

FORUM

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WOMEN IN HOME OFFICE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT CONFIGURATIONS

Mulheres em home office durante a pandemia da Covid-19 e as configurações do conflito trabalho-família

Mujeres en home office durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y las configuraciones del conflicto trabajo y familia

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to understand the impacts that working from home during the COVID-19 quarantine period had on the work-family conflict for Brazilian female workers. To reach the objective, fourteen professionals with different family arrangements, were interviewed. All the interviewees reported work overload due to organizational requirements, and the demands placed on them by their children and the home. Despite this, it is worth noting that, according to the testimonies, this work overload did not intensify the work-family conflict for all of them, contrary to what is claimed in the literature. Some interviewees stated that working from home brought them closer to their children and husbands and provided more time for physical and leisure activities. This finding can contribute towards broadening the debate on work-family conflict, by postulating that it is not only time, pressure and behavior that are the sources of this conflict, but also the physical distance imposed by the hours spent working away from the home.

KEYWORDS | Family-work conflict telework, COVID-19, quarantine, double shift.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa objetivou compreender os impactos que a adoção do home office, no período da quarentena da Covid-19, teve no conflito trabalho-família vivido por trabalhadoras brasileiras. Para alcançar o objetivo, foram entrevistadas 14 profissionais com diferentes arranjos familiares. Todas as entrevistadas relataram sobrecarga de trabalho devido às exigências organizacionais, às demandas com os filhos e com a casa. Apesar disso, cabe destacar que, de acordo com os depoimentos, a sobrecarga de trabalho não intensificou o conflito trabalho-família para todas, o que vai na contramão do previsto na literatura. Algumas entrevistadas alegaram que o home office aproximou-as dos filhos e maridos e propiciou mais tempo para atividade físicas e de lazer. Tal achado pode contribuir para ampliar o debate sobre o conflito trabalho-família, ao postular que não apenas o tempo, a pressão e o comportamento são fontes deste conflito, mas também a distância física que as horas dedicadas ao trabalho fora de casa requerem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES | Conflito trabalho-família, home office, Covid-19, quarentena, dupla jornada.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo comprender los impactos que la adopción del home office, durante el período de cuarentena de la COVID-19, tuvo sobre la relación trabajo-familia de las trabajadoras brasileñas. Para alcanzar el objetivo se entrevistaron catorce profesionales, con diferentes arreglos familiares. Todas las entrevistadas relataron sobrecarga laboral debido a las exigencias organizativas, obligaciones con sus hijos y con el hogar. A pesar de ello, cabe señalar que, según los testimonios, para ninguna de ellas la sobrecarga laboral dificultó la administración de la relación trabajo-familia, al contrario de lo previsto en la literatura. Algunas entrevistadas afirmaron que trabajar en el hogar las acercó a sus hijos y maridos y les proporcionó más tiempo para actividades físicas y de recreación. Este hallazgo puede contribuir a ampliar el debate sobre la relación trabajo-familia, a menudo conflictiva, al postular que no solo el tiempo, la presión y el comportamiento son fuentes de ese conflicto, sino también la distancia física impuesta por las horas dedicadas al trabajo fuera del hogar.

PALABRAS CLAVES | Conflicto trabajo-familia, oficina en casa, COVID-19, cuarentena, doble turno.

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INTRODUCTION

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was warned about cases of pneumonia in the city of Wuhan, China, caused by a new virus. A few days later, the WHO stated that the coronavirus outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and, on March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 was classified by the WHO as a pandemic (OPAS, 2020).

Given WHO's warning, the Brazilian Ministry of Health defined a series of measures to be taken to combat the coronavirus (Agência Brasil, 2020). To comply with these guidelines, many companies totally or partially suspended their activities or, where possible, started to operate on a telework basis. The interruption of several productive activities had immediate impacts on the workforce, but those impacts affected it unevenly. According to Barbosa, Costa & Hechsher (2020), workers who were already in fragile work conditions, such as young people, blacks, women, people with little education and informal workers, were more affected by the crisis, losing jobs and income to a greater extent than economically privileged groups.

