

Telling the Story of Gender Inequality During the Early Stages of the Covid-19 Crisis in Education and Introducing Feminist Alternatives to Change the Reality

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Research from different fields demonstrate that the disruption caused by Covid-19 exacerbated social problems. In education, literature reviews focus on issues related to technology, evaluations, or racial discrimination that were worsened as a consequence of remote teaching and learning. Few scholarly works of this kind analyze the problematics in the education system in emergencies from a gendered perspective. This literature review brings to the discussion the transnational burdens, risks, and divides that increasingly affect women during crises in education. Findings revealed that female actors—teachers, students, mothers—have received fewer opportunities and have been assigned more responsibilities in comparison to their male counterparts since the beginning of the pandemic. Through a framework of feminist theories, this review analyzes studies that illustrate the disparities affecting women's opportunities in education, as well as some of their responses. It makes the case to look for solutions that create better conditions for all and strengthen the educational structure itself. Finally, this article brings forth feminist alternatives to equip the education system when facing disruptions, based on ideas from practitioners and scholars that intend to decolonize teaching and learning through survival actions that support situated knowledge, collaboration, and mind freedom.

Keywords: education in emergencies, narrative review, social reproduction, decolonial praxis, education policy

Introduction

“...there is a macho society, where girls, no matter how young they are, have to do housework and are forced to do these things and put their education aside. They say: you already lost the school year, so it is better that you do things around the house, help out, and so they do not study anymore.” Gaby, 17, Ecuador (Plan International, 2021, p. 5).

As illustrated by the quote above, girls and women have been facing difficult times during the Covid-19 pandemic to continue engaged in education. Some girls might not ever be able to return to the classrooms—not because of the virus, but because gender oppressions become a barrier between them and education. During this emergency, in many cases, women were the only ones coping with caregiving responsibilities, at the time of learning their way through technology for education and remote work. In other cases, girls could not follow lessons from home as their presence in the house meant that they had to deal with house chores, among other circumstances that made women's survival in the education system more difficult than it was for their male counterparts (Wannamakok et al., 2020; Plan International, 2020; UN Women & ECLAC, 2020).

However, gender oppression in education has not been sufficiently addressed in academic publications from the beginning of the crisis. Additionally, even if after 2022 literature started being more prolific in terms of gender inequalities in education during the pandemic, during its first months only a few organizations and researchers focused their work on the experiences of female teachers, female students and mothers of school-age children. Hence, aiming to address the gap in literature about women experiences in education in the first year and a half of the Covid-19 crisis, I conducted this study with gender focus, from an insider perspective. From this section on, I use the pronouns "I", "we," "our," and "us", as I am a female researcher, instructor and student from Latin America.

With extensive territorial coverage, this study takes the form of a narrative literature review, gathering data from publications that focused on women's experiences in education during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 crisis, when the rest of the world had its eyes on different aspects of this emergency. Even if during the first stages of the pandemic the literature did not offer much information about women's situation in education, I was able to find ten publications to answer the following question: What were the issues that female teachers, students and mothers of school-age children faced during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 education emergency?

To find out if there were or transnational trends in the issues faced by women in education during this emergency, I used two strategies to analyze the publications. First, through a chronological concatenation of events and, second, by categorizing emerging themes. At a glance, it is perceived that gender disparities affect women's opportunities transnationally, not only to continue their engagement in education, but even to survive, across cultures. It is thus paramount to start looking through the lens of gender at how education responds to emergencies, to propose alternatives that would turn the education system into a safer space for all.

Background

The world experienced its most disruptive situation in modern times due to the Covid-19 virus, which started spreading in December 2019. A pandemic was officially declared in March 2020 by the director of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) and from there, almost all face-to-face activities in the world had to stop, including education. Despite severe measures to prevent the disease from spreading, according to the WHO (n. d.), by mid-2023, Covid-19 had left approximately 768,237,788 confirmed cases, including 6,951,677 accumulative deaths worldwide .

Due to the unprecedented and contagious characteristics of Covid-19, health measures taken during the years 2020 and 2021 included lockdowns that lasted long periods. In such disruption, school closures affected all countries to different degrees, and in some cases, lessons from home lasted more than 2 years. The emergency in education had different stages, including remote lessons, hybrid schemes, partial return to classrooms, and full return to schools (UNESCO et al., 2021). While education systems and the whole world were trying to cope with the crisis by implementing remote work alternatives, there was another hidden emergency affecting the physical integrity of mostly female members of our society. It was the increase in domestic violence that took place especially during the lockdowns (Sediri et al,2020), mostly in areas of the world

where patriarchy is still very strong. By the end of 2021, “1 in 2 women reported that they or a woman they know experienced a form of violence since the COVID-19 pandemic” (UN Women, 2021, p. 5).

