

## Gender and Food insecurity in the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil: hunger through women's voices

Brunah Schall (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9212-649X>)<sup>1</sup>  
Flora Rodrigues Gonçalves (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4854-5774>)<sup>1</sup>  
Polyana Aparecida Valente (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1441-328X>)<sup>1</sup>  
Mariela Rocha (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8388-0653>)<sup>1</sup>  
Bráulio Silva Chaves (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5944>)<sup>1,2</sup>  
Paloma Porto (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8583-6592>)<sup>1</sup>  
Agda Marina Moreira (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0091-1256>)<sup>1</sup>  
Denise Nacif Pimenta (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3248-9472>)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** *This paper presents the results of the research nested in the international project “Gender and COVID-19”, which includes several topics related to the impact of the pandemic on the lives of women and their families, including food insecurity and hunger. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from December 2020 to November 2021 with 49 women living in two urban conglomerates, Cabana do Pai Tomás (Belo Horizonte, MG) and Sapopemba (São Paulo, SP), and two rural quilombola communities, Córrego do Rocha (Chapada do Norte, MG) and Córrego do Narciso (Araçuaí, MG). The analyses were based on the following categories: hunger-related feelings and terms; reduced food amount and quality; lack of food and nutrients; difficulties producing food, receiving emergency aid or food donations; governments evaluation and support networks. The respondents’ reports show the challenges they experienced, their coping methods, and criticism of the government’s lack of responses. Besides presenting a gender perspective, women, especially the leaders who worked in the construction of solidarity networks, are fundamental voices in planning actions to prevent and mitigate the impacts of emergencies in their communities.*

**Key words** *Gender, Hunger, Food insecurity, COVID-19, Pandemic*

<sup>1</sup> Instituto René Rachou – Fiocruz Minas, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz. Av. Augusto de Lima 1715, Barro Preto. 30190-009 Belo Horizonte MG Brasil. [brunah.schall@gmail.com](mailto:brunah.schall@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica de Minas Gerais (CEFET-MG). Belo Horizonte MG Brasil.

## Introduction

Since February 2020, in the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of academics from Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and China have established a collaboration to research gender and COVID-19 in these countries. Subsequently, starting in June 2020, with funding from the Gates Foundation, the project was extended to Brazil, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, and Nigeria. This collaboration was called the “Gender and COVID-19” project ([www.genderandcovid-19.org](http://www.genderandcovid-19.org)). It aims to establish the gaps in the government response to COVID-19 concerning gender quickly and practically, producing evidence that can support decisions on policies to protect women and vulnerable groups in general. Like the groups that were organized internationally, in Brazil, the project included scholars from different areas, institutions, and networks, coordinated by FIOCRUZ Minas in partnership with the Federal Center for Technological Education of Minas Gerais (CEFET-MG), the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV), the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and the COVID-19 Humanities MCTI Network (<https://www.ufrgs.br/redecovid19humanidades/index.php>). The research presented in this paper results from this extensive network of international and national collaboration.

Studies before the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that, in Brazil, moderate or severe food insecurity is more prevalent in households whose reference person is a less-educated self-referred black (brown or black) woman<sup>1,2</sup>. Research during the pandemic reinforces this pattern: women and households supported by them were the most affected by hunger in the pandemic<sup>3,4</sup>. These data show the importance of analyzing the topic with women as a reference, from an intersectional perspective of gender, ethnicity, and class, among other social indicators. Moreover, historically, women have had greater responsibility for food within households due to traditional gender roles and the unequal division of labor, specifically, domestic work and care. In the case of food, this inequality escalated during the pandemic, when the time spent by women on food preparation increased significantly<sup>5</sup>.

Women are primarily responsible for food production in the countryside. A survey by the National Supply Company (CONAB) in 2020 showed that they corresponded to 74% of family farmers who supply the Food Acquisition Pro-

gram (PAA)<sup>6</sup>. In urban spaces, they stand out by leading the formation of solidarity networks that fight for food security in slums<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the female role in political activism and the production, acquisition, donation, distribution, and preparation of food reinforces the importance of investigating their ties with food insecurity during the pandemic in different Brazilian contexts and territories.

