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# The Same or Worse? Juggling the Private and Professional Lives of Women Journalists during Pandemic Coverage

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## ABSTRACT

Awareness of how journalists report critical events is crucial to acknowledge the media's social consequences. Especially during emergent public health threats such as the covid-19 pandemic, whose impacts extend to professionals' private lives. Yet, little is known about how journalists' identities and personal traits influence their reports. This paper focuses on this dimension of newsmaking by inquiring about the interplay between gender and journalism practices during the covid-19 public health crisis. Resorting to semi-structured in-depth interviews with women journalists, it investigates through the lens of gender how the pandemic impacted work conditions and professionals' lives. Results reveal what the first wave of the pandemic meant to women journalists, what happened when the lockdown officially began, and the consequences of working at home. They also disclose how women journalists handled the changes in their personal and professional lives during the outbreak, helping to acknowledge how gender shapes newsroom activities in exceptional times. Overall, they show, we contend, journalism as an institution that reproduces and creates gender relations.

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## Introduction

The consequences of the last decades of journalism's transformation have become even more complex in recent years with the covid-19 pandemic. The changes driven by the so-called structural crisis in the sector and the challenges imposed by networked technology were inevitably marked by the global public health crisis that emerged in 2020. Journalists' professional and personal lives have been impacted in several ways. Organisational practices, routines, demands, and expectations had to be restructured in the face of the predictability risks and to respond to the outbreaks to stop contagion. Likewise, personal lives were severely altered, demanding efforts to enhance security toward self and own family while pursuing information about a highly contagious infectious disease.

We recognise, like Shoemaker and Reese (1996; 2014), that the worldviews, attitudes, behaviours, and identities of those who make the news, in tandem with other factors, shape its language and format. We thus accept that professional and personal factors are closely related. What surrounds us interferes with who we are and how we view

the world and drives/guides our priorities, expectations, and dreams (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 74). This process of self-formation of social communicators does not differ from professionals in other fields. Journalists are unique because they construct meanings and opinions for the public, creating the social reality in which ordinary people are embedded. Under a severe public health crisis, with millions depending on media coverage, knowing how personal and professional life are related became imperative and, at the same time, an opportunity to understand newsmaking as a gendered process.

Yet, gender has been little explored in research that has the pandemic crisis as its context. During the first months after the pandemic was declared, research began to focus mainly on the issue of misinformation (Cardoso et al. 2020; Cinelli et al. 2020; Kouzy et al. 2020; Moreno et al. 2020; Prabhakar Kaila and Prasad 2020; Pulido et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2020; Zarocostas 2020). More recently, research has also shown the impact on the media industry and journalism practices without relating it to gender or other identity traits.

This article focuses on gender and explores the relationship between private and professional spheres by studying lived experiences of women journalists during the early months of the covid-19 pandemic. It does this through semi-structured in-depth interviews with Brazilian women journalists with different backgrounds and hierarchical positions in mainstream media, including television, radio, newspaper, magazine, and online news.

We resorted to a qualitative research approach to reveal the meanings attached by female professionals to their everyday activities in times of severe crisis and the extent to which these meanings were gender awareness. We follow feminist scholarship on journalism (Figaro 2018; Gill 2002; Jenkins and Finneman 2018; Ross 2001; Ruoho and Torkkola 2018; Silveirinha and Simões 2016; Steiner 2017; Steiner 2017) which see the newsroom as structured according to pre-existing power relations. Like society, this working environment is constituted by gendered practices that barely emerge into consciousness (Markham 2011). On the contrary, gendered practices are masked in a typically male, white, heterosexual universal vision consistent with informational values such as neutrality and objectivity. As contended by the feminist tradition in research (Oleson 2011), the effects of these veiled power relations are profound and extend across all spheres of life, particularly in the production of information.

