Higher Education (2024) 87:1791–1807
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01091-z

# Care and academic work in a pandemic lockdown: a study of women academics in South Africa

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Accepted: 2 August 2023 / Published online: 12 August 2023
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**Abstract**

The lack of women in leadership across higher education has been problematised in the literature. Often, contemporary discourses promote "fixing the women" as a solution. Consequently, interventions aimed at helping women break through "the glass ceiling" abound. We argue that the gendered power relations at play in universities cause entrenched inequalities to remain in place, regardless of measures implemented for and by women. This article reports on a study of the impact of COVID-19 on 2029 women academics in South Africa. We examine how academic women's roles as nurturers at home are extended to their roles as carers at work, and how these impact their prospects for career progression. The article further shows how expectations placed on women academics as carers contribute to gendered dimensions of inequality that are detrimental to both their own well-being and careers. Finally, we call on higher education institutions to "fix themselves", rather than "the women", if they want to dismantle gender inequalities.

**Keywords** Women · Care · Academic work · Pandemic

## Introduction

> Becoming aware of gender in a patriarchal system means recognizing that men and women are not valued equally, that in fact, men are socially more esteemed than women. (Flax, 1978, p. 173).

Gendered roles are thus contested and identities crystalised as academia and academic institutions become more intricate and differentiated environments (Clegg, 2008;

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Cole et al., 2007). Mather (1998) highlights two societal influences that impact how women's roles are perceived within academia. First, there is a heightened expectation that women take on the responsibility as primary carers in families, and that they sacrifice parts of their careers to this role (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Huopalainen, 2019; Nash & Churchill, 2020). Second, women within the academy are expected to fulfil a similar role by providing care to students and taking on greater teaching responsibilities than men, because the nature of this work is taken to be better suited to them than is research (Aiston & Jung, 2015; Magoqwana et al., 2020; Meschitti & Smith, 2017; Rosewell & Ashwin, 2019). The gendered divide between teaching and research (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; Grant & Elizabeth, 2015) has not changed over time, resulting in unfavourable outcomes where the barriers to progression and promotion of women academics persist (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021).

University students have been found to hold gendered expectations of their academic teachers, rating the best women teachers as 'caring and nurturing' (Sprague & Massoni, 2005). While students hold *all* teachers accountable to certain expectations, Walters et al. (2022) assert that the burdens on women are more labour-intensive than those on men. These expectations can at times lead to self-defeating behaviours, as care is not separated from the demands placed on educators. While care remains an elusive notion to measure, it is a critical component of what educators do, how they define their work, and how successful they are. (Mcbee & Mcbee, 2007). The ethical imperative to develop caring communities because it is the 'right thing to do' became an even greater consideration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Care is at the centre of our individual lives, successes and happiness, and having caring educators has been shown to have a positive influence on students' lives and educational outcomes (Goldstein & Lake, 2000). It is well established in the literature that women demonstrate an ethic of care that requires the development of meaningful relationships, the willingness to sustain relationships, and a pledge to engage with others with sensitivity and flexibility (Hawk, 2017; Mcbee & Mcbee, 2007; Smith & Kempster, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the career development and productivity of women academics, as well as on the tensions between their work and family life and the conditions in which they work (Oleschuk, 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021a, 2021b; Walters et al., 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). While it was not unexpected that women across employment sectors would experience the greatest impact, very few higher education institutions were able to provide additional support or flexibility in adjusting administrative and teaching workloads (Staniscuaski et al., 2021a, 2021b). The opportunities for women to thrive were consequently curtailed, rendering traditional models of work–life balance ineffective where the dual roles of carers and academicians intersect (Beech et al., 2021). The migration to working in hybrid and hyflex environments further complicates the experiences of nurturance and care as the emotional toll on women's academics has increased due to the blurring of work–home boundaries (Ronnie et al., 2022).

