



The impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on food and nutritional insecurity of single-parent households

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the impacts caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic on food and nutritional insecurity in single-parent families headed by women who received the first installments of Emergency Aid in the municipality of Sant’Ana do Livramento- RS. It also seeks to address issues related to female single parenthood; the profile of these women; the social isolation, work and, income of these women during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The adopted methodological procedures followed the following steps: in the first stage, secondary data were collected from CadÚnico; in the second stage, 235 structured questionnaires were applied. As a result, it is observed that the Emergency Aid, although it was important, was not a sufficient measure to overcome the condition of food and nutritional insecurity of single-parent families headed by women as the Pandemic of Covid-19 has worsened the financial situation of these families.

Keywords: Sant’Ana do Livramento- RS; Covid-19; Female single parenthood; Emergency Aid; Food and nutrition insecurity.

Os impactos da pandemia de covid-19 na insegurança alimentar e nutricional de mulheres monoparentais

Resumo

A pandemia provocada pelo coronavírus trouxe impactos para a economia global, empobrecendo grande parte da população mundial e gerou incertezas em relação às políticas

econômicas e sociais. Além disso, aumentou a frequência da insegurança alimentar. Este artigo teve como objetivo analisar a insegurança alimentar e nutricional nas famílias monoparentais chefiadas por mulheres que receberam o Auxílio Emergencial no município de Sant'Ana do Livramento– Rio Grande do Sul. Busca ainda abordar questões relacionadas à monoparentalidade feminina; o perfil destas mulheres; o isolamento social, trabalho e renda durante a Pandemia de Covid-19. Os procedimentos metodológicos adotados seguiram os seguintes passos: na primeira etapa foram coletados dados secundários do CadÚnico; na segunda etapa foram aplicados 235 questionários estruturados para uma amostra aleatória. Como resultados, observa-se que o Auxílio Emergencial, embora tenha sido importante, não foi uma medida suficiente para superar a condição de insegurança alimentar e nutricional das famílias monoparentais chefiadas por mulheres, pois a pandemia de Covid-19 agravou a situação financeira destas famílias. De forma prática, os resultados contribuem para o estabelecimento de políticas de apoio a populações vulneráveis, incentivando a gestão financeira e garantia de segurança alimentar.

Palavras-chave: Sant'Ana do Livramento– RS; Covid-19; Monoparentalidade feminina; Auxílio Emergencial; Insegurança alimentar e nutricional.

Os impactos de la pandemia de covid-19 en la inseguridad alimentaria y nutricional de mujeres monoparentales

Resumen

La pandemia causada por el coronavirus tuvo impactos en la economía global, empobreció a gran parte de la población mundial y generó incertidumbre en canto a las políticas económicas y sociales. Además, aumentó la frecuencia de la inseguridad alimentaria. Este artículo tuvo como objetivo analizar la inseguridad alimentaria y nutricional en familias monoparentales encabezadas por mujeres que recibieron el Auxilio de Emergencia en la ciudad de Santana do Livramento, Rio Grande do Sul. También busca abordar cuestiones relacionadas con la monoparentalidad femenina, el perfil de estas mujeres, el aislamiento social, el trabajo y los ingresos durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Los procedimientos metodológicos adoptados siguieron los siguientes pasos: en la primera etapa se recopilieron datos secundarios del CadÚnico; en la segunda etapa se aplicaron 235 cuestionarios estructurados a una muestra aleatoria. Como resultados, se observa que el Auxilio de Emergencia, aunque fue importante, no fue una medida suficiente para superar la condición de inseguridad alimentaria y nutricional de las familias monoparentales encabezadas por mujeres, ya que la pandemia de Covid-19 empeoró la situación financiera de estas familias. En términos prácticos, los resultados contribuyen al establecimiento de políticas de apoyo a poblaciones vulnerables, fomentando la gestión financiera y la garantía de seguridad alimentaria.

Palabras clave: Santana do Livramento - RS; Covid-19; Monoparentalidad femenina; Auxilio de Emergencia; Inseguridad alimentaria y nutricional.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated the global economy, leading to increased impoverishment among large segments of the world population. In addition, the pandemic generated uncertainty regarding economic and social policies (Asare Vitenu-Sackey & Barfi, 2021). This global health crisis also affected people's lives in various ways—including health, employment, and income. However, these effects were not equally distributed; instead, they

disproportionately impacted social groups, particularly in developing countries (ZHAO et al., 2022).

