

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

# Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

Double Issue Fall 2020 / Spring 2021  
Volume 11, Number 2 / Volume 12, Number 1



Anna S. CohenMiller, Casey Schachner, Nathalie Ségeral,  
Poh Tan, Alexandra Kisitu, Mairi McDermott and many more

## The Challenges of Being a Mother and an Academic Researcher during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil

---

*Mothers all over the world are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic mothers, particularly, have been struggling with deadlines and productivity demands. In fact, mothers are experiencing the most challenging time in the recent history of Brazil while working and mothering children from home. In this paper, we argue Brazilian academic mothers' challenges, which were already pervasive and inherent in Brazilian society before COVID-19, have become even more taxing due the current right-wing government's policies in the pandemic that have exacerbated existing inequalities. Based on a literature review and quantitative and qualitative data, we present key findings of the ongoing research project—"Brazilian Mothers, Media, and COVID-19"—to illustrate the difficulties the pandemic has caused for Brazilian mothers. We note how patriarchal motherhood still shapes the ways many of Brazilian women mother their children, as they remain isolated, deal with maternal roles individually, and have little social or governmental support. Finally, we highlight the need for Brazilian mothers to learn how to mother their children with media literacy and conclude by bringing some hope to this unacceptable scenario by encouraging further collaboration among academic mothers in Brazil.*

### Introduction

Since March 2020, mothers around the globe have felt exhausted and overwhelmed while isolated at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have become responsible for a myriad of responsibilities, including housework, paid labour, mother work, and the homeschooling of children. Moreover, many mothers are also struggling with income reduction, unemployment,

financial or housing instability, domestic violence, food insecurity, health concerns, and single parenting. (O'Reilly, "Trying" 7-8).

This paper discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the daily lives of Brazilian mothers, especially in relation to domestic work and mothering activities. We present key findings of the project "Brazilian Mothers, Media, and COVID-19," which includes a literature review as well as quantitative and qualitative fieldwork. The results highlight many similarities between the problems facing mothers around the world and the problems with Brazilian mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we argue the Brazilian socio-political environment creates additional concerns and challenges for Brazilian mothers in general, and academic mothers in particular, because of an especially troubling combination of adversities that exists in 2020 Brazil. Furthermore, academic mothers tend to be more aware of structural inequalities in the country. As claimed by the Fernanda Staniscuski et al, "We cannot allow this pandemic to reverse advances and further deepen the gender gap in science" (724).

As reported by the international press, the current Brazilian federal government's policies have been devastating for higher education, including a significant reduction in research budgets: "Brazil's main science funding has dropped from a peak of nearly 14 billion reais (about US\$2.55 billion) in 2014—just before a crippling 2-year economic recession—to around 4.4 billion reais in 2020" (Tollefson). However, the pressure to publish is still ongoing, despite the absence of family, society, or government support. Indeed, these additional obstacles deeply affect mothers in the professional and personal realms. Furthermore, it has been extremely difficult for socially isolated mothers to engage in collective action to promote social change.

First, we present the socio-political background of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil by describing the country's structural inequalities and the questionable pandemic measures taken by the current federal government. Second, we present key findings of the aforementioned research project to illustrate how difficult the pandemic has been for Brazilian mothers. Next, we present the pandemic journeys of three academic mothers. Then, we argue that the Brazilian sociopolitical situation has exacerbated the difficult working conditions of academic mothers, citing evidence from a survey conducted by the Parent in Science network. Finally, we conclude the paper bringing some hope to this critical scenario by encouraging further collaboration among academic mothers in Brazil.

## **Sociopolitical Background: Structural Inequalities and the COVID 19 Crisis in Brazil**

Brazil is shaped by several structural inequalities related to income, education, poverty, race and gender, unemployment, housing, and domestic violence. These disparities help us to understand the severity of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil.

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Brazil is the seventh most unequal country in the world, and 42 per cent of the total income of the country is in the hands of just 10 per cent of the Brazilian population. Brazil is in seventy-ninth position out of 189 countries and territories in the 2019 UNDP Human Development Index 2019, which is a similar position to Mexico (seventy-sixth), and Peru (eighty-second) but is significantly lower than developed countries, such as Canada (thirteenth) or the United States (fifteenth).

Additionally, as revealed by Continuous PNAD<sup>1</sup> 2019, 51.2 per cent of the adult population, totaling 69.5 million Brazilians, have not completed high school (PNAD IBGE). Moreover, IBGE indicates that 10.3 million Brazilian citizens suffered severe food deprivation from 2017 to 2018, while 50 per cent of the Brazilian households experiencing food insecurity were headed by women (Cabral). Particularly, 32.9 per cent of Black and Brown<sup>2</sup> Brazilians live on USD 5.50 a day or less. The governmental agency also shows that the income of white men is 44.4 per cent higher than Black and Brown women's income in Brazil (IBGE, Estudos e Pesquisas 1-3).

Another key structural inequality is the participation of women in the Brazilian workforce. Results from Continuous PNAD 2018 indicate that of the 6.2 million Brazilian domestic workers, 4.5 million are women. Furthermore, 96.4 per cent of Brazilian nannies and 97.3 per cent of the nursery and primary school teachers are women. In fact, women constitute the majority of the workforce dedicated to childcare, domestic service, pedagogy, nursing, primary and high school education, and psychology (Perissé and Loschi 23-24). Gender inequality is also observed in academia, and although there is a similar number of male and female university professors nationally, men still occupy most leadership positions in Brazilian universities. So, there are fewer women than men in Brazil working as research coordinators, full professors, department heads, and university deans (Batista and Righetti). Furthermore, unemployment levels confirm that inequalities persist in terms of gender and race. According to IBGE, the national unemployment rate reached 14.9 per cent among Brazilian women and 12 per cent among Brazilian men between April and June 2020. Moreover, it reached 17.8 per cent among Black workers and 15.4 per cent among Brown workers, but only 10.4 per cent among white workers in the same period (Nery).

