

COVID-19 AND THE AGGRAVATION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES FOR BRAZILIAN WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET: FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY AND INTERNATIONAL TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN

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COVID-19 E L'AGGRAVAMENTO DELLE DISUGUAGLIANZE SOCIALI NEI CONFRONTI DELLE DONNE BRASILIANE NEL MERCATO DEL LAVORO

- **ASTRATTO:** Il presente lavoro si propone di analizzare le conseguenze del Covid-19 sul mercato del lavoro, considerando in particolare le donne brasiliane in condizioni socioeconomiche avverse. L'Istituto brasiliano di geografia e statistica (IBGE) rileva che le donne sono state il gruppo più colpito dalla pandemia, ed è noto che le disuguaglianze sociali rendono le persone più vulnerabili e inclini a situazioni di rischio, nel tentativo di sopravvivere (come nel caso della tratta degli esseri umani). In questo senso, attraverso una ricerca descrittiva, il presente lavoro analizza come la pandemia abbia influenzato le opportunità di lavoro e i servizi di mercato per queste donne, e come la femminilizzazione della povertà in Brasile - aumentata dalla pandemia - possa causare impatti nelle statistiche relative alle donne vittima di traffico negli anni successivi. Nelle conclusioni si nota come la pandemia abbia condotto ad un nuovo paradigma, causando un aumento della povertà e peggioramento della vulnerabilità delle donne vittime di tratta.
- **PAROLE CHIAVE:** Femminilizzazione della povertà post-Covid 19; mercato del lavoro; tratta delle donne.

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- **ABSTRACT:** The present paper aims to analyze the consequences of Covid-19 on the labor market, especially considering Brazilian women in adverse socioeconomic conditions. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) notes that women have been the most affected group since the pandemic outbreak, and it is known that social inequalities turn people more vulnerable and prone to risk situations in search of survival, such as human trafficking. In this sense, through descriptive research, this work studies how the pandemic affected job opportunities and market services for those women, and how the feminization of poverty in Brazil - increased by the pandemic - can cause impacts in the statistics related to trafficked women in the following years. As main conclusions, we point out that the pandemic brought a new paradigm, acting directly in the intensification of poverty conditions, contributing to the vulnerability of women as targets of trafficking.
- **KEYWORDS:** Feminization of poverty post-Covid-19; Labor market; Trafficking in women.

COVID-19 E O AGRAVAMENTO DAS DESIGUALDADES SOCIAIS PARA AS BRASILEIRAS NO MERCADO DE TRABALHO: FEMINIZAÇÃO DA POBREZA E TRÁFICO INTERNACIONAL DE MULHERES

- **RESUMO:** O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar as consequências da Covid-19 para o mercado de trabalho, especialmente considerando as mulheres brasileiras em condições socioeconômicas adversas. O Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) aponta que as mulheres foram o grupo mais afetado desde o início da pandemia, e sabe-se que as desigualdades sociais tornam as pessoas mais vulneráveis e propensas a situações de risco em busca de sobrevivência, como o tráfico de pessoas. Nesse sentido, por meio de pesquisa descritiva, este trabalho estuda como a pandemia afetou as oportunidades de trabalho e mercado de serviços para essas mulheres, e como a feminização da pobreza no Brasil - potencializada pela pandemia - pode causar impactos nas estatísticas relacionadas ao tráfico de mulheres nos anos seguintes. Como principais conclusões, apontamos que a pandemia trouxe um novo paradigma, atuando diretamente na intensificação das condições de pobreza, contribuindo para a vulnerabilidade das mulheres como alvos do tráfico.

- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Feminização da pobreza pós-Covid-19; mercado de trabalho; tráfico de mulheres.

1. Introduction

On March 11, the World Health Organization declared that the level of contagion of the disease caused by the new coronavirus (Sars-Cov-2) had reached the pandemic stage. Worldwide, 60,534,526 cases of Covid-19 and 1,426,101 deaths were confirmed by November 27, 2020, according to the fact sheet Covid-19, from the Office of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in Brazil (2020).

Covid-19 is caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which has a clinical spectrum ranging from asymptomatic infections to severe conditions. Data from the World Health Organization shows that most patients (about 80%) with Covid-19 may be asymptomatic or have few symptoms, and about 20% of the detected cases require hospital care because they have difficulty breathing, among which approximately 5% may need ventilatory support (MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 2020). Another worrying aspect of Covid-19 is the rapid geographical spread of the virus.

This situation generated relevant social impacts, especially considering vulnerable groups. Although the Covid-19 pandemic appears as a significant threat to the health of all human beings, it has also affected people's lives in very different ways on a global scale, especially regarding social inequalities. Given the restrictions on maintaining collective health, this paradigm shift has significantly affected vulnerable groups experiencing special difficulties.

The "ILO Monitor: Covid-19 and the world of work" (Fourth edition, 2020), of the International Labor Organization (ILO), predicted that the pandemic would generate a contingent of more than 150 million unemployed people on the planet. We will see that recent data point to a large increase in the youth unemployment rate since February 2020, particularly for young women.

