

SCHOOL CLOSURES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: MATERNAL EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand mothers' experiences of school closures due to social distancing measures imposed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on family ties and the perception of motherhood. Twenty middle-class women aged between 29 and 45 who accompanied their children to school activities at home during this period took part in the study. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out remotely. The results showed that the pandemic has resulted in significant changes in family ties. The transition to remote classes has led to an accumulation of activities undertaken by mothers in the domestic context, resulting in overload and requiring extra dedication to their children's education. In addition, the participants were reflective about the bond with their children and the values related to education. The overload experienced by the women was highlighted, with potential repercussions on the mental health and well-being of their families.

Keywords: COVID-19; maternity; school

Cierre de las escuelas durante la pandemia de COVID-19: experiencias maternas con hijos en edad escolar

RESUMEN

Este estudio tuvo por objetivo comprender las experiencias maternas ante el cierre de las escuelas resultante de las medidas de distanciamiento social impuestas por el combate a la pandemia de COVID-19, y sus impactos en los lazos familiares y en la percepción de la maternidad. Participaron en la investigación 20 mujeres de clase media con edades comprendidas entre los 29 y los 45 años que acompañaron a sus hijos a las actividades escolares en casa durante en ese período. Las entrevistas individuales semiestructuradas se realizaron a distancia. Los resultados apuntaron que la pandemia ha provocado cambios significativos en los vínculos familiares. La transición a las clases a distancia ha provocado una acumulación de actividades realizadas por las madres en el contexto doméstico, lo que ha dado lugar a una sobrecarga y ha exigido una dedicación adicional a la educación de sus hijos. Además, las participantes reflexionaron sobre el vínculo con sus hijos y los valores relacionados con la educación. Se evidenció la sobrecarga experimentada por las mujeres, con posibles repercusiones en su salud mental y en el bienestar de sus familias.

Palabras clave: COVID-19; maternidad; escuela

Fechamento das escolas durante a pandemia de covid-19: experiências maternas com filhos em idade escolar

RESUMO

Este estudo teve por objetivo compreender as experiências maternas diante do fechamento das escolas, decorrente das medidas de distanciamento social impostas pelo combate à pandemia de COVID-19, e seus impactos nos vínculos familiares e na percepção da maternagem. Participaram da pesquisa 20 mulheres de camadas sociais médias, com idades entre 29 e 45 anos, que acompanharam seus filhos nas atividades escolares desenvolvidas em casa nesse período. Foram realizadas entrevistas individuais semiestructuradas por meio remoto. Os resultados encontrados apontaram que a pandemia resultou em mudanças significativas nos vínculos familiares. A transposição para aulas remotas acarretou um acúmulo de atividades assumidas pelas mães no contexto doméstico, resultando em sobrecarga e exigindo uma dedicação extra à educação dos filhos. Além disso, as participantes mostraram-se reflexivas sobre a vinculação com seus filhos e os valores relativos à educação. Evidenciou-se a sobrecarga vivida pelas mulheres, com possíveis repercussões na saúde mental e no bem-estar de suas famílias.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; maternidade; escola

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, a disease caused by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), imposed the need to adopt social distancing measures (Oliveira, Oliveira-Cardoso, Silva, & Santos, 2020), such as the suspension of classes and the compulsory closure of schools. This unusual measure affected a large number of children, adolescents and young people, who had their routines interrupted and experienced the transposition of teaching activities, previously carried out in the school environment, to the domestic context, through remote activities (Oliveira, Gomes, & Barcellos, 2020). The pandemic outbreak and the difficulties encountered in controlling it resulted in an extension of the confinement experience, which produced changes that significantly impacted the lives of families and communities (Moura et al., 2022; Santos, Oliveira, & Oliveira-Cardoso, 2020).

The health and humanitarian crisis has had an unequal impact on people's lives. Especially women working double shifts were more exposed to risks both in their workplace and at home, and the quality of health care was also weakened (Souza, Dumont-Pena, & Patrocino, 2022). This exceptional period brought a demand for reconfiguration of the domestic sphere, in which work and educational activities began to be developed simultaneously and in the same space, imposing the need for adjustments in the organization of the environment and domestic routine (Oliveira, Magrin, et al., 2020). The pandemic scenario highlighted persistent gender inequalities both at work and at home (Braga, Oliveira, & Santos, 2020).

