

Bodies in crisis: prostitutes and covid-19 in Brazil

Abstract

This article aims to analyze the impasses faced by prostitutes during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the media portrayed these professionals, seeking to bring visibility to the challenges faced: marginalization, lack of assistance and support from the State and persistent prejudice. Qualitative methodology in which extensive research was carried out on the coronavirus pandemic in Brazil, the concepts and history of prostitution, media, social representations in the country, in addition to delving deeper into the social representations of prostitution in the media.

Keywords: pandemic, COVID-19, prostitutes, media, image

Volume 8 Issue 3 - 2023

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Received: August 08, 2023 | **Published:** November 20, 2023

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic began in Brazil in the year 2020¹ and brought several consequences for the population, especially unemployment, which has led to several others Predicaments. It is important to note that this period did not reach the population equally, making it important to analyze and understand the trajectory of vulnerable groups that fought against COVID-19, especially in search of better life opportunities.

Thus, prostitutes were greatly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil², since, for the most part, work requires physical contact, which was one of the main ways of contagion of the virus - one of the protocols to prevent the spread of the disease was to avoid physical touch - exposing these professionals to danger. However, since these women could not exercise their profession, how would they face this pandemic period by being able to feed themselves and live fully?¹

This really was a great impasse faced by sex workers, although the federal government made emergency³ aid available, the amount was not enough for these people to live quietly and even feed their families, making it necessary to seek other alternatives until they could return to work normally, exposing these professionals to constant dangers.¹

Therefore, this research aims to present the trajectory of prostitutes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and analyze the imagery narratives of the country's media to understand how these professionals are portrayed by the press. In addition, it will be of paramount importance to bring visibility to the pains and impasses that these women went through during this period and the prejudice that still permeates about this craft.

The democratization of covid-19 in Brazil

The world's first known Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 2 (SARS-CoV-2)⁴ infection occurred on November 19, 2019, in Hubei,

¹The first confirmed case of an individual infected with the coronavirus in Brazil occurred on February 26, 2020.

²Article published by Paulo Talarico on June 30, 2021 brings accounts of women who faced impasses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, including lack of food. 2023.

³Linha do tempo do Coronavírus no Brasil.

⁴SARS-CoV-2 é um betacoronavírus que foi descoberto através de amostras de lavado broncoalveolar de pacientes com pneumonia de causa desconhecida na China, em 2019. Constatou-se que ele pertence ao subgênero Sarbec Vírus da

China. After this first contact, the disease was spreading and becoming known as COVID-19, reaching several people and generating unimaginable consequences.

In January 2020, the World Health Organization's (WHO) highest alert level was issued, classifying the coronavirus as a serious, high-lethal disease identified as a public health emergency of international importance (PAHO, 2020), prompting the representatives of each country to exercise caution and take steps to contain the spread of the disease.

However, in February 2020, Brazil confirmed the first coronavirus infection in the country (also being the first record of the disease in Latin America). This was a 61-year-old from São Paulo who had made a trip to Italy, where he was infected.

Therefore, to contain the advance of COVID-19 and preserve the health of Brazilians, on March 11, 2020, through a decree, the governor of the Federal District, Ibaneis Rocha (MDB), suspended services and classes in the public and private network, as well as events that required licenses from the government of the Federal District.

However, still as an attempt to encourage social distancing, the governor also decreed the suspension of public service activities in commerce, namely: restaurants, bars, shops, beauty salons, among others. Following this same line, the other states of the country also began to follow the quarantine protocols.

Amid all this, less than a month after the confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in Brazil, the country identified the first death. The victim was a 57-year-old woman who resided in São Paulo and her death was confirmed by the Ministry of Health on March 12, 2020, when the country already counts almost 100 people infected by the virus.

In addition to the decrees suspending activities aimed at social distancing in society, there was also the encouragement of government agencies for the population to sanitize their hands, wear face masks, as well as projects such as "Stay at Home", which encouraged people to follow social distancing measures in order to curb the spread of the disease. However, even with such initiatives, more and more cases were confirmed in the country.

família Coronaviridae, sendo o sétimo coronavírus conhecido a infectar seres humanos. (Ministério da Saúde, 2021, s/n).

However, when it comes to these issues, it should be noted that not everyone can have the privilege of “staying home” and following all the protocols encouraged by government agencies. A clear example of this is the vulnerable population of the country, since these people do not have full access to information, basic sanitation, quality health or even housing and income, making this group more exposed to diseases^{5,2}.

In Brazil, the risk factor for COVID-19 to be fatal to the individual depends on their social class. According to data released by the Municipal Health Secretariat of São Paulo, in July 2021 there was a 45% increase in deaths in the 20 poorest districts of the city, while in the 20 richest there was an increase of only 36%, showing how social inequality is directly linked to the mortality rate of individuals.

