"I WASN'T BORN TO BE A MOTHER": EXPERIENCES OF MATERNAL REGRET AMONG BRAZILIAN WOMEN

"NÃO NASCI PARA SER MÃE": VIVÊNCIA DE ARREPENDIMENTO MATERNO EM MULHERES BRASILEIRAS

"NO NACÍ PARA SER MADRE": EXPERIENCIA DE ARREPENTIMIENTO MATERNO EN MUJERES BRASILEÑAS

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ABSTRACT
The objective of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of maternal regret among Brazilian women. Participants were recruited using the "snowball" sampling method and were invited to share their experiences through semi-structured interviews conducted in a single session. Ten interviews were carried out with women who declared regret regarding their choice of motherhood: 5 Black women and 5 White women, with varying income levels and high educational backgrounds. The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three categories emerged: (1) Cultural scripts: naturalized and idealized motherhood; (2) The price: Giving up oneself; and (3) Overload and exhaustion. Reports frequently highlighted the burden of care concentrated on the maternal figure, leading to a near impossibility of maintaining personal projects or basic self-care. All participants reported issues with the children's fathers, related to their lack of attention and care for their own children. The results further suggest that a significant cultural idealization of motherhood persists, which, in our culture, remains far removed from the reality required of women when they become mothers. This idealization not only causes suffering due to frustrated expectations but also prevents the choice of motherhood from being made in a more conscious and deliberate manner.

Keywords: Motherhood. Regret. Feminisms. Gender. Non-motherhood.

RESUMO
O objetivo deste estudo foi investigar o fenômeno do arrependimento da maternidade em mulheres brasileiras. As participantes foram recrutadas pelo método conhecido como 'bola de neve' e convidadas a relatar suas experiências por meio de entrevista semiestruturada, realizada em único encontro. Foram realizadas 10 entrevistas com mulheres que declararam seu arrependimento pela escolha da maternidade, sendo 5 mulheres negras e 5 brancas, com rendas distintas e alta escolaridade. Os dados foram analisados pela metodologia da Análise Temática (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Três categorias foram encontradas: (1) Scripts culturais: maternidade naturalizada e idealizada; (2) O preço: Abrir mão de si e (3) Sobrecarga e exaustão. Foi comum o relato do peso da concentração de cuidados na figura

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materna, levando a uma (quase) impossibilidade de manutenção de projetos pessoais e de cuidados mínimos consigo mesmas. Todas as mulheres tiveram problemas com os genitores, relacionados a sua falta de atenção e cuidado com os próprios filhos. Os resultados sugerem ainda que persiste uma grande idealização cultural da maternidade, a qual se distancia bastante, em nossa cultura, da realidade exigida das mulheres quando se tornam mães. Essa idealização, além de promover sofrimento por expectativas que se frustram, não possibilita que a escolha pela maternidade se dê de forma mais consciente e ponderada.

Palavras-chave: Maternidade. Arrependimento. Feminismos. Gênero. Não-maternidade.

RESUMEN
El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar el fenómeno del arrepentimiento de la maternidad en mujeres brasileñas. Las participantes fueron reclutadas por el método conocido como 'bola de nieve' e invitadas a relatar sus experiencias a través de una entrevista semiestructurada, realizada en un único encuentro. Se realizaron 10 entrevistas con mujeres que declararon su arrepentimiento por la elección de la maternidad, siendo 5 mujeres negras y 5 blancas, con ingresos distintos y alta escolaridad. Los datos fueron analizados mediante la metodología del Análisis Temático (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Se encontraron tres categorías: (1) Guiones culturales: maternidad naturalizada e idealizada; (2) El precio: Renunciar a sí misma y (3) Sobrecarga y agotamiento. Fue común el relato del peso de la concentración de los cuidados en la figura materna, llevando a una (casi) imposibilidad de mantener proyectos personales y de cuidados mínimos consigo mismas. Todas las mujeres tuvieron problemas con los progenitores, relacionados con su falta de atención y cuidado hacia sus propios hijos. Los resultados sugieren además que persiste una gran idealización cultural de la maternidad, la cual se distancia bastante, en nuestra cultura, de la realidad exigida a las mujeres cuando se convierten en madres. Esta idealización, además de promover sufrimiento por expectativas que se frustran, no posibilita que la elección de la maternidad se dé de forma más consciente y ponderada.

Palabras clave: Maternidad. Arrepentimiento. Feminismos. Género. No maternidad.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary model of motherhood was historically constructed from the eighteenth century onwards, under the strong influence of state policies, religious and medical discourses, which acted in the normalization of female bodies and subjectivities (Del Priore, 1993). In this context, the physician began to play a central role in the biopolitical control of women's reproductive life, going beyond technical knowledge, acting as a disciplinarian of bodies.

