

Perceptions about remote teaching during physical isolation: what do mothers have to report to us?

Percepções sobre o ensino remoto-domiciliar durante o isolamento físico: o que as mães têm a nos relatar?

Denise Conceição Garcia Araujo^a

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0798-4842>

E-mail: decgarcia@yahoo.com.br

Letícia Natália de Oliveira^a

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2917-5010>

E-mail: nataliaoliveiraleticia@gmail.com

Regina Célia de Souza Beretta^a

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2817-0805>

E-mail: regina.beretta@unifran.edu.br

Cléria Maria Lobo Bittar^b

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8947-6491>

E-mail: profa.cleriabittar@gmail.com

^aUniversidade de Franca. Programa de Pós-graduação em Promoção da Saúde. Franca. SP, Brasil.

^bUniversidade Estadual Paulista. Programa de Pós-graduação em Serviço Social. Franca. SP, Brasil.

Abstract

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 imposed models of preventive care through a series of measures aimed to avoid the virus spread. Among them, the physical isolation proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) was the one that certainly had the greatest repercussions and resignifications to the different dimensions of social life, forcing the reorganization and incorporation of traditional practices into the domestic environment, such as studying at school. This qualitative study aims to describe the experiences and identify the main challenges faced by mothers in monitoring their children's school activities during non-presential classes. Data were collected by means of telephone interviews and divided into three thematic categories regarding the home-remote teaching: the first category shows the adaptations for distance learning, the second addresses participants' different experiences with this learning modality, and the third reports the difficulties in accessing equipment and internet connections. The reports evince the complexity of this teaching modality when associated with mothers' domestic and professional overload, especially for participants with a paid occupation.

Keywords: Mothers; Social Isolation; Emergency Remote Teaching; Pandemic; COVID-19.

Correspondence

Cléria Maria Lobo Bittar

Av. Eufrásia Monteiro Petrágli, 900. São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

CEP 14409-160.

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Resumo

A emergência da pandemia ocasionada pela covid-19 impôs modelos de cuidados preventivos, por meio de ações adotadas para evitar o agravamento da disseminação viral. Dentre essas medidas, o isolamento físico proposto pela Organização Mundial de Saúde (OMS) foi o que certamente trouxe maiores repercussões e ressignificações para as diferentes dimensões da vida social. Atividades habituais, como ir à escola passaram, a ser incorporadas ao ambiente domiciliar, reorganizando práticas tradicionais já estabelecidas socialmente. Este estudo qualitativo objetiva descrever as experiências das mães e identificar quais os principais desafios em relação ao acompanhamento das atividades escolares de seus filhos durante as aulas não presenciais. Para esta finalidade, foram realizadas entrevistas por meio telefônico. Os relatos foram divididos em três categorias temáticas a respeito do ensino remoto-domiciliar, na qual a primeira mostra as adaptações para o novo modelo de ensino, a segunda categoria abarca as diferentes experiências e a terceira aborda as dificuldades de acesso aos equipamentos e conexões. Por meio dos relatos, nota-se o quanto se torna complexa a experiência dessa modalidade de ensino quando associada à sobrecarga de afazeres domésticos e profissionais das participantes dentro de seus lares. Esta queixa é mais intensa entre as participantes que exercem profissão remunerada.

Palavras-chave: Mães; Isolamento Social; Educação a Distância; Pandemia; covid-19.

Introduction

The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic brought unthinkable changes, such as the closure of schools since March 2020, in Brazil. According to Unesco (2020), millions of children and teenagers have suffered the impacts of emergency remote teaching.

Homes of millions of students around the world suddenly had to adapt to remote teaching, thus affecting family life. Adults work and women are expected to take care of family members, food, and home in the same space. In this process, mothers also started to perform the so-called *home office*. Thus, housework, paid work, and remote teaching converged to the home, a space shared by the members of the household.

The reorganization of the dynamics and tasks in a house can be quite laborious for the household, but it can also be seen as a possible opportunity for closer ties with the children along with physical isolation (UNESCO, 2020).

The educational monitoring of mothers with their children, commonly carried out before the covid-19 pandemic, was based on subsidizing a pedagogical reinforcement of school content. Teachers previously worked on monitoring in the classroom. However, the new educational demands directed at mothers and their children now involve assistance, guidance, and explanation of school content with the help of teachers remotely.