Due to their vulnerable condition, working-class women who are heads of single-parent households were particularly affected (ASARE VITENU-SACKEY & BARFI, 2021; BLUNDELL et al., 2020). The intersection of gender, race, and class-based oppression, compounded by the burden of being the sole provider for dependents, amplified the pandemic's impact. As highlighted by Viveiros de Castro and Almeida (2021), in such single-parent family structures, women are solely responsible for the care, upbringing, and financial support of their children. In Brazil, most single-parent families are led by women, and Black families bear an even greater burden of inequality.

These female heads of household faced additional challenges, such as finding safe places for their children during the periods of social distancing in order to continue working. Many of these women are domestic workers—especially cleaners—and were often barred from entering households due to fears surrounding virus transmission. In general, unemployment rates affected women more significantly (ALON et al., 2020; CARLI, 2020), with many losing or experiencing substantial reductions in their sources of income due to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

As a result of these adversities, vulnerable populations experienced heightened levels of food insecurity (LABORDE, MARTIN & VOS, 2020; VALENSISI, 2020). Food insecurity is a global challenge, defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2013) as a condition in which individuals lack reliable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food necessary for normal growth, development, and an active and healthy life.

Data from the 2nd National Survey on Food Insecurity in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil, published by the Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security – PENSSAN (2022), reveal a decline in families' access to food. In households where women were the heads of the family, the situation was even more severe. While 47.9% of households headed by men experienced food security, only 37.0% of households headed by women reported the same. In other words, 63.0% of female-headed households experienced some level of food insecurity, and 18.8% were living in a state of hunger.

To mitigate the food insecurity crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian government implemented income transfer policies aimed at lessening the socioeconomic impacts of social isolation on the most vulnerable populations. Among the measures adopted, Law No. 13.982, enacted on April 2, 2020, established specific protection measures for women who are the sole providers in single-parent families. The aforementioned law stipulates that women who are heads of single-parent households are entitled to receive two (2) installments of the Emergency Aid (BRASIL, 2020).

In this context, the aim of this article is to analyze the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutritional insecurity among single-mother households that received Emergency Aid from the Brazilian Federal Government. Specifically, the study also seeks to address issues related to female single parenthood, the profile of these women, their experience during social isolation, and aspects of employment and income.

This research offers three key contributions: first, it highlights the profile of women who received emergency financial assistance—an important aspect for understanding how the economic shock caused by COVID-19 affected the most vulnerable populations. The economic and social constraints imposed by the pandemic have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities across dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, age, and geography (BLUNDELL et al., 2020). Within the context of single parenthood, single mothers are particularly vulnerable and appear to be underserved by public policymakers (RAHMAN, 2021). Second, the research sheds light on the employment conditions, income levels, and experiences of social isolation faced by single mothers. Understanding the pandemic's impact on key aspects of life—such as employment, work capacity, household responsibilities, child-rearing, education, and health—is crucial (BLUNDELL et al., 2020). Occupational gender segregation tends to affect men and women differently. Women already perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, and during the pandemic, they have not only been laid off at higher rates than men but have also sacrificed their jobs to meet domestic demands and caregiving responsibilities for children and relatives (FORTIER, 2020). Moreover, considering that female-dominated occupations are more likely to be classified as “essential,” women's work may have exposed them to greater risks of infection and job-related stress (CARLI, 2020). And Third, the article contributes to the literature on food and nutritional insecurity, particularly by analyzing a period of crisis. It advances the knowledge frontier by revealing the pandemic's impact on food and nutritional insecurity among vulnerable populations, such as single-mother households. Generally, the constraints faced by single-parent families significantly influence their experience with food insecurity. Time constraints due to single mothers' employment, the high cost of nutritious foods, and limited household budgets become barriers to accessing healthier dietary alternatives (SARKAR, TRAVERSO-YEPEZ & GADAG, 2020).

The municipality of Sant'Ana do Livramento is located in the Southwest Frontier region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. It borders other municipalities to the north and the Department of Rivera, Uruguay, to the south. The city lies within the Pampa biome, approximately 498 kilometers from the state capital, Porto Alegre. According to estimates from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2020), the municipality has a population of 76,321 inhabitants.

As a border municipality with a low Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.727 (UNDP, 2010) and a high percentage of people living in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability, Sant'Ana do Livramento represents an interesting case for research on this topic.

This article is structured into five sections, beginning with this introduction. The second section presents a discussion on female single parenthood. The third outlines the study's methodology. The fourth section presents the results and discussion, and finally, the fifth section offers the study's conclusions.

