

# Rural Women of Hidalgo, Mexico: Between Labor Informality and Subsistence during the Pandemic, 2022\*

[English Version]

Mujeres rurales de Hidalgo, México: entre la informalidad laboral y la subsistencia en pandemia, 2022

Mulheres rurais de Hidalgo, México: entre a informalidade laboral e a subsistência na pandemia, 2022

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To identify the strategies of rural women of Hidalgo, Mexico, who work informally in municipal markets of Pachuca de Soto to support their families.

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**Methodology:** Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 21 women between February and April 2022. They were between 20 and 63 years of age, married or living in a common law union, and with children of various ages. The data were organized and analyzed based on feminist theories of economics and from a feminist point of view. The items analyzed were a) perception of work under informal conditions of during the COVID-19 pandemic; b) the personal and social impacts of the strategies to face the pandemic and support their families; and c) types of participation of household members in domestic and care work. **Results:** Confinement measures during the pandemic intensified gender inequalities and the time participants spent in poverty. **Conclusions:** Care and domestic work for family subsistence was a palliative to alleviating poverty; however, participants' economic, patrimonial, and health conditions became precarious, and their poverty increased.

**Keywords:** gender division of labor; equal opportunities; women's work; rural women; pandemic (obtained from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** identificar las estrategias desplegadas por mujeres rurales de Hidalgo, México, que trabajan en la informalidad en mercados municipales de Pachuca de Soto para sostener la vida familiar. **Metodología:** se realizaron entrevistas de tipo etnográfico a 21 mujeres con edades entre 20 y 63 años, casadas o viviendo en unión libre, y con hijas e hijos de diversas edades, entre febrero y abril del 2022. Los datos se organizaron y analizaron a partir de las teorías feministas de la economía y del punto de vista. Los elementos de análisis fueron: a) percepción del trabajo en condiciones de informalidad durante la pandemia por COVID-19; b) impactos personales y sociales de las estrategias utilizadas para enfrentar la pandemia y sostener la vida familiar; y c) tipos de participación de las y los integrantes de los hogares en el trabajo doméstico y de cuidados. **Resultados:** las medidas de confinamiento frente a la pandemia recrudecieron las desigualdades de género e intensificaron el tiempo de pobreza de las participantes. **Conclusiones:** el trabajo de cuidados y doméstico para la subsistencia familiar actuó como un paliativo para mitigar la pobreza; sin embargo, se precarizaron sus condiciones económicas patrimoniales y de salud, e incrementó su pobreza.

**Palabras clave:** división sexual del trabajo; igualdad de oportunidades; trabajo de las mujeres; mujer rural; pandemia (obtenidos del tesoro UNESCO).

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** identificar as estratégias empregadas por mulheres rurais de Hidalgo, México, que trabalham na informalidade em mercados municipais de Pachuca de Soto para sustentar a vida familiar. **Metodologia:** realizaram-se entrevistas etnográficas com 21 mulheres entre 20 e 63 anos, casadas ou vivendo em união estável, e com filhos e filhas de diversas idades, entre fevereiro e abril de 2022. Os dados foram organizados e analisados a partir das teorias feministas da economia e da teoria do ponto de vista. Os elementos de análise foram: a) percepção do trabalho em condições de informalidade durante a pandemia de Covid-19; b) impactos pessoais e sociais das estratégias utilizadas para enfrentar a pandemia e sustentar a vida familiar; e c) tipos de participação dos membros do domicílio no trabalho doméstico e de cuidado. **Resultados:** as medidas de confinamento diante da pandemia agravaram as desigualdades de gênero e intensificaram a pobreza de tempo das participantes. **Conclusões:** o trabalho doméstico e de cuidado para a subsistência familiar funcionou como um paliativo para mitigar a pobreza; contudo, suas condições econômicas, patrimoniais e de saúde tornaram-se mais precárias, aumentando sua pobreza.

