

RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL) 

# Mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic: From experiences to narratives

*Mães no período de situação pandémica por COVID-19: Das vivências às narrativas*

*Madres durante la pandemia de COVID-19: De las experiencias a los relatos*

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## Abstract

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for mothers of children and adolescents up to 18 years of age in managing the responsibilities associated with their social roles.

**Objective:** To understand the meanings and contexts of the experiences of Portuguese mothers of children and adolescents up to 18 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methodology:** Qualitative, descriptive, and retrospective study using Bardin's content analysis. The sample consisted of 16 mothers of children and adolescents up to 18 years of age.

**Results:** Nine categories emerged - Feelings; Perception of health; Changes in health status; Significant experiences; Meaning of experiences; Difficulties felt during the pandemic; Difficulties felt in education; Difficulties felt as a mother and wife; and Impact on children's education.

**Conclusion:** Most of the interviewed mothers considered the COVID-19 pandemic a significant period in their lives, giving rise to ambivalent feelings and distinct life contexts.

**Keywords:** mothers; COVID-19; experience

## Resumo

**Enquadramento:** A pandemia por COVID-19 trouxe inúmeros desafios às mães de crianças e jovens até aos 18 anos de idade, pela gestão de responsabilidades a que o seu papel social se encontra inerente.

**Objetivo:** Compreender quais são os significados e os contextos das vivências de mães portuguesas de crianças e jovens adolescentes até aos 18 anos de idade, no período de situação pandémica por COVID-19;

**Metodologia:** Estudo qualitativo, descritivo e retrospectivo recorrendo à análise de conteúdo de Bardin. Participaram no estudo 16 mulheres, mães de crianças e jovens adolescentes até aos 18 anos de idade.

**Resultados:** Emergiram um total de nove categorias, sendo elas - Sentimentos; Perceção de saúde; Alterações no estado de saúde; experiências marcantes; Significado das experiências; Dificuldades sentidas durante o período de situação pandémica; dificuldades sentidas na educação; dificuldades sentidas enquanto mãe e mulher e impactos na educação dos filhos.

**Conclusão:** A maioria das mães entrevistadas considerou o período pandémico por COVID-19 como uma fase impactante nas suas vidas, originando ambivalência de sentimentos e contextos vivenciais distintos.

**Palavras-chave:** mães; COVID-19; vivência

## Resumen

**Marco contextual:** La pandemia de SARS-CoV-2 ha planteado numerosos retos a las madres de niños y jóvenes de hasta 18 años, debido a la gestión de las responsabilidades inherentes a su papel social.

**Objetivo:** Comprender los significados y contextos de las experiencias de las madres portuguesas de niños y jóvenes adolescentes de hasta 18 años, durante la situación de pandemia de COVID-19.

**Metodología:** Estudio cualitativo, descriptivo y retrospectivo mediante el análisis de contenido de Bardin. Participaron en el estudio 16 mujeres, madres de niños y jóvenes adolescentes de hasta 18 años.

**Resultados:** Surgieron un total de nueve categorías - Sentimientos; Percepción de la salud; Cambios en el estado de salud; Experiencias notables; Significado de las experiencias; Dificultades sentidas durante la situación de pandemia; Dificultades sentidas en la educación; Dificultades sentidas como madre y esposa, e Impactos en la educación de los hijos.

**Conclusión:** La mayoría de las madres entrevistadas consideraron que el periodo de la pandemia de COVID-19 fue una fase impactante en sus vidas, lo que dio lugar a una ambivalencia de sentimientos y diferentes contextos experienciales.

**Palabras clave:** madres; COVID-19; experiencia



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## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (COVID-19) has brought numerous challenges to the global population, including social isolation and the use of personal protective equipment. “The vulnerability of motherhood and fatherhood was associated with the consequences of social isolation and their impact on mental health, making this period in the life of new parents a double challenge” (Dias et al., 2021, p. 3).

This study is relevant because it is important to understand the consequences and potential losses experienced by Portuguese mothers of children and young adolescents up to 18 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic. Magalhães et al. (2021) found that the COVID-19 lockdown limited personal relationships and increased the burden on the family through greater coexistence of household members.

Women characterize this period as challenging, as it is difficult to reconcile the stimuli their children need with domestic activities, work, being a wife, and still having time for themselves (Souza et al., 2022).

