

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36489/saudecoletiva.2021v11i63p5476-5487>

The performance of the feminist collective Marielle Franco and the impact on the mental health of its members during the COVID-19 pandemic

El desempeño del colectivo feminista Marielle Franco y el impacto en la salud mental de sus miembros durante la pandemia del COVID-19

A atuação do coletivo feminista Marielle Franco e o impacto na saúde mental de suas integrantes durante a pandemia da COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the impact of the actions carried out at the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco to promote the mental health of university students during the pandemic of COVID-19. **Method:** It was an action research carried out with students from the Nursing and Psychology courses at the Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG). The Collective meetings took place remotely from April to June 2020. A semi-structured interview script was used for data collection and analytically the thematic categorical model proposed by Bardin. **Results:** The following emerged as thematic categories: 1. Perspectives pointed out about gender in the experience of the Feminist Collective during the COVID-19 pandemic; 2. The performance of the Feminist Collective during the COVID-19 pandemic and its articulation with the members' mental health. **Conclusion:** The collective actions developed remotely during the pandemic were successful in providing a space that was welcoming to the demands of the students, promoting mental health and the formation of a support network for women.

DESCRIPTORS: Feminism; COVID-19; Students.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar el impacto de las acciones realizadas en el Colectivo Feminista Marielle Franco para promover la salud mental de los estudiantes universitarios durante la pandemia de COVID-19. **Método:** Se trata de una investigación realizada con estudiantes de los cursos de Enfermería y Psicología de la Universidad Federal de Campina Grande (UFCG). Los encuentros Colectivos se realizaron de forma remota de abril a junio de 2020. Para la recogida de datos se utilizó un guión de entrevista semiestructurado y analíticamente el modelo temático categórico propuesto por Bardin. **Resultados:** Surgieron como categorías temáticas las siguientes: 1. Perspectivas señaladas sobre género en la experiencia del Colectivo Feminista durante la pandemia de COVID-19; 2. La actuación del Colectivo Feminista durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y su articulación con la salud mental de las integrantes. **Conclusión:** Las acciones colectivas desarrolladas a distancia durante la pandemia tuvieron éxito en brindar un espacio acogedor a las demandas de los estudiantes, promoviendo la salud mental y la formación de una red de apoyo a las mujeres.

DESCRIPTORES: Feminismo; COVID-19; Estudiantes.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar o impacto das ações realizadas no Coletivo Feminista Marielle Franco para a promoção da saúde mental de universitárias durante a pandemia da COVID-19. **Método:** Tratou-se de uma pesquisa-ação realizada com discentes dos cursos de Enfermagem e Psicologia da Universidade Federal de Campina Grande (UFCG). Os encontros do Coletivo aconteceram de forma remota de abril a junho de 2020. Para coleta dos dados utilizou-se um roteiro de entrevista semiestruturada, e analiticamente o modelo categorial temático proposto por Bardin. **Resultados:** Emergiram como categorias-temáticas: 1. Perspectivas apontadas sobre gênero na vivência do Coletivo Feminista durante a pandemia da COVID-19; 2. A atuação do Coletivo Feminista durante a pandemia da COVID-19 e sua articulação com a saúde mental das integrantes. **Conclusão:** As ações do coletivo desenvolvidas de forma remota durante a pandemia foram exitosas ao oportunizar um espaço acolhedor às demandas das estudantes, promovendo a saúde mental e a formação de uma rede de apoio para as mulheres.

DESCRIPTORES: Feminismo; COVID-19; Estudantes.

RECEIVED ON: 12/28/2020 APPROVED ON: 01/11/2021

Maria Eduarda Amorim Isidro Lins

Undergraduate student of the Nursing Course at the Federal University of Campina Grande - UFCG-PB.
ORCID: 0000-0001-8271-7635

Giovanna Raquel Sena Menezes

Undergraduate student of the Nursing Course at the Federal University of Campina Grande - UFCG- PB.
ORCID: 0000-0001-9059-0347

Priscilla Maria de Castro Silva

PhD in Nursing from the Postgraduate Program in Nursing at the Federal University of Paraíba (PPGENF/UFPB), Master in Nursing from PPGENF/UFPB. Specialist in Mental Health and Psychosocial Care by FIP. Bachelor and Licentiate in Nursing from the State University of Paraíba (UEPB), she is currently a professor in the Nursing Course at the Federal University of Campina Grande (CCBS/UFCG).

