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Quality of Life for Lesbian of Middle-aged and Older Women in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Calidad de vida de las mujeres lesbianas de mediana edad y mayores en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19

Qualidade de vida de mulheres lésbicas de meia-idade e idosas no contexto da pandemia da COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Brazil is currently a country characterized by its vertiginous growth in the older population and the feminization of old age. However, sexual and gender minorities have specific characteristics that affect the ageing and old age of this population, as is the case with lesbian

women, especially middle-aged and older women. In this context, the perception of Quality of Life (QoL) can be affected, making it relevant to investigate. This study aimed to investigate Social Representations (SR) among middle-aged and older lesbian

women about QoL in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were 21 middle-aged and older women ($m=57.67$ years). Two instruments were used to collect the data: I) a sociodemographic questionnaire and II) a semi-structured interview. SPSS software version 21.0 was used for the sociodemographic data, and Iramuteq version 0.7 for the semi-structured interviews. The result was a dendrogram

containing 4 classes of words. It is argued that the participants' SRs point to the impact of socially experienced discrimination on their perception of QoL, which has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic period. We hope to encourage debate about the need for public safety and health policies that reach out to lesbian women in the course of their aging and old age and that can influence a more positive QoL.

Keywords: Quality of life; aging; lesbian; covid-19 pandemic.

RESUMEN

Brasil es actualmente un país caracterizado por el crecimiento vertiginoso de la población anciana y por la feminización de la vejez. Sin embargo, las minorías sexuales y de género tienen características específicas que afectan el envejecimiento y la vejez de esta población, como es el caso de las mujeres lesbianas, especialmente las de mediana y avanzada edad. En este contexto, la percepción de la Calidad de Vida (CV) puede verse afectada, por lo que es relevante investigar. El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar las Representaciones Sociales (RS) entre mujeres lesbianas de mediana y avanzada edad sobre la CV en el contexto de la pandemia del Covid-19. Las participantes fueron 21 mujeres lesbianas de mediana y avanzada edad. Participaron 21 mujeres de mediana y avanzada edad ($m=57,67$ años). Se

utilizaron dos instrumentos para recoger los datos: I) un cuestionario sociodemográfico y II) una entrevista semiestructurada. Se utilizó el programa SPSS versión 21.0 para los datos sociodemográficos y el programa Iramuteq versión 0.7 para las entrevistas semiestructuradas. El resultado fue un dendrograma que contenía 4 clases de palabras. Se argumenta que las RS de los participantes apuntan al impacto de la discriminación socialmente experimentada en su percepción de la CV, que ha empeorado durante el periodo de la pandemia del Covid-19. Esperamos fomentar el debate sobre la necesidad de políticas públicas de salud y seguridad que aborden el envejecimiento y la vejez entre las mujeres lesbianas a lo largo de la vida y que puedan influir en una CV más positiva.

Palabras clave: Calidad de vida; envejecimiento; lesbiana; pandemia de Covid-19.

RESUMO

O Brasil é um país atualmente que se caracteriza por seu vertiginoso crescimento da população idosa e de feminização da velhice. Entretanto, minorias sexuais e de gênero possuem

especificidades que afetam o envelhecimento e velhice dessa população, como dá-se com as mulheres lésbicas, sobretudo as de meia-idade e idosas. Nesse contexto, a

percepção da Qualidade de Vida (QV) pode ser afetada, tornando-se relevante de ser averiguada. Objetivou-se com este estudo investigar as representações sociais entre mulheres lésbicas de meia-idade e idosas acerca da QV diante do contexto da pandemia de Covid-19. Participaram 21 mulheres de meia-idade e idosas ($m=57,67$ anos). Para a coleta de dados foram utilizados dois instrumentos: I) um questionário sociodemográfico e II) entrevista semiestruturada. Utilizou-se o *software* SPSS versão 21.0 para os dados sociodemográficos e Iramuteq versão

0.7 para as entrevistas semiestruturadas. Obteve-se como resultante um dendrograma contendo 4 classes de palavras. Discute-se que as RS das participantes apontam para o impacto da discriminação vivenciada socialmente na percepção de QV, agravada durante o período pandêmico da Covid-19. Espera-se fomentar o debate acerca da necessidade de políticas públicas de segurança e saúde que alcancem o envelhecimento e velhice entre mulheres lésbicas no curso de vida e que podem influenciar para uma QV mais positiva.

