

Women's feelings about work breaks during maternity leave

Sentimientos de las mujeres sobre las pausas laborales durante la baja por maternidad

O sentimento da mulher na licença-maternidade em relação ao intervalo profissional

Maria Leonice Barbosa de Araújo Martos¹

ORCID: 0009-0008-1955-4843

Anelvira de Oliveira Florentino^{2*}

ORCID: 0000-0001-8628-0565

Cristiano Rodrigues da Mota³

ORCID: 0000-0003-3154-7124

Adriana Furtado¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-7301-2892

Heloísa Lopes de Souza Inácio⁴

ORCID: 0000-0002-3611-2704

Michelle Ester Gomes Cabral¹

ORCID: 0009-0009-8720-9125

Jossilaine Evangelista Lopes Rossi⁵

ORCID: 0000-0001-9282-2009

Elienai de Farias Gama Siqueira¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-6826-9263

Denise Cristina Matheiski Alkmim¹

ORCID: 0009-0009-9609-4868

Jéssica Alessandra Pereira¹

ORCID: 0000-0002-6307-0343

Marcelo Vicente de Castro¹

ORCID: 0009-0003-1330-8565

¹Faculdade de Ensino Superior Santa Bárbara. São Paulo, Brazil.

²Faculdade Anhanguera. São Paulo, Brazil.

³Universidade de São Paulo. São Paulo, Brazil.

⁴Universidade Estadual Paulista. São Paulo, Brazil.

⁵Universidade Paulista. São Paulo, Brazil.

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*Corresponding author:

anelviraflorentino@yahoo.com.br

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the emotional experiences and feelings experienced by women during maternity leave, with an emphasis on the possibility of not immediately returning to work. An integrative literature review was conducted, searching the BVS, PePsic, and SciELO databases, considering articles in Portuguese published between 2019 and 2024. The analysis of the selected studies reveals that motherhood triggers a complex range of emotions, including guilt, fear, anxiety, and insecurity, frequently exacerbated by tension regarding the return to work. The results highlight the persistence of a significant challenge in reconciling professional and domestic spheres, a duality that falls predominantly on women. It is identified that the decision to interrupt one's career is rarely voluntary, being rather a consequence of the lack of family and corporate support networks, as well as the insufficiency of effective public policies. It is concluded that it is imperative to recognize the subjectivity and psychosocial demands of working mothers, fostering structures that enable them to remain in the labor market without having to give up the exercise of motherhood.

Descriptors: Maternity Leave; Women's Health; Employment; Mental Health; Labor Market.

Resumén

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las experiencias y sentimientos emocionales que experimentan las mujeres durante la baja por maternidad, con énfasis en la posibilidad de no reincorporarse inmediatamente al trabajo. Se realizó una revisión bibliográfica integradora, buscando en las bases de datos BVS, PePsic y SciELO, considerando artículos en portugués publicados entre 2019 y 2024. El análisis de los estudios seleccionados revela que la maternidad desencadena una compleja gama de emociones, como culpa, miedo, ansiedad e inseguridad, frecuentemente exacerbadas por la tensión ante la reincorporación al trabajo. Los resultados destacan la persistencia de un importante desafío para conciliar las esferas profesional y doméstica, una dualidad que recae predominantemente en las mujeres. Se identifica que la decisión de interrumpir la carrera profesional rara vez es voluntaria, siendo más bien consecuencia de la falta de redes de apoyo familiar y empresarial, así como de la insuficiencia de políticas públicas efectivas. Se concluye que es imperativo reconocer la subjetividad y las demandas psicosociales de las madres trabajadoras, fomentando estructuras que les permitan permanecer en el mercado laboral sin tener que renunciar al ejercicio de la maternidad.

Descritores: Licencia por Maternidad; Salud de la Mujer; Empleo; Salud Mental; Mercado Laboral.

