



Emotional Wellbeing: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Academics in South Africa

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After the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, countries around the world responded with state-mandated lockdowns. Emerging data on the adverse psychological impact of the lockdown shows that women as a whole are among the most vulnerable groups. This study explores the specific stressors manifesting for women academics during lockdown and their toll on emotional wellbeing. A qualitative interpretive analysis of responses from 2,029 women academics showed participants experienced frustration, weariness, anxiety, and being overwhelmed as the result of emotional taxation from three sources: home responsibilities, social milieu, and work environment. The work-life merge that occurred during lockdown seemed to have a concertina effect on emotional wellbeing as participants were pressured to manage an inordinate number of responsibilities at once. The specific consequences of the concertina effect found in this study highlight opportunities for the academy to better support the wellbeing of women academics.

Keywords: emotional wellbeing, women academics, work-life merge, stressors, emotional taxation, COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

After the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (American Journal of Managed Care, 2020), countries around the world responded with state-mandated lockdowns that have persisted in various forms up until the time of writing. To varying degrees and for different periods of time, these lockdowns have involved the closure of “non-essential” businesses, organizations, and services, including public schools, public universities, and childcare and domestic services, forcing those who can work from home to do so. There has been an outpouring of studies from around the world on the physical and psychological impacts of confinement, social isolation, unemployment, and remote working on women academics due to the lockdown. In a post-pandemic world, there is concern that the living conditions imposed on households during the lockdown may exacerbate pre-existing disparities for male and female academics over longer term, and that institutional policies must be created to respond to the specific challenges facing women academics.

The emerging data from multiple continents shows that, as a whole, women are more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of lockdown: higher rates of job loss and greater work disruption (Carli, 2020); increases in household and childcare workload (Collins et al., 2021); higher levels of stress (Kowal et al., 2020; Pieh et al., 2020); worse sleep quality (Morelli et al., 2020); and more symptoms of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ausín et al., 2020). These studies point to a range of different factors and circumstances that influence the

physical and psychological wellbeing of women: their profession and working situation, whether they are single or partnered, whether they have children, and the nature of their social interactions – for example, whether they live alone. Consequently, women in the academy are reporting a unique set of challenges and experiences during lockdown.

Studies exploring these phenomena over the past year have been conducted with academic cohorts in many countries, but not yet in South Africa. Further, few studies have explored the actual experiences of women academics during the pandemic over a large sample size to identify sources or mechanisms that may be detrimental to their wellbeing and careers. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a clearer understanding of how women academics have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to inform policy decisions. This study examines the experiences of 2,029 women academics in South Africa during the lockdown period, as reported in an open-ended questionnaire, to determine the impact of the pandemic on their emotional wellbeing and work experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Academics in Lockdown Increased Work Demands

The rapid change in working dynamics for academics during lockdown, with the near-exclusive adoption of online teaching tools and communication platforms, has increased work demands. In a self-reflection on her work-from-home experiences during COVID-19, academic Boncori (2020, p. 681) describes the extreme emotional labor demanded by the nature of digital work at this time: “I wish I could just go back to sleep now, but my brain has gone into analytic overdrive and I start to consider assessment options, blended delivery plans, staff cover issues, student welfare and a million other matters”.

The heightened demands of teaching during the pandemic extend beyond adapting to new technology. The psychological impact of the pandemic on university students is placing greater pressure on lecturers to provide students with emotional and psychological support. Numerous studies have shown the increased experiences of depression and anxiety amongst university students (Islam M. A. et al., 2020; Majumdar et al., 2020; Marelli et al., 2020; Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Rehman et al., 2020). This pattern is more pronounced in countries like South Africa, where high levels of inequality mean that large proportions of the population that were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic are experiencing extreme precarity during lockdown (Arndt et al., 2020; Chirisa et al., 2020). Supporting vulnerable students therefore becomes paramount and compounds the academic challenge of online teaching and supervision for academics.

For some, the professional threats imposed by the pandemic are far greater than productivity losses and high work demands. Crook (2020) explains that academics with precarious contracts, such as adjunct faculty, will likely see their larger career and financial prospects diminish.

Beyond concrete work demands and job insecurity, there are additional experiential impacts to consider. Gao and Sai (2020) write about how, as early career researchers, their professional development was threatened by the circumstances of lockdown through the lack of human interaction with colleagues and informal learning opportunities that come with being part of a shared organizational space. They further describe how the “silence” and drop in communication that has taken place as work has moved online serves to enhance their otherness as young, single, female academics. This, in turn, provokes fear and anxiety in them that dissuades their engagement in traditional forms of academic discourse.

Although the increased work demands experienced during the pandemic can affect both sexes, there are circumstances that will be described below, which explain why women can be affected to a greater extent than their male peers.