In view of the new reality, we shall analyze the consequences of remote teaching for mothers that accumulate household chores and are in charge of monitoring their children's entire school routine. In many cases, mothers need to reconcile this new routine with paid work.

Such behaviors expected of mothers are socially based on a patriarchal society. Federici (2019) points out the "myth of female work" whereby women are totally capable and efficient, involving household chores and childcare. Inequalities in gender relations condition women's experiences and are intrinsically linked to the categories of social class and race, which give them situations of greater risk or vulnerability, according to Biroli (2018). The results are economic losses, higher unemployment rates, greater exposure to domestic violence and other determinants.

Pandemic, mothers, and remote teaching

The Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education (LDB - *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação*), promulgated by Law No. 9,394, suggests in article 2 that education is an obligation of the State and the household, supported by the ideals of freedom, and mutual companionship. The absolute and continuous student progress is the objective aimed (Brasil, 1996).

However, with the interruption of in-person classes in view of the physical distance measures recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), it was up to the Governments - Federal and State - to ensure the precepts arising from the LDB and provide emergency educational measures in order to reduce damage for all students directly affected by physical isolation (Brasil, 2020).

Since the first half of 2020, remote teaching brought out numerous implementation challenges. The first one concerns access to the necessary technological equipment and internet connection. Couto, Couto, and Cruz (2020) explain that socioeconomic inequalities commonly accompany digital exclusion, reinforcing the condition of social vulnerability of part of the population.

In Brazil, digital inclusion is far from becoming a reality. Internet costs are high and not compatible with the financial power of the majority of the population, despite the right to communication and freedom of expression are guaranteed in the Federal Constitution of 1988. Access to the internet is extremely important to remote teaching, enabling access to information, providing knowledge and critical thinking. It expands the possibility of exercising citizenship for children and teenagers. However, a recent survey showed that 6% of the Brazilian population from 9 to 17 years (approximately 1.6 million children and adolescents) do not have home access to the internet, which undoubtedly increases the already extensive gap of inequalities that separate them from other children, whose guaranteed access to the internet does not affect their access to school content (Internet Management Committee - *Comitê Gestor da Internet*, 2020).

In this pandemic, remote learning is unveiling the different faces of social disparities, including

digital *apartheid*. The need to use new, expensive, and inaccessible technologies for a large portion of the population can contribute to perpetuating exclusion, creating an even greater gap between those who have and those who do not have access to technological innovations in communication and information.

Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE - *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*, 2018) indicate that the existence of microcomputers in households in the Southeast region was 49.7% and the number of households with *tablets* represented only 15.4%. As for the availability and use of the internet in households, the numbers stood at 84.8% in 2018. Such data portray the difficulty faced by a portion of society in having access to digital content, aggravating the effectiveness of emergency public education policies during the current context of physical distance.

In such cases, teaching and learning process may be disrupted because they are unable to access the teaching material and complete the activities autonomously. Moreover, students may not be able to enjoy an adequate place to carry out educational activities, exposing the vulnerability of many families during the pandemic, given poverty (Cano; Figueiredo; Souza, 2016).

In this case, the fundamental and laborious role of mothers stands out, because they are responsible to carry out and monitor remote teaching. Thus, social responsibilities increase in association with an intense mental load that the current scenario imposes. The unequal division of home care between the genders makes women feel more responsible to provide a safe and healthy environment for all family members. In this aspect, Macêdo (2020) states that the naturalization of the subordinate position occupied by women can cause them serious emotional exhaustion.

Mothers abruptly suffered for the directed intensification in their work journey, including remote work and home-remote teaching, with the contemporary aggravating factor: physical distancing. It is an arduous and unattainable mission to conduct and manage these “multiple journeys” along with daily tasks (Salgado, 2019). Fear,

unemployment insecurity, and financial instability also interfere in their personal life.

Hence this article proposes to describe the experiences and challenges experienced by mothers during physical isolation during the covid-19 pandemic, highlighting their perceptions about remote teaching.

Methodology

This is qualitative research. According to Minayo (2014, p. 57), this sort of research clarifies the relationships, perceptions, opinions, and “the products of the interpretations that humans make about how they live, feel, and think”.