Hunger is an event defined, observed, and analyzed from different contending perspectives. The first attempts to measure hunger reduced it to body mass indices and the number of calories ingested, associated with a view strictly concerned with individual energy balance<sup>8</sup>. This conception was widely criticized in order to incorporate psychological, social, cultural, and environmental aspects, reflecting on hunger in a socially recognized way and not just clinically identified. Furthermore, hunger started to be studied as a process, with stages of gradual intensity and considerations about the quality, amount, and frequency of food, with the adoption of food (in) security scales and questionnaires applied in households<sup>8</sup>. These scales contributed to understanding hunger as a highly complex event. However, the term “food insecurity” adopted in these scales has become a euphemism that often masks the existence of hunger, as discussed by Ribeiro Júnior et al.<sup>8</sup> Such concealment is also part of class structures, especially those historically found in Brazilian society, marked by slavery, the primacy of large estates, and hunger as an indelible factor of dependent capitalism<sup>9</sup>. Thus, this paper will aim to predominantly use the term “hunger”, although “food insecurity” can be used as a synonym.

Despite the theoretical/analytical advances, a view of hunger as something associated only with malnourished bodies in contexts of misery or exceptional conditions, such as wars and epidemics, remains in common sense. Such representations help deny the existence of hunger in apparent “normality” situations. Josué de Castro questioned them in his book *Geografia da fome*<sup>10</sup> (*Geography of hunger*), where he makes two important distinctions: total hunger (lack of food) and partial or concealed hunger (lack of nutritional elements). He also differentiates between permanent (endemic) and transient (epidemic) hunger. As the author emphasizes, partial and permanent hunger is widespread and severe in the Brazilian context, leading to a gradual, invisible degradation of the health of entire populations over time.

Hunger in the COVID-19 pandemic has been addressed in political statements as a transitory event, determined by economic factors resulting from the limitations necessary to contain the virus. However, we should point out that hunger in the country has already been deteriorating due to the economic and political crisis, especially since 2014<sup>4</sup>. The current stage is not simply a sudden result of the pandemic. As Josué de Castro<sup>10</sup> emphasizes, hunger results from political decision-making guided by economic interests when public health interests should guide it.

In this sense, the pandemic has made it increasingly evident to favor and maintain economic privileges for a minority, agribusiness, pesticides, transgenics, and monocultures to the detriment of the health of most of the population, especially those living in the inland region and developing sustainable family farming. Research shows that food insecurity in rural areas, precisely where food is produced, is more significant than in urban areas<sup>1,3,4,8</sup>, due to low income, limited access to water sources, lack of basic sanitation, and undercapitalization of food security public policies.

Thus, this paper aims to answer the question: How have women from vulnerable urban and rural contexts been addressing food security in the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil?

### Methodological procedures

The research included in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured guide revised after pre-tests with five women. The interview guide and the Informed Consent Term (ICT) were approved (CAAE 39133020.8.0000.5091) by the Ethics Committees (CEPs) of the participating institutions and the National Research Ethics Committee (CONEP), and are available at SciELO Data (<https://doi.org/10.48331/scielodata.S3XCJX>).

The interviews were held with women from two urban conglomerates, Cabana do Pai Tomás (which includes districts in the western region of Belo Horizonte, MG) and Sapopemba (a district that includes districts in the eastern region of São Paulo, SP), and from two rural quilombola communities from the Vale do Jequitinhonha (MG), Córrego do Rocha (Chapada do Norte, MG) and Córrego do Narciso (Araçuaí, MG). These territories were selected because they harbor low-income populations marked by significant vulnerability vis-à-vis the pandemic, where the project researchers were already conducting extension

and research actions. While similar concerning the factors mentioned, each territory has fundamental particularities to understanding hunger, food insecurity, and their local specificities.