Balancing Family and Career

Parenthood has emerged as the greatest differentiator between the working experiences of male and female academics during the pandemic. In a survey of 460 academics working across eight countries, Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021, p. 5) found that although the gender gap in the lockdown working conditions of male and female academics is weak, “the gap becomes alarming for women with children.” Myers et al. (2020) also picked up on variations in impact by field and found that women scientists with young children were hit hardest of all by the reduction of their time for research. One explanation is that “motherhood is seen as the limit, as the role that cannot be abandoned, even not for teaching duties” (Minello et al., 2020, p. 9).

Several studies and accounts have emerged from the community of women academics reporting similar patterns of struggle with the increased pressures of balancing parenthood and professional demands (Boncori, 2020; Gourlay, 2020; Guy and Arthur, 2020; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021). The closure of public schools and the loss of formal childcare service during the pandemic is a major reason for this increased pressure on working mothers (Crook, 2020). Of course, the inequities between women and male academics prior to the pandemic – in terms of lower representation in the academy and lower publication rates – are well documented (Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Beaudry and Larivière, 2016; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Helmer et al., 2017; Holman et al., 2018; Kamerlin and Wittung-Stafshede, 2020). However, in an autoethnographic study of their own experiences caring for young children during lockdown, Guy and Arthur (2020, p. 897) explain how “being a working mom is tough, but being a mom during COVID is more difficult than we could have ever imagined”.

There are additional concerns about how the disproportionate childcare demands on junior women academics, compared to men and women without children, will disrupt their tenure track (Cardel et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020). Indeed, in their 10-year study of the effects of family on academics prior to the pandemic, Mason et al. (2013) found that the single biggest inequity was the negative effect family had on early-career women academics, compared to its neutral impact on men.

As Pereira (2020) points out, in spite of the real impact of motherhood on the work experiences of female academics, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and the boundaries of parenthood as a cause of gender inequality in academia, and particularly during the pandemic. Historical disparities between male and female academics in terms of tenure, research output, and other measures of academic productivity have been documented as the result of structural factors, including resource allocation, stereotyping, work climate, and family and household responsibilities (Oleschuk, 2020). Most of these factors are internal to academic institutions, not homes and families. There are also many instances in which male academics who are fathers face the same burdens as female academics who carry the bulk of parenting responsibilities in their families.

Pereira (2020) also notes that the excessive and narrow focus on productivity in terms of research publication as the ultimate metric of parity between academics elides other aspects of the academic productivity (such as teaching, curriculum development, student support, and administration) that are upheld by women academics and are insufficiently valued. It also fails to capture the experiences and wellbeing of academics as human beings. Taken together, the challenges of increased workload and household responsibilities during lockdown pose a threat to the emotional wellbeing of women academics, which holds implications for their success and performance as both professionals and human beings.

Emotional Wellbeing

The construct of emotional wellbeing is a useful lens for examining the experiences of women academics due during COVID-19 pandemic for its focus on how day-to-day events impact an individual. Emotional wellbeing “refers to the emotional quality of an individual’s everyday experience – the frequency and intensity of experiences of joy, fascination, anxiety, sadness, anger, and affection that make one’s life pleasant or unpleasant” (Kahneman and Deaton, 2010, p. 16489). This construct is particularly relevant in the COVID-19 era because of the way the heightened uncertainty has hampered individuals’ ability to plan their lives beyond the immediate term (Islam S. M. D. et al., 2020; Settersten et al., 2020). The pandemic has shrunk lives to daily and weekly goals. The quality of individuals’ experience over these short periods of time therefore becomes all the more significant as indicators of their overall wellbeing.

A more general look at the factors that contribute to emotional wellbeing highlights the unique ways women academics in lockdown might be affected. As Lades et al. (2020) found in their review of the literature on the enhancers and detractors of emotional wellbeing, the combination of the activities limited by the lockdown conditions and those increased by it, suggests a major threat to emotional wellbeing. Activities like time spent in nature (MacKerron and Mourato, 2013), interpersonal interactions (Gonza and Burger, 2017), and walking (Hanson and Jones, 2015), all promote emotional wellbeing but have been dampened in various ways by the pandemic. Meanwhile, “time spent alone, engaged in social media use, and caring for children” (Lades et al., 2020, p. 2) have been shown to reduce emotional wellbeing. It would therefore be expected that

the lockdown is taking a toll on the emotional wellbeing of women academics. However, studies exploring how different daily activities are experienced during a pandemic or outbreak scenario are extremely limited in both number and method. Further, the studies of women academics during the pandemic have yet to examine emotional wellbeing as an indicator of individual happiness or fulfillment.