Resumo

Este estudo objetivou analisar as experiências emocionais e os sentimentos vivenciados pelas mulheres durante a licença-maternidade, com ênfase na possibilidade de não retorno imediato ao trabalho. Realizou-se uma revisão integrativa da literatura, com buscas nas bases de dados BVS, PePsic e SciELO, considerando artigos em português publicados entre 2019 e 2024. A análise dos estudos selecionados revela que a maternidade desencadeia uma complexa gama de emoções, incluindo culpa, medo, ansiedade e insegurança, frequentemente exacerbadas pela tensão quanto ao retorno laboral. Os resultados evidenciam a persistência de um desafio significativo na conciliação entre as esferas profissional e doméstica, uma dualidade que recai predominantemente sobre as mulheres. Identifica-se que a decisão de interromper a carreira raramente é voluntária, sendo antes uma consequência da falta de redes de apoio familiar e corporativo, bem como da insuficiência de políticas públicas eficazes. Conclui-se que é imperativo reconhecer a subjetividade e as demandas psicosociais das mães trabalhadoras, fomentando estruturas que viabilizem a sua permanência no mercado de trabalho sem a necessidade de abrir mão do exercício da maternidade.

Descritores: Licença-Maternidade; Saúde da Mulher; Emprego; Saúde Mental; Mercado de Trabalho.



Introduction

As highlighted by Zanello and colleagues¹, the public sphere, understood as the "external world," has historically been associated with men, constituting the legitimate space for formal work, a socially valued and remunerated activity. In contrast, the "private world," referring to childcare and domestic tasks, was imposed on women, especially by virtue of their reproductive capacity, consolidating the female figure as the caregiver par excellence. This type of work, however, is not socially recognized as such and remains unpaid. It is essential to emphasize that the function of caring is a universal human skill, capable of being exercised by any individual, regardless of sex, age, or social condition. However, as Badinter² points out, this function has been erroneously naturalized as an "instinctive" attribute of people who have a uterus, socially understood as women.

Rocha-Coutinho³ analyzes that the historical trajectory of women's work is marked by achievements, setbacks, and continuities. Initially, women were inserted into the labor market due to the demand for labor during the First Industrial Revolution. Subsequently, between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, they were removed from it by a hygienist movement and the social construction of an idealized maternal figure, exclusively responsible for the family's health. This process returned women, under new imperatives, to the domestic sphere, ignoring the fact that, for many, "work has an emotional importance that provides a sense of activity and productivity"⁴.

Angerami⁵ contributes to the reflection by stating that, in opening itself to new existential possibilities, consciousness elaborates new idealizations to realize experiences inherent to them. No human achievement occurs without first having been idealized. Since motherhood is a socially and historically idealized construct, a woman's capacity to generate life and the other attributes linked to it can reveal a previously unknown fragility. This occurs because the experience imposes difficult choices, generating complex and ambiguous feelings, demanding that women often relinquish their professional growth plans to meet rigid social ideals about the practice of motherhood⁴.

With the arrival of motherhood, a conflict may emerge between work, often associated with independence, autonomy, and personal fulfillment, and motherhood, which comes to be recognized for its presence and exclusive care, with the perceived responsibility of being the sole provider for the child's needs. In this context, marked by objective and subjective factors, returning to work can represent for a woman the need for an extreme decision between her professional career and the experience of motherhood.

Paid maternity leave represents a significant achievement in the Brazilian labor market. Established by the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) in 1943, initially lasting 84 days and paid for by the employer (a situation that led to discrimination in hiring), its cost was transferred to Social Security starting in 1973, following a recommendation from the International Labour Organization (ILO). Even so, the lack

of job security remained an obstacle. The 1988 Federal Constitution marked a milestone by guaranteeing job security for pregnant women and extending the leave to 120 days. Subsequent advancements, such as Decree No. 6,690/2008 and Law No. 11,770/2008 (Citizen Company Program), allowed for an extension to 180 days in some cases. Law No. 10,421/2002 further expanded this right, extending maternity leave to adoptive parents, same-sex couples, and widowed spouses, promoting greater inclusion and equity in labor relations.