This process resulted in the consolidation of a maternal ideal centered on selflessness, unconditional love and sacrifice, naturalizing motherhood as an essentially feminine destiny (Badinter, 1985; Donath, 2017). The construction of this model implied extensive convincing campaigns aimed at women, a process that Zanello (2018) calls "affective pedagogy", supported by medical, philosophical, and religious discourses. Such modifications proved to be so effective and profound that we can feel their effects to this day in westernized societies, as is the case of Brazil (Fontoura *et al.*, 2024; Zanello, 2018).

The current model of motherhood is, therefore, a byproduct of centuries of veiled interpellation, in which women live a femininity forged in love and motherhood, and which Zanello (2018) called Amorous and Maternal Devices respectively. Men, on the other hand, exercise their masculinity in a virile way, both in active sexuality and in investment in the world of work, through the Efficacy Device. These devices transform men into provider workers, while women are socialized in romantic love and care work.

Specifically in the maternal device, women learn to prioritize the demands and needs of others to the detriment of their own, and biological motherhood is conceived as the apex of this logic (the "heterocentricity"). This often means that the woman's person is subsumed in the maternal function (Donath, 2017). Azevedo and Arrais (2006) point out, in this sense, that the ideal of the mother always available promotes and reinforces female blaming and the silencing of ambivalences related to mothering.

From the 1960s onwards, with the sexual revolution, access to contraception and the growing insertion of women in the labor market expanded women's power of choice over marriage, children and career. In Brazil, these transformations are evidenced by the drop in the birth rate in recent decades, the increase in households headed by women (49.1% in 2022) and the increase in the number of couples without children, with 2023 being the year with the lowest number of births since 1976 (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2022).

Despite these changes, non-motherhood persists as a social taboo. Studies indicate that women who choose not to have children continue to be strongly socially challenged by the maternal ideal, and it is common to use the argument that they may regret it in the future (Fontoura *et al.*, 2024). However, little is discussed about those who have become mothers and regret it, as researched by Donath (2017) in his specific study with Israeli women.

In Donath's (2017) study, in-depth interviews with women who regret motherhood show that this regret does not stem from the relationship with their children, but from the social imposition of motherhood as an obligatory destination. The findings reveal how gender norms and moral expectations, associated with the absence of informed choice, produce suffering, guilt and silencing, destabilizing the myth of motherhood as a necessarily full experience.

Taking into account the importance of making the theme visible and the lack of research on regret in relation to motherhood in the Brazilian context, the present study aims to understand the experience of regret for the choice of motherhood among Brazilian women mothers.

2 METHOD

This is a qualitative study. The semi-structured interview model was used (Rubin; Rubin, 2012) and thematic analysis in the treatment of data (Braun; Clarke, 2006).

Recruitment occurred through snowball sampling, suitable for accessing hard-to-reach populations (Vinuto, 2014). The disclosure was made on social networks, with contact via phone and email. After the expression of interest, the research objectives were presented, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were verified and the duration of the interview was informed; Once eligibility was confirmed, the interview was scheduled according to mutual availability.

The inclusion criteria were: being a woman with at least one living child, declaring regret regarding motherhood, having access to the internet, and agreeing to the Informed Consent Form (ICF). Participants with physical or emotional impediments to the interview, without access to the internet, or who did not agree with the informed consent form were excluded.

The interview followed a semi-structured script, starting with the free report of the life story, focusing on the experience of regret in relation to motherhood. This approach allowed flexibility and deepening according to the research objectives, with the use of complementary

questions to clarify ambiguous answers (Moura; Ferreira, 2005). At the end, sociodemographic data were collected.

10 online interviews were conducted with Brazilian women, white and black, living in Brazil and abroad, aged between 27 and 56 years, all declaring regret in relation to motherhood. Most identified themselves as heterosexual, with income ranging from 0 to 11.36[3] minimum wages and schooling from high school to lato and stricto sensu training. It was observed a predominance of some link with spirituality practices, regardless of religious affiliation. The number of children varied, there were 3 participants with 1 child, 6 participants with 2 children and 1 participant with 3 children.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed in full, and the names of the participants were replaced to ensure anonymity, in accordance with current ethical legislation. The data were analyzed through Thematic Analysis (Braun; Clarke, 2006), which allows the identification, analysis and interpretation of patterns of meaning (themes) present in data, such as interviews or texts. It organizes and describes the data in a systematic way, enabling an in-depth understanding of the meanings attributed by the participants to the phenomenon studied. The analysis was conducted independently by the two researchers, who, after comparing the themes, constructed three analytical categories. The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under Opinion number 7,576,553.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the interviews, 3 categories were listed: (1) "Cultural scripts: naturalized and idealized motherhood"; (2) "The price: Giving up on yourself"; and (3) "Overload and exhaustion". Each of the categories encompasses themes and sub-themes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Categories, themes and subthemes

Categories	Themes	Subthemes
1. Cultural Scripts: Naturalized and Idealized Motherhood	1.1 Billing	1.1.1 Social
		1.1.2 Self-collection
	1.2 Being a complete woman	1.2.1 Personal sense
		1.2.2 Fulfilling man's desire
2. The price: Letting go of yourself	2.1 Loss of freedom	
	2.2 Being imprisoned forever	

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[3] Values expressed in the amount of minimum wages and fractions. In 2024, the year of data collection, the minimum wage was R$ 1,412.00.