The crisis caused by the pandemic aggravated unemployment and furthered the trend towards precarious work that has been in course in Brazil in recent decades (Martins, Lipp & Monteiro Junior, 2020; Melo & Cabral, 2020). The National Household Sample Survey (PNAD Covid-19), which began in May 2020, found a 33% increase in unemployment in September, which translates into 3.4 million people looking for jobs. Data from this survey also indicate that inequalities in the Brazilian labor market have worsened: while unemployment among women was 17%, the percentage among men was 11.8%, in September. Among blacks, it was 16.1%, compared to 11.5% for whites (IBGE, 2020).

Because it affects the workforce unevenly, the pandemic has had different impacts on different occupational groups. While on the one hand, as said earlier, it increased the share of workers excluded from the labor market, on the other hand it forced better-off workers to adapt to remote work as a way of keeping their jobs. Remote work, or telework, was adopted by 46% of Brazilian companies (Agência Brasil, 2020b). However, initiatives for this type of work aggravated the social inequality already mentioned. A Datafolha survey commissioned by C6 Bank shows that, in Brazil, the top income tiers concentrate the number of workers who managed to change to telework, making up 52% of teleworkers. Middle-income workers account for only 29% of the country's remote workforce; and workers in the lower strata represent an even smaller percentage of the total of teleworkers: 26% (C6Bank news, 2020). The survey also points out that the inequality in

telework adoption under pandemic conditions reflects gender, class and racial inequalities.

The sudden adoption of telework during the quarantine (Savic, 2020; Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai & Bendz, 2020) forced workers and their families to adapt to the new reality: household chores increased due to the absence of the services normally hired; schools and universities started to teach their contents via digital platforms; socializing and physical activities started to be done remotely. Such changes produced different impacts on Brazilian workers' professional life, which has motivated recent studies about the effects of telework adoption on work productivity in the context of the pandemic (Mendes, Hastenreiter Filho and Tellechea, 2020).

A survey conducted in April 2020 by LinkedIn indicated that 62% of respondents are more stressed about work than before. That group says it has been working longer hours (68% have been working at least one more hour per day, with 21% working up to four additional hours). In addition, 20% reported difficulties harmonizing work demands and the care for children. However, despite such difficulties, 59% of interviewees say that, with the quarantine, they have had more quality time with family (Tobias, 2020).

Our awareness that telework adoption in the context of the pandemic has affected the relationship between work and family life for workers in general and female workers in particular motivated us to conduct this study, which sought to understand the impacts of the adoption of this type of work on female workers' work-family conflict. This interest is due to the fact that, historically in Brazil (Melo & Thomé, 2018), the greatest share of responsibility for housekeeping and care for children is placed on women. Data released by the IBGE (2019) about "other forms of work" show that 92.2% of women perform some domestic work while for men this percentage is 78.2% (IBGE, 2019). Such indicators led us to assume that the sudden need to work from home and take care of household chores and children has entailed an additional burden to women.

The literature on work-family conflict corroborates this assumption by showing that the conflict, when it occurs, affects women more heavily, especially those who are mothers (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; 2012; Roman, 2017). Thus, the present study sought to contribute to the debate with an emphasis on the gender issue. It is worth noting that, while there is significant literature on the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of Brazilian management, most studies address issues related to tourism (Coelho & Mayer, 2020; Trigo, 2020) and public administration (Santos, 2020; Costa, 2020). Few studies address the impacts

of telework and the occurrence of work-family conflict, which reinforces the relevance of studying the topic.

To achieve the study's goal, we conducted interviews with 14 women with and without children, married and single. The study's conceptual bases, methodology and results are presented in the following sections.

WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

Work-family conflict is defined as a set of pressures that occur when professional and personal roles are played in a way in which fulfilling one role makes it difficult to conform to the other (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brimley, 2005; Netmeyer, Boles & McMurrian, 1996; Leslei, King & Clair, 2019; Zhao, Cooklin, Richardson, Strazdins, Butterworth & Leach, 2020).

There is evidence that, for those who have children, work matters can invade family life, sometimes in a positive way, considering the financial gains involved, and others in a negative way, since the time dedicated to work limits the attention given to family (Baxter & Alexander, 2008). Struggles in work and family management occur almost daily and have consequences for both professional activities and personal life (Pluut, Lies, Curseu & Liu, 2018).

