

Between Home and the Blackboard: The Struggle to Balance Academic Life and Motherhood

Entre o Lar e a Lousa: A Dura Conciliação da Vida Acadêmica e da Maternidade

Entre el Hogar y la Pizarra: La Difícil Conciliación de la Vida Académica y la Maternidad

RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo foi compreender como a maternidade e o trabalho doméstico impactam a vida acadêmica de professoras da Universidade de Brasília. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, exploratória e descritiva, com treze participantes, realizada por meio de um formulário online contendo perguntas abertas e fechadas. Os dados foram analisados com base na técnica de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados revelaram que as participantes enfrentam sobrecarga física e emocional, dificuldades em conciliar as esferas pessoal e profissional, impactos negativos na produtividade e na saúde mental, além da ausência de políticas institucionais efetivas voltadas para o apoio à maternidade. Conclui-se que a sobreposição entre as tarefas acadêmicas, maternas e domésticas compromete significativamente a trajetória profissional das docentes, evidenciando a necessidade de políticas inclusivas e sensíveis às especificidades da vida das mulheres na universidade.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Docentes; Maternidade; Trabalho Feminino; Saúde Mental; Equidade de Gênero.

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand how motherhood and domestic work impact the academic life of professors at the University of Brasília. It is a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research with thirteen participants, conducted through an online questionnaire containing open and closed questions. The data were analyzed using content analysis. The results showed that the participants experience physical and emotional overload, difficulties balancing personal and professional spheres, negative impacts on productivity and mental health, and the absence of effective institutional policies to support motherhood. It is concluded that the overlap of academic, maternal and domestic responsibilities significantly compromises the professional trajectory of female professors, highlighting the need for inclusive policies that are sensitive to the specificities of women's lives in the university context.

DESCRIPTORS: Teachers; Maternity; Women's Work; Mental Health; Gender Equity.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio fue comprender cómo la maternidad y el trabajo doméstico afectan la vida académica de profesoras de la Universidad de Brasilia. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, exploratoria y descriptiva, con trece participantes, realizada mediante un cuestionario en línea que contenía preguntas abiertas y cerradas. Los datos se analizaron a partir del análisis de contenido. Los resultados mostraron que las participantes enfrentan sobrecarga física y emocional, dificultades para conciliar las esferas personal y profesional, impactos negativos en la productividad y en la salud mental, además de la ausencia de políticas institucionales eficaces de apoyo a la maternidad. Se concluye que la superposición de responsabilidades académicas, maternas y domésticas compromete significativamente la trayectoria profesional de las docentes, lo que refuerza la necesidad de políticas inclusivas y sensibles a las especificidades de la vida de las mujeres en el contexto universitario.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Docentes; Maternidad; Trabajo Femenino; Salud Mental; Equidad de Género.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the presence of women in Brazilian higher education has grown significantly, both among students and faculty. However, this quantitative increase does not automatically translate into equal conditions for women to remain, advance, and be recognized in higher education institutions. In the context of public universities, female professors still face challenges that are intertwined with roles socially attributed to women, such as domestic work and motherhood, which remain invisible and undervalued in the academic environment.^{(10); (13)}

The double or triple shifts experienced by these women directly impact their productivity, well-being and career progression possibilities.⁽¹⁶⁾ The current academic model, supported by a productivist logic, demands full dedication to teaching, research and extension, disregarding the realities of teachers who, in addition to these functions, are also responsible for organizing the home and caring for children.⁽²⁰⁾

Although there are advances in policies for inclusion and support for motherhood in the university environment, such as leaves and assistance, many of these initiatives are insufficient, poorly implemented or little known by teachers.⁽²⁾ Furthermore, the lack of an intersectional perspective in institutional policies worsens the situation of black teachers, single mothers or those with children with

disabilities, whose needs are even less addressed.^{(12); (19)}

Although there are studies on women's participation in science and universities, there is a significant gap in the in-depth understanding of the experiences of female professors who are mothers, especially in specific institutions, such as the University of Brasília. The scarcity of qualitative data that gives these women a direct voice reinforces the need for research that explores their daily experiences, their challenges and the subjective impacts of this overlapping of roles.⁽¹⁴⁾

Given this scenario, this study aims to understand the experiences of female professors at the University of Brasília who are mothers, seeking to identify how motherhood and domestic work affect their academic life, productivity, mental health and perception of existing institutional support policies.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive study, with the aim of understanding the experiences of female professors at the University of Brasília (UnB) who are mothers, in conjunction with the demands of domestic work and academic life.⁽⁶⁾

Data collection took place remotely, between January 10 and 21, 2025, using an online form made available on Google Forms, which was created by the researchers. The research was conducted at the University of Brasília, with the institution itself

serving as the analysis site. The sample was defined by accessibility and comprised 13 university professors from different areas of knowledge who volunteered to participate in the research.