ORCID: 0000-0002-0344-8367

INTRODUCTION

With the scenario of the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), an infectious and contagious disease initially identified in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the world began to face countless challenges due to its high contagion capacity and an alarming number of infections, leading to being characterized as a pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO).¹ In view of this, precautionary measures had to be taken by governments and organizations, countries had to adopt measures such as social isolation, closing schools, universities and various public and private institutions.²

The COVID-19 pandemic has pervaded all areas of the collective and individual life of the population, so there was also a reflection in the scope of mental health.³ Taking into account university students, it was shown that, as the changes occurred very quickly, this factor may have caused difficulty in adapting the students, with this sudden rupture, since the classes had to be suspended, allowing psychological suffering.²

Furthermore, it is necessary to reflect on the various intersectionalities that go through gender discussions, because despite the pandemic reaching a huge portion of the population, the people most affected by the consequences of these viruses presented crossings of gender, race and class, which fell, abo-

ve all, in women, black and poor, who were most affected by the consequences of the pandemic. Another aggravating factor, especially in times of crisis, is the challenge of women's rights, making these women invisible and vulnerable to precarious work, to a subhuman journey of activities at home and, if inserted in the university context, to demand organization for academic activities.⁴

It is worth emphasizing that the context in which women are inserted has peculiarities that are not applied to men, due to the gender oppression present in society, as a patriarchal society stifles and defines gender behaviors, always assigning privileges to men, women, since they are born, are convinced that they must do everything for the family and for love, this devotion becomes a way of easing the violence and oppression suffered, as they end up accepting everything for a "greater good".⁵ Therefore, these students as women are affected by several issues in the domestic environment, such as charges for carrying out domestic activities, the need to take care of a family member and difficulty reconciling the hours of remote classes or studies with the demands of the home.

The relevance of the Feminist Collective was found through the search for the formation of a support and care network among university students, with actions aimed at breaking the hegemony of male domination and oppression over women, since the university, like any other institution inserted in the social space, it can

perpetuate cultural patterns that reaffirm oppression.⁶ The objective of the study was to analyze the impact of the actions carried out at the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco to promote the mental health of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a research hypothesis, it was pointed out that the continuity of collective meetings during the pandemic would potentially lead to the strengthening of students, to the sharing of care strategies in actions with significant contributions to mental health and the empowerment of these women.

METHOD

The present work was configured as a qualitative nature assuming the character of action research, this type of research is characterized as a method that allows intervention, generating change in the environment in which the research is developed.⁷ That said, this research established an active relationship between researcher and participants and together they developed solutions to problems detected in the pandemic of COVID-19.

This study was part of a research developed in the Institutional Scientific Initiation Program for Scientific Initiation (PIVIC - Programa Institucional Voluntário de Iniciação Científica) of the Federal University of Campina Grande, carried out from 2019 to 2020. In general, this research was developed in 3 phases, which were: 1 Conducting a semi-struct-

tured interview before the creation of the Feminist Collective; 2. Creation of the Feminist Collective and development of thematic conversation circles and 3. Application of semi-structured interviews after the creation of the Feminist Collective.

The research adopted the following inclusion criteria: 1. Be a woman (cis or trans) or recognize yourself as a woman; 2. Be a student regularly enrolled in one of the three courses at the Center for Biological and Health Sciences at the Federal University of Campina Grande on the Campina Grande campus (CCBS / UFCG); 3. Identify yourself with the theme addressed in the project. The exclusion criteria for the participants, on the other hand, were: 1. To be under 18 years old.