Participation rates within the academy vary across countries since organisational climate and societal culture play important roles in attracting, retaining, and promoting women in academia. The South African context is no different from elsewhere in the world; however, as a country, considerable progress has been made in bringing women into employment through the use of quotas (Employment Equity Act no 55 of 1998). Coe et al. (2019) argue that although '…Sub-Saharan Africa scores 0.569 on the Gender Inequality Index, making it the region where women face the most gender inequality in reproductive health, education, political representation, and the labour market'; the sub-Sahara African region has made notable progress in improving female representation at the leadership level.

In this article, we share the findings of a study on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on academic women. While this research contributes to the literature on caring, boundaries, and an ethic of care in higher education, its main contribution lies in its findings.

## Care is relational and more than a duty

The balance between benevolence and scholarly professionalism is often difficult to maintain, forming part of a continuous relational process between academics and students (Atkinson, 2013; Hawk, 2017). The focus on care within education and faculty–student relations has gained prominence since the 1980s and has become a central component of teaching and teacher education (Gilligan, 1982, 1989; Noddings, 1984, 2002; Robinson & Kilgore, 2020; Thompson, 1998; Zembylas & Mcglynn, 2012). Care is relational and defined according to the practices and actions of those who provide it (Hawk, 2017; Hawk & Lyons, 2008; Tirri & Husu, 2002). Despite the multiple axes of variation across cultures, it is commonly considered to be the expression of feelings of concern and responsibility towards someone or something (Lumby & Azaola, 2014; Zembylas et al., 2014).

Noddings (1984) explains that, as relational processes, caring relationships are characterised by four pillars: a fixation or attention on the relationship, shifts in motivation, promise and dedication, and constant validation. In other words, care requires meeting people first, 'where they are at' and being fully present; second, 'seeing the world from the others perspective or frame of reference'; third, 'not being incumbered by formal constraints that could weaken the relationship'; and finally, 'commitment must be constant, even in difficult times by both those caring and those cared for'. These requisites are not abstract but address concrete aspects in faculty–student relationships, in which care is expressed as a duty towards others, but also has *reciprocity* at its core (Chory & Offstein, 2017; Huopalainen, 2019; Noddings, 1984; Zembylas et al., 2014). Gilligan (1982) sees the ethic of care as more typically expressed by women and, like Noddings, she offers insights into how the responsibility in relationships *between* women and students form this ethic's core. For both Noddings and Gilligan, pioneers of ethics of care within feminist schools of thought, the moral imperative in *sharing* care moves beyond a duty- or justice-based ethic of the kind more often adopted by men in academia (Gilligan, 1989). These insights illustrate the delicate ecosystem that exists between faculty and students, in which the morality of care is linked to the faculty–student relationship, and the importance of reciprocity within it (Smith & Kempster, 2019).

Gilligan (1995) calls on educators to consider that care flourishes in the connections between people and how their lives are intertwined, explicitly and implicitly. While expressions of care can be seen as a responsibility owed to students (Zembylas, 2017), not all faculty are willing to be relational in sharing care. In many ways, the outward articulation of duty towards students has been described in the literature as 'faculty providing safe spaces for learning' (Flintoft & Bollinger, 2016; Sykes & Gachago, 2018); 'complying and engaging with 'mechanical' higher education and institutional standards' (Keeling, 2014; Sam, 2021); 'offering students support and considering student welfare' (Brower, 2021; Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Matthews et al., 2018); 'preventing discrimination in the class' (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin et al., 2006; Lu, 2018); and 'creating teachable moments and providing opportunities for engaging about concerns in an open and transparent manner' (Hawk, 2017; Scott, 2015).

While some studies have questioned the connection between gender and care (Burke, 2017; Elley & Judith, 2021; Juujärvi et al., 2010; Rashedi et al., 2015), it has been shown that women tend to do disproportionately more care work than men in higher education (Acker, 1995; Acker & Dillabough, 2007; Blackmore & Sachs, 2000; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Morley, 2000).