The closure of schools resulted in the immediate need for greater dedication of time to the children's care and education (Esper, Araújo, Santos, & Nascimento, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021), establishing a new demand whose burden fell on their greatest part on women, which highlighted gender inequalities (Ferraz, 2020), the crystallization of domestic roles and inequities related to the place occupied by women who are mothers in society (Jayachandran, 2020). Therefore, it became imperative to reflect about the relation between maternal burden and the new demands that emerged from the transformations experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Oliveira et al., 2020).

When examining the excruciating experience of the health crisis triggered by the new coronavirus, the dissemination of articles and reports about the various dilemmas faced by mothers in times of social distancing is often identified in the media. Studies produced since the emergence of the pandemic offer the first evidence about the difficulties that women with school-age children faced in terms of a more equal division of domestic tasks. Many mothers had to work from home to continue their paid work, which was transferred entirely to the home and transformed into on-screen work, at the same time that they had to continuously

support their children's online school activities (Bartlett, Griffin, & Thomson, 2020; Cifuentes-Faura, 2020; Emidio, Okamoto, & Santos, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021).

Considering this scenario, it is necessary to investigate aspects related to the personal well-being of mothers and the interactions established with their school-age children, since parental practices are considered predictors of adequate child development (Coser, Martinez, & Pamplin, 2013). Bartlett et al. (2020) consider that, in the extraordinary situation created by the pandemic, it is important for parents to strengthen communication with their children and actively participate in monitoring and guiding children in their daily activities, whether study, leisure or eating. Considering the context of uncertainty and persistent feeling of threat experienced by families at the height of the pandemic experience (Oliveira-Cardoso, Silva, Santos, Lotério, Accoroni, & Santos, 2020), the availability of parents to be present in their children's lives it is an essential resource for them to feel safe, accompanied and protected in the face of the traumatic changes and ruptures experienced in a situation that threatens the continuity of their existence (Sola, Oliveira-Cardoso, Santos, & Santos, 2021).

In this way, considering the process of transformations in family life and the possible psychological impacts resulting from voluntary confinement in the domestic space, this study aimed to understand maternal experiences with the closure of schools resulting from social distancing measures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on family ties and the perception of mothering.

METHOD

This is an exploratory, cross-sectional study, with a qualitative approach. Exploratory research aims to discover and elucidate a phenomenon of interest, aiming to provide information about a process or object of study that is still little known, in order to allow the researcher to formulate hypotheses that will guide subsequent investigations. The cross-sectional approach is appropriate when the object of study requires that the investigation be carried out at a single moment, without the intention of following up the participants. The qualitative approach is appropriate for answering questions that refer to a level of reality that cannot be measured and that touch on a set of meanings, perceptions, attitudes, motivations, expectations, beliefs and values that require a comprehensive approach.

Participants

In this study participated 20 women, mothers of children aged between two and 10 years, living in municipalities in different regions of the State of São Paulo and who followed their children's teaching activities at home. Most of these activities, in the period before the pandemic, were carried out in the school environment.

The inclusion criteria in the convenience sample were: being a mother of children aged between two and 10 years old, being in domestic confinement as a result of social distancing imposed as a measure to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, being employed and having joined to the home office system.

These criteria were established considering the Brazilian reality, specifically the state of São Paulo, which, in addition to being one of the federative units most impacted by the disease, established health protocols and sanctioned decrees with social isolation criteria that included determinations for compulsory closure of schools and transfer from school activities to the online environment. In order to meet the scope of the research, a section of the population was recruited that was able to join the "Stay at Home" campaign, maintaining the continuity of their full-time work activity thanks to working on screen. They are women who belong to the middle social strata, who work in professions that require a higher level of education and occupy qualified jobs.

The interviewees were aged between 29 and 45 years old, carried out paid work outside the home in the pre-pandemic period and, at the time of the interview, were working from home. Of the 20 participants who agreed to collaborate with the research, 13 were married and lived with their partner, two were single and lived at home with their parents, and five were divorced and solely responsible for full-time childcare. The average family income varied between three and 25 thousand reais. The number of children varied from one to three. Most of the children studied in a private school (16 participants) and all were taking online classes during the period of social isolation. Considering the profile outlined, it can be stated that the group studied is homogeneous from the point of view of its sociodemographic characteristics. These are mothers who were between the third and fourth decades of life, professionally active and belonging to the middle classes of the population.