The main sources of work-family conflict are: time, pressure and behavior. The more important a role is for an individual, the more time he will dedicate to it, and the greater the amount of pressure and specific behaviors required to play one of these roles, which will result in less time and energy for the other. Obligation to perform a certain function interferes with performing the other, and the level of performance in one function can sacrifice the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Conflict is more common among couples with children than without children and is more frequent when the children are under 18 (Baxter & Alexander, 2008; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004). Some factors related to work and family differ between men and women (Beutell & O'Hare, 2018), which makes gender a central factor, since mothers usually report higher levels of conflict than fathers (Minnotte, 2012; Roman, 2017; Leslei, King & Clair, 2019). In Brazil, studies show that 92.2% of women perform some domestic work while for men this percentage is 78.2% (IBGE, 2019). This inequality of time and energy makes it more difficult for women to dedicate to professional matters (Melo & Thomé, 2018).

In the family model formed by a man and a woman, the husband's support and dedication to housework is essential for the woman to advance her career and manage to harmonize

the family and work spheres (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Huffman, Casper & Payne, 2014; Lee, Zvonkovic & Crawford, 2014). In addition, it is well-known that other family members can help parents in caring for their children (Dessen & Braz, 2000). Outsourcing the care for children to babysitters and daycare centers can also help mothers harmonize motherhood and work (Lemos & Cavazotte, 2018).

Women's entry into the market furthered work-family conflict (Santujá & Barham, 2005), which leads many mothers to restrict their participation in the workforce so as to meet family needs (Beutell & O'Hare, 2018; Peters & Blomme, 2019) or even interrupt their careers (Elliot, 2002; Warner, 2013).

The increase in the prevalence of single-parent families has often been mentioned as an important demographic change. In Brazil, in recent decades, women are increasingly becoming the head of their households (IPEA, 2017). However, little research has explored the experiences of single-parent families in balancing work and family. Research with single mothers shows that their conflict levels tend to be higher than those of mothers living with partners (Roman, 2017; Minnotte, 2012).

The number of working hours and their inflexibility have been associated with work-family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Beutell & O'Hare, 2018); consequently, flexible working hours become an ally in harmonizing these spheres. And telework is one of the means adopted to allow this flexibility. However, these arrangements do not always offer more balance, which causes work demands to interfere with the time available for personal life (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Azara, Khana & Eerdeeb, 2018; Beutell & O'Hare, 2018).

Physical exhaustion is constantly present in work-family conflict precisely because of the overload involved (Pluut, et al., 2018). In addition, problems such as stress, depression, hypertension, anxiety, mood disorders and substance abuse (e.g., increased alcohol consumption) may arise (Eby et al., 2005; Oliveira, Cavazotte & Paciello, 2013).

TELEWORK: A TREND ON THE RISE?

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), remote work or telework can be defined as activities carried out in places other than central offices, with the integration between workers being mediated by digital technologies such as smartphones, laptops and desktop computers, among others. It is worth noting that the terms telework, virtual work, telecommuting and remote work are interchangeably used to refer to work that is done outside traditional work environments (ILO, 2017; Zerbini & Zerbini, 2020).

In recent years, telework has grown among Brazilians: from 2016 to 2017, the number of teleworkers increased by 16.2%, and from 2017 to 2018, by 21.1% (Agência Brasil, 2020b).

The literature on the subject highlights that telework has advantages as it allows for greater harmony between working hours and the time dedicated to domestic and family responsibilities, thus bringing about increased productivity and a better balance between these spheres. In addition, its adoption reduces commuting costs. As a downside, work may tend to become overly individualized, which can cause social, professional and political isolation. Longer working hours are also reported as a negative consequence of telework (Ferreira Jr., 2000; ILO, 2017; Haubrich & Froehlich, 2020).

Not all workers adapt to telework as it requires self-discipline, organization, autonomy and a pleasure in working alone (Haubrich & Froehlich, 2020). Workers with young children face more difficulties working from home, which indicates that this option is not convenient for many (Habib & Conrford, 1996).

The telework implemented in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is a circumstantial arrangement as it was the work modality adopted by many companies to overcome the crisis (Agência Brasil, 2020b). People who are working from home often have had their working hours changed, and the likelihood of interruptions and distractions is increased by the presence of the family, who is also at home due to the pandemic (Spurk & Straub, 2020).