Roberta Oliveira et al. highlight that Brazilian low-income and informal market workers are mostly Black people who live in vulnerable areas, such as the favelas, which are high density urban regions, with inadequate infrastructure of sanitation, garbage collection, and running water supply. These authors emphasize that the incidence and mortality of COVID-19 in Brazil has been higher within Black, Brown, and Indigenous populations (1-5). As indicated by IBGE 2019, oftentimes, three people share the same bedroom in homes in the favelas (6), which makes social distancing impossible.

Finally, Brazilian homes are not safe environments. As highlighted by the Brazilian Public Security Forum (6), there was a 22.2 per cent increase in femicides in twelve Brazilian states from March to April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Soon after state governments implemented social distancing measures in April 2020, the Forum also reported a 37.6 per cent increase in calls to the government helpline for violence against girls and women (11).

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened preexisting socioeconomic inequalities in Brazil. Although many middle- and upper-class Brazilians have formal jobs and can work from home, the situation of the lower-class Brazilian majority is dire. Most cannot follow the recommendation to stay home while struggling with poverty and hunger because they have informal jobs or are unemployed during the pandemic. In this sense, whereas many countries have a single but powerful enemy to battle in the coronavirus pandemic, Brazil has two: COVID-19 and the federal government's response to the Pandemic. With a population of 210 million, as of November 11, 2020, Brazil had 5,657,032 confirmed cases and 162,628 deaths from COVID-19—second place in the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVID-19 world ranking.

Ortega and Orsini describe the Brazilian situation “as governance without “central” government,” reporting “graves had to be dug with excavators to deal with swelling demand” (1) in Amazonas state, while São Paulo needed to build a new cemetery. On July 7, 2020, Bolsonaro declared he tested positive, told the press he was using hydroxychloroquine, and also encouraged the population to take this discredited ‘treatment’ (Ortega and Orsini 1).

As Fabiana Ribeiro and Anja Leist point out, instead of providing scientific-based information for the population and investing in clear communication campaigns, the federal government is denying the impact of COVID-19, thus confusing the population (1-3). Francisco Ortega and Michael Orsini argue that the current post-truth context becomes more complex when ignorance is politically destructive and emphasize that Bolsonaro's science denialism is harming democratic governance:

The defense of chloroquine and vertical isolation led to the dismissal of two health ministers in less than a month, Henrique Mandetta and Nelson Teich, both of whom are medical doctors. They were temporarily replaced a general with no medical training, Eduardo Pazuello, who militarized the leadership of the Ministry of Health and immediately created a protocol for chloroquine treatment with SUS.<sup>3(7)</sup>

By spreading denialism and ignorance among the Brazilian people through the media, Bolsonaro's government has polarized public opinion. Consequently, the lack of trust in science and in the Brazilian press grows exponentially among the population. Thus, many Brazilians, whose schooling and media literacy tend to be low, feel confused and insecure about most information they receive from mass media but especially that information they get through social media networks.<sup>4</sup>

Yet activists, opinion leaders and scientists seek to combat disinformation by disseminating scientific evidence and true facts on social media. For this reason, scientific discourse has unfortunately been associated with opposition to the federal government within the realm of political disputes (Nobre). In this sense, constant political attacks on science are affecting academic mothers.

## **Methodology**

This study combined a literature review, aimed at describing the Brazilian context, as well as online quantitative and qualitative fieldwork research. The quantitative survey was conducted by Milena Oliveira-Cruz, who coordinated a team of ten students from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) to collect the data and perform the analysis. The questionnaire comprised twenty-five questions, investigating women's perceptions of motherhood and how the pandemic has changed their mothering experiences. The quantitative questionnaire was conducted online, using the Google Forms platform, from June 6 to July 2, 2020. The total sample of 2,194 mothers, residing in the five regions of Brazil, had the following characteristics:

**Table 1. Sample Profile**

<b>Education</b>	
Graduate degree	<b>56.8%</b>
Undergraduate degree	<b>26.4%</b>
Incomplete graduate degree	8.4%
High school	6.0%
Incomplete high school	2.4%
<b>Number of children</b>	
One child	<b>54.5%</b>
Two children	<b>38.2%</b>
Three children	6.3%
Four children	1.0%
<b>Mother's status</b>	
Married to the child's father	<b>79.6%</b>
Married to someone other than the child's father	4.1%
Single mother with support network	6.7%
Single mother without support network	4.6%
Mother with shared custody	5.5%
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	4.3%
26-30	9.1%
31-35	<b>22.4%</b>
36-40	<b>29.0%</b>
41-45	<b>24.0%</b>
More than 45	11.3%
<b>Monthly family income per household in SM</b>	
1 SM	3.6%
1 to 3 SM	14.2%
3 to 5 SM	17.7%
5 to 10 SM	<b>26.3%</b>
10 to 15 SM	16.6%
More than 15 SM	<b>21.5%</b>

Source: Authors 2020

In 2020, the Brazilian national minimum wage (salário mínimo nacional or SM in Portuguese) is 1,045.00 Brazilian reais a month. On November 5, 2020, it was equivalent to 245.35 Canadian dollars. This means the monthly family income of 61.8 per cent of the sample would vary from 245.35 to 2,453.50 Canadian dollars, while only 21.5 per cent of those families would earn more than 3,680.25 Canadian dollars per month.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the respondents are married (83.7 per cent), have only one child (54.5 per cent) and have completed graduate school (56.8 per cent). Therefore, the sample represents a privileged section of the Brazilian population, especially regarding cultural capital. According to the *Education at a Glance Report*, by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “In 2019, 21% of 25–34-year-olds had a tertiary degree in Brazil compared to 45% on average across OECD countries” (OECD). The presence or absence of a partner in raising children is a relevant variable in the sample, since eleven million Brazilian families are headed by single mothers with children up to fourteen years of age (Bianconi).

