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# The female face on the front lines against the COVID-19 pandemic

**ABSTRACT** | Objective: To reflect on the gender issues that permeate the practice of Nursing in Brazil in the context of the pandemic. Method: This is a reflective theoretical essay, which uses data from the research "Working Conditions of Health Professionals in the Context of COVID-19" associated with the historical and sociological context of the profession. Results: Women account for 70% of health human resources and 85% of nursing teams in Brazil, a historically female profession. The pandemic had a negative impact on 95% of health workers, enhanced by the double shift and care for dependents, in the case of women. Conclusion: The reduction of inequality between professions and genders is a necessary path in search of more respect and professional recognition.

**Keywords:** Nursing; Pandemic; COVID-19; Health; Inequality.

**RESUMEN** | Objetivo: Reflexionar sobre las cuestiones de género que permean la práctica de Enfermería en Brasil en el contexto de la pandemia. Método: Se trata de un ensayo teórico reflexivo, que utiliza datos de la investigación "Condiciones laborales de los profesionales de la salud en el contexto del COVID-19" asociados al contexto histórico y sociológico de la profesión. Resultados: Las mujeres representan 70% de los recursos humanos de salud y 85% de los equipos de enfermería en Brasil, una profesión históricamente femenina. La pandemia tuvo un impacto negativo en 95% de los trabajadores de salud, potenciado por el doble turno y la atención a las personas dependientes, en el caso de las mujeres. Conclusión: La reducción de la desigualdad entre profesiones y géneros es un camino necesario en busca de mayor respeto y reconocimiento profesional.

**Palabras claves:** Enfermería; Pandemia; COVID-19; Salud; Desigualdad.

**RESUMO** | Objetivo: Refletir sobre as questões de gênero que permeiam o exercício da Enfermagem no Brasil no contexto da pandemia. Método: Trata-se de ensaio teórico do tipo reflexivo, que utiliza dados da pesquisa "Condições de Trabalho dos Profissionais de Saúde no Contexto da COVID-19" associados à contextualização histórica e sociológica da profissão. Resultados: As mulheres respondem por 70% dos recursos humanos em Saúde e 85% das equipes de Enfermagem no Brasil, profissão historicamente feminina. A pandemia teve impacto negativo para 95% dos trabalhadores da Saúde, potencializado pela dupla jornada e cuidado com dependentes, no caso das mulheres. Conclusão: A redução da desigualdade entre as profissões e os gêneros é um caminho necessário em busca de mais respeito e reconhecimento profissional.

**Palavras-chaves:** Enfermagem; Pandemia; COVID-19; Saúde; Desigualdade.

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The word pandemic, it seems, is not in the feminine by chance. Nursing is female. The front line in the fight against COVID-19 reveals the faces of thousands of women. They are the majority, the most affected and the most burdened in the health crisis that is plaguing the world and worsening in a tragic way, unprecedented in Brazil.

The feminine is associated with what is meant by care. From the Latin "cogitare e cura", the expression refers to the action of providing physical and

emotional well-being. In the first years of life, in illness and convalescence, in aging and in death, there is always a strong, female, present figure.

Historically nursing is a profession full of female faces. From Florence Nightingale, a pioneer in the care of the wounded in battles, in 19th century England, to Anna Nery, a nursing pioneer in Brazil, rescuing soldiers during the Paraguayan War, women played a fundamental role in consolidating the foundations of contemporary nursing.<sup>1</sup>

In the world, as in Brazil, the representation of women in health continues to increase: they account for about 70% of the teams of health professionals and almost 85% of the nursing workforce.<sup>2</sup> Of the 2.452.264 of nursing professionals registered with the Nursing Councils<sup>3</sup>, it is estimated that 50% are at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. That is, about 1 million women risk their

lives daily in the war against the coronavirus. The numbers also reflect the female and black profile of the profession: 53% are black (black and mixed race).

The recent study of Health Professionals' Working Conditions in the Context of COVID-19 (Condições de Trabalho dos Profissionais de Saúde no Contexto da COVID-19), carried out by Fiocruz with the support of Cofen<sup>4</sup>, throughout the national territory, released in March 2021, confirms that the workforce is mostly female (77,6%) also among higher education professionals, the object of this stage of the research. Most of the team is made up of nurses (58,8%), followed by doctors (22,6%), physiotherapists (5,7%), dentists (5,4%) and pharmacists (1,6%), with the other professions corresponding to 5,7%. It is important to underline that about 25% of them were infected with COVID-19.

The survey highlights that the pan-

demical has significantly altered the lives of 95% of these workers. For the worse. "After a year of health chaos, the reality of these professionals is marked by pain, suffering and sadness, with strong signs of physical and mental exhaustion. The fear of contamination and death accompany their daily lives, in management marked by the risk of loss of labor rights, low wages, extra expenses with PPE, alternative transportation and food", detailed the study's coordinator, Maria Helena Machado.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA - formerly the United Nations Fund for Population Activities) has also warned of the widening of gender inequalities and the worsening of women's quality of life. An important impact in the pandemic is on the domestic journey. Women are almost always the breadwinners of their families, raising children alone and caring for elderly or infirm relatives. They spend hours on public transport to and from work, accumulate shifts and, in the little that is left, they still cook and clean the house, when they should rest.<sup>5</sup>

Many mothers have still moved away from their children and remain socially distant after working hours, to protect them from the virus, making psychic vulnerability greater for these women.<sup>6</sup>

In this scenario populated by heroines, the pandemic exposed an ine-



Many mothers have still moved away from their children and remain socially distant after working hours, to protect them from the virus, making psychic vulnerability greater for these women.



quality to the world that can no longer be ignored. The essentiality of nursing must be recognized by society and its representatives in the materialization of decent working conditions, with legal support, which provide quality of life. The crisis imposes the need for simultaneous actions of emergency care and planning, with an attentive look at gender issues.

What is essential in society has been reframed. The urgency for better working conditions and decent wages impress the female face of the front line in the fight against the coronavirus. The appreciation of the performance of these women has not yet materialized as fundamental rights. A good start is to add the rulers and the population in support of the demands already made by the class.<sup>7</sup>

The reduction of inequality between professions and genders is a necessary path in search of more respect and professional recognition. The struggle of these women, who carry the representation of a whole gender, must be a struggle for all. Thus, the victory will be theirs and the entire population.

While the world proliferates the phrase "stay home", women on the front lines of the pandemic just want to go home, even with their faces marked, their mission accomplished, and the hope that better days will come. 🌸

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