

Women and their families' food insecurity during a pandemic in Brazil

This report presents preliminary results from the research “COVID-19, risk, impact and gender response” carried out in Brazil by Fiocruz and partner institutions¹. Several subjects related to the impact of COVID-19 in women's lives are addressed by the research, but this report focuses specifically on food insecurity. We present stories showing the struggles faced by the women interviewed during the research, their ways of confronting these situations and their perceptions about how the state handled the necessary measures in order to deal with the harsh reality in which they live.

Gender and food

Pre-COVID-19 studies have shown that moderate or serious food insecurity in Brazil was more prevalent in low-income countryside households where the reference person was a self-reported black (black or *parda*)² woman with low levels of education. Research conducted during the pandemic confirm that to be the standard³. Data shows the importance of analyzing the subject, taking women as reference, with a gender perspective. Furthermore, due to standard gender roles and division of labor, particularly housework, food has been women's responsibility throughout history. Women have more knowledge and information about purchasing and preparing food, making their perspective about food insecurity during the pandemic very important.

Interviewee profiles

Data presented in this report were gathered through in-depth interviews based on semi-structured guidelines, carried out with women from two urban agglomerations, Cabana do Pai Tomás (including neighborhoods from West Belo Horizonte, MG) and Sapopemba (district including neighborhoods from East São Paulo, SP), and also two quilombola communities from Vale do Jequitinhonha, Córrego do Rocha (Chapada do Norte, MG) and Córrego do Narciso (Araçuaí, MG). Those territories were chosen as they are low-income regions, characterized by significantly vulnerable processes during the pandemic, where researchers were already conducting academic activities. In urban areas, the interviews were carried out by phone between March and August 2021. In rural areas, due to the structural hardships in getting telephone lines and internet access, the majority of the interviews were carried out in person, following COVID-19 safety protocols, between late 2020 and July 2021. In total, 45⁴ women were interviewed,

16 from Cabana do Pai Tomás, 15 from Sapopemba, six from Córrego do Narciso and eight from Córrego do Rocha. Regarding race/color/ethnicity, 22 interviewees reported themselves as black (black or *parda*), 14 quilombolas⁵, one as an indigenous person and eight as white. Only eight interviewees had no children, one of them being pregnant during the time the interview was conducted. Their age ranged from 21 to 64 years-old. The research in quilombola communities is still under way, due to issues contacting women from said regions.

Pandemic impact in food access

The majority (61%) of the interviewed women reported that the pandemic had negative effects on access to food. Income reduction and price increase were pointed to as the main causes of this problem. It is important to emphasize that food access was interpreted differently by the interviewees. Some women reported not having been impacted by food scarcity because they were not starving, or because they had received food donations. On the other hand, some women reported a great impact on their food intake, even with donations. Furthermore, even though some women reported not having difficulties in accessing food, they said they had to adopt strategies to reduce the quantity or the quality of the food they consumed. An additional question about reduction of food consumption was asked to 30 interviewees, of which 25 (83%) answered they had reduced the quality or quantity of food consumed in some way. Beef was identified as the hardest food to come by during the pandemic, followed by basic items, such as rice, beans, oil and salt. Some women prioritized the quality of food over quantity, like Marcela:

“I mean, you used to buy a banana bunch, nowadays you buy half a bunch, right? It is less. But, I mean, the quality of the food we are trying to keep the same.”



Others, such as Beatriz, ended up consuming cheaper, lower quality food:

“Thank God, we didn’t starve, but the quality of the food is much lower, because we had to decide to buy cheaper food to keep eating every day.”

Most reports revealed either light food insecurity, characterized by a decrease in food quality or moderate food insecurity due to the reduced quantity of food. However, some serious food insecurity reports, in which starvation became a reality in the household, were very alarming. Antônia, from the quilombola community Córrego do Narciso, says, “I am thinking hunger is coming back”, like in her childhood:

“Because we, actually, we was raised with bone soup, we didn’t eat meat because we had no means. (...) We had those rice, we sifted, the rich ate the good rice, but we, we ate canjiquinha, that broken rice grain, that was what my mother used to buy at the farmer’s market. (...) Then, today we don’t even have that anymore, so, now things are hard for us.”

Emília, Sapopemba resident, mother of two children and six months pregnant, told researchers that she and her husband have informal jobs, with no guaranteed income and, because of that, “some weeks we don’t even have money for bread.” Márcia, currently living in Sapopemba as well, says she and her husband went through some bad times when they lived in the countryside, when “There were days we had a cup of rice for two people. Things are very ugly.”