Additionally, socially assigned roles and responsibilities made coping with the worst consequences of this emergency in education rely mostly on the shoulders of female members of the family (Thorsteinsen, et al, 2022), especially during the first year and a half, when the eyes of the world were focused on the health contingency, and women’s work inside their homes was taken for granted.

What Previous Literature Reviews Found

Literature reviews covering education issues that emerged during the Covid-19 crisis that preceded this study addressed topics such as racial issues or social indicators (Moore, 2021; Fallah-Aliabadi et al., 2022), technology (Salas-Pilco et al 2022;) or assessment (Chiang et al., 2022), all of which are pressing variables of education in emergencies. Following this train of thought, Moore’s (2021) literature review utilized a scoping strategy to select 16 articles about racial issues related to education during the Covid-19 crisis in the United States. In the analysis, the author identified worrying realities related to health, the economy, and policies. One of the conclusions is that the Latin American community’s morbidity and mortality increased during the lockdown due to loss of income, and instability in education and childcare services (Moore, 2021). In the same line, Fallah-Aliabadi and colleagues (2022) published a literature review of 31 articles identifying indicators that increased the vulnerability of people in relation to domains such as household & community composition; race, minority status & language; socioeconomic status; health; education; and information. It is interesting to notice that none of the findings of both literature reviews points to issues exclusively affecting women.

Likewise, Salas-Pilco and colleagues (2022) reviewed 23 articles related to online learning in Latin America during the Covid-19 crisis. These authors answered research questions about the characteristics of students’ engagement in online learning. Findings were presented across dimensions, such as behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and affective engagement. Gender was not included in their dimensions. According to the results, Latin America needs to transform its higher education through professional training and access to the Internet to achieve quality as well as students’ well-being.

With a different focus, Chiang and colleagues’ research (2022) aims to better understand academic dishonesty (AD) in online learning environments during the Covid-19 crisis in education. The authors were determined to find “influencing factors of AD in online learning environments and to classify effective interventions” (Chiang et al., 2022, p. 911). They analyzed 59 articles, mostly published in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). Influencing factors of AD include: fear of failure, the use of new cheating tools by students, and automated feedback. Among their conclusions, the authors state that “it is important to create a positive atmosphere and learning culture” to develop a kind of honor code (Chiang et al., 2022, p. 925).

But, what about women? We are black, doctors, wives, mothers, *Latinas*, online teachers, students, and more. This review is concerned with what happened to us during the crisis when gender problems were exacerbated, and physical distancing made it harder for women to access education and other services that provide support and protection from domestic violence, child marriage, unwanted pregnancy, and other gendered abuses (Wylie, 2021). The contribution of this article is to join voices with other researchers that aim to generate better understandings of education in emergencies, by adding gender to the focus of analysis.

Analytic Framework

To analyze the information gathered through this literature review, I drew from three branches of feminist theory. The first one, proposed by Brenner (1998, 2000), helps understanding the social and economic origin of gender inequalities. The second branch is intersectionality, which helps explore the conjugation of obstacles —such as gender inequality, race discrimination, and social class— that affect women's opportunities (Carbado et al., 2013). The third branch proposes feminist strategies to decolonize education, through practices such as situated knowledge, collaboration and mind freedom that can help overcoming the consequences of gender oppressions in today's education system (Icaza & de Jong, 2018).

These branches of feminist theory meet in their analysis when it comes to exploring issues faced by women during emergencies in education. To start doing so, it is valuable to remember that women have historically been subjected to a gender ideology that assigns them household duties and excludes them from other aspects of social interaction (Brenner, 2000). This ideology is “reproduced actively and directly by various exclusionary rules and radices (governing education, political participation, and the labor market) as well as marriage and property law and legalized male violence against women” (Brenner, 2000, pp. 222–223). Complementing this observation, intersectionality postulates that oppression comes from different sources, such as gender, race or social class, that pile up on the shoulders of individuals (Carbado et al., 2013).

Understanding the nature of the oppression faced by women would not be enough to make justice if their efforts to navigate the difficult situations in education were not also recognized. To do so, I draw on Brenner's feminist and class theory (1998, 2000) which describes how women carry out projects and strategies to survive in market-oriented societies, and on feminist lessons to decolonize education found in Icaza & de Jong' volume (2018), which joins the voices of different authors to propose decolonizing educational praxis, based on situated knowledge, collaboration, and mind freedom.