	2.3 Renouncing dreams/not prioritizing yourself
	2.4 Sleep deprivation
	2.5 Cut in professional life
	2.6 Having to maintain contact or relationship with the parent
	3.1 Concentration of liability
3. Overload and exhaustion	3.2 Not having a day off
	3.3 Lack of support network

Source: Survey data (2025).

The first category, entitled "Cultural Script: Naturalized and Idealized Motherhood", presented the experiences of the interviewees in the face of motherhood experienced, evidencing the social naturalization that women with reproductive capacity will necessarily become mothers (Leal; Zanello, 2022), at the same time that there is a vast idealization of motherhood and reproduction (Emídio; Okamoto; Maia, 2023). The statements illustrate how gender technologies (Lauretis, 1984) question women, producing a romanticized ideal of motherhood. Each excerpt below is identified by the fictitious name of the interviewees, followed by the letter "B" if she is white or "N" if she is black, and the number of children.

About romanticization and idealization, Conceição (B, 2) reported: "I had just married and had that princess thought, fairy tale that everything was beautiful and wonderful... Before having my daughter, I thought I was going to have a complete family." The idealization of a happy family, often coming from cartoons, also helped other women to build their desires related to marriage and children: "I had a very big romanticization of the family model of the father, the mother, the little son, I watched a lot of princess movies... That margarine family, which was going to be all beautiful, that breakfast all together" (Rosário, B, 3). In the case of Amparo (B, 2), idealization helped her create a kind of automatic path, where everything would follow a well-defined plan: "I organized that I was going to marry my boyfriend after two years [of dating], then I was going to have my first child, as if it were a script that I was planning to follow and not that it was something I was anxiously waiting for."

From the reports, we can see that projections about motherhood and being a mother may have begun in childhood, with Gender Technologies (Lauretis, 1994), which are very effective, among other purposes, in teaching girls and boys what places each one should occupy (Menezes; Menezes, 2024).

Within this category, two themes emerged: (1.1) "Demanding" and (1.2) "Being a complete woman". In the first theme (1.1) "Collection", two subthemes were identified: (1.1.1) "Social" and (1.1.2) "Self-collection". Regarding "Demanding" (theme 1.1), it was perceived that women feel charged to exercise motherhood. This begins in childhood and continues through adolescence to adulthood. When the demand is not expressed by the actors of

society, which is the case of "Social Collection" (1.1.1), it comes in the form of "Self-Collection" (1.1.2).

Regarding Social Demand, there have been many reports about charging for motherhood, as a way of complying with a script or a gendered script (Zanello, 2018). Nazaré's speech (N, 1) summed up this feeling: "I think this is not only in motherhood, in my case it also goes from this traditional relationship of marriage, of being a mother, of what society expects and I have always tried to fit into that".

In many cases, the charge came from the mother herself asking for grandchildren. According to Leal and Zanello (2022), the mother is one of the most present social actors when it comes to questioning her daughters to motherhood "My mother always made that demand 'I want a grandchild, when am I going to have a grandchild?'" (Rosário, B, 3). Glória (N, 2) was also massively charged by her mother: "This charge came a lot from my mother, she always told me 'ah, I'm going to die without you giving me a grandchild'... And it was interesting because she already had a grandchild."

However, even after the child is born, the demand does not stop, only the focus changes: to be a good mother, to take care of and love the child, as Conceição (B, 2) described: "Everyone giving a guess 'you can't do this, that' and those myths of grandma 'you can't catch wind', 'you're swallowing air'... I was in despair, I was afraid to breastfeed and she [daughter] would drown because I didn't know how to let off." She also made another observation, that the greatest concern, from the beginning, is with the child, while little or no care is taken with the mother. According to her "it's not a healthy attention to the baby, it's an attention that demands from the mother, 'are you breastfeeding?', 'are you cleaning?', 'are you bathing?', 'you can't give that' urg! I go crazy with life."

Nazaré (N, 1) and Lourdes (N, 1) brought statements that are in line with the observations about having to love the child and exist to take care of him, the first highlighted: "It is the demand that you are a mother, you need to love the child unconditionally and you need to be there with him all the time". And the second added: "They [friends] think you're a mother, you have to love the child... I like my daughter, I can't say I love her, but I like and raise her because I have the obligation."

It is observed that social demand takes multiple forms (mothers, family members, friends), delimiting expectations about women of childbearing age, which promotes confusion between biological capacity and social imposition. (Badinter, 1985; Barbosa; Rocha-Coutinho, 2007; Zanello, 2018).

The second sub-theme (1.1.2) "Self-demand" showed how much motherhood also represents an internal demand and the suffering involved in it. Lourdes (N, 1), for example, revealed that she thought it was a duty to have children: "I thought that every woman had to have a child, no one ever told me that a woman might not want to have a child".

