

**SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT OF THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC: GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE DOMESTIC LABOR
DIVISION**

***VIOLÊNCIA SIMBÓLICA CONTRA AS MULHERES SOB OS HOLOFOTES DA
PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: DESIGUALDADE DE GÊNERO NA DIVISÃO DO
TRABALHO DOMÉSTICO***

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PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: LA DESIGUALDAD DE GÉNERO EN LA DIVISIÓN DEL
TRABAJO DOMÉSTICO***



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ABSTRACT: The present study aims to analyze symbolic violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic. It starts from the hypothesis that the overburden of work and unequal division of domestic and caregiving tasks, based on gender premises, constitutes a violation of human rights and is a determining factor in mental health damage. Women's accounts were obtained from a segment of the research titled 'Education and Pandemic Impacts,' conducted by the Violence Observatory at the University Center of Barra Mansa (UBM) in three municipalities in the Southern Fluminense region of Rio de Janeiro. The interviews were conducted through online focus groups. To analyze the results, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts were employed. The research findings affirmatively confirmed the working hypothesis, indicating the need to expand studies in this field, considering ethnic-racial and social class markers.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19. Qualitative research. Violence against women. Symbolic violence.

RESUMO: O presente trabalho tem por objetivo analisar a violência simbólica contra as mulheres durante a pandemia da COVID-19. Parte-se da hipótese de que a sobrecarga de trabalho e divisão desigual das tarefas domésticas e de cuidados, com base na premissa de gênero, caracteriza violação de Direitos Humanos e é fator determinante de prejuízo à saúde mental. Os relatos das mulheres foram obtidos a partir de um recorte da pesquisa intitulada 'Educação e Impactos da Pandemia', realizada pelo Observatório da Violência, do Centro Universitário de Barra Mansa (UBM), em três municípios da região Sul Fluminense do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. As entrevistas foram executadas por meio de grupos focais on-line. Para analisar os resultados, foi utilizado as concepções de Pierre Bourdieu. O resultado da pesquisa confirmou positivamente a hipótese de trabalho, demonstrando a necessidade de expandir os estudos neste campo, a partir de marcadores étnico-raciais e de classes sociais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: COVID-19. Pesquisa qualitativa. Violência contra as mulheres. Violência simbólica.

RESUMEN: El trabajo que se presenta tiene el objetivo de analizar la violencia contra las mujeres durante la pandemia de COVID-19. Se parte de la hipótesis de que la sobrecarga de trabajo y división desigual de las tareas domésticas y de cuidados, basándose en la premisa de género, caracteriza violación de Los Derechos Humanos y es factor determinante de perjuicio a la salud mental. Los relatos de las mujeres fueron obtenidos partiendo de un recorte de la pesquisa titulada "Educação e Impactos da Pandemia", realizada por el Observatorio da Violência do Centro Universitário de Barra Mansa (UBM), en tres ciudades de la región Sul Fluminense del estado de Rio de Janeiro. Las entrevistas fueron ejecutadas por medio de grupos de enfoque "en línea". Para analizar los resultados, utilizamos las concepciones de Pierre Bourdieu. El resultado de la investigación confirmó positivamente la hipótesis de trabajo, demostrando la necesidad de ampliar los estudios en este campo, basados en marcadores étnico-raciales y de clases sociales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: COVID-19. Pesquisa qualitativa. Violencia contra las mujeres. Violencia simbólica.

Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). PHEIC represents the highest level of international health alert, and it has only been utilized by the WHO on six occasions throughout its history (HISTÓRICO DA..., 2022).

Shortly after that, on March 11, 2020, the WHO characterized the outbreak as a pandemic due to the rapid geographic spread of the virus. This context led approximately 1.4 billion students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020) to leave their classrooms, seek refuge in their homes, and adopt social isolation as a measure to contain the virus's spread. The practice of confinement not only posed health-related challenges but significantly impacted various aspects of human life, including the economy, education, and social relationships.