More specifically, in this framework, survival projects and strategies refer to collective actions carried out to accomplish fundamental tasks, especially in contexts of adverse social and economic conditions (Brenner, 2000). Situated knowledge refers to the postmodernist interpretation of knowledge as “socially constructed and historically situated instead of a timeless representation of the world by separate individuals” (Nicholson, 1989, p. 198). Collaboration is understood as one of the 21st century skills by which “bigger and better things [can be done] when people work together instead of against one another, [with] best results . . . produced when many brains are working on a problem” (Berliner, & Glass, 2014, p. 63). Furthermore, mind freedom calls for

emancipation from mental slavery (Garvey, 1937/2017), to overcome naturalized forms of oppression.

Methodology

Following bibliography searching methods, I combined keywords in online academic engines, databases, and libraries (Boote & Beile, 2005), such as Web of Science, EBSCO or JSTOR. The terms I used in this search were "Covid-19" [OR] "Pandemic" [OR] "Crisis" [AND] "Women" [OR] "Girls" [OR] "Gender issues" [AND] "Education" [OR] "School" [OR] "Education Policy". To narrow down the initial results, I set the time frame to the first year and a half of the pandemic between March 2020 and September 2021, because this was the most difficult period of adaptation for the entire education system, when the disruption had to be overcome with remote strategies and education policies designed on the spot, without preparation, training, or resources to face all the consequences of teaching and learning from home.

Additionally, I conducted a title, abstract, and keywords screening to find all publications truly related to my interest. After filtering the results with time and conducting the screening, I finally I obtained twenty peer-reviewed articles and publications from international organizations written in English. This low number of entries revealed that most of the grey and academic literature published in English during the selected period focused on topics different from the issues faced by women and girls in education.

After reading the twenty publications, ten were retained following these criteria: a) attention to education female actors' experiences during the Covid-19 crisis; b) clear research methodology, whether quantitative or qualitative; c) the location of the participants of each study, aiming to include in my review a variety of contexts, in order to contrast or find transnational trends. The selected articles and documents were published between July 2020 and September 2021, and include reports issued by international organizations, and academic peer-reviewed articles. The former will help set the scene at a wider scale. The latter provide an analysis into particular situations, allowing a transnational comparison of gender issues in education.

For the analysis, I constructed a narrative chronology of the publications and a thematic analysis across the documents (Ridley, 2008; Rother, 2007). A limitation of this study is the reduced number of analyzed publications. This limitation derives from the limited availability of research related to the specific topic of women's experiences in education, in the chosen time frame that corresponded only to the first year and a half of the crisis. Nonetheless, this limitation does not preclude this paper to derive important insights and lessons from this crucial period, as shown in the next section. Table 1 Organizes the reviewed publications according to the date in which they were accepted or published.

Table 1.
Reviewed publications

Title	Publication type	Author	Date	Focus on Women in Education
Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean.	Policy brief report	United Nations	July, 2020	Impact of the pandemic on women from LAC, including consequences on their access to education.
Education in the time of COVID-19.	Report	ECLAC & UNESCO	August, 2020	Impact of the pandemic on female teachers from LAC.
Care in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19. Towards Comprehensive systems to strengthen Response and recovery	Brief report	UN Women & ECLAC	August, 2020	Impact of school closures on female members of the society.
Human rights and education for Gambian young women during COVID-19: Recommendations for social policy and practice	Academic article	Wannamako k, W., Sissokho, O., & Gates, T. G.	September, 2020	Impact of distance education on girls from Gambia.
Halting Lives: The impact of Covid-19 on girls and young women	Research report	Plan International	September, 2020	Concerns about the widening of the gender gap in lower income countries due to the implementation of technological means for education.
Halting Lives 2 - In their own voice: girls and young women on the impact of COVID-19	Research report	Plan International	April, 2021	Impact of distance learning on young women and their experiences with education during the pandemic.
Covid-19 and female learners in South Sudan: The impact of school closures in Juba, Rumbek, Kapoeta, Torit and Pibor	Briefing paper	Oxfam	August, 2021	Obstacles experienced by female students from Sudan when trying to go back to schools.

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Beyond COVID-19: A Feminist plan for Sustainability and social justice	Report	UN Women	September, 2021	Women's responses to the crisis in education.
The evolving impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on gender inequality in the US labor market: The COVID motherhood penalty	Academic article	Couch, K. A., Fairlie, R. W., & Xu, H.	October, 2021	Disproportionate economic consequences of Covid-19 on mothers of school-age children.
Digital divide framework: online learning in developing countries during the Covid-19 lockdown	Academic article	Mathrani, A., Sarvesh, T., & Umer, R.	September, 2021	Impact of the use of technologies for education on female learners from Asian developing countries.