## Boundaries of care in academia

Caring and acting with care require faculty to know their students' interests and struggles (Goldstein & Lake, 2000). Smith and Kempster (2019) explain that faculty must show an appreciation of the context within which these relationships occur, as this forms the foundation of an educator's care ethics. The fixation on a relationship can be seen in the way women academics, *as carers*, fully engage with their students in nurturing ways for the totality of the relationship (Lumby & Azaola, 2014). While it may not be a work requirement to care for students beyond the classroom, women do so more often than their male counterparts, crossing this boundary (Walters et al., 2021) to deliver on the greater work demands placed on them by students (El-alayli, 2018). The 'burden' of care does not only arise in a teaching relationship between student and faculty. The gendered dimensions of leadership (Acker, 2012, 2014; Davies et al., 2020) often give rise to a 'morality that captures women' bringing both 'punishment as well as reward', (Morley, 2013, p. 118) and leaving many women sleepless and out of balance in the academe (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016).

Academic work has porous boundaries, and the expectations on women to show commitment, stay emotionally engaged, and be productive are not new (Kumar, 2005; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). With no distinct boundaries evident for academics, there tends to be no limit on the amount of work expected or performed. Women, in turn, tend to have to balance the demands of a paying career within the academy with those of the gendered role of providing care in both home and work environments (Franzway, 2000). Similarly, the boundedness of care does not exist; in other words, there are no limitations on the amount of care others require and may expect from carers (Sprague & Massoni, 2005). This has a direct impact on the progression of women in the academy, as Grummell et al., (2009:197) caution: 'childbearing and caring becomes crucial to determining women's future career paths, including senior management possibilities'.

How far can the boundaries of care then extend without unfairly impacting the careers of women (Walters et al., 2021) and without breaking spirits (Fine & Glendinning, 2005)? The level of commitment to unpaid work by women academics requires attention and support from academic institutions if equality of opportunity is to be achieved (Cardozo, 2017; Rogus, 2003). While men do express a willingness to take on greater levels of unpaid care work, the gender gap in unpaid care work has narrowed only slowly, both in the home and at work (Elson, 2017). So, why then are women more likely to commit to unpaid care than men in academic institutions (Hinman, 2008; Juujärvi et al., 2010)?

Walker and Gleaves (2016) explain why these boundaries of care are overridden or carried into the faculty–student relationship. They suggest that when the caring teacher embraces relationships with students at the centre of their practise with an "active concern in students' personal lives" (p. 68), care practices manifest in different ways: they feel compelled to care; they enact their care as a means of institutional resistance; and finally, they experience 'caring as less than', a situation in which conflicted feelings come to undermine

their personal ethics. Two key elements of Walker's and Gleaves' model stand out. First, they recognise that there are personal barriers that teachers encounter in terms of their roles and feelings, and second, they perceive that teachers' perceptions of the structural barriers for operationalising care in higher education institutions are often blinding. What is clear is that in expressing care, there are practical implications, as teachers are required to do more than fulfil a duty of sharing the curriculum, and are called on to relate to students in a person-centred manner (J. Walker, 2009).

## Method

This article presents a segmental report on a larger study of 2029 academic women in South Africa's 26 public universities. The target population was female academic staff in public universities, regardless of rank or terms of appointment.

A survey questionnaire was distributed to all women academics with 12 Likert-scale questions followed by an open-ended section with unlimited word space for respondents to report any aspect of the impact of the lockdown on their academic work. The survey questionnaire represented the 'data corpus' from which the 'data set', the open-ended questions at the end of the surveys, were analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Out of the 2029 responses to the survey, 1857 responded to the open-ended section (with a count of 14 characters or more). Responses with less than fourteen characters to the open-ended section were deleted. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework formed the basis of the qualitative analysis. Through this inductive data-driven approach we identified several themes prevalent across the data set (*see* Walters et al., 2021; Ronnie et al., 2022; Kriger et al., 2022). The 'keyness' of these themes were related to the experiences of care by women academics (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). Our first step was the reading and rereading of the data set individually noting any significant points and ideas. One author was then tasked with developing the initial codes across the data set as the second step, and subsequently, as the third step collated these codes as potential themes. Steps four and five, the reviewing and defining of themes, included all authors in scheduled meetings, where the themes were presented, discussed, and only accepted on consensus for the final stage of reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Steps four and five were a further means of triangulation. In terms of reporting the findings, survey responses came from women academics, with and without children, and at different career stages:

- Established (16 + years)
- Mid-career (11–15 years)
- Experienced (6–10 years)
- Early career (0–5 years)

For those with children in the home, these children ranged from infants to young adults, and included toddlers, kindergarteners, primary-school aged children, teenagers, and university students. These two aspects—parental status and career stage—were the only demographics gathered from the sample to ensure confidentiality of both respondents and their respective universities. Limitations in our methodology included the exclusion of male academics that could have provided opportunities for comparative experiences on nurturance to be explored. While the authors acknowledge the inequities due to apartheid in South Africa universities, the researchers were constrained ethically in collecting

specific socio-demographic information such as race, and therefore, a further limitation is our ability to deliver commentary on the demands of care by students and academics from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Findings

The key findings presented relate to the experiences of care by women academics showing the importance of societal expectations on nurturing and an associated emotional labour of care for women within academic institutions. For our participants, student demands and the cost associated with aspects of their welfare required sacrifice and commitment. The resourcing of this care outside of the 'normal' further exacerbated the experience of inequality in care expected of women as they sought to meet their institutions demands.

### Societal expectations and nurturing

The first and most striking observation from the qualitative data was the expectation expressed by women academics of their nurturing roles in the society, whether that is the home or the campus. 'We are expected to nurture and make others feel okay in a very uncertain time', mused one early-career respondent and mother of two children in primary school. This expectation, reasoned an established academic with no children, lies much deeper, for 'As women … one of our primal 'failures' is to care for the well-being of others before taking care of ourselves … and in doing so, often suffer.'

It is not that such a desire to care was at all new; as one experienced academic with two children in primary school explained: 'Why, all of a sudden, so much care now during the pandemic? That was the reality for us; it just intensified.'

While this account of the nurturing role expected of and given by women is concerned mainly with supporting students, that sense of care cannot be separated from the demands placed on women to fulfil similar duties within the home. That is, the nurturing role is amplified in the academic, as the care of students and family are intertwined. Serving in this anchor role at home, women's responsibility to care is inescapable: 'Everybody helps, but it always seems that the buck stops with the mother, this being myself—the female academic,' lamented one experienced academic. Moreover, another academic discusses how the lack of time affects research capacity, the most rewarded activity.

> working from home with the entire family on site leaves very little time for research related activities. One has to split herself between mothering, teaching, and researching. This results in one area of your life suffering. (Mid-career mother of three)

### Emotional labour of care

This caring is quite apart from the nurturing role that women department heads reported in relation to their staff, which they described as emotional labour distracting them from their core functions:

> There is a lot more emotional labour to support my team, which I am glad to provide, but that means less time for research and teaching. (Early-career mother of a preschooler)

There was reference to the extractive toll of nurturing students during the pandemic lockdown. One academic felt that the survey design should have specifically allowed for entries on this topic—even though the open-ended section allowed for such reflections.

Nevertheless, the 'increased needs of students,' in the words of an early-career academic, during the pandemic lockdown shows up repeatedly in the data sets.