The Ministry of Health declared the end of the health emergency in Brazil on April 22, 2022, nearly two years after the official declaration of the pandemic. This decision was based on high vaccination coverage and a reduction in new cases, with the country having recorded approximately 662,000 deaths by that date (MINISTÉRIO..., 2022; MÁXIMO, 2022).

During the pandemic, to understand the challenges in education arising from this emergency, the Violence Observatory at the University Center of Barra Mansa (UBM) conducted the research titled 'The Impacts of the Pandemic on Education.' Data was collected in 2020 and 2021 using online focus group interviews as a research tool. These interviews were conducted to gather the experiences of parents and teachers in the Municipal Education Network of three small municipalities in the Southern Fluminense region of the State of Rio de Janeiro. The guiding themes of this research included communications between the Municipal Education Department and schools, the use of technological tools by teachers, communications between schools and parents, and the unfolding of the learning process during the pandemic.

The main change that the pandemic imposed in terms of teaching tools, according to De Paula (2021, p. 3), was the compulsory and abrupt shift from an educational environment designed to support students' pedagogical development to an improvised virtual environment within their homes.

This change in environment had a profound impact on the family dynamic, as parents and guardians found themselves compelled to take on a more active role in their children's education. Simultaneously, they could not neglect their other professional responsibilities, household maintenance, and life in general. In the same vein, teachers were challenged to

quickly learn how to handle new technologies, utilizing every available resource to deliver lessons and support parents and students. As De Paula (2021, p. 7, our translation) aptly puts it:

Reconceptualizing education in a virtual setting this time was a shock for all: for families who had to assume a role that wasn't traditionally theirs, for teachers who had to swiftly update themselves through courses and training, for students unaccustomed to this form of remote learning, and for educational authorities who had to implement guidelines for this new 'style' of education.

In the context of the pandemic, where the family environment became the stage for all social interactions, even if virtual, gender inequalities, particularly concerning the division of domestic labor, were exposed. Historically, reproductive work, responsible for life maintenance, has been assigned to the female gender.

In the accounts of female teachers and mothers during meetings with focus groups, beyond the educational issues generated by this health emergency, there was evident psychological distress stemming from this unequal division of domestic activities, which is still deeply ingrained in our culture. This research finding, although not initially the primary focus, prompted us to delve deeper into the issue of symbolic violence against women due to the burden of work, which is the subject of this article.

In light of the preceding, this study aims to provide analyses of the pandemic, the role of women in society, entrenched sexism, and the vulnerabilities women confront. This takes into account the burden of work and the unequal division of domestic and family care responsibilities, further exacerbated by a gender perspective that was brought to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Methodology

The research was conducted in the Southern Fluminense region of the State of Rio de Janeiro and involved the participation of public schools encompassing early childhood education, first and second-cycle primary education, and high school, all under the management of three distinct municipalities, during the years 2020 and 2021.

The research methodology employed for data collection involved the organization of participants into focus groups and the use of discourse analysis as a method for interpreting their statements. These focus groups were divided into subgroups consisting of legal guardians of the students and subgroups of teachers.

The technique of focus groups has its origins in the Anglo-Saxon tradition and is based on group interviews conducted in an environment conducive to discussion, fostering interaction and communication among the participants. This method is widely used in social sciences and public health studies due to its low cost and association with obtaining valid and reliable data quickly, mainly when the aim is to conduct assessments. This proved to be the ideal tool for this research (TRAD, 2009).

Furthermore, due to the social distancing measures practiced during the pandemic, these groups convened online through video conferencing using the 'Google Meet' application. This format has presented several advantages for the research, including the absence of the need to arrange physical infrastructure and the ease of bringing together individuals who otherwise might not be able to participate if they had to travel to a predetermined physical location (BORDINI; SPERB, 2013).

Violence against Women

According to Bourdieu (2002), our society is culturally organized androcentric, with the male gender as the starting point and reference for any measurement or comparison. One of the characteristics of this domination is the belief that biological differences form the basis of social differences when, in fact, they do not

The strength of male sociodicy derives from its ability to accumulate and condense two operations: it legitimizes a relationship of domination by inscribing it within a biological nature that, in turn, is itself a naturalized social construct (BOURDIEU, 2002, p. 16, our translation).

