

# A look beyond the beauty of maternity: Matern burnout

Um olhar além da beleza da maternidade: Burnout materno

Una mirada más allá de la belleza de la maternidad: Agotamiento materna

## RESUMO

Objetivo: Compreender a experiência do esgotamento materno em mães de um município paraibano. Método: Estudo exploratório-descritivo de abordagem qualitativa desenvolvido com 22 participantes. Para a coleta de dados utilizou-se questionário sociodemográfico e roteiro semiestruturado. No processamento dos dados utilizou-se o software Iramuteq. Resultados: As participantes tinham idade entre 19 a 71 anos, escolaridade acima de cinco anos, desempregadas, renda familiar menor ou igual a um salário mínimo, pertencentes a famílias biparentais e com dois filhos. Através da Classificação Hierárquica Descendente, constatou-se sinais e sintomas do burnout materno, como: sobrecarga, cansaço, dor de cabeça, exaustão física, ansiedade e vergonha. Conclusão: A exaustão das participantes foi apontada devido à sobrecarga das atividades e cobrança pela maternidade ideal. Foram identificadas em todas as faixas-etárias das mães e filhos algum sinal ou sintoma que representava alguma das dimensões do burnout materno, tal condição pode implicar negativamente na qualidade de vida de mães e filhos.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Mães; Relações Mãe-filho; Esgotamento Psicológico; Estresse emocional; Saúde materna.

## ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the experience of maternal exhaustion in mothers from a municipality in Paraíba. Method: Exploratory-descriptive study with a qualitative approach, developed with 22 participants. For data collection, a sociodemographic questionnaire and a semi-structured script were used. The Iramuteq software was used for data processing. Results: The participants were aged between 19 and 71 years, had more than five years of schooling, were unemployed, had a family income of less than or equal to one minimum wage, and were from two-parent families with two children. Through the Descending Hierarchical Classification, signs and symptoms of maternal burnout were observed, such as: overload, tiredness, headache, physical exhaustion, anxiety and shame. ideal. Some sign or symptom that represented one of the dimensions of maternal burnout was identified in all age groups of mothers and children, this condition can negatively affect the quality of life of mothers and children.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Mothers; Mother-child relationships; Psychological Exhaustion; Emotional stress; Maternal health.

## RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender la experiencia del agotamiento materno en madres de un municipio de Paraíba. Método: Estudio exploratorio-descriptivo con abordaje cualitativo, desarrollado con 22 participantes. Para la recolección de datos se utilizó un cuestionario sociodemográfico y un guión semiestruturado. Para el procesamiento de los datos se utilizó el software Iramuteq. Resultados: Los participantes tenían entre 19 y 71 años de edad, tenían más de cinco años de escolaridad, estaban desempleados, tenían renta familiar menor o igual a un salario mínimo y eran de dos -Familias de padres con dos hijos. A través de la Clasificación Jerárquica Descendente se observaron signos y síntomas de desgaste materno como: sobrecarga, cansancio, dolor de cabeza, agotamiento físico, ansiedad y vergüenza ideal. Se identificó algún signo o síntoma que representó una de las dimensiones del desgaste materno en todos los grupos etarios de madres e hijos, esta condición puede afectar negativamente la calidad de vida de madres e hijos.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Madres; Relaciones madre-hijo; Agotamiento Psicológico; Estrés emocional; Salud maternal.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The practice of motherhood demands from women a capacity beyond what their own body and mind resources can provide. In addition, there is a culturally very romanticized perception by society, with a predominantly positive view of the exercise of motherhood, while the challenges are denied or covered up. Thus, when the mother presents exhaustion and intense overload, she is susceptible to developing maternal exhaustion, also known as maternal burnout.<sup>(1)</sup>

Maternal burnout is characterized by being a unique and specific syndrome, resulting from long-lasting exposure to chronic stress of mothers, that is, exhaustion occurs as a result of physical and emotional overload by performing the role of mother, and is defined by four dimensions: emotional exhaustion, emotional detachment, saturation and contrast.<sup>(2-3)</sup>