> Ironically, our academic caring responsibilities have increased substantially. As academics, we are at the coalface, dealing directly with students' concerns and vulnerabilities during this unsettling time. This takes an emotional toll on us, which is not accounted for. (Experienced academic with a child in primary school)

Instead, as many academics found, the institutional demands to follow the normal metrics, such as research outputs delivered, continued relentlessly, as if the pandemic had not increased demands for student nurturing and support:

> The implied message is that if you don't sustain a high level of academic productivity despite the lockdown, you will be disciplined. Such messages make the institutional commitment to staff wellbeing (and the money spent on it) null and void, and it flies in the face of an ethic of care. (Experienced academic with a child in primary school)

## Student demands and welfare

Such demanding pressure also came from students, who felt that they could express their needs to academics and seek support for everything from buying data to counselling support, in addition to the more familiar teaching and learning support. As the following quote reflects, the migration to the less familiar online teaching mode placed a crushing administrative load on academic teachers:

> Taking a course for 400 students online in the middle of the semester was a challenge, as I had to prepare new methods to teach the course online, a new study guide, and new ways in which to test students. On top of this, there was a lot more admin in general, students emailed more to ask questions etc. The accumulation of this left little time for research. (Early-career academic with no children)

It was postgraduate students, argued some, who were particularly demanding, as they 'were dealing with their own anxiety about their research projects and progress,' illustrating that their academic needs were combined with emotional needs. Another early-career academic without children also found that "postgraduate students were 'more needy'", requiring more online contact, and that "the demand on feedback for supervision was greater as students expected quicker turn arounds simply because we as supervisor's were at 'home'."

It was not only postgraduate students who were in need, but also undergraduates. And in response, it was women academics who took on their burdens and who, indeed, sought these students out to nurture and support:

> At one point I became extremely anxious about whether my students were coping and a group of disadvantaged students who received their university laptops late …. I spent large amounts of time interacting with these students and advocating for their needs …. All of this teaching-related work has a major impact on my research. (Established academic without children)

An appreciation of the enormity of inequality in the student's experience of lockdown was often expressed, both in terms of digital resources and in food security and family support. This became a major concern for many academic women and a source of constant concern that they took upon themselves to remedy:

> One student contacted me saying that she had to sell her laptop and smartphone to buy food for her family. I feel that the university did not communicate clearly with staff or students and did not look after either party's concerns during lockdown. I spent most of my time fretting and worrying about students like these and what could be done to help them and answering frantic e-mails or worrying about non-submission. (Mid-career mother of two primary school students)

This intense concern for students' welfare, health, and learning was echoed by many women in this study; it was, for many, a duty:

> Even before lockdown, I found this to be a very important albeit time-consuming part of my job. The extent of students' mental health challenges then was already deeply concerning. Now it is exacerbated. It has a clear impact on their ability to do their work … and *I worry about them constantly* (emphasis added). (Early-career academic with no children)

## Sacrifice, commitment, and institutional demands

This commitment became something of a mission, for several women academics, 'to not leave any students behind,' in the words of an early-career mother of three. It was also an act of sacrifice for many who allowed their own studies to suffer in the process. As one experienced academic reported, 'students need more communication and support … and my own research takes a backseat.' An established academic with a university-age child agreed: 'nurturing the students seemed to always come before my own academic output'.

Such commitment would extend to helping students financially:

> 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 without children)

In addition to assisting with students' material needs, academic women often assumed the roles of counsellors during the pandemic lockdown. Again, there was a trade-off, for while one mid-career mother of a teenager recorded that 'I spend much more time giving emotional support to students,' another experienced academic lamented 'a decrease in the amount of time I spend on self-care and mental health'.

This sense of anxiety among some women academics in attending to the needs of students was felt to come not only from within themselves, but also from external expectations—those of the university for which they work. In South Africa, the success rates of students form a critical part of the government's funding calculations for public universities; the more students who pass and graduate on time, the greater is the slice of the subsidy. Some academics felt there was pressure to perform in this regard: 'Though never overtly stated, the message from the university was to get students to pass at all costs,' reported one mid-career mother of two young children. As a result, regular reports on student needs and support had to be prepared for the university managers:

> We had to report on who was struggling with no data, poor internet connectivity, poor learning environments, and no devices, as this data became available. (Mid-career academic without children)