In its first phase, the research started with the participation of thirty students, sixteen students from the Nursing course, one from the Medicine course and fourteen from the Psychology course, the age range of the participants ranged from 18 years to 26 years. In its second and third phases, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an evasion of nineteen students, leaving three students from the Psychology course and eight from the Nursing course. This dropout by the students was characterized by the difficulty in maintaining a virtual link with the research, since it would not be possible to continue with the face-to-face contact.

As a result, the Collective meetings in 2020 were held remotely, from April to June, through a digital video calling platform, Google Meet. The Feminist Collective Marielle Franco has biweekly meetings, whose themes are suggested by the participants, enabling representativeness in the various topics covered and an exchange of knowledge between them, a very important factor when taking into account the interdisciplinarity existing in the academy. Several topics were discussed, such as: COVID-19 pandemic; Women and Mental Health; Mental Health and Gender; Black Feminism; Abusive relationship, among others.

The technique adopted for data collection was through semi-structured interviews conducted before and after the thematic conversation circles. The first interview was held at CCBS/UFCG, the locations for the interviews were chosen by the participants themselves, to make them feel more comfortable, such as a classroom. As a result of social isolation, the second interview was conducted through a digital platform, which was chosen by the participants. Both in the first and in the second phase the interviews were recorded.

The semi-structured interview script of the first phase had six questions about the motivation to participate in a feminist collective, the difficulties of being a woman in society and the expectations involved. In the script for the second phase, eight questions were asked about the experiences within the collective, the relevance of the themes addressed, the academic connection through this process and the relationship of these factors with mental health, including the experience of collective meetings during the pandemic.

As a result of the responses to these interviews, several categories of analysis emerged. However, this article analyzes only those collected by the second semi-structured interview, more specifically those on issues related to the collective contribution to the students' mental health and to meetings developed remotely due to the pandemic. Bardin's "Content Analysis" was chosen for data analysis 8 who works exploring written material, evaluating speeches. After the implementation, recording and transcription of the interviews, there was a fluctuating reading of the text and then a more detailed exploration of the material, determining the recording unit.

The research was only carried out after the project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Hospital Universitário Alcides Carneiro - UFCG - Campina Grande through CAAE: 19244919.1.0000.5182. Each participant read and signed a Free and Infor-

med Consent Form (ICF), whose information on all stages of the research and its risks and benefits were described. The participants' confidentiality was guaranteed, letters and numbers were used to identify them, the initial of the course and a number for each participant was placed according to the order in which it was interviewed, for example, for a Psychology student who was the fifth to be interviewed, identification P5 was assigned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results will be presented from two categories, with the respective discussion about the data found: 1. Perspectives pointed out about gender in the experience of the Feminist Collective during the COVID-19 pandemic; 2. The performance of the Feminist Collective during the COVID-19 pandemic and its articulation with the members' mental health.

Perspectives pointed on gender in the experience of the feminist collective during the COVID-19 pandemic

There is a process of erasing the conquests of the feminist movement developed by common sense that serves as the artifice of patriarchy to weaken the merit of the movement and restrict women's empowerment, causing a departure and even a repudiation of many women to integrate in the movement's struggle for end of oppression suffered. As Hooks⁹ defines, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression".

The lack of knowledge about the importance of feminism is present in several spheres, permeates the private sphere of individuals and persists even in the academic environment, which should be a space of broad political and social training of the subject, since in the academy reductionist and prejudiced discourses are disseminated about feminism.¹⁰ Many university students can experience this incomprehension about the move-

ment and distance themselves from the gender debate, a fact evidenced in the student's speech about participation in the Feminist Collective meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic:

“Challenging, but important. In the midst of all the chaos, I ended up coming to my mom's house in another city. Telling her that she participated in a feminist collective and was going to have these meetings caused her astonishment, just like me, she didn't know much about the subject either.”(P1)*

Another relevant observation observed in the interviewee's statement P1 was the return of these students to the family home environment, since many university students need their homes in other cities to carry out academic activities in person, and with the suspension of these and the possibility of being carried out remotely, they face another impasse of this pandemic period: the return to the home of parents/family for an indefinite period of time.