Even for those who have put some of the social mandates in check, the reflection has leaned more towards having children than the other way around, even though they have never identified motherhood as a desire. Above all, when the pressure tightened, personal circumstances were seen as obstacles that needed to be overcome. This was the case of Glória (N, 2): "I had been married for some time and I felt a certain despair 'what now? I don't have a child? A woman has a biological clock, after the age of 35 it becomes more difficult". Amparo (B, 2) decided to be a mother as if it were a traced route: "It was that script, I would have to fulfill this script, it was not a dream of my life, it was not something I longed for, a dream come true, it never was".

For Nazaré (N, 1), the demand came in the form of planning for her second child, even after the whole process of the first child had been very difficult for her: "After my son turned one year old, I started to put a lot of pressure, because I thought I needed to have more children, because that was what everyone expected of me".

In other cases, the self-demand was in the sense of having to love the child, but this also revealed the guilt for not being able to love: "I don't feel happy being a mother. It's a very bad feeling, I don't feel happy feeling it... I have to raise her, so I have to try" (Lourdes, N, 1). In the case of Aparecida (N, 2), the feeling of guilt is also evident: "She deserved a better mother, who did everything, who spoiled, she wanted her to have everything I can't give... I feel guilty, incapable."

All of them revealed that they felt this internalized demand, first in having at least one child and, then, fulfilling the role of what is socially understood as a good mother (Priyadharshini; Karthiga, 2025). Most of them recognized their resentment because they felt they were not reaching the place they had so longed for, others because they felt they did not love their children or loved less than they should.

The other theme to be explained is (1.2) "Being a complete woman", in which two sub-themes were also identified: (1.2.1) "Personal Meaning" and (1.2.2) "Fulfilling man's desire". In the first sub-theme (1.2.1) "Personal Meaning", the participants showed how much they imagined that motherhood, the love relationship, or even the combination of these two things could bring a sense of completeness to their lives. The participants Nazaré and Rosário had

a similar idea about personal fulfillment and starting a family: "I imagined that to be happy, I needed to find a good man, who would be my best friend and then we would have our child and from that moment on my life would be great" (Nazaré, N, 1). In consonance, Rosário (B, 3) reports: "They told me that I was born to be a mother, a mother's love is different, that only when we are mothers will we have this incredible feeling. I never thought about it, but I chose it for everything I heard." Aparecida (N, 2) also brought a belief that she would rise to a place of greater respect from the moment she became a mother: "For me it was a fairy tale, I was 15 years old, in my head, it was 'I'm pregnant', it was a feeling like 'I'm a woman, I'm already married' and such". She also believed that motherhood would guarantee her an even more special place, to be chosen by the father of her child: "Yes, I thought that having a child from him would improve my relationship. I thought he would love me much more because I was the mother of his child." This is in line with the experience of motherhood as "colonized empowerment", in which there is the fantasy that motherhood would be the seal of being chosen on the shelf of love (Zanello, 2018).

In the sub-theme (1.2.2) "Fulfilling the man's wish", statements were gathered that indicate that the decision for motherhood was, for many participants, crossed by the desire of their partners to become fathers. Some of them admitted that they were carried away by their wishes. This was the case of Guadalupe (B, 1): "When I met my husband, he said, 'It would be really nice if we had a child.'" Rosário also pointed out (B, 3): "I gave a child to a person who wanted to be a father. He [ex-partner] wanted to have a child and then as I was very in love, I got into having a child with him". Aparecida (N, 2) reported: "We met and three months later I was already pregnant, because his dream was to be a father. I was in love and he kept putting things in my head to be with me, and keep me there."

Many were able to recognize that they did not want to be mothers, as is the case of Amparo (B, 2): "In my childhood, I never thought about being a mother... The games of my friends who were dolls, houses... My interest was 'cops and robbers', 'pique', it was climbing trees, exploring the neighborhood." Others thought they wanted to, but only after motherhood did they realize that they had followed the cultural scripts, as was the case with Lourdes (N, 1): "It was never a dream, I thought I had to have it because all the women in my family and friends all have children and they thought I had to".

In general, it is also worth noting that most women had big dreams outside the box of "being a mother", but, as we have seen, for various reasons they ended up following the path of motherhood. In the words of Fátima (B, 2): "Being a mother was never a priority for me, I

dreamed of having my corner, living alone, having my job. I had an illusion of being an architect." Amparo (B, 2) highlighted that for her the important thing was freedom: "I dreamed of being free, doing everything I wanted to do and my parents wouldn't let me". Aparecida (N, 2) said: "I always had many dreams: to be famous, to be a singer, to dance, to expand everything in me, you know?" Lourdes (N, 1) also pointed out: "My dream was to be a polyglot, go to college, be a good professional and travel the world." Finally, Gloria (N, 2) concluded: "I had a dream that was to live abroad, I saw myself traveling the world, doing so many things... That's it, the feeling is 'what was this direction that my life took?'".