Thus, this study aimed to understand the meanings and contexts of the experiences of Portuguese mothers of children and young adolescents up to 18 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Background

According to Santos and Ribeiro (2020), adapting to the maternal role and maternal care takes longer or shorter periods for each woman, depending on the context in which she lives, her housing and cohabitation conditions, and the availability of her support network. For these reasons, there are positive and negative experiences in the process of adapting to motherhood that vary for each woman. “When a woman becomes a mother, she changes her role in society, aggregates other activities, responsibilities and needs that she did not have before” (Santos & Ribeiro, 2020, p. 4).

Mothers go through different stages with their children, such as pregnancy, birth, childhood, and adolescence. As expected, there are different demands and challenges at each stage that can be influenced by various factors, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Molgora & Accordini, 2020, cited in Pinto, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic changed expectations about adjusting to motherhood and highlighted concerns specific to this stage. Women were more concerned about the complications this infection could cause them and their children (Haruna & Nishi, 2020, cited in Pinto, 2021). Brito et al. (2020) define COVID-19 disease as an infectious-contagious disease caused by the COVID-19 virus. This virus spread rapidly because of its mode of transmission, but also because of its ability to survive in external environments. The diagnosis requires molecular testing and the presence of clinical signs and symptoms (Brito et al., 2020).

In the interest of public health and “to contain the number of cases in Portugal, two states of emergency were declared with prolonged total lockdowns” (Pires et al., 2021, p. 27). These lockdowns included restrictions on mobility and individual freedom; physical distance within the family, but also from friends and colleagues; the closure of schools and various sectors of economic activity, and the implementation of teleworking whenever possible (Pires et al., 2021).

Pires et al. (2021) note that since the first reported case of COVID-19, mental health has been adversely affected, as evidenced by the increase in the number of people with fear, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

The measures taken to prevent and control the spread of the COVID-19 virus have resulted in many changes in family routines.

The lockdowns made it difficult to access the family support network, and in the absence of these resources, there was an overload of work and domestic activities, with consequences for mental health and difficulties in accompanying the children (Magalhães et al., 2021). In most families, it had an impact on family organization, requiring the creation of coping strategies, flexibility, and adaptation to changes within a new family and relationship dynamic, leading to financial difficulties (Magalhães et al., 2021).

Araújo et al. (2022) found that mothers perceived an increase in the number of hours spent on teaching activities, leading to a growing concern that they would not be able to maintain the routine they had before the pandemic. In addition to their own paid work and household chores, mothers began to help, guide, and explain school content to their children remotely with the help of teachers (Araújo et al., 2022). Another aspect that led to dissatisfaction with distance learning was the different social responsibilities that are socially assigned to women. Participants said they felt more overloaded with work, household chores, and the need to care for and help their children learn (Araújo et al., 2022). On the other hand, some mothers reported that active participation in school tasks allowed them to be closer to their children and to better understand their learning process (Araújo et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is essential to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Portuguese mothers of children and young adolescents up to 18 years of age in order to understand their experiences and the contexts in which they occurred during this period.

## Research question

What are the meanings attributed by Portuguese mothers of children and young adolescents up to 18 years of age to their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Methodology

This is a qualitative, descriptive, and retrospective study. The nonprobability convenience sampling method was



used to select a sample of 16 Portuguese mothers of children and adolescents up to 18 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic. The snowball method was used, since the first mother was identified through previously identified members of a given population who knew each other.

The inclusion criteria used were mothers of children and adolescents up to 18 years of age who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were women without children, mothers without children aged 18 or under, and mothers who did not voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview, with open and closed questions. The interview gathered information on sociodemographic data such as age, education level, profession, and cohabitation, as well as data on the perception of health, emotionally significant experiences, and difficulties felt by Portuguese mothers of children and adolescents up to 18 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were conducted in compliance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were required to sign a form clarifying the objectives of the study and providing informed consent. The mothers consented to the use of the information collected solely for the purpose of this research, with a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity of their answers. The Ethics Committee of the Health Sciences Research Unit: Nursing of the Nursing School of Coimbra, Portugal, approved the study (opinion No. 676/06-2020).

The interviews were transcribed and coded. Descriptive statistics and Bardin's (2011) content analysis were used to process the data: pre-analysis, exploration of the material and treatment of the results, and interpretations. According to Bardin (2011), pre-analysis is characterized by a superficial reading of the interviews and the organization of the material that will be analyzed. The researchers read the interviews and organized them for the next stage. They proceeded to explore the material and process the results (Bardin, 2011). At this stage, the researchers carried out an analytical description, in which they reflected on the answers based on the study's objective, and coded, classified, and categorized the answers. Finally, at the interpretations stage (Bardin, 2011), the findings were processed and inferences and interpretations were made. The results were condensed and the relevant information for the study was highlighted. This last stage was characterized by moments of intuition, reflective analysis, and critique.