Exhaustion is the dimension that

appears initially, in most cases, the mother feels drained, exhausted and without energy and, generally, it can occur in committed and zealous mothers. Emotional detachment is characterized by a decrease in mothers' involvement with their children and difficulty in showing affection, however, the need for basic care, such as food and sleep, remains. With regard to saturation, it is conceptualized by the feeling of being fed up with the maternal role, inability to fulfill the maternal role, where the pleasure of being a mother is lost. Finally, the contrast is defined by the feeling of shame in relation to motherhood, as she does not consider herself as a good mother as she was in the past or idealized to be.<sup>(3-4)</sup>

The term burnout emerged to describe chronic stress related to work, called Burnout syndrome. However, a research<sup>4</sup> found convergences between work exhaustion and the difficulties experienced by adults in their parental attributes. These authors consider that the workload of salaried workers compares with the de-

mand for tasks associated with caring for children, and that this parental role can generate a state of physical and emotional overload.<sup>(5-7)</sup>

Thus, seeking to understand the experience of mothers in relation to the exhaustion and burden caused by motherhood, the following guiding question will be used: what is the understanding of the experience of maternal exhaustion in adult mothers in a municipality in Paraíba? What are the signs and symptoms that mothers show when they feel exhausted and overwhelmed in relation to the maternal role?

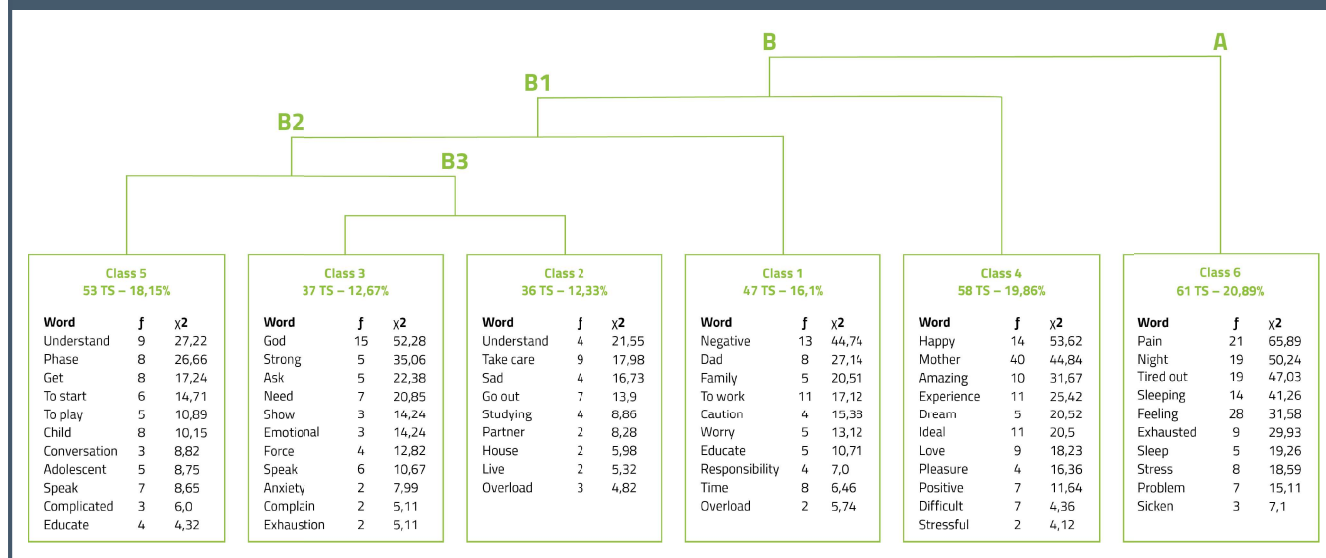
Therefore, the objective was to understand the experience of maternal exhaustion in adult mothers in a municipality in Paraíba, identifying the socio-demographic profile of the interviewees and the signs and symptoms of maternal burnout in the mothers.