Results

The low number of publications retrieved from the search indicates that gender issues in education were generally overlooked in research regarding education during the early stages of pandemic, which highlights the relevance of this study. The selected publications were made available between July 2020 and September 2021, comprising 59 countries, located in 5 continents. The results are divided in two sections: a chronological narrative and a thematic analysis. The chronological narrative follows the dates when the works were accepted or published and gives an account of how the pandemic unfolded in the chosen period. This section is divided into three moments: a) projections for women's difficulties in education; (b) negative impacts of the lockdown on females' opportunities; (c) surviving in the education system.

Chronological Narrative

This section narrates experiences and issues faced by females in education during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 crisis, based on the information found on reports by international organizations and on peer-reviewed articles. The first publications to see the lights during the global emergency were issued by organizations that had the capacity to analyze preexisting massive data and to make predictions on the base of the expected consequences of the lockdown. Drawing on social and economic indicators, they announced negative scenarios for vulnerable women and girls, who were susceptible to an increase in domestic violence and an overload of responsibilities, which would be obstacles for them to continue engaged in education. As the pandemic unfolded, early academic literature recorded experiences and testimonies of women and girls in relation to remote education, revealing similar difficulties in different areas of the world, such as lack time and space to follow lessons, or lack of support to continue their studies.

Projections for women's difficulties in education

Predictions on what could happen in education started being published by July of 2020, once it was clear that the situation was already changing peoples' opportunities. One of the first publications that appeared covering the topic of women during the Covid-19 pandemic was a policy brief issued by the United Nations (UN), contextualized in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) (UN, 2020). According to this document, gender equality and the empowerment of women needed to be at the core of the response to the crisis, because we had been "disproportionately impacted by the pandemic" (UN, 2020, p. 3).

The predicted risks for women and children in this area of the world were not only in economic terms, but also in terms of domestic violence. In this sense, the UN advised every effort to be made to guarantee "full-fledged rights of women, girls" and all vulnerable populations to "a life free of violence, exploitation and discrimination, the right to health and education, employment, wages and social protection, the promotion of economic autonomy and political participation" (UN, 2020, p. 3). This means that women from LAC counted as a vulnerable population who needed more protection, especially during this emergency. Given women's vulnerability, the UN recommended that policies should promote "meaningful participation by women and youth, and address gender bias barriers in the most technologically advanced and emerging sectors, including technology, medical supplies and pharmaceuticals" (UN, 2020, p. 12).

In August 2020, ECLAC and UNESCO published a report entirely focused on education. In this report, the hardship experienced by female teachers was highlighted as we "were facing double working hours, which included not only classroom work but also non-classroom teaching duties such as administrative tasks and lesson planning and preparation, as well as unpaid domestic and care work" (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020, p. 10). In LAC, most school teachers are women, representing more than 70% of all teachers at the primary level and more than 60% in secondary education by 2020 (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2022). Hence, the adaptations needed for education to continue in the virtual world and an increase in domestic responsibilities were predictively going cause "emotional exhaustion, feelings of being overwhelmed, and stress" (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020, p. 11) on female teachers. According to this report, female teachers had to assume "multiple responsibilities simultaneously: remote work, caring for children and other family members, supervising their children's learning, and unpaid domestic work" (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020, p. 14).

Negative impacts of the lockdown on females' opportunities

In this challenging context, UN Women & ECLAC issued a brief on August 19, 2020, according to which women's unpaid domestic-care work had exponentially increased in LAC due to school closures, pressure on the health system, home activities diversification, and unequal distribution of responsibilities. An additional source of stress for female teachers came from working in a paid capacity, and dealing with students' needs while taking on an increasing load of demands at home, which brought consequences to their productivity (UN Women & ECLAC, 2020). However, their position could still be somewhat privileged, as "over half of the 126 million women in the female labor force in Latin America works in informal conditions, which often

involve job instability, low pay, and a lack of protection and rights” (UN Women & ECLAC, 2020, p. 11).

Not only were female teachers’ situations affected by gender issues, but it was also the case of female students. In this regard, in September 2020, scholars published an article concerned with the impact of remote education on Gambian girls (Wannamakok et al., 2020). This article raises concerns about education through technological means. The authors explain that “as children stay home from school, issues of access to the newly introduced remote learning via radio and television are challenging for disadvantaged groups such as girls, whose household chores can discourage them from watching TV,” and the situation was harder in rural areas where access to electricity can place an additional barrier (Wannamakok et al., 2020, p. 827). To alleviate the situation, particularly for girls, the authors propose that the education authorities invest in “education infrastructure, including learning technologies such as computers and sustainable energy that can support educational continuity”, and even “working with local leaders to educate the community about the value of education continuity for young women during COVID-19” (Wannamakok et al., 2020, p. 827). The last proposal meant talking to families about women’s possibilities to economically help the household income once they can educate themselves and build a career path.