Of the 13 participants, considering the time of data collection, 3 were up to 40 years old, 7 were between 41 and 50 years old, and 3 were over 50 years old. Regarding the time of teaching at the University of Brasília, 7 had been at the institution for more than 10 years, while the other 6 had been working for between 1 and 8 years. These data indicate a heterogeneous composition of the sample in terms of age and academic experience, making it possible to identify both consolidated trajectories and professors in the early or intermediate stages of their careers.

The following inclusion criteria were adopted: being a professor at UnB (tenured or temporary), working as a higher education professor in any department of the institution, and being a mother of at least one child. The exclusion criteria were: not being a professor at the university, not having children, or not identifying as female.

The target population is composed of university professors working at UnB who are mothers, and the selection of participants was made through an invitation distributed on social networks, professional groups, and institutional e-mail. Participation was voluntary, and there was no financial incentive.

The form contained open and closed questions organized into six

thematic blocks:

Socioeconomic and academic profile (age, marital status, qualifications, time at the institution, area of activity);

1. Working hours (teaching, research, extension and administrative activities);
2. Household workload (division of tasks, time dedicated to household chores and care);
3. Maternity (number and age of children, impact on career, support network);
4. Mental health and well-being (effects of routine and accumulation of functions);
5. Institutional policies (evaluation of existing policies and suggestions for improvements).

The responses were organized and analyzed based on content analysis, according to the steps proposed by Caregnato and Mutti⁽⁵⁾: pre-analysis, exploration of the material and treatment of the results obtained. A cursory reading of the responses allowed the identification of recurring thematic categories, which guided the organization and discussion of the findings. No textual statistical analysis software was used.

Simple descriptive statistical analysis was used only on the variables characterizing the participants (age group, time in the institution, number of children, marital status), by counting and percentage of the data provided in the closed questions.

The research followed the ethical principles established by Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and voluntarily consented to participate by means of the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) included in the form itself.

RESULTS

Silent Overload: The Persistence of Gender Inequality in Everyday Teaching

Women have been gaining ground in universities and in the formal job market, but this inclusion has not been accompanied by an equitable redistribution of domestic and care tasks. What is observed, especially in the daily lives of mother-teachers, is the overlapping of multiple shifts, marked by persistent and invisible exhaustion. The reports of the teachers participating in the research reveal that, even with high levels of education and consolidated academic performance, domestic work remains a central responsibility in the lives of these women.⁽⁷⁾

The responses to the questionnaire indicate that the burden is not only physical, but also emotional and mental. The teachers describe in detail what they do at home — washing, cooking, taking care of the children, managing the family routine — while their academic work, although equally demanding, is described in less detail. This imbalance in the way they describe the activities already shows a naturalization of the role of women as caregivers and organizers of the home.

Although seven teachers reported some degree of sharing tasks with their partners, five said that they continue to do most of the household chores. The term “help” appears frequently to designate male participation, which reinforces the idea that the main responsibility lies with women. One of the participants sums up this logic well: “My husband is on the way, but the mental burden continues to fall on me, especially because men still think they don’t live in the house.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Another report exemplifies this asymmetry: “I do most of the work, but my husband takes on tasks that previous generations of fathers did not. But it is still a 60-40 split, it is not equal.” Even when partners are involved, women still bear the burden of management, planning and account-

ability. This is an invisible burden that is not counted as work, but which consumes time, energy and emotional health.⁽²⁵⁾

Lone motherhood was also a recurring theme. Expressions such as “I do everything, I am alone” or “my motherhood has always been very lonely” were prominent in the responses. The lack of a family or institutional support network increases the effects of overload and reinforces the need for the university to function as a space to welcome and support teachers who face this reality.⁽²²⁾

Motherhood and Academic Career: Between Interruptions and Resistances

Motherhood has a direct impact on teachers’ career paths. Participants reported significant changes in their routines and academic plans after the birth of their children. The most common effects include reduced productivity, abandoning projects, difficulty participating in events and calls for proposals, and even the feeling of not being able to maintain the same work pace required by the university.⁽¹¹⁾

One professor reported: “Being a mother had a direct impact on my productivity. During the first years of motherhood, my production was practically zero.” Another stated: “Being a mother made me change my research area and abandon ongoing projects. I had to start over, adapt.” These statements reveal that it is not just about adjusting schedules, but about reorganizing an entire academic identity in light of the demands of caregiving.⁽⁸⁾

The perception of unproductivity appears in several testimonies. Phrases such as “I have never been able to reach the same pace as before” or “I always feel like I owe something” reflect the conflict between institutional demands and the real conditions of mothers. Productivity assessment policies, centered on numbers, dates and deadlines, ignore the experiences of

interruption and restart that mother teachers experience in their lives.⁽²³⁾

The lack of opportunities or the inability to take advantage of them was also a common occurrence. Some teachers reported that they did not apply for scholarships abroad or turned down invitations to events because they had no one to leave their children with. One teacher, a single mother, wrote: *"I never applied for scholarships abroad because I am a single mother."* Another commented: *"I had to turn down invitations to important events because I did not have a support network. These losses do not appear on a resume, but they leave a mark on a career."*