Of course, for women academics who are also parents, the threat to emotional wellbeing extends into the home. The wellbeing of parents during the pandemic has been shown to decline, particularly for those who have lost their source of childcare (Patrick et al., 2020). Overall, the conditions have created increases in day-to-day stressors for parents with negative impacts on their mental health (Brown et al., 2020; Fontanesi et al., 2020; Marelli et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2020). Arthur describes the emotional toll of the combination of reduced productivity and increased childcare challenges: “[it] leaves me feeling empty and vulnerable to not earning the respect, validation, and connection of others” (Guy and Arthur, 2020, p. 894).

Current Study

Given the compounded challenge of professional gender disparities in academia and lockdown measures, this study explores the experiences of women academics in South African universities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of these experiences on their emotional wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted as part of a wider study of women academics during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. In an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, the South African government announced a nationwide lockdown on 23 March 2020, which started three days later. Under this mandate, all non-essential businesses, schools, and public universities were closed, and academics were constrained to work from their homes.

The data collection took place from July to September 2020. This means that the experiences described by participants stretched across the stages of hard lockdown (“level 5”, 27 March-30 April; “level 4”, 1 May-30 May; “level 3”, 1 June-17 August), which were characterized by intense restrictions on movement and activity, through to the eased stage of the lockdown (“level 2”, 18 August-20 September).¹ During all the stages of lockdown, South African universities were closed to face-to-face teaching and only minor exceptions were made with institutional permission, meaning academics were working from home throughout the data collection period. The average time to complete the survey was 22 min and no inducements of any kind were offered to participants.

Data Collection and Sample

Data for this study draws from the qualitative component of a cross-sectional study of 2,029 academic women working in 26

¹See <https://www.gov.za/covid-19/about/about-alert-system> for further information on the lockdown stages.

South African universities. An online survey that predominantly contained quantitative Likert scale questions as well as open-ended questions was distributed to women academics at institutions. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the relevant university's Research Ethics Committee. The ethical review process was followed by gateway clearance certificates in 25 universities; in one case, the research team was given permission by senior management to directly contact women academics at their university. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from the respondents through the online survey.

To ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of participants, the universities asked that the researchers limit the demographic information collected to career stage and parent status. The career stage of the study participants included established, mid-career, experienced, and early career academics (Table 1).

Just over half of respondents (53.6%) had children, while the 382 (18.8%) had children under the age of 6 in the home and 798 (39.3%) had school children ages 6-18 in the home. (Note that some respondents had children in both these categories).

Data Analysis

The study takes an interpretative, qualitative approach. The online survey contained an open-ended question for participants to discuss their experience of the pandemic. The subset of qualitative data from this portion of the data comprised more than 200,000 words and was included in this analysis. A conventional qualitative content analysis was performed, in which codes were generated from the text data. Given the large sample size, the open-ended nature of the qualitative question, and the amount of textual data, the aim was to identify common experiences among the group and possible relationships between the adverse impacts of the pandemic and the unique experiences or circumstances of women academics during the lockdown (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). A content analysis was therefore best suited to the study as it allowed the researchers to explore how and why the pandemic affected participants' emotional wellbeing based on their general and subjective descriptions of how lockdown affected them, rather than in response to questions probing specific mechanisms or issues identified *a priori* (e.g., child care, isolation, health issues). Hence, the approach reflects a commitment toward using the individual and subjective expressions of women academics to develop deeper understandings of their common experiences (Flick, 2015).

The selected analytic process allowed the researchers to transform the data utilizing a six-step framework as proposed by

Coleman and Unrau (2008). The coding of the qualitative data was performed using Atlas.ti 8 software. The benefit of using this software tool is that it allowed open coding in multiple rounds with many analytical layers that could be screened and sorted to pursue sub-topics in keeping with the Coleman and Unrau (2008) framework.

In the first step, data were prepared through extracting all written responses to the open-ended question of the survey. Confidentiality was maintained and anonymity ensured through removing the identifying information, namely participants' academic institutions. During the extraction process, each researcher became familiar with the entire data set independently before coding and interpretation commenced. In this way, allowance was made for meanings to emerge from the data instead of being prescribed.

The next step – reviewing of data – required each researcher to individually comb the data for responses that related to the theme of emotional wellbeing under lockdown conditions and screen these for contextual relevance. Responses were therefore filtered using relevant search terms: emotion and wellbeing. Because the open-ended question allowed participants to describe their experiences in all manner of terms that related to the adverse impacts of the pandemic, the data was intentionally filtered for explicit references to “emotion,” rather than references to “psychological,” “mental,” or “physical” issues, before screening them for meanings related to a toll or negative effect on wellbeing.

