

‘A Room of One’s Own’: Covid-19 Pandemic and Academic Motherhood in India

Santana Khanikar

Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract

The paper examines the disproportionately adverse impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on academic mothers employed in higher education sector. By looking at global data as well as institutional and socio-cultural background of higher education in India, the paper argues for the need of a systematic and institutional Covid-impact stock-taking. Without such a measure, the author argues, the already existing gender-gap in higher education in India will be further widened, with the gap becoming starker at the higher professional levels within academia.

Keywords: Academic mother, gender-gap, higher education, Covid-19, Covid-impact statement

Introduction

In the context of the covid-pandemic and the remote work and remote schooling for children, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind had written that Work from Home (WFH) has put working mothers under ‘triple burden’ (The Print 2022). He stated that the burden of unpaid domestic work has always been unequally high for women despite being involved in paid professional work. On top of that, with the pandemic, the WFH mothers were forced to take up the burden of supplementing their children’s ‘online school’. The concerns of President Kovind are very well-placed, and so was his subsequent appeal to male employees to share burden of domestic and childcare work. What was not addressed, however, was the institutional deficiencies that lead to such a situation. While his comment was for working mothers in general, this paper is trying to draw attention to the fate of a very small section of working mothers, that is mothers engaged in academic research and teaching, to examine how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected their work. I argue that while a pandemic is an extraordinary situation, which had substantially impacted every aspect of life for over two years between the years 2020 and 2022, and has continued to impact certain aspects of social and economic life still, the adverse impact the pandemic had on women in higher education who are parents of young children needs a better amelioration and stock-taking, with a supportive institutional set up. Mere appeals to the generosity, kindness and grace does not offer a solution that leads to correction of systemic injustice.

Before going further into it, I would like to make a disclaimer that this paper is in no way arguing that academic mothers are the only or the worst sufferers of the pandemic. The paper proceeds from a full recognition that this is a very small subgroup which is privileged in many ways, including the fact that they had a relatively stable income even during the pandemic. What I attempt to emphasise, is rather, the lack of acknowledgement and thus absence of any ameliorating provisions aimed at women academicians who are parents, at higher educational institutions, in a context where numerically higher education is

dominated by men from socially and economically privileged groups and socially and through institutional mechanisms childcare and child-rearing are fixed as women's responsibilities.

Academic work and motherhood

Academic work, especially at higher levels such as university teaching and research, is often seen as incompatible with being a mother. Hallstein and O'Reilly in the introduction of their 2014 edited volume titled *Academic Motherhood in a Post Second-Wave Context* write that in the context of the Euro-American world, in last two decades or so, when the challenges of access to higher earning professions are to some extent taken care of, one new challenge that women face is about how to take advantage of the access that women has gained as a result of second wave feminism 'while not shortchanging their desire to mother' (Hallstein and O'Reilly 2014, p.2). Referring to articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* - a newspaper and website that presents news, information and jobs for college and university faculty - they write that questions looming large in the mind of a lot of women graduate students and early career faculty are whether it is possible to 'balance children and tenure work', or 'find a parent-friendly place' (Hallstein and O'Reilly 2014, p.2).

The circumstances are a little different in India. According to the 2021 report of All India Survey on Higher Education (Ministry of Education 2021), only 37.1 percent of university teachers (including Assistant, Associate and full Professors) in India are female (News18, 2021). This number needs to be further analysed keeping in mind that representation of women from deprived sections is even lower within this already low number of women faculties.¹ Under the circumstances, women faculty members, who are minority in their institutions, routinely face everyday forms of marginalisation and inequality such as lack of hygienic toilets², lack of institutional child-care facilities etc.