Interviews in urban areas were conducted via telephone from March to August 2021. In rural areas most were held face-to-face, following all security protocols, from late 2020 to November 2021. Forty-nine women were interviewed. Sixteen were from Cabana do Pai Tomás, 15 from Sapopemba, nine from Córrego do Narciso, and nine from Córrego do Rocha. The mean length of the interviews was one hour. The interviews were often rescheduled due to respondents' lack of time, as they were overloaded with intense work routines. Most interviews were held at night when they found spare time. Few respondents accessed the internet, so the telephone was the most adopted means. The telephone signal was not always of good quality, which in some cases compromised the quality of the recordings. Some did not answer a call from an unknown number, requiring contact by referral (snowball method). The ICT was essential to prove the legitimacy of the research and establish trust. The impersonal, remote interview required greater care in inviting to participate, out of respect for the mourning and difficulties experienced by the respondents. The researchers' previous knowledge of people and their contexts was fundamental in this process.

The results presented in this paper correspond to the issue of food insecurity, which was addressed in the interview guide mainly through five questions: whether the pandemic affected access to food; whether it was necessary to reduce the consumption of any food during the pandemic; if during the pandemic: a) they received food donations; b) they made food donations; and how they evaluate the performance of governments regarding this issue. Complementary questions were freely asked by the interviewers as the interview progressed, since it is a semi-structured interview guide.

The answers to these specific questions and mentions of the topic in other parts of the interview were analyzed in greater depth concerning their content, based on the literature on the subject. The main categories of analysis were hunger-related feelings and terms; reduced amount and quality of food; lack of food and nutrients; difficulties producing food, receiving emergency aid or donating food; assessment of governments and support networks. A sociodemographic questionnaire was employed to profile the respondents, with questions about age, race/skin

color/ethnicity, schooling, marital status, number of children, pregnancy, number of household residents, and household income.

## Results and discussion

### Profile of respondents

Twenty-two of the 49 respondents self-identified as black (brown or black), 18 quilombola, one indigenous, and eight white. Only eight of the respondents did not have children, and one of them was pregnant at the time of the interview. The respondents' age ranged from 21 to 64 years, securing a relevant age diversity. Concerning marital status, 18 respondents were married, nine lived in common-law marriage, 16 were single, four were divorced, and two were widows. Eight of the 16 single women were mothers.

Regarding household income, the data were organized into the number of minimum wages or their fraction (reference value of R\$ 1,100.00, which corresponded to 193.78 US Dollars on December 16, 2021). Thus, the research found that nine women had a household income of less than one minimum wage per month, 11 earned more than 1-2 minimum wages, seven had a monthly household income of 2-3 minimum wages, four women earned more than 3-5 minimum wages per month, and five earned more than five minimum wages. In other words, 41.66% of the respondents had a monthly household income of less than two minimum wages. Nine women did not respond, and four did not have a fixed income. The number of people per household ranged from two to seven people.

Still, considering the monthly household income, emergency aid was essential for the subsistence of many women during some periods of the pandemic in Brazil. Among the respondents, 18 women (36.73%) claimed to have received the aid, while 24 (48.97%) did not receive it, and six did not respond (12.24%).

Below, we present reports with fictitious names to ensure the respondents' confidentiality, as informed in the ICT. These accounts are essential to understanding how these women are affected by food insecurity in their most diverse contexts.

### Hunger as a taboo

*These hardships I'm going through with my son. This situation with us at home: the lack of*

*food. [...] I don't want to talk anymore* (white female, 51 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).

The above account portrays the difficulty faced by many women to report the several deprivations they have endured during the pandemic. Besides the impersonal telephone interview, this difficulty may be associated with the negative feelings that these reports arouse. More specifically, some respondents reported feeling ashamed. When talking about her past, Sônia, from the quilombola community Córrego do Rocha, comments on this feeling when she and her daughter reached the point of having only coffee at home:

*Sometimes, people are ashamed to tell. I used to be ashamed. Today, I'm not anymore. (...) Then I got desperate, but I didn't tell anyone about my situation. (...) Because I never liked being exposed like this, right?* (quilombola woman, 50 years old, Córrego do Rocha, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

This feeling is also perceived in urban areas, as Marcela, from Cabana do Pai Tomás, comments when asked about a solidarity network among neighbors for food donation. Although she answers that neighbors know they can count on each other and that they exchange food mainly between family members, she realizes that people are ashamed to seek help even during a pandemic:

So, sometimes, possibly someone close by is in need but will not turn to the next-door neighbor because he/she is possibly ashamed of saying, "Oh, I'm in need" (brown woman, 30 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

As Josué de Castro<sup>10</sup> argues, hunger is a "delicate and dangerous" subject, "a forbidden topic or, at least, not advisable to be addressed publicly" (p. 11-21). The shame of talking about the subject poses methodological challenges, such as asking about hunger without causing embarrassment, and analytical, such as understanding between the lines that hunger is often reported without necessarily using this term.