2 Female Single Parenthood and Food Insecurity

In 2015, female-headed single-parent families accounted for 26.8% of family arrangements with children in Brazil (MACHADO *et al.*, 2021). A single-parent family can be defined as a household in which only one parent is present. This parent is solely responsible for providing for the household, as well as for the education and care of the children. It is worth noting that the concept of single-parent families has not always been understood in this way, having gained greater prominence and visibility starting in the 1960s (OLIVEIRA & CARVALHO, 2018). England was the first country to address the topic through statistical surveys, but it was in 1981, in France, that the term *monoparentality* was used in a study by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) to describe families composed of a single parent—whether single, separated, divorced, or widowed—and their children (SANTOS & SANTOS, 2008).

Single-parent families were officially recognized as a legitimate family structure under Brazilian law with the enactment of the 1988 Federal Constitution. Paragraph 4 of Article 226 defines a family unit as a community formed by either parent and their descendants (BABIUK, 2015). According to the author, female single parenthood should be understood as a contemporary form of reaffirming women's social emancipation.

The emergence of single-parent families stems from a variety of factors, whether rooted in the institution of family itself or arising as a consequence of new social dynamics (OLIVEIRA & CARVALHO, 2018). Single parenthood may result from divorce—where the child initially lived with both parents but later remains with only one of them—as well as from the death of a spouse, or from the choice of single mothers to live independently. In other words, it may originate from a wide range of circumstances in which one parent ends up raising the children alone (BRAIDE, 2006; DINIZ, 2002).

Benatti *et al.* (2021) identified both positive and negative experiences within single motherhood, including post-divorce challenges, the importance of social support, and family adaptability. Their research found no significant differences in parenting competencies when compared to nuclear families, and emphasized the need for greater attention to male single-parent households. However, single-parent families headed by women often face social disadvantages, marginalization, low income, and unemployment. Women's economic vulnerability—exacerbated by low wages and the burden of domestic responsibilities—reinforces these conditions. Anti-poverty strategies, often focused on immediate relief, tend to overlook the structural causes of inequality, and family projects frequently lack long-term planning (CAMAYD & GULI, 2022).

What ensures the relevance and social visibility of studies on female-headed households is not merely their relative statistical growth, but rather the increasing precariousness of their living conditions. This precariousness is closely associated with broader structural issues such as productive restructuring, shifts in labor market regulations, and changes in the role of the state. These phenomena intersect with demographic factors, including new migratory flows, declining fertility rates, rising divorce rates, increased female life expectancy, the relative growth of consensual unions, and an increase in independent parenthood.

Together, these elements contribute to the formation of new single-parent family arrangements (MACEDO, 2008).

On average, women who head households are five years older than their male counterparts; they also have lower educational attainment, lower labor market participation, and earn less income. This income gap is attributable to both their lower level of education and limited participation in the formal labor market—limitations that are deeply rooted in systemic discrimination against women. As a result, households headed by women tend to be poorer than other types of households. Additionally, children and adolescents living in female-headed households are generally in worse socioeconomic conditions than those living in other household arrangements (BARROS, FOX & MENDONÇA, 1997; NOVELLINO, 2008).

According to Babiuk (2015), while single-parent families have always existed, they were only formally recognized with the 1988 Federal Constitution. This recognition marked a shift from a narrow, singular concept of family to a more plural and inclusive understanding. In this context, women who are sole providers in female-headed single-parent households often act alone, assuming multiple roles and, at times, neglecting their own individual needs in order to care for their families. “Nevertheless, female providers of single-parent families are stigmatized due to the socio-historical and cultural constructs surrounding women, grounded in a patriarchal and capitalist structure” (BABIUK, 2015, p. 181).

It is important to emphasize that, although some studies have pointed to a correlation between female single parenthood and poverty, making this association without considering the broader historical, social, and economic contexts in which these women have lived—and continue to live—may reduce these family groups to mere symbols of vulnerability. Such reductionism further marginalizes the figure of the woman in society (AZEREDO, 2010; CARVALHO, 1998; TOLEDO, 2011; VITALE, 2002; OLIVEIRA & CARVALHO, 2018). Although female-headed single-parent families are indeed more susceptible to poverty and vulnerability—given their dual responsibility for financial provision and caregiving—they are also subject to persistent social stigma (CARVALHO, 2018).

Women from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds face multiple challenges, including lower levels of education, a higher number of children, exposure to domestic violence, and dependence on state support. Motherhood negatively impacts many women’s professional lives, leading to career interruptions and unemployment. Women who are the sole providers in single-parent households often support their families with insufficient wages, relying on informal work and extended family support. Moreover, the absence of the children's fathers places an even greater burden on these women (ARAUJO & CASACA, 2021).

To overcome these obstacles—poverty and the stigmatization of female-headed households—it is essential to implement public policies that combat wage discrimination and occupational segregation, among other issues. Additionally, policies should be developed to ensure greater school participation among children from these families, thereby interrupting the intergenerational cycle of low educational attainment (BARROS, FOX & MENDONÇA, 1997; NOVELLINO, 2008).

