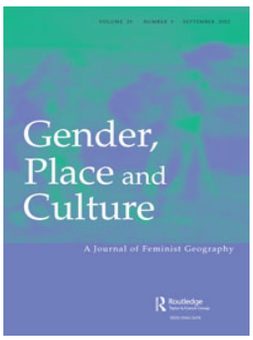

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A mother's voice and a child's view: revisiting the constructed role of women in rural Chile

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ABSTRACT

As gender constructs, the roles of mothers are shaped by family dynamics, social relations and cultural codes that influence the spaces in which these roles are performed. The pandemic can be seen as an element that altered these constructs to varying degrees, providing an opportunity to revisit them, particularly in groups in which the patriarchy is dominant. Thus, this article focuses on rural mothers from central Chile with elementary school-age children. Specifically, we analyze how prolonged school closures have impacted household dynamics and how rural women became responsible for their children's education. Using a qualitative approach, dyads that account of 24 testimonies of mothers and children from three different schools were interviewed after one year of school closure. Accounts of the children's head teachers were also included. Their testimonies shed light on how school, experience and actions intertwine, contributing to our understanding of the dynamic construct of motherhood and how it is being deployed during the current public health crisis. The main results indicate that the pandemic has reinforced these mother's role as the sole caretaker of her children. Despite their lack of education, knowledge and skills, female participants expressed that they have undertaken a new burden by adopting the role of vicarious teacher. Their children and their children's head teachers share this view, confirming traditional and patriarchal expectations of rural women as caregivers.

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Introduction

The pandemic as a context offers researchers and academics an opportunity to revisit social constructs. One area of interest is the pandemic's impact on the various spaces in which women and mothers enact their roles, as in

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many cases this public health crisis has forced them to adjust their gender positions (Guy and Arthur 2020; Yavorsky, Qian, and Sargent 2021). For example, the family dynamics of mothers with small children have been impacted by school closures and uncertainty (Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021; Thorell et al 2022). This is particularly evident in rural spaces in Latin America, where schools play a pivotal role in communities and women have historically been identified as the main caregiver (Núñez et al. 2019; Quiroz 2020). Many vulnerable families with lower education levels place a great deal of trust in schools as providers of both education and meals (Núñez, Solís, and Soto 2013). Furthermore, parents view their children's education as a valuable resource, and they are socialized to see it as a pathway to more skilled jobs and a better quality of life (Cárcamo-Vásquez and Méndez-Bustos 2019; Maertens and Verhofstadt 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic affected Latin America and the Caribbean in many ways. In terms of education, it resulted in a record 158 days of full school closure on average during the first year of the public health crisis (UNICEF 2021). Moreover, Chilean schools were only open for three full days in 2020 (UNICEF 2021). These closures have affected all of the roughly 300,000 students who attend the country's 3,317 rural schools (MINEDUC 2021).

While online classes were a choice in Western, developed and urban areas (Anders et al. 2020; Zhao et al. 2020), the persistent digital divide that impacts rural communities in Latin America presented barriers to remote online education (ECLAC-UNESCO 2020; Martinez, Mata, and Vega 2021). Limited Internet access and digital skills, and scant access to devices added to the burden of school closures. These elements are not only a reminder of the inequalities and disadvantages faced daily by members of rural communities (Pavez, Correa, and Contreras 2017). They also influence both the space in which motherhood is performed and the expectations of that role vis-à-vis children's education.

Scholars have noted that children's education is a key theme when discussing the expectations of motherhood (e.g. Arendell 2000; Faur and Pereyra 2018). This was also highlighted by evidence gathered regarding the pandemic. Although the experience of motherhood during the pandemic varies widely based on the context and understanding of what maternity entails, this reinforces the argument that the public health crisis proved particularly challenging for families with school-age children (Auðardóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir 2021; Alon et al. 2020; Parczewska 2021).

In our respondents' rural setting, the challenges are even more acute. Chilean rural women tend to have less access to resources (Araujo 2020; Donoso 2020) and health services (Canales 2005) and are exposed to gender inequality and discrimination (Caro 2017). Furthermore, in these spaces the role of women is embodied through motherhood, and childrearing is considered essential to cultural expectations locally attributed to the role (Castro

and Peñaranda 2011; Molina 2006). From this starting point, the two main questions addressed in this study are: 1) How did school closures during the pandemic impact rural mothers in central Chile and their children from the perspective of both groups? and 2) What insights can their narratives provide regarding the complex and diverse cultural construct of rural mothering? Answers are provided from a qualitative perspective that incorporates the accounts of 27 participants. The respondents include 12 rural mothers with elementary school-age school children, 12 elementary school-age children, and three head teachers who witnessed this new intersection between school and family.