Concerning Brazil, this new scenario introduced relevant changes in the women's labor market, bringing important effects that deserve to be appreciated, given that social inequalities make people more exposed and prone to risky situations in search of survival. In this context, human trafficking is structured based on these inequalities

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in the choice of its victims in such a way that it is necessary to understand in depth the densification of the feminization of poverty brought about by Covid-19 and its implications in this sense.

Among the measures adopted to control Covid-19 implemented at the federal level in Brazil, we had social distancing, which included the establishment of telework, anticipation of individual and collective vacations, compensation of hours and anticipation of holidays (According to Provisional Measure 927 /2020). Within the scope of the States of the Federation, there were also restrictions on holding events, specific measures for education (such as closing schools) and imposing limits on the movement of people on the streets. Social isolation was one of the main health control tools to contain the spread of the disease (AQUINO *et al.*, 2020).

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the largest proportion of workers away from work due to social distance were domestic workers without a formal contract, being 26.8% (IBGE, 2020). In addition, the possibility of remote service was a reality only for certain levels of education, such as people with higher education or postgraduate education (31.9%), only 0.3% of the population with no education or who have completed elementary school has the possibility to perform their jobs remotely (IBGE, 2020).

The present study aims to address the unequal impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the labor market of Brazilian women, proposing a critical-discursive analysis of the consequences of this event on the increase in vulnerabilities and its projection in the figures related to international trafficking in women. A deductive methodology is used to draw these inferences, through which premises are presented, as a foundation to build the debased arguments. Among the techniques substantiating this research, we mainly use the bibliographic and data survey produced by national and international organizations.

We present as specific objectives: (i) to point out the socioeconomic factors generated by the new circumstances emerging with the Covid-19 pandemic; (ii) demonstrate how these factors contribute to greater exposure, adding difficulties to Brazilian women in the labor market; and (iii) infer connections between the growth in the number of victims of trafficking in women and the context analyzed.

As hypotheses to the conjectured research problem, from the exposed methodology, we envision two possible results: (i) first, that the Covid-19 impacts aggravated social inequalities, specifically, altering the labor market of Brazilian women, and generating

an increase in the vulnerability of these women regarding human trafficking. Besides, that (ii) with the new structuring of the labor market with the pandemic, this workforce has not been entirely absorbed after a change of scenario, with the adoption of more concrete sanitary measures and vaccines.

The process of writing this paper started in 2019, so we consolidated the first version in 2020. At that time, no specific research corroborated our hypothesis, so we had to cross-check a series of data from different sources. We had the opportunity to exchange experiences and share preliminary ideas with other academics and researchers in the field, at events and conferences. Along with vaccines and a greater understanding of measures to combat and prevent the pandemic, a new scenario began to emerge. Fresh studies were carried out to prove our initial assumptions, as we seek to demonstrate.

We also try to explain how the feminization of poverty caused by Covid-19 can impact the number of trafficked female victims. In this sense, it was considered that social inequalities are intersectional and accumulate because of various risk situations in search of survival. That is, when people are subjected to conditions of vulnerability, it is at that moment that they are constrained to seek alternative ways to survive and, in this core, human trafficking is structured on these inequalities to collect its victims. This makes us think about a precarious situation that has been worrisome in the Brazilian reality for a long time, adding to the worsening scenario that emerged with Covid-19.

Thinking about this reality encourages us to reflect on women's fundamental rights to work, health and assistance and how the worsening of inequalities requires a response from the State; otherwise, exercising these rights and citizenship itself is infeasible. The aggravated conditions of inequality, acting on vulnerable groups, given the impossibility of access to their social and economic rights, enhance the crime and make these groups easy targets for trafficking.

In its first part, this paper investigates the obstacles and new roles assumed by Brazilian women during the pandemic. In the sequence, it is appreciated which groups of Brazilian women have suffered the most severe impacts in their labor market with the Covid-19 pandemic, to expose what possibilities were offered to these groups and how these workers were not entirely absorbed until now. Considering the pandemic's impacts on the labor market in question, the last part of this article approaches the worsening of the feminization of poverty and its consequences for international trafficking in women.

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2. Covid-19 and Brazilian women in the labor market: obstacles and repercussions

To be able to weigh the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the labor market for Brazilian women and what is the relationship between this and a possible increase in human trafficking, it is necessary to understand the space of these women in the labor market in the first place, and then discuss how this niche was affected by the pandemic.

2.1 Characteristics of the female labor market

The national female labor market has specific characteristics: the participation rate of women in the labor market (aged 16 or over) reached 57.3% in 2014. The activities developed by them are varied; however, the numbers in question consider, as an activity, only paid work, and “disregard unpaid work developed in the domestic home care space, of children, the elderly, the sick” (PINHEIRO; JUNIOR; FONTOURA; SILVA, 2016, p. 5, free translation).