Protective policies aimed at women have the potential to generate meaningful impacts. According to the 2010 Demographic Census conducted by the

Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 46.4% of families in urban areas with a per capita income of up to half the minimum wage were headed by women (IBGE, 2014). A historical analysis of data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNADs) between 2001 and 2015 shows that male-headed households increased by only 13% during this period—from 37.4 million to 42.4 million—whereas female-headed households more than doubled in absolute terms, rising by 105% from 14.1 million to 28.9 million.

In terms of population characteristics in 2015, data show that the Southeast region had the highest number of female-headed households (12.3 million), followed by the Northeast (8.1 million) and the South (3.94 million). There is also a higher prevalence of Black women and younger women serving as heads of household in Brazil. These trends may reflect a reduction in gender disparities or, alternatively, an increase in separations and divorces, as well as the formation of households without the presence of a father figure. In many cases, women assume the role of household head by default, as there is no one else to share these responsibilities (CAVENAGHI & ALVES, 2018).

With regard to gender inequality, Campos et al. (2018) point out that it manifests across several dimensions, including poverty, income levels, education, employment, and, consequently, food and nutritional security. In other words, the authors suggest that a history of poverty affects education levels, which in turn influence job opportunities and income—and ultimately lead to food and nutritional insecurity among female-headed households.

Considering single parenthood and food insecurity, the literature suggests that single mothers and older adults are more prone to food insecurity due to a complex web of disadvantages and discrimination (SARKAR, TRAVERSO-YEPEZ & GADAG, 2020). In Brazil, Food and Nutritional Security (FNS) is defined by Law No. 11,346 of September 15, 2006, which establishes the right of all individuals to regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient quantities, without compromising access to other essential needs. This right must be grounded in health-promoting dietary practices that respect cultural diversity and are socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable (BRASIL, 2006).

Silva, Silveira, and Almeida (2022) argue that, despite government aid in countries like Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity worsened—especially in nations that were already vulnerable. Thus, food insecurity is a global issue that affects both developing and developed countries, as food is not equally distributed across different segments of the population (SARKAR, TRAVERSO-YEPEZ & GADAG, 2020).

In the context of the pandemic, lockdown measures to control the spread of the virus disrupted global supply chains. There was a significant imbalance between supply and demand for food, due to the unexpected shutdown of production facilities, which affected the availability of various food items and, consequently, impacted food security (SHARMA, TYAGI & BHARDWAJ, 2021). Analyzing the effects of COVID-19 on single-parent families in Malaysia, Rahman (2021) found that many single parents were in difficult circumstances, in need of financial and food assistance. Therefore, financial and food-related vulnerabilities were exacerbated during the pandemic, making this topic particularly relevant for further analysis.

3 Method

This section presents the methodological procedures adopted to achieve the objectives of this study, which is characterized as descriptive in nature. The data were analyzed quantitatively and collected in two stages. In the first stage, secondary data were obtained from *Cadastro Único* (CadÚnico), following access authorization granted by the Municipal Department of Social Assistance and Inclusion of Sant'Ana do Livramento/RS. This was made possible through a partnership between the Federal University of Pampa (Unipampa) and the aforementioned municipal department.

To define the sample, the study considered women who were heads of single-parent households, beneficiaries of the Federal Government's Emergency Aid, and registered with a Social Identification Number (NIS). Based on the distribution of the first installment of Emergency Aid, the target population consisted of 3,043 women beneficiaries in the municipality, according to data from the Department of Evaluation and Information Management (SAGI) of the Ministry of Social Development (MDS).

A simple random sample was drawn from the population of 3,043 female beneficiaries. Considering the population's homogeneity and a margin of error of 5%, a total of 235 women were randomly selected. Using the CadÚnico system, researchers identified contact information, addresses, and profile variables of the selected participants to enable the second stage of data collection.

In the second stage, 235 structured questionnaires were administered in person between June and November 2021, in accordance with previously established protocols and approved by the Unipampa Research Ethics Committee (CAAE No. 36591720.0.0000.5323). Given the operational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the following health protocols were strictly followed by all researchers during data collection: i) use of face masks and 70% alcohol-based hand sanitizer; ii) maintenance of a minimum distance of 1.5 meters between researcher and respondent, and conducting interviews in open, well-ventilated spaces; iii) provision of disposable masks and hand sanitizer to respondents who did not have or were not using them at the time of the visit.