The online qualitative fieldwork started in July 2020. It consisted of ten in-depth interviews, using WhatsApp and Google Meet, with mothers from different regions and states of Brazil, who have one or more children up to thirteen years of age. Some raise their children alone, others with partners; the sample includes married, divorced, and single women. They work in several areas (journalism, knowledge and business management, tourism, design, cultural production, history, and literature) in the labour market or in academia (as graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and professors).

In this article, we describe the pandemic journeys of three academic mothers. Each qualitative interview lasted fifty to ninety minutes. We report their maternal experiences during the pandemic and focus on three issues: how mothers are feeling, what has changed in their mothering routines, and how they are interacting with the media during the pandemic.

## Key Findings

### *Effects of Motherhood on Women's Lives*

Most respondents recognized the effects of motherhood on their lives: 76 per cent agreed (in part or totally) that they make sacrifices for their children. However, the association between motherhood and altruism is not generally questioned by the sample: 55 per cent of the interviewees said that they considered it right or expected that mothers sacrifice themselves for their children, and 68 per cent of the sample understood that maternal love and affection for children is different from paternal love for children.

Most interviewees tended to integrate the changes resulting from motherhood in their lives with ideological assumptions of patriarchal



motherhood, as described by Andrea O'Reilly in *Matricentric Feminism*. This fact was especially evidenced in the assumption of individualization, which reflects an understanding of motherhood as an individual responsibility, centred solely on the figure of the mother. The assumption of normalization was also important in the interviews; this idea limits and restricts maternal identities and roles to the specific model of the nuclear family, in which the mother is the wife and main caregiver of the children, and the husband is the economic provider.

The participants reported that the vital changes after motherhood also encompass the relationship with themselves and with third parties, in addition to their own plans and outlook for the future. For 76 per cent of the sample, motherhood changed the relationship they have with their own bodies; 75 per cent of the interviewees stated that the birth of their children changed the relationship with their partners, and 84 per cent considered that motherhood changed their relationship with paid work.

### ***Paid Work, Housework, and Motherhood***

Reconciling paid work, housework, and motherhood was a difficulty for women in Brazil long before the pandemic. According to data by the PNAD IBGE, on average, Brazilian men devote eleven hours a week to housework and care, whereas Brazilian women devote 21.4 hours (PNAD IBGE 2019). According to a report published on the INSPER portal, more than 25 per cent of women leave their jobs after becoming mothers, compared to only 5 per cent of men; 21 per cent of mothers take more than three years to return to work. Consequently, caring for the home and children is an important factor in understanding how Brazilian women manage time and priorities and make life choices. In addition to the extra hours spent doing domestic work, they have either to reorganize their careers or quit their jobs to care for the children, a reality that men do not have to face. The lack of public policies and childcare provision makes it particularly difficult for low-income mothers.

### ***Mothering in the Pandemic: Challenges of Working at Home and Face-to-Face***

When analyzing how the pandemic affects the mothering and paid work routines of interviewees, two aspects stood out. First, the majority of the sample stated that they are working from home. As a result, they are facing the challenge of reconciling domestic, maternal, and professional demands in the same space and time. Meanwhile, 47.3 per cent of mothers stated that they are working at home, and 19.5 per cent are alternating face-to-face work and working at home. For the lowest income group (12.6 per cent of the sample), their paid work has been face-to-face, which has increased their exposure to contamination. They are also facing difficulties in organizing domestic routines and caring for their children, because daycare centres and schools

remain closed and children are at home. These results confirm the inequalities facing Brazilian mothers.

**Table 2. Paid Work during the Pandemic**

Working at home	47.3%
Working at home and face to face	19.5%
Face to face	12.6%
Stopped working or studying because of the pandemic	9.6%
Did not work or study before the pandemic	11%

Source: Authors 2020

### *Pandemic, Family Income Reduction, and Maternal Unemployment*

In our quantitative field study, 9.6 per cent of the sample were mothers who lost their jobs or stopped working because of the pandemic. Moreover, 30.1 per cent of the sample reported a small reduction in family income, while 24.1 per cent had a significant reduction in income and 8.1 per cent expected income to decrease at the time of the questionnaire.

**Table 3. Family Income during the Pandemic**

Remained the same	33.1%
Small reduction	30.1%
Significant reduction	24.1%
Expected income to decrease	8.1%
Increase in income	2.1%
Total loss of income	1.8%
Other	0.7%

Source: Authors 2020

### *Pandemic, Household Chores Overload, and Changes in Family Routines*

The pandemic has caused changes in the routines of all family members. However, the accumulation of household chores and the restructuring of new family routines have disproportionately fallen on women. Only 43.3 per cent of the interviewees have counted on the participation of fathers or another mother in childcare (table 2).

**Table 4. Childcare during the Pandemic**

Participation of the child’s father or another mother	43.3%
Shared care, but the mother is primary carer	31.4%
Sole carer	20.1%
Participation of other family members (grandparents, in-laws, aunts, and uncles)	19.9%
Help from a nanny or maid	11.9%
Help from older siblings	7.5%

Source: Authors 2020

***Key Challenges and Difficulties of Being a Mother during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Taking care of children is important, but this is not the only task that demands time from mothers. For this reason, we seek to understand the greatest challenges and difficulties facing the participants regarding mothering in the pandemic.

