

# Teacher-mothers during lockdown: exploited and overworked

**Lucía Rivera Ferreiro\* Roberto  
González Villarreal\* Marcelino  
Guerra Mendoza\***

*Translated from the Spanish by Carl Rosenberg*

## Summary

This essay documents the way in which female teachers with at least an underage daughter or son pursued remote classes and met the demands of the educational system, alongside providing care<sup>1</sup>, direct or indirect, for their children, developing various strategies to make

a living for their own families. As a methodical device, interviews were conducted with Mexican teachers of preschool, primary and secondary education residing in Mexico City, Morelos, Oaxaca, Veracruz and the State of Mexico, both from the public and private sectors.

One of the most relevant findings, in the case of female teachers of private schools, is that their salaries were reduced from the start of lockdown for an

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\*Full-time professors in the Doctoral Program in Socio-Educational Process Policy and the Masters Program in Educational Development of the National Pedagogical University, Ajusco, Mexico City.

1. Caregiving is understood as a political problem, placing emphasis on its vital character for the support of the polis, that is, life

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in a common territory. In this sense, caregiving is a necessarily collective process that embraces a broad scope of daily life, including education in all its forms.

indefinite period. Another aspect common to female teachers of public and private schools was the blurring of the limits of paid work, with the argument that “in a pandemic, there are no rights.” The extensiveness and intensification of the workday, joined with that of unpaid domestic work which increased notoriously due to confinement and infection of teachers’ own family members, had considerable impacts on their physical and mental health.

## Introduction

During the seventeen months that the schools remained closed to prevent the mobility of approximately thirty million Mexican girls, boys and youths, teachers who are mothers confronted a situation similar to that of other women, including economic insecurity and domestic violence.

At the same time, unlike other women, their environment and habitual working conditions changed abruptly in various ways. Their living room or other rooms became cages, opening their personal spaces to public scrutiny. They received various messages and instructions until late at night; carried out a large number of new tasks and activities related to the use of technology, they saw the need to establish different kinds of relations and forms of family organization; they activated or constructed support networks to be able to overcome their situation.

The purpose of this text is to document the way in which female teachers with at least an underage daughter or son carried out remote classes and met the demands of the educational system at the same time as they developed strategies to provide the necessary care for the maintenance of life for their own families.

From a common-sense perspective, caregiving is understood as attention to the basic needs of others who are dependent, such as underage children, persons with a disability, and older adults with a chronic illness. This widespread perspective turns out to be limited in understanding the crisis of caregiving which became clear during the pandemic, in addition to reaffirming

the position of those who consider that this problem belongs to the realm of private life.

We start by considering caregiving as a political problem, emphasizing its vital character for the sustenance of the polis; this implies conceiving it as a collective process present in the broad field of spheres which embrace the common life; we all need others to care for us, and at the same time we all have the capacity to do our part. Assuming this posture implies recognizing our vulnerability as a species. As Esquivel, Faur and Jelin point out, no one can survive without being cared for.

Historically, caregiving has been assigned to women, taking for granted that this differential assignation of responsibilities from men has to do with “natural” feminine dispositions, when in reality it obeys stereotypes and cultural guidelines that have become traditional, rooted in the definition of systems of rights and responsibilities proper to the last century (Faur and Pereyra, 2018), on which society is organized.

Studies that take notice of often unique educational experiences and forms of participation of mothers in education (Arenas, 2000) are scarce. In the case of women who are teachers and mothers at the same time, it is not known how they cope with the double working day that they carry out in itself, sacrificing their rest time, leisure, study, social life and political participation, at the cost of their health and emotional stability, which in turn negatively affects the provision of care of others (Palacin, 2018).

The purpose of this text is to document the way in which teachers who are mothers took charge of the remote teaching of their students and helped their own children, at the same time taking charge of providing the care necessary for family support during the pandemic lockdown.

As a methodical device, use was made of semistructured interviews of teachers of preschool, primary and secondary education, both of the public and private sector. The analysis was carried out along two major axes: teaching and caregiving.