Steps three and four involved first- and second-level coding. First-level coding involved generating a series of meaning units or codes where similarities and differences in responses were identified in broad code families. The researchers then compared codes and, where required, these were reorganized through constant comparison. This process was also conducted for data validation, allowing researchers to compare, test, and verify their interpretations with each other, and to reclassify the data where necessary. Meaning units that were similar were subsequently allocated to the same categories. Similarly, second-level coding involved identifying differences and similarities between categories.

The fifth step – interpretation of the data – involved the development of conceptual classification systems that identified the relationships between the main themes. Here, discussion also took place between the researchers on the most meaningful and revealing excerpts to best illustrate the key themes, and to ensure their meaning had been fully and accurately captured.

Data Validity

In addition to the data validation measures taken during first-level coding, data validity was ensured during the sixth step of analysis, which related to confirming trustworthiness of the findings (Coleman and Unrau, 2008). Here, different researchers reviewed and confirmed credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the data interpretations. All three authors were well versed in qualitative analysis and were part of a research team on the broader study project. Therefore, a different yet equally experienced and competent set of five researchers reviewed the data interpretations for credibility, as a form of “member checking” (Bazeley, 2013). This process

TABLE 1 | Participant career stage.

Participant career stage	n (%)	Children	n (%)
Established (16+ years)	527 (26.0%)	No children	941 (46.4%)
Mid-career (11–15 years)	393 (19.4%)	Children	1088 (53.6%)
Experienced (6–10 years)	504 (24.8%)		
Early career (0–5 years)	605 (29.8%)		

allowed for alternative perspectives to be voiced and for changes and further clarifications to be made where appropriate (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019). Relatedly, confirmability was achieved by researchers “practicing reflexivity” to determine their biases or opinions that might impact their interpretation of the data (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). The researchers therefore reflected on their roles as academics when analyzing data.

Dependability was ensured by collecting data in the same way across participants, accurately documenting the data, and using the exact words of respondents in the findings (Given, 2008), all of which were done for this study. Although it is not possible to generalize findings from a non-probability sample, transferability is possible by generating deep descriptions and contextualizing them to make them applicable in other contexts (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). The initial data filtering of the open-ended responses, which creates the opportunity for rich description, screened for deep responses that provided sufficient context and lend themselves to transferability. The demographic data collected also provided useful context for this purpose.

RESULTS

This study explored the experiences of women academics during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand impacts on their emotional wellbeing. The effects of the pandemic took a toll on the emotional wellbeing for many women in the academy, who expressed a sense of frustration, weariness, anxiety, and being overwhelmed. We refer to this as ‘emotional taxation’. The three sources of emotional taxation that emerged from the qualitative data were work environment, home life, and social milieu (Table 2). Of the 2,029 respondents, 340 (17%), discussed emotional taxation of some kind. The frequency of the themes was counted per dataset, allowing for responses to contain multiple themes, and leading to a total of 638 entries, despite there being 340 datasets considered.

The emotionally stressful experience of the blending and converging of all aspects of women academics’ lives in one space and period of time is encapsulated in the following extract:

You have to be the emotional rock for everyone and meet the demands of work and in the end your tank is running on empty. But you must smile. You cannot debrief yourself from work on your way home so that you can nurture your family. Work and home life are blended, and neither is getting the attention it needs. Your family asks you why you are grumpy all the time. Because the new normal is not normal at all. The uncertainty is psychologically taxing, and this affects home life and work life. (Established academic and mother of one primary school student and two high school students)

Work Environment

The work environment – through colleague interaction and student support and involvement – was the first source of emotional taxation.

Toll: Emotional burden on students and students’ insufficient e-learning setup

TABLE 2 | Impact of lockdown and sources of impacts for women academics.

Category	Themes/Sub-themes	Description	Frequency
Impact of lockdown Sources	Emotional taxation	Frustration, weariness, anxiety, being overwhelmed	340
	Work environment		319 (94%)
	<i>Tolls</i>	Emotional burden on students	
	<i>Responses</i>	Students’ insufficient e-learning setup Providing continuous support (academic, emotional, financial) for students Lack of resources (devices, tools, and support) for virtual learning Lack of clear planning from the university Juggling family responsibilities with work obligations Burnout Supporting fellow academics via WhatsApp Brainstorming with team and fellow teachers	
	Home life		187 (55%)
	<i>Tolls</i>	Increased household responsibilities	
	<i>Responses</i>	Loss of support structures Burden on single parents Isolation in the home No connection to workplace Prioritizing needs of family (partner, child, other members) over the self	
	Social milieu		132 (39%)
	<i>Tolls</i>	Caring for friends, family, community members outside the home	
	<i>Responses</i>	Constant digital communications Lack of social outlets (non-home, non-work activities) De-prioritization of work Engaging in spiritual practices	

The new nature of work engagement, primarily through online platforms, compelled women academics to devote large chunks of their time to work activities. Attending to the practical and emotional requirements of fearful and anxious students was clearly the most time-consuming of all the tasks facing academics. Reaching out and responding to students placed more demands on their time during lockdown, as they felt it important to regularly check in on their students’ wellbeing and ensure that they had the resources and support they needed to continue to be productive. This engagement was mentally, financially, and emotionally draining.