By investigating how women journalists perceived gendered newsroom practices in troubled times, we also contribute to deepening the understanding of the interplay between feminist concerns and the broader context of lived experiences. In line with Linda Steiner (2017) and Iiris Ruoho and Sinikka Torkkola (2018), we framed journalistic routines in multiple complex ecosystems attached to historical and cultural settings. The scenario imposed by the lockdown and the high risk of contagion brought new challenges to journalistic routines and activities but also new burdens to women's professional lives. We thus argue that gender was also shaped by labour experiences, creating new career barriers for female professionals.

Our results reveal that the pandemic meant to women journalists an experience embedded in the same precarious working conditions but also new weaknesses, particularly due to the lay-off regimes. Moreover, it also meant unprecedented demands for women, such as working in hazardous conditions and with their families' lives often turned upside down. Ultimately, participants' accounts reveal how women journalists

handled the changes in their personal and professional lives during the outbreak, helping to acknowledge how gender shapes newsroom activities in exceptional times. Furthermore, they show, we contend, journalism as an institution that reproduces and creates gender relations in periods of both crisis and routine. The Brazilian case serves as a compelling and multifaceted example of how the covid-19 pandemic impacted the journalism sector within the context of broader societal and economic challenges, such as the lack of government response, the previous precarious journalism labour, and the gender disparities in the news profession.

### ***Pandemic and Media Practice***

Everyday life is composed of risks. The risk perception is more intense in disrupting historical periods, such as when facing a pandemic with the presence of an invisible virus worldwide. This recent event exposed how an epidemiological issue has become loaded with social, economic, and political components (Fuchs 2020; Simões, Amaral, and Santos 2020). Personal experiences interfere with the way risk is perceived, and the emotional dimensions are crucial for the acceptance or denial of specific public health practices and discourses. Negative emotions can limit the adoption of coping strategies and health-sustaining behaviours. The population's response to potential health risks might even reproduce the "stigmatisation, marginalisation, blaming, shame, disgust, fear and exclusion of certain social groups" (Lupton 2013, 643). Given the influence of media coverage of critical events, their role in shaping this response is extremely relevant. This can be illustrated by the HIV/AIDS media coverage in the early 1980s, blaming the male homosexual community and female sex workers for the transmission of the virus and the disease (Pinto-Coelho 2009; Quintanilha, Paisana, and Vieira 2018; Traquina 2004).

Also, risk perceptions may alter and are marked by gender differences. Women and men tend to view, identify, and express their notions of threats and dangers differently. Therefore, since risk perceptions are a precondition for protective measures and action, gender identity is deeply linked to decisions, behaviours, and opinions (Gustafson 1998; Liuccio 2015; Lupton 2013; Siegrist, Gutscher, and Earle 2005). Some discrepancies based on gender were explored in a survey on the effects of covid-19 on women journalists, which was carried out in 77 countries. In particular, women journalists suffered more stress and anxiety than men. The result showed that the emotional effects were amplified due to the combination of professional duties and private life responsibilities, as care and domestic tasks often fall to women (International Federation of Journalists 2020).

In countries like Spain, Sweden, Portugal and the United States, work precariousness increased, as furloughs and layoffs were carried out (Appelgren 2021; Finneman and Thomas 2021; Miranda, Fidalgo, and Martins 2021; Odii, Ani, and Ojakorotu 2021; Villaseñor and Márquez 2021). Significantly, the context of insecurity, destabilisation and fragility affected mental health.

In the United States, television journalists reported a higher stress level than newspaper journalists because of specific coverage related to on-the-spot stories, the necessity of working from home, and the imposed social distancing protocols in the newsroom. On the other hand, newspaper journalists' stress was due to contact with sources (Hoak 2021). Undoubtedly, relations with sources have changed, as professionals have had to seek new ways to contact people since face-to-face contact was unlikely. In US journalism,

this demand comes when newsrooms are giving evident responses regarding the representation of minorities and historically marginalised communities in the media (Wenzel and Crittenden 2021).