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

Interviewees	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Children's ages (years)	Education	Organization	Position
Carolina	42	Married	0	-	Secondary education	Private-sector company	Accounting executive
Cassia	35	Widower	1	9	Secondary education	Private-sector company	Manager
Diana	55	Married	0	-	Marketing	Self-employed	Vice-president (partner)
Fátima	42	Married	2	10 e 1	Law	Self-employed	Partner in a law firm
Fernanda	45	Single	4	18, 11, 3 e 3	Mathematics	State-owned	Manager
Larissa	42	Married	2	11 e 4	Pedagogy	Military	Division assistant
Lourdes	50	Single	1	10	Information Technology	Private-sector company	IT analyst
Marcela	42	Divorced	2	12 e 1	Engineering	State-owned	Senior civil engineer
Maria	33	Married	0	0	Tourism	State-owned	Planning advisor
Mariana	33	Married	0	-	Pedagogy	State-owned	Coordinator
Nayara	33	Married	1	2	Accounting	Private-sector company	Senior analyst
Renata	34	Married	0	-	Pedagogy	Private-sector company	Supervisor
Valesca	38	Married	2	5 e 2	Management	Private-sector company	Manager
Vilma	48	Married	2	16 e 14	Marketing	State-owned	Director

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the goal of this study, we chose a qualitative approach and interviewed 14 women aged 33-55 years old via a digital communication platform, in June 2020. Most of the interviewees are from Rio de Janeiro, all used to work in a traditional work environment and adapted to telework due to the pandemic. As regards their profile, we sought workers with consolidated careers working in different industries. We first interviewed women from our circle of acquaintances, then complemented the sample using the “snowball” technique. Among the interviewees there are married, single, widowed and divorced women with and without children. The interviews were based on a semi-structured script with questions addressing the work routine before and after the pandemic, as well as the strategies used to harmonize work and personal/family life in the new context.

The interviews were recorded and lasted from 20 to 40 minutes. The accounts obtained were analyzed using content analysis (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002) in order to identify the elements that would allow answering the main question in this study: what effects did telework adoption have on female workers’ work-family conflict in the context of the COVID-19 quarantine? Table 1 shows the interviewees’ profiles and fictitious names.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study sought to understand the impacts that telework adoption had on the work-family conflict of female workers during the COVID-19 quarantine period.

The first point to be highlighted from the accounts concerns the fact that all interviewees reported an increase in the workload during the studied period. This is hardly surprising, given the exceptional condition in which the transition to telework took place, which combined the demands of corporate work with housekeeping and care for children (for those who are mothers). In addition, mandatory social confinement kept the whole family home at the same time. The work overload was due, in part, to the interviewees’ need to dedicate themselves to domestic chores, since the cleaner services they used to hire were no longer available; they also had to dedicate more time to their children, who were now attending school remotely. In addition to these aspects, the suddenness in which the transition to remote work took place (Savic, 2020; Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai & Bendz, 2020), without planning or prior preparation, contrary to what

is recommended by the literature on the topic (Haubrich and Froehlich, 2020), though understandable in the context studied, also increased interviewees’ trouble. Some found themselves lacking adequate material, such as computers and office furniture; others had difficulty organizing their work, which added to their overload.

However, the increased workload experienced by the interviewees did not intensify the work-family conflict for all of them, as one might suppose based on the findings of the literature on the subject (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Beutell & O’Hare, 2018). It is true that several interviewees confirmed this situation: overburdened with housekeeping, care for children and work demands, they reported not being able to cope with the multiple demands, and they feel very distressed about the current state of things. They claim they are unable to do anything satisfactorily: they are failing to take care of the home and children as they would like, and failing to meet work demands as they should. Feeling stressed, some resort to daily consumption of alcohol to unwind. Thus, their accounts corroborate the assumptions that inspired this study and indicate an aggravation of the conflict in the quarantine context.

However, several other interviewees, while also feeling overwhelmed, do not seem to have experienced the change to telework as an aggravator of work-family conflict (Ferreira Jr., 2000; ILO, 2017; Haubrich & Froehlich, 2020). Contrary to what the literature on the subject would lead us to assume, they say they are enjoying the experience as they are now closer to their children and husbands, in addition to having more time for physical and leisure activities. This led us to seek further insights into the nuances behind these disparate experiences: aggravation of work-family conflict for some of the interviewees, and mitigation of the conflict for others, judging by their accounts. To deepen this discussion, two topics were created: the first discusses the reasons that led some interviewees to increase their conflict experiences; the second deals with the conditions that eased the conflict.