It should be noted that according to gender statistics, especially social indicators of women in Brazil (IBGE, 2018), the proportion of workers in part-time jobs – up to 30 hours a week – is higher among women (28.2%) than among men (14.1%). In addition, working women spend about 73% more hours than men on household chores.

Even though women are more educated than men in the labor market, in Brazil, 62.2% of public positions and 60.9% of private managerial positions were held by men, against only 37.8% and 39.1%, respectively, occupied by women in 2016. It is worth mentioning that, considering the racial cut, 23.5% of white women have completed higher education, a percentage 2.3 times higher than that of black or brown women (10.4%) who completed this education level (IBGE, 2018).

In 2018, the participation of women in the occupation contingent, that is, those who represent the percentage of working age and are effectively employed in formal paid work, was 45.6%. Taking this percentage into account, their presence in the domestic service workers, in general, reached 95%, followed by elementary school teachers, who represented 84% of the workforce in this sector, workers cleaning interior buildings with 74.9%, and call center workers – 72.20% (IBGE, PNAD Contínua, 2018).

It is important to highlight that for precarious work, “that is, without a contract or for a short-term contract, dissociated from rights and protections” (IPEA, 2015, p. 11, free translation), women are still the majority in the exercise of these functions, with 66% of them performing this type of work, and black women are those who perform precarious work the most, reaching almost 40% of the total contingent (PINHEIRO, JUNIOR, FONTOURA, SILVA. 2016, p. 12). In analyzing the characteristics of the labor market occupied by women, we must consider that “98% of the people who perform paid domestic work are women and that, among these, many are inserted in precarious work relationships” (BIROLI, 2018, p. 23, free translation).

The information that almost 70% of precarious occupations are carried out by women in Brazil reinforces the importance of studying which position of the labor market feminization occupies. It is worth mentioning that this category includes not only workers without a work contract, but also low-paid occupations, income from work not exceeding two minimum wages.

This degree of protection can be well measured by aggregating specific characteristics of workers considered here as indicators of precariousness in the occupation. PNDA allows the identification of working-class sectors employed without a formal contract or engaged in activities recognized as autonomous, with a low degree of separation between capital and labor and low remuneration. In this analysis, we consider only the fraction occupied with income from work not exceeding two minimum wages. Rural workers dedicated to family farming were also excluded from this category, given that the debate on working in the countryside has particularities that require a separate analysis. The workers employed in the formal sector under the outsourcing regime were not considered here, as PNAD does not provide precise elements to identify them. If considered, the rates presented here would be significantly higher (PINHEIRO; JUNIOR; FONTOURA; SILVA, 2016, p. 11, free translation).

In this sense, to characterize the challenges faced by women in the labor market, it is worth mentioning the research carried out within the scope of the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), which points out the effects that maternity leaves on the trajectory of formal female employment, showing that almost half of the women (48%) are dismissed at their return. The results suggest the need for new policies to promote greater attachment of women in the labor market, especially for workers with less education (MACHADO; PINHO NETO, 2016).

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In 2003 (IBGE, PNAD), the data indicated that of women with young children (0 to 6 years), 48.3% of them do not attend school or daycare. In 2015 (IBGE, PNAD), children under four years old (10.3 million) represented 5.1% of the population and were present in 13.7% (9.2 million) of households.

Moreover, for 83.8% (8.6 million) of these children, the primary person responsible for their care was female. About 52.1% of the children had the main responsible person employed, but when that person was a woman, the proportion dropped to 45.0%, while, among men, the estimate reached 89.0%. In addition, the average household income per capita was also lower in households with children under four years old (IBGE, PNAD, 2018).

The difficulty of professional relocation for these women due to maternity, especially during the pandemic, increases the possibility of precarious work. The characteristics of the workspace occupied by women are noticeable from the information collected; that is: the participation of women in the labor market is still lower than that of men when it comes to formal paid work; they appear in greater expression in domestic services and informal and precarious jobs, in addition to the fact that there is still latent cumulation with reproductive work. Having outlined this profile, it is necessary to reflect on the impacts suffered by the labor market occupied by these women because of the pandemic.

2.2 Intersection of the female labor market and the consequences brought by Covid-19

To verify how the Covid-19 pandemic increased inequalities, it is necessary to compare two periods: before the crisis and after the beginning of the crisis (BARBOSA, COSTA, HECKSHER, 2020, p. 58). In the first version of our research, we compared the last quarter of 2019, and the period covering March 2020 or the last half of March 2020. And, finally, we were able to add data collected up to March 2023, which refers to a period with the dissemination of vaccines and the adoption of more advanced actions to combat the disease.

Notably, about 20% of employed women, between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the month of March 2020, lost their job and transitioned to unemployment or economic inactivity. Compared to the same period in different years, the loss was much

more significant during the pandemic since the number previously hovered around 10% (BARBOSA; COSTA; HECKSHER, 2020, p. 59).