I was not prepared for the emotional toll it would have. It is challenging when you have to maintain an online presence for students, responding timeously to queries. And providing support to students that extends beyond academic work. (Established academic with one child in primary school and another in high school)

I spent my own money in buying students data and have no regrets about this, but I feel for the students who are left behind despite the enormous effort my university had put in place to try and support the students – the need was just too great. (Established academic with no children)

As I have been actively involved with my students on platforms such as WhatsApp, I sometimes spend several hours with them discussing practical work. Their frustration of inadequate devices at home to do practical work (cell phones, tablet/laptops) had a

direct impact on my ability to teach. (Experienced academic with no children)

Toll: Providing continuous support for students

Women academics were most concerned about the provision of student support. Large numbers of students, already experiencing deeply concerning mental health challenges before lockdown, had been placed under additional stress by the pandemic. A sense of personal responsibility to support students and check in on those who had not responded to any university communication was evident.

As most of their data availability was after midnight, they got immediate support from me as I was still awake working, e.g., students asking via WhatsApp about the work at 2 am, got an answer within seconds to minutes from me. This of course came at the cost of sleep. (Established academic and mother of two teenagers)

Toll: Lack of resources for virtual learning

Women academics experienced further challenges when dealing with vulnerable students while having no training, resources, or related expertise to do so:

The emotional “burden” of the student struggles was very difficult to deal with. It almost felt like I needed debriefing as I was dealing with the vulnerable students that desperately needed to come back to campus. These students have such intense struggles and hearing about it was very difficult to deal with. (Established academic with no children)

Emotionally you are not coping because you know your students are going through the same issues. They are no longer removed from the social circumstances that make life difficult. They are now in the middle of difficult circumstances and there is not much you can do to support them. (Early-career mother of two primary-schoolers)

The stress of trying to help our disadvantaged students is taking an extreme toll on staff. I don’t know how we are going to manage completing this year without suffering with burnout or having a mental breakdown. There is no physical, emotional, or psychological support for what we are having to endure. (Established academic with no children)

Toll: Lack of clear planning from the university

Disturbingly, in some instances, academics received little support, encouragement, guidance, or practical assistance from their employers in navigating the changing environment.

I have been overwhelmed by the university’s opacity in planning and failure to communicate strategies in this time. (Early-career academic with no children)

Lecturers have worked extremely hard to support their students – including emotional support. The Department of Student Counseling has been entirely absent until the end of July – leaving lecturers to do far more work in the emotional arena. (Mid-career academic with no children)

I was not provided with sufficient resources in terms of laptop, printing equipment, etc., and I would need to fork out of my own pocket without the possibility of reimbursement. The

communication received from the institution also negatively impacted my emotional wellbeing. (Mid-career academic with no children)

Response: Juggling family responsibilities with work obligations

As a result of the additional demands on time, very few academics had the time, energy, or mental space to devote to research. One mid-career academic with a kindergartner and an adolescent shared how she could not submit her revised publication by the stipulated date and received “*little sympathy despite my efforts to actually reply in the end.*” She was frustrated, as she felt she had been held to the same standard as single and male counterparts and “*to compare me with others who do not have children and can work freely, puts me under tremendous stress because I have to work and try three times as hard (and am three times more burnt out).*”

Response: Burnout

Because women academics were on call at all times of the day and held themselves responsible for the time-consuming and emotionally draining plight of students, co-workers, and families, many experienced burnout:

I spent a lot of time on my phone to encourage others. The result is that I am exhausted! Like many females, I put myself last. I am proud that I cope under the circumstances, I do what I need to do, but I know from past experience that I need to take time for myself. I am a typical candidate for burnout. (Mid-career academic with one child in primary school and one in high school)

I feel bad if I don’t do everything in my power and more to support [students]. There is, however, nobody that supports my work-related emotional strain and burnout. I am very tired. I have been working seven days a week since the lock down started. (Mid-career academic with no children)

Response: Supporting fellow academics via WhatsApp and brainstorming with team

In the normal course of the workday, during which academic colleagues would have chatted regularly, communication had dwindled; some academics had attended only a few group meetings since the lockdown commenced, and it had left them somewhat directionless and adrift. As a result, heavy strain was placed on heads of department (HoDs) and those in managerial roles who had wider responsibilities – beyond their academic roles – to their academic communities in providing emotional support to their teams:

As HoD, I have an online meeting with our student representatives in the department every two weeks not just regarding the academic program, but very much regarding the emotional health and safety of the entire student’s cohort. The situation across the board created great anxiety and uncertainty among staff. (Established academic with no children)

The lockdown made my role as manager very difficult. I am used to being at the office most of the day with an open-door policy and colleagues can have real-time discussions with me and among each other. During lockdown, we have to schedule formal meetings, people keep their cameras off, I can hear in their voices that they are stressed out and I feel totally out of control.