## Results

Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample, seven mothers were aged between 30 and 40 years, eight between 41 and 50 years, and only one between 51 and 60 years. In terms of academic qualifications, seven had up to 12th grade, one mother had a master's degree, one had a *bacharelato* (3-year undergraduate degree), and the rest had a bachelor's degree. On average, the participants had 1.81 children with a mean age of 12.41 years. Nine categories were identified from the interviews: Feelings, Perception of health, Changes in health status, Significant experiences, Meaning of experiences, Difficulties felt during the pandemic, Difficulties felt in education, Difficulties felt as a mother and wife, and Impact on children's education.

After analyzing these categories, the Significant Experiences category was the focus of the analysis due to its relevance to the study's objective.

The mothers recounted significant experiences related to isolation, death, vaccination, online classes, and uncertainty (Table 1).

Regarding isolation, the following answers were obtained from the mothers: "limited contact with other family members"; "feeling frightened and demotivated by the obligation to constantly stay at home." (I6); "seeing the world coming to a standstill, with everything closed, and an uncertain future" (I7); "the isolation and the lockdown really affected me emotionally" (I8); "not being able to interact with people we used to be with on a daily basis or enjoy the same level of well-being as before the pandemic." (I9)

Death was also mentioned as a memorable experience: "seeing the number of deaths on television and knowing some people who died from the disease" (I3); "it was a colleague with whom I was every day, who was healthy and in his 50s, but died within a week". (I15)

One interviewee (I4) mentioned getting vaccinated as a significant experience. The mothers also mentioned that online classes were another significant experience: "in a positive way because I spent more time with my family and carried out activities that I wouldn't have been able to do if I had teaching activities". (I3); "The beginning of my daughters' online classes and the fact that I still had to go to work" (I13).

Another interviewee highlighted uncertainty as the most significant experience: "Probably the initial period when . . . no one really knew what to do." (I16)

**Table 1**

*Significant experiences category and components for thematic analysis of the corresponding subcategory (isolation, death, vaccination, online classes, and uncertainty)*

Category	Subcategory	n	Examples of record units
<b>Significant experiences</b>	Isolation	9	“... I'm involved in several local associations and having reduced this work and these contacts with other people affected me...” (I1)
			“... not contacting as I wanted with my parents...” (I2)
			“... limited contact with my family and friends...” (I5)
			“... limited contact with other family members...”; “... feeling frightened and demotivated by the obligation to constantly stay at home.” (I6)
			“... seeing the world coming to a standstill, with everything closed, and an uncertain future...”; “... on the positive side, it also allowed us to spend more time as a family.” (I7)
			“... the isolation and the lockdown really affected me emotionally” (I8)
			“not being able to interact with people we used to be with on a daily basis or enjoy the same level of well-being as before the pandemic.” (I9)
			“It was not being able to leave the house, ... and avoiding going shopping very often...” (I10)
			“... having to suddenly close everything down and stop leaving the house to do the routines I was used to...” (I14)
	Death	2	“... seeing the number of deaths on television and knowing some people who died from the disease...” (I3) “... it was a colleague with whom I was every day, who was healthy and in his 50s, but died within a week.” (I15)
Vaccination	1	“... getting vaccinated...” (I4)	
Online classes	4	“... in a positive way because I spent more time with my family and carried out activities that I wouldn't have been able to do if I had teaching activities.” (I3)	
		“Being able to manage everything... because my children started having online classes” (I11)	
		“... the beginning of online classes.” (I12) “The beginning of my daughters' online classes and the fact that I still had to go to work...” (I13)	
Uncertainty	1	“Probably the initial period... when no one really knew what to do.” (I16)	

## Discussion

The results indicate that the interviewed mothers perceive isolation as a limitation of the spaces they can go to and the physical contacts they can have.

According to Silva and Marcílio (2020), home should provide protection from fear and anxiety and be a comfortable place to live. However, during lockdown, although homes still made people feel good, comfortable, safe, happy, privileged, and calm, they also became a source of anxiety, distress, despair, worry, fear, and uncertainty (Silva & Marcílio, 2020).

With regard to physical contacts, Magalhães et al. (2021) found that physical distancing was one of the main difficulties experienced. Malta et al. (2020) reported that social distancing was the most effective measure implemented by the public health authorities to contain the spread of COVID-19, but it had negative repercussions on the psychological and social health of the population.