Despite the feeling of regret, many of the participants were able to see that the ideal of the mother socially proposed is unattainable, thus, some of them found in the acceptance of their own limits a possibility of appeasing psychic elaboration. Conceição (B, 2) highlighted what was important to her "I'm not a perfect mother, I never will be, the important thing is to send the girl clean, with food in her belly to school, take and pick it up, it's my obligation". Aparecida (N, 2) also found a way to feel better: "I don't have this keen sense of motherhood, but I decided not to carry this weight and do the best I can, being the mother I can." In the same direction, Graça (N, 2) said: "I forgave myself and I continue in this process of trying to do the best I can, because I was always blaming myself, I thought that nothing I was doing for them was good".

It is important to highlight that many of these women have managed to reach this place of reflection on motherhood driven by feminism and gender literacy. Since then, they have reported that their lives have changed and, thus, they have been able to face the dilemmas of motherhood in a different way: "Since I met feminism and realized my place and my role in society... Because this society sucks for moms, right?" (Fatima, B, 2). According to Rosário (B, 3): "It was from motherhood that I began to seek literacy of race, gender, class, you know? And it's very good to see that, but it's also very painful." There was also a search for literature that could encompass feelings and name subjective processes "There is a book that made me cry for a dick, which was 'Repentant Mothers' [Orna Donath], then feminism came into my life, then what it is to be a woman in society came in." (Fatima, B, 2). The naming of subjective experiences promotes their objectification and the possibility of reflecting on and talking about them, and not just experiencing them (Zanello, 2007 – 2007a or 2007b). It also allows its politicization, by bringing its structural-political character (shared with other women) and not just biographical-experiential.

Such affective learning, of deconstruction of the mystique of motherhood, began to be

shared with other women, and with their own children, because, as the participants reported, real motherhood is rarely discussed, especially by experienced mothers, maintaining a silence about the challenges and malaise associated with this model in Brazil (Fontoura *et al.*, 2024). Graça's speech (N, 2) summarizes an experience that was shared between them: "no one really says what motherhood is, everyone is collectively deceived".

In this first category, we were able to observe the path of women through motherhood, which for many represented a confrontation between ideal motherhood and real motherhood. After the birth of their child, many discovered how deceptive the dream of being a mother or the images built since childhood are for the vast majority of women. Part of this social imaginary is the image of a mother considered perfect, who is capable of meeting all the needs of her children, always being ready to love and care (Iacona; Masina; Testoni, 2025). When faced with the incompatibility between real and imaginary, many of them managed to find a way out, making peace with reality and assuming for themselves a commitment to reality, respecting its limits.

The second category, "The price: giving up oneself", is composed of six themes: (2.1) "Loss of freedom"; (2.2) "To be imprisoned forever"; (2.3) "Renouncing dreams/not prioritizing oneself"; (2.4) "Sleep deprivation"; (2.5) "Cut in professional life"; and (2.6) "Having to maintain contact or relationship with the parent". Within the themes, it was possible to list both the forceful statements about repentance, as well as to show invisible aspects of renunciation, which cause great discomfort to women mothers and about which little or nothing is said (Leal; Zanello, 2022).

In the first theme, (2.1) "Loss of freedom", the women explained that the arrival of motherhood brought many limitations to the autonomy they once had, as well as implications of this process in their lives. According to Lourdes (N, 1): "What catches me the most is the fact that 'for me it's a prison', it's that I have to be available to a person... it's my lack of freedom." Rosário (B,3) and Nazaré (N,1) brought a similar experience, summarized in the speech of the former: "I was very angry, waking up several times at dawn, a child crying... I wanted to sleep... then there was Micareta, I wanted to go and I was stuck at home with a child".

In addition to the deprivation of physical freedom, issues such as emotional freedom and maternal work on an intermittent basis also emerged. In the case of Nazaré (N, 1) "The lack is the power of choice and emotional freedom, because I wanted to do something for myself, but how am I going to do it, knowing that my son is at home and I could be with him?".

And in the case of Guadalupe (B, 1): "I always thought I was going to lose my freedom. This work [of care] is double, it is unpaid, there is no time to rest, there is no time to even take a shower."

Within this theme, the women reported that motherhood compromises their freedom, not only to come and go, but also in the emotional, choice, and time spheres (Freitas; Finamori, 2024). Many expressed resentment that this limitation was seen as part of maternal obligations and that they did not anticipate this impact before the arrival of their children.

The second theme (2.2), "Being imprisoned forever", showed how much there is a lifelong character in the attribution of responsibility of children to the mother, in the current maternity model. It is a never-ending work, according to Gloria (N, 2): "The father [of the children] was with them and said 'take a break, go take your bath' ... I went to the bathroom and started crying, I thought about killing myself, because I won't be able to handle this until I was 18." Amparo added (B, 2): "At what age do we stop being mothers? Because I didn't want to have to always carry this responsibility for their happiness."

All of them revealed how they feel about the demands of motherhood and emphasized that the choices are very scarce or do not exist, depending on the stage in which the child is. The concentration of work, organization, structure and care are always demanded of the mother (Freitas; Finamori, 2024).