Another factor that gives uniformity to the universe of participants is the fact that they are inserted in traditional family centers, in which mothers are responsible for the children's education, with no equal sharing or exercise of the parental role between fathers and mothers (Koltermann, Souza, Bueno, Paraventi, & Vieira, 2019).

Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview script, containing sociodemographic information, with the purpose of characterizing the research participants, and 10 open and closed questions. These questions were designed to facilitate the exploration of points of interest, but with a script flexible enough to provide a fluid and conversational interaction, so as not to make the dialogue stiff (Bleger, 1998).

Data collect

The interviews were carried out from April to July

2020, therefore, between the second and fourth months of the pandemic. Contact with the interviewees was made using the "snowball"¹ technique, based on an initial recommendation from third parties. In compliance with the rules of social distancing, the interviews were carried out via video or audio call (at the discretion of the interviewee) via the WhatsApp application. The choice for a remote interview proved to be appropriate to the recommendations of social isolation, enabling a safe way of communicating with the interviewees.

The virtual meetings lasted an hour and a half on average. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed in full. In this sense, it is important to highlight that the recording was authorized by the participants and the records were used only to meet the objectives of the study, following the methodological design, in order to protect the identity of the participants and their right to confidentiality regarding the information provided.

Data analysis

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

The examination of the research *corpus* was based on Bardin's (2010) content analysis proposal. After being transcribed, the interviews were read and re-read exhaustively in search of recurrences, symbols and codes. After this exploratory stage, the data were organized into units of meaning, which gave rise to the origin of the analysis categories. Based on exhaustive re-readings and categorization of the transcribed material, excerpts from the interviews were selected that were considered relevant to respond to the objectives of the study and illustrate the content presented in each category of analysis.

The analysis took place through the articulation between the data obtained and the relevant literature, at the confluence of psychological, sociological and anthropological perspectives on motherhood, having as its organizing axis the studies developed in the field of Psychoanalysis of Binding Configurations on intersubjectivity and the theory of intergenerational psychic transmission.

¹ This is a type of non-probabilistic sampling, from which documents and/or key informants are used, called seeds, with the purpose of locating some people who meet the criteria of the profile outlined for the composition of the sample of the search. Therefore, the people suggested by the seeds are asked to indicate other contacts, from their personal network and who meet the desired profile, until the sampling frame reaches the saturation necessary to achieve the research objectives. In this study, informants were used who indicated mothers who met the profile criteria to compose the sample (Turato, 2003).

Ethical care

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, CAEE protocol nº 30248920.8.0000.5401. All ethical precautions were taken, such as ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees, who received the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE) by email and returned it signed. In order to ensure the privacy of the interviewees and the confidentiality of the data, the names of the interviewed mothers and children were replaced by pseudonyms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the thematic analysis, two categories were created: "Education in the domestic environment and maternal burden" and "*I want mom*: the dilemmas of the presence-absence of the maternal figure".

Education in the home environment and maternal burden Throughout the interviews, the mothers repeatedly addressed issues related to children's schooling. When asked about what they missed most during the confinement period, the majority mentioned their children's school and the support they received in their children's education. Bruna declared that she missed school and mentioned in her report how important support from the school institution was before the outbreak of the pandemic. Converging with the reports of other mothers, the school emerged as a place that allowed them to enjoy moments of physical separation from their children, knowing that they would be safe and well cared for. Laura mentioned how family life was linked to the children's school routine, so that the school functioned as a fundamental support resource for the organization of family life. Beatriz revealed the difficulties she had been facing in accompanying her son in the literacy phase and Livia questioned the role of "teacher" for their children that mothers had to take on without being prepared.