Mothering: constructs and expectations

Massey (1994, 184) reflects on the geographic variations in gender construction, and particularly the place women occupy within the household. This gives rise to 'locally constructed gender relations' which provide the opportunity to look at the context in which the role of mother and caregiver is performed. In that same vein, Boyer (2018, 3) characterizes motherhood as 'a spatial practice' which again highlights the importance of how this context is compound. Yet this is a complex task, as Flather (2013) argues, as this space is more about intersected areas than separate spheres of household, work or family and is influenced by social relations. Therefore, the intersection of geography and gender has proved complex in the theoretical and methodological realms (e.g. Forsberg 2001; Little 2015; Pini, Mayes, and Rurality 2020). Yet territoriality plays a key role in understanding how social interactions, gender constructs and identities are intertwined (Little 2002). Thus, this article aims to contribute to leaving behind terms like 'farm women', which define women's roles on the basis of their contribution to the agricultural sector and its development (Babbitt 1993; Holt 2005; Valdés and Rebolledo 2015). Following Riley (2009), this research deconstructs the role of women through an analysis of their views and reflections, and those of their children, viewing them as active agents that are usually part of male dominated spaces and narratives. This allows us to frame the variety of roles enacted by rural women as diverse dynamics (Bescher-Donnelly and Smith 2019) with different levels of empowerment that are deployed in an environment in which patriarchal dynamics are still prevalent (Little 2002; Little and Panelli 2003; Valdés and Rebolledo 2015). Thus, conceptually, we approach the concept of gender 'as a set of socially constructed power relations' (Little 2003, 22). From this perspective, the pandemic gives us a valuable opportunity to reflect on mothering in rural areas and how cultural expectations and norms inform its social construction (Butler 1990; Holmes 2009).

Mothering has been defined as providing care and nurture to others (Forcey 2001), yet the literature has explored the concept as a construct that evolves according to historical circumstances (e.g. Bianchi et al. 2000; Milkie and Peltola 1999). Thus, an important element of these constructs of motherhood is agency (Glenn 2016), which can be defined as a 'meaningful action' toward a need or aspiration (Wessels 2013, 1534) and that can only be performed in the presence of personal freedom (van der Mark et al. 2019). Yet one caveat of agency is related to what authors have identified as emotion work (Hochschild 1979; Boyer 2020). This is because agreed upon conventions on care-work, which vary by cultural context and social position, play a major role in how women are expected to act and perform their role as mothers (Gu 2018). Emotional work looks at how a person tries 'to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling' (Hochschild 1979, 561) to fit the local shared rules and conventions. This kind of work has explored how mothers prioritize their children's emotions and wellbeing over their own (Quah 2018; Pedersen and Lupton 2018). Gu (2018) looks at cultural expectations of women in relation to their mothers-in-law and how behaviors and cultural expectations of the role are perpetuated through the suppression of true emotions and feelings. Other authors have analyzed how farmwomen perform emotional work based on their sense of family and the gender norms embedded in family structures (Herron and Skinner 2012). This is important to consider given that family and gender identities are framed by patriarchal definitions. This means that, for instance, feelings such as distress, lack of choice, or disempowerment are suppressed so that women can meet the local culture's expectations.

The context of rural women in Chile

In Latino culture, women tend to be on the front lines of family dynamics. This is particularly evident in the rural world, in which gender constructs and social expectations regarding how women are to lead their lives tend to be defined by patriarchal subordination, which, in turn, is considered to be a legacy of colonialism (Mora, Fernández, and Ortega 2016; Gómez and Jiménez 2015). The concept of the 'supermadre' or Super Mom (Hippert 2011, 506) exemplifies this situation, in which women are understood to be the 'defender of the family, to carve out a space for poor men in popular participation'.

