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“When the baby sleeps, I work” – Neoliberal motherhood in Latin America during the Covid-19 lockdown

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“When the baby sleeps, I work” –

Neoliberal motherhood in Latin America during the Covid-19 lockdown

Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores working mothers’ coping strategies concerning paid and unpaid work in Chile and Argentina during the Covid-19 pandemic. We aimed to understand the influence of cultural norms on motherhood and neoliberal workplace practices on mothers’ sensemaking processes and coping strategies. This study focuses on mothers living in Chile and Argentina where governments established mandatory lockdowns between March and September 2020. Drawing on the notion of neoliberal motherhood, we analyse women’s demands when paid work and mothering duties collide in time and space.

Design/methodology/approach

We conducted open-ended interviews with 17 women in Chile and Argentina. All interviewees had at least 1 child below the age of 6 and were working from home during the lockdown.

Findings

Neoliberal workplace demands, and disadvantageous government policies greatly heightened the dual burdens of working mothers. Women were expected to fulfill the discourses of the neoliberal worker and the good mother, while also adopting additional strategies in the wake of the lockdown. Our data highlights mothers’ strategies to cope with care and work duties by adjusting to new routines involving their partners, relatives, and the wider community.

Originality

The Covid-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to reflect on care work and gender, collective versus individual responses to care and work demands, and the idea of organising.

Research limitations/implications

The generalisability of the results is limited by the small sample of 17 interviewees, all from middle to middle-upper class. The changing scenario due to Covid-19 makes the collected data not sufficient to grasp the impact of the pandemic, as during the interviewees (December 2020 and January 2021) the process was still ongoing.

Practical implications

Organisations should assess their role in the management of paid and unpaid work for both genders, as the neoliberal discourse views the worker as masculine, full-time, always available and productive, ignoring women's additional care duties outside of the workplace.

Introduction

As the advice goes, "try to sleep when the baby sleeps". Getting rest when having newborns and infants is recommended by pediatricians to reduce levels of stress. Working mothers during the pandemic expressed the opposite, "when the baby sleeps, I work". This paper explores the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on mothers with young children by looking at their sensemaking process (Weick, 1995), and coping strategies during mandatory lockdowns in Argentina and Chile. Both Chile and Argentina constitute a particularly interesting case as both countries have introduced some of the strictest measures in the Latin American region in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (BBC News Mundo, 2020, April 27).

In March 2020, Chile declared an emergency state in which confinement became mandatory for Santiago (capital city) and most of the cities around the country (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2020). The closure of childcare facilities due to the pandemic was one of such emergency measures (IFC, 2020). In response, an emergency parental leave was introduced which allowed both men and women with children under the age of 6 to apply for a paid parental leave of at least three months for the duration of the state of emergency (Senado, 2020a). Another important change has been the implementation of the law N°21.220 (*Ley de teletrabajo*) which regulates remote work. This change in the labor law specifies how employers must provide their employees with all the tools, security and safety measures to conduct paid work from home. Equally in March 2020, the government of Argentina introduced various measures in response to the Covid-19 crisis. These pandemic-related regulations included

mandatory confinement, the closure of national borders for flights from overseas, and 14 days of mandatory quarantine for those infected with Covid-19 (Argentina Gobierno, 2020). Due to the pandemic, different feminist groups and politicians recommended the introduction of leaves of absence under extraordinary circumstances for mothers and fathers since schools, kindergarten and day-care facilities have been closed. According to a UNICEF (2020) Covid-19 survey, 51% of women in Argentina perceived an overload of domestic and care work. Similar to Chile, the Argentinian government discussed regulations concerning working from home during the pandemic. Some of the points under the new regulations included the right of digital disconnection (by establishing office hours from home that are compatible with care work of children under 14 years of age), the provision of infrastructure (of hardware and software according to the needs of the job), health and safety measures, and privacy regulations (Infobae, 2020). The government further established the regulation of telecommuting that came into effect in April 2021.

Since the onset of the pandemic, studies on the Covid-19 pandemic focused on countries such as the U.S. (Collins *et al.*, 2020), Australia (Craig and Churchill, 2020), Spain (Farre, *et al.*, 2020), and Italy (Del Boca *et al.*, 2020) and others (e.g. Fisher and Ryan, 2021; Güney-Frahm, 2020; Hennekam and Shymko, 2020; McLaren *et al.*, 2020). With this research, we add to the discussion on how the Covid-19 pandemic affects women, and particularly mothers of young children, by providing some voices of mothers within the Latin American context. Both Chile and Argentina have experienced unique circumstances during the global Covid-19 crisis. The interviews collected for this study therefore offer a particularly compelling testimony and insights of mothers' sense making processes during crisis situations and the coping strategies they developed as a result of the crisis.

On a global scale, the Covid-19 pandemic forced men and women to be confined to the home sphere, confronting them with the gender division of care and household duties, while at the same time engaging in paid work. We draw on the notions of neoliberal motherhood to capture the dual normative prescriptions posed upon women: to perform as workers as well as satisfy the cultural motherhood expectations (Ashman *et al.*, 2022; Güney-Frahm, 2020; Whiley *et al.*, 2021). Also within the Latin American context, cultural images of womanhood prescribe motherhood as a cultural ideal (Álvarez Minte *et al.*, 2021; Barrancos, 2007) within a neoliberal paradigm. This is further exacerbated during a crisis like the pandemic, which forces women to adopt new coping strategies brought about by work and care occurring simultaneously within the same special location (Fisher and Ryan, 2021; Hennekam and Shymko, 2021; McLaren *et al.*, 2020).

At the same time, the experiences of such ‘once in a lifetime’ global phenomenon is personal and revealing of the complexity of individuals’ socio-political and personal contexts. For example, in Latin American countries women spend three times as long as men on unpaid domestic and childcare work each day (CEPAL, 2020). Consequently, the closure of childcare facilities in that region as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic posed particular challenges for women with young children (IFC, 2020).