In fact, with few exceptions, such as Iceland, that, unlike other countries, did not adopt mass layoffs of media workers (Guðmundsson 2020), the covid-19 pandemic has been transforming the practice and business of journalism all over the world (Alonso 2020; Appelgren 2021; Bernadas and Ilagan 2020; Estella 2020; Villaseñor and Márquez 2021). In Europe, the suspension of contracts, the reduction of working hours and the retraction in the sales and advertising sectors have accentuated evidenced problems. In Portugal, for instance, during the first State of Emergency, which lasted six weeks beginning in March 2020, the tendency was to worsen journalistic work conditions (Camponez et al. 2020; Garcia, Matos, and Silva 2021; Miranda, Fidalgo, and Martins 2021).

### ***The Brazilian Context***

The Brazilian case followed the general deficiencies in the sector. Besides experiencing a health crisis, the country was also suffering a political and economic crisis for years. Journalism felt the challenges of the pandemic when 75% of professionals began to work at home, and 71% saw their salary reduced, according to a survey conducted in the third bimester of 2020 (FENAJ 2020). In addition to the majority (58%) having experienced a 25% salary reduction, the number of dismissals was also surprising in the journalists surveyed (20%).

A survey conducted with Brazilian journalists who are mothers showed that the barriers that women who have children have to face are discrepant since the overload of work based on gender is invisible and penalises women. There was no concern with the authorities' regulation of the home office activity, who also refrained from public discussions and practical actions to confront the pandemic in the socio-economic scope. Reality has imposed itself, and many of the journalist mothers have had to abandon their life plans, such as studies, wellness, and self-care activities, due to abusive and intense working hours and the articulation of their children's schooling with domestic chores. Due to the inequalities in the professional and private spheres, research suggests that the difficulties these journalist mothers have faced are far from an end (Rios et al. 2020).

### ***Gender and Media Practice***

Most women do not hold management positions and remain hierarchically subordinated to the "command" of men, which end up directly influencing the routines and journalistic practices, as well as the identity and perception of what it is to be a woman journalist (Lobo et al. 2017; Subtil 2009). In line with feminist scholars, we consider the sex's binary division useless once we frame gender performativity in many layers: identity and, above all, experiential. As shown in the latest report of the Global Media Monitoring Project (2020), which diagnoses the situation on gender equality in the media, 40% of the news in print and online newspapers, mainstream television and radio are signed by women. More specifically, the sections that have a greater balance in the number of male and female reporters are curiously those of science and health.

In terms of balancing professional and personal life, freelance media professionals in Western countries face substantial competition, which is also a result of the impact of

the neoliberal labour market context, such as the journalistic field (Henninger and Gottschall 2007). Rosalind Gill (2002) focuses on this same point when concerned with current new media work expectations, which mask characteristics and patterns of gender inequality in the form of flexible hours, informality, and autonomy. These issues can be explained because the personal scope is not considered, and accounting for domestic responsibilities and those related to motherhood, which are generally unfair and burden women, in particular, are left out of the race to professional advancement (Jenkins and Finneman 2018; Steiner 2017).

In Portugal, Silveirinha and Simões (2016) found an environment of profound change with the advance of new technologies in the dynamics of news production. The changes occurred at a macro-structural level and affected gender identities. The interviewees' perceptions elucidated the practical implications and the dilemmas experienced, with women being those who have to "compensate", attempting to reconcile work-family.

The life choices for most women journalists are sometimes limited and paradoxical. If they decide to continue in the professional field, a bifurcation arises. Either they choose to start a family, or they decide to move up the career ladder. Overcoming invisible hierarchical barriers is a new challenge with the feminisation of newsrooms (Lombardi 2017; Miranda 2014). Research by Karen Ross (2001) showed that British women journalists recognise difficulties in balancing work and housework. Especially for those who are mothers, a culture of long working hours is worrying. For those considering motherhood in the future, reconciling family and career is considered an unattainable possibility.

