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“Exhausted and anxious”: the worsening of women is psychological suffering in post-pandemic Brazil

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic experienced in 2020 and 2021, surprised and shook contemporary society. On the one hand, by intensifying profound social inequalities, it complicated old problems and generated new adversities both for those who were already vulnerable and for those who were previously secure. On the other hand, it worsened a mental health crisis already experienced pre-pandemic by exposing everyone to mass death reported every moment, social isolation, fear of death, mourning without goodbye, and anguish in the face of the unknown. Psychic suffering is then heightened, and anxiety, for example, which is so natural to people in dangerous situations, becomes pathological. However, despite the relief at overcoming the health crisis, the consequences of the pandemic continue to echo. In addition, it is precisely post-pandemic Brazil that this study focuses on, focusing on the mental health of the female population. Its objective is to analyze the mental health of women in post-pandemic Brazil. To do this, it reflects on the mental health crisis already underway before the pandemic and then maps the experiences during the pandemic period that influenced its worsening. It ends by analyzing women's exposure to anxiety disorder in the post-pandemic period. The preparation of this work included a broad literature review focusing on articles and scientific journals on women's mental health and post-pandemic anxiety disorder in Brazil, available in the databases of SciELO Brazil, Revista de Políticas Públicas (RPP), the Electronic Magazine Acervo Saúde (REAS) and the Electronic Journals Portal in Psychology (PepsiCo). It also included data from the report “Exhausted: impoverishment, care overload and women's psychological suffering”, released in August 2023 because of research carried out by Think Olga. It was observed that women have a very high risk of becoming ill when it comes to psychological distress. So much so that they suffer most from depressive and anxiety disorders. This fact becomes even worse in the post-pandemic scenario, when symptoms such as irritability, stress, low self-esteem, fatigue, insomnia and sadness become common in the daily lives of the female population. Such exhaustion has a visceral relationship with the gender inequality that structures Brazilian society. It is because of this, and the violent sociability it produces, that Brazilian women, in addition to being underrepresented in politics, and suffering more harassment, are overburdened with

care work, in addition to being more vulnerable to unemployment and less remuneration. It is concluded, therefore, that caring for women's mental health must be a priority commitment, especially in the post-pandemic period, in which the feeling of "the worst is over, now it's time to get on with life normally" makes serious and urgent problems such as those experienced by minorities groups. In addition, definitely, its authors agree, "there is no possible future if women's suffering and illness are not taken care of immediately".for yourself. It meets the need to find reason and fulfillment in life, as well as the need for hope and will to live well and happily.

Keywords: Covid-19. Post-pandemic. Mental health. Anxiety. Women.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, which reached its peak in 2020 and 2021, surprised and shook contemporary society. On the one hand, this context highlighted profound social inequalities, complicated old social problems, and generated new adversities both for those who were already vulnerable in the socioeconomic and health spheres, and for those who until then were understood as individuals in a situation of security. On the other hand, the pandemic scenario worsened a mental health crisis already experienced in periods prior to the pandemic, as the population's exposure to mass death reported every moment, social isolation, fear of death, mourning without goodbye, and anguish in the face of the unknown.

Psychic suffering is then heightened, and anxiety, for example, which is so natural to people in dangerous situations, becomes pathological. From this perspective, despite the relief in overcoming the health crisis, the consequences of the pandemic continue to echo today, causing consequences for the well-being of individuals and, consequently, the experience in society.

It is precisely post-pandemic Brazil that this study focuses on, with mental health as its research object, more specifically, the harmful effects that this context caused to the female population. With this, we aim to expand discussions on the topic, considering that this problem gradually becomes more evident in our daily lives.

We agree with Lima, Buss and Paes-Sousa (2020, p. 1) when stating that "the pandemic puts us in front of a mirror, which reveals to us a world crossed by many crises and in need of change". Therefore, we assume that thinking about new ways of living, working and relating, as well as facing the burdens arising from the pandemic period, resulted in a greater recurrence of psychological illnesses in individuals.