**Palavras-chave:** divisão sexual do trabalho; igualdade de oportunidades; trabalho das mulheres; mulher rural; pandemia (obtidos do tesouro UNESCO).

## Introduction

Health strategies to control and prevent the spread of COVID-19 caused significant economic losses that affected the population in metrics of poverty, social vulnerability and job insecurity to a greater extent. According to *Social Panorama of Latin America 2021*, of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2022), the loss of employment and reduction in labor income during the pandemic affected the lower income strata and informal occupations because they were exposed to greater occupational instability.

According to ECLAC (2020), the Latin American region, was characterized by large gaps in labor market and showed a high proportion of informal jobs. In Mexico, the National Institute of Geography and Informatics (INEGI, 2018) defines informal employment as "unprotected work in agricultural activity, unprotected domestic service, and non-subordinate workers who, despite working for formal economic units, do so without social security" (p. 5).

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the interruption of non-essential economic activities was one of the sanitary measures taken to control the spread of the virus, however, the planting, harvesting, and sale of food did not stop.

This paper analyzes the subsistence strategies of women from rural contexts who work in agricultural activity, without social protections, in the municipal markets of Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo.

Other reasons for the choice of the sector are that women, youth, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, and migrants are considered over-represented populations of informal workers (ECLAC, 2020). For example, the unemployment rate in 2021 was 11.8% for women compared to 8.1% for men (ECLAC, 2022).

In the country, according to the *National Survey of Occupation and Employment, New Edition* (ENOEN), carried out by the National Institute of Geography and Informatics (INEGI, 2022) in the first quarter of 2022, people in informal employment (31 million) increased by 1.8 million compared to 2021. The same survey showed that informal occupations during the same period showed an increase of 0.6 points for men from 18.1 to 18.7 million, and 1.2 points for women from 11.1 to 12.3 million.

In the previous characterization, there was a worsening of social inequalities because of the lack of employment and/or informal labor conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted gender inequalities. Gender and social divisions of labor caused women to be on the front lines of the crisis, taking on the task of resolving the difficulties of sustaining and preserving everyday life as their own social role (Segato, 2018). Poor women and women with children were the most affected during the pandemic (ECLAC, 2021, 2022).

ECLAC (2021, 2022) stated that the burden of unpaid care work tripled as there was a higher demand for care. Historically, there has been a greater concentration of women in informal work and in small businesses, so they have difficulties receiving basic services, and have a diminished financial capacity to cope with crises. Regarding patriarchal cultural patterns, there has been a higher exposure of women in cohabitation with aggressors or potential aggressors. Women had less power and less participation in decision-making processes to respond to the pandemic.

These issues and other differentiation categories that specifically shape the living conditions of women, mainly in rural contexts, generated situations of greater vulnerability for them. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2020), the informality of women is higher than that of men; in the agricultural sector it is 91.6% compared to 83.4% in men. According to the ILO (2020) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2020) in addition to these negative impacts, women are strongly affected by facing the risk of food insecurity, nutritional insecurity, and time poverty. Women have a considerable load of activities or demands that reduces their ability to distribute their time (Kes & Swaminathan, 2006) and, restricts their capacity for taking action. These women may face obstacles to participating in economic activities such as farming, fabrication, trading and general labor, or being self-employed or otherwise employed in those sectors associated with high and medium-high risk levels.

The reduction in income can lead household members to sell goods to cover their basic needs and, in the context of the pandemic, to deal with the COVID-19 disease. Because of power imbalances from patriarchal structures, women's assets, and crops may be the first to be consumed as was observed in this study and in others (Olivera *et al.*, 2021; Ramírez-Quirós, 2020). Of women living in the countryside on the American continent, only 30% own agricultural land (Organization of American States [OAS], 2020).