In Sweden, researchers heard from journalists who are no longer in the profession and highlighted that gender is a factor that stands out in explanations of job loss and career options. Some interviewees mentioned that the difficulties in finding a stable job happen because the risk of becoming pregnant is associated with them, implying another rhythm than the usual pace of work (Örnebring and Möller 2018).

In Finland, the situation is not at all similar because there are public policies that support gender equity. For example, the same period of the license is guaranteed for maternity and paternity leave. However, although women are the majority in newsrooms, they do not hold management positions and remain hierarchically subordinate to men (Savolainen and Zilliacus-Tikkanen 2015).

## **Research Design**

The multidimensional view of diverse media professionals allows an in-depth analysis of their lived experiences and how their perceptions influenced the dynamics of news production during the covid-19 pandemic. Through the interviews, it is possible to understand how the context of the beginning of the pandemic, the lockdown, and the expectation of the subsequent return to activities in public and shared places affected journalism professionals.

Journalists at the "frontline" news could communicate what had been happening inside them and what connected them to other people (Josselson 2013, 3). They revealed the impact, challenges and expectations when being questioned about their social context, their lived personal and professional experiences, as well as the perceptions of the social role of journalism in a crisis context, the changes in routines and processes and how these points were articulated with gender identities. Feminist critique frames

the analysis because this approach enables understanding issues involving dissonant power relations.

We conducted twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with women journalists living in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, occupying different hierarchical positions in Brazilian mainstream media, including television, radio, newspaper, magazine, and online news. The interviews were carried out remotely, on Zoom meetings, in August and September 2020, almost six months after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus crisis a pandemic, which guaranteed us recent perceptions of the facts.

The interviewees' average age was 33 years old, seven of whom were between 25 and 34 years old, four were between 35 and 44 years old, and one was between 45 and 54. Three of them have leadership roles, and the other ones are reporters (5), copywriters (2) and television presenters (2). They have worked as journalists for an average of 13 years, with a minimum of seven years of experience and a maximum of 20 years.

Following institutional ethical standards, we obtained the consent of the interviewees to participate in the study through the commitment to preserve their identity. In order to encourage participation in the study and avoid any embarrassment in reporting their experiences, we ensured confidentiality and treated data anonymously.

The interview script was based on the theoretical and methodological model of the hierarchy of influences proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996; 2014). Through it, we could access journalists' perceptions and experiences in a structured and organised way at different levels of analysis. The model was also chosen because it organises the different levels of influence of news production without subjecting them to stratified orderings. It thus helps consider the process of newsmaking as complex and engendered in multifactorial dynamics. Since there is no supremacy or imperative ordering in the hierarchical levels, gender can be seen as intrinsic and normalised both in daily life and in the working environment of journalistic newsrooms. This strategy allows sublevels of analysis to emerge, comprising social, political, economic and cultural arenas in which men and women are socialised in different ways. To organise data, we used the support of MAXQDA software.

We code the interviewer's narratives using three of the five levels of Shoemaker and Reese's model. Firstly, the individual level explores personal attitudes, risk perception and the impact of changing attitudes and behaviours over time about healthcare. We consider how particular questions are addressed when they are formulated in understanding broader questions, that is, with those referring to the other levels of analysis.

Secondly, the routine level involves the "rituals" of journalistic practices (Tuchman 1972). This category allows the understanding of how journalists carry out their functions, the rules imposed by the organisations, and the implicit rules, the unwritten ones, that surround the profession. This level of analysis is related to the organisational level because media organisations are responsible for different routines, creating work environments and defining softer or more intense tensions between employees and the needs and ambitions of each organisation. It allowed catching what the professionals think about the break-in routine imposed by the pandemic in Brazil and worldwide, how the disruptions in newsmaking were experienced and their effects on editorial decisions.