A study conducted by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation indicates that women's expectations of entering the labor market gradually increase throughout their lives, but decline after their first maternity leave. Female unemployment has a profound impact on their economic trajectory, a detriment that extends to the family and contributes to the perpetuation or worsening of long-term social inequalities. However, returning to work after leave does not always materialize, as many women face penalties simply for being mothers. Evidence suggests that women with two or more children, especially those of preschool age, are less likely to remain employed in Brazil. This correlation reinforces that motherhood has a negative impact on women's participation in the labor market, with this effect being directly proportional to the number of children. From a Heideggerian perspective, maternity leave can be interpreted as a unique moment of "being-in-the-world," which demands a reconfiguration of a woman's identity. During this time, she not only takes on the role of mother, but is also confronted with a series of emotional and professional challenges that redefine her self-perception and her place in the workplace. Evangelista⁷ emphasizes that understanding human beings must consider their concrete experiences and the sociocultural context in which they are embedded, allowing for a more in-depth analysis of the emotions and feelings that permeate this phase of life. Existential phenomenology maintains that emotions are not mere reactions, but experiences that reveal fundamental dimensions of existence. For women on maternity leave, feelings such as anxiety, joy, guilt, and insecurity emerge as responses to the new reality that is imposed. These emotional states are central to understanding how she perceives the professional hiatus and her subsequent reintegration into work. Psychological practice, therefore, must embrace such emotions as a constitutive part of the lived experience, helping her to find meaning in this period of transition.

Furthermore, Evangelista⁷ argues that psychological intervention should be adapted to meet the specific needs of women during maternity leave. This requires attention to the social and cultural issues that shape their experiences. Psychological support can be crucial in helping them navigate the emotional and professional challenges of this period, fostering more welcoming and understanding environments, both domestically and professionally. The author emphasizes the importance of capturing the woman's subjective experience in this context, as analyzing the feelings experienced during leave can foster



more effective and sensitive psychological practices that meet the needs of working mothers.

Given this scenario, this article aims to analyze the emotional experiences and feelings lived by women during maternity leave, with special attention to the possibility of not returning to work immediately. It seeks to understand the feelings associated with the need to interrupt one's career when this interruption is not a choice, but an imposition resulting from personal and structural circumstances.