In rural areas, the lack of water aggravates food insecurity by hampering crops, traditionally used for food and trade. Marina, from Córrego do Rocha, says that her crops teem with food during rainy times, but during the drought:

“You can’t plant, because when it blooms, that turns into the pumpkin, you have no water. So you see the plant die and you can do nothing. Because you need the water to drink, you can’t use it to water the plants.”

Some women reported having increased food consumption due to being confined indoors and feelings of anxiety. Like Sônia:

“Then, you see, some nights I got very anxious and I ate, ate and kept eating, I ate and just sat there, and went nowhere, I ate, sat there and never left.”



Many employers used remote work to justify taking away meal vouchers, without regard to food consumption at home, many times higher than in restaurants, as seen in Lígia’s report:

“Because when I worked at the company, I had some vouchers, now that I work at home, they give me no vouchers anymore. They think I don’t need to eat out or go anywhere, so no need for vouchers.”

Social welfare policies during the pandemic

Emergency Aid

Emergency help was collected by 42,5% of the interviewed women and 39% said somebody from the same household got it (besides themselves or in case they didn’t collect it). Many women criticized the Emergency Aid, judging it as insufficient to meet their food needs. They also criticized the bureaucracy involved in the enrollment process for receiving aid. There have been reports of women who could not collect aid or stopped getting it with no explanation. In addition there were women who weren’t able to collect it or whose partner got it in their stead. Such is Suzana’s mother’s case:

“At home my mother got the aid, at the beginning but then my father got it and my mother lost it, it’s very bureaucratic that aid thing.”

Low-income employed women could not collect Emergency Aid or any other form of help from the government, even when they could not afford food. Flávia is a single mother and provides for two children with her minimum-wage income. She reports having no access to any form of government aid, relying on donations from different sources:

“I get no aid. It’s just food donated by friends, you know? (...) We ask for help then somebody donates, or the school (where she works as a cleaner) donates. Sometimes there’s vegetables, there’s cookies, sometimes there’s a staple food package.”



Photo credit: Mídia Ninja



Staple Food Donations

Food donations were fundamental during the pandemic and 72% of the interviewees reported having received donations (26 women). Of those, 61% believed the donation to have come from a government source (16 women). However, they said donations were not adequate to cover everybody in need from their communities. In Belo Horizonte, staple food packages provided by the city government, particularly through public schools, were praised. State schools also donated, but Amanda, from Cabana do Pai Tomás urban agglomeration, criticized donation coverage, saying not every child was granted it:

“About the State, I heard the government donates a school meal kit, but not for everyone, just for people who get Bolsa Família. What about those who don’t?”

Furthermore, some women noted the donations sometimes went to people who did not need it, as stated by Joana:

“Many people who had the right for the package couldn’t register for it. Got it? They should look into it. I know people who get the right to receive it, by law, you know? But they don’t get it.”

Luíza, complained the package she received from Belo Horizonte City Hall, through her two-year-old son’s school, did not provide food security, due to low food diversity:

“There’s no vitamin-rich, protein-rich meal, it’s always rice, beans and flour, you know? There’s no other food to make a meal, which is also important, right? A meal rich in protein, minerals, vitamins, you know?”

In São Paulo, some women criticized government slowness in distributing food packages, with some food reaching them after it had expired, as seen in this report from Emília, resident of Sapopemba:

“They donated staple food at the school during the pandemic, but the sausage was spoiled. They waited too much. They preferred to see the food spoiled first and then deliver it.”

Government evaluation

The lack of initiative and action from the government in the face of food insecurity was criticized. Women commented that the government could have managed the increase in food costs better, donated more staple food, acted more quickly and enacted more policies to fight hunger. Jussara’s report, from Belo Horizonte, summarizes the general dissatisfaction towards the government:

“Though City Hall talks about a city food security plan, I think it’s on paper only. You have a big budget, but the information I get is that very little was used to fight hunger and welfare policies. The entire government doesn’t notice this is important. The inertia is impressive.”

Federal government, above all, was heavily criticized in respect to its lack of food security policies. As recalled by Paula, from São Paulo, the president Jair Bolsonaro went as far as denying the existence of starving people in the country:

“I saw an article in which the president was saying nobody is starving in Brazil, that starvation was a lie. Then I wanted for a moment to walk by him and say this: ‘How do you know it, son? Come take a walk with me and you’ll change your mind’. Then you see they don’t care, you know?”

Women leadership and solidarity networks

In the face of insufficient government action, several solidarity networks have been strengthened and created in the communities, many of them led by women. Among the interviewees, 85% reported having taken part in food donations, either sharing their own food, or procuring partnerships, helping with food distribution and identifying families in need within their territories. Here we tell the stories of three of these women who agreed to be identified.