Considering the various social dimensions that interact to explain disadvantages in the workplace (gender, class, race, and ethnicity), identities such as mother and being female can be seen through the theoretical standpoint of intersectionality. Intersectionality (Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991) posits that the patterns of disadvantage encountered by members of one historically underprivileged group (e.g. female) can be compounded when another underprivileged identity is added, such as becoming a mother. In this regard, Correll, Benard and

Paik (2007) studied how the workplace penalized mothers (“motherhood penalty”) making the labor market a space of double discrimination for women who are also mothers. In this paper, we draw attention to other identity markers that may be related to working Latina mothers experiences. We are here focusing on those aspects that appear most salient for the context and topic of our study (Misra et al., 2021), examining how issues of class, relationship status, employment type, and Latina identity interact with their working mother identity.

What follows is a discussion on the politisation process of gender and parenthood, particularly in the context of paid work and care work. We then describe our methodology which is based on Weick’s (1995) sense making processes in negotiating the different identities of worker and mother among the women interviewed. In our analysis section, we highlight the themes emerging from the interviews, discussing the challenges faced by our interviewees, the sense making process considering such a crisis, and the coping strategies developed as a response. In the discussion and conclusion section we draw on our theoretical framework of neoliberal motherhood in interpreting the interviewees’ coping mechanisms and sensemaking process as their response to mandatory confinement.

Literature review

Work and motherhood in the Latin American context

Already before the Covid-19 pandemic, societal norms and expectations towards women and mothers within the Latin American region impacted women’s experiences of being a parent and a worker (e.g. Undurraga, and Cornejo Abarca, 2021). For example, when analysing the household arrangements of working heterosexual couples in Chile, data shows that just 1 in 10

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2
3 couples share domestic and unpaid care work equally, whereas among the vast majority of
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5 couples women accomplish two-thirds of all household-related tasks as well as care work
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8 (Comunidad Mujer, 2017).
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10 The motherhood discourse within the Latin American context is understood at the core of
11
12 femininity (Álvarez Minte *et al.*, 2021; Barrancos, 2007) and deeply ingrained in societal and
13
14 cultural mandates towards women's role in childcare (O'Connor, 2014; Ramm, 2020; Yopo
15
16 Díaz, 2018). While the exact imaginations and expectations towards motherhood differ across
17
18 regions, social classes and ethnicities, the importance of mothers within society and the role of
19
20 motherhood in women's lives is shared within the Latin American context. According to Ramm
21
22 (2020), the contemporary motherhood discourse in Latin America is one that views motherhood
23
24 as a glorified role for women, often conflating womanhood with motherhood, "linking
25
26 motherhood with a superior morality" (p. 31). A study on public policy in Chile shows how
27
28 social programs targeting health, housing and the labour market are structured around the idea of
29
30 the exclusivity of a "women-caregiver" (Álvarez Minte *et al.*, 2021). This poses strict
31
32 expectations towards mothers about their duties and prescribed behavioral norms on how to
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34 mother children. This results in a gendered division of labour within the home sphere, with most
35
36 home chores and childcare attributed to women (Yopo Díaz, 2018). In Latin America, mothers'
37
38 employment and working hours are positively affected on the occasion of living with a kin
39
40 member (Aragao & Villanueva, 2021).
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47 One specificity of the context of our study is that traditionally, outsourcing care and
48
49 domestic work is common and affordable for middle class working mothers in Chile and
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51 Argentina. In Chile, "the nana" is another person, always a woman, who takes care of the
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53 children and in some cases, also cleans and cooks during the weekdays. For the middle to upper
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classes, “nanas” are important individuals to receive support in balancing home life with their careers. Although beyond the scope of our study, a recent study on Latin American films regarding the nana archetype discusses how domestic labour perpetuates gender inequality (Osborne, 2020). In Argentina, nanas are usually called “domestic worker”, mostly informally employed, and their duties are mostly cleaning the household. However, during the pandemic, the use of nana’s was restricted due to social distancing restrictions.

The pandemic has further exacerbated previous challenges for women, such as unemployment, work suspensions, and psychosocial risks (Presidencia del Senado, 2020). A study from Chile focusing on time allocation and care duties revealed that 69% of female primary caregivers continued working during the pandemic (Micropolíticas del Cuidado, 2020). Women’s labour market participation in Latin America was 46% in 2020, while men’s was 69% (in 2019 they were 52% and 73.6%, respectively). Social distancing measures and the mandatory quarantine affected the gender gap in time spent on domestic and care work (Sanhueza et.al, 2020). Gibbons et al. (2021) examined Guatemalan mothers experiences during the pandemic, and they found that even though mothers experienced daily stressors due to their increased care responsibilities, they relied on the traditional values of their culture as means of coping, where they were able to find positive agency in their circumstances by prioritizing the core values of family, faith and gratitude. A recent study conducted in Chile found that among bi-parental families, the mandatory quarantine decreased the gender gap regarding the time spent on care activities, however it increased the gender gap in times spent on unpaid housework (Sanhueza et.al, 2020). Overall, women were spending 21 hours more per week than men on domestic and care duties after the onset of the pandemic (Palma and Araos, 2021). Pama and Aaros (2021) also noted that ‘intergenerational solidarity’, such as grandparents helping with children, were

important coping mechanisms brought about by the pandemic. In Chile, during the first 3 months of the lockdown, the percentage of older people living with their grandchildren increased from 25% to 32%. At the same time, a study in Chile shows that 70% of all children below age 12 were homeschooled by mothers or grandmothers, reflecting the feminine nature of care duties (Álvarez Minte *et al.*, 2021). The slogan “stay home” (*#QuédateEnCasa*) that circulated during Covid-19 in Argentina romanticised the ideal of spending time with children, decluttering the home, and working comfortably wearing pajamas. However, studies on middle-class women in Argentina show that women were almost always the primary caregiver whose emotional labour was exploited because of the mandatory lockdown (Passerino and Trupa, 2020).

Neoliberal Motherhood

Despite gender equality measures and geo-specific gender equality policies, work and motherhood continues to pose a particular burden on women. On a global scale, women are responsible for 75% of unpaid care work and domestic work (Moreira da Silva, 2019). According to the International Labour Organization, before the pandemic, women spent 4 hours and 25 minutes on unpaid care work compared to 1 hour and 23 minutes of men (Pozzan and Cattaneo, 2020).