In addition to practical difficulties, there are reports of embarrassment and judgment in the workplace. In many cases, motherhood is not considered part of the professional experience. One teacher reported: *"I had to take a day off to take my son to the doctor and I heard jokes as if it were an excuse."* These episodes reinforce that caregiving is still seen as misconduct in the academic environment, and not as a legitimate part of any professional's life.⁽¹⁸⁾

In this scenario, resistance strategies emerge: night work, adaptation of research topics and informal support networks among mothers. These solutions, however, are individual. For there to be structural transformation, it is necessary for the university to recognize and consider motherhood as a legitimate marker of difference — and for institutional policies to stop treating mothers as exceptions.⁽²¹⁾

DISCUSSION

The teachers' responses clearly demonstrate the burden experienced by women who juggle motherhood, domestic work, and academic life. One of the participants reported: *"I do so much, it's exhausting to even talk about it all..."* This statement sums up

the exhaustion accumulated over multiple daily shifts. Although they hold highly qualified positions and have access to information, teachers still consider the burden of domestic work to be part of their obligations, often underestimating the time and effort spent. This reflects a process of gender socialization that legitimizes care and organization of the home as a female responsibility.^{(10);(13)}

The feeling of loneliness also appeared in the responses, as when one participant stated: *"I do everything, I am alone."* or even *"...my motherhood has always been very lonely..."*. The absence of an adequate support network increases the negative impacts on mental health, revealing that, in addition to the accumulation of tasks, there is also an emotional and affective drain on the daily face of these responsibilities.⁽⁴⁾ Although we may immediately think of a support network as synonymous with family, institutions can also play this role — especially when it comes to a work environment with high production demands.

The mental burden, which refers to the constant planning and organization of household and family demands, emerges as another central element of these women's experience. One teacher shared: *"My husband is on the way, but the mental burden continues to fall on me, especially because men still think they don't live in the house."* Although there is greater male participation in household chores compared to previous generations, as another interviewee points out (*"Most of it is my responsibility, but my husband takes on tasks that previous generations of fathers didn't take on."*), the division remains unequal. When male contributions are treated as "help," the idea that the primary responsibility remains female is reinforced.

Motherhood has a direct impact on academic productivity. Many participants mentioned difficulties in advancing their careers, interruptions in

projects and changes in work routines.⁽³⁾ Some women are not even able to apply for certain opportunities due to motherhood, as one professor pointed out when reporting the "impossibility of leaving the country to do post-doctorate work". This scenario reinforces what is already widely discussed in the literature: the current academic model, centered on productivity and competitiveness, excludes those who have caregiving responsibilities.^{(16);(20)}

There are also direct reports of discrimination, such as the embarrassment suffered by a teacher when she had to take care of her sick child, or the exclusion of scholarships due to maternity. Such experiences demonstrate that, in addition to the lack of support, there is a constant judgment of the legitimacy of the time that these women dedicate to caregiving, as if it were incompatible with professional performance. This shows that motherhood, within the academic environment, is still seen as an obstacle and not as a legitimate dimension of the lives of female workers.⁽³⁾

Regarding institutional policies, most professors were unable to identify concrete actions by the university that would favor the retention and development of professors who are mothers. Those who cited existing policies emphasized that they are insufficient — such as the daycare allowance, defined as "important, but absolutely insignificant." This perception reveals that, even when there are initiatives, they do not address the reality of academic mothers and their practical and emotional needs.⁽²⁴⁾

The statements also reinforce the role of the university as a potential agent of change. The professors' suggestions range from the creation of daycare centers on campus, greater flexibility in schedules and review of evaluation criteria for competitions and public notices, to strengthening psychological support. This shows that the professors are not only de-

nouncing inequalities, but also proposing ways for the university to become a more fair and welcoming space for everyone.⁽¹⁷⁾

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand how motherhood and domestic work impact the academic lives of female university professors. Based on the analysis of the responses of thirteen professors, it was possible to confirm that work overload is a constant reality, affecting both the private and pro-

fessional spheres. The participants reported that they accumulate multiple roles, face loneliness in the exercise of motherhood and experience concrete losses in their productivity and academic trajectory.⁽¹⁾

The research showed that, although some changes have occurred in family and institutional relationships, the unequal division of household tasks and the lack of effective support still fall heavily on women. Motherhood, far from being recognized as a legitimate dimension of academic life, appears as a factor of exclusion, devaluation and

self-demand.⁽⁹⁾

As a gap, we highlight the need to deepen the debate on the role of universities as agents of institutional care, as well as to investigate the effects of motherhood at different stages of the teaching career. Future research can explore comparisons between institutions, different family arrangements and the impacts of care on black female teachers, single mothers or mothers with children with disabilities, expanding the understanding of gender inequality in higher education.

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