Lúcia Helena Apolinária - Vice-President of Vila Imperial Community Association in Cabana do Pai Tomás urban agglomeration (Belo Horizonte - MG).

Living in the communities and dealing with them for many years I have seen people in need of food during the Dictatorship. In the 80s, 90s there used to be that demand because of the huge inflation, people used to beg on the streets. Then, from 2000 onwards, it was easy to get food. But today, in this pandemic of 2020 and 2021, harder in 2021, much more people are starving. I mean, literally, sometimes there's nothing to eat or to give their kids to eat. We have worried a lot about that, trying to gather resources to somehow get food for those families going through that right now. We have made partnerships, like with Mesa Brasil. We have partnership with CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores), we donate packed meals three times a week, we cook it and we donate it. It's little, 150 packed meals. I got a partnership and every month we donate, on average, 70 staple food packages. And a vegetable kit on weekends or Thursdays or Fridays. But, you see, it's a lot of people asking for food, asking for these meals.



Maria Aparecida Machado Silva - Rural Workers Union President in Chapada do Norte (Vale do Jequitinhonha - MG).

So, it's a challenge because, you know, people don't think this is a union role. The union doesn't donate, it fights for people's rights, for rural workers' welfare. But then I said: "Where's that welfare? What we're doing for it?" Food is also welfare. We went to 98% of the rural communities to give them this package. And we didn't invite anybody to leave their houses, we took them to the families. We got help of the health workers to map out vulnerable families, you know? In some communities there was five, in some ten, in some 20. We went to families that, like, had no wage-earners. Who's retired can get by with the minimum, that much they have. 'Bolsa Família' (government aid) is not income, so 'Bolsa Família' families are a target for us. So we created that strategy: families with no income are going to be helped. We found out 620 families, we managed to help 500. Bottom-line: 120 families would get no help. Then, do you believe it? I recorded a video saying "I'm here at Batieiro community, ok? Donating food, thank God, but more people need it and we can't donate for everybody, we don't have enough for everybody". Then I sent the video to the representative, you know? He chipped in and donated R\$ 3000. We had a quote and we managed to help the remaining 120 families. Since then we donated a lot of packages for vulnerable families. It's a lot of work, but we managed to get partnerships and we did a great job in our town.





Miriam Duarte Pereira - AMPARAR (CASA Foundation Inmate Friends and Family Association) Founder, in Sapopemba (SP)

I'm one of the founders of AMPARAR. But AMPARAR's story starts before its founding. We started in 1990 with a lot of women who had their sons' freedom taken

away in FEBEM (prison for minors). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, brought about multiple sufferings related to prisons, inmates' health condition and difficulties in communication between arrested people and their families. Besides those problems, inmates and their families food and financial insecurity has demanded, since the start of the pandemic, an ever-growing social mobilization to try and get urgent aid. The Coalizão Negra, Uneafro, CEDECA Sapopemba e CDHS (Sapopemba Center of Human Rights) have contributed with staple food packages so AMPARAR can donate it to the families in need. We also try to chip in to pay utility bills and even rent for the families.

About the research

Many women who were invited to participate in the research had had previous contact with researchers, and others were recruited through snowball sampling. Oral and/or written consent was obtained from interviewees, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was used for determining fast results, and these were shared in a timely manner, specifically to public administrators. Deeper intersectional analysis will be carried out for a better understanding of the differences in food accessibility among the different women we spoke with, but we hope these preliminary results draw attention to these urgent issues in need of response, such as food security, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notes

¹CEFET-MG, FGV, UFMG E UFGRS.

²PNAD, 2004; Marin-Leon et al. 2011. Bens de consumo e insegurança alimentar: diferenças de gênero, cor de pele autorreferida e condição socioeconômica. Rev Bras Epidemiol, 14(3): 398-410.

³Maluf et al. 2021. Inquérito Nacional sobre Insegurança Alimentar no Contexto da Pandemia da Covid-19 no Brasil, Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional (Rede PENSSAN); Galindo et al. 2021. Efeitos da pandemia na alimentação e na situação da segurança alimentar no Brasil. Food for Justice Working Paper Series, no. 4

⁴Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, we did not ask exactly the same questions of each interviewee. To calculate the percentage of answers, the total sample had to be adjusted.

⁵The majority of the quilombola people identify themselves as black or pardo. However, we opted for accepting quilombola as an ethnicity on itself, since it is recognized by law as being valid a self-reported ethnicity.

Researchers

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