**METHOD**

This is an exploratory-descriptive stu-



Figure 1 – Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC). Cuite, PB, Brazil, 2020.



Source: Authors' data, 2020.

dy with a qualitative approach, developed with 22 participants from a municipality in Paraíba. The following inclusion criteria were adopted: being a mother registered in one of the five Family Health Units (FHU) in the urban area, having at least one child up to 35 years of age living in the same household as the mother, mothers of children with a disability and mothers under 18 years of age were excluded.

Data collection took place between September and December 2020 in three stages: First: Survey of data from mothers in the municipality enrolled in the USF in the urban area, through existing data in the Citizen's Electronic Record, which identified 3,085 mothers; Second: pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, totaling 2,239 mothers; Third: the proportionality of the number of mothers per USF was considered, where a raffle was carried out with the aim of choosing around three mothers for each of the six classifications of children's age groups, established by the researchers (mothers of children under two years of age; from two to five years; from six to 10 years; 11 to 15 years old; 16 to 24 years old; and from 25 to 35 years) totaling 22

participants.

For data collection, an interview was used, with the aid of a voice recorder, a sociodemographic questionnaire and a semi-structured script. The interviews took place following the guidelines for standard precautions for the coronavirus. When it comes to guaranteeing privacy, the investigated mothers were identified by flower codenames.

For data processing, the Iramuteq software (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires) was used.<sup>(8)</sup> It is a free program that is anchored in the R software, and that allows processing and statistical analysis of texts. For this study, the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) was used<sup>(9)</sup> where, based on calculations performed by the software, segments of texts are classified according to their respective vocabularies, and the set of them is distributed based on the frequency of words.<sup>(10)</sup>

This study was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Federal University of Campina Grande, CAAE: 26414719.4.0000.5182, Opinion number: 3.832.466/2020. All precepts of

Resolution No. 466/2012 reserved for research involving human beings were respected.

## RESULTS

It was verified that the participants were aged between 19 and 71 years old, with more than five years of schooling (45.4%), unemployed (45.4%), with family income less than or equal to one minimum wage (68.1 %), belonging to biparental families (54.5%) and with two children (40.9%).

The result obtained through DHC showed a corpus consisting of 22 interviews, separated into 365 Text Segments (TS), with use of 292 TS, which is equivalent to 80% of the text. The classes are divided into two branches (A and B), with branch B divided into three sub-branches (B1, B2 and B3), as shown in figure 1. Thus, two main categories emerged, entitled: Being a mother and the burden of multiple roles, which will use branch B, and the invisible burden of motherhood, which will use branch A.

[Through the mothers' reports, it was identified that motherhood promotes a

satisfactory experience that reflects the feeling of love, happiness and completeness:]

*Being a mother is so wonderful and rewarding, I am very happy, and I will never regret being a mother. (Orchid)*

[On the other hand, in this research it was also identified through the participants' discourse, aspects of motherhood that contradict this romanticized view culturally imposed by society, such information can be verified in one of the reports mentioned below:]

*It's not quite the fairy tale that people talk about, as people have a false idea that being a mother is being happy, and it really isn't. (Calendula)*

[Regarding the overload of the multiple roles played by women in motherhood, several mothers were identified who, in addition to motherhood, were students, housewives, wives or had some type of work outside their homes, as can be seen in the fragments :]

*From a negative experience, I believe it's more this lack of time, because being a mother, being a housewife, being a wife, being a professional who works outside the home, demands a lot of time and a lot of wear and tear, both physically and mentally. (Violet)*

[It was possible to observe that the main reasons for mothers' exhaustion and overload were: for children under two years old, change of routine arising from the need to adapt to the birth, growth and development of the child; from two to 10 years was lack of time to pay attention to children and take care of oneself; In adolescence and youth, from 11 to 24 years old, the children's disobedience and disagreement with decisions taken by their mothers were highlighted; In the adult phase, from 25 to 35 years old, domestic activities and concerns about when the children are not at home were mentioned

as being overloaded:]