Before the questionnaire was administered, each participant was provided with a copy of the Informed Consent Form (ICF), allowing her to give verbal consent to participate in the research. This consent was recorded by the researchers. The questionnaire, composed of closed-ended questions, aimed to collect information on the socioeconomic impact of social isolation on the respondent and her family. It also included questions about employment, income, and, in particular, food insecurity.

The final section of the questionnaire sought to assess food insecurity by comparing the respondent's food situation before and during the pandemic. To this end, the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (EBIA) was applied, based on the 2013 National Household Sample Survey – Food Security Module (IBGE, 2014). The EBIA is a psychometric scale that directly measures one of the dimensions of food and nutritional security within a population through perceptions and experiences of hunger (SAGI, 2014, p. 03). The EBIA identifies the perception and lived experience of food insecurity and hunger at the household level, reflecting access to food. It

offers high reliability and captures the psychological and social dimensions of food insecurity by quantifying the household's difficulty in obtaining food (SAGI, 2014).

The original scale comprises 14 questions. For the purposes of this study, the instrument was adapted to include a comparison between two time periods: the three months prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic period itself. This adaptation resulted in a total of 28 items, measured using a Likert-type frequency scale.

To analyze the results, descriptive statistics and measures of central tendency were employed. The levels of food insecurity were calculated based on the classification proposed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2013). According to the EBIA classification: Food Security (FS) is defined as the condition in which all household members have regular access to sufficient quantities and quality of food without fear of future scarcity. Mild Food Insecurity (MFI) describes households that exhibit some concern about the quantity or quality of the food available. Moderate Food Insecurity (MoFI) refers to households in which members experienced, at some point, a restriction in the quantity of food consumed. Severe Food Insecurity (SFI) is identified when both adults and minors under 18 years of age face food deprivation and experience hunger. Table 1 illustrates the variables and references used in the questions addressing food and nutritional (in)security.

Table 1 – Variables Used to Measure Food and Nutritional Insecurity

Variables
Before (during) the pandemic, were the household members worried that the food would run out before they could buy or receive more?
Before (during) the pandemic, did the food run out before the household members had money to buy more?
Before (during) the pandemic, did the household members lack money to have a healthy and varied diet?
Before (during) the pandemic, did the household members eat only a few remaining food items because the money had run out?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member aged 18 or older skip a meal because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member aged 18 or older ever eat less than they should because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member aged 18 or older ever feel hungry but not eat because there was no money to buy food?

Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member aged 18 or older ever eat only one meal a day or go a whole day without eating because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member under 18 ever lack access to a healthy and varied diet because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member under 18 ever not eat enough food because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, was the amount of food served at meals for any household member under 18 ever reduced because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member under 18 ever skip a meal because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member under 18 ever feel hungry but not eat because there was no money to buy food?
Before (during) the pandemic, did any household member under 18 ever eat only one meal a day or go a whole day without eating because there was no money to buy food?

Source: Adapted from the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (EBIA) for the periods before and during the pandemic. Based on the *National Household Sample Survey – Food Security Module 2013*. Available at IBGE (2014).

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Profile of Women Beneficiaries of Emergency Aid in the Municipality of Sant’Ana do Livramento – RS

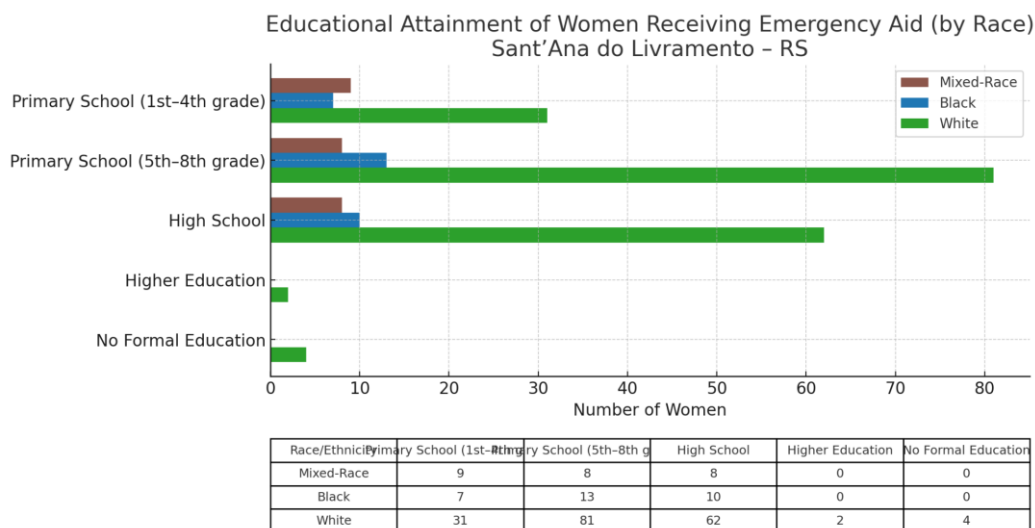
This section presents the socioeconomic and demographic profile of the 235 women who participated in the study. In terms of age, the majority—63.40% of the women—were between 31 and 50 years old; next were those aged 19 to 30, accounting for 22.98%; and 13.62% were over 51 years old. Regarding race/ethnicity, 76.60% of the participants identified as White, 10.64% as Mixed-Race (*Parda*), and 12.77% as Black.