For the first time in South African higher education, academics were also required in some departments to 'find' students who did not show up for the teaching engagements during the lockdown. For one experienced course administrator, this meant that 'during the lockdown, the admin load has gone up dramatically, with endless reporting and tracing of students who are not engaging online/remotely.' Strikingly, women academics also did something unusual, and that was to check on students who missed submission deadlines. Before the lockdown, missing a deadline counted against a student, period; it was their responsibility. The pandemic changed those kinds of administrative calculations for some:

> Students also needed A LOT of emotional support. And there was a need to reach out to students and find out why they hadn't submitted ... that I never do when on campus—then make a plan to assist them. I had 200 undergrads that is a lot of emotional support even for 25% of the class (emphasis in the original). (Established academic with a child in high school)

Part of the concern here was likely to ensure that institutional communications reached every student—especially those without ready and reliable online facilities—to ensure that no registered student was left stranded. It was, nonetheless, a task many women academics did voluntarily and one they would have done without institutional directive.

## Resourcing student care

What made this nurturing role much more difficult was the expectation on the part of the students that their academic teachers were available around the clock: 'My students thought I had to be 24/7 available to them,' reported one experienced academic and mother of two. Several established academics spoke about the fact that 'there are no boundaries anymore'; this refers to the collapse of time and space when it came to academic student engagements. 'Students and parents,' complained one early-career academic and mother of three young children, 'are phoning, texting, and emailing me constantly looking for answers'.

Before lockdown, appointment times could be entered on a page nailed to the office door or on an electronic diary; now direct email access was the primary means of demanding attention:

> I had a sense of being available to all students at all times despite boundaries and gatekeeping mechanisms … students seemed more in need of pastoral care and guidance than under normal conditions. (Established academic without children)

One added dimension of this problem of availability was the fact that for students, data costs were lower after normal working hours, in response to which academic women would be more flexible in their "office" hours; as one established academic explained, 'I work into the night to accommodate those students who can only access internet very late at night.' Another established academic with two teenagers explained that there were heightened levels of expectations, requiring her to be responsive: 'Students asking via WhatsApp about the work at 2 am got an answer within seconds to minutes from me.'

This sense of the academic being 'at home,' and therefore readily available was therefore not only an assumption of institutional managers but also of students. But as indicated above, this was a symbiotic relationship, in which the need to nurture was met by the need to be nurtured:

> I would have loved to take vacation leave but feel too guilty due to my students' expectation of being there for them in this turmoil time. So many of them needed emotional support being ill of the virus or having a family member(s) that became ill or passed on. (Experienced academic with two children in primary school)

Or, as another mid-career mother of two teens put it, 'My students are very dependent on my care. I took extra measures to support them emotionally.' Sometimes, the extremes of care came through in the women's voices, as in this case the following quote shows:

> This of course came at the cost of sleep. Students continued asking questions and required emotional support during the academic recess on issues such as applying for honours, confirmation that their marks are good enough, fears about the practical component of the course that is deferred to the fourth term, etc. I suppose that I can be "blamed" for this—I really, really care a lot about my students and always try my best to support them, motivate them, encourage them, etc. This is even more so during lockdown. (Established academic and mother of two high school students)

This bond made the disentanglement of work and care difficult, and the burden of academic work very hard for the women involved; it certainly escalated the workload, as this established academic described: 'I work constantly to complete the work and pacify stressed students.'

Students did not only reach out to academics for material, emotional, and academic needs but also for a sense of social connection and to demonstrate that they were 'there' and doing their work:

> The reality of students' personalities affected the time and/or effectiveness of working with them on a remote basis. You have to factor in their individual needs. For example: Some of the postgrads wanted me to know they were working hard every day—so they gave frequent e-mail feedback of the kind that required me to acknowledge the work. (Established academic with a university-age child)

## Inequality in care

In these expressions of the duty of care, the gendered dimensions of inequality quickly become clear. As one early-career head of department and mother of two teens observed of her small unit, 'the 3 females, all mothers, did an extraordinary amount of work and showed increased empathy and caring for the students.' Sometimes, this generated outright disdain for the unequal arrangements of care, and its consequences:

> I am resentful of male colleagues whose research productivity has surged while I take care of administrative tasks and emotional labour of engaging with confused/ panicked/ struggling students. (Early-career academic with no children)

Again, an established academic and mother of two made the same point: 'When crises like this [the pandemic] comes along, male academics get on with the business of research, leaving women academics to nurture the students.'