By the same token, on September 5, 2020, Plan International, an organization focused on children’s rights and equality, published a report focused on 14 countries on all continents, with a sample size of 7,105 girls and young women in between the ages of 15 and 24. It is important to highlight the ability of this organization to conduct a massive closed-question survey followed by interviews. According to their findings, during the lockdown, most of the surveyed girls were negatively affected by “not being able to go to school or university (62%), not being able to socialise with friends (58%), and not being able to leave the house regularly (58%)” (Plan International, 2020, p. 9). These findings position the inability to continue face-to-face education as the number one downside of Covid-19 for female students. Moreover, in the report it is explained that the use of technology has made the gender gap in education wider, particularly in low-income countries where there is a “digital divide,” meaning girls “find it hard to access the information they need for their education and their health” (Plan International, 2020, p. 28). It seems as if patriarchy prioritized boys’ access to the Internet and education.

During the pandemic, the use of technology has in some cases been the only thread that connects female actors to the education system. Hence, this digital divide may be the reason why 33% of the girls in International Plan’s study perceived Covid-19 would affect their future employment opportunities, 25% perceived Covid-19 would affect their future income, and 19% “responded that they would have to put their education temporarily on hold” (Plan International, 2020, p. 26). From this study, it is also noteworthy that, apart from the use of the Internet to access “YouTube videos, online classes and educational websites (both paid and unpaid options)”, 37% of the girls who answered the survey “practiced self-learning using books and other non-digital materials” (Plan International, 2020, p. 13). Given the digital divide previously mentioned, this could be considered a survival strategy that helped women navigate gender oppression during this crisis in education.

On April 27, 2021, Plan International published a second report on the Covid-19 impact on girls and young women. Interestingly, this report focuses on direct testimonies through short excerpts from 74 in-depth interviews with girls located in Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Spain, the United States, France, Vietnam, and Zambia. This document has the purpose to supplement the statistical report previously issued by the same organization. It includes details about girls' and young women's experiences with education during the Covid-19 crisis. It is interesting to notice that, even coming from such a variety of countries, the number one complaint of girls kept on being education, referring to frequently discussed "issues with remote learning in terms of access to technology, lack of space to study at home and schools and colleges themselves struggling to adjust" (Plan International, 2021, p. 3). During in-depth conversations, the organization found that "overall, the girls and young women felt that face-to-face learning was the optimal way to be taught" even if they had "adapted to alternative ways of learning, but continue[d] to find them problematic" (Plan International, 2021, p. 14).

Surviving in the education system

Oxfam (2021), a confederation of charitable organizations, conducted a qualitative study with educational stakeholders and female learners from Sudan. With a similar methodology to the one used by Plan International—surveys and interviews—, its publication was made available in August 2021. By the time of the data collection, the issues related to Covid-19 in education were starting to shift, as the pandemic evolved to a different stage, one in which students were expected to go back to the classrooms in some countries. Yet, if virtual classes had posed a problem before, apparently returning to the classrooms was not going to be the solution, at least for some girls located in certain areas.

This study found that part of the difficulties that female learners had when trying to go back to school was "an increased burden of domestic chores, along with pressure to support income-generating activities for their households, to the point that they felt exhausted and isolated" (Oxfam, 2021, p. 3). In Sudan, the Pandemic followed years of other types of emergencies, such as armed conflicts, displacements and floodings (Oxfam, 2021), which is a similar scenario to the one found in LAC. Furthermore, this study allowed me to compare the reality of Sudan, in economic terms, to the situation in Latin America, where for educators it was hard to keep being engaged in the education system during this crisis, as "teachers needed to be given more financial support through increased salaries or incentives, because [our] salaries tend to be extremely low, and [our] payments sometimes delayed for months" (Oxfam, 2021, p. 14).

The fact that in some contexts not everything depended on technological devices might have helped a few female education actors, which is the case of certain schools in Sudan, where they developed "home-learning packages" with "assignments that students picked up from their school each week, and returned to their teachers for grading the following week" (Oxfam, 2021, p. 22). However, learning from home increased the risks of gender violence and teenage pregnancy, as was highlighted by Oxfam's report, as well as mentioned by the reports on LAC.