As for educational attainment, 1.70% of the women (4 individuals) had no formal education; 20% (47 women) had completed only grades 1 through 4 of primary school; 43.40% (102 women) had completed grades 5 through 8; 34.04% (80 women) had completed high school; and only 0.85% (2 women) had completed or were enrolled in higher education.

These results indicate low educational attainment, as 65.11% of the participants had completed education only up to elementary level. These findings

are consistent with the studies by Barros, Fox, and Mendonça (1997) and Novellino (2008), which highlight low levels of education among female heads of single-parent households. The data are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Educational Attainment of Women Who Received Emergency Aid of R\$ 1,200.00 (by Race) in the Municipality of Sant’Ana do Livramento – RS



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from CadÚnico (2021).

Regarding income prior to the pandemic, data from *Cadastro Único* indicate that the majority of the women (64.25%) were in a condition of extreme poverty—that is, with a per capita income of less than R\$ 89.00. In Brazil, according to the official threshold of the *Brasil Sem Miséria* Plan, families with a per capita income of up to R\$ 70.00 were classified as extremely poor; this threshold was updated to R\$ 77.00 in May 2014 and to R\$ 89.00 by March 2023. In turn, the poverty line in 2022 was set at R\$ 178.00 per capita.

It is worth noting that the condition of extreme poverty was even more prevalent among mixed-race and Black women—affecting 80.00% of mixed-race women, 76.67% of Black women, and 60.00% of White women. The incidence of extreme poverty is thus higher among mixed-race and Black women compared to their White counterparts. Consequently, the percentage of women who were above the poverty line, with a per capita income higher than R\$ 178.00, was 14.44% among White women, 6.67% among Black women, and 12.00% among mixed-race women.

An analysis of the women's employment status reveals that 97.02% had no formal employment ties. Of the total, 47.66% reported working independently—doing odd jobs or working as freelancers—while 49.36% did not report any defined occupation.

Table 1 – Employment and Occupation of Female Single Parents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative (%)
Formally employed (with signed labor card)	2	0,85	0,85
Formally employed (without signed labor card)	3	1,28	2,13

Intern	2	0,85	2,98
Self-employed (odd jobs, freelance)	112	47,66	50,64
No defined occupation	116	49,36	100,00

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from CadÚnico (2021).

This scenario of labor informality may be one of the causes of the low income levels identified in the study, with more than 60% of the women reporting monthly earnings of up to R\$ 89.00. The following section presents results related to the pandemic period, including aspects of Emergency Aid receipt.

4.2 Social Isolation, Employment, and Income of Female Heads of Single-Parent Households During the COVID-19 Pandemic

After analyzing the profile of the women who participated in the study, this section presents results related to their experiences during social isolation and the impact on their employment and income during the pandemic. The respondents were asked about their daily routines during the pandemic, their perceptions of the Emergency Aid program, and issues related to their work and income status.

Regarding the routines adopted during the pandemic, most respondents (76.60%) reported following social isolation guidelines, leaving their homes only to perform essential tasks, such as purchasing food or medicine. Due to social distancing measures, the dynamics of home visits also changed: 44.68% stated that they did not receive any visitors and lived only with the household members. Among those who did receive visitors, most indicated that visits occurred one to two times per week and were limited to close relatives (50.64%).

With respect to preventive health measures, 73.08% of the respondents reported not having tested positive for COVID-19—an important outcome. Among the women who did test positive (13.25%), 9.83% reported that only they themselves had contracted the virus. For others, infections were reported among children, parents, siblings, and other relatives, reflecting a variety of family contagion scenarios. Overall, the relatively low infection rate among the women may be linked to the adoption of social distancing and isolation practices. The effective implementation of Emergency Aid enabled unemployed and vulnerable women to remain at home, which allowed a significant portion of the Brazilian population to isolate safely (ALBANI et al., 2022).

This is reinforced by the high value placed on social distancing among the participants: nearly all respondents (98.30%) stated that social distancing was important. Only two women (0.85%) believed it was not important, while another 0.85% reported being indifferent to distancing recommendations.