This research deals with the different perceptions and experiences about remote teaching, from a subjective perspective of the participants. Perception provides meaning and organization to the individual sensations, thus symbolizing the uniqueness of individuals (Oliveira; Júnior, 2013).

In a more contemporary perspective, the authors Prado Filho and Martins (2007) reflect that subjectivity is built by the relationship between the subject’s knowledge and experiences, allowing individuals to be different from one another. Thus, understanding the subjectivity and perception of each individual is important in this work in order to acknowledge new realities and experiences.

For this study, we singled women over 18 years old out. They lived in the São Paulo (Brazilian state) countryside with their children, aged between five and seven years old. Kids attended municipal public schools. We did not include adults living in the same house (grandparents, parents, or older siblings).

The researchers invited a municipal teaching school from the São Paulo countryside, in which one of them works as a teacher, and presented the proposal to the school board, which randomly selected a group of women whose children, aged between five and seven years, were enrolled. The school management team gave the names and telephone numbers to the researchers, without prior knowledge about the participants’ identities.

Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and carried out via telephone call. Participants only answered the questionnaire after

explaining the study objectives and agreement. Mothers were asked about the changes caused by physical distance, concerning reconciling paid work with the care and demands of the home, besides monitoring and carrying out school activities with their children. The interviews were recorded using the *Cube ACR smartphone* application, with the knowledge and authorization of the participants.

The interviews were transcribed and later treated in light of Content Analysis. Content Analysis consists of a compilation of investigative tools, commonly used in qualitative research, in order to examine and report the content achieved through the subjects’ speeches. In addition, this methodology allows revealing implied information present in the reports, as well as the achievement of logical and justified assumptions regarding the origin of this information (Bardin, 2016).

Bardin (2016) establishes three phases for Content Analysis: pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment of results. Pre-analysis refers to the organization and structuring of the material to be worked on. This stage enables a floating reading, choose documents, formulate hypotheses and objectives, and elaborate indicators. The second phase, called material exploration, presents the codification, classification, and categorization of the work. The third stage deals with the treatment of results, inference, and interpretation. This phase is characterized by intuition, critical and reflective analysis of the content (Bardin, 2016).

From the reading and analysis of the collected data, we sought to approximate the meanings of the participants’ statements, identifying three thematic categories related to remote teaching: the first involves adaptations to the new teaching model, the second encompasses the different experiences of the participants over this period and the third deals with difficulties in accessing equipment and connections.

In order to preserve the identity of the participants, they were mentioned in the results and discussions through alphanumeric identification (P1, P2), where P refers to participants, followed by the numerical sequence from 1 to 15.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under opinion number: 4,103,389,

respecting Resolution 466/12 of the National Health Council.

Results and discussion

The results point to the creation of three thematic categories that represent the participants' perceptions about the experience with remote teaching. These categories are divided into adaptations to the new teaching model, mothers' experiences with this new model, and the main difficulties with the use of technologies.

Profile of participants

The study included 15 women aged 25 to 50 years, with education ranging from incomplete elementary school to complete higher education. Participants also ranged from one to seven children. All participants were married or lived with a partner in a stable relationship. Considering the performance of paid activity during the pandemic, seven participants declared to be employed and eight were unemployed. The profile of the mothers participating in this study is detailed in the chart below.

Chart 1 – Profile of participating mothers

	Age	Schooling	Occupation	Marital status	Number of children	Age of the child enrolled in the researched school	Residents in the same house	Any older adults living in the same house?	Extended family?
P1	41 years old	Complete secondary education	Call Center Attendant	Common-law marriage	1 child	6 years	4 residents	Yes	Yes
P2	50 years old	Complete secondary education	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	7 children	6 years	9 residents	No	No
P3	39 years old	Complete primary school	Pet store employee	Married	2 children	6 years	4 residents	No	No
P4	38 years old	Complete higher education	Basic education teacher I	Married	1 child	6 years	3 residents	No	No
P5	32 years old	Complete secondary education	Seller	Married	1 child	7 years	3 residents	No	No
P6	49 years old	Incomplete primary school	Seller	Married	2 children	6 years	4 residents	No	No
P7	36 years old	Complete higher education	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	3 Children	6 years	5 residents	No	No

continue...