Major changes have taken place in rural Chile since the early 2000s, such as women's incorporation into the workforce and an increase in the number of women who identify as heads of household (Cid et al. 2017; Donoso 2020). However, these changes have not been mirrored within families. On the contrary, the number of domestic chores and responsibilities that fall to women has increased and their role as primary caregiver has been

reinforced (Fawaz and Villagrán 2012; Fawaz and Vallejos 2011), perpetuating the patriarchal model within the social representation of rural families (Castro 2012). Despite recent developments and advances in women's education, researchers report that rural women's identity is still linked to the idea of raising a family and taking care of children in contrast to men's identity, which is linked to being the breadwinner (Valdés and Rebolledo 2015). Furthermore, inequality and abuse of women have been found to be common practices in the rural world (Caro 2017).

The data also point to rural women's vulnerability and invisibleness. In Latin America, 1 in 2 people living in rural areas live in poverty compared to less than 1 in 5 in urban areas (Araujo 2020). The most recent government report on rural women in Chile is rather inauspicious (Cid et al. 2017). Despite developments in access to healthcare and education, women remain an extremely vulnerable group due to the prevalence of gender discrimination and high poverty levels. The report notes that the gender gap is rooted in differences between how men and women make use their time (given that women's primary responsibility is caring for the household and children) and women's lack of access to credit. The authors argue that 'one of the main causes of the gender gap is the fact that women's work is not visible in the rural productive sphere, as it takes place in the most internal sphere of the home and its surroundings' (Cid et al. 2017, 14). Evidence has also shown that the gender gap in terms of pay is as high as 40% in rural areas (Araujo 2020). According to Chile's National Institute for Human Rights, violence against rural women is still prevalent as isolation and living in outlying areas prevent victims from reporting perpetrators to the police (INDH 2018). In regard to health and living conditions, rural women are more vulnerable because they engage in seasonal employment that involves working long hours (more than 12 hours per day) under extreme conditions including exposure to pesticides (INDH 2018).

Children's education as a goal

Rural women report that one of their main priorities is their children's well-being. Latinas value paid work insofar as it gives them access to their own money 'always, in any case, considering their expenses and those of their children' (Castro 2012, 192). Scholars have noted that the understanding of the role of the mother is closely linked to the idea of helping their children pursue an education (Orellana 2015). Many members of vulnerable populations identify education as a starting point to a better quality of life (Cárcamo-Vásquez and Méndez-Bustos 2019; Maertens and Verhofstadt 2013). Thus, in rural settings women tend to link education to social mobility, future success in the labor market (Ortega and Cárcamo 2018) and 'a chance to escape from poorly paid jobs in the countryside' (Castro 2012, 192).

Educational opportunities for children and an increase in household comfort have been identified as the main drivers for rural Chilean women's employment (Fawaz and Villagrán 2012). Furthermore, research consistently shows that female rural employment directly impacts elementary school attendance by increasing enrollment (Maertens and Verhofstadt 2013) and children's education as a key reason for getting an Internet connection (Pavez and Correa 2018).

Schools in rural Chile are culturally and ethnically inclusive institutions that deliver services in a context of extreme poverty, indigence and low skill levels (Núñez, Solís, and Soto 2013; Núñez et al. 2019). The evidence has shown that schools are an important place of for socialization for mothers: 'Schools symbolize an institution that integrates these women, bringing them together in a systematic way and identifying them as a group' (Núñez, Solís, and Soto 2013, 621). Therefore, from a pedagogical point of view, it should come as no surprise that women are usually the ones who take on the role as guardians and serve as the main points of contact between the family and children's schools (Núñez et al. 2016). Women perceive their own limitations and trust teachers to provide their children with the tools they need to improve their academic performance and to instill social values (Ortega and Cárcamo 2018; Bescher-Donnelly and Smith 2019). The significance of education in these contexts is also supported by the fact that children's academic development improves when there is a smooth relationship between families and teachers (Cárcamo-Vásquez and Méndez-Bustos 2019).