Palavras-chave: Qualidade de vida; envelhecimento; lésbicas; pandemia de Covid-19.

Brazil is one of the countries with the largest older population, with about 37.7 million in the country, according to data from the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (Dieese) (Agência Brasil, 2021). In addition, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2018) points to the existence of a higher percentage of older females, which indicates the process of feminization of old age, that is, the predominance of women over men within the older population. Brazil, as a developing country, is notable for its continental size, which influences its population. Moreover, these factors are intertwined with a high rate of social inequality that directly impacts the quality of life and aging of its inhabitants (Freitas et al., 2022). Although the increase in the number of older people is an advance, Barbosa (2019) points out that this is one of today's biggest challenges, as this increase, when occurring quickly and abruptly, hinders adaptations in different areas, such as social security and health services. This community not only faces these difficulties regarding the services offered to maintain their well-being and quality of life, but also endures several societal stigmas, such as the stereotype that older people do not express their sexuality.

This stigma is rooted in a biological bias in understanding human aging, which tends to silence the dialogue between sexuality and old age. Studies point to changes in this perspective; however, it is still based on a universal view of old age that excessively encompasses white heterosexual men, marginalizing socially excluded groups (Bezerra et al., 2025). Given this, research from an intersectional perspective is necessary to understand the intersections and sum of the social roles played by aging individuals (Stoodley & Conroy, 2024).

Considering this fact, some studies have begun to explore and understand the diversity of scenarios experienced by minorities (Sousa et al., 2023; Souza, 2023). Regarding female aging, it is known that women make up the majority of the older population; however, their aging is marked by several factors that directly affect health and quality of life, such as violence, unequal wages, multiple working hours, and a greater risk of external dependence for survival (Fonseca et al., 2025). Concerning older lesbians, Fonseca et al. (2022) highlight that they often face environments marked by discrimination and hostility, which may result from their public declaration of sexuality, rendering them more susceptible to judgment, discrimination, and intolerance.

Lesbian women report that the process of reaching old age is challenging, as this population is targeted by discrimination and intolerance in a heteronormative society, potentially preventing many from reaching old age. Additionally, these women express uncertainty and a lack of knowledge about their future, as many hesitate to disclose their sexuality due to fears of intolerance and discrimination from society. This can consequently render them invisible both to the broader society and within their own LGBT community (Souza, 2023).

The aging process of lesbian women goes through several particular experiences, some different from those that occur in heterosexual aging. These experiences involve ruptures, difficulties, anguish, and afflictions in the face of accepting homosexuality and coming out to family, friends, and society as a whole. These facts affect the lives of most

older lesbians and make them seek and establish a network of support and friendship that, for the most part, replaces their previous relationships (Dantas, 2021).

Given the above, it is understood that the LGBT older population experiences difficulties and discrimination in the most diverse areas of their existence. Given this, many lesbian women do not access some basic services due to the inability of many professionals to deal with this population (Silva & Gomes, 2021), generating discomfort in the face of insecurity in health care spaces.

Although the Statute of the Older points out that the State must ensure the protection of life and health, through the implementation of social public policies that promote healthy aging and in conditions of dignity, access to these services by the LGBT population ends up not occurring in the manner proposed by the National Policy for Integral Health for LGBTs (Brasil, 2013).

Given the above, the importance of public policies aimed at plurality is highlighted, contributing to the experience of this population in the most diverse areas of their lives, directly influencing their quality of life (QoL). It is important to highlight that QoL manifests itself dynamically and is related to well-being, being developed based on sociocultural experiences, beliefs, and values. It is also demonstrated through the activities that the older can perform, the interpersonal relationships they maintain over the years, as well as the satisfaction of needs, desires, and other factors that go beyond the physical, such as the psychological and social (Souza Júnior et al., 2022).