Telework in the quarantine and aggravation of work-family conflict

As pointed out earlier, some of the interviewees, overwhelmed by the multiple work demands arising from the quarantine context – corporate and domestic work and/or care for children –, were dissatisfied with their current situation. This group is formed by Marcela, Fernanda, Larissa, Maria, Mariana and Fátima. Marcela, 42, divorced with two daughters, a 12-year-

old and a 1-year-old, reports difficulties harmonizing the two spheres with an emblematic statement:

“Impossible, they know it’s impossible! My boss, thank God, is a nice guy. It’s not like I’m some grudging, lazy employee, I’ve never been that, but I’m in a situation where it’s impossible (...) I’ll attend meetings like I’m talking to you now; I only turn the audio on when I’m going to speak, and even then, sometimes she (the one-year-old) is screaming here.”

Fernanda, also single with four children aged 18, 11 and 3-year-old twins, explains her situation:

“I feel bad about it because I’m not taking part in anything; at the same time, my team understands, but I don’t know for how long. I don’t feel good (...) soon after my working tool arrived, it was gone because three people want to use it in this house, but I can’t concentrate; they (the twins) are always clinging on my back.”

These two statements show the difficulty meeting the work demands experienced by these two interviewees who are mothers of young children, a circumstance that is highlighted in the literature as an aggravator of the conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004). Furthermore, the fact that they do not live with their children’s father increases their difficulties, which has been pointed out by studies that highlight that women with this family arrangement face even greater challenges to harmonize the domestic/family and professional spheres (Minnotte, 2012; Roman, 2017). These interviewees are not being able to dedicate themselves to work as they need to, so they have to rely on the goodwill of managers and teams, which is probably only possible due to the exceptional pandemic context. And they are failing to give proper attention to their children. In the reported cases, the interviewees are frustrated not only about a poor performance at work, but also about the lack of attention to their children:

“Sometimes I don’t put in my best at home, I keep pushing myself, but some days I don’t read for them, some days I don’t play, because I’m fed up and not feeling patient, and being with them doesn’t mean I have the time to dedicate myself nicely”. (Fernanda, single with four children aged 18, 11 and 3-year-old twins)

But women with this family arrangement are not the only ones who report an increased imbalance between the family and work spheres in this context. Larissa and Fátima, married with children, are also distressed about the new situation:

“I’m getting a lot more tired; besides these things (housework) you have to keep an eye on the (son’s) duties all the time ... I just followed, so it was easier; now no, you have to watch the video, there is a back and forth, you have to do the job, review the video.” (Larissa, single with children aged 11 and 4-year-old daughter)

“There were times, I’m working and suddenly I go, ‘Oh, my God! Oh boy! He’s gotta have dinner.’ Then I take him off the cradle, the child is soaked in pee because I was so focused on the job [...] I’ve taken too long. I feel like crying when that happens”. (Fátima, two sons, a 10-year old and a 1-year-old)

As noted in the accounts, while the presence of young children in the home can increase the conflict experienced by these women, Maria and Mariana, who are married but without children and in management positions, were not satisfied about telework either:

“The work overload that the pandemic caused in my sector, I can’t seem to find time for anything else, I can’t seem to balance this home function, the lack of structure to work from home, to manage people that work with you, that’s even worse”. (Maria)

“...now I’m coordinating this team [...] I had to provide guidelines of something I wasn’t trained for, and I didn’t even know how I myself was to deal with it.” (Mariana)

The difficulty harmonizing the work and domestic/family spheres, in the case of the interviewees who are mothers but live alone with young children, can be explained to a large extent by the fact that there is no other adult at home to share the care for children (Minnotte, 2012; Roman, 2017). It is worth noting that the quarantine context increased this difficulty, since classes were suspended, daycare centers closed and cleaners and nannies dismissed. Without much help, these female workers had to take

care of the home and children by themselves, which impacted their work performance heavily.

