



# Colliding Identities During COVID-19: Identifying and Addressing the Challenges of Being an Academic Mother During a Global Pandemic

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Academic workloads require a careful balance of teaching, research, supervision, and administrative responsibilities. Being an academic parent adds an additional level of responsibility to this, which has traditionally been successfully managed with organisation, careful planning and support. For many academic parents the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted this carefully curated balance, forcing them to work from home while also dealing with the loss of childcare and the requirement to provide homeschooling. The pre-existing gender disparity in childcare and housework was exacerbated by lockdown, with a disproportionate impact on academic mothers who were often forced to take on additional childcare and housework responsibilities, alongside remote schooling. The gender disparity further affected job stability, with women losing a greater number of paid working hours during the pandemic and having greater employment instability. This article reflects upon the impact of gender disparity in academic parents during the Covid-19 pandemic, and considers potential barriers to productivity and progression, including the role of interruptions, delivering sensitive materials in a workspace shared with children and technological challenges.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, academic, challenges, parent, pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

In July 2020, the New York Times stated “in the Covid-19 economy, you can have a kid or a job. Not both’. Working parents who had previously carved out clear boundaries between their professional identity and their role as a caregiver, suddenly found themselves working from home, with their children not only perpetually present, but now requiring attention, support and in many cases homeschooling. This burden has been found to disproportionately affect women at both the physical level of work, such as the number of hours able to be worked, and the cognitive load that is associated with such work (Czymara et al., 2021). The implication of this for many mothers working in higher education, was that the obligation to support and teach their students suddenly sat alongside the need to teach their own children and support them as they navigated the impact of a global pandemic on their own lives. Inevitably, the slew of challenges that arose from the competing roles of both academic and parent while in the same house (or even sitting across the same table) did not allow for those previously crafted boundaries to remain in place, resulting in a decrease in the productivity of many academic women during this time (Brown et al., 2021) and an increase in parental burnout (Aguiar et al., 2021). This article reflects upon the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on gender disparity within working parents, and specifically in relation to obstacles faced by academic mothers

during the pandemic, as they sought to reconcile two distinct identities as professional and parent, while traversing a range of barriers to productivity. These barriers included the impact of gender disparity on caregiving and professional output, learning to engage with new technologies or the lack of uninterrupted time in which to work.

## GENDER DISPARITY

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was well-documented that women assumed a greater proportion of household and childcare responsibilities than males. In contemporary couples within the United Kingdom, women took on a disproportionately high level of housework, childcare and additional caring responsibilities (Xue and McMunn, 2020) and this remained true even in households where both parents worked full time hours (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Theabaud et al. (2019) suggested that this disparity may be rooted in clear expectations for each gender, with women being held to higher standards of cleanliness within the home than men. Additionally, they suggested that men are generally perceived to suffer more negative social consequences than women if they fail to meet these standards, while women are considered to be more responsible for housework across a range of work and family arrangements. Against this pre-existing background, it is perhaps unsurprising that the additional burden of childcare and remote schooling created by the Covid-19 pandemic fell primarily to women.

The sudden loss of childcare facilities associated with the pandemic created a substantial increase in caregiver responsibilities including for many, the need to undertake remote schooling. Xue and McMunn (2020) determine that each week during lockdown, women spent an average of 5 h more doing housework and 10 h more doing childcare when compared to men. Adams-Prassl et al. (2020) analysed time-use data to determine that amongst the population working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, women spent significantly more time homeschooling and undertook significantly more responsibility for childcare than men. This increase in caring responsibilities and housework was associated with higher levels of psychological distress for women and may have future implications for mental health (Xue and McMunn, 2020). This psychological distress may be due in part to the increased anxiety and mental load carried by women during lockdown. Czymara et al. (2021) determined that women were consistently more worried than men about how to manage childcare alongside work, and the challenges associated with achieving the balance of meeting children's needs alongside the requirements of their job.

The gender disparity associated with security of employment may also have added to women's psychological burden, with women found to be reducing their paid working hours significantly more than men during the pandemic (Czymara et al., 2021; Xue and McMunn, 2020). In addition, significantly more women than men lost their employment since lockdown began (Farré et al., 2020). This suggests that gender inequality has risen in terms of both paid and unpaid work during the pandemic, which must be addressed if we are to avoid

contributing to a further widening of the existing gender pay gap during the recovery process from the pandemic (Czymara et al., 2021). The implications of the lockdown on gender disparity can be examined through the lens of academic mothers, in order to identify and reflect upon the specific challenges that are faced, and how the gender disparity contributes to these.