*I can't sleep, having spent the day taking care of the house and my daughter and that makes me wake up tired the next day. My daughter wakes up very early, and I feel very overwhelmed with being a mother, very exhausted. (Flor de Lotus, twelve-month-old daughter)*

*When they want time from me that at that moment I am not available to them, it makes me feel like... sad, because we don't always have time to meet their needs. Sometimes I even forget about myself a little, of my time, because the dedication is totally for them. (Jasmine, children aged five and six)*

*They have everything in their hands and do not appreciate it, they are influenced by games, the internet, most do not want to study, do not want to value their studies... It is hard work to take care of a child, it is very tiring, it is exhausting to take care of a child, and mostly teenagers. (Daisy, children aged 17 and 21))*

*What gives me pleasure and makes me happy is when the three of them are together with me, close to me... when they're at home, because when they go out... I miss it... when they're all together it's better. (Sage, children aged 24, 25 and 26)*

### The invisible burden of motherhood

[In this category, there was a report of some sign and symptom that represents some of the dimensions of maternal burnout. It is worth mentioning that none of the interviewees presented the four dimensions simultaneously:]

*I feel very exhausted, we don't know what else to do, we get tired, stressed, there are times when I want to give up everything, to*

*throw everything in the air, and that's what I do. (Sunflower)*

*If it weren't for my youngest son, I'd leave everything and disappear into the world. (Daisy)*

*I think I'm a terrible mother... I feel like I needed to do better. (Azalea)*

[On the other hand, reports have also shown some protective factors for maternal burnout, as shown in the fragments below:]

*Thank God I had a lot of help to raise them, there were always cousins, nieces, family, grandmother, husband. (Azalea)*

*It's a walk, watching a movie, games, all these moments, being together, sitting at the table during lunch, dinner, all these activities bring me great joy. (Peony)*

[In terms of risk factors, it was identified in the fragments below:]

*I feel very overwhelmed when I see that she is giving a lot of work, because I am a single mother, and I have to educate her in everything myself. (Sunflower)*

*Sometimes I think I'm too tough, I supervise a lot, so I really want her to be an example, because I believe that at each stage she has a need, and these expectations. (Violet)*

[Most participants pointed out one more risk factor, referring to the financial situation. During the interview, (68.1%) indicated in the sociodemographic questionnaire an income of less than or equal to one <sup>(1)</sup> minimum wage. This situation can be observed in the fragment below:]

**Another part that I think is negative is financial,**

*when there are months when they ask for things that I can't give them, they ask for different food, to go out, different clothes and I can't give them, that also makes me very sad.* (Lily, maid, income of 1 MW)

## DISCUSSION

Due to the imposition of some social and cultural beliefs, women are expected to reflect on motherhood at some point in their lives. In such a way, women, whether they want motherhood or not, feel pressured to fulfill this social role. And, along with the imposition of "Being a mother", ambiguous feelings also arise in these women, such as doubts and fears related to motherhood.<sup>(11)</sup>

The birth of a child can bring happiness to the mother and offer a new meaning to her life. However, the responsibilities and activities of motherhood can also represent new burdens and stress for the mother.<sup>(12)</sup> In this same sense, a romanticized view of motherhood is placed on motherhood, which presents the woman-mother as happy and fulfilled, so that any woman who does not wish to have a child would be fleeing her nature, being selfish with the "divine role" given to her and questioning what was instituted as her essence.<sup>(11,13)</sup> Corroborating with the literature, it was identified in the participants' reports the feeling of love and completeness with the birth of the child, however they verbalized that the experience of motherhood is not as romantic as presented by society.

In this way, the experience of motherhood can overload the woman, resulting from the dependence on the child, who demands attention and care, associated with all the other activities that the woman needs to perform in addition to being a mother, such as: working, studying, taking care of home and family. The multiple roles played by women in motherhood can cause emotional, physical and financial overload, in addition to possible restrictions on social and leisure activities, due to the intense routine.<sup>(6)</sup> In

this research, it was found that exhaustion and overload happened mainly because these women had to reconcile domestic services with maternal activities and work or study.