Chart 1 – Continuation

	Age	Schooling	Occupation	Marital status	Number of children	Age of the child enrolled in the researched school	Residents in the same house	Any older adults living in the same house?	Extended family?
P8	25 years old	Complete primary school	Does not exercise paid activity	Common-law marriage	3 Children	6 years	5 residents	No	No
P9	39 years old	Complete secondary education	Seller	Married	2 children	5 years	4 residents	No	No
P10	41 years old	Complete secondary education	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	3 Children	7 years	5 residents	No	No
P11	36 years old	Complete secondary education	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	3 Children	6 years	5 residents	No	No
P12	40 years old	Incomplete secondary school	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	2 children	6 years	4 residents	No	No
P13	36 years old	Complete secondary education	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	2 children	5 years	4 residents	No	No
P14	29 years old	Complete secondary education	Does not exercise paid activity	Married	3 Children	5 years	5 residents	No	No
P15	25 years old	Complete secondary education	Customer Service Agent	Common-law marriage	1 child	6 years	5 residents	Yes	Yes

Adaptations for Emergency Remote Teaching

The adaptations adopted by the school to help parents or guardians to develop emergency remote teaching during physical isolation allowed for a selection of contents that would be remotely worked throughout the school year. The flexibility

of school content aimed at greater acceptance and understanding of children and parents, who would be helping their children in these activities. The obligation to start the formal literacy process with children aged five to seven years was replaced by the work with other basic skills, practicable and accessible to parents.

Based on the interviews, we noticed that the school stuck to providing pedagogical and educational content, not addressing issues such as food security, social assistance, and emergency assistance, even if some families need this information of a social nature.

The demands of the school attributed to the household, concerning educational activities during physical distancing, consisted of the daily performance of activities offered by the basic education teacher I (*professora de educação básica I*) and the weekly execution of activities provided by the physical education and music education teachers. The school provided daily digital materials in the form of a PDF file and printed materials in the form of handouts bimonthly. Besides, there was real-time online assistance and monitoring with basic education I teachers, music teachers, and physical education teachers by the *WhatsApp* application.

At the end of this daily and weekly process, it would be up to the parents or guardians to send the teachers photos and/or videos of the activities proving their accomplishment. In addition, this feedback in the form of photographic and audiovisual material was used as an assessment of student learning:

Groups were made on WhatsApp and we are being monitored by teachers, physical education, classroom. (T1)

I think we are having support as far as possible and this WhatsApp form is handy. (P12)

The school is giving support, yes, the guidelines comes out in the group (WhatsApp). (P4)

It is noteworthy that the relationship between the school and families during the pandemic period was based on the recommendations and possibilities of communication, part of the interviewees criticized the way in which the school offered pedagogical assistance.

While we're on WhatsApp, I know that in private schools students are taking classes online, as we don't, that's how we manage. (P5)

I feel that the difficulty is for all sides, both for students and teachers. It's something very new. It's been an attempt, I don't learn as much, but I see the effort on both sides. (P2)

The difficulties and differences in the experiences between families and students from private and public schools were expressed, denoting that more resources can determine better follow-up and learning.

Mothers' experiences on Emergency Remote Teaching

The educational demands required by the school were mostly carried out by the mothers participating in this study, which resulted in the increase of worked hours, daily dedicated to the children's formal education. Before the pandemic, it was up to family members to help their children with pedagogical reinforcement tasks, also called homework. These activities require an hour to an hour and a half a day to be carried out, as this is a reinforcement of what was worked on in the classroom by the teachers. However, during remote teaching, the hours devoted by mothers to carrying out pedagogical activities increased according to their perception.

From one o'clock to four o'clock we do school activities every afternoon. (P5)

I don't have time to wash a bathroom, to do my routine here at home, the laundry is piling up, my husband doesn't help. I was kind of a teacher. I'm not even a mother anymore. There are times when my youngest daughter talks to me and I say: get out there, I'm helping your brother with his lesson. (P13)

It is noted that the dedication to school activities affects women's daily lives in several ways, including the concern with not being able to maintain the same routine as before the pandemic period (De Oliveira, 2020).

The process of adapting and organizing the routine to carry out the pedagogical tasks was of paramount importance to avoid the accumulation of activities and for their performance to be legitimate

with regard to the children's learning. One of the interviewees reports:

"The teacher sends the schedule of the day with exercises, she has the material and the Portuguese and math handouts, so she gives us the schedule and we do it. What I'm doing is creating a time at home to do the chores". (P5)

We observed that some mothers did not fully understand the guidelines provided by the school in relation to the syllabus. The participants expressed their limitations regarding remote teaching and attributed this fact to not having specific training in early childhood education and to their own level of education.