I have to know if you did the task. From day to night I have to provide a dinosaur stamp, research on the family's ancestors and also play, photograph and send it to the teacher. In all this, a period of my day when I could work I spend doing these activities with him, which is still small and doesn't do it alone, so I accompany him, but what happens? I spend the early hours catching up on my work, or putting something forward for the next day. Being my son's "teacher" was not something I imagined living. It's tiring, stressful. And I can't wait for school to return. (Livia)

Look, after this pandemic I started to value the teacher a lot. How can they teach so many things through play? Be willing! Furthermore, I realized that school goes beyond content, teaching content. School is a space of socialization for children, security for the family and an important support in

our routine; I feel without support with the school closed and, furthermore, I don't know how to teach the content to the boys. I'm tired, I have a lot of demands and they come with a math calculation, or asking me if M is before P, wow! (Ana)

Livia and Ana's statements show that, with the reorganization of their domestic routine, mothers felt overwhelmed with their children's school activities, which began to be carried out remotely. The accumulation of responsibilities makes them feel helpless due to the lack of support they had from the institution before the pandemic. The reports also bring to light a new perception of the place of school in family life. This expanded understanding allows us to see that the school context goes far beyond the teaching-learning relation, being also a place for children to socialize, which opens up a free space for mothers to calmly carry out their work activities, relax and dedicate to other personal interests. When work and school invade the home environment, mothers find themselves overwhelmed with so many tasks, which pile up and take up almost every hour of the day and night. This is why they say they are more susceptible to fatigue, tired or completely exhausted at the end of the day, in addition to having to remain in a permanent state of alert, no longer being able to count on the comfort provided by the school in sharing responsibility for the children's formal education.

It is important to highlight that children from middle-class families spend a large part of the day involved in school activities or participating in sports and cultural training projects and activities. These tasks, in addition to their primary objective of training for life in society, also indirectly help mothers to feel less burdened with the exercise of their maternal role. Thus, maternal reports in the interviews position the school as a source of support so that they can exercise their mothering experience. The experiences of breaking with normality and the imperative of social isolation imposed by the pandemic broadened the participants' perspective about the importance of partnership between family and school.

The experience of losing this source of support offered by the school meant that mothers had to take over the organization of their children's educational routine, offering continuous and constant support to their children, who are still in a stage of their life cycle marked by intense dependence adult supervision. Furthermore, they need to support children and help them overcome the traumatic situations of the pandemic, with the challenges inherent to an unprecedented experience in the history of humanity, permeated by deprivation and transformations, which increases anxiety and generates emotional instability (Sola, Garcia, Santos, Santos, & Oliveira-Cardoso, 2022).

It's something that demands from us, mothers, in addition to energy to organize everything, strength

and maturity, because I want to say: suspend the school year, dear, which would make it a lot easier for me. But I see that my daughter is already suffering with the changes in her life, she barely understands everything that is happening, and seeing her teacher and friends through a computer screen has been one of the most fun moments of the day for her. So, I take a deep breath, sit down and follow her to school. We do our homework, I spend my time looking for material for school activities, but we have been walking. I feel tired, but at the same time I see how important this is for her to be able to face everything we are going through. So I stand firm. (Paula).

It can be noticed, therefore, that the school, even if reconfigured by communication mediated by a digital platform, can function as a healthy link with the pre-pandemic life that was momentarily suspended, and the maintenance of this bond began to be perceived by mothers as a necessary effort to preserve their children's emotional health. This awakens a feeling of satisfaction and personal well-being in mothers, as they realize that their extreme dedication is being rewarded. In this sense, it can be understood that remote education has imposed a new level of demands on mothers, which go beyond providing the necessary conditions to preserve children's formal education, insofar as it is configured as an effort to maintain continuity children's emotional connection with a social space that they value and which, in fact, is essential for their process of subjectivation and not just for their socio-cognitive development.

Metapsychic organizations, such as schools, serve as "*the backdrop of the individual psyche and among it and the broader frameworks – cultural, social, political, religious – on which they rely*" (Käes, 2011, p. 20). The group and community and shared belongings precede the constitution of individual psychic space. In it lies the structural importance of bonds in establishing the foundations of the psyche. The mothers' complaints point to the perceived failures in the support functions provided by metapsychic organizations, due to the disruptive and turbulent period, which suggests the recognition of the disorganizing potential of the discontinuities established by the pandemic outbreak.