### About "being in need"

*I didn't go hungry or anything, but I needed some things* (quilombola woman, 21 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

The language most used to talk about dietary changes during the pandemic was "being in need" or "facing a hardship". Reducing the consumption of some foods, replacing healthy foods with ultra-processed foods, and the complete

lack of some food, in general, were not interpreted as hunger:

*So, things got really complicated. It's really the basic needs, right, that we have to, unfortunately, dose a little. But thank God, I didn't face any hardship* (white female, 34 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

*I didn't face any hardship, but it reduced a lot. This month, we didn't eat meat at all. We had to reduce a lot in January and February* (white female, 27 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

Most respondents (27 women, 55.1%) reported that the pandemic hampered access to food. The decreased income and higher food prices were identified as the leading causes of this problem. Among those who answered that the pandemic did not affect food access (18 women, 36.73%) are women whose household income was not drastically impacted by the pandemic or women who just did not “face a hardship” because they were receiving food donations. Although they answered that access to food was not impaired, these women said that they had to adopt strategies to reduce the food amount or quality when asked about reducing food consumption. The accounts of Marcela, from Cabana do Pai Tomás, and Beatriz, from Sapopemba, illustrate this:

*So, you used to buy a bunch of bananas. Today, you buy half a bunch, right? It was reduced. But we are trying to preserve food quality* (brown woman, 30 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

*Thank God, we didn't run out of food, but the quality decreased a lot. We had to choose more affordable food to be able to keep our livelihood* (white female, 39 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).

### **Partial hunger/total hunger**

*[...] there is no variety of foods. We don't have a diet rich in vitamins and protein. It's always rice, beans, and flour, you know. There are no other types of food that can compose this diet, which is also essential: a diet rich in vitamins, minerals, and protein, right?* (brown woman, 32 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

Women who depended on food donations to support their households during the pandemic reported partial hunger or a lack of food diversity. Thirty of the respondents (61.22%) said they had received donations, from which 17 were made by the municipal or state government. Many women did not know where the donations came from.

These donations were essential to secure a daily diet, but failed to ensure a balanced diet. While carbohydrates and flour are in excess, calories/nutrients-rich foods are lacking:

*Sometimes we receive much pasta, but something else is missing. Instead of four packs of pasta, it could be something else to invest in, right?* (quilombola woman, 51 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

Most reports reveal the predominance of partial famine. However, some reports of total famine show its deep aggravation in the country. Antônia, from Córrego do Narciso, says, “I think that hunger will return”, as when she was a child:

*Because we were raised with bone soup. We didn't eat the meat because we couldn't afford it. [...] We had that rice, then we sieved it, the rich ate the good rice, and we were raised with rice grits; that broken rice it's what my mother bought at the fair. [...] So, today, we don't even have that anymore. It's difficult for us now* (quilombola woman, 47 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

Emília, a Sapopemba resident, mother of two children, and six months pregnant, says that she and her husband live on informal jobs without a fixed income and that *we don't even have bread money some weeks* (brown woman, 26 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP). Márcia, currently in Sapopemba, says that she faced hard times with her husband when she was in the inland region because *one day we had a glass of rice to make for the two of us. Things were very ugly* (white female, 51 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).

### **The hunger of food producers**

*We were raised accustomed to working in the fields, planting, weeding, and making fences. Working with my mother to help my mother support the house because my father only drank and did not help my mother* (quilombola woman, 47 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

Traditionally, quilombola communities produce various food in their territory, either for consumption or sale in nearby urban centers. Women predominantly carry out family farm work, as explained by Antônia from Córrego do Narciso in the excerpt above. In the communities covered by this research, we identified plantations of oranges, corn, cassava (used in flour production), various types of beans, vegetables, chicken, pork, and other essential foods for consumption and income supplementation.