In this sense, there is a tendency to consider that certain cultural constructs, such as gender-based division of labor, are natural and originate from biological differences between bodies. While these differences exist, nothing within them justifies that activities deemed socially more noble or productive should be attributed to the male gender, leaving those considered inferior or reproductive to the female gender.

In fact, following this logic, Federici (2019, p. 232, our translation) exposes that "the concealment of unpaid women's labor behind the disguise of natural inferiority" allowed capitalism to significantly expand the unpaid part of the workday and use male wages to accumulate female labor. Therefore, much of the growth and maintenance of contemporary society is owed to the reproductive work, concealed and unpaid, performed by women.

This domination, however, occurs through power relations established symbolically between the two genders, between the dominant male and the dominant female. Foucault (1998, p. 80, our translation), on the other hand, teaches us that "society's control over individuals does not simply operate through consciousness or ideology, but begins with the body, within the body."

Corroborating this idea, Bourdieu (2002) suggests that the female experience of the body is 'from the body to the other,' as the measuring rod is the male gaze. This is in line with Butler's understanding (2017) regarding the paradox involving subjection to power:

Destined to seek the recognition of their own existence in categories, terms, and names they did not create, the subject seeks the sign of their existence outside of themselves, in a discourse that is both dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify both subordination and existence. In other words, the price of existing within subjection is subordination. When choice is impossible, the subject seeks subordination as a promise of existence. This search is neither a choice nor a necessity. Subjection exploits the desire for existence, as existence is always granted from elsewhere; to exist, it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other (BUTLER, 2017, p. 20, our translation).

In this sense, Beauvoir (2009[1949], p. 256) already emphasized that it is the mediation of the Other's gaze that allows an individual to constitute themselves, hence her celebrated and well-known quotation: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society" (BEAUVOIR, 2009, p. 256, our translation).

Regarding gender issues, violence against women, even before the existence of COVID-19, was one of the most significant violations of Human Rights. In this regard, the pandemic only highlighted an existing structural social problem, leading the Executive Director and Deputy Secretary of the United Nations, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, to declare that "violence against women is an invisible pandemic" (ONU MULHERES BRASIL, 2020, our translation).

It is important to emphasize that when it comes to violence against women, the reference is not limited to physical violence, which is the most apparent but extends to a broader sense, encompassing other forms, including symbolic violations of women's Human Rights.

Among these forms, the Maria da Penha Law (11,340/2006) describes five types of violence against women, involving both physical and symbolic aspects, which can be summarized as follows: physical violence, encompassing behaviors that harm physical integrity or bodily health; psychological violence, causing emotional harm and diminishing self-esteem, among other behaviors aimed at controlling or subduing; sexual violence, involving acts of

sexual nature without consent; economic violence, characterized by the retention, subtraction, or destruction of assets and any other financial resources; and finally, moral violence, consisting of acts of slander, defamation, or insult (BRASIL, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Six focus groups were conducted with legal guardians of the students and researchers, and five focus groups with teachers and researchers, totaling eleven distinct groups. It is noteworthy that the invitation to participate in the research did not discriminate by gender. However, among the participants who joined, comprising legal guardians and teachers, only one was male, statistically negligible considering the predominance of women. This already indicates, at an initial level, that the female gender and issues related to primary education are culturally intertwined in some way.

Furthermore, the research had the general objective of understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting schools and what managerial and pedagogical measures were being taken. However, during the data collection, it became apparent that there was a recurring theme - in several focus groups, with different participants, in various municipalities - of reports from mothers and teachers, highlighting the burden of family and household care tasks, where the division of labor was based on gender premises. The descriptions indicated psychological distress, which can be understood as a form of violence, as evident in this statement from a teacher:

Teacher Respondent 1:

Being at home with the children was challenging, especially with my husband. But all right, he would say things like, "You give ideas to other people, but not to me." Then he would ask, "Who is that person talking?" and I would say, "I'm in a meeting. Now I'm in a class." Because I still had school meetings, college classes, videos, and professors. So, I had many groups. He would ask, "Can I talk now?" "No, I'm in a college video." "But can I talk now?" "No, I'm with the school principal." He would be like that. I couldn't stand it because he wanted me to be physically present, and I would say, "No, only my body is here, my mind is anywhere but here at home." But we managed to work through that situation. It was exhausting.