Finally, the organisational level implicates the group's collective issues belonging to a particular media outlet and, more homogeneously, the journalistic class as a whole. We analyse the perceptions of the sudden changes in the routine in March 2020 that lasted for months. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, technology and



network communication have altered journalistic production routines and imposed new rules and rhythms in newsrooms. With the transfer of the workplace to the home, new dynamics and challenges have emerged. The organisational category allowed us to identify the perception of health care and understand how the lockdown measures were articulated in a professional area that has not ceased to work.

## Findings

### *When Home Becomes the Workplace*

Circumstances related to the individual level were the most highlighted during the interviews. When asked about what the pandemic meant for journalists, it was evident that social isolation was the most striking feature of the period. As for its impact, we perceived that professional and personal life were closely connected. Although some professionals remained in face-to-face work, facing the risk of contamination as inherent as journalistic work, others were forced to transform their homes into a workplace and thus had to face remote work. “Fear”, “transformation”, “anxiety”, “change”, “confusion” were words that connected to explain the moment they went through in the first months of the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, such emotions and perceptions affected the mental health of the interviewees. “I tried to work on my head so that I didn’t freak out because if I did, I think everybody around me would freak out along with me, so I held it together” (television journalist, news presenter, 37y), said a female editor-in-chief who was faced with the responsibility of choosing who would be fired, taking into account whose in their private life, had to overcome family difficulties with her young children and parents with comorbidities. The issue of children is presented differently depending on the child’s age, and the support network, which in the cases heard were sometimes family members (mother and brother), sometimes neighbours, or the nanny.

Issues of rearrangement of private life were presented, in which space and time had to be conjugated differently and in which demands of a personal life had to be rearranged or postponed. A postponed wedding, mothers with small children, one of whom had to provide school assistance to her child who was in the literacy period, and another who had her child in the weaning process, are examples of this reordering of personal life.

The overlapping of the home space and work time can be noted in their statements:

At home it’s law, I have coffee here at the computer, I have lunch at the computer, it’s the new normal. And then you don’t take an hour for lunch (online journalist, reporter, 36y)

There is a machine to [turn on], I do the laundry ... sometimes I come at the end of the day and see that the quality of my work was not so good (press journalist, editor and reporter, 33y)

It is 12 hours straight (of work), but interspersed with various domestic tasks (press journalist, editor and reporter, 33y)

The adaptation of space is told with lightness, showing that the interviewees found alternative solutions to deal with telecommuting: “sometimes I work in the bedroom, sometimes I work in the living room. And when I’m working in the room, when work ends, I go to the living room to pretend that, gee, (laughs), I left the place, I left work” (online journalist, copywriter, 28y). Anyway, this integration of the home and workplace brought some constraints, such as the radio reporter who reported that she goes on



air with the dogs barking and another who, when she had meetings, would “lock herself in” in her room. At the same time, her mother took care of the children.

Domestic work was so exhausting, so overwhelming, that some interviewees said they preferred to go to work to “rest a bit”. Compared to their home, many without equal division of domestic chores preferred professional work to housekeeping. For this very reason, the return to face-to-face work was something quite expected. But the perception of the future was not at all positive, because there was the expectation of dismissal upon returning to presential work, besides feeling at risk for the coronavirus contamination. It was reported that some went back to smoking, drinking, and overeating.

The existing international research, focused on conjunctures of great social impact on health, is in tune with the perceptions of the Brazilian women journalists, who had a sense of journalistic responsibility above any danger of contamination and assumed that the job of reporting on an unprecedented global health crisis was crucial. The choice of words, the way to align the journalistic discourse with ethics criteria without causing panic but making people aware of behavioural changes was the most difficult moment in the careers of many of them, due to the unprecedented nature of the coverage and the assignment in selecting which professionals would be fired.

