

WORLD VIEW · 17 APRIL 2020

The pandemic and the female academic



I'm curious what lockdown will reveal about the 'maternal wall' that can block faculty advancement.

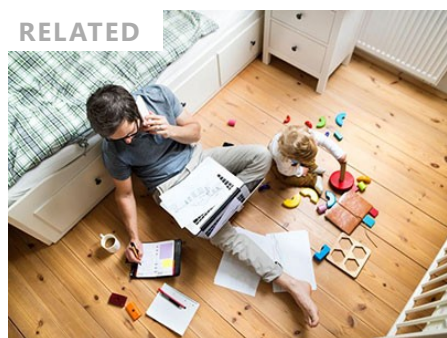
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Humour is one way for women in academia to face the pandemic's consequences for their work and family lives. Last month, a viral Twitter post read, "The next person who tweets about how productive Isaac Newton was while working from home gets my three year old posted to them!"

Since COVID-19 closed my university on 12 March, I've seen more sunrises than in the rest of my previous life. Now, I must be at work before daybreak.

Silence and concentration are pivotal for my thinking and teaching. When I record lessons for my students to watch online, minimizing background noise is a must. But my son is two years old. In the first lesson I tried to record, you can clearly hear his toy trumpet playing during the last two slides of the presentation. Night and dawn – when he's asleep – are my only options for recording.

Another demand on my time are colleagues located around the globe who have the atavistic desire to meet face-to-face online. At any hour of the day. And that's how my colleagues have come to know my son, whose little head pops up on the webcam now and again.



Ten work–life balance tips for researchers based at home

This means I have less time for writing scientific articles. Instead of working, my colleagues and I are aiming to make it through daily life. Of course, when compared with the drastic consequences of contracting COVID-19, this is a trifling matter. And we know that we are all lucky to have the jobs we do. Wealth, or lack thereof, and other social inequalities are affecting people's access to work, health care, shopping and other services.

during the pandemic

Still, I am a social demographer who studies how families manage household and paid work. I often focus on academic and professional women, and now I feel as if I am my own subject. I am already working with colleagues to set up interviews and an online ethnography study.

This pandemic can teach some of us an important lesson: mothers and fathers together are facing a short-term reorganization of care and work time. In the long run, these changes in productivity will affect careers. Those with fewer care duties are aiming for the stars. Will anyone in the academic community take into account our unbalanced approach to family care and work? No. All of us will participate together in open competition for promotion and positions, parents and non-parents alike.

Academic work – in which career advancement is based on the number and quality of a person's scientific publications, and their ability to obtain funding for research projects – is basically incompatible with tending to children. I expect that data on publication records over the next couple of years will show that parents in academia were disadvantaged relative to non-parents in 2020.

Those data might also reveal the consequences for women. Care work is, in fact, unbalanced – even among highly educated couples. Women devote significantly more time to household work than do men. When married mothers and fathers in the United States are compared, the former spend almost twice as much time on housework and childcare. In the gender-egalitarian countries of northern Europe, women still do almost two-thirds of the unpaid work. Even among heterosexual couples with female breadwinners, women do most of the care work.

Overall, the COVID-19 experience is changing the way research is done, especially in some sectors: the new mechanisms of accelerated peer review, the increased quantity and speed of available data and the distribution of funding across sectors are changing the equilibria of the academic world, and we will need to pay attention to the effects this has on disparities.

So, what happens if both members of a heterosexual couple are at home? The greatest likelihood is that this will exacerbate gender inequality.

The beginning of an academic career is marked by a prolonged period of precariousness, one which coincides with women's reproductive period. The term maternal wall, referring to the

discrimination and limitations faced by working mothers, has been in use for well over a decade. Policies such as guaranteed work leave and accommodations to care for family members can be particularly important for women. One immediate idea is to count this period of lockdown as care leave for those tending to any dependent family member, and this can be considered when they are later evaluated, for example, in an open competition for career advancement. This might be extremely helpful for families that are even more disadvantaged during this time – particularly those with single parents, who are more likely to be women.

Men can have a role. Paolo Brunori, an economist colleague of mine at the University of Florence in Italy, has two children, aged 18 months and 5 years. His wife is a paediatrician. She is still working at the hospital, while he is working remotely. He confesses: “Keeping your head on the research duties is almost impossible, because I never have three to four consecutive hours of peace to be concentrated. I try to break down the things I have to do in many small tasks and do them when Silvia, my wife, is at home or when everyone is asleep.” Paolo and all the others who are experiencing similar situations should spread the word: the hours that even members of our own household put into its care and running are so often invisible and overlooked.

The only real solution is the classic one: a long-term investment in gender equality.

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