The domestic environment has historically been attributed to women as the only place for the expression of their interests and their wills, still considered as an environment of lesser social prestige and maintenance of unequal relations of power between the figure of man and woman. In this sense, culturally the social roles of men and women are defined according to “strategic binarism”, which uses biological differences to reaffirm and justify social inequalities.¹¹ This environment is also liable to express different forms of oppression and types of violence, since all forms of violence against women are linked to the power relationship and the idea of subordination of women to men.⁵

In this way, the social detachment necessary during the pandemic brought to light numerous indications of the increase in violence against women in several countries around the world, including Brazil, during this period.¹² This is a wor-

rying factor, as it demonstrates that there is no protection for women even in their own home. Such affliction was indicated by a research participant, as can be seen below:

“And I also think about the context of other women in the collective who are in the home of a family that is deeply rooted in patriarchy, machismo, forms of oppression of women and abuse as well. [...] Because these women have to be at home constantly with other people who oppress them or who do them harm, I think it is very important that the collective is in this period of pandemic.”(E10)

The demands resulting from interactions in this dysfunctional domestic environment are contemplated and accepted in the collective's actions. The experience of remote encounters made it possible to protect these students not only in the aspect of psychological distress, but also as a support tool for maintaining the physical and mental integrity of the participants through trust in this formed support network. Situation ratified in the following statement:

“These meetings, having this contact for me is one of the highlights of my period at home due to the pandemic and it also works as a protection for me, right? Because it is a moment that I really hope for during the week, which is the meeting of the collective, contact with women also for me are self-care tools too, you know, because I feel strengthened, I can also strengthen other women, so this is of inestimable importance for mental health as well.”(E12)

This discourse highlights the relevance of support among women in coping with the obstacles imposed by machismo, based on the term Sorority that was coined by the writer Kate Millet in the

late 1960s as the social union between women without distinction of social class or of race.¹³ Political solidarity can be expressed by sorority, sharing the feeling of common suffering and commitment in the fight against patriarchal injustice.⁹ This experience was noted as a repercussion of involvement in the activities of the feminist collective, according to the interviewee's report E12:

“Finding this space for welcoming, listening, exchanging experiences, is surrounded by women so strong, so present in the collective, it has this importance for me too, because I get stronger as a woman, I get stronger in this period of instability that we is living due to COVID-19.”

Thus, it is noted that the operationalization of the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco during the COVID-19 pandemic was an essential tool to provide a welcoming and strengthening space for students at this time of crisis.

The feminist collective's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic and its joint with members' mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic brought several changes in the way of living in society, the measures taken during this period, such as the quarantine and closing of schools and universities, generated a decrease in direct contact between human beings, this factor is configured as a stressor for individuals' mental health.¹⁴ Student P6 reinforces the thought described, demonstrating that the COVID-19 pandemic emerged unexpectedly and brought several negative feelings, as can be seen below:

“We didn't expect the collective to have to face these virtual meetings and have to do it that way. The pandemic was something that surprised everyone and in a very negative way, because we are very

distressed. Anyway, we were deprived of a lot that we would like to be living, right? ” (P6)

The restriction of daily activities that were common before, but which became impossible with the pandemic, generated several impacts on people's lives, one of the consequences of this scenario was the deprivation of educational activities.¹⁵ As a result, educational institutions needed to seek strategies that would make it possible to keep part of their practices active, thus arising the need to implement activities remotely.