### **Some information regarding female Mexican teachers.**

According to the National Survey of Occupation and Employment (ENOE) of the last quarter of 2019, out of 1,19,7778 persons who work as teachers in basic education, 71 out of every 100 are women. By educational levels, in preschool, 94.2% are women; in primary school, 2 out of every 3 (66.8%) and in secondary, 57 of every 100 (56.8%).

One would expect that women's access to positions in the upper hierarchy would correspond to their numerical superiority, but this is not so. On the national level, 54.9% of the directors of primary education are men (INEE<sup>2</sup>, 2019); in secondary education, only 28 of every 100 women occupy executive posts.

Regarding their pay conditions, female preschool and primary teachers who work regular workdays in public schools receive a salary of around eight thousand pesos for a schedule of 25 hours a week, covering a timetable of 8 A.M. to 12:30 P.M.

Their participation in teachers' unions has taken place in conditions of subordination, even in the sections of the so-called democratic teachers current. Historically they have been the vertebral column of the teachers' struggles, and form an active part of mobilizations, preparing food for the entire contingent, taking turns in the schools and encampments which they take part in organizing. During the long days of protest against the government's educational reform of 2013 during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto, support for the resistance was possible thanks to this female presence.

"We women have always been taking part as activists, but we have had few opportunities to obtain posts of leadership. There is a lot of machismo, but we are key participants in sectional assemblies..." (Martinez, 2013). Nevertheless, this sector has lacked the recognition that it deserves on the part of union leadership, headed generally by male teachers.

2. Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación  
(National Institute for Evaluation of Education).

### **The vicissitudes of teaching and caregiving during lockdown.**

In the pre-pandemic era, female teachers covered a double workload. Nevertheless, there was a clear time-space division between paid and unpaid work; even so, in teaching in general, it has become the custom to take work home.

During lockdown, remote teaching, fulfilling various responsibilities of administrative and pedagogical management; and at the same time providing necessary care to sustain the life of their own families, constituted a challenge in itself. On this all teachers interviewed were agreed.

Without any kind of support on the part of the education system, the teachers' unions or owners of private schools, female teachers divided their time and energy over four major groups of tasks, the majority of them carried out simultaneously:

a) Activities before, during and after remote classes, such as: planning, searching for, and selecting attractive material on the internet, or preparing videos and other resources of their own.

b) Various work responsibilities, some already well known, others completely new: creating various kinds of reports on a weekly basis; being present at virtual meetings which generally take place outside the regular work schedule; helping parents of students' families to explain to them tasks and difficulties of various kinds; preparing attendance reports and records of homework handed in by students; posting evidence of work done to institutional platforms or sending it by e-mail.

c) Activities of self-training, such as undertaking post-graduate studies online, workshops or courses with the goals of technological qualification, whether as an obligation or voluntarily, according to the needs brought about by lockdown.

d) Indirect and direct caregiving. Among the first are cleaning the house, washing clothes, shopping, cooking; the second includes feeding their children, other family members, and even pets, as well as helping their own children do their homework.



MOTHERS STRESSED DURING THE PANDEMIC. PHOTO: DIARIO U CHILE

In the case of the teachers at private schools, it was found that all activities were carried out in the face of a salary reduction of between 30% and 50% as a condition to keep one's job, without it being made clear in return when and how this reduction would be recovered.

During the suspension of in-person classes, which it is worth remembering were prolonged for almost a year and a half, women who were teachers and also mothers began the workday at around six in the morning and ended it in the late hours of the night. In addition, they were forced to radically modify their routines, giving up their personal spaces, carrying out a variety of new activities and tasks, and found themselves forced to establish different relations and forms of family life.

In the same space, often reduced, they devised various strategies to teach students, utilizing their own resources, fastening cardboard to the walls of the kitchen, listening to their students or colleagues in virtual meetings while they cooked and tried at the same time to stay busy and calm for their own children, especially if they were very young.

They also evaluated and handed in grades under strong institutional and family pressure, filled out forms and reports; responded to messages at any hour of the day, cleared up difficulties of parents or tried to support students on technological subjects that they themselves had only recently learned.

The activities of teaching and the work of caregiving have intensified considerably. Consequently, the time of leisure and rest has been reduced drastically. The female teachers interviewed spoke of feeling exhausted owing to the mental load which the fulfillment of a double workday in exceptional conditions represents. The tension was increasing in the face of an educational system which hastened, exerted pressure, and constantly demanded the fulfillment of quotas and the handing in of reports and evidence of work carried out.