Considering the key challenges and difficulties of being a mother during the pandemic, 53.6 per cent of the interviewees declared that they feel overwhelmed by the accumulation of domestic and maternal tasks, whereas 50.9 per cent said they do not have time to be alone or take care of themselves, complaining about the lack of privacy and self-care.

**Table 5. Key Challenges and Difficulties of Being a Mother during the Pandemic (Multiple Choice)**

My child misses interacting with other children/ teenagers	56.4%
I feel overwhelmed by domestic tasks and mothering	53.6%
I do not have time to take care of myself or be alone	50.9%
My child feels bored or saddened by not being able to go out	44.6%
I feel guilty for not being able to give enough attention to my child	34.6%
I cannot satisfactorily reconcile work and motherhood	34.0%
I regret that friends and family cannot visit my newborn child	25.4%
The intense and constant relationship with my family has been stressful	23.7%
I cannot keep up with my child’s schoolwork	12.7%

Source: Authors 2020

The responses demonstrate that child-centered thoughts and concerns predominate. The answer most cited by the sample (56.4 per cent) specifically highlights the mothers' difficulty in dealing with children who miss interacting with their peers. Additionally, for 44.6 per cent of the interviewees, social isolation has caused sadness or boredom in children because they must stay at home.

In addition, mothers are worried about how the children are handling the pandemic. Maternal guilt also emerged; 34.6 per cent of women declared that they feel guilty about not having enough time to care for their children.

### *Positive Aspects and Key Learning from the Pandemic Experience*

Regarding positive aspects and the learning acquired during pandemic experiences, 55 per cent of the sample said that they can now spend more time with their children and monitor their development more closely during social isolation. In this context, appreciating spending more time together was cited by 45 per cent of mothers, and the monitoring of children's school activities was highlighted as a benefit by 26 per cent.

Time management was a core issue cited by the mothers. After all, the challenge of juggling different domestic, maternal, professional, and personal demands as well as setting priorities, managing routines, practical activities, and emotional issues are intertwined with expectations, social roles, and maternal conflicts.

### *First Images, Words, and Feelings When Thinking about Being a Mother in the Pandemic*

The pandemic has intensified family life and compressed maternal time, as mothers' individual activities have become intertwined in family routines. The difficulty in dealing with the new family demands is evident in the answers to the following question: What are the first images, words, and feelings that come to mind when you think about what it is like to be a mother in the pandemic? Their answers included tiredness, fear, home, patience, routine, pandemic, love, chaos, daughter, baby, closer, gratitude, and husband. These are the words that synthesize the thoughts, sensations, feelings, and images of Brazilian mothers during the pandemic.

### **Academic Mothers' Pandemic Journeys**

Here, we report key findings obtained from the three mothers involved in academia, who work or study remotely in different Brazilian cities. We use pseudonyms for all the interviewees and their family members and describe the most relevant aspects of their pandemic journeys.

The first interviewee is Juliana, who is thirty-four years old. She is a white, heterosexual woman. She is married and lives in Brasília, the capital of Brazil.

She is a history teacher at a public school and a PhD student in education at the University of Brasília. On the day of our interview, Juliana was in the thirty-second week of pregnancy. She said she actively participates in the education and maternal care of her stepson, Tomás, who is eleven years old. Juliana said that being pregnant during the pandemic evokes an ambiguous feeling. On the one hand, she discussed how she misses her students, friends, and colleagues due to social isolation and laments the fact cannot share her pregnancy with them. As she said, “The pregnancy is a moment to celebrate with our friends, but I have not had that.” On the other hand, she noted how privileged she was to have her husband presence twenty-four hours a day, as he is working from home.

According to Juliana, the pandemic has transformed her family relationship into a closer, more intense, and affective one. Juliana and her husband share custody of her stepson with the child’s mother. Due to the pandemic, she has become more involved with the boy and now helps him with his school activities. In this sense, her experience as a schoolteacher has aided her stepson’s new routine:

I was used to studying at home. With the pandemic, Tomás and my PhD, the tension between the two has become stronger.... Teachers think homeschooling is easy: you send activities, the child opens them, and understands Google Class.... They assume the child will be able to search and know what to type on the keyboard.... Tomás did not know what to type in Word. So, with the baby in my womb, I have been trying to be patient and help him.... At first, we argued a lot... He had two houses, but now he was staying fulltime with us.... But I’m a teacher, and I have four hundred students a year. So, when he lied to me, I said, “You are lying,” then he cried. It was exhausting. The pandemic showed problems he used to hide before, while living both with us and at his mother’s home.

The second interviewee is Luciana, who is Black, lesbian, married, and a mother. She lives in São Paulo, the most populous city in Brazil. She is a journalist and professor of marketing at a private university. She is the mother of Aline, a six-year-old child who was conceived by Luciana’s wife through artificial insemination. The pregnancy was planned by Luciana and her spouse. Motherhood brought them feelings of care, preservation, and the pleasure of participating in their daughter’s development. Luciana said the pandemic has intensified intimacy with her daughter. During social isolation, the interviewee and her daughter have been together twenty-four hours a day. Thus, she felt more present as a mother because she plays, feeds, and stays with her daughter at bedtime. She has easily adapted to working at home because she already had good technology skills, which helped her with her academic work. However,

her main challenge was to be tolerant and patient to help her daughter's daily online school activities while doing her teaching activities at the university simultaneously. She shared the following: "Yes, I must stay with her! She feels insecure to give wrong answers to the teacher. So, I have to be next to her. While doing my job, I keep looking at her books, paying attention to what the teacher is doing ... helping Aline to show her drawing.... So, every Monday my school routine starts at 1:30 p.m. and ends at 5:00 p.m."