The unusual scenario created by protective measures to prevent the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 produces a new profile: the mother confined at home with her children. It turns out that, typically, this is a woman who, in the context of the contemporary family, has always been burdened by countless demands. The feminization of care means that women accumulate the functions that are traditionally attributed to the female gender, such as caring for offspring and managing the home, with functions related to their paid work and other personal interests and professional career aspirations (Braga et al., 2020). What is new about the pandemic is

the need to reconcile the simultaneity of time and space when carrying out countless tasks with the unrest raised by a threatening social atmosphere.

In accordance with this hypothesis, the extension of social isolation measures resulting from the lack of control over the pandemic in Brazil proved to be particularly challenging for women, who suddenly found themselves having to bear an expanded burden of tasks and responsibilities (Macêdo, 2020; Souza et al., 2022), at a time when they lost much of their institutional and linking support (Sola, Souza, Rodrigues, Santos, & Oliveira-Cardoso, 2023). Women, in the pandemic context, were exposed to high levels of stress resulting from the deprivation of social contact and the overload of activities in the home space, in addition to the emotional overload that they had already been managing in their daily relationships, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic (Emídio et al., 2021; Moraes, 2020).

In addition to these issues, Oliveira et al. (2020) point out that, among the various conflicts exacerbated by the closure of schools in the pandemic situation, one of them refers to the limitation of parents' ability to teach, evidenced, above all, with children enrolled in more advanced grades and when they are faced with needs of stimulation during early childhood. On the other hand, studies (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021) reaffirm the importance of family involvement in their children's education, helping to complement the teaching-learning process. In the specific situation of social distancing, the interviewees' reports indicate that mothers became protagonists in the process of educating their children. It is possible to locate, in their speeches, the burden that such a reversal caused in the face of the unpreparedness and helplessness into which they found themselves thrown. Despite their investments, efforts and attempts to provide satisfactory experiences for their children, there was an increase in weaknesses, whether due to the confinement of the entire family or the fact that mothers continued to carry out their professional activities in the same domestic space without being able to count on with their network support.

Braga et al. (2020) attribute the exhaustion resulting from task overload to the maintenance of the social division of labor, which, by assigning women the exclusive role of caring for the home and children, perpetuates culturally incorporated inequalities, naturalizing the feminization of care practices. Furthermore, during the pandemic, external assistance from the network support was hampered by the need to maintain isolation. From this perspective, the authors question: who takes care of women, especially those who are mothers of children, during the pandemic?

Cifuentes-Faura (2020) considers that, although many parents are able to dedicate time and attention to the educational support of their children, this process will never be flawless or constant, and it can result in

some calm and fun situations, as well as others that can produce frustration, when they find themselves confronted by a multiplicity of responsibilities that cause physical and mental exhaustion. In any case, it is true that, on average, parental commitment, however good it may be, does not completely effectively replace the learning that takes place in schools.

There are also other factors that negatively influence outcomes, mainly the enormous social differences observed in access to available resources, which can increase the vulnerability of certain family configurations. The time that parents are able to invest in their children's education varies in each home, as does intellectual curiosity, epistemophilic attitude, symbolic capital and the degree of parental knowledge and cognitive development. Permeating these vicissitudes, there are profound socioeconomic disparities that characterize Brazilian families, constituting another vulnerable factor that needs to be considered.

I want mom: the dilemmas of the presence-absence of the maternal figure

Before carrying out the interviews, mothers were asked to ask their children what the time of social isolation was like for them, and to identify what they liked most and what they liked least during this pandemic period. The suggested questions were: "What do you think of this period of isolation that we are experiencing due to the new coronavirus pandemic? What are you enjoying more and what are you enjoying less?" It was recommended that the questions be prepared in a colloquial, dialogued way and as close as possible to children's language, so that children could understand what was being asked and preserved a certain spontaneity in their responses. However, it is worth highlighting that what was of interest at this moment was the narrative and the mother's view of her children's response, since the focus of the research was the maternal experience.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to narrate their children's answers and reflect about this issue, how they felt when talking to them and what they thought when listening to the children. All the children said they liked staying at home together, that they were afraid of the new coronavirus and death, but that they felt safe with their parents. The children also mentioned the difficulties in adapting to the online education system and perceived that their parents worked a lot, even though they stayed at home all day and that, as a result, they could not play with them any longer.

