

Women in Times of Pandemic

*A hundred men can form a camp,
but it takes a woman to make a home*

—Popular Chinese saying

The year 2020 began with news of an infectious disease in Wuhan, China. Most Brazilians thought it was unlikely to reach our country. In March, however, Italy and Spain, countries so similar to us, presented contagion rates above any expectations. In about three months, the world had become infected, and the number of deaths started to grow exponentially. This was not an unprecedented situation in human history, but the last time had been in 1918. Therefore, pretty much no one alive has experienced a pandemic before.

Each country reacted in its own way, not knowing what to do, as the legend of Rome's succession shows. As Plutarch reports, after a reign of 38 years, Romulus disappeared, carried away by rain and wind, leaving nothing behind, not even his corpse. Until then, no transition process had been formulated to appoint a successor, so the coronation of Numa Pompilius did not occur immediately after Romulus's death. For some time, the senators ruled the city in rotation, alternating among themselves every ten days, in an attempt to replace the monarchy with an oligarchy. This period became known as an *interregnum*.¹

Currently, there seems to be a period of interregnum. The pandemic could not have better exemplified this finding. Not only does everyone know about the disease, but we also know we are all susceptible. However, each organism reacts in its own way, ranging from asymptomatic (80%, apparently) to death from severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in a few days (1% or less, depending on the country). Since no one has any idea what his or her reaction is, there are those who panic and those who disregard SARS-CoV-2 (or COVID-19), as the disease came to be called, as being of little severity. In short, we have a few common denominators. Almost all doctors say since there is no medicine to cure the disease or a vaccine to prevent it, we must remain home in a more or less forced kind of quarantine for all non-essential workers.

¹ PLUTARCO, *Vidas paralelas*. T. I, p. 109. Available at: <<http://www.elaleph.com>>, access on May 10th 2020.

Each country reacted in its own way: There were curfews and bans on leaving the house, with the exception of one person per family once weekly; there were also those who considered themselves on vacation and took walks along the coast. There was everything. For example, in at least 30 of the 50 US states, far-right demonstrations broke out defending individual freedom against measures that tried to prevent people from leaving to contain infection.

Interestingly, while only a few countries are currently governed by women, about 10 in 193 countries (189 of which are UN signatories), those populations have suffered the lowest levels of contamination and few deaths.² This was true in Iceland, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Taiwan, and Germany—countries located on almost every continent. The woman-led countries of Scotland, Trinidad-Tobago, Georgia, and Switzerland had only slightly worse results. Not incidentally, women represent about 70% of the world’s health professionals; unlike traditional wars, women are the majority of those at the front.³ These results indicate that women excel when faced with an unprecedented crisis, despite continuing prejudice.

The so-called negationist presidents or dictators are also noteworthy. This “Ostrich Alliance,” includes the dictators of Nicaragua and Turkmenistan as well as the presidents of Brazil and Belarus. For them, COVID-19 is nothing more than nonsense that, in the words of one of them, “must be faced as men and not as kids”. The president of the United States cannot be included in this group just because he struggles to pretend to take the disease seriously.

The pandemic also highlighted another aspect relevant to women’s health. It has long been said that the most dangerous place for a woman is her own home.⁴ The quarantine, with the requirement to stay at home, only confirmed that domestic violence, and violence against children increased considerably worldwide. In Brazil, the increase was a little more than 35% and was noticed even with the decrease in telephone complaints

² What Do Countries With The Best Coronavirus Responses Have In Common? Women Leaders. *Forbes*. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/#260ce9873dec>>, access on May 10th 2020.

³ Mathieu Boniol, Michelle McIsaac, Lihui Xu, Tana Wuliji, Khassoum Diallo, and Jim Campbell, *Gender Equity in the Health Workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries* (World Health Organization, 2019). Available at: <https://www.who.int/hrh/resources/gender_equity-health_workforce_analysis/en/>, access on May 10th 2020.

⁴ “Leslie Morgan: Por que as vítimas de violência doméstica não vão embora?”. Suggested video available at: <<https://youtu.be/J9BG9egWR08>>.

via emergency numbers because other quieter channels (E-mails, WhatsApp, Libras) have increased in use.

The tragedy of violence within the home has been addressed by the Brazilian Congress through frequent legislative changes; however, the numbers have not decreased.

I often remember the story of a young Sardinian who, about 50 years ago, was prosecuted for indecent assault. When he presented before a female judge, he could not believe that she was, in fact, female. It is said that he fell to his knees and cried. Until then, he thought that women existed only to serve and obey.

The fact that women-ruled countries have done so well in the fight against the pandemic so far can be used to teach everyone that women were born to contribute and play a fundamental role in modern society, not just exist behind the scenes. Above all, they must be respected and not humiliated by their husbands and companions.⁵

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⁵ “Jackson Katz: A violência contra a mulher é um problema masculino”. Suggested video available at: <https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue>.