Luciana is spending more time working at home, whereas her wife is still working outside the home. But Luciana emphasized that even though she is at home, it does not mean she is free: "Working at home is really challenging, and this is a complicating factor in a relationship, especially when only one person works outside."

Because Luciana is a journalist, she criticized the information overload and its potential consequences: "It is a feeling of fear, right? But fear with hope because I am a mother. That's it for me. The fear of having too much access to information knocks on my door, [yet] my philosophy of life is not to be afraid. On the contrary, I have hope. So, I move on safely, thinking about hope and wishing that everything will be alright soon."

Renata is the third interviewee. She is a postdoctoral researcher, white, and the thirty-seven-year-old mother of two daughters (four and one); she is also married to the children's father. She lives with her family in Florianopolis, in southern Brazil. Her husband works outside the home, whereas she stays at home to care for their two children. For Renata, it has been difficult to manage time and several demands from her daughters, home and work:

The demands seem to have grown; I have to be a mother, a teacher, a psychologist, a cleaner, a driver, a telephone operator, so I almost have no time to work on my demands! I am the mother of two young children, who are at home all the time. They demand a lot of attention and company. Sometimes, they play alone, but they still don't eat alone.... So, I'm always preparing, serving, cleaning, helping, right?

In Renata's words, being a mother before the pandemic was "challenging but rewarding" while being a mother during the pandemic has been "maddening." After the pandemic, she hopes that being a mother will be "liberating." In fact, the difficulty of handling multiple demands is more complicated because the children want things instantaneously: "Their time is urgent! They always say 'I'm hungry now ... I need it now!' So, I need to manage their demands for sleep, snacks, class, baths. So, the biggest challenge is having time to do things for myself.... I have to take care of my personal and professional agenda, so I work while the girls sleep." Renata is exhausted; however, she tries to deal with professional demands objectively, giving priority to the most urgent and important tasks. She cited the number of online events that have arisen during

the pandemic, saying it has been impossible to keep up with them while taking care of the children at home with schools closed.

Renata is concerned about the pandemic's effect on her children into the future. She mentioned how the intense use of computer screens, cell phones, or other media may harm children as well as the effects social distancing. In this sense, she said children may become more introverted and less sociable after the pandemic, and she felt that her daughters are already afraid of going out due to the coronavirus: "Girls let us go to the garden?' 'No, not today, mom. I want to stay inside... the virus is out there, right, mom?'"

Renata associates the current feeling with a moment of struggle for survival because she needs to learn to deal quickly with the pandemic and make life work:

I feel like I have jumped out of an airplane, without having a parachute. You know? What about it now? How am I going to learn to fly? I must fly, but I don't know how to fly! This is how I feel.... No one was prepared for it, but now we have to make it work, you know? Nothing will come out perfect ... but in the end of the day, we must be alive, with our feet on the ground and survive!

### *The Brazilian Blindness*

In the novel *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (*Blindness*), the Portuguese writer José Saramago tells the fictional story of a white blindness that suddenly spreads and uncontrollably transforms all characters, except one woman, into blind people. During the last nine months, the similarities of our daily lives in the pandemic with Saramago's novel are numerous. He writes that as long as the causes, treatment, or vaccine for the sudden white blindness were not discovered, all blind people and those who had physical contact or direct proximity with the illness must be isolated to avoid further contamination; otherwise, the blindness would spread (Saramago 45).

Since March 2020, many Brazilians have made several efforts to decipher what is happening through their cell phone, computer, or television. The invisibility of the virus is, in fact, the greatest discomfort, creating anxiety about what is actually contaminated. Before the pandemic, the social imaginary was of huge monsters, exhibited on the big screens of the movie theaters, where we cannot go anymore. But now, we see little green or red droplets in graphic animations that didactically explain how the coronavirus spreads through the droplets produced through sneezing or breathing. We could never have imagined that arriving home with the grocery shopping would become such a difficult activity. While we spray alcohol gel on our hands, we think of the contrasts between the inside and outside of our home, between cleanliness and dirtiness, between safe and contaminated spaces, and

between public and private spheres. Then we take off our shoes, dip fruits and vegetables into bleach buckets, and after that, we finally shower.

Despite the information overload, there are many people wishing that everything would return to normal as soon as possible. However, it is necessary to remember that the word normal originates from Latin—“normalis,” which means according to the rules. In other words, “normal” means something regular, usual, and socially accepted—something which follows established cultural standards. Does it, therefore, make sense to think of a “new normal” in pandemic times? In our perception, there is, at this moment, an inversion because the opposite of what would be normal is ruling Brazil. At the same time, entrepreneurs and many citizens are putting pressure on the government (at the federal, provincial, and city levels) affected by a metaphorical blindness but with extra cruelty and irrationality, arguing that everything needs to immediately return to “normal,” ignoring the pandemic.

What can we do to face such stupidity? Incoherent measures have been taken by the government. What we are experiencing can be anything but normal. In 1967, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore stated that “All media work us over completely” (26) in “personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social” dimensions (26). Thus, the information overload of news and media images about the pandemic has been shaping us daily since February with worrying messages about the COVID-19. Besides that, the disastrous performance of the Brazilian federal government has polarized public opinion, as has an overwhelming amount of misinformation.

Brazil has continental dimensions and many resources. Although it represents one of the world’s largest economies, it is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Such inequalities reinforce general misinformation and contribute to social vulnerability. Therefore, any promise of return to normality in the present context would certainly be another harmful illusion.