(Established academic with a child in primary school and another in high school)

Others had more positive experiences:

I work with a dynamic team. We have continued to meet using online platforms but most of the meetings are supportive discussing how everyone is feeling, addressing the isolation, providing support for our clinical colleagues who are treating COVID patients. (Established academic with no children)

Support from fellow colleagues in the form of WhatsApp messages/groups and online Google meetings were a saving grace. We were able to talk about the new way of working, support one another professionally and personally. (Mid-career academic with no children)

Home Life

The next source of emotional taxation, potential distress, and strain experienced by women academics was home life, which included all the personal interactions, household responsibilities, and experiences that happen there.

Toll: Loss of support structures and increased household responsibilities

The absence of support structures such as schools, extended family, friends, or hired help made it almost impossible for women academics who were parents to devote energy to any meaningful academic task and resulted in a sense of frustration and exhaustion that left them emotionally tired.

The gender burden was observed by several respondents, leading to feelings of discontent:

The labor of shopping, cooking, cleaning, and dealing with health and welfare matters for a network of loved ones is falling heavily on women. (Experienced academic with no children)

I have drawn up a roster with regard to the housework which needs to be done but this hasn't worked out satisfactorily and I find that I have to first clean the house before I can get started on my university work. I have also experienced resentment toward my husband and children because of this. (Established academic and mother of a high school student and two younger children)

Academics found that their emotional work in their families had doubled through having to be understanding and calm, and providing comfort to others. In their opinion, this spoke directly to the socialization of gender roles.

Toll: Burden on single parents

While women in traditional family units expressed their distress and discomfort, single parents similarly reported an uphill battle, feeling emotionally strained, with little available support and opportunity for self-care:

Lockdown is particularly stressful for single parents as support structures such as friends, elderly family members, etc., are no longer accessible. (Early-career academic with a child in primary school)

Everything was just way too much, all at the same time. It was just my daughter and I in the house. I found this really demanding on

me. I had to keep it together for the child and myself. All this when I was emotionally down and drained. (Established academic with an adolescent child)

As a single mom, at home with two small children it is impossible to pretend it's business as usual. I have a very good work from home set up but doing academic work with little kids interrupting me is impossible. Taking care of their emotional and physical needs is obviously my priority. (Early-career academic with two young children)

Toll: Isolation in the home and no connection to workplace

Living alone had its own challenges too, especially when coupled with being new to a university and in an unfamiliar city:

The emotional stress/trauma of the hard lockdown was very, very difficult to cope with. I was relatively new to the university and to the area so had absolutely no local support system. It is very difficult to concentrate on academic work when you're stuck at home and have to cope with all of this all alone. (Early-career academic without children)

Another academic confided that living on her own had a very detrimental effect on her wellbeing, as she was a very extroverted person and found it very difficult to energize herself alone at home. This caused her to become very depressed, to the point that she had suicidal thoughts.

The home environment, typically a place of refuge from the stresses and strains of work, became an emotionally charged space for women academics during the pandemic, even when home life was not or had not been a source of strain and distress.

Response: Prioritizing needs of family over self

Women academics struggled with further challenges, as they not only had to support children emotionally, feed their families, and keep their homes liveable, but also had to deal with family members' realities:

I had to cope with my own anxieties and help my children cope with theirs. Both my children, one at school and the other, first year at university, had their own online learning challenges to deal with. We had to cope with home space becoming office spaces, classrooms, and lecture halls. (Experienced academic with one adolescent child and one child at university)

It took a few months for me to get into some sort of routine. My husband also worked from home and is in a very demanding job, so my needs were always the last to be met. On many days I felt like I wasn't coping [and I] had some days where I was really down and unproductive. (Early-career mother of two teenagers)

Social Milieu

The last source of emotional taxation and potential emotional distress was the social milieu, which involved extended family members and friends.

Toll: Caring for friends, family, community members outside the home

Friends of women academics had also faced challenges, including the death of loved ones, income-loss, loneliness, and mental health issues, while family members faced increased

childcare pressures, anxiety, financial stress, and sickness. Much of the time of women academics had been spent on emotionally supportive conversations and the provision of practical support.