## Productivity

Feng and Savani (2020) sought to identify changes in work-related productivity and satisfaction in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that women reported a greater perceived loss in both productivity and job satisfaction than males, though this may be limited by the pre-covid scores for both measures being obtained retrospectively and therefore being slightly less reliable. The impact of this on the productivity of academic mothers specifically, is illustrated by the statistics around who submitted to academic journals during lockdown. While the number of men submitting articles increased, the number of submissions from women fell significantly compared to the previous year (Vincent-Lamarre, Sugimoto & Lariviere, 2020). Squazzoni et al. (2020) found that this trend continued in research papers related to the impact of Covid-19, and was particularly notable in senior female academics who had a PhD, and therefore were most likely to be of the age where they had childcare responsibilities. Unfortunately, this means that those academics who were most affected by the pandemic have also been the least able to add their voices to the conversation around it. This creates an unfortunate paradox: if we only hear the voices of those less affected by these changes, then how can we fully understand and appreciate the impact of the pandemic on all academics, especially academic mothers whose productivity has been so affected? Given the gender disparity, it is essential to listen to the voice of academic women, and particularly academic mothers, in order to avoid a situation where these valuable perspectives are missing from the discussion.

## Lack of Uninterrupted Time

Academics are only too familiar with interruptions, even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. From the student who knocks on their office door just as they're starting data analysis, to the urgent email that pings through to their computer and requires a response straight away. The working day is traditionally punctuated by these interruptions and academics have become used to dealing with them and getting straight back to work, safe in the knowledge that if they need an undisturbed chunk of time, they have a range of strategies available to them; going to another office space, mute their emails for a few hours or simply putting a 'do not disturb' sign on their office door. These uninterrupted periods of time are essential to productivity, in order to avoid errors and delays in the time taken to complete the task (Cole et al., 2016) therefore one of the most difficult losses for academic parents was the opportunity for uninterrupted work. This was particularly impactful during lockdown when, for many households, everyone was now at home, doing work, remote schooling or just requiring attention and supervision that had

previously been provided by childcare facilitators for a portion of the day. The unequal burden of childcare and remote schooling that fell on women (Xue and McMunn, 2020) meant that women were significantly more affected by these type of interruptions. Additional challenges such as a school's safeguarding requirement that children do not engage in any online school activities from a bedroom created further barriers to achieving an uninterrupted workspace.

For many academic parents now taking on the burden of childcare and remote schooling, periods of previously uninterrupted academic work were replaced with shorts bursts of activity, interspersed with frequent interruptions. During lockdown, meals, activities, learning and attention that used to be provided throughout the day at school, now had to be provided by parents, creating not only an additional physical load, but a vastly increased mental load. Grandparents who could previously have been relied on to help out with childcare and offer a little breathing space as deadlines approached or the marking piled up, were now no longer able to visit and could only provide some distraction for their grandchildren for as long as the children were prepared to sit in front of a laptop. A lasting memory of the lockdown for this academic parent will be watching my child conduct a science experiment about absorption when they were in South West England and the experiment itself was taking place in Scotland. Over a zoom meeting, various substances were poured, while the young scientist watched the screen intently, timing each event. This attempt to provide some interruption-free time, while an excellent idea in theory, in practice actually turned into a running commentary about what was happening at each step of the experiment so 'uninterrupted work time' became 'science theatre time' where the academic parent was forced into the role of enthusiastic audience member, clapping and cheering as muddy water was filtered through a t-shirt 300 miles away. Making memories? Definitely. Making deadlines? Definitely not.

Of course, some types of interruptions can actually be positive and assist with multi-tasking by keeping the worker alert (Brumby et al., 2019). Abdullah et al. (2016) found that interrupting long periods of work to take breaks can increase focus and creativity. However, this positive effect relies on interruptions being self-determined, and falling at a natural place in the work. A child suddenly demanding food or attention is unlikely to meet these criteria. It may be that they simply cannot avoid interrupting your webinar because their teacher wants them to print their algebra worksheet right now, or their laptop just shut down unexpectedly and they require immediate assistance. These interruptions, innocent as they are, fall into the category of external interruptions and can have a significant negative impact on productivity, leading to a chain of interruptions that reduces productivity for several hours (Iqbal et al., 2005). Simply getting back to the task at hand as quickly as possible may not provide the solution as external, non-work-related interruptions require some recovery time and attempting to resume the task too quickly after such an interruption can lead to errors. Taking this knowledge on board could potentially allow the academic parent to wait for a period before resuming work following an interruption, in order to maximise productivity. However, the additional demands

created by working and parenting through a global pandemic did not allow the luxury of choosing exactly when to resume work as those who took on the additional childcare responsibilities had to fit their work around their child's schedule. Academic work was fitted around new responsibilities. Papers were written in the early hours of the morning, telephone interviews had to be conducted in the car to avoid background noise and emails were responded to on phones whenever a few minutes allowed. The work may have gotten done eventually, but the price paid to achieve it was great, and was significantly higher for women than for men (Hipp and Bünning, 2021).