Power (2020) employs the term ‘hypocrisy economy’ when discussing unpaid care work, since within the current neoliberal discourse, women are now also participating within the paid economy framework without structures that would alleviate their responsibilities at home. The infamous terminology of the ‘second shift’ illustrates this double burden (Hochschild and Machung, 2003). Newer discussions around women’s roles within the home and the workplace utilize the terminology of the ‘third shift’, referring to the emotional labour, which is unpaid and

oftentimes unacknowledged, performed by women who take care of the emotional needs and well-being of family members (Chung, 2020).

Cultural images and expectations of mothers continue to pose a burden. At the same time, neoliberal globalisation and its accompanying requirements to be an efficient and committed worker impose particularly demanding roles towards mothers (Ashman *et al.*, 2022; Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2008). Failing to comply with both imperatives is viewed as a failure of the individual mother (Güney-Frahm, 2020). Güney-Frahm (2020) discusses the two powerful contemporary discourses of the ‘good neoliberal worker’ and the ‘perfect mother’ as highly demanding roles equally expected of women, combining “the patriarchal and neoliberal worldviews” (Güney-Frahm, 2020, p. 5). Hence, the “neoliberal mom” (Lavee, 2016, p. 503) is one that is involved in intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) while at the same time being a good neoliberal citizen participating in the marketplace (Ashman *et al.*, 2022; Güney-Frahm, 2020; Hays, 1996).

According to Güney-Frahm (2020), neoliberal policies might seem to promote gender equality because of the encouragement of women to participate in the labour force. Yet, neoliberal policies disregard women’s unpaid labour outside of the workplace. Further, neoliberalism does not address socio-political inequality based on gender, ethnicity, race, and socio-economic status. Ultimately, neoliberalism and its blind eye towards hierarchical structures contributes to the feminization of work, and the feminization of care work (Nilson, 2015).

Neoliberal Motherhood and Covid-19 Pandemic

For women, the neoliberal notions of motherhood were further exacerbated by Covid-19 and working from home. Women found themselves in the crossfire between being good corporate workers and good mothers whose children now stayed at home, rather than being in

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3 daycare facilities or at schools. The pandemic increased women's "vulnerability to a worsening
4 of gendered burdens" (McLaren *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). Research shows that women perceived higher
5 levels of stress, anxiety and psychological upheavals during the pandemic and found it harder to
6 remain positive than men (Craig and Churchill, 2020; Fisher and Ryan, 2021; Whiley *et al.*,
7 2021). This would speak to the 'third shift' of women to feel responsible for the mental and
8 emotional well-being of their family members.
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17 Gendered expectations were exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. Women were now
18 expected to also deal with the new challenges, while continuing to maintain the same standards
19 of care and work like pre-pandemic. This further increased women's role strain while at the same
20 time reduced external support (Fisher and Ryan, 2021; McLaren *et al.*, 2021; Hennekam and
21 Shymko, 2021). This is illustrated by a study on British families during the Covid-19 lockdown.
22 For every hour that fathers spent working without interruptions, mothers had around 20 minutes
23 of uninterrupted worktime (Whiley, Sayer and Juanchich, 2021). Mothers' increased time spent
24 on house and child duties during the pandemic is reflected also in studies done in Australia
25 (Craig and Churchill, 2020), the USA (Collins *et al.*, 2020), Spain (Farre *et al.*, 2020) and Ghana
26 (Akuoko *et al.*, 2021), among others. For example, Akuoko *et al.*'s (2021) study of Ghanaian
27 working mothers found that their household and care duties steadily rose during the pandemic
28 and the shift from office to homework. Similar findings have been reported also from the Nordic
29 contexts, that are generally considered pioneers in gender equality. Hjalmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir
30 (2021) show how women in Iceland experienced greater responsibility for childrearing and
31 household labor during the pandemic, which caused them stress and frustration. Overall, during
32 the lockdown, their time spent on domestic and care duties rose by 166% in mean hours,
33 significantly increasing their overall workloads.
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Ultimately, the pandemic can be viewed as a particularly taxing burden for women around the world. While this once in a lifetime crisis has occurred, workers were expected to conduct ‘business as usual’ after a short transition period to home office. At the same time, working mothers took on additional burdens brought on by the crisis, such as increased care and domestic duties, home schooling, or keeping up with the ever-evolving health orders (Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022). This resulted in a form of double disaster, forcing women to develop new coping strategies within such a precarious scenario (Hennekam and Shymko, 2021; McLaren *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

This empirical study aimed to give voice to working women's experiences during Covid-19. We adopted a sensemaking approach (Weick, 1995), which allows us to capture how our interviewees’ construct and interpret their lives during the pandemic and how they develop meaning around these events, as sensemaking at large is retrospective and often initiated following uncertainty and shock. Researchers that use sensemaking like Weick (1993) study of the Mann Gulch disaster, are able to explore and understand group and individual behaviour in unusual situations (Paull, Boudville & Sitlington, 2013). Weick’s (1995) approach involves seven interdependent properties: 1) identity construction (the many identities that structure who we are and shape how we understand a particular event); 2) retrospection (past experiences contribute how we make sense of the present); 3) enactive of environments (we receive influence from the environment we have configured and operate within); 4) social (we make sense through interactions with others); 5) ongoing (the sensemaking process never stops); 6) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (what seems plausible matters more than what seems accurate);

7) focused on extracted cues (we perceive cues backing up our notion of plausibility while discarding what doesn't support this). All properties are interdependent and while some might be more relevant than others, depending on the situation, they are all necessary in the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). By following Weick (1995) approach we analysed interviewees' narratives. The women addressed the role of their employer regarding their care duties. Regarding parenthood norms in the workplace, the interviewees viewed employers as providing the bare minimum. As almost all interviewees affirmed, employers only complied with the law. Most interviewees took paid parental leave before and after pregnancy, and they describe flexibility to breastfeed or leaving early for work as a negotiation with their boss – mostly a positive experience. When asked about special programs for caregivers or parents, they explained, like Carola (Chile, 1 child, 5-year-old): “There is no policy dedicated to motherhood and personal responsibilities, the “dual role” they only comply with the law”. Their experiences of paid and unpaid work during the Covid-19 lockdown resulted in a connection of actions by themselves and with others (partners, neighbours, family, online teachers). The sense-making approach allows us to emphasise the sense-making process of those women and the emerging coping strategies brought about by the global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sample

We conducted open-ended interviews to gain insights into the thought processes and experiences of working mothers with young children. The interviewees worked in a wide range of positions for employers and freelance. Through a blend of snowball and convenience sampling techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994), we recruited 17 interviewees through personal contacts in Chile and Argentina. It was immediately noted that most women were eager

to share their stories almost as a cathartic way to process their experiences in what some referred to as the worst year of their lives. Between December 30th, 2020 and January 19th, 2021, the lead author of this study conducted phone interviews with the 17 working mothers. The women were between 28 and 47 years old, with an average age of 37 years. A full description of the interviewees' demographic is provided in Table 1.