The issue of time elapsed since the start of the pandemic proved to be a critical factor in the differences observed in children's responses. When reporting that they enjoyed being at home, in the company of their parents, children in the first months of the pandemic (between April and May 2020) had few complaints regarding the interruption of their daily activities and

the separation from socializing with friends. The children of mothers interviewed between June and July 2020 reported that they felt tired and missed their friends; they also missed contact with the school environment and the life they led before the start of the pandemic.

The time issue, considering the months in which the interviews took place, shows how the impacts of isolation and disruptions in routine are subjectivized differently by mothers and children depending on the duration of confinement. Recurrently, the term fatigue was used to describe the relation established with the need to maintain social distancing. In this sense, it is important to be aware of the impacts that exposure to chronic stress, susceptibility to fatigue and distancing from people produce on the mother-child bond, with their likely repercussions on the subjectivation process (Scorsolini-Comin, Rossato, & Santos, 2020).

The Lucas' speech, Luíza's son, illustrates how many children told their mothers what they felt about the pandemic.

I'm not enjoying it, I'm loving it! I hate going to school online, I love being with mom and dad, I love when we play games together and have lunch together, I love games and being free all day. I don't like when you teach, but I've gotten used to it because I look to the side and see you there, my heart feels warm.

All the interviewees were moved when they reported their children's answers and when they realized that their figure and role as a mother are so important to them. They felt comforted by being loved and recognized, but were surprised by the high emotional value that this seemed to have for their children. This perception gave rise to experiences of guilt, which emerged in the statements when they reflected about how they organized their lives before the pandemic and how they were able to get even closer to their children during this exceptional period.

It distressed me, I kept thinking about the real importance that children give to things and what we adults continue to insist on doing; I just keep thinking about how important it is to have a simpler look at things. (Joana).

It's been curious to hear and live with Enzo's feelings. We talk about the subject without obligations and big soap operas, and when he is uncomfortable I try to guide him so he can express himself. This didn't happen a lot in our lives, so it's surprising too. In fact, I'm surprised, it's as if I'm meeting, recognizing my son. (Patricia)

The issue of resized time, with the acceleration or slowing down of the life pace under the pandemic regime, while producing challenges that require adjustments, creates a unique opportunity for reflection. Mothers

recognize that there has been greater rapprochement, which allows them to know facets of their children's personality that previously unnoticed. This perception brings to the fore the issue of the dyad's bond and the nuances involved in this very special relationship. The maternal function is thought of by Winnicott (1956/2000) as a central component in the constitution and emotional development of the child. The quality of the bond established is a vital aspect in building the bond that children are capable of establishing with the world and objects, modulating the trust they will have in the environment and in human relationships. Although the psychoanalytic discourse has contributed to some extent to the legitimization of the place of maternal care in the constitution of children's subjectivity, often not paying attention to the different possible ways of exercising motherhood, an issue is evident in the statements of these children refracted by the maternal narratives: they want to enjoy spending time with more available and attentive mothers during the day, and they feel more emotionally secure because they are closer to their parents.

This leads to a discussion about the bonding tissue, a source of support for the experience of being in the world. It is clear that the feeling of constant presence caused by the greater physical mothers' proximity, a direct effect of the imperative of domestic confinement, seems to have given visibility to certain children's emotional needs that previously unnoticed or were not so evident, revealing failures or deprivations of care. Facing these insufficiencies causes discomfort in mothers, as they express their feelings of regret at not being able to meet the demands of continuous contact in the way they would like, if they had full availability during the day, except in exceptional circumstances such as during holidays from work or, at present, due to the possibility of working from home.

In recent times, there has been much debate about the weaknesses of family ties, the relationships difficulties, the formation of relationships with others and the various symptoms or psychopathological conditions that emerge as clinical demands in contemporary times. For Birman (2007), these demands are linked to ways of life that automatically resonate in the subjectivation processes today, resulting in problems located in the field of the weaknesses of existence and the feeling experiences. The author considers that such issues can be linked to contemporary social and family transformations and that a key element in thinking about these transitions is the massive entry of women into the job market. The conquest of public space removed women from the traditional place of permanent presence in the house, the gravitational center of the family and great "home manager", opening new horizons for the inscription of the feminine beyond the exclusive role of caring for the children and the husband's lives. This change is

effectively not the core of the problems triggered by the transformations in social roles, but rather the difficulties that families began to face in producing new links based on the changes that occurred in the maternal role.