In Chile, rural schools tend to lag behind their urban counterparts in terms of infrastructure, number of teaching hours, quality of education, pedagogical resources and results (Quiroz 2020). Despite these drawbacks, schools are still seen as a key leveling agent in vulnerable contexts such as the ones described here (Patiño, Poveda, and Gabrielez 2018) and as the place where children receive two meals per day. Therefore, the pandemic and resulting school closures, which lasted for over a year, have increased learning and inequality gaps (Eyzaguirre, Le Foulon, and Salvatierra 2020). Moreover, as previously mentioned, online classes presented several barriers in rural communities due to a lack of Internet connections and devices (ECLAC-UNESCO 2020). Schools tried to offer at least one or two hours of instruction per week using platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom to teach what they considered to be the most important subjects, such as language or math. However, students faced several barriers. As a result, in some communities, online teaching was dropped entirely, and students received study guides, which were delivered to them weekly. This system inevitably added to the burden of the student and his or her family, as no teaching or class time meant less guidance from teachers.

Methods

We chose to use a qualitative approach to explore how school closures have impacted the construction of rural mothering because qualitative studies provide the basis for context-specific analyses of data regarding participants' contexts, attitudes and behaviors (Porter 2000). This approach also allowed us to channel participants' voices and guide researchers towards an understanding of a phenomenon based on the reasons for the decisions, pathways, degrees of experience and levels of involvement of the subjects. We included the women's children as respondents because they can offer their own narratives and contribute to our understanding of the cultural construct of rural mothering. This approach helps us to give a voice to sets of two participants whose perspectives complement each other. It also allows us to shed light on the experiences shared by two individuals (Ummel and Achille 2016). Other scholars have used this methodology to gain access to similarities and disparities and to understand a phenomenon by integrating different viewpoints (Brownhill and Hickey 2012).

We worked with the schools to launch the recruiting process for the study. Respondents were identified based on the criteria of rurality, proximity and categorization of vulnerability, a standardized index provided by the Ministry of Education (JUNAEB 2021). Teachers and principals shared information about this study with the parents of 6th and 7th graders. We then provided further information to those who showed an interest in participating and secured informant consent from the adults and their children. The participant mothers and children are described in the table below (Table 1). Their names have been changed to protect their privacy (Table 1).

We also gathered and included input from the children's head teachers, complementing the mothers' day-to-day experiences with the views and discourses of adults who play a key role in their children's schooling context. Children can be easily influenced by how interview questions are formulated (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). Thus, the reliability of children's testimonies can also be highlighted by exploring the experiences of other adults. The three head teachers are described below (Table 2). Again, we changed their names to ensure anonymity (Table 2).

In total, 27 participants from three different communities participated in the study.

Access to sampling depended on the researchers' ability to approach schools and their communities. An invitation was sent to ten schools in rural areas in central Chile, and only three agreed to participate in the study. These schools are located in the towns of Puangue, Huelquén and San Pedro, and over 80% of their students are considered highly vulnerable (MINEDUC 2021). Initial access was mediated by school principals, who offered to put researchers in contact with two to three families that they believed might

Table 1. Participating mothers and children.

Name	Age	Highest level of schooling reached	Number of children in the household	Children interviewed	Age
Francisca	40	Elementary school	2	Laura	11
Teresa	30	High school	3	Nicole	12
Ana	33	High school	3	Lorena	11
Berta	40	Elementary school	2	Isabella	12
María	49	Elementary school	1	Gabriel	12
Sara	32	High school	4	Josefa	12
María José	39	Elementary school	1	Monserrat	12
Lourdes	39	High school	4	Danae	11
Susana	33	Elementary school	2	Rosa	11
Sofía	32	Elementary school	3	Consuelo	11
Magdalena	37	High school	4	Manuela	11
Julieta	31	High school	2	Patricia	12

Table 2. Participating head teachers.

Name	Age	Locality
Juan	31	Puangue
Pilar	33	Huelquén
Margarita	41	San Pedro

be interested in participating. Initial contacts were followed by a snowball sampling outreach strategy to conduct further recruiting in the community.

The fieldwork was performed between December 2020 and May 2021, at which point schools had been closed for one year. Researchers originally planned to conduct face-to-face interviews and engage in participant observation in households and schools. However, the COVD-19 public health crisis and the ensuing restrictions, closures and health warnings forced us to adjust our approach. We complemented face-to-face interviews with online interaction through WhatsApp chats and phone calls depending on each participant's access to technology. Thus, digital ethnography elements were incorporated by complementing participants' discourses and reports through exchanges conducted over time. It is known that interviewees feel comfortable sharing and reporting experiences in the context of the pandemic through digital media (Góralska 2020). All of the interviews and exchanges were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. This software helped researchers focus on meanings based on three stages: (1) coding, (2) condensation, and (3) interpretation (Kvale and Brinkman 2009). Segments that extended across testimonies were coded and labeled (Fielding and Thomas 2008). The coding procedure followed a deductive approach. The main topics and labels selected were based on the research questions and literature about gender, education and digital inclusion. Thus, aspects such as experiences with school closures and views on motherhood, women, rurality and children were coded. During the second stage, we reread the transcriptions in their entirety to provide space for emergent topics (Flick 2002).