The same sense of responsibility was seen in journalists from Germany and Finland who responded to crisis cooperatively and saw their role as indispensable to mobilisation. Consequently, the risks of disease could be minimised (Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019). During the Chinese coverage of SARS, a critical shift in perspective initially occurred when the journalists assumed protecting lives. However, what was perceived after the crisis was an immediate return to the usual routine (Wilkins 2005).

As the interviews were conducted before the vaccination, which began in January 2021, the idea of the future, the expectation of returning to the newsroom and the expectation for the end of the crisis showed uncertainty. The interviewees had the feeling that the future did not depend on them, but on the progress of the disease, and they placed their expectations on the application of the vaccine. As one journalist put it: “the world will not be the same when the coronavirus ends” (radio journalist, reporter, 31y). Like her, the interviewees considered that the “new normal” would last a long time, with the wearing of masks being maintained, for example. They felt that it was impossible to plan their own lives in the medium and long term without knowing when and how they would see their parents again, what the end-of-year parties would be like, whether they would be fired or kept on the job, whether the work would be in a flexible and hybrid regime, working some days at home and some days in the newsroom. The professional and personal instability caused tensions and dilemmas, directly affecting mental health, and generating physical exhaustion.

### ***The new Normal at Work***

With the rupture in personal lives, journalistic practices were also affected. The emptying of the newsrooms, even though some professionals still worked in person before going to remote work, was listed as the fact that shocked the most. Furthermore, they realised that the problem that was a matter in Europe was an imminent situation to be experienced in Brazil. “It was too bizarre. It was regrettable you arrived in the newsroom like that” (radio journalist, news presenter and reporter, 37y).

Some situations were not seen as new, and the interviewees were aware that they worked more during the first months of the pandemic outbreak, regardless of whether they were on remote work or working in person. The report that the crisis impacted over-work is evident: “I was overloaded” (press journalist, deputy editor, 48y), “there is no routine for us, there is no 8-hour workday” (radio journalist, news presenter and reporter, 37y). The long hours of work were seen with a certain naturalness as an inherent part of the profession in times of crisis. In many cases, they had to cover for other colleagues who were sick or even presenting symptoms of covid-19. They also had accumulated days off and had been working for 12 days without a break. This situation changed when some professionals went on layoff, during which the bosses carefully controlled working hours and app resources that marked/indicated the hours worked.

The suspension of face-to-face work was reflected in the routine level. Resilience was a keyword for the interviewees, who had to juggle adapting their professional lives as journalists with their personal lives at a time of crisis that surprisingly shook the world. To cope with their workload, the professionals had to get up earlier than usual before their children woke up to concentrate on their work. Even so, the contact with journalistic sources often took place in the middle of a domestic task and the presence of the children. The feeling of not knowing how to deal with the issues appeared both in female reporters and in women in management positions. “I was completely lost” (press journalist, reporter, 40y), confessed one of them.

Besides the “new normal” being evidenced at the individual level, this aspect was also elucidated at the routine level. In the case of television and radio, the technological demands are more specific. “The producer and the reporter do a bit of everything. So, we are learning in-house how to record an interview through Skype, and we are learning how to do other things, which I think is part of the future” (television journalist, tv producer, 32y), said a television journalist who began to assist in the process of video editing, accumulate functions and participate in the operational change of television practices. In addition, a radio journalist said she bought an app to capture better audio during telephone interviews and to edit the reports on her mobile phone.

Interviews by Skype, Zoom and Google Meet became frequent, as did weekly agenda meetings by video. When asked about how they presented themselves and any kind of pressure regarding physical appearance, it was clear that this expectation was implicit. Many had makeup on and only changed clothes from the waist up while still wearing pyjamas from the waist down and slippers.

Remote access via VPN (Virtual Private Network) to the media system became a constant practice with constraints about the internet connection, in the space of one’s own home, or with the company’s slow system. The new adaptations to the work routine were easily received. Contrary to what De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers’ (2019) research evidenced, the interviewed journalists were at ease with updates in the journalistic routine that involved technology, presenting no “fear” or “detachment”, and incorporating the needs openly, with confidence and tranquillity.

