



Research Discourses on Women Academics During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Has a Bad Situation Turned Worse?

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor force is not gender-neutral. Despite both genders being affected by disruptions in the workplace, women are particularly vulnerable due to long-standing occupational gender segregation and labor market inequalities (Carli, 2020; Zarrilli & Luomaranta, 2021). Data show that women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to the pandemic's consequences. Additionally, more women have transitioned from full-time to part-time employment to take on increased domestic and childcare responsibilities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This is because women tend to cluster in occupations requiring higher personal contact, making them more susceptible to the pandemic's

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fallout (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Women in less developed countries face even greater challenges, such as rising levels of poverty, hunger, and social inequality due to employment changes, further exacerbating their situation (Al-Ali, 2020).

Women working in academia are not immune to the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic due to preexisting gender disparities in the field. Despite global efforts to diversify academia, a quick overview of the literature reveals representational and experiential disparities (Gonzales et al., 2023). For instance, women are more likely to be employed in less stable, more teaching-focused positions with limited power and resources (Finkelstein et al., 2015). Studies also indicate that women academics take on or are implicitly assigned care work both at the workplace and at home (Dengate et al., 2019). Female academics are expected to engage in non-academic tasks, such as caring for students' and colleagues' needs (Gonzales et al., 2023), and tend to invest more time in housework and childcare than male academics (Naz et al., 2017). Furthermore, organizational cultures within higher education institutions across the globe are often gendered, leading to women academics feeling unwelcome (Rhoads & Gu, 2012). With universities worldwide shifting to online classes and remote work and higher education institutions cutting pay and laying off employees due to financial hardship (Rapanta et al., 2020; Lederman, 2020), the COVID-19 crisis may have exacerbated the structural gender inequality in academia, particularly for women academics in contingent positions who take on more teaching and administrative work.

This literature review aims to provide a sneak peek into the research published before April 2022 concerning women academics' experiences during the pandemic, diving into the research discourse that first surfaced. Understanding the gendered impact of the pandemic on academia is crucial for those interested in addressing gender disparities within the profession. The review question is as follows: How does research discourse represent the experiences of women academics during the pandemic?

CONCEPTUAL LENS

The conceptual lens of this review draws upon colonial logics. Specifically, the notion of colonial logics helps me unpack how "social classifications" are created, shaping contemporary global structures. Quijano (2000) argued that identity categories were one of the most powerful colonial impositions, while Oyěwùmí (1997) suggested that the colonial state's

creation of the “woman category” was one of its earliest accomplishments. Along the same line of thought, Lugones (2010) suggests that gender is mapped onto the labor hierarchy so that women, especially women of color, are positioned in the lower strata in the labor hierarchy. Gonzales et al. (2023) build upon these arguments by highlighting how colonial logics construct women as inferior to men and nonwhite women as inferior to white women based on physical attributes. Furthermore, the immense economic inequalities in the world today are a path-dependent outcome of colonial processes (Acemoglu et al., 2001). Understanding these colonial legacies is essential for understanding how the pandemic has affected women academics across the globe and disciplines, as these inequalities continue to shape the academic profession.

METHODOLOGY

Critical Discourse Analysis

I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) in this review, which allowed me to examine how the literature reflects and reproduces the issues of dominance, inequity, and power originating from structures and powerful actors (Foucault, 1970; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Gee (2015) illustrated the basic types of discourse analysis: “small d” discourse analysis (“language-in-use”) and “big D” discourse analysis (the enactment of socially and historically significant identities and social structures). Fairclough (2003) distinguishes between the abstract concept of “discourse” as the dual property of construing and describing social life and the count noun “discourse/discourses” as different ways of representing social reality or diverse perspectives on a particular issue. I follow Foucault’s perspectives and view discourse broadly as the history of knowledge and practice and as the process by which knowledge and practice become solidified and normalized (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Stahl, 2008).

Discourse analysis has been considered to have great potential in higher education research (Sousa & Magalhães, 2014; Nokkala & Saarinen, 2018) and has been adopted in systematic literature reviews to discern power relations demonstrated through texts (e.g., Yao & Mwangi, 2022). According to Foucault (1970), discourse and structures of power and inequity are interrelated. This aligns with my belief that the literature concerning women academics during the COVID-19 pandemic not only depicts their experiences during the pandemic but also integrates issues of

inequity, which places their experience in a wider historical and social context where women have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed in academia.