Women academics confirmed the significant amount of time and emotional energy spent in trying to support family members and friends who were not coping. One experienced respondent with no children described her responsibility *“to ensure all those we know who need help are taken care of and also to support those who help others. This care took two to three days of the week.”* With regard to their own parents, a mid-career respondent described how she *“had to take responsibility for my elderly mother who lives on her own, and whom we have told not to go out at all. All her account payments, grocery shopping, and other responsibilities have become mine.”* This was echoed by other academics who had either taken the responsibility of keeping older parents safe or were concerned about parents who were not physically close.

Toll: Constant digital communications

The work of supporting others resulted in further emotional strain on the already over-stretched academic:

As time went on, I found the constant digital communication started becoming unsustainable for me, emotionally. It began to drain me, and I had to begin setting even stricter boundaries with my devices, my time spent reading of the news, following up on people, and responding to every message. (Early-career academic with no children)

Response: De-prioritization of work and engaging in spiritual practices

Meeting the emotional needs of others required good support structures within the academic's own home, where, for example, partners were fully involved in setting up and maintaining routines and had assumed a hands-on role in child-rearing and household chores. Although the relief of being able to be present and supportive for loved ones was evident, the emotional burden of care was taxing in terms of time, motivation, and energy. Respondents coped through a variety of strategies that included reprioritizing, self-talk, and faith.

There have also been days where I have accepted that it is all too much, and I need to spend half a day doing non-work activities if my mental health is going to survive this protracted crisis. (Early-career academic with no children)

I also felt emotionally drained. The positive thing about it is that I became more human and more humble [and] started praying more. (Experienced academic with no children)

Putting others first and juggling multiple responsibilities meant that one experienced academic and mother of a teenager had to *“defer my own course to finish at a later date. I feel defeated and yet I feel guilty about it – like I should be able to cope. I've always felt strong and resilient until now.”* This highlights the emotional price women academics had to bear, with a fellow experienced academic without children adding that *“the impact at home leaves me negative and stressed out which has a direct impact on my own academic studies.”*

Toll: Lack of social outlets

Yet, as the extracts reveal, even coping strategies had limitations and caused feelings of frustration and distress.

I feel completely emotionally spent but I cannot be; there is no room in our life for me to unravel. I have to maintain my cool and keep going. There is no chance for me to clock out of this situation; so, like so many other women, I have to put everything else before myself and it is making me deeply miserable. (Early-career mother of an infant)

I can't go to church to recharge emotionally. I participate in online services, but it is not the same. Everything is just too much. (Established academic with no children)

DISCUSSION

Work-Life Merge

The conditions of the pandemic lockdown took an emotional toll on many women academics, who recounted their experiences of stress, burnout, and fatigue. From the detailed descriptions they offered of the unique challenges that arose from the lockdown, it is clear that this emotional taxation is due to what Fetherston et al. (2021) refer to as “work-life merge.” As a consequence of the hard lockdown imposed in South Africa, home space merged with workspace as academics' houses became offices and classrooms. This held great consequences for how women academics lived and worked, and for their emotional wellbeing. Within this merged space, our findings suggest there were three predominant sources of taxation on emotional wellbeing for women academics: home life, social milieu, and work environment.

Participants who were partnered parents reported an unequal burden between themselves and their partners in sharing the heightened family responsibilities related to childcare and household maintenance. These findings may provide additional support for those of Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya's (2021) about the role of parenthood in the gender gap between the working experiences of male and female academics during lockdown. While several women academics used the lockdown as an opportunity to reconnect with their children, many were overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, depression, and anxiety at now being expected to cope with all aspects of their family, work, and social lives at once. This was exacerbated for single parents, who had little to no support.

Under strict lockdown, childcare and home assistance were limited and, in line with Crook (2020), participants reported that school closures and the unavailability of childcare services increased their workload, causing significant emotional stress. Single academics and new recruits described the emotional toll of isolation in similar terms as Gao and Sai (2020). For them, the merger of their work lives into the home space was threatening because they could not connect with colleagues, receive support from the university, or feel part of a workplace, which impacted their productivity and sense of themselves as academics. Participants indicated that prolonged isolation could lead to periods of hopelessness and self-doubt, severely hampering their emotional wellbeing. The response to this stress was to self-moderate their workload and spend more time on

non-work activities to preserve their mental health. This likely meant that they were reducing their research and other less urgent work as a coping mechanism, although it is not clear how effective this strategy was for maintaining emotional wellbeing.

