, used as a strategy to halt advances in the process of female emancipation, to subjugate women so that they give up their historical achievements and remain primarily imprisoned in the maternal place in which the patriarchy has allocated them.

The places occupied by individuals are designated and secured in the group so that women and men access their places in institutions according to the pact established to define and maintain the bond. The advancement of female protagonism means a contractual change that encompasses the other actors involved, who may be aligned with patriarchy and the regulatory system that assigns roles and establishes the part occupied by each in this chain. Psychological intervention should support women who wish to rethink their space and the guilt that comes from the desire to break with such a contract (the traditional maternal place), enabling an identity movement that can result in changes, with systemic effects, in reorganized gender roles in the family space.

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