The following theme (2.3) "Renouncing dreams/not prioritizing oneself", listed the most forceful statements about how much, in addition to responsibilities and demands, women are also required to renounce their dreams for the sake of their children, the home and the well-being of all. That is, that they fulfill the maximum mandate of "heterocentricity", in the maternal device (Zanello, 2018).

Fátima (B, 2) pointed out: "Today I'm working, I have plans for myself, and I'm not going to give up, I've already given up to take care of my children and it cost me a lot". Guadalupe (B, 1) also commented: "My work will never be the same, my time will never be the same. The worst thing is to give up on myself, to do everything for the other." Aparecida (N, 2) brought: "The bill arrives... you do everything for your son... the son will fly, he will grow up and you will no longer exist, because your life was to exist for the son... What about you? And your dreams?". On this topic, the participants agreed on having to give up several things in their lives, planning, and dreams for the sake of motherhood (Santos *et al*., 2023). Some of them consider that they have missed the window of opportunity for personal fulfillment, others are trying to remake plans, within what is possible.

The theme (2.4) "Sleep deprivation" emphasized an experience considered "common" in the maternity ward, not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of sleep quality. Rosário (B, 3) pointed out: "I suffered a lot from the nights, from waking up every night, then I started to see that it wasn't going to be that little doll game". Lourdes (N, 1) added: "It was stronger [the notion of regret] there when I was sleep deprived... Her sleep only came regular now at almost three years old." Guadalupe (B, 1) brought: "I thought 'how long am I going to live this?' waking up at dawn, and this baby crying, having to keep changing, I'm hating this life, so I said 'what have I done with my life?'". Finally, Nazaré (N, 1) reported having a similar feeling: "I was exhausted after the birth of my son and I remember holding him, hugging him, trying to make him sleep, I was exhausted and started crying and saying 'what did I do with my life?'".

Sleep deprivation stood out as an important stressor among mothers. Studies indicate that abstinence from sleep compromises emotional regulation, cognitive performance, and neurobiological stability (Cabellino *et al.*, 2025; Motta *et al.*, 2024), and may intensify with the arrival of the newborn and affect the mental health of the mother and child, especially when it extends through the puerperium or beyond (Astbury *et al.*, 2025).

The next theme (2.5), "Cut in professional life", came as an unfolding of motherhood and happened to most women, bringing physical, emotional and social damage. Graça (N, 2) pointed out how much motherhood was a factor that delayed her professional development: "Motherhood does not allow me to do the best I can in my work. One day I have to be available for my daughter, the next I'm exhausted, the next I have to cook, I'm always in demand for her." Conceição (B, 2) also complained: "I could have been much better, I could have gone to college, graduate school, have my own clinic... There are N things I could have done if I hadn't chosen to be a mother... But now I have a house to clean and that's it."

The effect of motherhood as an impediment or retarder of professional development has been called in the literature as "sticky floor" (Berheide, 1992; Ferrito, 2021), a situation in which women face difficulties in advancing in the labor market at the most basic levels, due to structural obstacles related to gender stereotypes and concentration in family and child care occupations.

Fátima (B, 2) narrated that she did not work and gave up looking for a job to take care of her son, but this left her vulnerable in the relationship with the child's father: "At the time I didn't work and where does the man punish you? In the pocket. We have to do a lot of

makeup, we have to say calmly. The problem is what do you do with a baby and no money?" Other participants reported similar experiences. In the case of Graça (N, 2), in addition to this experience, there were other sanctions: "I stopped working because we agreed that I was going to stay at home and dedicate myself to the family, and then when we separated, he threw me out of the house and left me with nothing."

Studies indicate that these women face greater occupational instability and a higher probability of abandoning their careers, due to the overload of care and the fragility of social support networks (Magalhães; Nascimento; Rocha, 2022). Another important factor is the insufficiency of child care policies, restricted parental leave, and the precariousness of working conditions that disproportionately affect women in situations of social vulnerability (Pimenta, 2021). For these women, motherhood can represent a decisive factor of economic exclusion, intensifying cycles of poverty and financial dependence.

The last theme (2.6) "Having to maintain the relationship or contact with the parent", revealed that many women are either unable to divorce their children's parents or, when they do, they need to maintain contact with them, no matter how bad the marital relationship may have been. The participants who remained married to their children's parents revealed their discontent, especially with the lack of attitude, participation and division of responsibilities that a child brings. Graça (N, 2) pointed out that her husband believes that the financial contribution he makes is enough: "To this day he thinks that it is enough to pay the bills". Aparecida (N, 2) vented: "In the puerperium it was horrible, her husband at the time worked and studied. He said I wouldn't go through everything alone... Guess what? I went through everything alone, sad, exhausted, with two cuts, having to clean the house, make food." Fátima (B, 2) also highlighted her disappointment in motherhood with what she expected from a partner: "I dreamed of a soap opera husband, the one who helps his wife in the middle of the night, who picks up the child and gives her to breastfeed... And I didn't have this husband, you know?" And she also added "It's a mix of hatred due to tiredness, exhaustion... To see the guy [husband] on the couch and you taking care of yourself... the hatred you're feeling from seeing a person... a vase [husband] inside your house, you know?" Finally, Rosario (B, 3) pondered "Man can do anything, including not wanting to be the father of the son he brought into the world. My daughter's father is not responsible. He wanted this daughter, but he didn't want to take responsibility for her." Despite the discomfort and anger, some women did not feel free and structured to separate, even more so with the existence of a small child, totally dependent. As Guadalupe (B, 1) clearly pointed out: "I'll even speak

softly, I think that if I weren't a mother, I wouldn't even be with him [husband]."