Procedure

We were interested in hearing experiences and perceptions of working mothers during strict confinement and Latin America was the perfect opportunity for doing so. With this study, we do not aim to make comparable generalisations about working mothers on a global scale. Rather, we are interested to tell how mothers in Latin America experienced the pandemic concerning paid and unpaid work in the specific context of our study. Our open-ended interviews focused on three themes. First, interviewees were asked to talk about societal issues concerning motherhood, such as government initiatives, societal norms and women's roles as caregivers. Second, they were asked to describe what policies, initiatives or programs their employers (when was suitable) had in place pre-pandemic and during Covid-19 regarding gender and motherhood. Third, they were asked to explain how their parental responsibilities were arranged before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Interviewees gave their consent verbally at the beginning of the phone interview, after the first author explained in detail the purpose, benefits and risks of a research of this nature. The names of the participants were changed for anonymity and confidentiality. Phone interviews have particular challenges, especially because non-verbal communication is not available. However, the tone of voice and the choice of particular linguistic expressions transmit valuable information that was noted by the interviewer for the analysis stage. Interviews lasted from 30

minutes to 1 hour and were held in Spanish. Transcripts were later translated into English by the first author (Spanish-English speaker). The researcher took notes, an important aspect of each interview. The first author, a female academic of Argentine origin, conducted the interviews, because of her first-hand knowledge regarding Argentina and Chile's culture. During the interviews, the first author also went through a sensemaking process herself, and later on with her co-author, an academic and a mother as well.

This research is qualitative in nature, based on open-ended questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) which cannot be answered with a yes or no, thus increasing the possibility of collecting rich, thick data. Software for qualitative data analysis (ATLAS.ti 9) was used to code and manage the data collected. An inductive approach to data analysis was taken. We first examine the 17 interviews as raw data by a process of reading and re-reading, and then proceed to coding quotations based on similarities and differences among the narratives. This resulted in 22 codes. Some examples of the codes include: “on the go” or “comply with the law”. These examples capture women’s own expressions. Other descriptive codes include “help through Covid” or “living on the edge”. The 22 codes were grouped according to three relationships: causality, correlation and property of. By using the Atlat.ti network option and considering the relationships beforementioned, we further grouped the 22 coded into four themes: 1. Coping with Home-Children-Work; 2. Help during Covid-19; 3. Society; 4. Women's experiences during Covid-19. After analysing the themes and grounded in our theoretical framework, we present our findings through three conceptual ideas: 1. Society-Neoliberal Context; 2. Coping-Care work; and 3. Intersectional experiences of women during Covid-19.

Findings

Our analysis shows how the various societal, organisational and personal factors impacted the interviewees’ perceptions on their lives brought on by the crisis, and their subsequent coping strategies. In line with research from other parts of the world (e.g. Collins *et al.*, 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Del Boca *et al.*, 2020; Farre, *et al.*, 2020; Fisher and Ryan, 2021; Güney-Frahm, 2020; Hennekam and Shymko, 2020; McLaren *et al.*, 2020; and Miller, 2021), the Covid-19 pandemic created tension between productivity at work and care duties at home for our interviewees. As previously discussed, organisational responses were mostly in line with the legal measurements or programs provided by the government. Yet, in most cases no additional special programs or policies were enacted that could improve work-life balance in such unusual circumstances. This is evident in the interviewees’ narratives on the heightening burden they carried as working mothers, now working from home.

In the following sections, we discuss our main findings. First, we describe the current neoliberal socio-cultural scenery for the Latina mothers of our data, second, we present our interviewees’ experiences between their roles as workers and mothers and their coping strategies considering this unexpected crisis and their emotional sense making process concerning their heightened burdens brought about by the collision of home and work duties, and third, we offer an analysis of the intersectional inequalities for mothers with diverse backgrounds.

Neoliberal context of middle-class Latina mothers: Revisiting the machista model for care work

We begin by describing how the women we interviewed made sense of their socio-cultural environment. The women in our study distance themselves from the traditional division

of care labor. For example, some interviewees describe the homes where they grow up as traditional – some will use it as a synonym of *machista* – meaning the mother is viewed as fully in charge of care work.

I come from a family of traditional origin. Very macho. The woman takes care of everyone. We break that model. ... My mother admits I overloaded myself in relation to my siblings. She has changed (now). It is complex, [women] were not educated for that [working outside the home] ... I confronted that model” (Blanca, Chile, 1 child, 1-year-old)

As we see from Blanca’s narrative, she positions herself as a representative of the new generation, who “break” the traditional gender order. Her parlance also echoes an individualistic neoliberalist ethos as she emphasizes her own agency in “confronting the model”. In some cases, the interviewees explained that their mothers engaged with both paid and unpaid work. However, the interviewees’ responses concerning domestic and care work reflect research on Latin American gender roles within the household (Rodriguez Enriquez, 2015). Generally, domestic chores and care duties were the responsibility of mothers. Those interviewees who had been raised only by their mothers described a non-traditional household, where they had to grow up independently and do domestic work at an early age.

