

Who is at home? The impacts of Covid-19 on care and domestic work in Brazil

Abstract: This article explores data from PNAD Covid19¹ to examine the situation of Brazilian workers stratified in terms of gender, race, region, and education during the pandemic. We examine the case of those performing remote work in the course of 2020; specifically from April to October 2020, as April is the first month of the available data and October the last. Our analysis discusses how different groups were impacted by this economic, social, and health crisis in a different manner. Thus, we showcase how structural inequalities and emerging trends disproportionately impact some demographics due to their social positioning and discuss the possible impacts of these arrangements on domestic and care work. The article is structured around: i) an introduction; ii) a background on the sexual division of labor in Brazil; and iii) an intersectional analysis (regarding gender, race, region, and education) on individuals performing remote work in the course of 2020. Our iv) final considerations offer a summary of key aspects on the impact of Covid-19 on care and domestic work in Brazil and policy recommendations.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; intersectionality; labor market participation; care work; domestic work; Brazil.

The Covid-19 pandemic has posited unprecedented challenges as a public health crisis with unfolding social and economic consequences highly conditioned by structural gender inequalities (Bali et al, 2020). The latter is enrooted in context-specific intersections of labor market, race, social class, age and skills, among other dimensions.

Measures such as social distancing and the closure of institutions that support social reproduction have fueled concerns on the overburden of paid and unpaid care and domestic work among women across the globe (Xue & McMunn, 2021). Special attention has been addressed to the Global South, where precarious social systems, limited infrastructure, and inconsistent policies do not support women in their diversity (Al-Ali, 2020). Moreover, due to a more limited availability of public care, having frail older parents and young children to care for, or young grandchildren, is more common in the region, increasing time devoted to care demands (Alburez-Gutierrez et al, 2021).

Pioneer work in Brazil shows that the workload and stress of taking care of others have increased significantly for women during the pandemic (SOF, 2020). An intersectional perspective shows this occurs in different proportions and ways, depending on women's social position, job loss, remote working regimes, social class, family arrangements, and living conditions (Fares et al, 2021; Oliveira & Emídio, 2021).

¹ PNAD Covid19 is a national representative survey conducted by the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE for Portuguese) in Brazil, analyzing the months between April and October of 2020. This survey has been used to collect data on the unfolding of the pandemic.

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ii) Background on the sexual division of labor in Brazil

Brazil is a country of continental proportions marked by sexism, racism, and very pronounced regional differences. The 388 years in which the country was structured around slavery has left profound marks on the country's society and economy, building on and strengthening racial inequalities but also gender and regional differences. Access to social rights is marked by inequalities in terms of class, gender, race, regional, among others. Education, as a fundamental right and as a means of increasing one's income, is a marker of social status. According to the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD, 2018), in a comparison between the countries of the organization and its partners (Brazil, Costa Rica and Lithuania), Brazil is the second country among those analyzed with the greatest income differential between one person with a high school education and one with a higher education degree. It can be seen that, in Brazil, the restricted access to education reflects and reproduces inequalities. Therefore, gender, race, class, and regional differences structure the society and influence how domestic and care work is performed in the country.

As in many countries, Brazil conveys an unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work between women and men to the detriment of the former. The sexual division of labor in the country is also marked by race, class, and regional issues. With heavy workloads in the households, juggling with double burden shapes women's participation in the labor market, career path,

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dependence on institutions that support social reproduction, among other dimensions of life (Fares et al, 2020). The disparity in unpaid domestic work and caring for others is embedded, and reproduced, by gender relations and the expected performance of tasks attached to traditional imaginary around feminine activities.

The last comprehensive research on this topic was based on the PNAD Continua of 2019 (IBGE, 2020) conveying a considerable difference in the number of weekly hours spent by women and men in domestic work. Before the pandemic, in 2019, 92% of women in Brazil performed some kind of domestic work compared to 78% of men. In terms of weekly number of hours, women spent 10 hours more than men in unpaid domestic and care work. It is noteworthy that while unemployment increases the weekly amount of unpaid work for women by 6 hours, it does not represent an addition in hours for men. Regarding traditional roles and tasks, there is a gendered division of activities. While cooking, laundry, and cleaning are mostly performed by women, maintenance and small repairs in the household were the only category with a slightly higher participation of men. Specifically, unpaid care work presents a difference in detriment to women: in 2019, 31% of the Brazilian population was taking care of someone in or outside the household without economic compensation; among them, almost 37% of women declared taking care of someone, contrasting with almost 26% of men.