When the mother moves away from the center of the family scene and no one takes her place, the spaces of institutional care (schools, hospitals, medical and psychological offices) are strengthened and medicalization begins to permeate family life to control children's erratic behavior. Even so, the look at places, at the roles and functions exercised by the contemporary family remains fixed, fixed on the reproduction of expectations models based on the maternal figure shaped in the patriarchal system, from the advent of the bourgeois nuclear family, when the mother was given the role of managing the care of the entire family (Braga et al., 2020). The woman is still perceived as the sovereign of private space, the "queen of the home". In this sense, it is understood that this cry for the mythologized "mommy" and all the complaints related to women's work and maternal reports that the prolonged stay at home allowed them to establish new connections with their children, are meanings that the pandemic context contributes to resize, also functioning as a warning for them to allow themselves to be docilely recaptured by the discourse that naturalizes the maternal (Badinter, 2011). The cry of affection and self-responsibility for the quality of attachment, as well as the demand for connection produced with time and availability, require a sharing in which the places and functions of family group members can be thought of in terms of a network affections that promote support for becoming, so important in the subjectivation processes.

On the other hand, a mother in rags, dressed in historical clothes that no longer fit her, without the support of her network, can get sick and see her children get sick too. When feeling helpless, she can resort to immediate solutions, understanding that the problem is personal, that she is the one who failed in her role, which legitimizes the guilt she feels for having made the choice to also be present in the world of work. This can favor the repetition of imprisonment in the gears of traditional gender roles. Lulled by ideological statements that camouflage themselves in uplifting nomenclatures, such as "warrior", "lioness", "fortress", "heroine", "the home star", mothers often hide their pain, renounce their projects and suffocate their desires, as if they had to bear the fate of perpetuating a pattern of feminine behavior that no longer fits in the contemporary world.

These issues emerge in the speech of Talita, mother of two-year-old Mariana, author of the appeal: "I want mommy". When her mother asked what she thought about the pandemic, the girl said: "There's mom, look at mom." Talita said that she has been repeating all day that she wants her mom. This led her to reflect on the way she has looked at mothering today.

Look, I've been thinking a lot with my fellow teachers about how difficult being a woman is, but how being a mother is perhaps a cooler possibility than being a woman. I think that's it, being a mother gives comfort in seeing their smile, their love, all of that, but at the same time it seems like we want to achieve the unattainable, it seems like we want to be able to handle everything at any cost, and look how little we talk here about partners, the body, the demands of being beautiful, sexy and competent, so many things that come into our day... I wish I could just be happy, kind of break some standards, be a mother in my own way, I can be happy in my work, relax a little, but today I live in search of achieving, achieving, achieving... and I suffer, I feel suffocated, at the limit, it seems that these clothes no longer fit me. (Talita)

In this sense, the refrain "I want mommy" seems to update the mark of a demand that needs to be looked at in the historical horizon and through the subjective constitution of women, on the path of an emancipation process that led to the resignification of their social role and family, and which certainly reverberates in family ties, in the mothers' mental health of and other family members. The pandemic provided an unexpected time for reflection for these women who enjoy certain privileges, while also experiencing the hardships of being mothers and professionals. With the process of female emancipation, they had access to higher education opportunities and belong to the middle classes in the social hierarchy, however they still feel imprisoned by the injunctions conditioned by patriarchy. It is necessary to expand their critical reflection so that they can reorient their gaze towards motherhood, so that motherhood can be resized and recognized in its subversive power, which could contribute to rethinking motherhood and its transformations also as experiences of struggle and historical resistance which are linked to the possibility of accessing emotional issues that nourish hope and strengthen confidence in the future.

In this aspect, avoiding crystallizing an individualizing look at the bonding context explained by the maternal and filial discourses analyzed, the concept of unconscious alliance developed by Käes (2014) allows us to understand the obstacles found in the process of transforming the exercise of motherhood, taking into account polysemy of motherhood in contemporary times.

Käes (2014) considers the unconscious alliance to be an intersubjective psychic construction celebrated among subjects engaged in a bond, in order to establish and reinforce, in each member, the narcissistic and object investments, and ensure the continuity of the necessary processes, functions and psychic structures, resulting from repression or denial, deauthorization or rejection. Thus, unconscious alliances, as well as established contracts and pacts, sediment psychic reality, sending

subjects to the symbolic place occupied by each one in the group. At the same time, the subjects involved and connected with each other contract, through established alliances, commitments, obligations and subjections, in the same way that they distribute benefits and satisfactions, measured according to the psychic costs required of each one to share such benefits.