On many occasions the participation of rural women in agricultural activities has no economic remuneration and, there is little or no recognition of the crops produced thanks to women's efforts: fresh food, value chain crops, and crops for export (Singaña, 2022). However, studies in several Latin American countries (Arroyo, 2020; García, 2021; Gómez *et al.*, 2021; González, 2020; Pajín, 2020; Singaña, 2022) show that during the pandemic many women from rural contexts began to obtain their food from small stores or near their homes, or stopped their production cooking or doing handicrafts to sell to cover the demand of caring for the home. The damage of this work overload meant sickness, physical exhaustion, and emotional discomfort. It also increased gender violence in their

homes, mobility restriction, a negative impact on their productivity, and fear of contagion from potential customers buying products.

This reveals the accommodation and resistance strategies of women from rural contexts in facing the various challenges during the pandemic in supporting their family life. These strategies are crucial to talking about the capacity of agency and showing that vulnerability as part of the same political resistance as a body (Butler, 2014). Following Picchio (2010), this research is based on this recognition at a macro level, domestic and care work as fundamental for social reproduction, and, on an individual level, is a vital part of human life. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify the strategies to support family life by the rural women of Hidalgo, Mexico, who work informally in municipal markets of Pachuca de Soto.

## Methodology

The design was qualitative and the epistemic component was the feminist point of view. Its main approach is that the position and condition of women in the social structure gives them a privileged perspective in an epistemic component regarding the understanding and interpretation of social reality, and in the construction of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1995; Harding, 2010). The feminist theories of economics are fundamental to seeing the link between lives as an individual and social process, and working conditions in the economic production process; but also, to showing how jobs contribute to different human needs, meaning, sustainability and quality of life (Carrasco & Díaz, 2018; Picchio, 2005).

## Data Collection Techniques

The ethnographic or non-directive interview was used. According to Guber (2011) a social relationship that allows understanding the meaning of social life and discourses that emerge from daily life informally in direct observation and participation.

## **Items of Analysis**

The topics addressed in the interviews were limited to the following items:

- a. Perception of work in conditions of informality during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. Personal and social impacts of the strategies carried out by women in facing the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting family life.
- c. Types of participation of household members in domestic and care work.

## **Information Analysis Techniques**

The information from the audio recordings of the interviews was processed according to the Kvale proposal (2007): transcription, coding, condensation, categorization, and interpretation. The reliability and authenticity of the information was guaranteed using audio recorders for the interviews, and field diaries to record direct and participatory observations.

## **Sample Configuration and Strategy for Participant Identification**

Qualitative research seeks people who show relevant theoretical particularities. Therefore, intentional non-probabilistic sampling was carried out (Patton, 1990). The strategy for choosing participants was to go directly to the municipal markets of Pachuca de Soto, Hidalgo: Primero de Mayo, La Surtidora, Benito Juárez and Barreteros.

## **Participants**

Twenty-one women from rural contexts from different municipalities of the state of Hidalgo who work in contexts of informality in those municipal markets participated. They were between 20 and 63 years of age, and at the time of the fieldwork, most of them were married or living in a common law union, and with children of different ages.

## Procedure

The fieldwork was carried out between February and April 2022. Participants were informed of the goal of the research, collaboration was requested, and they were asked for their oral consent to audio-record the interviews. The most convenient days and times for the interviews and observations were agreed on by the participants. The interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes.

This procedure respects the UNESCO principles of *Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights* and does not represent any risk to the physical, psychological or social integrity of the participants.

## Work Context

According to the 2020 *Population and Housing Census* (INEGI, 2020), there were 3,082,841 people in Hidalgo, of which 1,601,462 are women and 1,481,379 are men. Of the overall population, 57% live in urban areas and 43% in rural areas. There are 4,514 rural and 176 urban localities in the state. In Pachuca de Soto, the capital of the state and municipality where the municipal markets are located, 314,331 people live. Pachuca borders the municipalities of Mineral del Monte and Mineral del Chico to the north; Zapotlán de Juárez and Zempoala to the south; Epazoyucan and Mineral de la Reforma to the east; and San Agustín Tlaxiaca to the west.