We believe a strong indicator of how this division of unpaid domestic and care work expresses gender relations is the fact that the highest difference between men and women undertaking these activities was presented by married women. The highest difference between women and men carrying out unpaid domestic and care work was observed between married individuals, of 14 percentage points, compared to those who are the sole responsible of the household, of 8.7 percentage points (IBGE, 2020).

As we explore in the following sections, regional differences and the intersection of race and gender are particularly important in understanding the disparities in unpaid domestic and care work between women and men. In the Northeast region of Brazil, with the highest concentration of Black population, the difference between women and men undertaking these activities was particularly high. By 2019, 90% of women reported performing unpaid domestic work compared to 69% of men in the mentioned region. While women surpass men in carrying out these activities regardless of race, the highest rate of unpaid domestic work was reported among Black women, reaching 94% of them.

Performing domestic work is also connected to educational attainment. Among men, carrying out these activities increases along schooling years. The difference between those with uncompleted primary school and those with completed high education was around 11.6 percentage points. We stress this was not the case for women, since the difference between women performing domestic work along the same educational attainment parameters was of 3.8 percentage points. In other words,

a higher education does not decrease the high rate of women who perform unpaid domestic and care work.

iii) Domestic and care work and remote work during the pandemic

While data on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on these phenomena is scarce, pioneer work shows that social distancing and remote work is impacting significantly on women's lives. A few studies have related how the possibility of performing remote work during the pandemic has affected domestic work. Zoch et al (2021) examine the consequences for care-arrangements among working parents affected by the closure of schools and institutional childcare due to the pandemic in Germany. They find that mothers continue to play a key role in the care-arrangements during the first months of the pandemic and that working conditions matter, especially the possibility of remote work, as not all parents and especially mothers could easily combine work and childcare. The work points towards systematic gender differences in the relationship between parental working conditions and the care arrangements.

Dunatchik et al (2021) examine how the shift to remote work altered responsibilities for domestic and care labor among partnered couples and single parents in the US. They highlight that before asking how big and long-lasting the consequences of the pandemic will be, there is a need to understand how diverse families experienced and responded to sudden changes in employment and childcare. In the case of this article, the authors find little evidence that the gender gap in domestic and care work declined: as fathers who began working at home became more involved, mothers also increased their involvement. In contrast, the gender gap increased when mothers worked from home, but their partner did not. And in couples where neither parent worked from home or where mothers alone worked from home, mothers became the stopgap who absorbed most of the additional caring and schooling of children. These findings suggest that gender remains a powerful force in organizing domestic work despite the greater flexibility that remote work allows.

Manzo & Minello (2020), analyzing the case of Italy (where care-related work is divided along traditional lines), explores how the increase in remote working has created unequal domestic rearrangements of parenting duties with respect to gender relations during the Covid-19 lockdown.

“The remote-working mothers who participated in our study told us that they primarily worked when their children were sleeping: at dawn, at night, and during the post-lunchtime nap, which suddenly became the peak of their productivity. The couples who attempted to support each other between calls and deadlines, and tended to divide childcare equally, were few. The ‘male-breadwinner’ model, which unconditionally privileges men’s work, prevailed (Manzo & Minello, 2020, p. 121-122)”

Their virtual ethnography illustrates the centrality of mothers' emotional resources to deal with the pandemic as care leaders: women, including those working regularly, performed most of the household duties. According to the authors, there is the urgency to understand why the male 'breadwinner' model prevails even in emergency conditions when it shows intrinsic limits.

Nash & Churchill (2020) examine how Australian universities are supporting academics to manage remote work and caring during the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings suggest that, during the pandemic, the Australian higher education sector positions decisions about caring leave and participation in the paid labor force as 'private' matters in which employees (mainly women) design their own 'solutions'. Overall, the results highlight the continuing challenges of combining work and care for Australian women in academia and that a lack of institutional policy supports during the pandemic privileges a male 'ideal' worker.