In the same way, it is perceived that people with less education and black people have suffered greater job losses. Considering that interrelated vulnerabilities create extremely challenging situations for some groups, black, young women with incomplete secondary education or less have suffered the most exacerbated impacts of the pandemic (BARBOSA; COSTA; HECKSHER, 2020, p. 59).

In this context, it is worth noting that there is a systematic discrimination based on race, manifesting itself through conscious and unconscious practices that have repercussions on disadvantages or privileges for individuals, depending on the racial group to which they belong. We conceive racism as a result of the social structure itself, where political, economic, legal and even family relationships are constituted. Thus, it is always imperative to reflect on the impacts of racism on social, political, and economic relations (ALMEIDA, 2018, p. 25).

The workers who belong to the lower third of the wage distribution, those who do not have a formal contract, and who worked part-time were the most affected during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore:

[...] workers in a more precarious situation in the labor market, those unable to do their job at a distance and those in the informal sector of the economy are at greater risk of losing their jobs (BARBOSA; COSTA; HECKSHER, 2020, p. 61, free translation).

In addition to the findings regarding the characteristics of the work, it should be noted that women were also affected by the pandemic “in a different way due to the absence of classroom activities and due to the increase in domestic and care activities” (BARBOSA; COSTA; HECKSHER, 2020, p. 61, free translation). In other words:

[...] the effects of this crisis on the labor market were immediate and affected workers differently. The most affected in terms of loss of occupation were women, the youngest, blacks and those with less education. Regarding jobs, the highlights are part-time workers, informal workers, and those with lower wages among those who have had significant losses (BARBOSA; COSTA; HECKSHER, 2020, p. 61, free translation).

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For some women, care crafts are mixed with home office and homeschooling routines. The inequalities of formal work are accentuated, added to the need to reconcile with the reproductive care of the home. In addition to class and race barriers, carrying out paid virtual activities can be an impossibility, either due to the informal employment relationship or the nature of the activity performed, conditions that worsen with the loss or decrease of income, and lack of networks of support due to social distance measures (MOREIRA *et al.*, 2020, p. 6).

Thus, even women who managed to develop their professional activities through remote work suffered with this new structure created due to the pandemic. We verify that a series of factors mentioned above can explain this. One of them is that women mostly perform domestic work, and it is common for them to assume other roles, combining employment with housework and children. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that without daycare centers and schools in operation, even remote work is difficult for women with children and adolescents at home.

In Brazil, considering the effects of unemployment, we had the Emergency Program for the Preservation of Employment and Income (Provisional Measure - MP nº 936/2020) and the Basic Emergency Income - RBE (Law nº 13.982) / 2020), that deals with the distribution of per capita household income and poverty. According to the program's rules, the RBE consisted of the unconditional transfer of three installments of R \$ 600.00 to the eligible population. The benefit reached 61 million people in June 2020. Even so, in comparison, the Bolsa Família Program (PBF) supported, in April 2020, a total of 14.3 million families (43.7 million people over whole), with an average benefit per family of R \$ 175.00 (BARBOSA; PRATES; 2020, p. 65-66).

We also had a provisional measure - Medida Provisória Nº 936/2020- to encourage employers and employees to agree to reduce working hours and wages. The reduction can be 25%, 50% or 70% for up to three months or the complete suspension of the employment contract. There was a complementary benefit based on the amount of unemployment insurance the worker would have access to, given their income level. About 8,154,997 agreements were sealed until May 2020 (4.4 million suspensive, 1.2 million with a 25% workload reduction, 1.4 million with a 50% reduction, 991 thousand with a 70% reduction). However, the measure focused only on formal employment, reducing labor income (BARBOSA; PRATES, 2020, p. 66).

Between 2019 and 2020, Brazil had a 10% drop in the number of employed women, that is, a drop of 4.2 million employed women. Of the 25 million admissions

to the labor market in Brazil between March 2020 and August 2021, men represented 61.77% and women 38.23% of job hires (VIEIRA; ATAÍDE; CURVINA, 2021, p. 77).

In the 3rd quarter of 2022, Brazil had 89.6 million women aged 14 or over, of which 47.9 million were part of the workforce. The female workforce was 47.5 million in 2019, falling to 46.4 million in 2021. Also, the number of unemployed black women increased from 4.4 million in 2019 to 7.3 million in 2021, according to PNAD. This set of factors influences the vulnerability conditions of these groups, operating to deepen existing structural inequalities. Furthermore, it is on them: violence, unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunities in the labor market, that human trafficking is erected.

3. Aggravation of vulnerability conditions

From the data above, it appears that when we consider the gender cut, added to race and occupation, it is visible that the structural and intersectional inequalities that already existed were intensified by the adverse conditions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in (i) increase in the unemployment rate, especially when it comes to young, black and poor women; (ii) difficulty or impossibility of carrying out informal jobs, in addition, of course, that remote jobs encounter socioeconomic and technological barriers and face cumulation with care focused on reproductive work. And the panorama of the labor market contributes to the worsening of vulnerable conditions.