According to data from the 2019 *Economic Census* (Government of Mexico, 2019), retail commerce was the sector with the highest concentration of economic units in Pachuca de Soto.

## Results and Discussion

From the female point of view, and from the perspective of feminist theories of economics, this subsection analyzes, interprets, and discusses the results based on the aforementioned items.



## Perception of Work in Conditions of Informality during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The worsening of social and gender inequalities is exposed by the participants, who also warn of several institutional deficiencies pre-existing the COVID-19 pandemic, which put social survival and quality of life at risk.

There are few sales, one becomes desperate and tries to look for other options because the children and even the husband who does not have a job depend on oneself. I have looked for jobs, but in some places, they do not accept me because of my age. In other places, they ask me for work history. What I have done the most is self-employment, working on my own [...] I become desperate, because it is not enough, and indeed when the pandemic started sales were very low, right now, there are days that there is not much, others more or less [...] The pandemic is one thing, another thing is my age and it's no longer so easy to get a job. I had a strategy, originally I sold only tortillas by hand, then the cost of gas increased, the cost of dough increased, my sales went down because there were other people in stands near me, then well, I distributed the small sales, and sometimes there were even problems with other women, and well, it went down, then I made the decision [she left the tortilla sales business, because as she said] it does not work, the gas and the investment, then I went to work cleaning houses. It did not work either, well, money was not enough because it was not every day, then I started selling appetizers, so that was my strategy [...] to sell appetizers in the government offices [...] and that has worked for me, not enough but those who work do buy from us. (Personal communication,<sup>1</sup> April 25, 2022).

As a result of the capitalist economic model in its neoliberal phase, there has been talk of a systematic multidimensional crisis (Bartra *et al.*, 2013), a survival crisis (Carosio, 2010) that has deepened inequalities where life is reproduced. The testimony of the participant shows difficulties in acquiring salaried employment, as a deficit in accumulating capital throughout her life. Her age is considered unsuitable for productive performance; she has few opportunities to get work experience and that is linked to her low level of education. It is collective gender discrimination that, intertwined with ethnicity, social class, and life cycle, evidence precariousness in the lives of these women, and undermine their possibilities for expanding their economic capacity.

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<sup>1</sup> 58-year-old woman from Zempoala. Tortilla and snack seller in Mercado Primero de Mayo.

The digital gap was also exposed. According to the research: *Digital Gender Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Rotondi et al., 2019), women in rural contexts face a major disadvantage in accessing information and communication technologies because of lower coverage of these services in those areas and also because of their gender.

No, there is no way, there is no way to sell, to sell online, no, I don't know about that, there are vegetables, potatoes and other seeds, so I don't know how to sell online. (Personal communication,<sup>2</sup> February 19, 2022).

Patriarchal structures are also reproduced in relation to the ownership of cell phones, as mention before. However, age is a variable that can affect the participation of women in this sector in the digital dynamic. During the pandemic, the conditions described affected rural women, if one considers that the social functions that they assumed as their own support life and family stability.

The deficient of institutional regulatory mechanisms to produce resources and better distribution for the population that works in informality in agricultural sector have also affected the social reproduction capacity.

Well, it has been very complicated because, as we work in the street, they have taken our things many times, they have moved us to other places, and it is complicated. There is not much work and, as people stayed in their homes, there is not much activity, we do not sell much. There are inspectors or there are people who avoid trade and are the ones who take our things. Here in the market, they tolerate us, there has been no problem with them, they do not really say anything, but we are still careful not to leave garbage, use face coverings and antiseptic gel, or not block the paths, so they trust us, although it generates more expense, there is no real problem with them. The problem has been with the Presidency, the one that does not leave us. [...] We started (she and her children) going out to other places, at the beginning, we were just here, and when the pandemic started and they did not let us get there, then we started in other municipalities; we go to El Arenal, to Ixmiquilpan, and Santiago de Anaya. We are looking everywhere, and obviously it is expensive and tiring, but if there is nothing here, we have to look other places, we have to help the children, the husband who is sick, and that is what has helped, going to different places, putting ourselves in the streets, in

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<sup>2</sup> 62-year-old woman from Mineral del Chico. Legume and seed seller in Mercado Primero de Mayo.

neighborhoods where there are no problems. (Personal communication,<sup>3</sup> March 5, 2022).