Considering that the QoL of the older population involves several factors, including health, the Covid-19 pandemic was a driving factor for several demands, especially in the older population, which became a vulnerable population in this period, mainly due to the changes resulting from the aging process. The focus on the older population in the face of the pandemic was due to the great risk that the older population has of contagion and the severity of the disease (Ferreira et al., 2021).

With the emergence of the pandemic, social distancing was a fundamental factor in providing necessary care, but it also led to a more solitary daily life due to restrictions on contact. Alongside loneliness, anxiety, and fear became intertwined with the aging process in the context of the pandemic, impacting structural support, impairing autonomy, and limiting communication with friends and family (Harden et al., 2020).

Another important outcome of the pandemic period was the rising level of ageism (discrimination based on a person's age). Amid the increasing number of deaths, the lives of older individuals were often explicitly deemed worthless, reinforcing the stereotypical perceptions of these individuals (Santana et al., 2023).

Given this experience, it is crucial to understand how this period affected diverse populations. This study specifically focuses on middle-aged and older lesbian women and uses the theory of Social Representations (SR) as a framework to identify this group's understanding of QoL and COVID-19 based on their own experiences.

Developed by Moscovici (1978), the theory of social representations offers a means of dynamically and diversely apprehending thoughts or ideas constructed within the social environment, represented in various forms without hierarchization (Sousa et al., 2023). Its formation occurs through two fundamental processes: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring involves framing new knowledge within existing elements, infused with value judgments. Objectification is characterized by concretizing and externalizing this acquired knowledge, effectively transforming it into a part of reality. In Brazil, studies utilizing this theory serve as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of social reality and improving interventions within that reality (Jodelet, 2011). Consequently, this research aims to identify the SRs of QoL and the COVID-19 pandemic among middle-aged and older lesbian women. It is essential to highlight that, because SR is elaborated and shared within the same reality, it is also possible to discern similarities or differences in these women's perceptions of the constructs examined in this study.

Method

Type of Research

This is a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive, and cross-sectional research (Nobre et al., 2025). People's participation was voluntary, being characterized as non-probabilistic for convenience.

Participants

The present study included the participation of 21 middle-aged and older lesbian women (*mean age = 57.67 / SD = 6.88*). The number of participants was determined according to a previous study by Silva et al. (2024). They were contacted through institutions, agencies, and NGOs that have direct contact with the research public, as well as Facebook groups, and through referrals from the women themselves. Thus, contact was initially made with the institutions so that they would support the dissemination of the research. Later, the participants who were interested in participating were contacted by the researchers for further clarification about the investigation, and then the collection procedures began.

The inclusion criteria were: being 45 years of age or older, identifying as a lesbian woman, living in Brazil, and participating in the research voluntarily. The exclusion criteria were: not having the minimum age mentioned, not identifying as a lesbian woman, not living in Brazil, and not accepting voluntary participation.

Although the researchers did not intentionally demarcate the participants' natural state most of the population participating in the study lived in São Paulo (42.9%) and Rio de Janeiro (28.6%), while the states of Paraná, Pará, Ceará and Maranhão had the lowest participant population, with 4.8% of the average. This is an interesting fact, considering the level of inequality present in Brazil and, consequently, its interaction with aging. The Brazilian northeast region, for example, has one of the lowest human development and urbanization rates in the country, which, combined with other factors, reduces the life

expectancy of residents (Freitas et al., 2022). It is also important to highlight that all participants were cisgender, a finding that can be contextualized by the low life expectancy of transgender people in Brazil, which is under 40 years. Consequently, the presence of older transgender people in the country is extremely limited (Bezerra et al., 2025). Also, among the study's collaborators, it is worth noting that 6.9% lost people to COVID-19. Below are the sociodemographic data of the participants:

Table 1.
Sociodemographic data of the women participating in the study

| Variable | Category | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Marital status | Single | 57% |
| | Widow | 19% |
| | Married | 14% |
| | Divorced | 9% |
| Religion | Catholic | 23% |
| | Evangelic | 9% |
| | Spiritist | 28% |
| | None | 23% |
| | Other | 14% |
| Schooling | Primary school | 14% |
| | Middle school | 19% |
| | Higher Education (incomplete) | 9% |
| | Higher education | 23% |
| | Postgraduate studies | 33% |

(Continues)

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the women participating in the study (Continuation)

| Variable | Category | Percentage |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Type of work | Formal work | 52% |
| | Informal work | 28% |
| | Not applicable | 19% |
| Monthly income | Up to 1 minimum wage | 14% |
| | From 1 and 2 minimum wages | 28% |
| | From 2 and 4 minimum wages | 28% |
| | From 4 and 5 minimum wages | 9% |
| | Above the 6 minimum wages | 19% |
| Who do you live with? | Alone | 47% |
| | Wife | 19% |
| | Family | 28% |
| | Friend | 4% |
| Comorbidities | Hypertension | 33% |
| | Diabetes | 4% |
| | Cancer | 4% |
| | None | 57% |
| Had Covid-19? | Yes | 33% |
| | No | 66% |

Instruments

For data collection, two instruments were used: the sociodemographic questionnaire (which is intended to characterize the population participating in the research, with questions such as age, gender, sexuality, state where they live, income, education,

housing, and religion) and a semi-structured interview (which presents questions about quality of life, lesbian aging, and the Covid-19 pandemic).

Ethical Procedures

The Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Federal University of Piauí, by opinion No. 4,942,097, approved the study. The Free and Informed Consent Form, presented to the research participants, attests to their safety in participating, the confidentiality of their information, the objectives of the study, and the risks to which they will be exposed when participating in it.

Data Collection

It was carried out through online questionnaires or interviews by video call, where the sociodemographic questionnaire was applied to identify the women participating in the research. Then, a semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate the participants' perception of their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic period, as well as their SR about quality of life and old age, with questions such as: "What is quality of life in old age for you?"; "Do you believe that older lesbians have safe conditions to have a good quality of life in Brazil? Why?"; "What do you think needs to happen for seniors to have a better quality of life due to the pandemic?". These were trigger questions, expanded to further explore the data when necessary.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the sociodemographic questionnaire was performed using the SPSS for Windows software, version 21.0, a resource that provides descriptive statistical data that facilitates the characterization of the population that comprises the research. The semi-structured interview was analyzed using the IraMuTeQ software, version 0.7, using the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC). The DHC is one of the many lexical

statistics tools available in the IRAMUTEQ software. In this technique, the level of connection of each word with the class is measured, based on Pearson's chi-square test (X^2). Calculation. However, in addition to this, the expertise of the researchers, as well as contact with the participants, is added, since the software allows the identification of each complete speech, as well as the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants who uttered it, favoring the qualitative discussion of the data (Carvalho, Mota & Saab, 2020).

Results

The data obtained in the semi-structured interview were grouped in a database that comprises a textual corpus composed of 21 texts, i.e., interviews. After data analysis, the information was grouped into 146 text segments (TS) that make up 4 different word classes: Class 1: 46 ST (35.38%), Class 2: 38 ST (29.23%), Class 3: 21 ST (16.15%) and Class 4: 25 ST (19.23%). The dendrogram that represents the data related to the formation and structuring of each indicated class will be shown below using an illustrative figure, taking into account the order of division of the classes in their subcorpus, the frequency of the words (F), as well as the X^2 . After the word classes are presented, they will be discussed.