## Discussion of Sensitive Topics

The challenges of remotely delivering lectures, or having academic discussions - with children present - are not only to do with being interrupted. There may be some subject areas that are necessary for an academic to discuss, which are simply not suitable for children to hear. As a senior lecturer in forensic psychology, who leads a bystander intervention programme to tackle domestic and sexual violence, the move to conducting lectures from home posed some specific challenges around how to deliver sensitive topics while not exposing children in the household to those sensitive topics. For example, while it may be logistically possible to teach a class from the same room that your child is reading or working in, if that session is focusing on violent behaviour or the impact of intoxication on the ability to consent, suddenly things become a little trickier. This issue may be resolved by simple logistics: put the children at one side of the house and deliver the sensitive subject from a far-away room. However, this can be hampered by a number of factors, such as the wi-fi range within the home and the age of the children and their ability to remain unsupervised for any length of time.

This issue may also affect students who need to discuss their course subjects with their tutor, or want to have a private conversation about personal challenges that they are facing. Even if a student could guarantee a safe and private space in their own home, they may not feel confident that their tutor can offer the same. This could result in discomfort or reluctance to share concerns about their studies or personal circumstances with academic staff. Unless academic parents have a private office in their home, it is extremely difficult to guarantee complete exclusion of the background noises of family, televisions or even pets, however quiet they are attempting to be. Unfortunately, at a time when many students are anxious about the potential impact of the pandemic on their studies, the challenge of finding a safe and private space for open and honest discussions has the potential to diminish the effectiveness of personal academic tutors, just at a time when students need them more than ever. As childcare responsibilities were taken on by a disproportionate number of women during the pandemic, such logistical challenges would be more likely to fall to academic mothers, further increasing the gender gap in relation to productivity and job satisfaction (Feng and Savani, 2020).

## Technology

In the event that an academic parent has found solutions to the challenges of uninterrupted time and locating a private and safe

space to work, it might be supposed that they are now able to work productively, even perhaps reaching the same rate of productivity as pre-pandemic. Unfortunately, this is still not guaranteed as working outside of the office environment in the absence of equipment, technical support, or even consistent and reliable wi-fi led to parents being forced to choose between competing activities that required access to technology and sole use of the computers and wi-fi bandwidth (BBC News, 2021). Decisions had to be made about whether a child should attend their online teaching session or whether the parent could attend a professional webinar that was running at the same time. The impact of these technological challenges highlighted the importance of academics having the right technology to be able to carry out their jobs effectively, as well as shining a light on the problems that can arise when academic parents are required to use their own private technology for both home working and remote schooling. As women are more likely to be taking on the additional burden of childcare during lockdown, they are also likely to be disproportionately affected by having to use their technology for remote schooling and therefore reducing their ability to work effectively, creating yet another barrier to their academic career.

## CONCLUSION

The gender disparity which existed pre-Covid has been inflated due to the increased childcare and housework burden placed upon women during the pandemic. This has created a reduction in productivity, and in the ability of women to do their jobs effectively and efficiently, aligned with increase in psychological distress and greater job instability. With burnout among academics already well-established, and over 70% of higher

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education staff reporting experiencing feelings of high stress during their career (Kinman and Wray, 2013) it more important than ever to acknowledge the disproportionate burden that has been placed on academic mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that working in academia does come with its own privilege, and it would be remiss to discuss this issue without acknowledging the privileged position that academic parents are in with regards to relatively good job security, ability to work from home rather than face furlough or unemployment, and the stability that comes with being part of a large organisation such as a university. However, the challenges faced by academic mothers are still very real and must be acknowledged and addressed.

The unique challenges of managing the conflicting roles of academic and parent during this pandemic are undeniably great, and may even appear insurmountable, but it is hoped that with empathy and acknowledgement of these challenges on the part of colleagues, organisations and students, they can be overcome, ensuring that higher education remains an inclusive, respectful environment where everyone can flourish.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

GH is the sole author of this submission and is accountable for the content of the work.

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