

The Washington Post

Business

In Brazil, moms are bearing the brunt of pandemic's blow



Actress Kelly Regina da Silva looks out from the window of her room in a building occupied by squatters in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Tuesday, March 16, 2021. Before the coronavirus pandemic hit da Silva had made it out of her working-class favela and landed a leading role in a play showing right across from Ipanema beach. (Silvia Izquierdo/Associated Press)

By **Diane Jeantet** | AP

March 28, 2021 at 2:32 p.m. GMT-3

RIO DE JANEIRO — When Sao Paulo city officials put out a call last month for 4,500 public school cleaning jobs, targeting Brazilian mothers affected by the raging pandemic, they were unprepared for the ensuing tsunami. More than 90,000 women applied in just two days.

“It exceeded our expectations, by far,” said Armando Junior, who helped create the initiative, aimed at trying to alleviate skyrocketing unemployment among women and helping schools comply with new COVID-19 protocols for keeping classrooms hygienic and taking students’ temperatures.

The overwhelming response offers a glimpse at how Brazilian women — particularly mothers — have been disproportionately sidelined by the crisis. Worldwide, as schools remain closed, many mothers juggle fewer work hours with homeschooling and household duties. Others put their careers on hold entirely, or were laid off.

Brazil is battling a brutal resurgence in COVID-19 cases, making it one of the hardest-hit countries in the world. Latin America's largest nation accounts for less than 3% of the global population, but with an average of 2,400 deaths each day, it accounts for a quarter of daily COVID-19 fatalities worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins University data. Economists say the nation's worsening health and economic crises are further delaying the return of women to the workforce.

"This job fell from the sky for me," said Marilene Paixão, one of the mothers selected for the cleaning jobs. But just a month after Sao Paulo hired the women in mid-February, the city closed its schools again on March 15.

Starting in the 1950s, the participation of women in Brazil's workforce increased exponentially, but the pace began to slow in the early 2000s and plateaued from 2010 onwards. Even before the pandemic hit, only 53% of women were in the labor market, compared to 71% of men.

This is partly due to Brazilian women facing worse labor choices or requiring flexible hours to raise their children, particularly since public schools provide only half days of classes. As a result, a greater proportion of women work in Brazil's large informal sector or perform low-paying manual work like housemaids, according to Solange Gonçalves, an economist and professor at the Federal University of Sao Paulo.

"All these pre-existing inequalities only got stronger during the pandemic," said Gonçalves. "In a recession, lower-skilled employees are the first to be made redundant."

During the pandemic, more than 6.5 million Brazilian women exited the workforce, dropping their participation rate below 48% — the lowest in more than a decade, according to official data published this month.

Maria de Lourdes do Carmo, coordinator of a group that offers help to informal sector workers in Rio de Janeiro, says more people have been seeking assistance after losing their jobs. As for herself, after 26 years selling women's clothing on the street in the city's once-bustling center, do Carmo decided last year to pack up her things and wait for brighter days.

"I haven't been back since," do Carmo said. "Business is too weak. The street is empty."

The virus has slammed hospitals, which unexpectedly cost nurse Thassy Cruz, a 26-year-old single mom, her job at one of Sao Paulo's most prestigious medical facilities when it began treating only COVID-19 patients. Her 8-year-old daughter Alice suffers from asthmatic bronchitis, putting her at greater risk if she caught the virus, so Cruz quit her job rather than work with infected patients.

Now Cruz is homeschooling her daughter five days a week, still has no job and has emptied her savings account.

"I feel hopeless, everything went downhill," Cruz said. "Not working goes far beyond not being able to pay your bills. It's about the difficulty of facing the world without having an activity to go to every day. It's about feeling useful to yourself, and being part of a society."

Working women worldwide have paid a high price during the pandemic. Even among the world's richest nations, a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey this month found COVID-19 threatened to reverse the important gains women made over the last decade with "lasting, or even permanent" damage.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the impact stands to be worse. More people in the region work in sectors requiring close physical proximity, and fewer can work remotely, according to an International Monetary Fund paper.

In Brazil, average earnings dropped 6.2% for women in 2020 from the prior year compared to 3.4% for men, according to **Marcelo Neri**, director of the social policy center at the **Getulio Vargas Foundation**. The gender gap was especially pronounced among the wealthiest 10%, where women lost 5.5% of their wages and men just 0.4%. That reflects women either leaving the labor force or working fewer hours, consistent with their double roles, **Neri** said.

The Brazilian government's emergency pandemic aid program provided a lifeline to nearly 70 million poor and unemployed Brazilians, with single mothers receiving twice the stipulated amount.

One of the recipients was Kelly Regina da Silva, 25, who before the pandemic hit had made it out of her working-class slum and landed a lead acting role in a play across from Ipanema beach.

In hindsight, she finds the title and plot – “I Just Want to be Happy,” about a group of slum dwellers chasing their dreams but finding prejudice and a staggering lack of opportunity — to be foreboding.

Shops, restaurants and cultural venues closed down, the cast disbanded and her nascent career came to an abrupt end. She left her rented apartment and moved in with a sister, then her mother, then a boyfriend. When she got pregnant, they split. Monthly pandemic aid ended in December.

Now seven months pregnant, she lives alone in a small room in one of the city center's many squats and works at a supermarket deli. It offers stability — even supermarkets stay open when the city clamps down on activity — though she said she's tired, and scared about exposing herself and her unborn child to the virus.

Brazil's Congress approved renewal of pandemic welfare payments this month but with tighter requirements, and da Silva doesn't qualify.

“I have to support myself,” she said.

Copyright 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/in-brazil-moms-are-bearing-the-brunt-of-pandemics-blow/2021/03/28/2fed94f8-8fd8-11eb-aadc-af78701a30ca_story.html