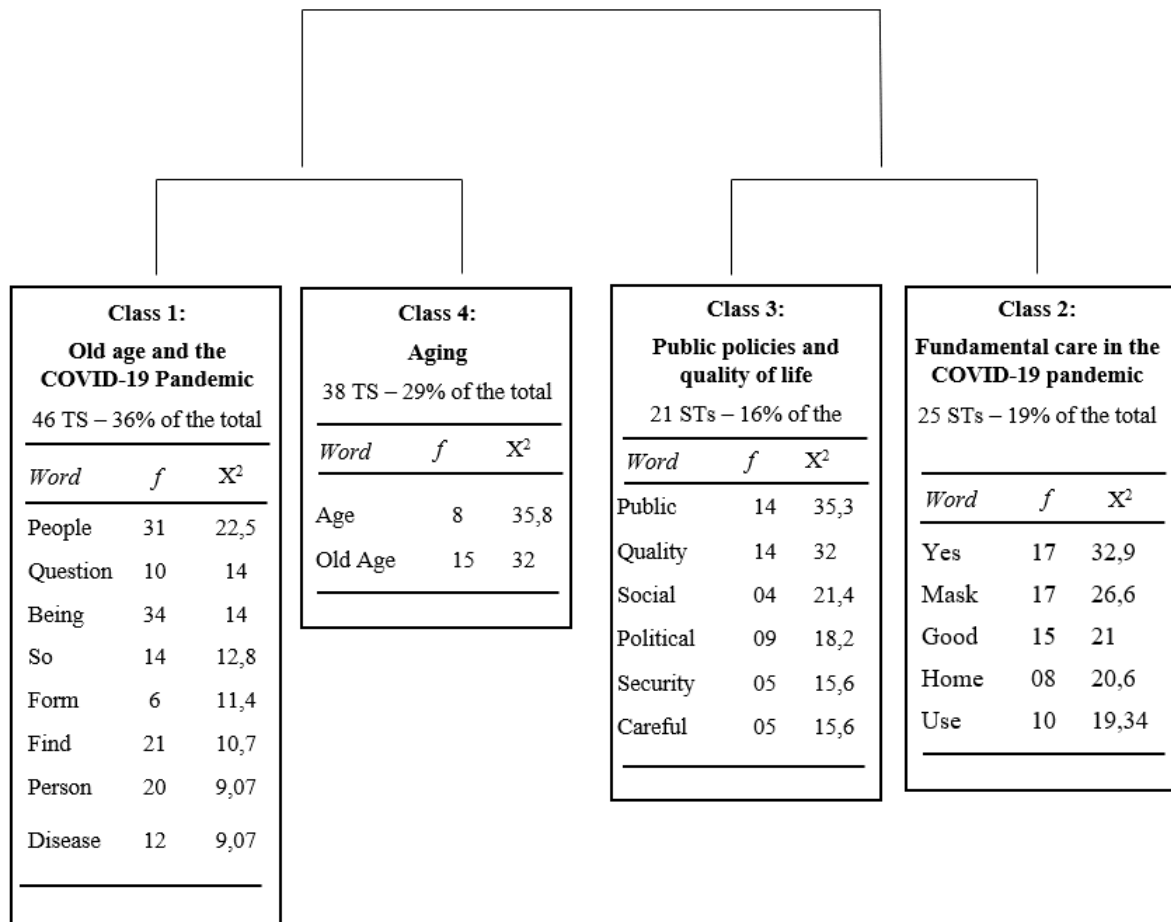


Figure 1. Descending Hierarchical Classification Dendrogram

Discussion

Class 1: Old Age and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The most prominent terms in this subgroup refer to the participants' representations of the aging process during the COVID-19 period, as well as the limitations resulting from the pandemic. In their speeches, it was possible to notice that some women point out that the pandemic has affected different areas of people's lives, especially in the field of health, where consequently the daily use of masks, vaccination, and social isolation are necessary.

This class addresses the harm to the autonomy of the older population, as these women reveal in this class that they "no longer have a voice and autonomy", that is, that their

opinions and desires are often not considered relevant during the pandemic period. Siqueira and Tatibana (2022) point out that a satisfactory quality of life, both physical and mental, is associated with more active autonomy in this population. Linked to this fact, the participants in this class also reported lesbian old age, where they state that this community is the target of discrimination.