I think it's very difficult because we didn't study to teach and I don't know how to deal with early childhood education. To tell you the truth, for me this is the difficulty, I don't understand much. (P6)

We don't know, we don't have the same notion, we didn't study. (P3)

I quit school too early, you know? I can't help much. (P8)

In this sense, Freire, Roazzi, and Roazzi (2015, p. 35) think that the low level of education and literacy of parents can interfere in the school development of their children, because it "[...] implies the transmission of knowledge to the children when putting them to study and helping with the tasks proposed by the school, generating a feeling of insecurity; for this reason, they consider themselves incapable of transmitting knowledge".

The present school established a standard in the way of offering pedagogical accompaniment. However, some teachers overcome the guidelines.

"She has classes every day through WhatsApp, the teacher is sending video, audio, there is interaction between students, activities they do and then we post video or photo, her teacher created a YouTube channel with stories and activities, it's been very interesting, she's enjoying it too much". (P9)

The feeling of satisfaction was mentioned by some participants when they reported about the opportunity to actively participate in the pedagogical and cognitive development process of their children during the remote teaching:

"I'm even thinking this quarantine is good because I'm closely following his development". (P1);

"For me, actually, it's been more relaxed doing the activities than before." (P10)

On the opportunity and commitment of parents to monitoring their children, Saraiva-Junges and Wagner (2016, p. 115) consider that "[...] regardless the cultural context, the household tends to participate and get involved in the most varied ways with their children's school and show concern for their success at school". In fact, it can be observed that the role specifically of mothers is evidenced at this time, making this period also one of growth and approximation of them with their children.

Thus, it is noted that the specificities of each family nucleus influence this assessment and perception of the feeling of satisfaction. Some narratives, however, showed dissatisfaction with the experience of teaching away from home. It was observed that dissatisfaction comes, above all, from participants who exercise a paid profession. The main justification was the professional work overload associated with housework.

One mother, a *pet store employee*, related the extensive workload in her routine:

"I only have night and weekend to help, everything is delayed, I work all day and her father too". (P3)

P4, who is a basic education teacher and is working remotely during the pandemic, reports that her dissatisfaction with homeschooling with her daughter is due to her overload of professional and domestic work:

"As a worker, I think this is very difficult, it's much worse, we are charged all the time". (P4)

The multiplicity of tasks and responsibilities in the course of physical distance extends to your home. The participant explains that the fact of working at home remotely puts her in a position of self-demanding to perform all household tasks:

“At the same time I’m with my class as a teacher, I’m teaching my daughter, I’m doing the food and cleaning the backyard because I’m at home, I have to do everything”. (P4)

In this context, participants realized that helping children in school activities was one among other demands socially attributed to women during the quarantine period. Ogido and Schor (2012) note the absence of social policies aimed at mothers who need to work and still care for their children, reflecting a greater workload for them.

Biroli (2018, p. 14) explains that “one of the cruel faces of unequal accountability is the attribution to mothers not only of everyday tasks, but of the responsibility for ‘educating’ and ‘protecting’ their children in social environments”. The United Nations (UN) recognizes the importance and social role of women during the covid-19 quarantine and proposes, as a recommendation, “promote policy measures that allow the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of the unpaid work overload that occurs in homes” (UN, 2020, p. 3). They are mothers, professionals, and also home educators all in one.

Some participants with no paid work during the quarantine also complained about the overload of housework and remote teaching.

“We get overloaded with homework and chores and every day you have to be there thinking about what you’re going to do for lunch, at dinner, son, and it’s a mother’s baby” [“A gente fica sobrecarregada com lição, tem o serviço de casa, que é um serviço que todo dia você tem que estar ali pensando no que vai fazer para o almoço, na janta, filho, e filho é da mãe”]. (P11)

“I was very overwhelmed, so I went to my husband and said: please, we have to get organized, I can’t handle it, you need to help me.” (P13)

“I do everything here at home”. (P13)

P14, who also does not have a paid profession and has three school-age children, concludes:

“I am the employee of the month, I am a mother, a teacher, and a maid”. (P14)

The interviewee’s statement reveals the stress on the unfair sexual division of work at home. According to what Hirata and Kergoat (2007), the division of household chores between the sexes is disproportionate. According to studies by Biroli (2018), the perception that women have about themselves, regarding their role in society, is directly related to gender relations and the sexual division of work.