In all cases, interviewees differentiated themselves from their families of origin in terms of gender norms. This well reflects the colliding discourse of neoliberal mothering (Ashman *et al.*, 2022; Güney-Frahm, 2020). The interviewees viewed themselves as professional workers who were committed to their jobs and were as much providers as caregivers. As Javiera pointed out, her family of origin had a family arrangement different from hers:

It was a machista model, in which mom did not work, she was in charge of the household and the care work. My husband took the responsibility of our home. I say that the husband “help” but actually he is not helping, it is his responsibility. I never wanted to repeat the model lay out by my family of origin (Javiera, Chile, 3 children, 5, 9 and 19-year-old)

Javiera’s excerpt illustrates her understanding of a new family model. Women’s work is outside of the home as well, and men’s responsibilities within the home sphere are not viewed as ‘favours’ but as responsibilities equally shared.

Caught between neoliberal worker expectations and mothering duties: Making sense of, and coping with care and work during times of crisis

Our analysis shows that our interviewees’ experiences of combining motherhood and work during the pandemic entailed struggles. The pandemic, and as a result the introduction of mandatory confinement in both Chile and Argentina forced families to absorb care duties. As we will next show, the responsibility for this was predominantly laid upon women.

In this section of findings, we present the key struggles and responses as working mothers cope with care and work. These struggles notably revolved around the tensions caused by the neoliberal expectations of work on the one hand, and the persistence of traditional motherhood norms on the other. The time split among paid and unpaid work was a recurring topic among the interviewees. On one hand, there was the interviewees’ struggle with their worker-mother roles, as women “do it all”. On the other hand, employers’ demands towards workers provoked the reaction of ‘*sobre la marcha*’ – on the go – based on daily changes to rules regarding social

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3 distancing, confinement, and curfews –from 9pm until 5am. Most women interviewed struggled
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5 with the expectancy to be as productive as usual. Our analysis of the interviews surface how the
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7 women struggled to maintain and live up to the requirements for neoliberal working mothers as
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9 they often experienced contradictory expectations to opt out and place their own work as
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11 secondary to the careers of their male partners and the needs of their children. Women felt
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13 obliged and did not see any other alternatives rather than continue to be the primary caregiver to
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15 their children, while at the same time being a full-time worker. Coping with care and work was
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17 even more complex for those interviewees whose partners continued to work outside the home.
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19 As health and safety duties were particularly necessary, the government provided special permits
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21 to those who needed to work outside their homes. This had a profound impact on the
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23 interviewees who stayed home alone from 9am until 5 or 6pm and had to combine paid and
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25 unpaid work. It was typical that women whose partners worked outside of the home, arranged
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27 their own work schedules around the care of children:
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33 My husband leaves home 9, 9.30am to 8pm. I thought I could sit down to work straight
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35 away... it was impossible. I got frustrated, frustration .. then I realized my work
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37 schedule had to be different. In the mornings [I took care of the] children. In the
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39 afternoon, they play next to me. I [started] working with Olivia all the time. I had to
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41 "drop" the issue of cleanliness: clothes, bathrooms and food [that's the most important]."
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44 (Eva, Chile, 2 children, 3 and 5-year-old).
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49 In Eva's narrative, we see how she narrates her pandemic experience from her own
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51 viewpoint, emphasizing the individualised nature of actions she had to take in order to cope.
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54 Rather than referring to a joint household, she positions herself as the key responsible for
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running both the household, and adjusting her work schedule to accommodate the needs of her family. Eva’s experience illustrates how the pandemic further enforces the gendered division of labor, as women become the sole managers of their households (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Hjalmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Based on the “superwoman syndrome,” a social belief that perpetuates the idea that “women can do it all” (Hayes, 1986), women made sense of the many responsibilities at home brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and the struggles to manage these new challenges. For instance, Marcela (Argentina, 2 children, 11 and 2-years-old) says, “Shopping, there is more to clean. I receive orders from the supermarket. What you do on a daily basis: children, home, food, everything”. Marcela’s statement reflects her belief that it is her responsibility to take care of domestic and care duties.

The interviewees developed strategies to fulfill both their roles: mothers and workers. Paid and unpaid work become entangled, and the process of navigating that knot brought a great amount of tension. Some expressed emotions of living on the edge, which forced them –in some cases– to rise to the challenges without overthinking the situation. Eva’s narrative (Chile, 2 children, 3 and 5-year-old) started by her realizing the importance of prioritizing.

I'm doing everything I can. If I get sick, everything goes to hell. I shouldn't feel guilty when I am playing with Olivia at 3pm. At first I was from "here to there" (children-work). I learned to work in small spaces of time.

Eva’s narrative shows how the “superwoman syndrome” emerges in times of crisis as getting ill is not allowed for mothers, as everyone comes before her. Eva’s swearing illustrates the emotionally challenging effects of having to cope with competing responsibilities. Similarly to other interviewees, Eva felt guilty for not having enough time to play with her daughter due to work loads. In addition, to accomplish work tasks, she had to work in small gaps of time as a

way to simulate a “normal” work day. Also other studies during the pandemic have shown that women’s time is more fragmented (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). According to critical sensemaking scholars (Helm Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010) we understand the world within limitations in regards to established dominant social values. The neoliberal narrative that values “productivity” above all, reinforces the ideal of the worker/mother archetype, which seems to shape the women’s attempts to organise both their personal and work lives during the pandemic.

Ema’s narrative (Argentina, 1 child, 1 year-old) explains the impact of her husband working outside, after having spent some months working from home.

When he started working [outside of home] everything went to hell. I had to distribute work / care and study at night. We decided to go for walks at least 1 hour a day. I had to work fewer hours [while caring for the children] and wait until 5pm when he will take over [her husband]. I will get back to work ... Dante [her son] doesn't let me stay on the PC much so I have to wait for when Juan Pablo arrives.

Like Eva, also Ema narrates her experience using swear words, which signals the emotionally laden situation of these women. Ema draws on individualistic narration of her coping strategies, and her narrative portrays her as having sole responsibility with resolving the care duties at home and represents her work-life agency as secondary to her spouse. Moreover, we can see in Ema’s narration how women’s time is not only fragmented, but it draws our attention to aspects of gendered control of time among parents (Bryson, 2016), as Ema organizes not only reduces her work hours but chooses to study and work during the evenings and even during the night. While Ema practices self-care in the form of taking a walk in the park (see also Gibbons et al. 2021),

her narrative is underpinned by a frustration in the adjustments she has to make to juggle with the new realities.