Finally, for the case of Brazil, Fares et al (2021) draw from a questionnaire answered by 455 people during social distancing in Brazil. This study indicates that the pandemic increased both domestic and care activities, with the former being more frequent for women and those under remote work. In general, this was not accompanied by a better division of these activities across the sexes. Some improvements in the sexual division of labor were observed amongst those under remote work regarding domestic work, but not regarding care work. However, when this was not enough to counterbalance the overall increase of unpaid work related to remote work, or when an improved division of tasks did not occur, remote work tended to be associated with an increase in women's overburden.

We highlight some staggering findings from research conducted on a representative sample on Brazilian women in Brazil by the NGO SempreViva (SOF, 2020). Firstly, during the first months of the pandemic 50% of Brazilian women started taking care of someone. Secondly, among those who were already caring for someone, 72% reported an increase in the amount of time and attention required by this activity. Thirdly, 40% of Brazilian women who kept their job during the pandemic reported working more, among them the majority were White and highly educated women. This finding conveys that domestic and care work is frequently outsourced in Brazil and performed by Black women who are overrepresented in this working niche (Pinheiro et al, 2019). In other words, the sex-segregation of reproductive work within the private realm is maintained and strengthened in this exceptional scenario, even among privileged families. Among those with less resources, 40% of women reported that the pandemic has threatened their capacity of sustaining the household. Of this group, the majority were Black women who reported struggling to pay rent and basic amenities (SOF, 2020).

These initial studies show that women in general are shouldering the overburden of unpaid domestic and care work in Brazil during the pandemic. In the country, gender relations are structured

around inequality, thus the intersection of race, educational attainment, and family arrangements defines the severity of the increase in time, stress, and work. We explore these dimensions in the following lines.

As in Brazil there is still no data available from the national surveys on the performance of domestic and care work itself during the pandemic, the next section will map the characteristics of those working remotely, which facilitates understanding family dynamics of labor and household maintenance during the pandemic.

iv) Intersectional analysis on individuals performing remote work in Brazil during 2020

As Dunatchik et al (2021) argue for the US regarding care work:

“remote work is a classed option for mostly white-collar workers whose jobs do not require providing in-person services or manipulating machines or tools. Whereas remotely working parents have been expected to suddenly care for children and supervise their education, parents who cannot work remotely have had to find caretakers for their children while they continue to commute to a hospital, grocery store, or other on-site work setting. Still others have had to cope with the demands of full-time parenting after losing their job or seeing their work hours reduced.”
(Dunatchik et al, 2021, p. 196)

We can see from the data presented in this section that differences in the ability to perform remote work are also visible in Brazil. A key aspect is that the country has a structurally high informality rate: before the pandemic, around 40% of its occupied population (IBGE, 2021) was in the informal sector, which presents lower income and less stability. This sector attracts workers with a more vulnerable background: lower schooling levels, more commonly the Black, and in the North/Northeast of the country. When the pandemic started, the informal sector was severely hit and Brazil recorded a decrease in informality, as informal occupations were more sensitive to changes in the economic activity.

For our study, we used microdata from the Covid-19 Household Survey carried out throughout 2020 (PNAD COVID19). We analyzed which social groups were most likely to be working remotely and how remote work changed from the first semester of the year to the second. We explored variations by sex, education, geographical regions, and race. The category “Black” includes individuals self-defined as Black and mixed-race Black people, classified as “*Pardos*” in Brazil.

As shown in Table 1, more than half of the population holding a graduate degree (e.g., MA or PhD) worked remotely in April, while not even 1% of the ones with primary education had this opportunity.

Table 1: Percentage of remote workers in Brazil according to sex, race and educational attainment in 2020.

	April			October		
BRAZIL	Occupied population	Remote workers	%	Occupied population	Remote workers	%
Total	66249943	8687594	13,11	81242155	7311858	9,00
Men	39627027	4030907	10,17	47918568	3082930	6,43
Women	26622915	4656687	17,49	33323586	4228928	12,69
Race						
White	31746648	5535952	17,44	37673345	4680973	12,43
Black	33699953	2979680	8,84	42669530	2490233	5,84
Educational attainment						
Primary	17168073	136457	0,79	20696681	84140	0,41
Secondary	27208752	1201877	4,42	34270668	835990	2,44
College	18053148	5349293	29,63	21685675	4527855	20,88
Postgraduate	3819966	1999964	52,36	4589126	1863871	40,61