This study does present methodological limitations as its qualitative nature does not allow us to extrapolate its results to the rural population as a whole. However, the testimonies of the members of the three groups interviewed (mother, child, head teacher) are consistent and thus serve to further research on female figures within the family.

Results

Exploring the space in which gender roles are enacted amid patriarchal dynamics

The participants referred to machismo as part of their family's past and something they perceived in neighboring families. However, they did not see it as part of their own daily lives. This is somehow contradictory, as it is possible to see macho attitudes in their testimonies and in the traditional way in which tasks are assigned in the households. Phrases like 'moms with small children have to take care of them' (Sara, 32) suggest that the respondents see women as solely responsible for childcare. Lorena (11) remarked, 'Sometimes they (the men of the household) order me to make food for them'. It is worth noting that she chose the word 'order' rather than the verb 'ask'. This view reveals respondents' expectations regarding the kind of activities that men are to perform and those that should be handled by women. It also points to the fact these prospects seem natural to them. Although women recognized this reality, they did not consider it a sign of gender inequality. Rather, the women saw it as part of the gender construct that is accepted in their communities. These boundaries perpetuate roles and shape how women are seen and treated, as María and Ana explain:

> 'There is less machismo than before. Now they (the husbands) help. For instance, my son, the only son I have, is at home now, and everyone pitches in'. (María, 49)

> 'I see it (machismo) in the way they treat their wives. I won't share much because there are few neighbors here, but I see how they treat women, how women are sent to the kitchen, how men like to be served, and the way they express themselves, too'. (Ana, 33)

Rural girls were more in tune with gender inequalities as they relate to their roles and responsibilities than their mothers. They seem to be conscious of this bias and seem to have learned to perceive machismo in their daily lives and what they see in their environment. For example, girls spoke openly about being assigned domestic tasks or being asked to care for younger siblings just became they are girls. Furthermore, the girls see their mother's tasks and work environment as more difficult than those of their fathers, as they are aware that when their mothers work outside of the household, they have also to take care of household chores. Some girls also believe

that part of the extra machismo in their environment may be due to 'huaso' or rural central Chilean culture because men expect women to cook for them and serve them. As Rosa put it:

> 'It is difficult for women to live in the countryside because of what the men have. They are all huasos, and most men are very 'macho'. They care for the animals, and everything else is done for them'. (Rosa, 11)

In some cases, girls are called 'mama chica' (little mom) in recognition of all of the tasks they undertake. This is the case of Consuelo, the third of five siblings. She is responsible for caring for her younger siblings (ages 5 and 7) every other week when her mother works the day shift.

> 'When my mother is not here, I do the cleaning and help my brothers do their chores. I learned to cook during quarantine. I learned to cook, and I cook for them, and I take care of them there. They call me "Little Mom"'. (Consuelo, 11)

Consuelo socializes her role as something she need to take on and does not question whether their brothers should do the same. Similarly, the mothers do not question why their sons contribute less to the household compared to their daughters. Consuelo's mother instead remarks on how proud she is of her daughter's character and sense of responsibility. It is common for mothers who live in this context to refer to this kind of responsibility as something natural. Interestingly, in this kind of dynamic, it is possible also to see how mothers and daughters bond and the feeling of sisterhood that develops as the mothers begin to depend on their daughters when they need extra help.