To cope with this new reality, most interviewees came up with an explicit schedule of responsibilities that was divided into childcare/domestic duties and home-office work. Most negotiated their schedules with their partners, while single mothers relied on other mothers or their own parents.

Most interviewees continued juggling with the Covid-19 situation the best they could. The lack of external help to do the household or to take care of the children, in a social context that says “women do it all”, required a re-organising of parental responsibilities. “As a woman, I try to do it all, doctor, supermarket...it is more part of my life” (Eva, Chile, 2 children, 3 and 5-year-old).

Eva anchors her experience to her gender, where being solely responsible and juggling between a full range of duties regains normalcy, being represented as something that is an interchangeable part of a woman’s life.

As the months of mandatory confinement passed, some of the interviewees created new routines tied to their children’s schedules: ‘when the baby sleeps, I work’ (Emilia, Argentina, 2 children: 1 and < 6 year-old), reflecting women’s heightened efforts to accommodate both, neoliberal expectations of being a good worker and at the same time being the organising force within their households. The following excerpt portrays this:

I started getting up much earlier. For what it required concentration. I woke up at 6am. At 9am he had meetings. The boys get up at 9.30-10 with my husband. (Teresa, Argentina, 2 children, 7 and 5-year-old)

Child awake housework, child asleep intellectual work. (Rosa, Argentina, 1 child, 4-year-old)

Putting the children to sleep and staying until 1 am/1.30am. When the baby sleeps, I do my work and homework for Juango [6-year-old son]. (Emilia, Argentina, 6 and 1-year-old).

Aside from the practicality of scheduling paid and unpaid work, the interviewees commented on the emotional burdens that heightened as a result of the pandemic and the lockdown. Many of the emotional processes to deal with the situation reflect research findings conducted on the emotional labor and burdens experiences by women during the pandemic (e.g. Álvarez Minte *et al.*, 2021; Energici *et al.*, 2020; Fisher and Ryan, 2021; Whiley *et al.*, 2021). Our interviewees equally felt responsible for the functioning of everyday lives in their homes as well as for the emotional welfare of family members. Similar to other research, due to the new structures and heightened burdens resulting from the lockdown, women experienced high levels of stress, anxiety and burnout. The interviewees' narratives expose how the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their daily lives by using words like "hell" and "collapse". In terms of mental health, some interviewees, like Jacinta (Chile, 1 child, 3-year-old), had to take antidepressants.

It had a very terrible impact. The main one was the psychological one. I was used to working from home for 5/6 years. Not having domestic help...My husband and I separated for 6 months because he did not stop [working outside of the home], ...I had to ask for psychiatric help...they prescribed antidepressants. The anguish...what impacted me the most was the exhaustion and domestic demands. It is different to have small children... a baby... dress them... feed them. Without domestic help I could never have worked and still produce. I had a very bad time, very horrible period. My mother had to come to my house to help us [I had a lot of responsibility]. We didn't even see each other with my husband [the interviewee explains that she was scared of sharing the same space

with her husband as he had to leave home every day, so they decided to live apart during the pandemic]. My work ... they don't empathise "I couldn't handle anymore... I couldn't think... I cried while cooking... My mother also works so I appreciated her help. I always have her. Apart from being a domestic slave and still having to perform... both things cannot be."

Jacinta later explained that "co-responsibility is incompatible with both parents working". Through her emotional reflection she actually unravels what is wrong with the neoliberal mother discourse, a system which overemphasises the virtues of a productive worker and a devoted mother (in Latin American terms) simultaneously.

In this section, we have illustrated how the pandemic caused a backlash to women's work life participation by normalising their responsibility for care and household. Next, we examine the intersectionality of these women's experiences.

Intersectionality of Latina mothers during the pandemic

We now present and discuss the aspects of intersectional inequality for the women in our data. First of all, the narratives we collected surface the heightened vulnerability of self-employed single mothers. This is reflected in Rosa's narrative:

I needed time to prepare a game for my daughter. I had to solve work related matters. One does not shield behind motherhood in order not to deliver. (Shield sounds "weak"). As a freelancer they ask me "do you have time to do it?" "I always say YES, if I don't, I won't be paid (Argentina, single mother, 1 child, 4-year-old).

Rosa's narrative offers a view into the contemporary socio-cultural requirements for mothers. Rosa's description of her coping mechanisms to resolve competing demands at home and at work signal an acceptance of the neoliberal requirements. We interpret her refusal to 'shield behind motherhood' and consideration of such behaviors as 'weakness' as conforming to the neoliberal feminist ideology that calls upon women to demonstrate an ability to balance their work and home relations and refute from showing their vulnerability (Adamson & Kelan, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2018). The narrative is also illustrative of the intersectionality of the experiences of working mothers during the pandemic. First, Rosa's narrative reflects how her choices in the job market are affected by the financial insecurity of self-employment. She is by far not alone in her acknowledgement of a need to be 'always on', as this is a familiar situation for both self-employed women and men (Hilbrecht & Lero, 2014). Second, Rosa experiences heightened vulnerability due to her position as a single mother as she struggles to cope with the requirements of her job and the increased daily care responsibilities at home.

The enacted context (Weick, 1995) shaped interviewees' experiences. Carmen (2 children, 2-year-old and 3-months-old) is an academic and she feels in charge of her schedule, as "academic work is very flexible". Carmen's extract below reflects her experience.

You manage your time a lot. I worked months - I fulfilled the minimum. I did not reach my research agenda. It has consequences on my CV [yes], but they won't kick me out.

While Carmen manages to organize her work in a manner that allows her to maintain her job, nonetheless she acknowledges the negative impact of the pandemic on her career progress, thus shedding light on the less visible implications that the pandemic may have upon women's work. Prior research has shown that mothers working in academia experience career disadvantages as

their family leaves may lead them to lack behind the publishing requirements (Langin, 2021; Lutter, & Schröder, 2020; Minello, Martucci, & Manzo, 2021), and following Carmen’s narrative, the pandemic seems to establish a similar motherhood penalty.