### ***Being an Academic and a Mother during the Pandemic***

The Brazilian academic environment adopts quantitative parameters of academic productivity, thus following the dominant culture in many Northern hemisphere countries (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*). The demand for productivity disregards the effects of motherhood on an academic career by maintaining high productivity requirements, which are quantitatively measurable in the selection processes and funding offers.

Since 2015, the Brazilian movement Parent in Science has been collecting data and demanding more equal conditions for mothers (and fathers) in the academic environment. Its participants propose specific actions for funding agencies and demand that universities consider the consequences and effects of maternal work on the productivity of mothers (and fathers), especially in



early childhood. According to a survey carried out by Parent in Science from April to May 2020 with about fifteen thousand Brazilian scientists, including graduate students and professors, the pandemic has reduced the progress of scientific research and decreased the number of article submissions. Compared to other segments of researchers, working at home has particularly reduced the productivity of female scientists who are mothers of young children.

Parent in Science data show that gender inequality is notable in explaining the falling productivity of academic mothers during the pandemic. Only 4.1 per cent of Brazilian mothers who teach at universities can work remotely. This percentage increases to 18.4 per cent among Brazilian women without children. However, 14.9 per cent of Brazilian men with children have managed to maintain their work routine during the pandemic, compared with 25.6 per cent of Brazilian men without children, who have not had their productivity affected due to the pandemic. The situation is even more unequal among Brazilian graduate students. Whereas 11 per cent of women with children have managed to maintain their research routine during the pandemic, 41.1 per cent of men without children have maintained their research routine while working from home.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the difficulties, challenges, and positive aspects have been experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results from Brazil are consistent with the global picture of mothering in the pandemic. Yet Brazil has two variables that exacerbate the gravity of the situation: the federal government's attitude of denial and its politics of undermining science, academic research, and Brazilian intellectuals in general. Both quantitative and qualitative data illustrate the magnitude of the pandemic's effect on the daily lives of Brazilian mothers in general and academic mothers in particular because we—students, professors and researchers—believe in scientific evidence, and fight against social inequalities.

Many Brazilian mothers have remained isolated in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are dealing with their maternal roles individually and privately, while following most of the ten assumptions of patriarchal motherhood as defined by O'Reilly (*Matricentric Feminism*): essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization of motherhood. We need to explore new connections between motherhood and academic work in Brazil and develop creative and collaborative skills. In this context, we position ourselves as Brazilian mothers and academic researchers, affiliated to federal—and publicly funded—Brazilian universities, whose national importance needs international support at this critical moment.

Some Brazilian academic mothers have been gathering on social media and research networks to discuss the pandemic's consequences on their careers to ensure the inclusion, permanence, and progress of mothers in university jobs. The following initiatives give us hope: Parent in Science, Mamães na Pós-Graduação, MãEstudantes UFSC, Coletivo Mães estudantes UFPB, Maternâncias Plurais UFBA, Coletivo Mães da UFF, Núcleo Interseccional em Estudos da Maternidade (NIEM UFF), and GT Maternidades Cientistas e Maternidades Plurais.

Brazilian mothers need to mother their children with media literacy to develop a critical understanding of media content because it is crucial to fight against COVID-19 misinformation especially in Brazil—a country with low levels of education and political consciousness among many citizens. We hope that a significant portion of the Brazilian population begins to understand how important our public universities and public health system are during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our scientists are researching future vaccines and treating the COVID-19 patients in university hospitals. Moreover, Brazilian federal and state universities are providing telemedicine services and psychological care for the population, producing statistics, and developing open-source ventilators for patients. They are also creating informative materials concerning hygiene and health to counter the misinformation circulating throughout social media.

We also need to discuss the effects of the pandemic on our academic lives and productive capacity; we must talk about the specific demands facing academic mothers and fathers throughout the pandemic. Academic productivity has decreased, especially among female scientists who have young children. Besides that, our homes have been suddenly transformed into schools, home offices, and virtual meeting rooms. We agree with Aisha S. Ahmad, who asserts that it will be impossible to return to normality as if nothing had happened. According to Ahmad, we will need to gradually and humbly abandon our academic ego in multiple ways. So, we will have to learn how to change the ways we think and see the world to repair reality as if we were in a marathon (Ahmad).

### **Acknowledgments**

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior—Brasil (CAPES)—Finance Code 001. We are extremely grateful to all mothers who participated in the study and are particularly thankful to the students who worked with us during the fieldwork: Antonia Haag, Giovana Dutra, Marina Freitas, Julia Perez, Anna Pivetta, Nathalia Brum, Thainá Gremes, Kalliandra Conrad, Martina Irigoyen and Isadora Severo. We also appreciate the encouragement and feedback from Richard Perassi, Lindy Van Creveld, Flávia Cardoso, and Patrícia Fanaya.

## Endnotes

1. Most official demographic data from Brazil are available online at the website of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The main source for this section was the Continuous National Household Survey (Continuous PNAD) available online at IBGE site.
2. IBGE uses the terms “Black (pretos),” “Brown (pardos),” and “White (brancos)” as colour and race markers for the Brazilian population.
3. SUS is the Brazilian national health service.
4. For detailed information regarding communication and political issues involving the COVID-19 crisis and the dissemination of misinformation in Brazil, please consult the following works: Barberia and Gómez; Kalil and Soares; McCoy and Traiano; Pan American Health Organization (PAHO); Philips; Prates and Barbosa; Recuero and Soares; Tavares, Oliveira Júnior, and Magalhães; Zarocostas.