The interviewees believe that the need to work from home accelerated the migration of newsrooms to the multiplatform style, which had already been happening since the beginning of the century with the advent of the internet and network communication (Garcia et al. 2020; Vobič 2015). This has strangled some female journalists’ personal lives because they started to require new digital skills and emotional ones that tied

together with the personal and the professional, making them accumulate more functions and responsibilities.

Technological adaptation happened personally, with no training provided by the company and accompanied by constraints because companies do not provide adequate material, as will be discussed below when we address the organisational level.

### ***Security Issues and Work Conditions***

As for the organisational level, we looked at the structures of the newsrooms. Most of the media offered working conditions and made available masks and hand sanitiser for the female employees interviewed. The mandatory use of individual protection equipment was recurrent, following the World Health Organization guidelines. More specifically, hand sanitiser pedal, temperature measurement at the building entrance, glass partitions between work desks, limitation of people in the use of restrooms, in the lift and the cafeteria. One of the broadcast television networks set up a temporary restaurant to cater for all employees as the restaurants around the tv complex had ceased work. However, test kits were not available to any of the teams of female employees interviewed.

More specifically, the environment has changed how one journalist communicates with another other on the radio. Reporters go on air, isolated from the group, from a transparent booth. This ensures that the reporter sees the presenter and sometimes communicates by gestures, but not in the same environment. Those who had to work in person, even if not full-time, experienced more adaptations to the structure in the newsrooms. One example is illustrated by an editor who had to go to the newsroom to finish the press edition in the first days after the lockdown was declared. Not trusting that she could get agile access to the newspaper's system on a remote network, she had to move her work bay away from other editors. Being aware of their responsibilities, she and her colleagues had to take turns going to the newsroom in person.

The general perception of the interviewees was that nothing was left to be done regarding health measures. Considering the context of novelty and complex decision-making, the companies' precautions were sufficient. However, those working in a company with economic vulnerability reported and demonstrated their dissatisfaction.

Although the departure of reporters for external assignments decreased, the coverage considered essential continued to happen, especially when the first cases and deaths began to emerge in the country. Even in the beginning, when remote work was not possible, the orientation was that "street reporters" should not enter the newsroom to avoid contact and possible transmission. There were no specific safety protocols issued by the media organisations, which made itself felt in managers' decisions on whether and how reporting was done on the street. One interviewee reported that she found herself in a complicated situation because only one reporter on the weekend on-call team was comfortable leaving the house, so she was uncomfortable having to overburden her. Another case of imminent risk in hospitals was described by an editor who authorised the reporter to do the coverage only considering the use of the mask. After the occurrence, the company issued an order that it is necessary to request authorisation from the legal sector before going to high-risk locations. Indeed, in times of crisis, some editorial norms do not apply. Therefore, it is reinforced/encouraged that the media need to

“establish protocols for emergencies similar to those of the police, firefighters and medical services” (Sorribes and Rovira 2011, 1059).

Unlike the protective equipment, which was made available in the workplace, the structure for remote work was neglected. At home, the organisation and accommodation are different, as in situations where a reporter had to buy a new work chair and another who worked in a chair without one of the wheels. Despite the decrease in salaries on behalf of the layoff regime, they had to invest in internet access and buy notebooks and better equipment to support the technological demands. This can be illustrated by the case of one of the journalists, who reported that it was very difficult to make a video at home and that the conditions in the newsroom were better in terms of technology and specific skilled labour for videos and images.

The news stories were not always related to the pandemic, and other types of coverage besides health continued to happen; the risks were also different in the big cities. One reporter complained that the company did not guarantee the physical safety of the journalists by providing “only the mask against the coronavirus. Not the bulletproof vest against the shot” (radio journalist, reporter, 31y). Violence cases, especially in favelas communities and periphery areas in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, continued to deserve media attention. The public health crisis in Brazil took place in a moment of intensified political and economic instability, which inevitably encounters echo on social matters.