In this sense, this research – as well as research in this line – is relevant to the possibility of thinking about new ways of dealing with mental suffering in the post-pandemic context, based on visibility about the reality experienced by Brazilian women, who often is silenced and/or normalized in everyday relationships, as well as the development of forms of care and self-care through assistance and support services at municipal, state and federal levels.

Furthermore, studies on the topic allow professionals and students from different areas working in the fields of care and social protection to build knowledge and reflections on the topic, consolidating greater ownership of forms of prevention

and intervention. In addition, consequently, better monitoring of your patients, users and even customers.

In view of the above, we took as the guiding question of this research "what are the problems that involve the worsening of women's psychological suffering in post-pandemic Brazil?", as we consider that, in addition to the issues that permeate the female gender in society – arising from violence symbolic based on gender inequality, which constitutes an agent that reproduces violence in social relationships, especially those directly involved in the action of care -, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered several other factors that make the psychological well-being of women even more difficult. Brazilian women.

Therefore, seeking paths that contribute to reversing this scenario requires a collective effort, with the aim of repositioning psychological care as a sphere of understanding the social from individual perspectives.

2. Objectives

Understand the issues surrounding the worsening of women's psychological suffering in post-pandemic Brazil.

2.1. Specific objectives

- ✓ Identify in current scientific productions the emerging factors in the post-pandemic context that triggered the psychological suffering of Brazilian women;
- ✓ Analyze the possibilities of repositioning the field of psychology to construct new ways of alleviating and/or remedying the psychological suffering of Brazilian women.

3. Methodology

The present work is the result of a bibliographic study that included a broad literature review, carried out through the following phases: definition of the theme; construction of the research problem; delimitation of the study object; determination of objectives; identification of sources; location of sources and selection of material; reading the material; taking notes; making cards; and writing the work.

The guiding question of the research was the situation of women's mental health in post-pandemic Brazil, considering that there was already a critical scenario of psychological suffering before the covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic. Articles and scientific journals on women's mental

health, and post-pandemic anxiety disorder in Brazil, available in the databases of SciELO Brazil, the Revista de Políticas Públicas (RPP), the Revista Electronic Health Collection (REAS) and the Electronic Journals Portal in Psychology (PepsiCo) formed the object of analysis. It should also be noted that the data contained in the report "Exhausted: impoverishment, overload of care and the psychological suffering of women", released in August 2023, was also considered, the result of research carried out by Think Olga in the same year.

The search for works took place in the months of September and October 2023, using the following descriptors in the Google Scholar search tool: covid-19 pandemic; women's mental health; post-pandemic anxiety; and mental illness in contemporary times. In total, 115 scientific articles were located within the thematic spectrum of interest. Their titles were analyzed by the authors, considering the following inclusion criteria: articles published in Portuguese between 2017 and 2023; having anxiety in the covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic as a central theme; discuss women's mental health; be on the bases of SciELO Brazil, the Revista de Políticas Públicas (RPP), the Revista Eletrônica Acervo Saúde (REAS) and the Portal de Periódicos Eletrônicos em Psicologia (PepsiCo).

The exclusion criteria were: theses, dissertations and monographs; articles whose texts dealt with anxiety applied to specific contexts, or outside the analysis related to the covid-19 pandemic and its consequences; deal with audiences other than female; sources that deal with the covid-19 pandemic, but outside the thematic field of mental health; works without significant content on the proposed topic in their abstracts. After evaluating the titles and abstracts, 30 works were selected, 15 of which were included for discussion after applying the established exclusion criteria.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The challenges of the pandemic context and social changes

The first confirmed case of a Brazilian infected with the coronavirus occurred on February 26, 2020, where the symptoms were characterized by a severe acute respiratory syndrome. Since then, federal authorities have developed a series of measures with the aim of stopping contagion across the country. Considering that "the strategy most used by most countries to combat COVID-19 is social isolation" (Albuquerque *et al.*, 2020, p. 5), Brazil also takes it as the main sanitary measure, with the aim of preventing physical contact and, consequently, the spread of the virus.