## Works Cited

- Ahmad, Aisha S. “Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus Inspired Productivity Pressure.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 Mar. 2020, [www.chronicle.com/article/why-you-should-ignore-all-that-coronavirus-inspired-productivity-pressure/](http://www.chronicle.com/article/why-you-should-ignore-all-that-coronavirus-inspired-productivity-pressure/). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Barberia, Lorena G., and Eduardo J Gómez. “Political and Institutional Perils of Brazil’s COVID-19 Crisis.” *The Lancet*, vol. 396, no. 10248, 2020, pp. 367-68, [doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31681-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31681-0). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Batista, Everton, and Sabine Righetti. “Mulheres já produzem metade da ciência no Brasil, diz levantamento.” *Folha de São Paulo*, 8 Mar. 2017, [www1.folha.uol.com.br/sobretudo/carreiras/2017/03/1864542-mulheres-ja-produzem-metade-da-ciencia-do-brasil-diz-levantamento.shtml](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/sobretudo/carreiras/2017/03/1864542-mulheres-ja-produzem-metade-da-ciencia-do-brasil-diz-levantamento.shtml). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Bianconi, Giulliana. “Maioria entre informais, mulheres têm lugar central na inédita renda emergencial.” *Gênero e Número*, 27 Mar. 2020, [www.genero.numero.media/mulheres-renda-emergencial/](http://www.genero.numero.media/mulheres-renda-emergencial/). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Cabral, Umberlândia. “10,3 milhões de pessoas moram em domicílios com insegurança alimentar grave.” *IBGE Press Agency*, 17 Sept. 2020, [agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-noticias/2012-agencia-de-noticias/noticias/28903-10-3-milhoes-de-pessoas-moram-em-domicilios-com-inseguranca-alimentar-grave](http://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-noticias/2012-agencia-de-noticias/noticias/28903-10-3-milhoes-de-pessoas-moram-em-domicilios-com-inseguranca-alimentar-grave). Accessed 21 Sept. 2020.
- Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. “Nota Técnica. Violência Doméstica Durante a Pandemia de COVID-19.” *Fórum*, 29 May 2020, [forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/violencia-domestica-covid-19-ed02-v5.pdf](http://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/violencia-domestica-covid-19-ed02-v5.pdf). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.

- IBGE Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. *Síntese de indicadores: uma análise das condições de vida da população brasileira: 2019* IBGE. Coordenação de População e Indicadores Sociais, 2019, biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv101678.pdf. Accessed 9 Oct. 2020.
- IBGE Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. *PNAD Educação 2019: Mais da Metade dos Adultos Não Concluíram o Ensino Médio*. Estatísticas Sociais, *IBGE Press Agency*, 15 Jul. 2020, agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-sala-de-imprensa/2013-agencia-de-noticias/releases/28285-pnad-educacao-2019-mais-da-metade-das-pessoas-de-25-anos-ou-mais-nao-completaram-o-ensino. Accessed 15 Oct. 2020.
- IBGE Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. “Desigualdades Sociais por Cor ou Raça no Brasil.” *Estudos e Pesquisas. Informação Demográfica e Socioeconômica*, no. 41, ISBN 978-240-4513-4, IBGE 2019, pp. 1-12, biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv101681\_informativo.pdf. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Kalil, Isabela, and Marie Soares. “Coronavírus, Pandemia, Infodemia e Política.” Research Report, *FESPSP / UFRJ*, Apr. 2020, pp 1-21, www.fespsp.org.br/store/file\_source/FESPSP/Documentos/Coronavirus-e-infodemia.pdf. Accessed 2 Nov. 2020.
- “Maternidade Dificulta Ascensão Profissional e Boa Remuneração.” *INSPER*, 14 May 2018, www.insper.edu.br/conhecimento/estrategia-e-gestao/maternidade-ascensao-profissional. 15 Sept. 2020.
- McCoy, Terence, and Traiano, Heloísa. “Limits on Coronavirus Testing in Brazil Are Hiding the True Dimensions of Latin America’s Largest Outbreak.” *Washington Post*, 24 Apr. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\_americas/coronavirus-brazil-testing-bolsonaro-cemetery-grave-digger/2020/04/22/fe757ee4-83cc-11ea-878a-86477a724bdb\_story.html. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. 1967. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Gingko Press, 1996.
- Nery, Carmen. “Desemprego avança em 11 estados no 2º trimestre: Estatísticas Sociais. As desigualdades permanecem entre sexos, por cor e raça e por idade.” *IBGE Press Agency*, 28 Aug. 2020, agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-noticias/2012-agencia-de-noticias/noticias/28700-desemprego-avanca-em-11-estados-no-2-trimestre-amapa-e-para-tem-queda. Accessed. 29 Aug. 2020.
- Nobre, N. “Projetos buscam garantir vacinação da população brasileira contra COVID-19.” *Agência Câmara de Notícias*, 26 Oct. 2020, www.camara.leg.br/noticias/702002-projetos-buscam-garantir-vacinacao-da-populacao-brasileira-contra-covid-19/. Accessed 2 Nov. 2020.