We now begin to reflect on the influence of these factors in increasing the degree of vulnerability of this group, through the social vulnerability index developed by the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA). The concept of social vulnerability to which the Social Vulnerability Index (IVS) refers considers income insecurity resulting from the insertion in the labor market precariously. In addition, it defines that the well-being of families “still depends on adequate housing, with clean water supply and basic sanitation, access to health services, schools and quality public transport, among others” (IPEA, 2015, p. 15, free translation).

Hence, the referred index has three parameters of analysis: (i) IVS urban infrastructure; (ii) IVS human capital; (iii) IVS income and work. “The dimension that contemplates vulnerability in the urban infrastructure field seeks to reflect the conditions of access to basic sanitation and urban mobility services” (IPEA, 2015, p. 22, free translation). The human capital parameter, on the other hand, considers indicators

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that assist in the assessment of health conditions and access to education. The third parameter is related to income and work, and is covered in more detail below.

There are five criteria used to obtain the IVS income and work: (i) Percentage of people with per capita household income equal to or less than half the minimum wage; (ii) unemployment rate for the population aged 18 or over; (iii) percentage of people aged 18 or over with no complete elementary education and informally employed; (iv) percentage of people in households with per capita income less than half the minimum wage and dependent on the elderly; and (v) Activity rate of persons aged 10 to 14 years of age (IPEA, 2015).

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation of the Brazilian women's labor market was violently affected. To demonstrate this finding, we carried out an analysis based on the indicators used to obtain the IVS income and work, drawing relations with the consequences of the pandemic.

Appreciating data from 2010 on the percentage of people with per capita household income equal to or less than half the minimum wage, the universe of individuals is limited to those who live in permanent private households. Regarding women's income during the Covid-19 pandemic, IPEA found that those who receive the lower third of the wage distribution were the ones that suffered the most impact, with almost 30% of them suffering occupational loss due to the Covid-19 pandemic (IPEA, 2015).

The unemployment rate of the population aged 18 or over consists of verifying the percentage of the economically active population (PEA) in this unemployed age group, that is, not employed in the week prior to the census date, but looking for work over the month preceding the survey date. We see that 20% of employed women, between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the month of March 2020, lost their job and transitioned to unemployment or economic inactivity, which demonstrates a worsening of the unemployment situation during the period of the pandemic, and specifically regarding women (IPEA, 2015).

When it comes to the percentage of people aged 18 or over without complete elementary education and in informal occupation – which corresponds to the ratio between people aged 18 and over without complete elementary education, in informal occupation, and the total population in this age group, multiplied by hundred –, it is worth mentioning that the term “informal occupation” means working, but not with a formal contract. Also excluded are military personnel from the army, navy, aeronautics, military police or fire brigade, employed by the legal regime of civil servants or

employers and self-employed workers with a contribution to an official social security institute. About 70% of women in this context develop precarious jobs (IPEA, 2015).

The activity rate of persons aged 10 to 14 years of age concerning the ratio between persons aged 10 to 14 years of age economically active. This item assesses the issue of child labor. IBGE did not disclose any specific data regarding child labor; the National Forum for the Prevention and Eradication of Child Labor (FNPETI) issued a public note requesting the Institute to disclose data on child labor in Brazil in the years 2017 and 2018 as well regarding the pandemic. According to ECLAC and the ILO, “in Latin America and the Caribbean alone, approximately 326,000 children and adolescents between five and 17 years of age must seek work as a result of the post-pandemic economic and social crisis” (public note, FNPETI, 2020, free translation).

That said, it is evident that in all the indices to which we find data, it is possible to perceive that the pandemic has contributed in a transversal way to the increase in the vulnerabilities of these women. In addition, it is asserted that the concept of vulnerability allows us to make the understanding of what constitutes a situation of fragility in society more concrete; considering a person or group that “in the exact personal circumstances in which he finds himself, he has no better choice of survival, other than the trafficker’s proposal, although apparently abusive to the perception of the other” (CARNEIRO, 2019, p. 17, free translation).

It is also worth mentioning that according to the Additional Protocol to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime to Prevent, Repress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (“Palermo Protocol”, promulgated by Decree N° 5,107, of March 12, 2004):

The term “human trafficking” means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, accommodation, or reception of persons using the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, kidnapping, fraud, deception, abuse of authority or the situation of vulnerability or the delivery or acceptance of payments or benefits to obtain the consent of a person who has authority over another for the purpose of exploitation. The exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery, or practices like slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs (Art. 3, ‘a’, of Decree N° 5,107, of March 12, 2004).

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It is noteworthy that the protocol takes three fronts: preventing trafficking, fighting it, and protecting the victim. It is admitted in its preamble that effective action to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, especially women and children, requires a global and international approach, including measures to prevent trafficking, punish traffickers and protect victims, safeguarding internationally recognized fundamental rights.