From this perspective, Silva et al. (2024) state that, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the context of aging as a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex process, discrimination against older adults has been increasingly common. The same authors also address that ageism, during the pandemic, may have appeared more assiduously because many older people are in their homes, depending on the help of other people, especially family members, to obtain, for example, basic items of their daily lives.

Santana et al. (2023) show that individuals targeted by social stigmas are people who have characteristics considered, in the eyes of others, inferior or of less value. It is through this thought that behaviors and attitudes of prejudice are based on ideologies that see such beings as a threat, to marginalize their existence and possibilities of life.

According to the same study cited above, age discrimination is part of a perspective that ends up framing certain ideas and hardening them. This means that anything that deviates from the standard is placed in a place of contempt and stigmatization, as happens with the older and, in this case, even women and lesbians.

Class 2: Fundamental Care in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The speeches of this class expose the representations of the participating population about the essential care during the pandemic, which aims to prevent the virus. It can be seen that the most recurrent words in this class refer to getting vaccinated, wearing a mask, and the importance of social isolation. The acceptance and visualization of some necessary behaviors are elements considered and practiced in the population participating in the study (middle-aged women and older lesbians).

As already mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic is a risk factor for the general population, but the older community was one of the ones that most focused on care and, especially, on social isolation. Social isolation was the main protective measure in the context of the pandemic, which promoted a new reality for the population, which can cause great tension in the most different areas, such as socioeconomic, cultural, and public health policies aimed at controlling the virus (Harden et al., 2020).

Still on social isolation, some participants point out that he restricted in their activities by being recommended to stay at home, which caused a large decrease in leisure and self-care activities, thus having a potential impact on their well-being and consequently on their QoL. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced the life satisfaction of the older population, and although isolation is a protective measure against COVID-19, it has caused an increase in the feeling of loneliness in the older and mental illness (Chen & Olsen, 2022).

Harden et al. (2020) states that the fact that older people are considered a risk group in the pandemic has made ageist practices increasingly frequent. Therefore, as a consequence of this, scenarios were constructed with ideas of uselessness, disability, and disposability for these people, in order to cause an even more negative impact in various areas of their lives, such as the choice of ICU beds, when necessary.

The author also points out that this context led to thinking about the rights and policies aimed at the older, considering all their plurality, as is the case of lesbian women. That is, the pandemic has caused a movement of almost suspension towards the demands of beings in this age group, harming their inclusion and sociability as ways of life and social participation.

Class 3: Public Policies and Quality of Life

This class discusses the representations that the researched public has about the QoL of the older lesbian population, as well as the need to implement public policies that aim

to contribute to the promotion of health and QoL in this group. It can be seen that the content related to the highlighted words is related to public and security policies, QoL in the most diverse areas, as well as the precise care of these beings.

The QoL of the older community is related to different elements that are not limited to the physical, since both physical and mental well-being, insertion in the social environment, attribution of meaning to life, and the presence of a support network are aspects that contribute to healthy aging (Souza Júnior et al., 2022). Thus, it is pertinent to expose the fact that the research participants point out the need for improvements, especially in the field of health, so that there are advances in their QoL, considering that, especially in this study, more than 30% of participants reported having some type of comorbidity.

The need for attention to the older population and public policies that ensure the safety of this population in the social environment is also cited as essential for women. The QoL of this age group is an element that has come to be understood as a result of social policies, taking into account that people's health, protection against different types of violence, and the preservation of basic rights contribute positively to an evolution in QoL (Souza Júnior et al., 2022).

Therefore, it can be thought that, because they are often placed in a socially marginalized place, these women end up suffering as a reflex through the absence of these needs mentioned above. In addition to the fact that she is older and lesbian, one can mention the fact that she is a woman and, additionally, other factors are added to these in a continuous and inseparable movement of social neglect towards them (Alves et al., 2020).

Class 4: Aging and Family

In most of the answers, the act of aging is seen as something natural and part of human development.