In September 2021, UN Women published a “feminist plan” highlighting initiatives around the world thanks to which some women have been empowered, raising their chances of surviving in the education system during emergencies. Namely, the *Campesino-a-Campesino* (CAC) or farmer-to-farmer methodology, developed in LAC since the 1970s, that uses “popular education to share knowledge and solutions for common problems with ... peers, using their own farms as classrooms” (UN Women, 2021, p. 58). Currently, the CAC methodology allows women farmers from Nicaragua, Brazil, and Cuba to support agricultural livelihoods and provide education, among other benefits (UN Women, 2021). Another initiative was a chat group created in Argentina called *Mujeres Gobernando* (Women Governing), thanks to which it was possible to “incorporate a gender perspective into public policies, to facilitate information sharing and strategize across institutions to influence the budget,” as part of the actions taken by women to “ensure that the 2021 national budget committed US\$13.4 billion (3.4% of the country’s GDP) to address gender gaps in education, health care and other areas affected by the pandemic” (UN Women, 2021, p. 72).

In October 2021, the Economic Inquiry Journal accepted the publication of an article about women’s economic struggle in the United States (US). When analyzed through the lens of education, the article offers important facts and information about what mothers of school-age children faced during this crisis in the US. Starting with an explanation about gender disparities in the labor market —that were conducive to a greater economic impact on women than on men— the authors go on to:

compare trends in female and male labor market outcomes across child age groups and estimate difference-in-difference, triple-difference and event-study models to isolate impacts due to increased child caregiving demands in the first three quarters after the adoption of statewide closures of non-essential businesses in March of 2020 (Couch et al., 2022, p. 486).

According to Couch et al. (2022) calculations, not only “disproportionate reductions in employment for women occurred among those with school-age children in comparison with men with school-age children” but also “women with school-age children experienced disproportionately large reductions in employment in comparison with women without children,” and there was an “increased home-based caregiving demand that disproportionately reduced women’s work activity” (pp. 486–487). This is to say that, in the US, and probably in other nations, women who had sons or daughters still attending school were the most financially affected workers during Covid-19, as they were more likely to lose or decrease their professional activities when compared to men or women without children. This reveals a clear disadvantage for mothers as education actors, to survive in the system. In addition to the need of helping their children with remote learning —with or without preparation for it— and protecting them from contracting the virus, mothers also faced harsher economic challenges.

Focused on technology and gender issues in education, Mathrani et al (2021) published a “digital divide framework” in September 2021, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from some Asian contexts. The researchers employed a survey for “male and

female students from five developing countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Nepal) to understand digital divide issues that had impacted online learning during the lockdown” (Mathrani et al., 2021, p. 2).

They found that smaller percentages of girls reported having good internet speed or devices to follow the virtual classes. Furthermore, the qualitative data gathered for this study revealed that “female students reported lack of confidence in being able to effectively engage in online classrooms, while male students reported that they enjoyed learning to use new digital tools” (Mathrani et al., 2021, p. 14). At the same time, this study revealed that, in the researched countries, home contexts are more favorable for boys’ education, given that the ones included in the study reported “less familial opposition and . . . fewer household responsibilities” (Mathrani et al., 2021, p. 13).

Female Teachers, Students and Mothers of School-age Children Facing an Unprecedented Crisis in Education: A Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis of the retained publications revealed that inequality, problems with remote education, and obstacles to return to school were the three broad categories of issues faced by all female actors of education during the Covid-19 crisis. These categories were found across all articles, even if each publication had a different target population, which reveals that gender inequities affect us all, regardless of our age or role. Table 2 synthetizes the themes found throughout the analyzed publications, distributed in those three categories.

Table 2.

Issues faced by women and girls during COVID-19 crisis in education in 5 continents

Inequality	Remote Education	Return to School
Economic Hardship	Domestic Violence	Lack of support
Job precarity	House chores	Pressure to generate income
Caring responsibilities	Stress	Pregnancy
Motherhood	Digital divide	Domestic responsibilities

(Source: self-elaborated)

Inequality

Reviewed publications express that gender inequality in economic opportunities affected women in education. It was mothers of school-age children the first ones to lose their paid jobs and the last ones to be reintegrated into the job market. Additionally, in some countries, women had to work much more than males performing household duties, which were incremented due to the requirements of education from home. This meant that women involved in education had to perform more hours of unpaid work, and had less opportunity to generate income, which led to more precarity (UN, 2020; ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020; Wannamakok et al., 2020; Couch et al., 2022).