When possible, the separation could provide partial relief. Amparo (B, 2), for example, could not bear the overload with her ex-husband: "he was a guest in the house. I did everything, I worked outside the home, I had a child, I had to take care of the house, prepare breakfast for him. I was very unhappy in the marriage." The malaise and hatred arise not only in the face of the amount of work to be performed, but also in the face of the feeling of being exploited, because it is necessary to do it for two.

However, even women who managed to separate from their parents had to maintain the relationship with the same, due to the child(ren). Many reported fights with their ex-partner due to their demands for a fairer financial division regarding responsibilities with their children, as pointed out by Graça (N, 2): "It was a fight for him to pay half of the girl's school. Everything with him is a fight to make him pay, he thinks he's doing too much...". This dynamic, in which the children's bills fall disproportionately on the mothers, although common in our country, can be characterized as patrimonial violence (Britto; Flowers; Zanello, 2025), which compromises women's dignity, freedom, and economic independence (Barroso, Silva; Paula, 2024).

Tired of the fights and financial demands (for the child) not met by the ex, many assumed, to a large extent, almost total responsibility for the expenses with the child(ren) (Augustijn, 2023; Pimenta, 2021). In this sense, Aparecida (N, 2) commented: "I did extra, cleaning, I had to jump up and down to support her, because he [the child's father] gave her R$ 150.00 in pension at the time, you know?". Glória (N, 2) also reported receiving a pension far below what she needed to support her children: "Financially, the father of my children pays a pension that would be enough to pay for a person to stay with them in the morning, cook... I assume all the rest, I assume all expenses". Thus, structural gender inequalities manifest themselves, affecting women's choices and autonomy.

This category showed how much women mothers, in addition to being demanded full-time, are also called upon to all kinds of responsibilities for the life of their child(ren), which in many cases also involves maintaining a relationship with abusive parent(s). The maternal role with regard to care, organization, responsibility, conflict mediation and everything else that involves the life of the child(ren) is thus disproportionately attributed to the woman (Duarte; Morimoto, 2024).

The third category, "Overload and exhaustion", listed the women's reports about the consequences of a lifetime dedicated to child care. The themes listed from this category

were: (3.1) "Concentrated responsibility", (3.2) "Not having a day off" and (3.3) "Lack of support network". The words of Fátima (B, 2) bring a small summary of the category: "I have always taken care, you know? I use a term like 'since I them, I'll take care of them', you know? And I took great care, I was very firm always taking care. They can't complain about care, it was care for the school, doctor, everything."

The theme (3.1) "Concentrated responsibility" points out how the woman, when a mother, is considered as "the" (sole or main) responsible for the care of the children. Reports were listed about how women needed to structure their lives according to their children and issues that involve them, especially because care is not shared. Men have their lives spared the mental and manual burden that motherhood represents to women (Duarte; Morimoto, 2024). Conceição (B, 2) commented: "I cried, I despaired, I didn't take a shower for days, because I was afraid to leave her alone to take a shower". Fátima (B, 2) reported that she readily understood what was expected of her as soon as the baby was born: "I had a feeling of responsibility 'I'm going to have to take care of it, keep it alive'. The responsibility comes when she [the child] is on your arm, that the doctor says 'it's here, beautiful, now it's going to be happy, it's your problem'".

One point that deserves to be highlighted is the exclusive responsibility of the mother in the administration of everything related to the children, ranging from the organization of the child's life and routine to medical consultations. Rosário (B, 3) described: "You're thinking 24 hours a day about what you have to do, what's missing, what you have to organize, the doctor who has to make an appointment, about the organization of that child's week so you can handle your outings". Glória added: "I have to decide which school they go to, I have to look at the fridge and know that there is food, if there are clothes, if not".

Negligence and paternal absence emerged as central elements of women's overload and exhaustion, since male participation in care, when present, was minimal. According to Garcia and Marcondes (2022), the sexual division of care work remains asymmetrical, with less involvement of men, restricted mainly to support activities and external to the home.