In July 2020, Ipea, in partnership with UN Women, published technical note n. 47, on the vulnerabilities of domestic workers in the context of the pandemic in Brazil, considering that this type of work represents the reality of almost 15% of employed workers who are women (10% of whites and 18.6% of black). They are, in general, black and poor women, with low education who take on the domestic work of wealthier families. The note reflects the increased vulnerability of domestic workers due to the type of work performed, being exposed to objects and body fluids in their work environment (IPEA, 2020, p. 10).

Linking women to care roles – whether they are related to the care of their partners, children, elderly, or household chores – is a factor that limits their possibilities of study and qualification for the formal job market. Notably, women interrupt their studies to assume domestic chores and care about 13 times more than men. Women are concentrated in activities with low qualifications and remuneration and in sectors with little or no regulation, such as domestic work. These conditions leave them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. In addition, the naturalization of the sexual division of labor can make it difficult to visualize abusive and exploitative labor relations, while considered as “characteristic” activities of women, such as those related to cooking and care (MINISTÉRIO DA JUSTIÇA, 2021, p. 14).

It should be highlighted that 70% of domestic workers do not have a signed Employment Card. Labor bonds are precarious, and the type of work performed represents the main factors that expose these women in the pandemic context (IPEA, 2020). It is estimated that, in Brazil, around 826,000 domestic jobs were lost in the pandemic, according to a study by the Doméstica Legal Institute. Also, more than 1.5 million women domestic workers lost their jobs in Brazil during the pandemic (INSTITUTO DOMÉSTICA LEGAL, 2021).

4. Feminization of poverty and trafficking in women

The term “feminization of poverty” was used for the first time in 1978 by the North American sociologist Diane Pearce to talk about the trend of an increase in the proportion of women among groups of poor people, and the presence of these women as providers for their families. Subsequently, several works were carried out to verify the existence of feminization of poverty in the US and other countries (COSTA *et al.*, 2005, p. 8).

Conceptualizing “feminization of poverty” and bringing a methodology to measure that term can be a challenge. It is known that the analysis of the term depends on the dimension of gender, women or families headed by women, as well as what is meant by women and by family. In addition, what is considered poverty also influences the final assessment (IPEA, 2015, p. 14).

There is no consensus on the definition of the term “feminization of poverty”; however, some bases can be established. First, the term has a temporal dimension, in other words, it implies the comparison between two periods. Logically, the term also indicates a growth trend in poverty in the female universe (IPEA, 2015, p. 15).

Among the possible metrics for defining the phenomenon, in this paper, we assume that “an increase in the proportion of poor people among women or an increase in their poverty (a reduction in the income of poor women) would characterize the feminization of poverty. In other words, it would be an absolute worsening of poverty indicators for women.” (IPEA, 2015, p. 16, free translation). Based on this premise, it is possible to use this concept to appreciate the data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic and to measure the impact of this event on women’s lives after the pandemic’s beginning.

Gender discrimination is based on a system of oppression, in which gender relations organize a discriminatory social order for women, limiting or preventing the development of their potential in different social spheres. The feminization of poverty, recurrent in developing countries, is also characterized by the racial element. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that black or brown women together represent 39.8% of extremely poor people in Brazil. This information is important to understand the circumstances in which human trafficking occurs, considering that economic vulnerability is a risk factor (MINISTÉRIO DA JUSTIÇA, 2021, p. 13).

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Considering the periods between the fourth quarter of 2017 and the month of March 2018; the fourth quarter of 2018 and the month of March 2019; and the fourth quarter of 2019 and the month of March 2020, it appears that during the last period mentioned there was a drastic reduction in the income of poor women. Data from IPEA (2022) show that the income of Brazilians fell by 8.7% in the first quarter of 2022, compared to the first quarter of 2021. Women had a greater drop than men in income, that is, 6.7% for women against 5.5% for men in effective income in the first quarter of 2022. After all, women are the ones who had more occupational losses during the pandemic period; in addition, the losses were more significant, especially for those who do not have a formal contract, work part-time and receive lower wages.

According to the IPEA (2022), it can be noticed that income was below pre-pandemic levels, with a drop in income compared to the first quarters of 2019 and 2020. These aspects indicate insufficient income, which was the measurement chosen to determine how much the poverty situation worsened.

The fact that the pandemic has impacted women's loss of work and income and the consequent increase in vulnerability is perceptible by the data presented. What should be detailed are the possible consequences of this context on trafficking in women.

Human trafficking is a very old phenomenon related to the trafficking of Black people to the West, which has been transmuted with the advent of globalized society to broader contexts, focusing mainly on people in extreme conditions of socioeconomic and social vulnerability (CHIARELLO; ATCHABAHIAN; PLACCA, 2018, p. 38-39).