In an effort to harmonize these different spheres, the interviewees had to devise some strategies: Marcela and Fernanda rely on the help of their older children to cope with their multiple tasks:

So I ask her (12-year-old daughter) to watch (1-year-old daughter) so I can do the dishes, (...) dust the house, hang the clothes to dry.” (Marcela)

However, it is worth noting that the presence of a partner in the home does not guarantee a more balanced division of domestic tasks:

“...he needs to be told and managed, it's really annoying, I can see he's willing, but it's like, 'What am I gonna do for dinner? When are we gonna sweep up?' I'm the one who's organizing all this. I can't seem to balance it, I think my home is just tasks (...) I'm dying to work at the office again because the pandemic is turning out just awful to me” (Maria, married without children)

The husband's lack of participation in these chores is dramatically described by Fátima:

“Some days I'd do the cleaning in tears, by myself, while he's lying in bed watching TV [...] he wouldn't help me basically because he wanted me to get the cleaner to come.” (Fátima, married, two children)

The increased stress experienced in the quarantine led to increased alcohol consumption, to which some of these women resorted to withstand pressure (Eby et al., 2005; Oliveira, Cavazotte & Paciello, 2013):

“I've always enjoyed drinking on weekends, and in the pandemic, any day is fine; to get out of stress, to have some time to relax, I was drinking beer every day, alcohol consumption increased.” (Fernanda, single, four children)

“And you drink a lot, too, [...] you end up drinking to relax.” (Fátima, married, two children)

These women's testimonies corroborate to a large extent the literature that points out that work-family conflict is greater for women who have young children (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004). This conflict is due to the accumulation of tasks related to both work and care for the home and children that occurred during the quarantine. However, it is worth mentioning that two married women, much like the single ones, feel overwhelmed by care tasks: their husbands do not participate much in them, to the extreme case of Fatima, who gets no collaboration whatsoever from her husband. Their cases confirm the findings of studies that highlight that women have historically borne the greatest share of responsibility as regards housekeeping and care for children (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Lee, Zvonkovic & Crawford, 2014; Melo & Thomé, 2018). In the case of the interviewees who are married, this inequality is evident, for though their partners are home, the burden of household chores fell on these women's shoulders.

Telework in the quarantine and mitigation of work-family conflict

As said earlier, despite being overloaded, some of the interviewees say they have found in the new situation conditions to better balance the relationship between work and family life. Contrary to what is usually pointed out in the literature on the subject (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Beutell & O'Hare, 2018), the increase in the corporate and domestic workload did not reinforce the experience of imbalance, judging by their accounts. This reinforced our interest in understanding the conditions that allowed such an experience. These aspects are explored in this section.

Of the interviewees who reported an increased balance between the spheres of work and personal/family life, three have no children: Renata, Carolina and Diana. The absence of young children in the home and the participation of husbands in domestic chores explain, to a large extent, why the conflict has not worsened for these women. Their accounts indicate that male participation in care for the home and children increased during the pandemic. As highlighted in the literature, the participation of partners is key for harmonizing the work and domestic spheres for female workers (Huffman, Casper & Payne, 2014; Lee, Zvonkovic & Crawford, 2014). Renata, married without children, describes the new routine:

“My job is more supervised, with meetings, I end up being busier during the day, and my husband has much more flexible hours because he works with his partner and on demand. So while I'm in

a meeting in the morning, he's fixing breakfast, and if there's anything to cook in advance for lunch, he'll do it. ”

In the case of Diana, married without children, her husband has been participating in household chores since before the pandemic, which allowed for better conditions in the balance between family and professional life:

“We'll share domestic chores rather well, (her husband) is quite willing to share those, (...) I didn't have much trouble compared to the groups of women I've heard (...) I meditate, these things can help, they can make you a little more balanced.”

Carolina, also married without children, had an experience similar to that of Renata and Diana, and she reports the positive balance for this new arrangement:

“I'm able to do more than I used to, I take my nap, watch a soap, do my treadmill, do my Pilates with my mother and sister via video call, [...] it's being incredible for me.”