Another point that stood out, in addition to objective and material responsibilities, was affective responsibility, as Nazaré (N, 1) highlighted, with regret: "This responsibility that weighs on me is the fact that I have to give him the love he needs to be happy, if I am not present in his life, the rest is not enough, do you know?" Affective accountability can even reach the mediation of conflicts between the child and the parent, as explained by Fátima (B, 2) "It's always a cucumber, a bummer, one (child) wants one thing, the other wants

something else, it's a difference of interest, of personality, it's a difference of everything and it's you who has to manage it from there". This demand for emotional management of relationships is perpetuated, even when separated from the parent, as it was in the case of Graça (N, 2): "One thing that weighs a lot on me is their relationship [father and son], they fight a lot and do not find ways to dialogue and want to turn to me". This statement is in line with research that points to the work of the role of mediation of mothers between children and fathers, regardless of the situation and condition that led to the separation of these parents (Luduvice; Lordello; Zanello, 2004).

Even the growth and becoming an adult on the part of the children does not necessarily seem to free the woman from this maternal function. In this sense, Amparo (B, 2) highlighted that the care of the children lasts until the present, even though both are already adults: "I imagined that at this time, they had already conquered their spaces... Even the oldest is 27 and the youngest is 25, I organize my issues so that I am able to support them." As Lourdes pointed out (N, 1): "Children are a nuisance for life".

One of the aspects of this theme is the exploitation of women by the Maternal Device and guilt, in which women reported even greater abuses committed against them, especially in the responsibility that was imputed to them.

The second theme in the category "Overload and exhaustion" is related to or stems from the first, (3.1) "Not having a day off". The participants demonstrated, according to their experiences, that they cannot have a minute of rest in the work of care. In the words of Rosario (B, 3): "Because that's it, you dedicate yourself to a small human being, you don't have time to take a shower many times". Conceição (B, 2) highlighted the high and constant demand of maternal work: "There is no benefit to having children, the responsibility, the expense, the physical and mental exhaustion... You hear all day long 'mom, mom, mom, mom, mom, mom.'" Care work, socially attributed to women, is an essential activity and, at the same time, made invisible and devalued (Carneiro *et al.*, 2023). Unlike a formal job, it does not provide for days off, requires continuous availability and compromises rest, self-care and well-being of women.

Due to this exhaustion, the relationship with one's own work outside the home is often transformed: it becomes the place of rest, of being able to exist again as a person and not a mere function. Glória (N, 2), for example, reported that it was at work in the public sphere that she found rest from the work she did at home: "I don't know what my life would be like if I didn't have the possibility of spending so much time outside, because being at home is

being demanded and sucked into motherhood all the time".

The last category (3.3) "Lack of support network", showed that the network available to women mothers, when it is not non-existent, ends up being very restricted and composed only of women, in this case it is the mothers themselves (the child's grandmothers), sisters, daughters-in-law, etc. Conceição (B, 2) told us: "it was very difficult, because my mother does not live nearby, It turns out that I never had someone by my side to help me." Aparecida (N, 2) also lived her processes in a solitary way: "I never had a support network from any of the parties. Neither from my family nor from her father's family, so it was very much me for her and for me." Fatima (B, 2) had a similar experience: "I didn't even have support from my family... It was me and me, you know?"

Even the women who had a hammock ended up showing how fragile and small this hammock can be, as in the case of Lourdes (N, 1): "His cousin's wife [the child's father], his niece and his ex-sister-in-law helped me... That's what helped me not to have donated her [daughter]." For Graça (N, 2), the support is more affective: "My support network is currently my mother and my sister. It's a support network that actually supports me more psychologically, because they're there in their runs."

The naturalization of care as an extension of femininity contributes to the maintenance of gender inequalities, by making women responsible for sustaining daily life, without adequate social, economic or institutional recognition (Carneiro *et al.*, 2023). Performed mostly in the domestic and family sphere, this work involves continuous physical, emotional and cognitive demands, resulting in overload, exhaustion and restrictions on female autonomy. In this way, gender inequalities are perpetuated and penalize mainly women (Garcia; Marcondes, 2022). In the words of Fatima (B, 2): "There is a lack of women playing the real 'Guys, being a mother is hell'... Ah, 'to be a mother is to suffer in paradise', where is paradise?".

Despite the relevance of the results, the research has limitations, such as the concentration of the sample in large urban centers, the underrepresentation of women over 50 years of age, and the limited ethnic-racial and social class diversity. Such aspects indicate the need for new studies that expand the sample diversity and deepen the investigation on maternal regret.

4 CONCLUSION

The results indicate that maternal regret is a relevant social phenomenon, which

demands greater visibility in the public debate. Motherhood should be understood as a choice, and not as a social imposition. The recognition of maternal regret and the absence of the desire to mother highlights the need to shift these experiences from the private to the collective, contributing to the denaturalization of motherhood as an obligatory destiny for women. The scarcity of academic productions on the subject reinforces the need to expand studies on maternal experiences.

The study also points to the urgency of involving men in the debate, beyond financial responsibility, promoting their active participation in the care of children and in supporting mothers. Maternal overload, often associated with a lonely and exhausting motherhood, highlights the need for an effective redistribution of care work, which should not fall exclusively on women. In this sense, it is essential to develop strategies that encourage male engagement in parental responsibilities, considering that financial support represents only a portion of the work involved in raising children.

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