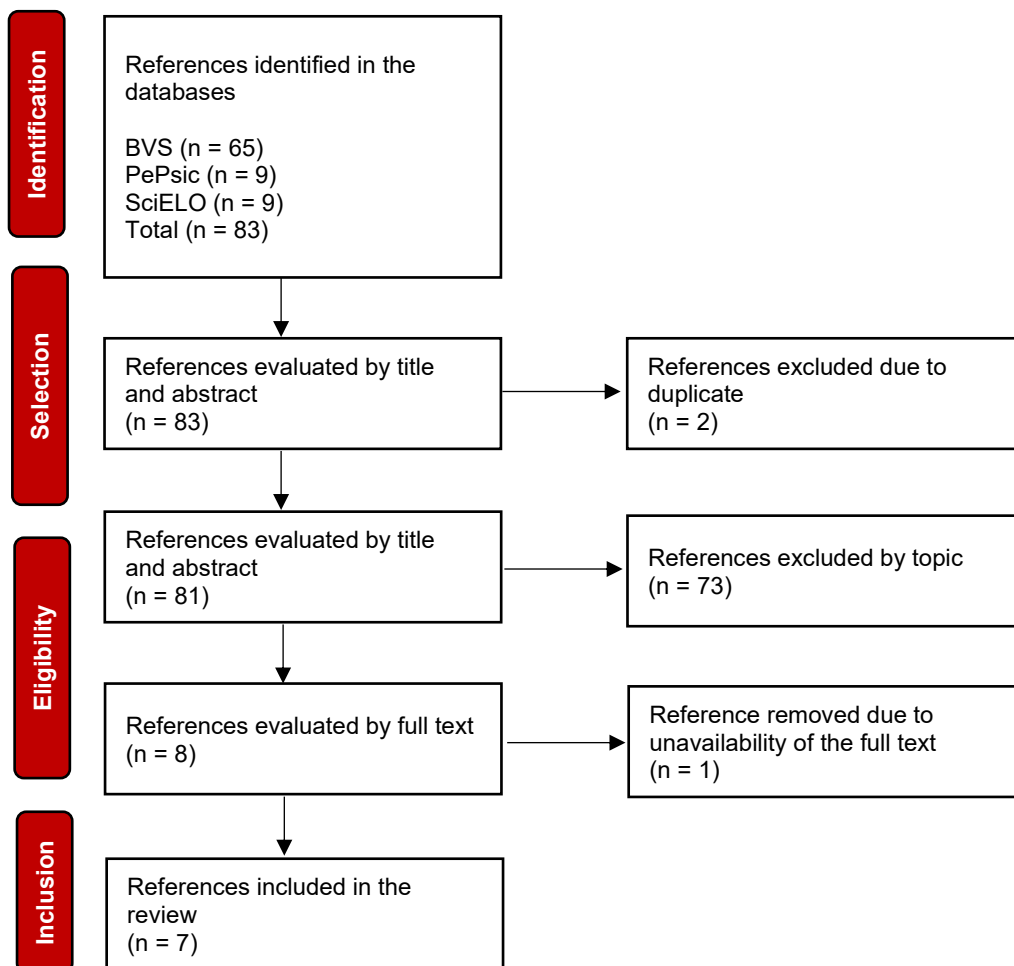
Methodology

This work constitutes an integrative literature review. This research method allows for the identification, critical evaluation, and synthesis of available scientific evidence on a delimited topic. Due to its comprehensive nature, it includes studies from various methodologies, both experimental and non-experimental, and is fundamental for the advancement of knowledge in the field, ensuring the rigor necessary for the reliability of the analyzed results⁸.

Data collection was carried out through systematic searches in the databases Virtual Health Library (BVS), Electronic Journals in Psychology (PePsic), and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO).

For the selection of articles, the following descriptors and Boolean operators were used: "maternity leave"; "motherhood AND work AND feeling"; and "motherhood AND professional career". The inclusion criteria were complete scientific articles, published in Portuguese, within a five-year time frame (2019 to 2024), and that directly addressed the investigated theme. Duplicate, incomplete articles or those whose content did not align with the object of study were excluded. The search and selection process resulted in the following overview: in the BVS database, 65 articles were identified, of which only two met all eligibility criteria. In the PePsic database, of the nine articles located, eight were excluded for not specifically addressing the central issue, and one for being in a language other than Portuguese, thus leaving no articles from this source for analysis. In SciELO, of the nine articles retrieved, five were selected to compose this review.

Figure 1. Study search and selection flowchart. Tatuí, SP, Brazil, 2025



Results

The seven studies selected for this review are presented in the chart below with their respective variables,

such as authors, year of publication, article title, methodology, objective, and main results and conclusions.



Chart 1. Selected articles. Tatuí, São Paulo, Brazil, 2025

Author(s) and Year	Article Title	Methodology	Objective	Main Results/Conclusions
Emídio et al., 2021	Entre voltas e revoltas: um estudo sobre mães que abandonam a carreira profissional	Qualitative study, with in-depth interviews and content analysis.	Understand the subjective and social factors involved in leaving a professional career after motherhood.	The mothers reported guilt, exhaustion, and conflicts between motherhood and work, associated with a lack of institutional and family support, influencing their decision to abandon their careers.
Zanello et al., 2022	Maternidade e cuidado na pandemia entre brasileiras de classe média e média alta	Cross-sectional study using an online survey, with a quantitative-qualitative approach.	Analyze the distribution of caregiving and housework tasks during the pandemic.	The unequal division of caregiving persisted, with women bearing a greater mental burden, exacerbating gender inequalities and negatively impacting their career paths.
Pereira et al., 2022	O trabalho feminino e a maternidade: revisão integrativa	Integrative literature review.	Analyze scientific evidence on women's work and motherhood.	Motherhood has been shown to be associated with difficulties returning to work, setbacks in career advancement, and insufficient support policies.
Rodrigues et al., 2022	Acolhimento e desafios no retorno ao trabalho, após a licença-maternidade em uma instituição de ensino	Qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.	Understand the experience of women returning to work after maternity leave.	The return was marked by insecurity, difficulties adapting, and weaknesses in the institutional care provided.
Sorj & Fraga, 2022	Licenças-maternidade e paternidade no Brasil: direitos e desigualdades sociais	Documentary and analytical study of public policies.	Analyze rights related to maternity and paternity leave in Brazil.	These policies reinforce gender inequalities by concentrating caregiving responsibilities on women, impacting their professional trajectories.
Almeida et al., 2022	A influência do retorno ao trabalho no aleitamento materno de trabalhadoras da enfermagem	Qualitative study, using interviews and content analysis.	Analyze the influence of returning to work on breastfeeding.	The early return to work and the lack of institutional support contributed to early weaning and emotional distress.
Alves et al., 2023	Experiences of mothers with early weaning: a grounded theory	A qualitative study grounded in grounded theory.	Understanding the experience of mothers facing early weaning.	Returning to work was central to early weaning, associated with frustration, guilt, and insufficient workplace support.