Public scrutiny fell on them, the vigilance of a society which in pandemic circumstances revived the smear campaign against educators judging all the teachers—female and male—equally. Some parents said, “They don’t do anything, they only as-

-sign homework which they don't check and they just calmly collect their salaries"

In the interviews carried out, the existence is recognized of emotional disorders caused by the impossibility of reconciling their work with caring for their children, in spite of all the efforts which they have made. This situation constituted a source of guilt and internal conflicts regarding what is considered as a neglect of their social function as women: prioritizing teaching of their students and responding to the demands of school authorities, above attention to their own children.

When not relying on other kinds of support, they resorted to the familiar networks to deal with domestic and work demands; their mothers, sisters or neighbours cared for their children while they gave classes. One can say that this contributed to deepening familiarization of caregiving, and especially its feminization, thus reaffirming the separation between teaching as part of public life and caregiving as part of private life, when in reality this separation was simple and simply impossible to sustain, unless someone assumed part of the domestic workload, which was rarely possible.

## Final reflections

The government strategy to manage the pandemic sidestepped the need for caregiving of a distinct kind on the part of the population. Consequently, the absence of collective responses to deal with a common problem did no more than reproduce and deepen the various inequalities inherent in the model of economic and social organization which results in domestic work and caregiving falling back on women. For example, the declaration of President López Obrador, who at the start of the lockdown declared, "The tradition in Mexico is that daughters are more often those who care for the parents, we men are more detached, but the daughters are always available" (Redaccion AP, 2020, June 25).

It is worth remembering that during the lockdown, the schools and day-care centres closed their doors; furthermore, the teacher-mothers saw themselves forced to search for a way to comply with the activities pro-

per to their paid work along with carrying out unpaid domestic work. The specific policies or government supports, as well as measures of protection on the part of the unions to reduce the difficulties of teaching and caregiving simultaneously, were nonexistent.

With a salary cutback imposed on the backs of the teachers—in the case of teachers of private schools—female teachers took charge of buying computer equipment and contracting internet services with their own resources. To teach, they created videos, prepared special materials, and communicated directly with the parents, covering exhausting work days. And when for some reason they needed to be absent from meetings and virtual classes to take care of their children, there was no lack of those who responded: working at home, there are no rights.

The limits of time and space that separate salaried work at home and family existence were erased. The educational system took the home by surprise, appropriating all the life spaces of female teachers that generally pass by outside the school, such as maternity.

Teachers who are mothers shared their privacy with that of the students, and vice versa. They gained the confidence of the youngest, those who for the first time attended "school" without being there; they overcame the limits interposed by the screens. They discovered how their students lived, they encountered difficult situations, generally hidden when they taught in person, they felt impotent to stop the family aggressions which unexpectedly passed in front of their eyes; they did what was possible to prevent other students from witnessing ill-treatment and blows and hearing bad words.

Nevertheless, for the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and wide segments of society, the teachers received their salary punctually, and in return did not do enough, they did nothing!, when in reality, they kept alive the pedagogic link and protected the life of their students at the cost of neglecting their own children.

The most important lesson that we can take from the testimonies brought forward by the teacher-mothers is that, during the lockdown, in the midst of uncertainty,





IMAGE: ME MOM, ME TEACHER

the fear of contagion and the very instability of the pandemic, they taught while caregiving and gave care while they taught.

This puts in doubt the insistence on placing caregiving and teaching as part of different systems, where on one hand the institutions which form part of the educational system are defined as “formal education” which is occupied by teaching, and on the other “informal” education which is occupied by all the other spaces and experiences which are “only caregiving” (Redondo y Antelo, 2017).

This reminds us that caregiving should not be a question of heroic women, but principally, a commitment and shared responsibility. Social organization of caregiving must change, transform, break with the current model to redistribute responsibilities. But this will be impossible while the workload of caregiving is seen as a personal problem and not a social one.

Teaching to provide care and caregiving while one teaches—this is what education involves in these turbulent times of destruction and death; female teachers are called to play a crucial role in this transformation.

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