The lack of access to quality water has historically compromised the food security of these communities, which do not have running water courses in their territories and currently depend on cisterns to capture rainwater and supply drinking water from a water truck. Also, the lack of access to sanitation is a common denominator in the quilombos, with dry pits (where waste is dumped directly into the soil), sinkholes (known as gray pits), which are pretty rudimentary and with a significant risk of contamination of groundwater table), or open sanitary sewage, with a risk of contaminating the water and food they consume. Besides these structural problems are territorial conflicts due to lack of land ownership, which, as Mendes<sup>11</sup> argues, interfere with the access of quilombola communities to natural resources necessary for their subsistence.

In these communities, the rainy season arrives after approximately nine months of drought, always starting at the end of the year. While welcome and long-awaited by the quilombola people, rain causes problems on the roads, which are pretty unsafe.

Heavy rains blocked the roads, particularly at the end of 2021 and early 2022. They caused evictions in several municipalities in the Médio Jequitinhonha, hindering communication and visits to the territories to conduct research. Before the rains, communities' access to nearby cities was several times restricted due to health measures to contain the virus. Ivone, from Córrego do Narciso, reports that she faced hardships when Araçuaí was closed due to the high number of COVID-19 cases:

*Sometimes you had something to fetch from the market, which was supposed to be today, but you couldn't go. Even the cars didn't go there for many weeks. The city was closed, so we didn't go. There was a time when we faced some hardships, right? Because I couldn't go to Araçuaí to get it (quilombola woman, 58 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).*

Many quilombola women reported a declining consumption of food they used to produce due to the lack of water. Higher prices of industrialized products also reduced the intake of several essential items, such as rice and beans. The accounts of Fátima, from Córrego do Rocha, and Márcia, from Córrego do Narciso, illustrate these issues:

*You can't plant because when the flower blooms, which is when you should harvest the pumpkin. There's no water for you to water. And then you will see the plant die, and you can't do anything. Because we can't take out drinking wa-*

*ter to wet a plant's stalk (quilombola woman, 33 years old, Córrego do Rocha, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).*

*It's costly. Everything, mainly rice and beans. [...] Then you have to share. Take a little bit to one corner, a little bit to another, a little bit for rice, a little bit for beans, a little bit for pasta (quilombola woman, 60 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).*

Besides the lack of water and rising prices, unemployment during the pandemic further exacerbated hunger in communities. Many quilombola families depend on the seasonal coffee harvest to supplement their income, which the restrictions imposed by the pandemic have impacted. Márcia, from Córrego do Narciso, talks about the need to migrate to the coffee crops to get work and food and the pain of having lost a child far from home without being able to say goodbye:

He was raised and married here. He left, stayed away and died out there far from his family. Searching for food to feed, right? We have no jobs here (quilombola woman, 60 years old, Córrego do Narciso, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

#### **Food that doesn't feed? Weight gain and nutritional loss**

*Sometimes at night I got very anxious. I ate and kept eating. I ate and sat. I didn't go anywhere. I ate, sat, and didn't go anywhere (quilombola woman, 50 years old, Córrego do Rocha, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).*

Accounts of women gaining weight seem contradictory among so many hunger experiences. These accounts, like Sonia's, are accompanied by feelings of anxiety, fear, and lack of control due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Also, we have the intake of empty calories and simple carbohydrates, as reported by Leticia from Sapopemba, illustrates:

*So, we exaggerated a lot in the intake of white flour in the pandemic, which led to a considerable weight gain here at home. [...] We try then to do several diets that don't work because of this anxiety. We adopt a diet, but then we end up succumbing and eating many things at the same time (white female, 38 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).*

The income of Jussara from Cabana do Pai Tomás was not harmed by the pandemic. On the contrary, she even got a new job in this context. In her case, the negative impact of the pandemic on her health and food was the result of having switched to in-app purchases to avoid leaving home and exposing herself to the virus:

*We ended up buying things that are not so healthy. We order food by the app here in the nearest supermarkets. Then we end up going with the flow and consuming more ultra-processed foods. So, I think it had a negative impact from a health viewpoint. Not because of income, but due to this difficulty, I went through a certain complacency in ordering food. So, we order something like instant noodles and many cookies, and the like (white female, 61 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).*

The accounts evidence the complex relationship between access to food, income, emotional state, weight gain, and health. Contrary to expectations, we may witness weight gain in households with moderate or severe food insecurity, as shown by some studies, such as Santana et al.<sup>12</sup> Henriques et al.<sup>13</sup> discuss the evidence of an “obesogenic environment” that serves the interests of processed food commercial corporations and agribusiness. It is essential to establish nutritional education measures and regulations on purchasing and advertising unhealthy foods.