Children, as many expressed, required attention, and many interviewees needed at least a couple of hours –in ideal circumstances- to focus on being productive. The difference in women's experience with toddlers or babies emerged in the narratives. Emilia comments (Argentina, 2 children, 6 and 1 year-old):

Today, I work remotely. Complicated experience. The school puts classes from Monday to Friday (gymnastics, math ... etc.) via Zoom. I attended the 5 year old in the process. I wallpapered my house with cardboard, the alphabet to help him. When Juan (the 5-year-old) was in class I gave him my new PC and I used an old one.

Coping during the pandemic was particularly challenging for those women who lacked a support network of family members. This forced women to rely on their next door neighbors or the surrounding community. Marta, Eva and others living in community buildings expressed that as a last resource. They were allowing their children to play with other children from around the neighborhood. Reliance on neighbors and relatives in addition to close family members has been identified as a coping strategy in other Latin American contexts during the pandemic also (Gibbons et al. 2021).

By contrast to the experiences of single mothers and mothers who did not receive considerable support from their partners or extended support network, our data also included stories that show the availability of neoliberal, productive motherhood for some of the mothers. This seemed to be conditional upon the availability of equal spouse participation as well as

external hired help, emphasising the relationality between partnership status and class in constituting a different type of experience:

My case is an exceptional one. Sometimes I think my husband does more than me.

During summer holidays, January, my eldest son went to the kindergarden until 13.30.

The NANA picked him from kindergarden.

16.00 I will take care of the children.

17.30 my husband take care of the children

The nana does deep cleaning, she comes from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. everyday and she is fundamental [before pandemic]. I take care of the clothes. My husband does the cooking and shopping.

During covid we were 3 to 4 months alone. I will do the deep cleaning, my husband cooked (everything with the kids).

I never stopped, I was writing a book...very frustrating. Now, my nana came back, (and) everythings is much better. (Carmen, 40 year-old, 2 children: 3 months and 2 year-old)

Carmen's situation was not a typical case among our interviewees - however, it is important in highlighting further layers of intersectionalities at play in the lives of working mothers. In contrast to the other women in our data, Carmen describes how the arrangement for care in her family seemed to follow a distribution of work between her and her spouse. In addition to highlighting Carmen's case as illustrative of ongoing change in household chores, Carmen's story illustrates the privileged situation she experiences as a middle-class professional woman. The availability of nana allows her to concentrate on her work during regular work hours. Some

of the narratives we have discussed earlier, show that unlike Carmen, most of the women in our sample were dependent either on the help of extended family, or in the unavailability of such an extended network, were left to struggle on their own.

Discussion and Conclusions

The pandemic has been a setback for women related to health, paid work, unpaid work, and gender violence among others (Álvarez Minte et al., 2021). More so, it highlighted a long standing paradigm of “women do it all” based on the superwoman syndrome. The pandemic left individuals with the burden of dealing with the crisis at home; and those with wider social or economic capital suffered less. The pandemic did not seem to transform the hypocritical economy (Power, 2020). In our study, the neoliberal motherhood discourse was further heightened. All interviewees remained primary caregivers while continuing to work. Instead of a second shift (Hochschild and Machung, 2003) or third shift, there were many shifts and no break from work or parenting. Interestingly, while our interviewees ascribed themselves as representing a new generation for whom care duties are more equally distributed among men and women, the narratives of their pandemic worklife foregrounded largely individualised coping strategies, which seemed to be underpinned by taken-for-granted regress to the traditional gender order. Similar backlash has been reported in societies that represented high gender equality (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

Various institutions failed to adequately address the interviewees’ pandemic realities regarding care work. As Álvarez Minte et al. (2021) explain, by shifting care work to families, the government indirectly transfers care work to women, not families, because women, not families, are in charge of that duty. Although an emergency postnatal leave in Chile was

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3 enforced rapidly by the Chilean government, it only served women with babies up to 5,5-
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5 months-old. In Argentina, women had no choice but to go back to work with small babies (2,1
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7 month-old baby) as the law mandated (World Bank, 2020), except public sector employees who
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9 were able to apply for an exceptional leave of absence. Government help wasn't available for
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11 women in this study whose children were above 1.6-years-old.
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16 Employers and the market were in line with the neoliberal worldview as organisational
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18 policies, according to our interviewees, disregard women's unpaid labour outside of the
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20 workplace. Among family-friendly policies, data shows that flex-time (which included home-
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22 office) was the main choice. Formal workload reorganisation was not commented on among the
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24 interviewees, yet the workload reorganisation was intuitively enacted by women to perform and
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26 "do the work"; making sense of their neoliberal worker identity. As coping strategies, women
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28 drew on others to accommodate work and care, such as moving in with their in-laws or bringing
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30 their mother to live with them. This would speak to Pama and Aaros' (2021) concept of
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32 'intergenerational solidarity' as a coping strategy during the pandemic.
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37 Latin American women went through a "qualitatively different" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245)
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39 experience of the pandemic, due to the intersection of gender, motherhood and class in the
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41 context of a historical construction of gender norms (Stevens, 1972/1998; 1973; Stobbe, 2005).
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43 Our interviewees' lived experiences reinforce the sensemaking process of Latin American
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45 working mothers, one in which the religious syncretism -between Christianity and Indigenous
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47 beliefs - and the social mixture- between Europeans and indigenous - influences notions of
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49 motherhood (Montecino, 1990). Drawing on the notion of intersectionality in our interviewees'
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51 experiences allows us to show the voices of the women interviewed as unique experiences,
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53 occurring at a historically unique time at a particular place, shaped by its unique socio-historical
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power relations. In our study, the mothers interviewed become a disadvantaged group in light of the pandemic. Our interviewees from Chile and Argentina shared similar experiences due to their cultural heritage, described by Montecino (1990) as the identity of the *latinoamericana* (Latin American). The patriarchal society in Latin America draws on particular cultural elements from Europe and America, in terms of norms and religion. As a result, the cultural ideals of the Virgin Mary represented in the Latin American ethos and the construction of femininity greatly impacts contemporary understanding of gender. Femininity is anchored in the private sphere of reproduction, care, breastfeeding, and loving ones' children, above anything else (Montecino, 1990). This idea is reflected in the language used by our interviewees. Our finding of new ways of organising work meant re-doing old routines and creating new ones with others. Still, the formative context (Helms Mills, et al, 2010) limits how interviewees make sense of the world. Their decision-making process was constrained: paid and unpaid work arrangements were evidence of that. During a time of a crisis like the pandemic, our interviewees' narratives showed how motherhood and worker identity has been such an overlearned behaviour that it was inevitable not to do it (Weick, 1996). The problem with that is the consequences they have, and over whom: working mothers.