> 'I have to teach my daughter to do these things so that she will be there to help if I don't have enough time or I need a hand. My eldest sometimes has to take over the household duties. My younger daughter does so, too, but she only helps out with her little brothers'. (Lourdes, 39)

> 'Of course, she (the daughter) helps me around the house, cleaning up and doing housework in the afternoon. She has to tidy up her room and do things I tell her to do, such as caring for my younger daughter, hanging the clothes on the line, sweeping…' (Ana, 33)

This repertoire of activities perpetuates gender roles from a young age (Crouter, Manke, and McHale 1995). As other authors have pointed out, the pandemic has tended to put more pressure on mothers with small and/or school-age children (Parczewska 2021; Thorell et al 2022). Thus, in these spaces where gender is performed, the role of girls as a source of help for

the mother is perpetuated, as is the expectation that women will take on the lion's share of responsibility within the home. This became particularly clear when the entire family was spending more time at home during the pandemic.

A mothers' voice: women's reflections on their involvement in their children's education

The pandemic came as an unexpected test for women given that there was an implicit expectation that they would step in to fill a role commonly performed by teachers. As the center of household chores and dynamics, mothers also became the main providers of education during this period. The participants in our study include mothers of children of different ages, but all of them have a 6th or 7th grader. Most had to supervise and teach content that they confess that they had never seen before. Despite their misgivings about their own level of preparedness, they took on the task in the hope of helping their children to successfully complete their academic year. They thus played a pivotal role in their children's education. The pressure on mothers was so great that many report having felt like they had gone back to school and were being graded, as if they had co-earned their children's grades. Phrases that included pronouns such as *I* and *we* when referring to their investment in the educational undertaking were common: '*we studied together', 'we earned this grade',* or '*we passed the test*'. Sara, the mother of four young children, explains:

> 'We did them (the guided exercises and schoolwork) together. We had to do schoolwork every day (…). It was a huge blow, because suddenly I had to do the schoolwork for all four children and sometimes there wasn't enough time because you have to take on various tasks as the woman of the house'. (Sara, 32)

Due to low quality Internet connectivity, scant access to devices and limited digital skills, mothers faced waves of frustration with online classes and digital activities. Some of the participants in our study recalled trying to log their children into classes on their mobile phones, which proved problematic and stressful due to the small size of the screen and unreliability of the signal.

> 'The teachers knew we were trying (…). They (teachers) tried to talk to the children through my phone, but they did not understand the classes through the mobile phone, the small screen (…). They did not want to do it anymore, and neither did I. It was too much stress for everyone'. (Teresa, 30).

This situation was so common in these rural communities that schools gave families the option of asynchronous education, mainly by delivering schoolwork and study guides to students' homes on a weekly basis. Teachers visited

families every Wednesday or Friday to drop off the weekly set of guided exercises and collect the set from the previous week. Sometimes teachers would spend 10 to 15 minutes with the student to answer questions or help solve problems. However, most of these encounters were limited to a swift exchange of educational materials, and both teachers and students would trust mothers to provide the support their children needed to complete the schoolwork. For instance, teachers reported receiving calls and WhatsApp messages from mothers looking for help with an assignment or subject. This highlights the idea of mothers being on the front lines. Sofía (32), a teacher, explains:

> 'Moms reached out to me to tell me they didn't understand, that they had studied this subject many years ago, that they didn't know how to help their children. So sometimes we had video calls, and I explained the material to the moms (…). I believe children also were confident that their mother would ask the teacher to explain what they hadn't understood'.

According to participants, when the mothers were too busy, older sisters and grandmothers took their place to make sure that children studied and completed the schoolwork. They also helped the students connect to online classes when they were available. Participating mothers went great lengths to ensure that their children continued to receive an education. For instance, when online remote learning was offered, they were the ones to lend their cell phones to their children. The exchange of guided exercises and requests for help were also mediated by mothers. As these participants explain:

> 'He (the son) always completes his schoolwork, even if his chores remain undone. But there are still subjects that he doesn't like, and I (the mother) need to be there to make sure that it gets done'. (María, 49)

> 'Now that she is home all the time, I help her (the daughter). So far, I understand everything that they have taught her. Last year I also understood everything (…). I stay on top of it. I can practice with her more, so she did well on all the schoolwork and tests' (Ana, 33)

Teachers also report that some mothers go beyond their roles as helpers, which may have had an impact on outcomes. Teachers see this as the explanation for some children performing better at home than they did in school. Teachers were the first to spot this. In Sara's words (43, San Pedro): '*Girls did very well, but I am certain they did better than they would have because their mothers helped them*'. She and the other teachers report feeling that mothers were overly present in their children's studies. All participants -teachers, mothers, and children- failed to mention the role of fathers or even hint at the existence of a male figure in the home who could be in charge of or help with schoolwork or have a presence in the educational process conducted at home.