In this way, unconscious alliances constitute, at the same time, the agent and the raw material of intergenerational psychic transmission, which is based on instinctual renunciation and the transmission of pacts established to fix unconscious contracts. This means that it is precisely through the renunciation of instincts, especially those destructive motions, that the possibility of establishing a contract emerges that can benefit all members of the group – the couple, the family, the group – as a community of rights that "protects us against violence, imposes necessity and makes love possible" (Käes, 2011, p. 202).

In this sense, we find in maternal discourses that the generationally established contract sustains the sacred place of the woman/mother still in force in the imagination, reproducing the old patterns historically established in the bourgeois family. Despite the countless subjective transformations that shake contemporary society, women's place continues to be invested in and supported by organizing values from previous generations. When faced with such a conflict, mothers are susceptible to feelings of guilt, as if they had not satisfactorily fulfilled their role in the unconscious pact established with the generations that preceded them.

The breaking of this subjective cycle generates a conflict chain – both with the previous generation and with others involved in this alliance – partners and children. Reports about fatigue, exhaustion and guilt resulting from the overload generated by the naturalization of feminization of care demonstrate the difficulty of balancing women's narcissistic and object investments, although they result from the psychic benefits and costs experienced by the couple and in family life, accordingly with the established binding modality.

From the children's perspective, the colloquial expression "I want mommy" can condense multiple meanings. In principle, it can demonstrate the need for narcissistic investment addressed by parental figures to their children, because it is the group's investment that establishes the place occupied by each member in the family's microsocial set. This is the narcissistic contract, a concept introduced by Castoriadis-Aulagnier (1975) to designate a structuring alliance in which the family chain narcissistically invests the subject, recognized as the bearer of the group's continuity, in order to guarantee the symbolic inscription of their place in the group set. On the other hand, such investment would not be the result of maternal investment alone, despite the importance

that the prior establishment of this bond has for the child's development, since the burden that falls on mothers is far from that on fathers. This shows that the unequal distribution of costs and benefits for children's education perpetuates the places traditionally occupied by men and women in the family and generational chain.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study made it possible to understand the mothers' experiences of school-age children in response to the demands raised by the compulsory closure of schools, highlighting its impacts on family ties and the perception of mothering, considering the importance of this knowledge to resize the mental health needs of mothers and sons.

The results show that, although parental figures can collaborate and complement their children's educational process, with the suspension of face-to-face activities in schools and domestic isolation, the impacts on family life have exacerbated the traditional roles attributed to women in the domestic routine, in which they have already accumulated the female role traditionally reserved for motherhood, added to the professional role characteristic of the contemporary.

With the vacuum left by schools, it is possible to question the type and intensity of narcissistic investments in children, since part of them was supported by the school institution, until they passed almost exclusively to the domain of families, more specifically mothers. Listening to the participants highlighted the exhaustion resulting from the accumulation of new demands that fell disproportionately on them, causing physical and psychological exhaustion.

The increased exposure of working mothers to helplessness and suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic exposes the need for advances in policies and the protection network for the mental health of women and children, especially in critical periods and prolonged crises. It is necessary to ensure that attention to emotional needs is not compromised during these periods. It is also essential to invest in the transformation of society towards a more equal redistribution between women and men of tasks and responsibilities for the children's care and education, moving towards greater equity in gender, race, class and generation relations.

The unprecedented experience of the pandemic, by providing full interaction with their children, also offered an opportunity for mothers to review priorities and consider the effects of their absences on the child's development. It can also be an ideal time for adults who do not have children to appreciate and understand the complexity of parenting.

This study contains some limitations that need to be highlighted, such as the fact that the sample was restricted to mothers from a single Brazilian state and a highly developed region. The research was limited to

listening to women from the middle social classes of the population. Another limitation that can be pointed out is the fact that other perspectives were not included, such as the children, husbands and teachers' voices, which could eventually be considered in future studies. These aspects require caution when generalizing results to other contexts.

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