In addition, there is also concern about the food insecurity⁶ faced by these individuals. A survey conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) found that about 27 million Brazilians over the age of 18 have been without food since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. To arrive at this data, the interviewees answered the question: “since the beginning of the pandemic, that is, since the carnival of 2020, did you or someone who lives with you stop eating because there was no money to buy more food?” and, at the end of the survey, 17% of the individuals responded positively to the question.

Thinking of these most vulnerable groups and considering that part of the population had their income decreased or were dismissed from their jobs with the beginning of the pandemic in the country, the State created an aid to support⁷ these people.

Dedicated to informal workers, the federal government published the law that created an aid of R \$ 600.00 monthly on April 2, 2020, for an initial duration of three months. The focus was to provide assistance to people without a formal contract and fixed income, affected by the social isolation measures adopted to contain the spread of the coronavirus in the country.

In addition, data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) found that in July 2020, about 49.5% of the Brazilian population – 29.4 million people – benefited from state aid, showing how there really were many people who needed this support to face the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil.

But even with the government’s initiative, many individuals and families have experienced adversity during the pandemic. According to IBGE, the consumption of Brazilian families decreased by 5.5% in 2020, the largest decline in 25 years. This data proves that, although the Brazilian Government has offered this aid, it was not enough for people to live fully, generating this decrease in consumption and caution with household expenses.

While the population faced all these hardships provided by the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists were working to make immunization a reality as soon as possible⁸. But for Brazil, the process was slower

⁵Vulnerable population is, most of the time, the group that have more infected by diseases and deaths.

⁶Food insecurity is a situation in which the population of a specific country or region does not have physical, social and economic access to resources and foods aimed at nutrition that meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and properly healthy life.

⁷The Emergency Aid was a financial benefit created by the Government to guarantee income to Brazilians in a vulnerable situation during the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. It was intended for people without a formal contract and fixed income, informal workers.

⁸<https://jornal.usp.br/ciencias/ciencias-da-saude/cientistas-brasileiros-ja-trabalham-numa-candidata-a-vacina-contra-novo->

and more laborious because the Brazilian government turned down 11 formal offers to supply coronavirus vaccines, six of them from Coronavac⁹, three from Pfizer¹⁰ and two from the Covax Facility^{11,3}.

After this long and delicate process, vaccination began in Brazil on January 17, 2021. Nurse Mônica Calazans¹² was the first person in Brazil to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and the first groups to be immunized were health professionals, indigenous people and quilombolas.

However, although immunization has indeed begun in the country, many people have still not been able to access vaccines, making a large portion of these individuals still vulnerable to the virus.

In a study conducted in July 2021 by the NGO Instituto Pólis¹³, central neighborhoods have a higher number of vaccinated when compared to peripheral regions of São Paulo. Data confirm that, in upscale neighborhoods, the percentage of the population vaccinated is 22%, while in peripheral neighborhoods this number drops to only 9.7%, a worrying percentage.

However, this reality is not concentrated only in the city of São Paulo, according to the doctor and sanitarian, Jorge Kayano, this inequality can also be noticed in other cities of the country, since the immunization pattern shows that the regions with fewer cases and fewer deaths have greater vaccination coverage, that is, richer regions and with the predominance of white people. On the other hand, peripheral populations, with more cases and more deaths, have vaccination much more delayed.

These data show how social inequality impacts the lives of citizens and how the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil has highlighted all these problems that already existed in our country. Thus, in a survey conducted by Fumec (Minas Gerais Foundation for Education and Culture)¹⁴ it was found that there were about 1.5 million people in prostitution.

In addition, data showed that there are two main reasons for individuals to become sex workers: the need to earn more money to help support the family (55% of respondents) and unemployment (28% of respondents), exposing how people who exercise such a profession are there out of necessity, and need support from the State for a dignified life.

coronavirus/#:~:text=Cientistas%20brasileiros%20j%C3%A1%20trabalham%20numa%20candidata%20%C3%A0%20vacina%20contra%20novo%20coronav%C3%ADrus,-Por%20meio%20de&text=Pesquisadores%20do%20Laborat%C3%B3rio%20de%20Imunologia,o%20Sars%2DCoV%2D2

⁹Vaccine made by Butantan against the new coronavirus, developed by the Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac in partnership with the institute. It provides 78% protection against mild COVID-19 cases, which require hospital care.

¹⁰The vaccine produced by U.S. drugmaker Pfizer, in partnership with German company BioNTech, has a two-dose regimen and has an efficacy rate of 91.3%.

¹¹It is an international alliance led by the WHO (World Health Organization), among other organizations, with the aim of accelerating the development and production of vaccines against COVID-19 and ensuring equal access to immunization worldwide.