## Discussion

In a situation like the pandemic of covid-19, which caused the death of more than 4.5 million people and infected more than 217 million globally<sup>1</sup>, it is likely to be commonplace for someone to have known at least one infected person, if not having been infected themselves. The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the personal and professional lives of journalists was therefore profound. However, we also found that for the Brazilian women journalists interviewed pre-existing issues related to working conditions have been intensified, taking on new dynamics in both spheres and continuing to be perpetuated in a normalised way.

Firstly, they recognised the same limiting and precarious labour conditions they experienced before the pandemic. The long hours dedicated to covering the pandemic and the lack of routine show how resilient and adaptable news professionals are to new challenges. It does not mean that the practice of journalism is an easy task. On the contrary, journalists have faced health hazards while they have felt the mission to better inform about the coronavirus. Their perceptions show that situations they had already experienced were exasperating during the pandemic and more agonising during lockdowns. The new scenario imposed by remote work was generally perceived as more demanding. The layoff regime was a new scenario that exacerbated already fragile labour standards, with the control of working hours and editorial pressure regarding technological skills. Finally, they exposed their conditions as women journalists who cope with domestic and family demands, such as housework and childcare.

However, acknowledging this does not mean that the interviewed recognise the impact of gender in the newsrooms. As research generally documents, work expectations mask characteristics and patterns of gender inequality concerning flexible working hours, informality, and autonomy, making it difficult to realise that domestic and maternity

burdens disproportionately affect women and impede their career advancement (Gill 2002; Jenkins and Finneman 2018; Silveirinha and Simões 2016; Steiner 2017).

The structure and culture of newsrooms are traditionally masculine, which essentially does not include concerns about the varied routines, which are often differentiated by gender. The normalisation of extended working hours and the choice for male reporters in the front line of coverage to be considered dangerous are some examples of reproduced and accepted behaviours. These attitudes are not considered gender-based discrepant, and much less challenged (Figaro 2018; Jenkins and Finneman 2018; Ross 2001). In this sense, and like Ruoho and Torkkola (2018, 67), we consider journalism a gendered institution, meaning that gender is present “in the process, practices, images and ideologies of journalism - and its distributions of power” and that its relations constitute a “phenomenon that is methodologically complex”.

## Conclusion

Unlike the crisis scenario generated by wars and conflicts, the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed itself invisibly and silently. However, it has triggered profound societal changes. These changes directly affected women’s and men’s bodies and experiences differently (World Health Organization 2020), ordering new practices and habits in the public and private spheres. Like other workers, journalists were forced to adapt their routines to contexts where no boundaries distinguish the time or the space dedicated to work. This has affected women professionals in particular ways.

This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews with women journalists to investigate through the lens of gender to what extent female professionals were affected. We did this by asking from which points of view the stories were told, why, how and under which new conditions the events were reported, and to what extent these conditions intertwined with personal life.

Despite its limitations, namely the limited number of participants and its geographical and contextual specificities, one obvious conclusion can be drawn: the pandemic brought new burdens to women’s lives.

Despite recognising the deterioration of working conditions in a novel scenario, women journalists perceive their work with pre-existing constraints, including precariousness, without thinking of these limitations as gender-related. Layoff policies impacted journalism practice with increasing pressure to deliver news content better, considering technology know-how and editorial duties. It also pushed women to work remotely from home, a space where the unvalued work of caring became more acute.

Journalism is an institution that reproduces gender representations but also creates gender relations. That’s why it is important to study journalism practices, especially in crisis contexts, where media framing is crucial for individuals and communities’ decisions. Future research on this issue should compare perceptions of men and women to bear upon a more accurate interpretation of the gendered effects of the pandemic on the journalism environment and, additionally, in the social construction of reality.

## Note

1. According to World Health Organization on 31 August 2021.

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