Data Collection and Analysis

To identify eligible studies, I conducted a search on ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search terms included *women* OR *female*, AND *professor* OR *academics* OR *teacher*, AND *COVID-19* OR *pandemic* OR *COVID-19 pandemic*. For studies to be included, they needed to be (1) published in a peer-reviewed journal, (2) published in English, (3) collected empirical data, (4) addressed women academics in higher education contexts, and (5) addressed the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Fig. 10.1, the literature search generated 66 results. Data collection was completed by the end of April 2022. After removing articles based on the inclusion criteria and deleting duplicates across search results from different search engines, 25 were included for further analysis.

The data analysis process followed the general analytical framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Mullet (2018). First, I examined the background of each text and summarized their primary characteristics, such as the research context, primary research questions, overarching research methodology, and primary results. Second, using an inductive approach, I coded the texts and identified three major themes: increased care work, reduced research productivity, and impacts on mental health and career outlook. Next, I conducted external analysis, comparing the literature on women academics during the COVID-19 pandemic with other related literature to uncover similarities and differences in the discourses. I also included studies on women academics beyond the pandemic to better understand the commonalities and uniqueness of this body of literature. Additionally, I conducted internal analysis, examining patterns, words, and linguistic devices that represent power relations, social context, or speakers' positionalities. Finally, I interpreted the meaning of the major themes and external and internal relations in relation to my research question and conceptual lens.

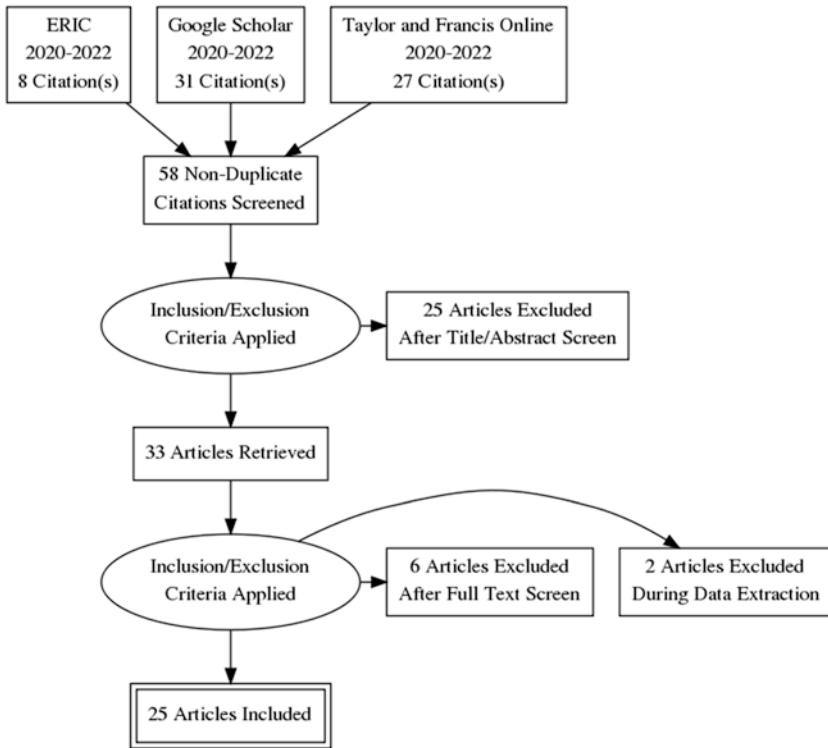


Fig. 10.1 Literature search process

FINDINGS

The literature analyzed in this study demonstrates rich diversity in terms of disciplinary and geographical representation. It focuses on women academics across various fields such as social sciences, humanities, medicine, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). This diversity is reflected in the types of journals where the articles were published. While only two of the selected articles were published in education-related journals, the rest were published in either discipline-specific journals or those that focus on labor, leisure, and family relations. The literature also covers a wide range of geographic locations, including the U.S., the U.K., Australia, South Africa, Canada, Pakistan, Poland, Turkey, France,

Germany, Sweden, Italy, Norway, and Brazil. Methodologically, surveys, interviews, personal reflective narratives, and visual methods are utilized in the studies to investigate women academics' experiences during the pandemic. The following sections summarize three major themes that emerged in the literature: declined research productivity, increased care work, and mental health and career prospect impacts. The conceptual lens will be used to unpack the implications of the themes.