With regard to other sources of emotional taxation, women academics were often juggling not just home-related responsibilities but the emotional needs of extended family and friends in their social milieu. During this time, concern for the wellbeing of others weighed heavily on participants. Time spent on supporting others further eroded the time women academics could devote to personal wellbeing and drained their already low reserves. Participants reported using a number of coping mechanisms, such as prayer and self-care, with varying degrees of success. Although they did not necessarily cite their interaction with colleagues as a coping mechanism, they discussed these interactions in very positive terms, which corresponds with Guy and Arthur's (2020) top recommendation for addressing mental health stressors.

Work and Wellbeing

It has previously been established that women academics are inclined to view their roles as more than mere jobs, but as integral to their identity and a place where they can contribute (Rosewell and Ashwin, 2018). By one interpretation, the work environment was the most emotionally taxing source, as it consumed so much time, which put pressure on other responsibilities and placed high emotional demands on academics. The responsibility of checking in with students to ensure they were coping with remote learning drained even the most able academics. Boncori (2020) described these demands of online teaching as emotional labor that exceeds normal job requirements. The women academics in this study, who were particularly challenged by the hardships facing their disadvantaged students, reported the impact of that labor on their emotional wellbeing in terms of fear of burnout and emotional breakdowns.

For women academics in leadership roles, the lockdown created challenges with professional communication and support, which required them to take on even more responsibilities on top of their demanding work and family responsibilities. Participants shared a sense that while the university communicated the message that lecturers should care for their students, they offered little in the way of guidance or resources for academics to do this effectively, requiring some participants to purchase materials for their students. This led to participants experiencing self-directed feelings of frustration and anger, and having concerns that they were emotionally exhausted.

Concertina Effect

Overall, this study showed that the work-life merge of lockdown acted as a concertina on the emotional wellbeing of women academics, manifesting in extreme increases in levels of stress as they struggled to manage their household, social, and work responsibilities all at once. This is to say nothing of the negative impact on their academic output: disruption of their studies, delays in research, or reduced writing, examples of which are already emerging in the literature on academic gender gaps during COVID-19 (Andersen et al., 2020; Gabster et al., 2020).

Investigating the reasons for these patterns through interviews with women academics, Minello et al. (2020) found that one key cause is the precedence that teaching is taking over writing for women academics. The activities of holding online classes, monitoring students, and preparing different types of lectures are extremely time consuming, and, as our findings confirmed, the challenge of making time for all of them is exacerbated for women who have the dual role of academic and caregiver – whether that is care for children, family members, friends, students, or colleagues.

In her study of the online working experiences of academics during the pandemic, Gourlay (2020, p. 809) describes how “performing the university” in this way places a complex set of practical and emotional demands on academics by rendering “the private and domestic space hybrid, complex, and compromised”. According to her analysis, the emotional taxation on academics in the pandemic era – the very experiences voiced by our participants – is inextricably linked to a limited conception within the greater academic community about what digital engagement actually is, and what its implications are for how academics perform it.

CONCLUSION

As the work-life merge is expected to carry on indefinitely in higher education, universities need to be aware of its adverse impacts on the emotional wellbeing of women academics, with severe implications for their families, students, colleagues, work, and own personal wellbeing. These findings of the specific challenges facing women suggest the ways in which universities and the academic field can mitigate the emotional toll on women, such as alleviating the emotional labor burden on women by finding other avenues to support students; extending deadlines, adjusting requirements, and lowering demands on academics with young children and complex personal situations; and providing emotional support by ensuring regular communication and engagement between academics and their colleagues.

For women academics themselves, many in the field have already been forthcoming with recommendations for managing the practical and psychological challenges of working in lockdown (Guy and Arthur, 2020; Kowal et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020). As Restubog et al. (2020) find of parents working from home during lockdown, practicing emotional regulation by actively discussing positive events with family members and colleagues, or adopting an adaptability mindset toward career changes, is a useful and available lever for managing one's own emotional wellbeing.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The data considered in this study were drawn from a larger study of South African universities and the findings may be specific to the local context and the lockdown conditions within the country at the time of the data collection. The study would have benefitted from the inclusion of male academics as participants to ascertain

whether certain stressors were gendered and in what ways. Future studies may wish to seek views across demographic categories, career stages, disciplines, and geographical sites. A further avenue for exploration would be an in-depth qualitative study to explore the redress measures sought by women academics to alleviate challenges to their wellbeing.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because, as part of the agreement for access with all universities, we undertook to keep the dataset completely confidential. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to CW, cyrillwalters@sun.ac.za.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Stellenbosch's Research

Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioral and Education Research – ethical clearance number REC-2020-15216. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LR and AB conceptualized the manuscript's focus, proposed the objectives, prepared the draft manuscript, and wrote all the sections. CW conceptualized the original broader study from which the data were drawn and collected all the data. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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