Analyzing the seven selected articles^{1,4,6,9-12}, it becomes clear that the researchers chose varied methodological paths to map such a complex terrain. Most of the works adopted a qualitative approach^{4,9,11,12}, relying on attentive listening to women to capture the nuances of their feelings and the meanings they themselves attribute to this moment of career suspension. Several studies relied on in-depth interviews, followed by analyses that sought to identify the central themes of these narratives^{4,9}, which allowed us to access the richness and pain of the emotional processes at play. Furthermore, one of the studies was dedicated to reviewing and weaving together existing evidence⁶, offering us a broader overview of how literature has addressed this intertwining of being a mother and being a worker.

The objectives of these investigations, despite differences in focus, converge on a central point: understanding how motherhood recalibrates and often interrupts women's professional lives. The researchers focused on the emotions and challenges of returning to work⁹, gave a voice to those who made the difficult decision to leave their careers⁴, examined how pressure to

breastfeed and the lack of shared caregiving act as forces that push the market apart^{11,12}. And, very pertinently, they highlighted how the pandemic laid bare and deepened old inequalities in the fragile balance between home and work¹.

The findings paint a difficult picture. On one hand, a subjective experience laden with guilt, anxiety, and fear^{4,9}, feelings that feed on the constant conflict between what is expected of a dedicated mother and what is demanded of a productive professional. The discrepancy between the length of maternity leave and health recommendations for breastfeeding, for example, appears as a powerful source of this unease, crystallized in the idea of "maternal guilt"^{9,11,12}.

On the other hand, studies reveal that leaving the job market permanently is rarely an option^{4,10}. It is, in fact, the almost inevitable consequence of a series of structural failures: the absence of a truly co-responsible partner, the chronic difficulty of accessing daycare, the indifference of companies towards parenthood, and work environments that hinder, if not sabotage, breastfeeding^{11,12}. The pandemic acted as a brutal accelerator of these dynamics¹, overburdening women with a full-time double shift, without any support.



It became evident that this burden is not distributed equally¹⁰. Motherhood penalizes some women much more than others. Those with university degrees and formal employment find more support, albeit insufficient, to pursue their careers. However, for Black women, those with low incomes, and those in unstable jobs, the obstacles multiply, making remaining in the workforce an almost insurmountable challenge and frequently leading them to informal work or economic dependence¹⁰. The message that emerges from the studies is clear and unanimous: consistent public policies and a profound cultural shift are urgently needed to share the burden of caregiving and build support networks^{6,10}. Only in this way will it be possible for the experience of motherhood not to translate, as still happens, into a sentence of professional penalization.

Discussion

In contemporary times, the attempt to reconcile work in the private sphere, which includes housework and childcare, with work in the external, or public, sphere, is still an almost exclusive reality for women, as highlighted by Zanella et al.¹. This double shift, or reconciliation, has not yet become normalized in the male universe.

The research by Rodrigues et al.⁹ demonstrates that maternity leave, guaranteed for four months in Brazil, frequently clashes with the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations for exclusive breastfeeding until six months of age. This disparity exposes working women to conflicts between the need to resume their professional activities and the desire to maintain practices considered ideal for childcare, a situation aggravated by so-called maternal guilt. This guilt is amplified by social pressure to reconcile professional productivity and care considered ideal. The study, conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that remote work brought paradoxes: while it allowed for greater closeness with children, it also intensified the mental load associated with the simultaneous management of domestic and professional tasks. Women experienced an overload resulting from the unpaid double shift (domestic and professional), which indicates that the scarcity of policies adapted to health crisis scenarios further stimulated gender inequalities.

The same study indicated that 60% of mothers experienced symptoms of generalized anxiety or postpartum depression, exacerbated by returning to work. This data reflects the duality faced almost exclusively by mothers, who must reconcile caring for their babies with work demands, and highlights the lack of institutional support for an equitable division of family responsibilities, reinforcing the need for policies of parental co-responsibility⁹.