Several transformations in the ways of living in society occurred abruptly, requiring an expansion of access to information about the concepts and risks of contamination. Linked to this, the news about the increase in cases, deaths and instability in the economic and cultural sector produced a certain type of 'terror' among the population, triggering a feeling of extermination of a society.

On the other hand, long-term home confinement (in Brazil, quarantine has been in place since March 2020) to prevent the disease from spreading creates an unprecedented situation for humanity, which has given rise to another collective challenge: that of psychological problems. Increased anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorders, alcohol abuse, domestic violence and xenophobic attacks (mainly against Chinese and Italians) were some of the complications observed (Albuquerque *et al.*, 2020, p. 5).

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a profound change in relationships, space and time in the face of infectious diseases (Lima; Buss; Paes-Sousa, 2020), requiring a new look not only at the main virus, but also for several other pathologies that emerged in this context. In the field of psychology, psychological suffering was evident as one of the main effects of the period of isolation and contagion of the virus.

Taking as an example, more recent studies by Meirelles and Teixeira (2021) aimed to list and discuss the main triggers of stress and psychological suffering in the pandemic period at a global level. These aspects were perceived by health professionals, especially psychologists, as stimuli for minor psychological illnesses, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as various psychosomatic symptoms. They claim that

The change in routine imposed by restrictive measures, quarantine practices and greater adherence to the strictest recommendations to prevent the spread of the virus were also identified as stressors that affect the mental health of subjects. (...) In the younger population, changes in teaching activities, with the new remote teaching format, seem to have affected emotional stability and educational perspectives, in which being a student has become a greater stressor during the coronavirus pandemic. Than in normal periods. (MEIRELLES; TEIXEIRA, 2021, p. 164-165)

Despite all efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the social disorder caused by the psychological suffering of the population has become one of the main factors in increasing the spread of the disease (Meirelles; Teixeira, 2021); given the few actions that have sought promote the reduction of negative impacts on mental health during this period.

These data, in general, have as their main consequence the demands for increasing the availability of assistance services for suffering individuals. However, the severity of the condition has had relatively little impact on

studies on the causes of the increase in mental illness today, meaning that the relationship between suffering/psychological illness and living and working conditions is still a topic of little visibility. (VIAPIANA; GOMES; ALBUQUERQUE, 2018, p. 176)

Given this scenario, there is a need to increase research in the area of cause-effect relationships in mental illness. With this, science took a new look, which not only broke with the attempted fragmentation between body and mind but also integrated and transformed studies to other social dimensions, until little explored, such as intra-family and work relationships.

In this sense, studies on the psyche broke with the dualism characteristic of a Cartesian dimension (Lima; Buss; Paes-Sousa, 2020), assuming a transversal and multidisciplinary perspective, which seeks to understand the role that individuals – here understood as social actors – play in their living contexts.

Therefore, it is clear that countless complexities of the social environment enter current mental health studies, revealing contexts of social, racial and gender inequality, which are reaffirmed in the different ways of seeing and conceptualizing the world and, consequently, in the countless possibilities of mental illness in the face of these transformations.

4.2. Mental health x social roles: where were women in the pandemic?

When carrying out the debate around the issues that permeate the psychological suffering of Brazilian women in the post-pandemic context, there is a need to expand understanding around the historical factors that contribute to the determination of social roles linked to the female gender.

With this, we agree with Costa and Mendes (2021) when they state that, contrary to what was preached by different social groups during the period of isolation, the coronavirus did not reach the population in an equal – or 'democratic', widely used term. Used in the period -, but revealed that social inequalities also produced effects at different levels in the population.