The capitalist economic model in its neoliberal phase has caused that reproducing conditions of possibility in life, use and maximize the few opportunities that exist in contexts of deep inequality. The patriarchal model makes limiting a family's livelihood to a woman's possibilities easier. "Reproduction," according to Dobrée (2018), is not limited to the performance of the most common domestic tasks, but to the means the deployment of several strategies to achieve the basic survival of the family unit, as it can be seen in the previous testimony. In this way, and in contexts of deep inequalities and during the COVID-19 pandemic, women mitigate the consequences of structural exclusions through their work.

### **Personal and Social Impacts of the Strategies Carried Out by Women to Face the COVID Pandemic and Support Family Life**

"Neoliberalism" is more than a specific type of economic policy or relationship between the State and the economy. It is the hegemonic discourse of a civilizational model of modern society and a rationality that configures all aspects of human existence in an economy. It has transformed individuals and social forms, and changed a certain type of people (Lander, 2000; Nijensohn, 2018) who experience the effects of this model by themselves.

Well, I'm just tired. Thank God I don't have any disease that needs medication. Compared to the pandemic, now everything is more tiring, my work has increased, my back already hurts, my feet hurt, sometimes my head too because of worries. [...] Right now, my concerns are not having enough money, sales are low and a lot doesn't sell. That is one of my concerns, sometimes I get desperate and I want to look for other options. I do look for them, but I have looked for other jobs, but they give me the same, they offer me a salary almost like the one I earn now, so I choose to stay because I own my business, I manage it and I am more aware of my daughter, I choose to stay, as I am. It gives me time to do more things at the same time. (Personal communication,<sup>4</sup> March 12, 2022).

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<sup>3</sup> 62-year-old woman from San Agustín Tlaxiaca. Fruit and vegetable street seller in several markets in Hidalgo.

<sup>4</sup> 58-year-old woman from Zempoala, resident of Pachuca for 12 years. Tortilla Seller in Mercado La Surtidora.

Working conditions in neoliberal capitalism and in the current health context led the research team to analyze the precariousness of both work and individuals' physical and subjective states. Lorey (2018) states that as work becomes more precarious, people as a whole, including their bodies and intellectual abilities, become a workforce. Precariousness becomes the engine of productivity.

As can be seen, the effects of work overload and the tensions for the difficulties of her economic situation reflect in the participant's body. Poverty ensures the reproduction of conditions of possibility for their lives, with the cost paid in their physical health and emotional well-being. Thus, there is a process of self-precarization (Lorey, 2018) in the lives of these women.

One cannot stop working, nothing has changed, one has to solve, feed [...] fearful or not, I kept going out to sell in houses, knocking on doors. Yes, it is difficult, one gets more tired, my feet hurt, they swell, my hip aches, lots of pains, but we have no choice, we have to work. (Personal communication,<sup>5</sup> March 19, 2022).

According to Lorey (2018), in the regime of precariousness, the individualization of risk, and emotions of fear or anxiety, self-management and self-responsibility are the main aspects that a subjective figure needs that enables and stabilizes the neoliberal government through precariousness and insecurity. Conceivably, the physical and affective economy has devastating effects on people's lives (Cano, 2018).

These self-precarization processes, parallel to the dispossession of economic, material and/or patrimonial goods from women in rural contexts, would be part of new enclosures, new ways of accumulation of dispossession (Federici, 2020) that neoliberalism needs for the reproduction of capital. To create similar States and institutions, neoliberalism has led to an individualizing and restructuring of the social welfare State, where women end up mitigating this shrinking of State services such as social security and health.