Increased Care Work

Several studies included in this review have highlighted the increased demand for care labor during the pandemic, particularly for women, both at home and in the workplace. The pandemic has further exacerbated the uneven distribution of domestic work, which was already present before the pandemic. The lockdown measures implemented in many countries have resulted in reduced availability of childcare and domestic support, such as in-person school attendance, daycare facilities, and extended family support. Additionally, the closure of restaurants has forced people to cook more often at home. As Górska et al. (2021) noted, “as homes turned into workspaces, the motherhood penalty and patriarchal division of labor within the private sphere set different starting points for male and female academics’ ability to perform professional work” (p. 1550). The pandemic has indeed affected male and female academics differently (Ali & Ullah, 2021; Bender et al., 2021; Górska et al., 2021) since women are more likely to take on extra care work. In addition, women academics often find themselves as the primary emotional support provider for their family members (Minello et al., 2021; Bender et al., 2021). For instance, Bender et al. (2021) found that women academics felt responsible for mitigating the negative consequences of the pandemic for their children. However, the physical, emotional, and cognitive energy required for this mitigation, particularly when they had to take on the primary default caregiver role, was often overwhelming.

There was also an increased amount of care work related to teaching as most classes moved online. A study collecting qualitative and quantitative data from 2029 women academics in South Africa specified that the pandemic complicated teaching and administration the most. While women are more likely than men to hold teaching positions, the added responsibilities of teaching and administration associated with switching classes online have “implications for an already elusive gender equality in research”

(Walters et al., 2022, p. 1). Similarly, both men and women claimed to have more individualized interactions with students than before the pandemic, yet men focused on formal support in terms of course content, while women reported a sense of responsibility for supporting students not only academically but also psychologically and emotionally (Górska et al., 2021).

The compelling evidence concerning care work women have taken on further exposed the structural gender inequity in academia. In comparison to the pre-pandemic literature examining women academics' experiences, the literature in this review has paid more attention to how women manage their conflicting roles as researchers, teachers, administrators, mothers, and caretakers amid increased care work. Indeed, the preexisting uneven expectation and distribution of care work widened the care labor gap during a challenging time. Overall, women struggle more with work-life balance due to the blurred boundary between one's personal and professional lives under the condition of lockdowns (Crabtree et al., 2021). When examining these phenomena through the lens of colonial logics, I posit that these problems linger because the academic labor force all around the world is invested in and built from colonialist "social classifications," which assign certain types of work to certain individuals (e.g., women academics are assigned or expected to take on care work).

Decreased Research Productivity

Several studies have found a decline in women's research productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using databases from journals and scholarly preprint repositories, researchers measured women academics' research output before and during the pandemic (Ribarovska et al., 2021; Squazzoni et al., 2021; King & Frederickson, 2021). For instance, Squazzoni et al. (2021) analyzed submitted manuscripts and peer-reviewed activities for all Elsevier journals between February and May from 2018 to 2020. They found that during the first wave of the pandemic, women submitted proportionally fewer manuscripts than men, and this disparity was more pronounced among junior cohorts of women academics. Similarly, King & Frederickson (2021) examined the gender composition of more than 450,000 authorships in the arXiv and bioRxiv scholarly preprint repositories and found gender disparities in first, middle, and solo authorship submission rates during the pandemic. Women with children were more severely affected, reporting greater disruptions to their

routines than men or women without children (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

Some studies focus on how female and male academics perceive the impact of the pandemic on their productivity across various geographical locations (Breuning et al., 2021; Staniscuaski et al., 2021; Parlak et al., 2020). These findings were consistent with data presented in studies that focused on journal publications and authorships. For instance, Breuning et al. (2021) surveyed women and men academics and found that both groups considered the pandemic disruptive to their research activities, but they agreed that “women will be worse off than men in academia, post-pandemic” (p. 429). Similarly, Staniscuaski et al. (2021) surveyed 3345 Brazilian academics from various research institutions and knowledge areas, asking whether they were able to submit papers as planned and meet deadlines during the initial period of social isolation. The results indicated that male academics, particularly those without children, were the least affected group, while Black women and mothers were the most impacted groups.