Even though it has expanded and affected people of different classes, races, ethnicities, genders and sexualities, but who are equally human, its transmission, illness and objective-subjective and physical-mental consequences express our abrupt and unacceptable differences in the realization of this humanity; that is, the non-correspondence between formal humanity, in the abstract, and concrete humanity. (COSTA; MENDES, 2021, p. 222)

Along these lines, it was possible to perceive that during the pandemic period, Brazilian women were inserted in

a context of worsening symbolic violence related to their role played in society, understood here as a role that is defined based on "power relations that are form between individuals (and/or institutions), who are located in systems/structures of power that become instruments to help ensure that one class dominates another" (Silva; Oliveira, 2017, p. 163).

Examples of the exercise of symbolic violence include gender relations in which men and women agree that women are weaker, less intelligent, less trustworthy, and so on (and for Bourdieu gender relations are the paradigmatic case of the operation of symbolic violence), or class relations in which both the working class and the middle class agree that the middle classes are more intelligent, more capable of running the country, more deserving of higher wages. (SILVA; OLIVERIRA, 2017, p. 162)

The strengthening of a subordinate role of women, anchored in terms such as 'vulnerability', 'care' and 'support', crystallizes in different classes and social groups, determining "profiles of social reproduction, expressed in particular ways of life, to which certain epidemiological profiles are associated" (Viapiana; Gomes; Albuquerque, 2018, p. 178).

In this way, the intensification of symbolic violence triggered a movement of women's seclusion from domestic space and the maintenance of family well-being, which, associated with other social aspects such as the sexualization of the female image and the constant reduction of political space, restricted and restricted the possibility of fighting for political and economic autonomy in pandemic and post-pandemic society, generating an increase in women's psychological suffering with each attempt at emancipation.

In view of the above, the importance of psychological support for women in the post-pandemic context is highlighted, paying attention to signs of psychological distress associated with pathologies, such as anxiety, depression, psychosomatic illnesses, panic disorder and social phobia, with a view to reintegrating them into society not only in a symbolic way, but rather highlighting the importance of their participation in this context.

4.3. The causes and effects of the psychological suffering of Brazilian women in the post-pandemic

From the data collection carried out in the databases of the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO – Brazil), the Revista de Políticas Públicas (RPP), the Revista Eletrônica Acervo Saúde (REAS) and the Portal de Periódicos Eletrônicos em Psicologia (PepsiCo), and from the report developed by the NGO *Think Olga*, it was possible to identify the effects of the pandemic context on mental health in Brazilian women.

Thus, the scientific productions analyzed reaffirm that, during the pandemic, "67% of new cases of depressive disorders and 68% of new cases of anxiety disorders were

registered in women, with a higher prevalence among the 20 to 40 year old age groups. Depression and from 15 to 40 years old for anxiety” (Think Olga, 2023, p.11). At a global level, the results point to significant values of 374.2 million cases for anxiety disorder and 246.2 million cases registered for depressive disorder, including the reference cases in 2020 and additional cases caused by the pandemic context (Think Olga, 2023).

It can be identified that the increase in domestic responsibility proved to be a stressful factor for women, considering that, when making a comparison with the level of male work, they had greater responsibility in their routines (Meirelles; Teixeira, 2021, p. 165).

Regarding the population most affected by psychological distress, Souza, Souza and Praciano (2020) state that ages between 18 and 29 years, regions with higher mortality rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, genetic predisposition, use of medication, unemployment or removal from work, as well as the reduction or pause in a physical activity routine during the period of isolation were shown to be risk factors for compromising female mental health.

With this, we can see that, in addition to gender issues, the socioeconomic factors that permeate the daily lives of Brazilian women interfered in a crucial way in the development or worsening of psychological suffering in this context.

In this context, emerging evidence shows that the pandemic had traumatic impacts on mental health, causing an increase in cases of anxiety, substantially caused by loneliness, uncertainty and lack of human contact. Although social isolation and loneliness are understood as distinct conditions, the two are correlated with premature mortality, depression, cardiovascular disease and cognitive decline (DA CUNHA *et al.*, 2021, p. 9023).