The market closed, and then my husband got sick with COVID and I had to take care of him, and since there was no income, we sold a plot of land that my father inherited years ago to support us [...] right now, I'm back in the market, hopefully the pandemic will end and more people will buy from us. (Personal communication,<sup>6</sup> March 20, 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> 55-year-old woman from Tulancingo. Vegetables seller in Mercado Benito Juárez.

<sup>6</sup> 63-year-old woman from Acaxochitlán. Cactus and vegetables seller in Mercado La Surtidora.

Dobrée (2018) states that the reproductive field in which women are protagonists, becomes one of the few places in which to protect the lives denied by capital and, in current turbulent times, of a neoliberal capitalism that is leading to barbarism.

The reproductive conditions of life depend on using and maximizing the few opportunities and/or resources in contexts of deep inequality. In this way, the participants' circumstances create conditions of possibility and the existence of capitalism (Carrasco, 2016). These circumstances use a patriarchal model that, by hiding the relationship of exploitation and dispossession, makes limiting the women's livelihoods possible.

### **Types of Participation of Household Members in Domestic and Care Work**

This subsection shows how participation in domestic and care work is still a feminized activity in the sector.

My little daughter, who is in third grade, supports me all the time, even if she has classes. If she sees I have an order she helps me if she can, if she does not have to turn the camera on for her online class, she helps me with my tortillas or soups, she heats the sauce. At home, she supports me if she has time when she is on vacation, she supports me in everything. When she is in class, she supports me how she can, she cleans her room, the table, she does support me. (Personal communication,<sup>7</sup> April 9, 2022).

This illustrates how from an early age the daughter begins to participate in the work of domestic activities at the same time she conducts other activities, like attending school. Online classes allowed this situation. However, the important thing is the cultural transmission around the behaviors that the girl learns through her mother.

Domestic care is an issue that has not had social prestige because is associated with the feminine and considered unproductive as it is not economically compensated. However, caregiving is a social activity that enables people to fulfil their basic human needs: physiological, material, cultural, and symbolic, affective and spiritual (Hinkelammert & Mora, 2009).

Well, mainly, my grandmother is the one who makes breakfast, so we can eat, together with my mother [...] they take turns because my grandmother is old, I

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<sup>7</sup> 29-year-old woman from Pachuca. Tortillas and snacks seller in Mercado 1º de Mayo.

try every day to clean, to sweep, [...] we have to take care of my grandfather, we have to wash him, [...] and my grandmother, too. They are elderly people, and we also have to take care of them because my grandfather took care of us, and because if we do not take care of them, who would do it? That is why, we have to work harder. (Personal communication,<sup>8</sup> April 2, 2022).

The previous testimony leads to several points of reflection. The interdependence that is sustained between people is fundamental for our life to have continuity (Dobrée, 2018); we take care, but we are also taken care of. We care, but we also need care. However, the unequal division of unpaid work caring for children, the sick, and older adults, among others, are reasons why women live a greater poverty compared to men, due to multiple tasks, jobs and energies for the production of goods and the physical functioning of human beings, as well as care. These conditions impact women's autonomy and hinder the expansion of their human capacities and their personal development and greater participation in other social scenes.

However, sustaining the lives of the members of the family and with affiliations and links makes reflecting on the notion of "dependence" important. This dependance has been negatively valued by assumptions and values related to western masculinity, and by capitalist principles of *homo economicus*.

Neoliberal capitalism conjures a certain type of individual that requires consider themselves autonomous and independent. Structural factors, such as division of labor by gender, make participating in public scenes without being limited by domestic and care work easier for economic agents in liberal and capitalist societies because of freedom of time and availability of labor (Carrasco *et al.*, 2019). As Riger (1997) states, understanding the situation hinges on recognizing that people act depending on their relative position in social structure; while men interact in social systems out of the closest social group, interactions for women are directed within the group. The author states that this dichotomous reading is inadequate because they do not have the same value in the capitalist economic model.