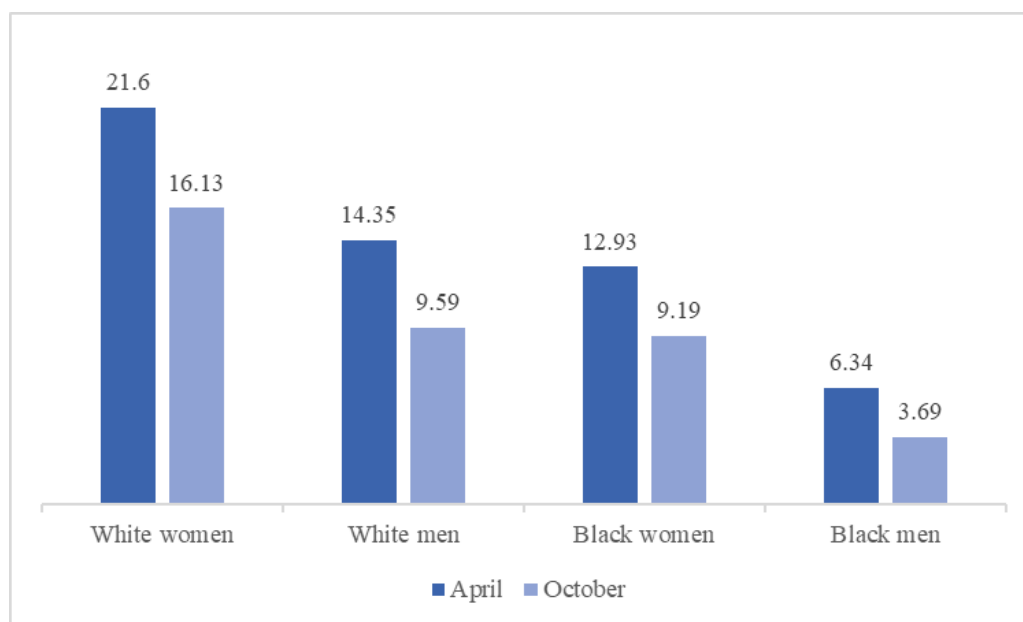
Source: Authors' estimations based on PNAD-COVID19 (May and November releases).

White people and those with post-secondary education showed the highest prevalence in remote work during 2020. It is known that patterns of occupational segregation in Brazil are marked by racial divides in the access to education and the quality of education received during one's life (Rosemberg, 1998).

Therefore, educational attainment seems to be a strong indicator of existing differences regarding remote working. High qualification is present among those who were able to work remotely during the first year of the pandemic, while those who could not, most likely due to occupational segregation, are characterized by low educational attainment. This aligns with Crowley et. al (2021), showing that remote working inequalities are primarily related to differences in individual education and gender in Ireland.

Looking specifically to sex and race, we can observe that the percentage of White women and men working remotely are higher than the percentage of Black women and men. In April 2020, 21.6% of White women who had an occupation were working remotely in contrast to 12.93% of Black women and 6.34% of Black men, as shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Percentage of each demographic group performing remote work in 2020.



Source: Authors' estimations based on PNAD-COVID (May and November releases).

From April to October, the percentage of individuals performing remote work decreased in all analyzed groups, due to a general loosening of sanitary measures, even when we consider geographical differences. Table 2 and Table 3 present the disaggregation of the national data according to Brazilian regions. The North and Northeast regions (table 2) display overall lower percentages of remote work. That was expected, given Southern states present higher shares of urban population and their municipalities fare better on development indicators such as wealth, education, and life expectancy (IPEA, 2013).

Table 2: Percentage of remote workers in the North and Northeast regions according to sex, race and educational attainment in 2020.

	April			October		
NORTHERN STATES³	Occupied population	Remote workers	%	Occupied population	Remote workers	%
Total	18374560	1723067	9,38	24797723	1420586	5,73
Men	11500871	775263	6,74	15178037	527419	3,47
Women	6873688	947804	13,79	9619685	893166	9,28
Race						
White	4509831	596836	13,23	6012185	513000	8,53
Black	13620300	1097782	8,06	18513283	890192	4,81
Educational attainment						
Primary	5870432	38760	0,66	7602678	18631	0,25
Secondary	7814900	288047	3,69	10858147	186497	1,72
College	3903153	1012132	25,93	5267051	845817	16,06
Postgraduate	786071	384124	48,87	1069843	369636	34,55

Source: Authors' estimations based on PNAD-COVID (May and November releases).