The UNIDOC Global Trafficking in Persons Report (2018) shows that adult women accounted for almost half of the victims detected in 2016. In addition, analyzing data on victims of trafficking in the past 15 years, women and girls together continued to represent more than 70% of the detected victims of trafficking (UNIDOC, 2018-I, p. 25). Of women trafficked globally, 83% are trafficked for sexual exploitation, 13% for forced labor, and 4% for other purposes (UNIDOC, 2018-I, p. 28). Thus, women and girls are disproportionately affected by human trafficking, representing 99% of victims in the commercial sex industry and 58% in other sectors, in line with the International Labor Organization (2020).

Understanding the characteristics of women victims of trafficking helps in understanding how the context of excessive vulnerability created by Covid-19 can contribute to an increase in the trafficking of women. It is known that anyone can be a victim of human trafficking, regardless of social class. However, certain characteristics

make some women and girls more vulnerable and more likely to be victims. Both the precariousness of the workforce and the social construction of subordination are reasons for women and girls to be recruited for sexual purposes, as we will see below:

The case study reports build two opposing ideal types for the recruited woman: a) the naive, humble person, who goes through great financial difficulties and is therefore easily deceived, and b) the woman who has the “domain of the situation”, evaluates the risks very clearly and is willing to run them to earn money.

Generally, these women come from popular classes, have low schooling, live in peripheral urban spaces lacking sanitation and transportation (among other community social goods), live with a family member, have children and perform low-demand work activities. Many have already gone through prostitution.

These women are involved in work activities related to domestic service provision (house-keeping, maid, cooking, janitor) and trade (general services assistant, waitress, supermarket clerk, clothing store attendant, title sellers), discredited or even subordinate functions. *These functions, poorly paid, without a formal contract, without guarantee of rights, with high turnover and involve a prolonged and exhausting daily journey, establishing a demotivating routine and devoid of possibilities for growth and improvement* (LEAL; LEAL, 2002, p. 58, emphasis added, free translation).

There is an intersection between the group of women who most suffered the consequences of the pandemic and the group in extreme vulnerability, which is often the focus of traffickers.

In addition, other difficulties were imposed because of the pandemic. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC), in its preliminary findings and messages based on a quick review to address the Covid-19 Pandemic in human trafficking, the unprecedented measures taken to compress the curve contagion - which includes mandatory quarantine, curfew and confinement, as well as travel restrictions and limitations on economic activities and public life - may appear, at first glance, effective in controlling and increasing police presence at borders. However, these measures can also cooperate with the clandestine (UNODOC, 2020, p. 1).

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In other words, when discussing human trafficking, criminal agents adjust their “business models” to new circumstances, even abusing communication technologies. On the other hand, Covid-19 affects the ability of public authorities and non-governmental organizations to offer essential services to victims of this crime by intensifying systemic economic and social inequalities, which are among the main causes of human trafficking (UNODOC, 2020, p. 1).

Measures to combat the pandemic can worsen the situation of victims confined by their traffickers. Furthermore, the increase in domestic violence levels is a worrying indicator for the living conditions of many victims of trafficking, such as those in domestic servitude or sexual slavery, forms of exploitation that disproportionately affect women and girls (UNODOC, 2020, p. 2).

Evidently, human rights violations cannot be understood as resulting from the pandemic. That is, they already occurred prior to the crisis now installed, so much so that they are on the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 of the United Nations (UN), which make up the so-called “Agenda 2030” (ATCHABAHIAN; GAMBA, 2020, p. 14).

Women and girls remain the main victims of trafficking worldwide, mainly for sexual purposes. The development of social networks and chat applications facilitated access to potential victims by traffickers during the Covid-19 blockades, circumventing the inefficiency of traditional means for recruiting sexual exploitation. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) asked governments to seek all appropriate means to eliminate this type of trafficking (ONU BRASIL, 2020).

The UNODC Report “The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons and Responses to Challenges” (2021) shows that the status of the migrant, ethnicity and disability, in addition to the socioeconomic status, are some characteristics that, combined with gender, have the potential to exacerbate women’s vulnerability during emergencies. In addition, women and girls are generally also most affected by human trafficking, especially sexual exploitation.

The negative effects of Covid-19 have the potential to create additional situations of risks for women and girls in 2020, around 114 million people lost their jobs, so most of those who lost their livelihoods were women. Women’s jobs are 19% more at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic than men’s employment, a difference that can

be measured due to occupational segregation by gender, which makes women work mostly in the most affected sectors (UNODC, 2021, p. 28).

As we commented, the measures implemented to contain the spread of Covid-19 also exposed women to an increased risk of gender and domestic violence. With restricted mobility, school closures and financial constraints, causing additional stress on families, which can trigger higher levels of substance abuse and violence against partners and children. The connection between gender violence and human trafficking needs to be watched, as the two crimes are intertwined with some of the factors of the victims' vulnerabilities (UNODC, 2021, p. 29).