The classification of labor based on gender, as previously discussed, is coupled with the hierarchical assignment of value to different types of work, which only further amplifies gendered labor hierarchies during times of crisis. There have been abundant discussions on the disruptions in productivity and achievements (or lack thereof) in the production of research outputs among women academics (Lerchenmüller et al., 2021; Ribarovska et al., 2021; Squazzoni et al., 2021; King & Frederickson, 2021). The heightened focus on research output is not surprising. Mar Pereira (2021) argued that data on research output are relatively easy and quick to collect on both small and large scales. While research output is also an important theme in studies conducted prior to the pandemic (e.g., Aiston & Jung, 2015; O’Brien & Hapgood, 2012), the overwhelming dominance of this type of research in the pandemic-related literature is unprecedented. However, it is important to note that the focus on publication reflects the institutionalized cultures of performativity where publication increasingly becomes the indicator of academics’ performance and excellence (Mar Pereira, 2021). In contrast to the way research publication is centered, care work in both domestic and public spheres is usually invisible and unrewarded, which affirms that the stratified academic labor force positions women in vulnerable positions.

Aversive Effects on Mental Health and Career Prospects

Another theme that emerged from the literature is the aversive effects of the pandemic on women academics, specifically regarding their mental health and long-term career outlook. Several studies have highlighted the increased risk of mental health challenges faced by women academics during the pandemic (Ali & Ullah, 2021; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021). Docka-Filipek and Stone's (2021) survey study found that gender was a significant predictor of pandemic-related risks to mental health. While their study did not fully explain academic women's heightened clinical measures of depression and anxiety, other studies offer some insights into potential reasons. In addition to the increased challenges of balancing professional and family responsibilities (Bender et al., 2021; Burk et al., 2021; Kim & Patterson Jr., 2022), Burk et al. (2021) argued that the lockdown situation reproduced feelings of maternal guilt and shame, as women were more evidently "unavailable" to their children in a sociocultural context where expectations of intensive mothering remain dominant. Indeed, most studies indicate that women with children experienced greater pressure. However, Gao and Sai (2020) nuanced the discussion by highlighting the social isolation and struggles of single women academics. The authors argue that masculine policies that emphasized "scientific and strategic" responses to the pandemic have been dominant, adding to the sense of exclusion, isolation, and loneliness experienced by single women who live alone during the lockdown.

Research also indicates that the long-term effects of the pandemic on women academics may impact their career prospects. Kim and Patterson Jr. (2022) found that female academics, particularly those in junior positions, tweeted less about their professional accomplishments than their male counterparts. This decrease in professional communication could potentially damage the reputation of women academics and may be attributed to the added family responsibilities resulting from the pandemic. Tso and Parikh (2021) predict that women academics may experience delayed career progression due to the pandemic, and there is even a risk that some women may lose their jobs in the long run (Spradley et al., 2020). Moreover, women academics may face scrutiny of their professionalism, and their multitasking to fulfill academic responsibilities and caregiving duties may be seen as unprofessional, leading to potential punishment. As a result, women academics may experience increased insecurity and

pressure to prove their worth to their institutions to counteract any interruptions to their work (Spradley et al., 2020).

Despite a rich body of literature on the organizational structure and culture of higher education and its relationship to the experiences of women academics prior to the pandemic (Carapinha et al., 2017; Makori et al., 2016), the literature that emerged in the early phase of the pandemic does not appear to address the issue at the organizational level. As Gumport (2012) argues, some researchers have approached the equity problem as if it were an individual or isolated issue. Studies that address the struggles of women academics with mental health and career prospects should also challenge the academic system that values certain epistemologies, labor, and bodies while devaluing others to dismantle colonialism and its “social classifications.” Neglecting the organizational dimension of the problem is a significant drawback in seeking to understand the underlying factors that enable and sustain gender inequality in academia worldwide or in initiating transformative changes to improve female academics’ career advancement opportunities and work environments.

DISCUSSION

Pushing the Discourse Forward

The literature examined in this study uncovers the gender inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic by underscoring various challenges women academics are faced with. However, I argue that the discourses manifested in the literature may reproduce problematic assumptions about gender and academic labor globally. In several of the studies, productivity was assumed to be research productivity, which was measured through the number of articles published and whether women academics were the first authors of the publication. The problematic equation implicitly or explicitly made between productivity and research output is concerning, as women academics’ domestic and academic care work that is productive is devalued and framed as a counterforce against their research productivity (Bender et al., 2021; Breuning et al., 2021). Pointing out the fact that women academics’ professional identities are under threat, Couch et al. (2020) guarded against the implicit assumption that women are less “focused” or are not truly “working” at home. Regardless of the intention, the discourses that heavily focus on research outputs may reproduce the colonialist ideologies of what counts as work and productivity.