Table 3: Percentage of remote workers in the Center-West, South, and Southeast regions according to sex, race and educational attainment in 2020.

April

October

³ Acre, Amapá, Roraima, Rondônia, Amazonas, Pará, Tocantins, Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão, Piauí, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte e Sergipe.

SOUTHERN STATES⁴	Occupied population	Remote workers	%	Occupied population	Remote workers	%
Total	47875383	6964526	14,55	56444431	5891273	10,44
Men	28126155	3255643	11,58	32740531	2555511	7,81
Women	19749227	3708883	18,78	23703900	3335761	14,07
Race						
White	27236817	4939115	18,13	31661160	4167973	13,16
Black	20079653	1881898	9,37	24156246	1600039	6,62
Educational attainment						
Primary	11297640	97695	0,86	13094001	66147	0,51
Secondary	19393850	913829	4,71	23412520	649492	2,77
College	14149995	4337159	30,65	16418623	3682036	22,43
Postgraduate	3033894	1615840	53,26	3519283	1494235	42,46

Source: Authors' estimations based on PNAD-COVID (May and November releases).

All in all, we can see that having the chance to work remotely during the pandemic is not homogeneous for the Brazilian population and that remote work is marked and reinforced by the country's own inequalities. Firstly, the ability to perform remote work is not independent from racial, class, social and regional context, and those in the informal sector were the most vulnerable. Secondly, we showed the significant difference around the unequal division of unpaid domestic and care work in the private realm shaped by gender and its intersection with race. Thus, even when remote work is a possibility, its advantages or overlapping with other forms of work, such as unpaid domestic and care work, varies according to the intersection of race, gender, educational attainment, and region.

v) Final considerations and policy recommendations

⁴ Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Goiás, Distrito Federal, Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Espírito Santo, Paraná, Santa Catarina e Rio Grande do Sul.

In this chapter, we have approached the issue of domestic and care work during the pandemic and gender relations through exploring the data on remote work. We understand this current phenomenon takes place in a social context that has been shaped by gender, racial, and social class differences that are structural to the economy of the country. The sex-segregation of unpaid domestic and care work is a historical feature of Brazilian society, relying and normalizing women's performance of these tasks.

As the literature review highlights (Zoch et al, 2021; Dunatchik et al, 2021; Manzo & Minello, 2020; Fares et al, 2021), remote work is most likely a double-edged sword: being at home is a protective measure against Covid-19 whilst bringing extra hours of care and domestic work. Furthermore, this has gendered impacts, as there are systematic gender differences in the relationship between parental working conditions and care arrangements. Dunatchik et al (2021), for example, find that the gender gap in domestic and care did not decline under remote work arrangements. These findings suggest that gender remains a powerful force in organizing domestic work.

In Brazil, with a very pronounced sexual division of labor, the differences in the ability to perform remote work are of interest. We found that in April 2020, approximately 17.5% of women having an occupation were working remotely in contrast with 10.2% of the male occupied population. This speaks directly to the increased and heightened workload, stress, and time dedicated by women in unpaid domestic and care work since the pandemic started. In other words, an already existing unequal division of labor is likely to be enhanced under social distancing and remote work dynamics.

Regarding policy recommendations, we stress Brazil must reinstate anti-discrimination policies and its budget, which have been under constant attack since 2015, to create public anti-discrimination campaigns and to address the sexual division of labor in schools. Reestablishing and increasing the budget for gender issues is critical in creating a full-time public care provision system, which would take pressure off women.

We underline the importance of more women in leadership positions, especially in the public sector, to encourage the recognition of gender as a cross-cutting issue in all topics. Gender based analysis + (GBA+) should be incorporated in all public policy, particularly on labor issues. Lastly, on measures regarding the labor market, we recommend the reduction in working time with maintenance of wage - accompanied by the mentioned campaigns - for families to rearrange their provision of domestic and care work and increase their quality of life. We also recommend the reinstatement of labor rights removed by the 2017 labor reform, as the increasing precariousness brought by the reform puts an extra burden on women.

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