In this statement, we can observe that the woman is present at home, even while working in a 'home office' arrangement, and thus occupied, is disregarded by her husband, who sees her as available to be approached.

Following a similar path, another teacher's account unfolds:

Teacher Respondent 2:

My husband can do everything himself; he washes, he irons, he cooks, and he does everything with mastery. But when I'm at home, he needs to ask me how to do this, how to do that, where something is. So, I tell him, "Dear, when you're alone, you do it; pretend I'm not here, please." Then he says, "No, I wanted to..." So, it's very complicated, and with my kids, the girls are also doing distance learning in college. They are more focused, spending more time in their rooms, but not the boys. He runs up the stairs, he comes down, he goes outside, he says, "I want to go somewhere, I want to do something, and everyone is locked in their rooms, I'm the only one alone in the middle of the house," dramatic.

In these statements, it is possible to perceive that the female gender is constantly demanded when it comes to household, childcare, and husband-care activities, and they resent the overload because they understand that the division of labor is unfair. It is as if the mere fact of these women being at home signifies that they are there solely and exclusively at the disposal of serving the family, without taking into account other activities and demands of their interest and desire.

As discussed by Araújo, Picanço and Cano (2019), it is observed that the division of labor in the modern era still relies on a dual conception of labor division, distinguishing it into productive and reproductive. In this approach, the responsibility for unpaid reproductive work falls upon women, who, despite entering the workforce, still carry a significant portion of this burden that was previously associated with the domestic environment. They note that this shift was "not accompanied in the same proportion by paradigmatic redefinitions of daily life organization, and even less so by effective rebalancing in the traditional sexual division of labor" (ARAÚJO; PICANÇO; CANO, 2019, p. 24, our translation).

In these accounts, it is essential to note that some women recognize and are aware of the unequal division of reproductive labor and have reported linked psychological distress. However, their discourse implies conformity and submission, based on the belief that the responsibility for taking care of the house and children is a biological nature of women, even when they are working or studying remotely - 'home office' - and this leaves them overwhelmed, affecting their physical and mental health.

In this account, the awareness of the overload, as well as conformity with inequality and psychological distress, becomes evident:

Mother Respondent 1:

So, suddenly, you're a mom here, a mom there, you don't do it, you don't attend to the child, you don't tidy up the house, you practically only make food so they don't go hungry, then the rest is whatever you can do because you don't

know if you stay with the child if you... you're constantly calling, "Mom, watch TV with me," "Mom, help me build the Lego," "Mom, it's this, Mom, it's that," the child, you leave, you let go, sometimes you can't even get their attention all the time [...]

[...] It's the whole day. It's complicated. My studying was saved for when, well, my husband and son were showered and lying in bed. So it was starting at eight o'clock at night, and there was a day of the test, deliver it at four in the morning on a Sunday. Because there was nothing else to do, you had to deliver it. Some tests have a deadline, so I needed to do it. [...] At first, my husband was at home, it was worse because he had meetings all day, and he was talking to others all day, so he got a room for himself. In my house, there are two floors, but how do you hold a child running, jumping, and calling the father and opening the door in the middle of the meeting and saying hi in the middle of the meeting [...]. Sometimes, we shout. There's a little flower essence here that I've been taking, if you want, I can recommend it, it's great. No contraindications.

It is relevant to highlight that in the statements, the presence of the husband emerges as a factor that intensifies the domestic burden, often prioritized over household and childcare responsibilities. This suggests an implicit obligation to the well-being of the husband, a pressure to always be available for the male, meeting his desires and needs, which, at the same time, generates feelings of resentment.

In some discourses, it was possible to observe that when there was no overload of caregiving tasks during the pandemic, it was because the activities had been delegated to another woman in the family (daughter, mother, or mother-in-law).