The UNDOC Trafficking Report 2022 shows that the Covid-19 pandemic has created conditions for an increase in human trafficking and sexual exploitation of the most vulnerable groups around the world. Considering the change in the number of detected victims (per 100,000 population), Brazil's percentage reached 250% in 2020-2021, compared with 71% in 2019-2021 (UNODC, 2022, p. 22).

To illustrate this scenario, it is worth mentioning that the 2022 Report on Human Trafficking in Brazil provided information that most of the victims of trafficking identified are Black or brown people, and many are Afro-Brazilian or of African descent, so that 63 % of victims assisted in 2020 were identified as Black or brown.

In 2021, the Brazilian government reported identifying 441 victims of human trafficking, compared to identifying and providing protective services to 357 potential victims of human trafficking in 2020. As for the profile of trafficking, traffickers exploit women and children from Brazil and other South American countries, and when talking about transgender women, they are one of the most vulnerable populations in Brazil, even more so if the focus is on sex trafficking (BRASIL, 2022).

The pandemic brought a new paradigm, acting directly on health and the labor market, imposing conditions of survival beyond those existing, such as poverty. Unprecedented difficulties have arisen, taking advantage, however, of existing structural inequalities. The intensification of conditions of poverty, which included increased unemployment, precarious jobs, and the search for alternatives for survival, contributed to the vulnerability of these women as targets of trafficking.

Data presented during a public hearing about Brazilians abroad promoted by the Permanent Joint Commission on International Migration and Refugees (CMMIR) in December 2021 show that if victims were previously attracted to trafficking by people close to them, today, what we have is great interaction on social media. Thus, several

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people receive proposals for work and romantic relationships and drop everything in search of these promises, only later discovering that they were misleading (AGÊNCIA SENADO, 2023).

Countries such as Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia are routes of origin and Brazil has received people from these countries for exploration in its territory. What has been mapped from Brazil abroad is that the United States, Switzerland, and Italy are the countries where Brazilian men and women are most exploited. Of the Brazilian victims, 80% are women, 18% are men and 2% are trans people. Most of this exploitation is for sexual purposes and 44% is for work (AGÊNCIA SENADO, 2023).

We verified that poverty and unemployment are among the vulnerability factors linked to human trafficking. That is, deteriorated economic conditions and job insecurity in the countries of origin can increase the number of people willing to take risks searching for job opportunities. This economic vulnerability acts as a factor in the exploitation of these people. Also, human trafficking is related to other structural circumstances of inequality that affect some specific groups, such as women (MINISTÉRIO DA JUSTIÇA, 2021, p. 17). The economic effect of the pandemic has contributed to the worsening of labor exploitation. In addition to the sanitary measures of social isolation, we had a decrease in the demand for products, an increase in food prices, people being evicted from their homes, in addition to the precariousness of work (MINISTÉRIO DA JUSTIÇA, 2021, p. 19).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to demonstrate that the feminization of poverty, the worsening conditions of vulnerability and related barriers to the labor market already presented themselves as a cause of trafficking in women in periods prior to the pandemic. These factors, added to the increase in unemployment, precarious work, inaccessibility to technologies and even to support networks, constitute a set of factors that strongly indicate, as has been gauged in preliminary studies by international organizations, that trafficking, in an “invisible” maneuver, has been reformulating its strategies to feed on these weaknesses erected under an unequal structure, in which the main victims of this activity remain girls and women, especially when dealing with trafficking for sexual purposes. Looking at the complete picture of this group, the most impacted people are poor Black women.



In this sense, the present work sought to trigger an alert to this worrying situation, which already reveals the intensity of the conditions of the vulnerability of women as victims targeted by trafficking, serving as a warning to public bodies and civil society to reinforce the protection of women. in this period. Preventive and protective coping with the victim is extremely relevant in this period, even more so considering that the measures taken suffer the serious risk of being neutralized by the loss of inspection efficiency of the public power due to the sanitary impositions resulting from the scenario of Covid-19.

This retro alimentation from trafficking, equipped with the new paradigm brought by the pandemic, relies on the use of differentiated technologies and taking advantage of the opportune circumstances of clandestinely empowering people who have already suffered a considerable load of impacts related to transversal inequalities and who, in this *sui generis* context, were forced to seek alternative conditions for their survival.

In the Brazilian market, we saw that even in the face of a scenario of gender and race inequality, in which women are the majority in informal jobs and domestic services, in the spectrum of the last decade, the vision was enthusiastic in the participation of women. in the job market, a process that risks paralyzing or even going backward. Thus, it is necessary to expand the actions aimed at this confrontation, more urgently of a preventive-protective vector, forcing us to reflect on how to give resilience and effectiveness to the design of policies.

Taking as a reference the documents analyzed by UNODC from 2017 to 2020, it is pointed out that the relevance of developing, among other measures, tools for rapid assessment of the impact of the pandemic for victims – especially in essential services – and application capabilities of the law, rethink the management of resources from Funds aimed at victims of human trafficking, carrying out studies on the pandemic in victims and organized crime groups.

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