- Oliveira, Roberta G. de et al. “Racial Inequalities and Death on the Horizon: COVID-19 and Structural Racism. Essay.” *Reports in Public Health*, vol. 36, no. 9 e-00150120, 18 Sept. 2020, doi.org/10.1590/0102-311x00150120. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). “Education at a Glance Report 2019.” *OECD*, 2020, doi.org/10.1787/19991487. 5 Nov. 2020.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). “Educational Attainment and Labour-Force Status.” *OECD Education Statistics (database)*, doi.org/10.1787/889e8641-en. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- O’Reilly, Andrea. “‘Trying to Function in the Unfunctionable’: Mothers and COVID-19.” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, vol 11, no.1, 2020, pp. 7-24, jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/40588. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- O’Reilly, Andrea. *Matricentric Feminism*. E-book, Demeter, 2016.
- Ortega, Francisco, and Michael Orsini. “Governing COVID-19 without Government in Brazil: Ignorance, Neoliberal Authoritarianism, and the Collapse of Public Health Leadership.” *Global Public Health*, vol. 15, no. 9, 2020, pp. 1257-77, doi: 10.1080/17441692.2020.1795223. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.
- Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). “Understanding the Infodemic and Misinformation in the Fight against COVID-19.” *Iris*, 6 Jul. 2020, pp. 1-5. iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/52052. Accessed 2 Nov. 2020.
- Parent in Science. “Produtividade acadêmica durante a pandemia: efeitos de gênero, raça e parentalidade. Levantamento realizado pelo Movimento Parent in Science durante o isolamento social relativo à COVID-19.” *Parent in Science*, 3 Jul. 2020. 327b604e-5cf4-492b-910b-e35e2bc67511.filesusr.com/ugd/0b341b\_81cd8390d0f94bfd8fcd17e6f29bc0e.pdf?index=true. Accessed 15 Sep. 2020.
- Perissé, Camille, and Marília Loschi. “Trabalho de mulher. Mulher e Trabalho: Papeis Sociais em Questão.” *Revista Retratos, IBGE*, vol. 17, Jul-Aug., 2017, pp. 19-24, agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/media/com\_mediaibge/arquivos/b06abac34a360666981b4b86621776f2.pdf. Accessed 1 Nov. 2020.
- Philips, Tom. “‘So What?’: Bolsonaro Shrugs Off Brazil’s Rising Coronavirus Death Toll. Outrage at President’s Response to News That More Than 5,000 people Have Lost Their Lives.” *The Guardian*, 29 Apr. 2020. www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/so-what-bolsonaro-shrugs-off-brazil-rising-coronavirus-death-toll. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020.
- PNAD IBGE, 2019 (National Household Sample Survey, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2019). *PNAD Contínua: condições de vida, desigualdade e pobreza*. IBGE, www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/multidominio/

- condicoes-de-vida-desigualdade-e-pobreza/17270-pnad-continua.html?=&t=o-que-e. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020.
- PNAD IBGE, 2020 (Continuous National Household Sample Survey. Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Apr-May-June 2020). *IBGE*, biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/index.php/biblioteca-catalogo?view=detalhes&id=73086. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020.
- Prates, Ian, and Rogério J Barbosa. "The Impact of COVID-19 in Brazil: Labour Market and Social Protection Responses." *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics: The Quarterly Journal of the Indian Society of Labour Economics*, vol. 63, no. 10, Sept. 2020, doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00252-3. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.
- Recuero, Raquel, and Felipe Soares. "O Discurso Desinformativo Sobre a Cura Do COVID-19 No Twitter: Estudo De Caso." *E-Compós*, Sep. 2020, doi:10.30962/ec.2127. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.
- Ribeiro, Fabiana, and Anja Leist. "Who Is Going to Pay the Price of COVID-19? Reflections about an Unequal Brazil." *International Journal for Equity in Health*, vol. 19, no. 91, pp. 1-3, 2020, doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-01207-2. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.
- Saramago, José. *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*. Companhia das Letras, 1995.
- Staniscuaski, Fernanda et al. "Parent in Science Movement. Impact of COVID-19 on Academic Mothers." *Science*, vol. 368, no. 6492, 15 May 2020, p. 724, doi: 10.1126/science.abc2740. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- Tavares, L. P., F. L. de Oliveira Júnior, and M. Magalhães. "Analysis of President Jair Bolsonaro's Speeches in the Midst of the Pandemic: Is the Coronavirus Just a 'Little Flu'?" *Research, Society and Development*, vol. 9, no. 7, May 2020, p. e609974469, doi:10.33448/rsd-v9i7.4469. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.
- Tollefson, Jeff. "Brazilian Lawmakers in Showdown to Double Science Budget. President Jair Bolsonaro Has Threatened Deep Cuts to Research Budgets—Now Scientists Hope Legislation Will Give Them Protected Funds." *Nature*, 19 Aug. 2020, doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-02433-y. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.
- UNDP, Brazil. United Nations Development Programme Brazil. *Relatório do PNUD lança luz sobre nova geração de desigualdades*, 9 Dec. 2019. www.br.undp.org/content/brazil/pt/home/presscenter/articles/2019/condicoes-de-partida-podem-determinar-desigualdades-no-futuro--r.html. Accessed 7 Nov. 2020.
- UNDP. United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report 2019 Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century Briefing Note for Countries On the 2019 Human Development Report*, hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\_theme/country-notes/BRA.pdf. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.

- UNDP. United Nations Development Programme. *2019 Human Development Index Ranking*, [hdr.undp.org/en/content/2019-human-development-index-ranking](http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/2019-human-development-index-ranking). Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.
- World Health Organization (WHO). “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard, Situation by Country, Territory or Area.” *WHO*, 11 Nov. 2020. [covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAtK79BRAIEiwA4OskBng0J3fG06w53FLBBQuR9TOVDaOpVq5AHsvY9Br1Q7no-rkEfdvfABoCyDQQA\\_vD\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAiAtK79BRAIEiwA4OskBng0J3fG06w53FLBBQuR9TOVDaOpVq5AHsvY9Br1Q7no-rkEfdvfABoCyDQQA_vD_BwE). Accessed 12 Nov. 2020.
- Zarocostas, John. “How to Fight an Infodemic”. *The Lancet*, vol. 395, no. 10225, 29 Feb. 2020, pp. 676, [doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30461-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30461-X). Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.