#### **Emergency aid and food donations**

Low-income women with formal employment and contract did not receive aid or assistance from the government, although their income was insufficient to ensure their food security. Several accounts address the difficulties of unemployed or low-income mothers, such as Flávia, who supports two children alone with an income of one minimum wage. She says she doesn't have access to any government aid, only donations from other sources:

*I don't earn any benefit. It's more of a staple food basket from friends, you know? [...] We ask for help, then someone donates, or the school (where she works as a cleaning lady) donates. Sometimes they have vegetables, cookies, or a staple food basket (brown woman, 42 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).*

Some accounts point to a delay in receiving the staple food baskets, which causes the loss of validity of some foods:

*They gave a staple food basket at school during the pandemic, but the sausage was rotten. They held on to the staple food basket to later release it to us, so much so that they preferred to let some food in the basket spoil and then deliver (brown woman, 26 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).*

Furthermore, access to staple food baskets was not directed to all households. Difficulty in school registration and aid requests were the

reported reasons. Amanda, from Cabana do Pai Tomás, for example, criticizes the criterion established by the state government of Minas Gerais:

Regarding the state government, I learned that the government gives a lunch kit, but not all students receive it. Only students who receive the *Bolsa Família* do. What about those who do not receive it: how do they manage? (black woman, 33 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

Several mothers had problems receiving aid, although they were responsible for the care of their children; as Beatriz, from Sapopemba comments:

*Sometimes, I saw it happen with fathers of families, separated mothers; when fathers were not entitled and received the aid and when a mother taking care of her child was left unassisted (white female, 39 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).*

The closing of schools, even with food donations to replace school meals, overly affected the food and income of the women interviewed. In households supported by women, Lígia comments:

*And the issue of children at home as well... Whether you like it or not, you send your child to school, he eats there. Now, because they are indoors all the time and have to eat and not just dinner, we have the issue of snacks. They want to eat something and say: “Hey, mom, give me something to eat”. Furthermore, mothers have nothing to give them. This is heartbreaking; it's too hard (white female, 27 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).*

#### **Dissatisfaction with the government**

The lack of initiative from all spheres and powers of the government regarding the issue of hunger was criticized. Twenty women (40.81%) evaluated that the governments' actions in all spheres were terrible, and eight (16.32%) said they should improve. Seven women downrated the federal government but responded that the state and municipal governments initiatives were good. One woman only praised the municipal government, and one only criticized the federal government. Twelve women did not respond. In general, 36 women (73.46%) were dissatisfied.

Women commented that the government could have been more active on the issue of rising food prices, made more food donations, acted faster, implemented more public policies to combat hunger, and took actions geared toward women. Jussara, from Cabana do Pai Tomás, is a

municipal councilor at the Municipal Food Security Council of Belo Horizonte and summarizes the general dissatisfaction with the public power:

*Although the city government advertises that it has a municipal food security plan, I think that plan is very much on paper. You have a big budget, but the information I have is that very little has been used to fight hunger within social assistance policies. Governments in all their spheres and powers do not see it as an important point in the fight against inequality. The government's inaction is staggering* (white female, 61 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

The federal government, in particular, was the most criticized regarding food insecurity. As Paula, from Sapopemba, comments, President Jair Bolsonaro went so far as to deny that people are starving in the country:

*I saw an article in which the President said that no one was starving in Brazil and that this conversation was a lie. Then I wanted so much, for a few moments, to pass in front of him and say, "where did you see this, my son? Come with me for a walk, and you'll change your mind". So, you see the neglect, right?* (black woman, 43 years old, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).