A child's view: experiences and accounts of rural mothering

Children in the communities covered by this study report that women played a key role in rural homes even before the pandemic. They describe their mothers as the authority figure in the home and as responsible for the well-being of all its members. Moms are also seen as responsible for enforcing discipline and setting limits. Children reported that these limits included how long they could watch television or be on their mobile phones, the assignment of domestic chores, or the granting of permission to go out with friends, as reflected in these participants' testimonies:

> 'My mother asks me for it (the mobile phone) or takes it from me when I have to do something like clean my room'. (Patricia, 12).

> 'There are rules. We are not allowed to use our mobile phones in the evening or at night. At night we give my mom the phones'. (Danae, 11)

The children's testimonies suggest that their mothers enforce the rules while men or fathers are seen as breadwinners. This is consistent with how the patriarchy is established in these communities, as references to men appear when talking about jobs outside of the household. These perceptions persist despite the fact some of the mothers participating in this study run small businesses. However, it is clear that this is done alongside their mothering role. For instance, they look for jobs or tasks that they can manage from home, such as selling cakes, desserts, or pastry products, or raising free-range chickens so they do not overlook their households. This also shows how difficult it is to set clear boundaries regarding the space where gender is performed place (Flather 2013).

Thus, the children report that their mothers played a key role in this new household-school intersection during the pandemic despite the presence of other adult figures in the household. Mothers alone provide the link to school, helping their children study and complete their work. Some children reported that they wouldn't have participated in classes or assessments if their mothers had not been involved and that they would miss most school activities. Phrases like '*My mother will have to teach me*' (Consuelo, 11) and '*My mother has the teacher's phone number, and they keep in touch (…) The teacher explained it to her, and my mother explained it to me*' *(Nicole, 11)* are examples of this. Nicole's case provides more information about how problems are solved following the same pattern: when the child's mother could not connect to an online class or help with a subject, she sent her daughter to her own mother's home. Grandmother thus stepped into the helping role, showing how this idea of motherhood responsibility is not transferred to the other adult or men in the house, but to other women, in this case, the grandmother. Nicole explains, 'I *had to get through the year, and the one (subject) that was most difficult for me was mathematics. My grandmother helped me*'. While the participating children explicitly mentioned gender roles

and were aware that gender inequalities exist, they did not question their mother's role as the main connection to school or the mother's level of involvement in their education. On the contrary, it was expected.

Discussion and conclusion

The construct of rural mothering is a moving target. Women's gender roles are dynamic and respond to the local context, the spaces where those roles are performed, they are also responsive to social relations (Massey 1994; Boyer 2018). We explored rural environments in central Chile to deconstruct the role of women with school-age children and examine how their testimonies and reflections and those of their children contribute to gender construction in their communities. We conducted this work during a period of change. Women are traditionally expected to oversee their children's schooling and performance (Castro 2012; Núñez, Solís, and Soto 2013). In these mostly vulnerable environments, education is highly valued as a place that provides opportunities that cannot be found at home (Núñez, Solís, and Soto 2013; Núñez et al. 2019). Therefore, when schools closed for almost a year due to the pandemic, women were forced to navigate new types of connections between the school and the family, which in turn forced household dynamics and gender roles to adapt.

As expected, we found that gender roles are influenced by a dominant patriarchal view. Although the interviews were not centered on gender inequalities, participants' descriptions of their daily activities and responsibilities point to the expectation that women will be responsible for child-drearing, logistics and running the household. This aligns with the literature that describes gender roles in these settings as the pillar of the home (e.g. Bianchi et al. 2000). This also became evident in the testimonies of the girls who took part in the study. They talked about cleaning and cooking, taking care of children/younger siblings, and the idea of '*helping around the house*' as part of their day-to-day activities. However, tensions arose, as rural mothers do not acknowledge the existence of any patriarchal dynamics in their homes. They are, however, able to recognize these situations in the households of neighbors and family members. Although the lack of awareness among participants prevents us from applying the concept of emotional work (Boyer 2020), this concept opens up avenues for further explorations.