Research has shown that being a mother, although it is most often reported as a positive experience and as the last achievement in a woman's life, motherhood can also be understood as a mourning, since, metaphorically, when being a mother there is a death of the being-woman who takes care of herself, to be born the being-woman who gives up her subjectivity to take care of someone else. Aspects like these, associated with the multiple activities carried out by these women, can generate levels of overload and exhaustion, which can result in maternal exhaustion.<sup>(11,14)</sup>

Understanding that caring is an intrinsic condition of motherhood, mothers often feel grateful when exercising maternal care. On the other hand, when there is prolonged exposure to stressful and exhausting situations, where the negative aspects of motherhood outweigh the positive aspects, the woman-mother can become exhausted, that is, she can develop maternal burnout.<sup>(4)</sup>

Maternal burnout comprises four dimensions: emotional exhaustion, emotional detachment, saturation and contrast<sup>(3)</sup>, and it happens when there is a chronic imbalance between protective factors (parental self-compassion, high emotional intelligence, good parenting practices, leisure time, positive co-parenting, external support, among others) and risk factors (low emotional intelligence, countless activities, bad parenting practices, lack of spousal support, lack of external support, and parental perfectionism, among others).<sup>(4,15)</sup> In this study, the symptoms most verbalized by the interviewees were: overload, tiredness, headache, physical exhaustion, anxiety and shame. With regard to protective factors, the following were identified: good parenting practices, external support, leisure time and positive co-parenting. With regard to risk factors, it was demonstrated in the

interviewees' reports: countless activities, parents' perfectionism, lack of support from the spouse, lack of external support, among others.

Parental perfectionism, which is considered a risk factor for Maternal Burnout, can be classified as: self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. The first refers to parents' expectations for themselves, or what they feel they should be doing and achieving as parents. The second concerns society's perspective on the function and activity performed by parents. Thus, it is possible that those mothers who dedicate themselves to achieving higher levels of self-oriented or socially prescribed perfectionism may be more exposed to the development of maternal burnout.<sup>(16)</sup>

Another risk factor was identified in the interviewees' report for maternal Burnout: being a young mother, multiparity, having teenage children, having many children living in the same household and there being a large age difference between the children.<sup>(16-18)</sup> In this study, through interviews, young mothers who already showed signs of overload and exhaustion were identified.

In addition to being a young mother, unemployed mothers have a higher risk of burnout than those who were employed. In this same perspective, those who were in poorer financial situations are at greater risk for maternal burnout than those with better financial situations.<sup>(16)</sup> In line with the literature, during the interviews, it was reported by the mothers that the low financial situation had a negative impact on the exercise of motherhood.

Thus, aspects presented in this study make it possible to reflect on the risk of maternal burnout that these mothers are experiencing in the practice of motherhood. It is worth noting that illness due to maternal exhaustion has harmful consequences for the well-being of both parents and children.<sup>(14,19)</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From the participants' reports, exhaus-

tion is a present reality in the lives of mothers. It was verified the existence of suffering women, in different age groups and with children in different age stages, with at least one or more signs and/or symptoms that represented some of the dimensions of maternal burnout, such as: overload, tiredness, headache, physical exhaustion, anxiety and shame.

The participants' exhaustion is pointed out due to an overload of activities, as well as the demand for ideal motherhood.

However, it was mentioned that the greater burden is due to domestic activities compared to maternal activities. In any case, regardless of the overload condition, illness or the presence of signs and symptoms of maternal Burnout negatively affects the quality of life of mothers and children.

As limitations, the sample size stands out, making it impossible, therefore, to generalize the results of this study to any and all populations of mothers, and the

coronavirus pandemic, which caused a delay in data collection.

However, this research brings to the academic community and society as a whole, a picture of the positive aspects, but above all the negative aspects of motherhood that can lead to mothers becoming ill, in addition, it also provides a reflection beyond the romantic beauty of motherhood.

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