What made the nurturing and support role of students during the pandemic even more demanding was the sheer numbers of students served by academic women—especially in the case of South Africa's premier distance education university. These were some of the pertinent excerpts from the data:

> I had 632 students who were dependent on me alone during the months we have been in lock down. (Early-career academic without children)
> I have a whopping 709 students in my postgraduate honours' module. A massive over-enrolment—but who cares? (Established academic with a teenager)
> An academic-to-student ratio of 31,000 to 2 (the absolute honest truth) makes any form of other work impossible. This is not the norm …. (Experienced academic without children)

Academic women did their duty, despite these admittedly extreme teacher-to-student ratios:

> I need to support a large number of students who need some form of consistency in their lives. My students are trying their best to keep up with their studies in difficult conditions. I feel bad if I don't do everything in my power and more to support them. (Mid-career academic with no children)

And yet, notwithstanding all this constant nurturing and care, most academic women across all levels felt the need to be ready and available to their students, regardless of their own needs: 'I felt I needed to be positive for my students despite all the pressures and stress on my end,' related one early-career academic. That self-care suffered as a consequence is a theme running throughout the stories of academic women.

Sometimes, the growing demands of the academic workload, along with the extremes of care demanded of them came at a personal cost, as in this disturbing account:

> Needless to say, I am now under the care of a psychiatrist and on prescription medication for depression, anxiety and medication to enable me to sleep at night. It is due to these meds, and the therapy I am under, that I have not jumped off a building. (Established academic and mother of a teenager)

There are, without doubt, women who felt that their investment of care and nurturing in their students was not met with a corresponding concern from their universities—as in this plaint by a mid-career mother of two: 'All we have heard from our universities is how we must care for our students, but who cares for us?' The plea among women academics is for more than the routine, almost obligatory, messages from management that include a 'take care' message as if by rote. As a mid-career mother of two observed, 'There are official emails reminding us to take care and stay safe but there are very few real changes or acts of kindness and empathy to make us feel valued for what we do.'

It is a sentiment echoed by other academic women, like this experienced academic and mother of two: 'Despite people stating that they are concerned, no one cares about your well-being. This is evident by the fact that nothing changes in terms of deadline or work distribution.' Furthermore, with no sense of direct, physical engagement, one established academic expressed feelings of being unseen by university managers: 'Because they are no physical graduations this year, we have become invisible.'

For others, though, the pandemic has revealed what was obscured in the competitive jungle of higher education; they believe that the lessons of care need to be taken up in the post-pandemic world:

> I do not wish for us to return to "normal", since that "normal" was flawed in many ways. We need to practise much more self-care and compassion for our fellow human beings, and we need the workplace to be an enabling environment to support everyone's wellbeing. (Established academic and mother of two)

## Discussion and conclusion

The concept of women as nurturers has received stinging criticism from feminist scholars over the years for being sentimentalist, essentialist, stereotypical, and, in the end, socially prescribed (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Cole et al., 2007). Over time, the notion of women as nurturers has assumed the status of common sense, because biological roles have been conflated with sociological roles (Rogus, 2003). We agree.

What this research seeks to do, however, is to demonstrate how social expectations create, enable, and sustain these roles of women as nurturers in the context of South Africa's public universities. Walters et al. (2022) demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of women (80.3%) in the broader study believed that it has been 'more' to 'much more' difficult for women than for men to do academic work during the lockdown period. Similarly, this paper also demonstrated the burden and emotional well-being of respondents where a total of 40.5% of participants indicated they required much more or significantly more emotional support as working academics to cope with the demands of the job, while 25.8% indicated they required the same amount of support as before. Similarly, in an associated study Ronnie et al. (2022) showed that the altered nature of work engagement taking place through online platforms drove women to dedicating significant amounts of their personal time to work activities. In most instances women were compelled to not only support their children, feed their families and maintain their homes but also had to consider their family's needs above theirs.