Considering both the significance of social distancing and the caregiving responsibilities borne by these women, the majority reported that their responsibilities either increased (32.48%) or increased significantly (34.19%), totaling 66.67%. A further 29.91% said their responsibilities remained unchanged. These results suggest that the pandemic brought meaningful changes to the lives of these women, intensifying their day-to-day obligations.

The increase in responsibilities likely stemmed from health precautions, changes in household routines, intensified caregiving duties (especially for children

and elderly relatives), and greater financial burdens. In short, the literature highlights that women face heightened pressure during periods of adverse shock, becoming more financially vulnerable due to the growing demands placed upon them in the home (BLUNDELL et al., 2020; BULOG, PEPUR & SMILJANIĆ, 2022; CARLI, 2020; RAHMAN, 2021).

Following the characterization of daily life during the pandemic, the study turned to employment and income conditions during this period. Respondents were asked whether they were working before and during the pandemic, and if so, what type of occupation they held. The results related to employment status are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – Employment Status Before and During the Pandemic

Work situation	Before the pandemic		During the pandemic	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	154	65.53	95	40.77
No	81	34.47	138	59.23
Total	235	100	233	100

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

The results show that prior to the pandemic, the majority of the women (65.53%) reported being employed. However, the main type of employment reported by respondents was informal work (72.73%), such as odd jobs and/or work without a formal labor contract. During the pandemic, the data changed significantly: the majority of the women (59.23%) were no longer working. As a result, it can be inferred that the pandemic altered the employment status of these women, eliminating their informal income streams—a generalized and gendered feature of labor markets in developing countries (BERNIELL et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with the literature, which shows that women were more affected by unemployment during the pandemic (ALON et al., 2020; CARLI, 2020).

Given this context, the study also investigated the sources of income reported by women before and during the pandemic. In the pre-pandemic period, the most commonly cited sources were Bolsa Família (57.02%) and income from work (34.47%). During the pandemic, Bolsa Família beneficiaries began receiving Emergency Aid, which became the main source of income for 91.49% of respondents. Income from work became significantly less relevant, cited as the main income source by only 5.53% of the women.

Based on these results, the study further asked respondents about the overall effects of the pandemic on their income. The answers varied considerably: while 21.03% of the women reported an increase in income, 25.75% stated that they had lost all income and became entirely dependent on Emergency Aid for survival. These aspects are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – Household Income Situation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

What happened to your household income during the pandemic?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Income increased.	49	21.03
Remained the same.	39	16.74
Decreased by less than half.	53	22.75
Decreased by more than half.	32	13.73
Lost all income and depend on government aid.	60	25.75

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

It is important to highlight that although the percentages were distributed across different response categories, when analyzing income reduction and loss together, the cumulative percentage reaches 62.23%, representing the majority of respondents. This indicates that the pandemic had a negative impact on the income of these women. In contrast, for women whose income remained the same or increased (a more optimistic scenario), the cumulative percentage was 37.77%. Thus, while there were varied experiences regarding changes in income, the predominant outcome was either a reduction or total loss of income, representing the majority of respondents and likely contributing to the financial difficulties faced by these women.

Finally, to complement the discussion on income, the study included results related to the women's perceptions of the Emergency Aid program. To characterize Emergency Aid receipt, respondents were asked how many installments they had received. The results showed that nearly all of the women received the full five installments of R\$ 1,200.00 provided by the federal government. Regarding the R\$ 600.00 installments, 60.94% reported having received four payments, which was one less than the total of the previous phase.

In addition, results showed that other family members of these women did not receive Emergency Aid (84.28%), indicating that the benefit was exclusive to the women themselves. After characterizing the respondents, the next section presents an analysis of food and nutritional insecurity.

4.3 Food and Nutritional Insecurity Among Families of Female Heads of Single-Parent Households Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With regard to food insecurity, the present study shows that the situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the three months prior to its onset. An analysis was conducted to assess the classification of food insecurity across the two periods—before and during the pandemic. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 – Classification of Food Insecurity Levels Among Female-Headed Single-Parent Families Receiving Emergency Aid, Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Classification	Before the Pandemic		During the Pandemic	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Food security	25	11,26	7	3,10
Mild food insecurity	106	47,75	89	39,38
Moderate food insecurity	48	21,62	47	20,80
Severe food insecurity	43	19,37	83	36,73

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

According to the data presented in Table 4, 11.26% of the families of these women experienced food security prior to the pandemic. However, this figure dropped to just 3.10% during the pandemic period. With regard to mild food insecurity, the number of women in this condition decreased when comparing the three months before the pandemic to the pandemic period. This reduction occurred because part of these women transitioned into more severe categories of food insecurity. While 47.75% of the women had been in a situation of mild food insecurity before the pandemic, this number fell to 39.38% during the pandemic.