Additionally, this body of literature lacks discussions on intersectionality. The prepandemic literature concerning women academics entails rich discussions about women academics' complex intersectional identities, such as race, class, sexuality, position type, and nationality (Moore et al., 2019), which is not as visible in the literature examined in this study. This body of literature also tends to address women academics from different parts of the world through a "one size fits all" approach, which is what transnational feminism argues against. Transnational feminism critiques the concept of a "global sisterhood" and recognizes that the experiences of women vary depending on their local and global contexts (Morgan, 1984). In essence, transnational feminism aims to challenge the idea that women worldwide share the same types of experiences, oppressions, forms of exploitation, and privileges and instead explores how the diverse experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the world may differ or intersect (Zerbe Enns et al., 2021). The current studies are either smaller in scale and context-specific (Ali & Ullah, 2021; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021) or large-scale quantitative studies that include different contexts but do not differentiate or contrast the context differences (Staniscuaski et al., 2021; Kim & Patterson Jr., 2022). The current research discourses might leave the audience with the false assumption that women academics across the globe share the same pandemic experiences despite much evidence suggesting otherwise.

Implications and Future Steps

The impact of the pandemic on the academic labor force is gendered. What is less obvious is "how exactly one should conceptualize academic work, academic productivity, and even gender, when analyzing these phenomena and making policy demands about them" (Mar Pereira, 2021, p. 500). While it is true that the COVID-19 pandemic might have exacerbated the structural inequity in academia, all hope is not lost. While few, there are scholars who urge disruptions of the current labor distribution and how value is assigned to different types of work. Couch et al. (2020) argued against positioning women's work and their way of working as lesser. They asked whether the pandemic might help people recognize the problem behind these assumptions. Similarly, Oleschuk (2020) suggests higher education institutions to "work toward shifting institutional norms around gender, work, and carework" (p. 511). As such, future studies may

ask different questions that disrupt the prepandemic status quo by challenging colonial impositions. Instead of measuring research productivity by counting the number of articles published, for example, future researchers may consider how other types of labor that have long been devalued can be centered and valued.

Meanwhile, I call for reflexivity, which requires exploration, critique, and deconstruction of the reproduction of Northern or Eurocentric knowledge, particularly regarding gender-related experiences (Canetto, 2019; Yakushko, 2020). There is an urgent need to examine women academics' experiences during the pandemic across different races, classes, and nationalities. This body of literature offered perspectives from various contexts other than the Global North such as Pakistan, South Africa, Turkey, and Brazil (e.g. Parry & Gordon, 2021; Walters et al., 2022; Ali & Ullah, 2021; Parlak et al, 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021), yet further analysis is needed to nuance women academics' intersectional identities by taking global power and economic differences into consideration. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to dive into how higher education institutions may further diversify academia in detail, I maintain that higher education institutions should open the doors for more flexible work schedules and acknowledge the contributions that women academics make outside of research. With that, scholars and practitioners may focus on exploring educational practices that resist the colonial "social classification" in academia.

The studies analyzed in this review were published by April 2022, but it is important to note that many more studies may have been published since then. Therefore, the themes that emerged in this review may not fully represent the experiences of women academics worldwide. This review provides a snapshot of the research discourse when people just started to write and publish on the issue of academic gender disparities during the pandemic. As more studies are conducted, future research should examine the literature on this issue over time to see how the discourse evolves and its implications. For example, there may be more studies concerning women academics in the Global South or those in less research-focused institutions and position types that have not been fully represented in the first wave of publications. It would be valuable for researchers to examine whose voices are being prioritized and represented in research in a timely manner and whose experiences and voices are being ignored or delayed in representation. This will allow us to better understand the complex experiences of women academics during the pandemic

and work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for all.

CONCLUSION

The studies analyzed in this review showcased that women academics struggle with increased care work, decreased research output, and challenges associated with mental health and long-term career prospects. By using colonialism as a conceptual lens, I interpret the challenges that women academics face during the pandemic as a result of a stratified academic labor force, where “social classification” dictates the roles that women academics are assigned and whose work is valued and rewarded. While studies published during the first two years of the pandemic have exposed gender inequities in academia across the world, I caution against the danger of the research discourse further perpetuating colonial logics by reinforcing the superiority of research and publication and viewing women’s epistemology and work as less valuable. Drawing on arguments made by transnational feminists, I also emphasize the importance of understanding women’s experiences worldwide from different perspectives, rejecting the “one size fits all” or “global sisterhood” assumptions. Finally, when examining the discourse in research, it is crucial to reflect on who is being represented and whose voices are being heard and prioritized. Through conducting this review, I challenge readers to consider whose experiences might be missing from early publications on women academics and the implications of such representational issues in research.

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