However, from the feminist perspective of this research, relationships and interdependencies are emphasized as the main values in human experience and to sustain life, and a false separation between the private and public becomes evident. Guzmán (2005) states that the private is the place from which other productive and relational spaces access the public, and where surplus value and economic wealth are also created (Alberti *et al.*, 2014).

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<sup>8</sup> 38-year-old woman from Pachuca. Legumes and food seller in Mercado Barreteros.

## Discussion

Care is an organizing principle in human and non-human life. The sustainability of life, according to Dobrée (2018) is inextricably linked to care. To have life, taking care of it is necessary. Care is needed to live well. At all times people demand care, even more under unfavorable conditions. This is when recognition of interdependent relationships becomes fundamental (Carrasco *et al.*, 2019).

Within economic, political, social and health contexts fostered by COVID-19, because of gender and structural inequalities, women come out to sustain life. In a careless and chaotic world today, who cares? whom do they care for? in what conditions is care proffered? who cares for the person who cares? what does caring mean? are relevant questions when analyzing the sustainability of life. This research analyzes testimonies of rural women who work selling food in markets of the city of Pachuca, Hidalgo, Mexico, who are responsible of caring for their family members.

By the theories of a feminist point of view and economics, women deal with structural inequalities in the labor market. Age, work experience, gender and even the use of technology affects and makes their work and productive opportunities precarious. In this context of multiple inequalities, women work longer shifts to deal with institutional mechanisms that discriminate against them for being street vendors in local markets.

The strategies used by women are not inconsequential to in their bodies nor their health. Fatigue, worries, and stress are experienced in their bodies. In neoliberalism, as a political system and social organization, the precariousness of women's work contradictorily becomes the engine of their individual productivity. This survival mechanism affects their emotional state, intensifies their working days, as well as their concerns and stress, since they assume the responsibility of providing sustenance and care work in their homes.

When analyzing the collaboration of other family members in caregiving tasks, the division of care work falls on the women in the family, and is structured through existing gender norms. Thus, the daughters are the ones who help mothers in cooking for sale and taking care of grandparents or sick male relatives. Mothers assume that daughters help means a manner of family reciprocity and reinforces the notion of female altruism in households.

The findings are consistent with the Latin American trend of increasing participation of rural women in non-agricultural economic activities and multi-activities. Women have intensified their workloads, mainly the most precarious of structural changes such as structural adjustment policies and recurrent economic crises that, since the 1990s, have impoverished households

and increased gender inequalities (Benería, 1995; Chant, 1994; Levrin, 1987). From this perspective, in contexts of uncertainty and high risk, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the work of rural women from different generations has been key to sustaining and, in many cases, supporting the lives of family members. However, this responsibility assumed by mothers and/or heads of families also intensified the fatigue of older women, and the early incorporation of young daughters into the world of work.

Although several studies have investigated the role of productive assets in gender-differentiated decision-making in rural households (Agarwal, 1997; Deere, 2011; Deere, 2020), in this research, the restrictions by women in productive assets, the role of technology and its management was highlighted as a main factor that influenced the effectiveness of subsistence strategies implemented by Hidalgo women in pandemic contexts. These findings shed light on the structural challenges differentiated by gender and a generational cohort which were exacerbated during the pandemic.

## Conclusions

The experiences of women in caring and sustaining household life in a pandemic era, full of precariousness and uncertainties, provide knowledge in understanding social reality. Thus, to counteract the precariousness of women's work in all its dimensions, the need to de-feminize care work, to politicize the reproductive sphere, and make care something prestigious is clarified. These measures point to ethical and policy options that address the gender and social inequalities of rural women.

The health risks and uncertainty associated with excessive work exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic led to considering care, labor, technological and support needs differentiated generationally and by gender, in governmental intervention plans to address the needs of the less favored and mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic.



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