The content of the highlighted words also refers to the fact that aging in Brazil is not a good thing, and that being a lesbian woman, almost or already in old age, is something lived with difficulties. Thus, it is observed that the way middle-aged or older lesbian women are seen and treated in society impacts the representations they have about their aging and how they lead their lives, including access to basic aspects such as health permeating this moment due to fear or apprehension in seeking services, corroborating the literature (Silva & Gomes, 2021).

In addition, the family is an element mentioned by some participants as a base of support and a necessary support for quality aging. This concerns the view that the family is established as a fundamental source of assistance in the aging of these women, which leads to better life satisfaction (Nakamura et al., 2022). It is worth noting that 28% of the participants live with family members; however, as a limitation of the present study, the degree of kinship was not identified, nor even the quality of the bonds with these family members. Furthermore, in this regard, it is important to highlight the fact that a large proportion of participants are single (57%) and live alone (47% of the total), a worrying factor for QoL, especially during the pandemic period.

Based on these ideas, it is possible to assess that aging can have several meanings and forms based on each reality. That is, when there is loneliness, exclusion, and impediment of possibilities, it becomes more difficult and likely to be seen negatively. However, when the opposite happens, it can be considered as something positive and that there is some kind of attribution of meaning in this process (Alves et al., 2020).

Dantas (2021) also point out that, when this family support exists, lesbian women can find ways to sustain their social place as a person who has their particular aspects like any other. This points to the fact of the possibility of living coherently with one's own identity and characteristics, since one seeks and fights for respect for identity and sexual diversity.

Final Thoughts

Given the above, it can be seen that middle-aged and older Brazilian lesbian women understand that they still suffer prejudice and discrimination in society. Most of them believe that being a lesbian older person in a country like Brazil is not something pleasant to experience, since stereotypes and social stigmas are present in the most diverse population contexts.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants emphasize the need for health and safety policies for the older population, as this is one of the populations that most needs this care, since most older women may have comorbidities. From this perspective, the population present in the study points out this need for attention to health care, where it is observed that the representations that these women have about the health system confirm the presence of failures and unpreparedness of some spaces in dealing with the older population, especially with older lesbians.

The health factor is one of the highlights in the discourses of the surveyed public, since health is essential for the well-being and QoL of this population. However, other aspects play a fundamental role in obtaining QoL, such as leisure, economic issues, physical and mental well-being, support network, etc. Given this, it is worth mentioning that the women report that the presence of the family is essential in their aging process, that is, in addition to being a form of support for these older women, the family is also a factor that influences the QoL of these women. It is worth noting, therefore, that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, family, friends, and health are factors that may have provided better experiences in the face of this distressing reality.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this study has limitations. First, about the context in which the research was conducted, since the pandemic period makes it impossible to have more direct contact with people, due to the need for social isolation. Thus, online interviews were conducted that may limit the amount of content and even acceptance by the surveyed audience. For this reason, it is also worth noting that the survey does not

cover all social classes, since not all middle-aged and older women have access to the internet or know how to use electronic devices.

In any case, the study's main objective was to identify what these women represent about the quality of life and the pandemic in this given context. It is hoped that this research will serve as a basis for other studies on the theme and/or the referred public. Thus, it is recommended that future research broaden the diversity of the target population by including transgender individuals and people from the northern and northeastern regions of the country. Moreover, it supports the development of a comparative study between heterosexual and lesbian women, acknowledging that heterosexual women also encounter challenges in the aging process, thereby justifying the relevance of comparing their differing perspectives. It is also crucial to more thoroughly investigate participants' current and past family contexts. Finally, this study underscores the need for the development of educational initiatives aimed at combating ageism, as well as the establishment of professional practices, particularly within the healthcare sector, that equip practitioners to address the intersectional dimensions of aging.

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Authors' contribution statement

CA contributed to the drafting and writing of the manuscript, collection of participants and results, ME contributed to the final revision of the manuscript, EM and IE contributed to the data analysis, LF contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript.

Data availability

The database on which the results of this study are based is not available.

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