The intersection of education from home and economic hardship that affected women during the early stages of the pandemic can be explained by the socially assigned caring responsibility that lies on our shoulders (Brenner, 2000). The reviewed publications revealed that women are expected to take care of children's education from home on their own, and that, despite researchers' recommendations, education policies do not offer much support in this regard. To clarify, the United Nations (2020) explained that in LAC:

"Women spend thrice the time that men do on unpaid domestic and care work each day — between 22 and 42 hours per week before the crisis. In spite of women's wider presence on the front lines of the crisis (they account for 72.8% of persons employed in the health-care sector), their income in this sector is 25% lower than that of their male counterparts. Confinement, school closures and sick family members have placed additional pressures on women as primary caregivers. Domestic violence, femicide and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence have increased." (p. 15).

What the quote above illustrates is that the inequalities derived from gender divisions not only affect women's opportunities, but also their capacity to survive a global crisis, even if they obey the health measures that confine them to the walls of their houses, because even inside their homes they are at risk of violence. In addition, such gender inequalities and violence have negative consequences on females' possibilities to engage in education, given that they spend more time in activities that are not related to their own or their children's learning, which can limit economic opportunities in the future, and their hopes of breaking the cycle of domestic violence or scaping the consequences of patriarchy.

Remote education

Education from home was one of the measures taken to protect the health of all members of the society, however, women faced risks that were overlooked at the time of developing those measures. The reviewed publications explore the exacerbation of domestic violence as one of the problems experienced by women and girls as a side effect of the lockdown and remote education (UN, 2020; Oxfam, 2021). Additionally, the possibility of developing virtual education with some children depended solely on mothers' ability to assist them, or to provide the necessary devices, which in many cases added stress to the already difficult situation (UN Women & ECLAC, 2020).

Another consequence of the remote education was that the gendered digital divide was worsened, not only because boys tend to face easier circumstances when accessing technology in comparison to girls (Mathrani et al., 2021), but also because in some countries girls at home had to take care of house chores instead of using their time to study (Plan International, 2021). To illustrate how remote education affected the opportunities of girls, Oxfam (2021) reports that in Sudan there are "social norms that place the burden of domestic chores and childcare on female household members," which is why during school closures girls "had been given more responsibilities for household chores and childcare" (p. 14). Opposite to what boys from Sudan experienced

during school closures, when “male learners tended to not be negatively impacted by the trends in early and forced marriage, gender-based violence and teen pregnancy” (Oxfam, 2021, p. 19).

Return to school

The gender disparities that increased the vulnerability of girls inside their houses were identified before Covid-19. In fact, in LAC it was expected that risks associated to gender—rape, early pregnancy, abuse— would “prevent these girls from returning to the classroom once schools reopen” (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020, p. 15). In other areas of the world, some girls could not return to the classrooms because there was not support for them to continue their academic journey, or because the family counted on their collaboration to generate income (Wannamakok et al., 2020; Oxfam, 2021). Furthermore, two of the consequences of the lockdown were the exacerbation of domestic violence and of obstacles to accessing information and protection services. As a result, teenage pregnancy and its effects made it impossible for female students affected by that situation to go back to school (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020). In other words, female students faced more obstacles than their male counterparts to continue studying, even when schools reopened.

Implications and Discussion

The moments and themes disclosed in the results section illustrate the disparities, burdens, risks, and divides that affected female teachers, female students and mothers of school-age children during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 crisis. The selected publications portray a panorama with many obstacles faced solely by female actors. Such obstacles are related to the gendered social and economic disadvantages that were theorized by Brenner (2000) and Carbado et al. (2013) before the pandemic. Moreover, measures such as the lockdown and remote education left women more vulnerable inside their own homes. These measures and a lack of gender-focused policies contributed to increased housework, domestic violence, economic hardship, teenage pregnancy, pressure and other misfortunes related to education during the Covid-19 emergency.

The insights drawn from the chosen literature can be used to strengthen our response in the education system to face future emergencies, as the results here do not only reveal obstacles, but also offer a glimpse of decolonizing praxis, such as studying with non-digital materials (Plan International, 2020), group communications to achieve political goals, and contextualized education projects (UN Women, 2021). These are examples of alternatives and survival strategies that speak to the feminist framework of decolonizing education in an emergency through situated knowledge, collaboration, and mind freedom. It is valuable to pay attention to these resisting praxis in education because they differ from the values of competition and division that colonialism and patriarchy have ingrained in teaching and learning (Icaza & de Jong, 2018). We can change the reality of the oppressed with strategies that encourage us to work together to face problems, including all actors of the education system, learning from how women have maneuvered this emergency, and drawing on their experiences to design more equitable gender-focused policies that foster ways to support each other while enabling solidarity among citizens, families, neighbors, and friends to build communities and networks (Brenner, 1998).