These statements corroborate data from the IBGE New Agency (*Agência IBGE Notícias*, 2020), released through the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD - Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios), which demonstrates that women devoted an average of 21.3 hours of their weekly time to housework or caring for people, while men spent only 10.9 hours weekly in 2018. These numbers increased significantly during the pandemic because family life and tribulations intensified.

Difficulty in accessing equipment and connections for emergency remote teaching

For remote teaching to take place, families should have the necessary technological means, such as cell phones, *tablets*, or computers with internet access. However, the lack of resources and ability were limiting factors.

P2 has seven school-age children and reports the difficulty faced regarding the shared use of smartphone devices. The household has a limited number of smartphones with internet access, which means that the children have to take turns carrying out the educational activities provided by the school. The participant describes it like this:

“It’s a nuisance! My internet didn’t work, I’ve a outdated computer, my husband works and his smartphone can’t be lend, my thirteen-year-old [daughter] didn’t have a cell phone, my twelve-year-old [son] shares [his smartphone] with the six-year-old, resulting in a lot of anxiety”. (P2)

Full access to digital media today has become as essential as other products and basic features of a home. According to a survey carried out in 2019 by the Regional Center for the Development of Studies on the Information Society (CETIC - *Centro Regional para o Desenvolvimento de Estudos sobre a Sociedade da Informação*), related to the Internet Management Committee (*Comitê Gestor da Internet*), Brazil currently has 134 million internet users. The study points out latent inequalities when considering gender, race, and region, emphasizing that solutions report to concrete government actions in the area (Internet Management Committee in Brazil, 2021).

P15 brings in her speech an uncertainty whether this type of teaching is being effective, associating her financial condition to her daughter's school performance:

"I can't say whether I like it or not, the problem is if this works out, are children learning? I don't think so. I am poor and my daughter will be left behind". (P15)

Santos (2018) argues that people are largely affected by the social conditions in which they live. In fact, the social condition of households reflects the impacts caused by socio-economic inequalities ingrained in the country and aggravated in the pandemic period.

The experiences lived by these mothers during emergency remote teaching are complex and their perceptions and assessments cross over issues of gender inequality and socioeconomic disparities. Their roles in conducting their children's school activities during the pandemic demonstrated that the sexual division of labor continues to be a reality and expose them to tasks that require proper training and remuneration. In the final analysis, overwork exploits women of lower social class above all. So we think about the impact that this situation exerts on their lives, routine, and health.

Final considerations

The entire educational sector has reinvented itself and currently has several initiatives through digital platforms, from the simplest to the most complex, intending to help the students' learning

process. Thus, it is evident that part of the teachers sought different alternatives, in addition to the school strategies to ensure quality education for all.

Although the adjustments proposed by the school were designed to make remote home teaching feasible, some situations such as the lack of technological resources (including computers, *tablets*, and internet) and the mothers' lack of preparation in dealing with the content of the subjects were factors that hampered the satisfaction in educational proposals. We stress the sexual division of labor and the aggravation of the female burden. Women completely assumed the direction of their children's educational process, many of them without the support of partners.

Despite dissatisfaction with this reality and with the perception of overwork, fatigue, and anxiety, some participants also realized that the daytime contact with their families and their active participation in the process of solving school tasks have been an opportunity to approach their children and know their learning process better.

A racial approach is necessary to understand this phenomenon, knowing that the racial issue determines different experiences for women, even though women from the same socioeconomic background are being analyzed.

We needed more studies to identify the different ways by which women deal with the challenges arising from the pandemic, especially the consequences of this "new normal", the workload, and the impact on health, including mental health. Black women suffer different impacts. Although we do not address this issue here, we consider they have children enrolled in public schools and, thus, black mothers belong to similar social strata.

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Author's contributions

Araujo and Beretta are responsible for conducting this research and analyzing the data. Araujo is the main author of this article. Bittar is responsible for its design. Oliveira and Bittar are responsible for conducting and reviewing this study.

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