By contrast, girls report being more sensitive to this environment than their mothers. They believe that women and men are treated differently, and that household dynamics are more favorable for boys and men. Although we also did not encounter suppression of emotion, the subject was not openly discussed, and it would seem that girls perform emotional work more frequently than their male counterparts. Despite perceiving the sense of injustice and frustration surrounding the organization of the housework, girls

habitually perform the tasks that their mothers ask them to do without hesitation. For instance, the daughters were expected to cook, care for pets, help their mothers with chores, and take care of younger siblings. The house became a space where conflicting feelings were constantly present for girls. On one hand, they were aware of differences when it comes to following gender norms and overseeing house chores. On the other, there was a sense of pride and accomplishment around the tasks that they performed successfully, and this was also reinforced by their mothers.

The increased burden undertaken by mothers and daughters became more evident as children were secluded at home for an entire school year due to school closures. Although one male student was proud to report that he helps around the house, girls uniformly reported an increase in their level of responsibilities. This was so much the case that one participant was called '*mamá chica*' (little mom). Eleven of the 12 households that participated in the study had an 11- or 12-year-old daughter, and their accounts showed that they had helped with household chores and to care for younger children. These data help us to arrive at a better understanding of how these narratives and performances add to the local cultural construct of rural mothering. These testimonies reinforce the construction of rural mothers as the adult responsible for childrearing, where there is an accepted and unquestioned absence of male figures in the children's day-to-day activities. Indeed, fathers and male figures were absent throughout the process of conducting this study, from the initial process of contacting parents and guardians through schools to the interviews with mothers, teachers, and students. Men are not seen as playing an active role in the participant children's educational activities. If help was needed, older sisters or grandmothers were contacted, which hints at the gender roles and inequalities that are locally constructed and accepted.

The testimonies provided by mothers and their children suggest that the participants reinforce the expectation that mothers serve as the primary person in charge of their children's education (Núñez, Solís, and Soto 2013). For instance, participants reported that they took on new responsibilities as vicarious teachers. They said that they felt that they had a shared responsibility for their children's schoolwork and performance on tests. They described the despair caused by Internet problems when trying to connect to online classes. In fact, this seemed to impact the mothers even more than children. The teachers reported that mothers contacted them for clarification on subjects, deadlines and tests. In some cases, they identified this as an overinvolvement that misrepresented students' interests and achievements. In their view, some women went beyond helping and took on the children's responsibilities, which resulted in grades that were higher than their children might have earned otherwise. The participants seem to have taken on this role without questioning whether they should do so or what

role the father should play. The construction of motherhood is so conflated with sole responsibility for the children that the respondents did not second guess the pressure they felt for their children -and for them- to perform well in the school. This may be due to how highly education is valued and socialized as a means of accessing better opportunities that go beyond rural life. Women were less concerned about the burden of having children home all day and more concern about educational gains and losses. Children's testimonies confirm their mothers' reflections and identify them as the natural main link with schools. They also describe their mothers as staying close while they complete schoolwork and as being involved in explaining, helping with or supervising that work, which speaks to the role that is attached to motherhood in this unforeseen setting of a pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the home became a new space for education, becoming the new school for mothers and girls. Teachers took a secondary role and mothers stepped into the limelight, teaching, explaining and doing homework. Mothers felt more stressed and overwhelmed as a result of this shift. Some did not have the educational tools required to explain the material to their daughters. Some had not completed high school and were thus not familiar with the subject matter. They used phone calls or WhatsApp messages to contact teachers and ask for support or relied on older children. Some even learned by themselves so that they could explain it to their daughters later on.

Although this study had a limited number of participants, the inclusion of mothers, their children, and the teachers helped us to complement the views surrounding gender construction of mothering in this rural setting. We were able to dive into tensions around patriarchal views that are perpetuated among generations. Furthermore, we examined how the role of mothers in the educational realm during the pandemic is perceived by teachers as an overstepping boundary. The testimonies and experiences come from different spheres in which roles are enacted. Future studies could enrich our understanding of the construction of gender roles and expectations of women by looking at male perspectives on children's education. This will provide insight into how they perceive these dynamics and the increased responsibilities taken on by mothers. It would also be interesting to explore how this phenomenon evolves over time, particularly when schools open again and mothers are forced to renegotiate their vicarious role of teachers and heads of education in their households, further expanding the repertoire of rural mothering.

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