Situated knowledge applied in the education system encourages us to learn from our everyday battles by reading each other's experiences and writing about our own, to construct a vocabulary to question the oppression, to care for the most vulnerable, to learn from the marginalized populations, and to embody education (Batallones Femeninos, 2018; Masamha, 2018; Retos, 2018). In the context of a disruption of the education system, situated knowledge should allow education policies to better address women's situations and needs. This would facilitate the continuation of everyone's learning, rather than having girls performing house chores and generating income, which during the Covid-19 crisis made it very hard for them to learn remotely or return to the classrooms, as it happened in Sudan and Gambia (Oxfam, 2021; Wannamakok et al., 2020).

During the Covid-19 emergency in education, the mental health of female teachers in LAC was put at risk because the amount of work and pressure was overwhelming (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020). To address this problem, the strategy of collaboration, reciprocity, and horizontal distribution of responsibilities, constantly questioning our positions in relation to others (Auerbach, 2018; Fernández & Gill, 2018; Varadharajan, 2018) can play a key role in education, especially during crises that require the best of us to continue existing. To this end, one alternative supported by feminism is to include materials that raise political consciousness in the curriculum of schools, to involve parents in the education of their children, and to stop relying entirely on digital technology as the fundamental source to obtain and share knowledge. In other words, to connect "with one's world, one's senses and one's capacity to understand phenomena from one's experiences" (Vergès, 2018, p. 97). In this way, we can start putting aside the gender divisions evidenced during the pandemic through the inclusion of decolonial perspectives and practices in our teachings (Naepi, 2018).

The education system can benefit from the mind freedom feminist postulate that encourages us to use education as a space for reflection, where cultural differences are recognized and valued, and where we can leave aside harmful colonial imaginaries (Motta, 2018; Shilliam, 2018; Xaba, 2018). In this sense, learning from each other's experiences and using non-digital materials are not only strategies to survive in the education system during emergencies, but also feasible feminist alternatives in this digital era when the use of technology has created additional divisions between those who have it and those who do not. As the pandemic strengthened some dichotomies (digital-analog, men-women, rich-poor, etc.), paper books and materials were the only tools that some had to rebel (Plan International, 2020; Oxfam, 2021).

The pandemic made more visible the urgency of looking for alternatives to protect all of us from the perpetuation of inequalities, at least in the education system. As expressed in some of the selected publications, the lockdown left a lot of girls at risk of not being educated, teachers at risk of mental breakdowns and mothers at economic risk (Couch et al., 2022; ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020; Oxfam, 2021; Plan International, 2020; UN, 2020; Wannamakok, Sissokho, & Gates, 2020). This current visibility needs to be taken as an opportunity to call the attention of the whole education system to give greater importance to protection, reflection, and self-understanding, especially at moments when we all need a refuge.

In this line, it is valuable to highlight the achievements of two survival projects or collective actions for which people joined efforts in order to survive in adverse conditions (Brenner, 2000). Namely the *Campesino a Campesino* (CAC) methodology and the *Mujeres Gobernando* strategy (UN Women, 2021). The CAC strategy allows education practitioners to have access to an education relevant in their context. The *Mujeres Gobernando* group made it possible to secure resources to address gender issues during the early stage of the pandemic. These are actions that break gender divisions and the logics of social reproduction in education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), by which women achieve fairer conditions in education.

Conclusion

In light of the results obtained, it seems important to recognize that one of the lessons that the Covid-19 pandemic left us in the education system is that there is a need for gender-focused research and education policies that aim at protecting women and girls, from the early stages of emergencies. This is a very valuable lesson because this pandemic was just one of many emergencies that affect education worldwide. By gathering studies from various contexts in one piece, I demonstrated that some of the gender disparities that affected female teachers, female students and mothers of school-age children during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 crisis in education are transnational, and that they create material negative consequences for us, such as lack of access to technological devices, lack of opportunities to study at home, family opposition to get an education, violence, and rejection from the job market as a consequence of motherhood.

To contribute to filling this gap, in this study I outlined the need for more related scholarly work. Subsequently, I built a framework that draws on feminist theories (Brenner, 1998; Brenner 2000; Carbado et al., 2013; Icaza & de Jong, 2018) to understand the origins of gender oppressions, as well as the actions carried out by women to survive in the education system. Likewise, this study has illustrated feminist praxis and alternatives for a more equitable teaching and learning. Centering our efforts on developing decolonial strategies such situated knowledge, collaboration, and mind freedom (Icaza & de Jong, 2018) from the beginning of emergencies in education may help us save lives and prevent the perpetuation of economic inequities and gender oppressions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Such alternatives have the potential of pivoting education in emergencies into a space that supports more humane practices, such as self and collective discovery (Vergès, 2018), which in turn should enhance our readiness to respond to emergencies.

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