In these scenarios, the feelings experienced were of being solely responsible, due to their gender, for the care of the home and the family. However, they also reported feelings of "luck" due to the strong support network formed by other women, which allowed them to share tasks and avoid the negative psychological impacts of the workload.

In this scenario, where a woman constitutes herself and perceives her existence through the gaze of the other - whether the other is of the male or female gender, as long as it represents the symbolic representation of the dominant category, the suitable environment for symbolic violence to occur is created. Bourdieu (2002, p. 25) explains this issue well in the following passage:

The practical acts of knowledge and recognition of the magic boundary between the dominant and the dominated, triggered by the magic of symbolic power, and by which the dominated often contribute, sometimes against their will or even against their will, to their own domination, tacitly accepting the imposed limits, often take the form of bodily emotions - shame, humiliation, shyness, anxiety, guilt - or of passions and feelings - love, admiration, respect -; emotions that are often even more painful because they sometimes betray themselves in visible manifestations, such as blushing, stuttering, clumsiness,

trembling, anger, or omnipotent rage, and many other ways of submitting, even unwillingly or against one's will, to the dominant judgment, or many ways of experiencing, often with internal conflict and ego splitting, the underground complicity that a body that defies the directives of consciousness and will establishes with the censures inherent in social structures (BOURDIEU, 2002, p. 25, our translation).

Symbolic violence is veiled, invisible to untrained eyes, as it leaves no traces like physical or sexual violence, although it allows for the impression of deeper marks, as it affects the woman's psychic structure, the way she sees herself, and her place in the world. Physical or sexual violence would not be possible, it should be noted, without symbolic violence, which ends up placing the woman in the position of a dominant and submissive victim to the aggressor.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) World Report on Health and Violence (2002), violence against women is not limited to isolated events but constitutes an ongoing process that has adverse effects on both physical and mental health. This leads women to seek healthcare services not only to treat functional problems associated with physical assaults but also to address psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and phobias. This reality results in a significant economic impact.

Final considerations

If we take Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," there is no reason, neither biological nor social, to justify that women should be dominated, considered inferior, and burdened with reproductive work, i.e., household and caregiving responsibilities, in a way that impairs their physical and mental health (ONU, 1948).

Women have been experiencing suffering throughout history due to this unequal division of labor based solely on gender differences, which can constitute symbolic violence and, consequently, a violation of human rights. The COVID-19 pandemic has only brought this issue to the forefront during a crisis, highlighting that productive work has historically relied on care work and that this care work is still considered the responsibility of the female gender (MALTA *et al.*, 2021, p. 862).

The suspension of school activities, as well as the possibility of remote work, had different impacts on men and women. Despite women's increasing participation in the workforce and social life, the burden of responsibility for reproductive work still falls almost exclusively on women.

During the pandemic, while men isolated themselves in offices or other spaces in the house to continue working remotely without worrying about meals, children, and other essential household responsibilities for daily life, women became multitasking heroines. They took on the roles of mothers, teachers, professionals, wives, housekeepers, and cooks full-time, all within a confined environment. Reports indicate that, often, husbands came to rely on their wives for care, transitioning from partners to dependents, which added more stress to the situation. Moreover, in most cases, this burden occurred without practical support from the female support network that used to exist, resulting in physical and mental health impairments for women, as well as a threat to their dignity as human beings.

Finally, keeping in mind the 2030 agenda proposed by the United Nations, specifically in its Sustainable Development Goals - SDG 05 Gender Equality and SDG 08 Decent Work and Economic Growth - along with the findings obtained in this research segment, it was realized that there is a need to expand studies (ONU, 2019). Since this finding emerged in research with a different focus, it was not feasible to examine the data based on ethnic-racial and socioeconomic indicators, which are crucial for a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of this topic.

In the country, there is a considerable volume of research being conducted on physical and sexual violence against women. However, the number of studies on symbolic violence, which is rooted in the patriarchal structure of current society and plays a fundamental role in the existence and perpetuation of other forms of violence, is relatively low.

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