According to these authors, the implementation of social distancing measures and the necessity for individuals to stay at home led to a significant reduction in physical activity, an increase in stress-related symptoms, and an increase in alcohol and tobacco consumption.

Some of the interviewed mothers reported that the most significant experience for them during the pandemic was death. The media reported the number of deaths every day, and their family and friends were even part of this group. According to Pereira (2022), mourning is a psychological and physiological response that occurs after the loss of a loved one and is therefore a natural and expected event. Although it is usually experienced in a painful and intense way, over time it diminishes. Certain circumstances can make it challenging for individuals to mourn and readapt to their surroundings. The COVID-19 pandemic and its context have complicated grieving processes.

During the pandemic, eight major risk factors for complicated grief were identified. These include the lack or

impairment of funeral rituals (the lack of physical contact, non-direct family members were discouraged from participating in the ceremonies, and the impossibility of viewing the body of the loved one); the inability to attribute meaning to the loss, that is, a loss considered unfair or inexplicable; increased feelings of self-blame, guilt for contagion, and anger towards medical teams; the existence of unfinished conversations and pending goodbyes; reduced social support; camouflage through isolation within one's own home; the constant media coverage of death and self-devaluation of the suffering experienced (Pereira, 2022). The interviewees also mentioned vaccination as a significant experience. According to data from the National Health Service (Serviço Nacional de Saúde, 2021), 86% of the Portuguese population was vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus in October 2021. Although the majority of the population has been vaccinated, Fernandes and Pinheiro (2021) argue that government institutions and representatives have spread misinformation (indications for ineffective drugs, dissemination of misinformation about the type and risk of vaccines, and unclear hospital guidelines). This misinformation and denial carried out by the media against the health measures indicated by the World Health Organization (WHO), while economic and private interests were covered up, gave emphasis to the critical production of scientific formulation (Fernandes & Pinheiro, 2021).

Education during the pandemic period underwent several changes as it was taught remotely. As a result, mothers had to make changes to their lives to adapt as best they could to this new reality. Araújo et al. (2022) found that despite schools' efforts to teach the syllabus remotely, many families faced difficulties due to the lack of technological and computer resources, as well as low family literacy, particularly among mothers, in the field of new technologies and computer systems. This research indicates that women were the most overburdened during the pandemic. In addition to their own work and caring for the home and family, women took on full responsibility for their children's educational activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to changes in people's daily routines (Moretti et al., 2020), resulting in uncertainty, insecurity about this new way of life, fear, and mistrust (Moretti et al., 2020). Despite this negative reaction, Moretti et al. (2020) also highlights people's capacity for resilience and adaptation to the current situation.

These results could be a valuable resource for nursing professionals, especially those specializing in Maternal and Obstetric Health Nursing. Increased understanding of the pandemic's effects on women and mothers can help healthcare professionals better address their needs and develop specific nursing interventions for a reality that has never been experienced before.

## Conclusion

This study explored and reflected on the impact of the pandemic on mothers of children and young adolescents

up to 18 years of age and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to respond to the general research objective outlined, that is, to understand the meanings and contexts of the experiences of Portuguese mothers of children and young adolescents up to 18 years of age during this period.

The sample consisted of 16 mothers of children and young adolescents up to 18 years of age, who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. The nonprobability convenience sampling method was used for selection.

With regard to sociodemographic characteristics, most mothers were in the 40-50 age group. Concerning their education level, the majority had up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade or a bachelor's degree.

The mothers were asked about their feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic. While negative feelings were prevalent, ambivalence of feelings was also observed during this period. With regard to their perception of health, the majority revealed that they did not perceive any changes in their health status.

When asked about their most emotionally significant experiences, the majority mentioned social isolation and giving greater importance and value to social, family, and personal moments.

Mothers faced various challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as handling computers, managing work, wearing masks, and raising their children.

Regarding the impact on their children's education, the mothers mentioned reduced social interaction, concentration difficulties, emotional exhaustion, and stress.

The researchers conducted this study to deepen knowledge in an area where the effects of the pandemic on the lived experiences are not yet fully known. Additionally, this study may give rise to new questions since this topic is still discussed on a daily basis.

For nursing science, this study can help identify areas of focus in nursing practice where the target of care is the mothers who are often overburdened, especially during public health emergencies when demands on them are amplified.

## Author contributions

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