Of particular interest was the notion that among the interviewees the risk of losing their job or the possibility of quitting the job was not plausible. The explanation might be that we studied middle-upper class professionals whose jobs were more secure than of women who work in lower-level jobs, such as the service industry which was the most affected by Covid-19 related layoffs. Class created a particular power situation of status that provides them with economic, cultural, and knowledge resources; explaining why work performance dominated the interviewees' concerns, rather than unemployment. The discourse of the ideal worker (Acker,

1990) had an important impact on the ideal of the working mother. The pandemic reinforced the “women do it all” expectations, because they actually did it all.

This study contributes to the research pursuing an intersectional analysis of Covid-19 to further explain the gender implications beyond gender-based analysis (Bowleg, 2020; Hankivsky and Kapilashrami, 2020; Maestripieri, 2021). Crenshaw’s (1991) approach focuses on pinpointing power dynamics differentiating women’s experiences. By drawing on structural intersectionality, our study shows that the geopolitical context (Latin America), class and gender (middle-class working mothers) reinforce the contextual constraints in the process of sensemaking. We argue that Argentina and Chile present similar experiences because of the similar intersections (women, workers, mothers, middle-class), and sharing a socio-cultural background (latinamerican). What Covid-19 did was to expand those already existent gaps (Berniell *et al.*, 2022). Our study continues with this line of research, focusing on neoliberal motherhood within the context of Latin America.

Limitations

The generalisability of the results is limited by the small sample of 17 interviewees, making it difficult to develop any patterns from the data. The changing scenario due to Covid-19 makes the collected data still not sufficient to grasp the impact of the pandemic, as during the interviewees (December 2020 and January 2021) the process was still ongoing. Sampling a group of working mothers might not be representative of working mothers that actually are no longer in the labour market. This could be further developed in future studies. The same applies to sampling working fathers’ experiences to compare the gender experiences of Covid-19.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Family-friendly policies have come to be viewed as potential opportunities for mothers to overcome organisational barriers to career advancement (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019; Lewis and Cooper, 1999). This however, might also produce the side effect that employers have the assumption that it is still women who bear the additional burden of childcare. When interviewees were asked about employers' initiatives for workers with care responsibilities, especially mothers, all but one said that no other policies beyond law compliance were in place. The Covid-19 pandemic forced equal time spent at home for both genders, and organisations should learn from the experience to create interventions that rebalance unpaid childcare among the genders after the pandemic (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020). Finally, despite the burden of care duties and household chores, more time spent with the family was appreciated, which should be taken into account for policy making. Initiatives like the reduction of work hours from 45 to 40 per week in Chile (Senado, 2020b) is one good example.

Organizations should assess their role in the management of paid and unpaid work for both genders, as the organisational discourse views the worker as masculine, full-time, always available and productive. The perceptions that employees have towards time and physical presence should be reevaluated by Human Resource departments.

The pandemic presents a unique, unforeseen situation which serves as an opportunity to re-designing organisations around care work. Since work now is done through virtual platforms, technology and robotisation might reduce redundancies and help a process of care work reorganisation. We argue that the pandemic has changed the nature of work permanently. Hence, this is a good time to put in place practices and set guidelines that assume community (collective

mindset) responses to care (unpaid work) rather than the traditional division of (paid and unpaid) labour. In practice, this will encourage putting care at the center of the organisation.

Future research

Studies on post-pandemic life should address comparisons between mandatory confinement versus non mandatory confinement contexts and its influence on working individuals. Further, studies should assess how work-life balance policies might be outdated as the way of working and the organisation of time has changed permanently. Further, there is a need to examine working mothers' experiences beyond middle-class women. For example, during the pandemic, nana's experienced temporary loss of employment because of the lockdown, which opens up other types of questions for the intersectionality inquiry that distinguishes the impact of covid-19 among working-class informal female workers (domestic workers and homestay workers).

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Tables

TABLE 1 Participant information

#	Pseudonym	Age	Children	Employment	Relationship Status	Country
1	Rosa	47	1 child: aged 4	Freelance Editor	Single Parent	Argentina
2	Maria	37	2 children: aged 6 months & 3	Commercial Planning Manager	Male Partner	Chile
3	Carla	32	1 child: aged 2	Academic	Divorced	Argentina
4	Carola	37	1 child: aged 5	Archival Researcher	Divorced	Chile
5	Carmen	40	2 children: aged 3 months & 2	Academic	Male Partner	Chile
6	Ema	37	1 child: aged 1	Administrative	Male Partner	Argentina
7	Emilia	40	2 children: aged 1 & 6	Administrative	Male Partner	Argentina
8	Javiera	37	3 children: aged 5, 9 & 19	Public Servant	Male Partner	Chile
9	Jacinta	40	1 child: aged 3	Freelance Journalist	Male Partner	Chile
10	Marta	30	1 child: aged 6	Arquitect	Male Partner	Chile
11	Marcela	37	2 children: aged 2 & 11	Administrative HR	Male Partner	Argentina
12	Ines	35	1 child: aged 2	Account Manager	Male Partner	Argentina
13	Teresa	41	2 children: aged 5 & 7	Innovation quality manager	Male Partner	Argentina
14	Victoria	40	1 child: aged 3	High School Teacher	Male Partner	Argentina
15	Eva	40	2 children: aged 3 & 5	Administrative	Male Partner	Chile
16	Blanca	28	1 child: aged 1	Quality Manager	Male Partner	Chile
17	Simona	39	1 child: aged 4	Academic	Male Partner	Chile