¹²Mônica Calazans is a 55-year-old nurse living in Itaquera, in the East Zone of São Paulo. Monica was part of the risk group for the disease and worked on the front line against COVID-19 at the Emílio Ribas Institute of Infectology, in addition she was a volunteer in the third phase of the CoronaVac clinical trials and had received a placebo.

¹³The Polis Institute is a civil society organization, of national activity, non-profit, non-partisan and pluralistic. It works in defense of the Right to the City, always working with civil society aiming at local development in the construction of more just, sustainable and democratic cities.

¹⁴FUMEC University is a higher education institution in Minas Gerais. It is maintained through the Minas Gerais Foundation for Education and Culture, a non-profit private legal entity.

This research was conducted in 2010, although it is a distant date, they are the only data available on this group, evidencing how they are not properly assisted and live marginalized in society, without government support and suffering prejudice constantly.

As an attempt to cherish the health of these workers, in April 2021, the Association of Prostitutes of Minas Gerais (Aprosmig)¹⁵ reported that sex workers would suspend and attend in an attempt to achieve priority in vaccination against COVID-19, because, according to the president of Aprosmig, Cida Vieira, they are targets of prejudice and “the most harmed during the pandemic.”

The work of sex workers was greatly affected, as it was incensed, mainly, social distancing and mask-wearing, issues that are almost always essential. This situation makes it difficult to maintain the job, generating a decrease in income and health risks: “Many of us have had our homes taken away. We are ahead of this pandemic. We are vulnerable. We need to be seen as a priority because we are prevented from working,” says Cida.

Another point was the absence of medical care and food on the table of these people. According to the collective Coisa de Puta + several women died as a result of this shortage, accounting for about 12 people until June 16, 2021, clearly showing how these professionals are excluded from society and how the state remains silent in guaranteeing public policies and support to this social group.

However, even with the protest and request to the Brazilian Government for priority in immunization against the coronavirus, this did not occur, exposing how their voices are not heard, and that specific assistance was not offered to these professionals.

In this way, it is possible to identify how COVID-19 in Brazil has hit each group differently, especially those marginalized by society and forgotten by the state. It is very important that the voice of these people are heard, giving them the proper dedication and support, prioritizing the well-being and health of this population.

Social representations of prostitution in the media

MÍDIA

From the Latin “media”, plural of “medium”, media is about “medium” or “form” and this process requires three stages for its effectiveness: sender, message and receiver.

First, the sender refers to the person who intends to inform a message, and can also be called the source or origin. However, for such a message to be properly delivered, it is necessary that it be decoded, that is, read, translated, in order to be elaborated and transmitted.

Finally, the receiver is the stage that will receive the message through the media, concluding, in fact, the communication process in which the media participates. Thus, the media is responsible for providing viable ways for the message to reach its audience and the steps to be completed, being of paramount importance for information to be disseminated and communication to be made in today’s society.

With the influence of technology in society, the media began to occupy a prominent place, becoming a tool that forms and creates values, opinions, norms and knowledge. With the ease in sharing information, the social body began to consume it in an abundant way, alienating individuals and massifying them.

¹⁵APROSMIG (Association of Prostitutes of Minas Gerais) was created in 2009 and is an agent of rights to work, promotion of citizenship and combating gender violence, putaphobia, sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, violence against women and human trafficking. In addition, it has an important role as an agent of public health and safety and cultural agent.

Therefore, combining the dissemination of information with the advent of technology, there needs to be caution on the part of society when it comes to the search for information through the media, since, with all the research available, do not let yourself be influenced by biased and partial news that distort the truth and form opinions, knowledge, norms and values.

Social representations of prostitution

Social representations, according to Serge Moscovici¹⁶, French social psychologist and Denise Jodelet¹⁷, professor and researcher active in the areas: theory of social representations, social representations, mental health, otherness and culture, are like a system of interpretation, ideas, values and practices that individuals actively participate, governing a social order which groups and people orient themselves in society, That is, they are not totally passive, they participate in the process and are responsible for the construction of new representations of society. In addition, they point out that, through these attitudes, it is possible for social communication to be carried out between individuals.

Its emergence is due to the social representations of Durkheim¹⁸, French Jewish sociologist, philosopher and anthropologist, who assisted in Moscovici’s concept of social representations through the Theory of Social Representations (SRT). Moscovici understands that the media are great influencing agents when it comes to the construction of stereotypes about psychoanalysis in the social body, since the media has the power to hinder or inhibit the perception of other meanings by the subject.

In addition, social representations are formed from two basic concepts: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring is about turning what is seen as “unfamiliar” into “familiar” through categorization by relating it to paradigms stored in our memory. It is a factor of paramount importance so that the individual can orient himself in the social environment.

On the other hand, objectification is the process of making something that was previously abstract, idealized, tangible, possible in society. It has the main focus of making the unfamiliar into something ordinary, simple to be interpreted through the reproduction of a concept.