#### **Support networks and performance of female leaders**

*[...] everything that is left out in someone's house, she tries to find someone to donate, and then she creates this solidarity network here within the community* (brown woman, 25 years old, Cabana do Pai Tomás, Belo Horizonte, MG).

Given the insufficient public power action, several solidarity networks have been strengthened and created in the communities, many led by women. Most respondents (32 women, 65.3%) said they had participated in food donations, either by sharing their food or receiving donations through partnerships, contributing to the logistics of deliveries, and identifying households who most need donations within their territories. Here we highlight the statements of three leaders who agreed to be identified:

*I got a partnership, and every month I, in my association with our team, have distributed an average of 70 baskets per month, and another vegetable kit on the weekend, Thursday or Friday* (Lúcia Helena Apolinária, vice-president of the Vila Imperial Community Association of the large Cabana do Pai Tomás conglomerate, Belo Horizonte, MG).

*We went to 98% of rural communities to distribute this basket. It was a basket that we didn't*

*ask anyone to leave the house: we took it to the families. I got it from the health workers so that we could map all the vulnerable families. Some communities had five and some others ten or twenty* (Maria Aparecida Machado Silva, president of the Rural Workers' Union of Chapada do Norte, Vale do Jequitinhonha, MG).

*[...] Financial and food insecurity of relatives of inmates and survivors has demanded, since the onset of the pandemic, the mobilization of solidarity networks in search of increasingly urgent help. The Coalizão Negra (Black Coalition), UNEAF-RO, CEDECA Sapopemba, and CDHS (Sapopemba Human Rights Center) have contributed in a solidary way to donations of staple food baskets to AMPARAR to distribute to family members* (Míriam Duarte Pereira, founder of AMPARAR – association of relatives and friends of inmates of the CASA foundation, Sapopemba, São Paulo, SP).

#### **Final considerations**

Women's accounts provided an overview of food insecurity in different Brazilian territories. They highlighted the urgency of taking hunger in the country seriously, which is still denied and made invisible in political circles or only superficially alleviated by donations. We seek to expose this backdrop through the voices of women who live with hunger daily, and we highlight the need to think deeply about the social indicators that traverse this issue, especially gender, race, and class issues.

An essential feature of the effects of the pandemic in Brazil is the lack or insufficiency of data on the population affected by COVID-19 and its side effects and, consequently, the lack of plural public policies aimed at the most vulnerable groups. In response to this absence of government responses, such groups organized themselves, producing agendas of demands and new ways of existing in the pandemic. We should highlight that the disastrous action of the federal government during the pandemic was not about incompetence or negligence but a purposeful action to spread the virus, to resume economic activities at any cost, as evidenced by the study by Asano et al.<sup>14</sup>

We observed that women, especially black women, were the most affected. On one hand, this situation indicates a historical permanence of invisibility and subordination imposed on black women in Brazilian society, on the other the leadership of these women in their communities emerges as an experience of decoloniza-

tion and new social and political ways of thinking about the world and producing answers to daily problems.

The leadership of these women in producing strategies to secure the food security of their households is filled with resilience and indignation at the injustice to which they are subjected, affection for their family members, and the invention of other ways of addressing food, which goes against the grain of capitalist logic. These women do not struggle just for food on the table but for land to plant and income to choose what to buy. In other words, it represents a struggle for a more just and egalitarian life. Thus, we believe

that the trajectories and experiences of women in this work and many others leave clues that overcoming the impacts of COVID-19 does not lie in universal strategies but local responses, respecting the specificities and needs of different social groups and their gender, race, and class crossings.

Finally, another facet highlighted in women's narratives concerns the relevance of civil associations and social movements in creating agendas, in dialogue with governmental and non-governmental entities, especially where governments neglect the demands of civil society. Public policies must consider the knowledge and claims of these groups.

### **Collaborations**

B Schall, M Rocha, and BS Chaves worked on the research design, collection, analysis, and interpretation of data and writing of the paper. FR Gonçalves and PA Valente worked on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data and writing of the paper. P Porto worked on the writing of the paper. AM Moreira and DN Pimenta worked on the research design, data collection, and review of the paper.

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