According to Pereira et al.⁶, the decision not to return to work after maternity leave is rarely a voluntary choice for women who choose to dedicate themselves to the first years of their child's life. In most cases, it is a consequence of structural penalties faced by mothers in the labor market. Studies show that motherhood negatively impacts women's participation in the workforce, with effects that worsen proportionally to the number of children. Furthermore, research reveals that motherhood modifies

women's professional aspirations and ambitions. To enable a return to and continued participation in the labor market, it is necessary to implement structural adjustments and public policies that balance family and work responsibilities. From this scenario emerges the reality that women who desire motherhood and plan a pregnancy often postpone this project, waiting for greater stability or a more opportune moment in their professional lives. A crucial factor in strengthening the return would be the partner's support in childcare and household chores, as well as the child's enrollment in school or daycare on a part-time or full-time basis, considering the low availability of places for children aged 0 to 3 years. Although this initial separation entails an emotional cost in the adjustment period, it constitutes a facilitating alternative for the continuation of the mother's career.

Sorj and Fraga¹⁰ emphasize that, despite women's significant contribution to the labor market, they continue to occupy lower-paying positions and are less protected by legislation. The responsibility for family care and domestic chores, imposed especially on Afro-descendant and low-income women, is a decisive element in explaining the perpetuation of gender inequalities in the market. According to the authors, the stability of working mothers is legally guaranteed until the fourth month after childbirth. However, after this period, it suffers a significant decline, either due to dismissal or because there is no other option but to give up the job. However, for employees with higher levels of education, this reality is mitigated, indicating that this group is more protected in the formal labor market. In short, it is concluded that maternity and paternity leave in Brazil has not yet become a universal right, and it is necessary to advance public policies that promote equal access and overcome social and gender inequalities.

The study by Almeida et al.¹¹, conducted with nursing professionals, indicates that breastfeeding is one of the relevant factors that hinder mothers' return to work. The difficulties faced include lack of support from bosses and colleagues, the absence of a suitable place and time for expressing breast milk, decreased milk production due to work-related factors, as well as the overload and unhealthy environments characteristic of nursing.

According to Alves et al.¹², much has been studied in the literature about the reasons and circumstances of early weaning, but little about the maternal experience in this process. There is a need to view the mother as an individual endowed with subjectivity and conflicts, considering that contemporary women face the challenge of reconciling various social roles. The authors also highlight that women experience a significant overload imposed by motherhood, since most are occupied, in an affective and effective way, with the care of their children, which reveals psychic and physical consequences. Thus, the urgency of a sensitive and attentive approach to maternal needs related to this overload is understood.

The reality of motherhood and its demands bring to the forefront reflection on the emergence of guilt, experienced through moral conscience and influenced by external factors related to the internalization of social



expectations of conduct imposed on women. The obligation to breastfeed can become a relevant factor in this process, since it is considered a premise for demonstrating maternal love. Returning to work often implies leaving the baby without exclusive breastfeeding. Guilt can originate from internal feelings, but also from the judgment of others for not being able to comply with health recommendations, such as exclusive breastfeeding until six months. This reality points to the relevance of intervention and prevention actions by health professionals, focused on the emotional aspects experienced by the mother, especially in strengthening the support network, aiming to mitigate early weaning and alleviate maternal self-imposed pressure.

The image of women is traditionally associated with availability to care and be of service, an expectation that is even greater for Black women, who are frequently seen in a position of voluntary servitude. In Brazil, professions related to care are undergoing a process of feminization, which implies that it is work, but also something "vocational," whose supposed personal fulfillment already constitutes part of the payment. This explains the lack of social recognition of domestic work, which is simply considered a chore and not work in the proper sense.