Furthermore, during the period of social isolation, “indices of domestic and sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy increased as a result of men's longer stay at home, which contributed to the significant prevalence of psychological clinical conditions in women during this period” (Souza; Souza; Praciano, 2020, p. 663).

In this way, it can be stated that women have a very high risk of becoming ill in relation to psychological distress, presented by the high rates of diagnoses of depressive and anxiety disorders. In the post-pandemic scenario, these pathologies reveal themselves through symptoms such as irritability, stress, low self-esteem, fatigue, insomnia and sadness, becoming common in the daily lives of the female population.

The data presented here also reaffirm the visceral relationship between gender inequality, the symbolic violence that structures society and the increase in psychological suffering among the female population, revealing the need for

a reversal of the gender hierarchy consolidated in the Brazilian context.

4.4. Collective repositioning as a possibility to reduce the psychological suffering of Brazilian women

The post-pandemic scenario presents numerous challenges to be overcome, especially with regard to the fight for a transformation of models of psychosocial care and promotion of the population's mental health. In this sense, Araújo and Joazeiro (2022) state that the critical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the vital need for the population to have access to a well-structured social health policy, recognizing the particularities that mark our socio-historical formation and how they present themselves in the reality of current Brazilian society.

Thus, there is a need to expand the “theoretical-political debate in the field of Mental Health, so that we can work together towards strengthening a society project that is capable of enhancing science and ethics, in addition to resisting the traps of simplification” (Araújo; Joazeiro, 2022, p. 438), aiming to rescue the well-being of the population, especially Brazilian women who were victims of all the problems that involved the period of social isolation.

As more information is obtained about the factors associated with women's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, multidisciplinary strategies can be consolidated as guides for better decisions about diagnoses, therapeutic approaches and prevention of new cases. One must also be attentive to the return of public mental health policies, considering the “new normal” in the care of these women, in order not to prolong the diagnosis and start of treatment (SOUZA; SOUZA; PRACIANO, 2020, p. 667).

From this perspective, the importance of psychotherapy in the social sphere is evident, as it is “(...) necessary for individuals who developed the disorder or worsened their condition due to the pandemic to recover their psychic and consequently social dignity” (Siqueira; Silva, 2023, p. 7). In this way, efforts are focused on rescuing the political and economic autonomy of these women in an energetic way, understanding all the aspects that led them to a situation of psychological suffering.

Furthermore, despite the important role of the professional psychologist, it is also necessary to understand that “(...) individual actions, civil society, the private sector and, above all, the public sector need to go beyond looking at the disease and go beyond to think about care, burden and the feminization of poverty in an intersectional and connected way” (Think Olga, 2023, p. 43), with the perspective of consolidating a network that strengthens gender and reduces inequalities.

5. Conclusion

This research, which had as its main objective to understand the problems involving the psychological suffering of Brazilian women in the post-pandemic period, was based on the understanding that mental illness is crossed by countless economic and social complexities, as well as existing power relations. In certain contexts.

Thus, when analyzing the factors that contributed to the development of pathologies such as depression, anxiety, social phobia and panic disorders in Brazilian women in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods, it can be identified that aspects such as age, social class and change of routine pointed out as crucial influences for these mental health conditions.

Still, as a main aspect, gender inequalities, resulting from a process of worsening symbolic violence that is consolidating in Brazilian territory, contributed significantly to the illness of the female population, given the displacement of women's social role towards care, highlighting a position of vulnerability.

Therefore, it is understood that care for women's mental health must be a priority commitment, requiring efforts from the public and private sector, as well as collective action from civil society, rescuing the perspective of cooperation to rescue female autonomy in the face of social participation. We highlight that the discourses that are based on the idea that 'the worst is over, now it's time to get on with life normally' mask serious and urgent problems such as those experienced by minority groups, such as the one discussed in this research.

Finally, the need to further expand debates in the area is highlighted, with a view to achieving a restructuring of policies aimed at mental health and psychological care in Brazil, considering the contexts in which these women – as well as many other individuals – meet.

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