However, a fact stood out: the interviewees without children and married to partners who share domestic chores were not the only ones who experienced an increased balance between the family and work spheres. Interviewees with children, single and married, also reported that teleworking during the quarantine has helped them achieve a greater balance. This statement of Nayara, married with a 2-year-old daughter, summarizes the new scenario:

“My workload is bigger now, but I'm also satisfied because I have more time with my daughter and my husband, which I didn't have because it was basically just weekends, because I'd be out the whole day. We end up spending more time together and that's really good.”

Wilma, married with two children, aged 16 and 14, also sees positive aspects to the new situation:

“I'm working much more... both (with) domestic chores, I'm working more, and job tasks, but I still think it's better this way because I get to define my working hours, make plans for myself.”

Valesca, married with two children, has had significant collaboration from her husband in caring for their children during the pandemic, and she also reported adaptation to telework:

“My routine was really absent from my personal life (...) but during the pandemic, my youngest had a fever, and I was able to be with him, hold him, cuddle him, which was impossible before.”

Thus, the flexible working hours allowed by telework seem to be conducive to work-family harmonization, at least for some of the interviewees (Ferreira Jr., 2000; ILO, 2017; Beutell & O'Hare, 2018; Haubrich & Froehlich, 2020).

Although they live alone with their children and cannot rely on the help of partners, which makes them even more overwhelmed, Cassia and Lourdes value the increased physical nearness to their daughters that is allowed by telework in the quarantine. Even though they are working more:

“I think I'm working more (...) because now things are taking a little longer, you don't have everyone together, so information is taking longer to pass from one person to another”.

Cassia values mainly the fact that she is closer to her only 9-year-old daughter:

“I have more time with her, I can watch a movie with her, which I could rarely do before; I can have lunch with her, which used to be just on weekends.”

Lourdes, the mother of a 10-year-old girl, feels equally overwhelmed, but the fact that she is closer to her daughter and can participate more in her routine leads her to celebrate:

“My job chose to reduce the working hours. We're still working under a 25% reduction, so that means I'm working 6 hours, but in practice it's not like that... for the last two weeks I'm working 11 to 12 hours. [...] Now it's going to be 100% telework, and I just love it, I love it!” (Lourdes, single, one daughter)

But it is worth noting that, except for Diana, who had her work demands reduced in the quarantine period in virtue of the industry she is in, all the others recognized that the workload has

increased. Thus, Lourdes' statement that she 'loves' telework is significant:

"I was extremely tired, I won't deny it, because I'm teleworking and I had to deal with the new thing which was her (her daughter's) online classes, and I had [...] our meals to think about, I had to order food." (Lourdes, single, one daughter).

Despite having the home as a place of overlapping roles (Ferreira Jr., 2000; ILO, 2017; Haubrich & Froehlich, 2020), these women seem to have better endured the telework overload during the quarantine because they were also able to have moments with their families that were possible thanks to the physical nearness contingent to the studied context.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Developed with the purpose of understanding the impacts that telework adoption during the COVID-19 quarantine had on the work-family conflict for female workers, the present research brought some findings to the debate about the present conflicts, which are explored below.

All respondents reported an increase in their workloads. However, this increase cannot be attributed only to the increased corporate workload arising from telework adoption that is described in the literature (Ferreira Jr., 2000; ILO, 2017; Haubrich & Froehlich, 2020). Although this fact appears in many accounts, the quarantine context brought more overload to the interviewees, since in addition to dedicating themselves to remote work, they also had to take care of their home and children. The dismissal of maids and cleaners forced them to perform chores they did not always use to perform, and the closing of schools and daycare centers demanded more attention to their children, who were now staying home. In this exceptional context, it stood out that many reported their partners' participation in household chores. Only Renata, Diana, Vilma and Mariana said they had always shared housework with their husbands; the others said that their partners started to "help more" during this period, a phrase used by many to refer to this participation, which reinforces the notion that such activities are fundamentally the woman's responsibility. However, it is worth questioning whether this "help" will be present in the post-pandemic scenario or if it will prove only a participation associated with the exceptional context.

The weight of machismo did not appear only in the use of the word "help". Maria and especially Fátima did not have much "help" from their husbands, which made their telework experience more painful. The accumulation of activities weighed heavily on the interviewees who were single with young children, which is perfectly understandable, since the dismissal of their cleaners left them facing the triple task of care for children, housekeeping and work demands. In Marcela's words, such a combination is "impossible". As pointed out earlier, for many interviewees, the accumulation of activities that characterized the quarantine period furthered the work-family conflict, a finding that is in line with much of the literature on the subject, which describes this accumulation as an aggravator of the conflict (Minnotte, 2012; Pluuit, et al., 2018; Roman, 2017).