In the publication by Zanello et al.¹, it is highlighted that, in the exercise of motherhood, breastfeeding is considered one of the woman's first demands, followed by the responsibility of raising children. At the beginning of the 20th century, the so-called "scientific motherhood" emerged, a construction fueled by discourses from pediatrics, psychoanalysis, and psychology, which defended the idea of the mother as largely responsible for the personality or emotional structure of her children. Historically, this produced a form of maternal guilt, adding to the woman a new responsibility intrinsic to the fact of being a mother. In Brazilian society, where sexism is common, motherhood and qualities considered maternal are constantly linked to the idea of being a woman and to what is socially desirable for them. It is important, however, to go beyond these expectations and reflect on how our culture teaches not only behaviors, but also which emotions are considered acceptable. In this context of impositions on the definition of what it means to be a woman and a mother, it is noticeable that, from an early age, girls are taught to prioritize, always first and foremost, the desires, wishes, and needs of others, to the detriment of their own.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, women have been burdened with the accumulation and overlap of paid work and domestic and family care. Childcare has become more demanding due to the loss of support networks, such as schools, daycare centers, grandparents, and other family members (especially women), which has led to work overload and physical and psychological exhaustion, with detrimental impacts on physical and mental health, affecting women more emotionally than men. Research by Zanello et al.¹ shows that, during the pandemic, although most respondents lived with their spouse or partner, 59.1% stated that household chores were unfairly distributed; 65.7% reported that, even with divisions, they were responsible for ensuring their

completion; 68.7% indicated that if they did not enforce the rules, the chores often would not be done; and 55.6% said that, in addition to ensuring compliance, it was necessary to check if the chores had been completed. Therefore, 76.5% asserted that planning, organizing, and ensuring the completion of daily household chores was understood as something that depended primarily on them.

According to Emídio and Castro⁴, when considering the option of motherhood, we currently find a scenario composed of two divergent realities: women who do not wish to have children to dedicate themselves exclusively to professional and individual projects; and women who choose to abandon their professional careers to dedicate themselves entirely to the care of their children.

According to Emídio and Castro⁴, in the context of the sexual division of labor, four models can be identified: the traditional model (women as caregivers, men as providers); the reconciliation model (women try to reconcile professional and family life); the partnership model (men and women share domestic tasks and family care); and the delegation model (domestic tasks are delegated to other professionals). The second model being the most common in Brazilian society, it is clear that, even with women's entry into the labor market and a process of transformation of their role in the family and at work, gender relations still show little impactful changes, remaining stable and sustaining a condition of inequality in the sexual division of labor.

The question then arises: how does motherhood intertwine with work, that is, what issues arise for contemporary women in the face of work and motherhood? However, Brazilian research dedicated to understanding the attempt to reconcile work and family regarding motherhood is rare. The relationship between women, work, and motherhood presents a significant incompatibility. On the one hand, it can be argued that the number of children is inversely proportional to a woman's dedication to her career, with children being seen as an obstacle to professional life. On the other hand, culturally, motherhood is idealized as a unique experience of complete fulfillment. The meaning of paid work for women goes beyond economic necessity; it is a source of personal pleasure, contributes to the work environment and society, and has an emotional importance that reinforces the feeling of productivity and accomplishment. This reality highlights the dilemma faced by women who try to reconcile the roles of mother and professional, frequently dealing with conflicting demands. Although motherhood is socially encouraged, it does not offer professional recognition to women, recognition that is only given through paid work. This creates a contradiction: the labor market neither welcomes nor offers possibilities for reconciling work and motherhood, pushing women back into the domestic sphere. Therefore, women are burdened with both productive and reproductive work, causing them to feel overwhelmed by the obligations of maintaining a level of productivity, which can lead to psychological distress, feelings of helplessness, and loneliness.

According to research by Emídio and Castro⁴, women who decided to abandon their careers for a more



dedicated experience of motherhood, even with the support and resources of their partners, encountered common feelings: anguish and loss of financial autonomy, as they became economically dependent on their partners again, generating a feeling of loss of hard-won freedom; loneliness and social isolation, due to the greater seclusion required by motherhood and the lack of social interaction provided by work; identity crises and low self-esteem, as they faced questions about their professional identity, feeling inactive and insecure about the future; and ambivalent feelings, between the opportunity to follow their child's development and the loss of financial independence, professional satisfaction, and social recognition. These feelings indicate that the difficulties lie not only in reconciling demands but also in the emotional and social impacts that accompany such a decision.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the arrival of motherhood triggers a complex spectrum of feelings in women, such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, frustration, overload, and loneliness. These emotional states, identified in most of the reviewed articles, are frequently not verbalized or recognized as legitimate demands for mental health care and social support.

Furthermore, the lack of a solid family support network and the inadequacy of efficient public policies contribute to a significant number of women involuntarily interrupting their professional careers. This forced removal from the labor market reintegrates them into the private sphere, where domestic work and childcare remain invisible and devoid of adequate social recognition.

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