It is possible to identify that social representations can differ from each other according to the culture to which the individual is inserted, in addition, they can be modified over the years, since society develops and takes with it new changes of thoughts and habits.

However, bringing social representations to the field of prostitution in Brazil, a survey was conducted by the Federal University of Sergipe in which the interviewees answered the following questions: “What are the first feelings and thoughts that come to mind when you hear the word prostitution?” and “How does society, in your opinion, consider prostitution and what do you think about it?”

The research obtained 113 responses, which were grouped into five categories, presented in the following Table 1:

¹⁶Serge Moscovici was a French social psychologist who lived between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He was responsible for theorizing social representations and influencing almost every discipline in the social sciences.

¹⁷Denise Jodelet is a professor and has experience in the area of Psychology, with emphasis on Social Psychology.

¹⁸Émile Durkheim was a French psychologist and sociologist considered the founder of sociology.

Table 1 Statements produced from the inducing term “prostitution” for the interviewees (n = 66)

Category	Utterance examples	Frequency	Percentage
Social exclusion	lack of education, lack of family, money, lack of income, unemployment, need, Survival, Violence, Victim, Prejudice, Exploitation/ Misery, etc.	38	33,6
Moral judgment	bad thing, wrong, transgressing a correct thing, absurd, ugly, destruction, defeat, naughtiness, lack of respect for God, etc.	28	24,8
"Feelings negative/aversion"	Sadness, disgust, revolt, indignation, contempt. Disgusting, disgusting, filth.	24	21,2
Groups, places and risks	Young girls. white, girl street, disease, stranger, drugs, night, entertainment, etc.	22	19,5
Do not know	I don't know	1	0,9
Total		113	100,0

At the end of the research it is visible that prostitution is seen as a “complex and multifaceted phenomenon”, since several aspects are able to identify it, such as: economic, moral, cultural, social and psychological. However, it is possible to identify that people still have a negative feeling about prostitution, deep aversion, “contempt”, “disgust”, “disgust” and others.

This fact confirms the idea that prostitution has less value in society, besides not being possessors of human rights, loaded with stigmas and infra-humanization.

However, for this social representation of prostitution to exist in society, it is indisputable that the media has a primary role for it to be formed. As already exposed in the research, the representations are generated and altered according to the culture and social body in which the individual is inserted, therefore, the media is a great agent capable of changing or even forming thoughts on a specific subject, making it essential to understand the weight and responsibility that the media has in generating and changing social representations in society.

Methodology

This qualitative research aims to present the trajectory of prostitutes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and analyze the media's imagery narratives, with the aim of understanding how these sex workers are portrayed by the Brazilian press.

To carry it out, extensive research was carried out on the coronavirus pandemic in Brazil, the concepts and history of prostitution, media, social representations in the country, in addition to delving deeper into the social representations of prostitution in the media. All of this content was divided into themes and segmented into specific subthemes that could conceptualize the subject and assist in reading.

An analysis of the photojournalism carried out by Folha de São Paulo is also carried out, relating it to the concepts covered in the research and understanding how the Brazilian press sees prostitutes and how it represents this vision for society.

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that all the information presented here is legitimate, acquired through scientific articles, theses, books and journalistic reports, focusing on passing on truthful and responsible information.⁴⁻¹⁶

Conclusion

After all the conceptualization presented in this work and the image analysis of the media, it is possible to see how prostitutes suffered with the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. As already explained, the pandemic period in Brazil did not affect the entire population equally, causing vulnerable groups to need other resources to survive, as State aid was not enough.

Thus, these women had to “break the quarantine” and return to work, even at the risk of being infected by the virus and, in the worst case, dying. For this reason, prostitutes asked to be considered a priority group for vaccination, since, to a large extent, these women's work depends on physical contact. However, the request was not met by the State, and they had to wait.

At various times, it was exposed how these professionals experienced difficulties in feeding themselves or having a place to live and, even so, it was not possible to find many journalistic articles in Folha de São Paulo that addressed this issue, how these women needed support to be able to overcome that delicate moment. This entire issue shows how this group is marginalized by society and the Brazilian State. These women faced difficulties throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and were forced to return to work (even though they knew all the dangers of it) in order to live and, still, this was not widely addressed, exposed and supported by the Brazilian media. These people were not heard or assisted, their problems were not resolved, which forced them to look for other means to cope with the pandemic.

Bringing this issue up for debate is extremely important so that there is greater visibility for this group in society, as well as so that the State can correct the mistakes it made in the past by not supporting these women and acting to ensure that this does not happen in the future. These people need to work and live in a dignified manner, with all their rights protected by law and being assisted and respected.

Acknowledgements

None

Conflicts of interests

Author declares there are no conflicts of interests.

Funding

None.

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