However, it is worth highlighting that a significant group of interviewees, who also felt their workload increased, mentioned gains in this situation. Carolina, for example, said it is being "incredible", and Lourdes, says she "loves" it. For most married women without children, the experience allowed for a better balance between the different tasks performed, and the reported work overload refers mainly to corporate work. The absence of children largely explains this reality (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2004; Baxter & Alexander, 2008). In addition, their husbands' increased participation in domestic chores in the quarantine context has alleviated the overload resulting from these tasks, which allowed these women to have more time for themselves and to be with their partners.

But the finding that surprised us concerns the fact that some interviewees with children, whether married or not, reported simultaneously an increased workload and greater satisfaction from being able to be with their families. Contrary to the literature that points out that lack of time is one of the main sources of work-family conflict (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Azara, Khana & Eerdeeb, 2018; Beutell & O'Hare, 2018), for these women, teleworking during the quarantine, rather than aggravate the conflict, has mitigated it. We argue that this finding provides a relevant contribution to the debate. Apparently, these female workers have endured and somewhat belittled their work overload, given the opportunity provided by telework to be closer to their families. Possibly accustomed to managing a usual work overload, these women consider that the nearness to the family allowed by the new routine outweighs its resulting increase in workload.

Thus, in line with the literature that highlights the flexibility brought by telework (Spurk, Daniel; Straub, Caroline, 2020), we found that this arrangement allowed them more time

with their families, especially during meals and between work breaks. The combination of flexibility and physical nearness allowed Valesca to take care of her son when he had a fever and Lourdes to watch her daughter's presentation, experiences that would not have been possible had they been in conventional work. It stands out that the blurred boundaries between the spaces of work and non-work, which appear in the literature as one of the causes of aggravation of the conflict (Peters & Blomme, 2019), have, in these cases, contributed to alleviate it.

To broaden the debate on the subject, it is worth noting that not only time, pressure and behavior aggravate the conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), but also physical distance seems to impact it. Understanding the impact of this fourth factor – i.e., the physical distance from the family that the hours dedicated to regular, office-based work requires – would help explain the fact that, despite the work overload, several interviewees have experienced this circumstance as a mitigator of work-family conflict. This finding reinforces the notion that female workers who are mothers want to exercise both professional and maternal activities, even at the expense of work overload, and that the combination of flexibility and physical nearness to the family that quarantine telework allowed was valued by the interviewees who are in more balanced family contexts.

However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that several interviewees who are mothers reported exhaustion and difficulty working. This finding raises a relevant issue for the near future discussion on the expanded implementation of telework in the post-pandemic context: although this work model can bring gains for some employees and employers, its homogeneous adoption for the workforce as a whole, disregarding the particular features of the different domestic/family arrangements, can further aggravate the inequalities between workers.

To conclude, the finding that telework seems to meet the desires for harmonization of these two spheres, at least for some of the interviewees, indicates that this modality should be considered by the organizations that wish to be more inclusive, even if such a discussion needs to be weighed according to the different family arrangements in their workforce.

It is worth highlighting, as a limitation of the present study, the fact that, due to the researched profile and the way of accessing the participants, there is considerable homogeneity in the group of interviewees, since they are all white heterosexual, middle-class women. In this sense, the research findings reflect the specific features of this subgroup of women. The specificity of the context studied – the COVID-19 quarantine – also implies limitations, since this has both aggravated work overload and increased male participation in domestic chores. Thus, we

suggest that future studies look further into the impacts of telework adoption on the work-family conflict for women with different family arrangements, but in a non-atypical context, such as the one studied.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ana Heloísa da Costa Lemos and Alane de Oliveira Barbosa worked on the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach. The theoretical review was conducted by Alane de Oliveira Barbosa. Data collection was coordinated by Priscila Pinheiro Monzato. Data analysis was conducted by Ana Heloísa da Costa Lemos, Alane de Oliveira Barbosa and Priscila Pinheiro Monzato. All authors worked together in the writing and final revision of the manuscript.