These remote activities start from the application of the use of information technologies in the academic environment.¹⁵ Thus, there is an adaptation of these technologies according to the need presented in the environment in which they are being inserted. Despite this, many social and personal issues interfere and become obstacles for the application of these technologies to occur, below two students who are part of the Feminist Collective report the difficulties encountered to participate in the activities of this group remotely:

“I’m not going to lie that it was complicated for me, okay? Because I still haven’t adapted very well to this new learning format. [...] But I understand that it is a way for us to stay connected and that it is an issue that we need.” (P8)

“Sometimes it was a little complicated to be able to participate due to internet issues, people at home, but in spite of everything they were incredible meetings with great energy even if remotely..” (E11)

In the statements above, it can be observed that this adaptation to the new reality faced is not being easy, students needed to have a double adaptation, due to social isolation and remote activities.¹⁵ Taking into account the possible negative results that the pandemic could generate, the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco

decided to continue its activities remotely, in an attempt to guarantee a place that allowed sharing and care, below you can see the students' statements reporting how this experience was set up:

The restriction of daily activities that were common before, but which became impossible with the pandemic, generated several impacts on people's lives

“It really is a way out, at least for me, to be able to take the person’s mind out of everything that is going on. I spend the whole week thinking ‘my God, the collective is on a certain day, I hope it comes soon’, because it’s a different thing in the routine, you know? It is something that, as I said, everyone is going through this, everyone understands and we calm down. [...] Continuing the collective remotely has been very good.” (E15)

“I think it is very important that these meetings were held remotely, because as we cannot meet in person, we have a way of supporting ourselves, we build a

support network, even if it is not physically, but socially we are still meeting.” (E9)

Thus, it is necessary to maintain the link between individuals to ensure biopsychosocial well-being. The formation of a support network is linked to the coexistence of individuals, that is, this network will be built through affective exchanges and sharing experiences, generating empathy and respect in the group.¹⁶ In the current scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic, the construction of a support network is an important tool for mental health care. The consolidation of this network for CCBS/UFCG students took place through the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco, one can observe the relevance of its functioning during the pandemic in the speech below:

“It was important to participate in that moment and share the experiences, the anxieties that the moment caused/causes. We discuss issues that go through our day to day, the anxiety caused by the moment, it is important because we end up recognizing in each other’s speech, we know that we are not alone.” (P1)

The emotional difficulties mentioned by the student are characteristic of the moment experienced, a review of studies carried out on quarantine moments shows a high incidence of negative psychological effects on people, these in turn can prevail for a long period.³ Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to an area of health that is often neglected: mental health. Below the students report the impact of the Feminist Collective in caring for the mental health of its members during the COVID-19 pandemic period:

“It is being a balm, because I am experiencing moments of a lot of stress, a lot of anxiety and when I enter the collective, it is as if it relieved, you know? [...] The collecti-

ve is always very light, it is always a space for speech, it is always a space for you to place yourself. [...] so, this quarantine is being one thousand and one percent of importance.” (P6)

“So, my experience with the collective during the COVID-19 pandemic was very positive, it was strengthening, I feel that it moved my days in this pandemic, that made me reflect on many things and that helped me to seek this mental health.” (E10)

Thus, it was observed that despite the difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco has configured itself as a powerful tool for the care of the mental health of its participants, enabling the

construction of a support network that it generates listening, sharing, bonding and relieves the pressures that exist in this context of a pandemic.

CONCLUSION

In view of the fact that women were most affected by the pandemic scenario, due to the overload of functions in the domestic environment and the increase in violence against women during this period, it was necessary to carry out strategies to promote and prevent possible psychological damage that can arise in crisis situations, among them is the creation of a place that provides a support network. With this, the Feminist Collective Marielle Franco sought to continue its activities, even if in a remote way, to guarantee its participants a welcoming

and sharing place, in which they could express the pains and learnings that occurred during this period.

However, one of the main difficulties during the implementation of the remote activities was to be able to keep the participants linked to the group, since some students had difficulties with the use of information technologies, with obstacles such as connecting to the internet and adapting to virtual platforms. Even so, it was possible to maintain a very active group and the experience with the collective in this period proved to be successful, promoting the mental health care of its members. It should be noted that the presence of a Feminist Collective and the construction of research on gender in the academic environment are forms of resistance and to ensure the permanence of women in these spaces. ■

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