Students *expect* women academics to respond as nurturers, a finding not in conflict with studies in other national contexts (Basow, 1998; Sprague & Massoni, 2005). At a time of significant crises, students had someone to turn to who acted on the compulsion to care at a significant cost to themselves (Smith & Kempster, 2019; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Our findings are illustrative of the relational nature of care and how boundaries of care 'naturally' extend into student and faculty relationships even in 'unnatural' circumstances such as an enforced lockdown (Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Faculty met students 'where they are at' showing an active concern in students personal lives and became more accessible while not being constrained by institutional apathy (Noddings, 1984). Furthermore, the unrewarded emotional labour exerted by faculty was evident in this study. Here, we put forward the need to consider a transversal nature of reciprocity considering the external factors impacting on the carer when theorizing care in student and faculty relationships. Building on the work of Nodding's and others, we suggest that reciprocity is ecological rather than linear in form in relationships and does not necessarily translate into equal experiences of validation in academic institutions in a traditional forward and backward manner between student and faculty. In other words, in our study we see that while students were being cared for, women academics, as proxies for the institution, where cared for less, experiencing a suffering ignored by their academic institutions which diminished their personal resources and opportunities.

Moreover, the institutional expectations of academics during the pandemic lockdown varied across the 26 public universities but shared one commitment: that all students had to receive continued education regardless of their circumstances (e.g., those without online connections), and that every effort had to be made to locate students for this purpose. Our data suggests, however, that women academics went well beyond those expectations to find students and make themselves available to students even after hours when many had access to more affordable data. Responding to such expectations inevitably adds to 'the extra burdens felt by female academics' (El-Alayli, 2018) and makes academic work harder. During

the pandemic, the extension of working boundaries between women academics and their students have been distorted even further. We therefore call on higher education institutions to 'fix themselves' by delivering improved workplace policies to foster reciprocity and a better work–life balance for women academics. Universities should first acknowledge these gendered inequalities and then, together with women academics, determine what support is required. And they should express care towards women who have been shown to be readily available, committed, and dedicated to fostering student relationships during the pandemic. In this regard, universities need to develop alternate means of supporting students' need for care and the impact on women academics. Some practical considerations include the professionalization of care, i.e., ensuring adequate time and resources inclusive of remuneration are available to those providing care as academics. Other practical considerations require more flexible work arrangements for women with young children. Universities should consider the development of care practices supported through dedicated centres that can support women in ensuring they can maintain the boundaries of care.

This study, however, also shows that students' expectations—indeed demands—for nurturing and care are met with intensely positive responses from women academics, who take on these roles, often to the detriment of their own health and careers. We accept that these are socially constructed roles and argue that these are both essential and essentialized ones under pandemic conditions (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019). However, we also caution against the impact that COVID-19 has had on women academics and against the danger of 'compassion fatigue' often associated with carers (Henson, 2020; Landay & King, 2021; Pehlivan & Güner, 2018).

We, nevertheless, remain intrigued by the phenomenon of care, its intensity as experienced in the cause of a national pandemic lockdown, the intertwined relationship of the care-seeker (student) and the caregiver (academic), and what seems to be the durability of these social functions, at least in South African society. Further research considering the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the faculty-student relationship is required.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Stellenbosch University.

**Data availability** Due to the nature of the institutional and participant permissions, data will be made available on request.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate** Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the host institution with project number: REC-2020–15216 and the ethical review was followed by the gateway clearance certificate in most of the 26 universities. In one case, the research team was simply given management permission to proceed directly to contact the women academics on campus.

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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