Moderate food insecurity, which affected the families of these women before the pandemic, remained relatively stable during the pandemic, decreasing only slightly from 21.62% to 20.80%. In contrast, severe food insecurity, which affects both women and their children under 18, worsened significantly during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, 19.37% of the women were affected by this level of insecurity—a figure that rose to 36.73% during the pandemic.

The data clearly show a worsening of severe food insecurity among families headed by women, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from the 2nd National Survey on Food Insecurity in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil, published by the Brazilian Research Network on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security – PENSSAN (2022), support this observation. The study found that 63.0% of households headed by women were experiencing some level of food insecurity, with 18.8% living in conditions of hunger. When comparing these results to the city of Sant’Ana do Livramento, it becomes evident that the situation in the municipality is worse than the national average, as over 96% of female-headed households experienced some degree of food insecurity.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that food security among female-headed single-parent families, which was already low prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (11.26%), worsened during the pandemic, with only 3.10% of such families living in conditions of food and nutritional security.

The prevalence of moderate to severe food and nutritional insecurity during the pandemic was observed in nearly 6 out of every 10 female-headed households, whereas this number was just over 4 out of 10 before the pandemic. When including

all forms of food insecurity (mild, moderate, and severe), nearly all single-mother households experienced some form of food and nutritional insecurity during the pandemic.

In light of these findings, it is important to acknowledge that, beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, other socioeconomic factors also contributed to the worsening hunger experienced by female-headed households with children under 18. These include poverty, low levels of education, informal employment, and loss of income. In fact, government restrictions and the economic consequences of the pandemic disproportionately affected those who are less educated and less affluent (CLAES, SMEDING & CARRÉ, 2021).

5 Conclusión

This study aimed to analyze the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutritional insecurity among single-parent families headed by women who received Emergency Aid from the Brazilian Federal Government. The data collected and analyzed throughout the research revealed significant changes in women's employment and income levels caused by the pandemic. The findings indicate that many women became dependent on Emergency Aid due to reduced job opportunities during the crisis.

Vulnerabilities such as poverty and low levels of education among women appear to be associated with precarious labor conditions. In this context, informal work emerged as a common source of income for single mothers both before and during the pandemic. Thus, job and income insecurity may contribute directly to food and nutritional insecurity, especially during periods of external shocks such as the pandemic.

As previously discussed, 64.25% of the women lived in conditions of extreme poverty, with a per capita income below R\$ 89.00/month. This condition of extreme poverty is one of the key factors contributing to food and nutritional insecurity in female-headed single-parent families. With limited financial resources, women are unable to acquire food in sufficient quantity and quality to meet the needs of their families. However, as Oliveira & Carvalho (2018) emphasize, it is not appropriate to associate single parenthood with poverty without considering the broader historical, social, and economic contexts in which these women have lived and continue to live. Their history of poverty may also be linked to low levels of educational attainment.

Although a significant proportion of the women have low educational levels—65.11% had completed only elementary education or less—it would be inaccurate to attribute their condition of poverty and food insecurity solely to low schooling without considering their broader socioeconomic background.

In terms of informal employment, as previously noted, 65.53% of the women reported being employed before the pandemic, primarily in informal roles such as day labor or freelance work. However, during the pandemic, the situation shifted, and 59.23% of the women were no longer working. Therefore, it can be stated that social isolation measures led to major disruptions in women's employment, which in turn negatively affected their income and may have aggravated their families' food

and nutritional insecurity. The shift in employment status had a direct impact on household income.

Thus, the main finding is the reduction or total loss of income, reported by the majority of respondents. This economic hardship contributed to worsening financial conditions for the women and directly influenced their food insecurity.

Based on the data collected from *Cadastro Único* and the questionnaire applied in the field, it can be concluded that although the Emergency Aid program played an essential role during the pandemic, it was insufficient to overcome the condition of severe food insecurity among female-headed single-parent families in the municipality of Sant'Ana do Livramento – RS.

Therefore, the findings support the assertions of Barros, Fox, and Mendonça (1997) and Novellino (2008), who argue that female heads of household generally have lower educational attainment, limited participation in the labor market, and lower income levels—factors that contribute to their economic vulnerability.

To break the cycle of food and nutritional insecurity among female-headed single-parent families, the first step must be to lift these women out of poverty. Subsequently, it is essential to develop a comprehensive set of public policies aimed at increasing educational levels—both for these women and for their children—in order to interrupt the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.

For future studies, it is recommended to follow up with these families and re-administer the questionnaire in the post-pandemic period to assess the extent of recovery in terms of employment, income, and food and nutritional security.

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