Academia, mothering and the unequal impact of the covid-19 pandemic

Let us now fast forward to March 2020, when the Covid19 pandemic hit us. The Covid-19 pandemic had taken an unbearable toll upon everyone, men, women and children. The predicament of the poor and the marginalised sections, *dalits*, tribals, minorities, have been the worst. The lives lost to the virus are innumerable and many of us are still recovering from its after effects, or what has come to be known as 'long covid'. The human suffering that accompanied the pandemic, in form of job loss, closure of business, and the migrant worker crisis - with men and women, young and old, pregnant and elderly walking hundreds of miles in burning heat, and various other policies and politics around it - all together have forced upon us levels of violence and cruelty, and at a scale, that many of us haven't had witnessed before. Amidst such life and death circumstances, advancements in technology allowed remote work for many professionals including teachers, and allowed them to stay relatively safe amidst the raging pandemic. But

¹ This is in contrast to the fact of women teachers outnumbering male teachers at school level and connected to the general perception that women are more suitable as school teachers whereas educated men are more attracted to higher paying and more prestigious teaching and research jobs at university level.

² This is a problem even in some of the top ranked universities of the country. For instance, the author of this paper, who teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, routinely faced this problem which prevented her from spending long hours in her office, something that her male colleagues were able to do.

while work continued ‘somehow’, the relative toll it had taken on academic and personal lives of women faculty members with small children, remain completely unaccounted for in any formal discussion. In informal discussions and social media, while many quipped about how in the absence of maids men were seen entering kitchens or holding brooms, and how many were rediscovering their long-lost hobbies, there wasn’t any serious institutional discussion on covid-impact on the professional lives of various groups of employees. What implications such a ‘triple burden’ had for women whose career progress depended on number of research papers published, in a context which is already male-heavy at the top, did not find any space for discussion anywhere, including institutions of higher education. Virginia Wolf, writing in early twentieth century, talked about how women need a room of her own to be able to engage in academic or artistic pursuits, away from the hum-drum of the domestic life one is bound to otherwise (Wolf 1929). The Covid-19 pandemic has proved once again, after one full century, the importance of that ‘room of one’s own’ and how its absence in the context of patriarchal value systems and absence of institutional support systems, affects women tremendously.

In March 2020, when work moved online for a large section of the employed people, and daycares, preschools and schools closed down simultaneously, parents were forced to cope with working while taking care of their children. Lighthearted memes and jokes about appearances of young children in serious online business or academic meetings were all over social media. As commonly understandable in a patriarchal social set-up, the extra burden fell unequally on women than on men employees. In the western context, evidence for such unequal impact has been formally collected by several studies.

Women faculty members across the world have experienced that the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and created additional challenges for women, especially women with children, and women faculty members are struggling to maintain their research productivity. As Katie Langin (2021) shows statistically in the *Science* magazine, while both men and women suffered loss of work hours, mothers suffered 33 percent larger drop compared with fathers, as per a survey conducted between May and July 2020. Maria Fernanda Escallón, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Oregon and mother to a 3-year-old daughter was quoted in a October 2020 New York Times piece thus : “I hope the administration realizes that anything they do now to alleviate this issue for caregivers will directly impact how the professoriate will look five to 10 years from now — how diverse it will be, and how many women will be in positions of power within academia” (Kramer 2020, ‘The Virus Moved Female Faculties to the Brink. Will Universities Help?’). A paper published in *Nature* in 2020 suggests data that women are publishing less during the pandemic, especially women in early career positions (Viglione 2020, ‘Are women publishing less during the pandemic? Here’s what the data say’). A paper published in September 2020 cites data that women have submitted fewer papers in 2020 compared to previous years, while articles by men have relatively increased (Mickey, Clark and Misra 2020, ‘Measures to Support Faculty During Covid-19’). Malisch et al (2020) cites data in arguing that COVID-19’s effects are driving more of a wedge between women and men in academia in terms of research opportunities. With fewer submissions and hence fewer publications and hence “(W)ith the recent decrease in scholarly visibility, women are less likely to be invited to speak at conferences and seminar series, to serve as grant panellists, or be asked to review articles. These combined factors will lead to a quantifiable slump in publications and grant submissions from women” (Malisch et al 2020). The toll is even higher for women faculty from

marginalised sections and first generation educational backgrounds with lesser social support and more familial care needs.

As all unprecedented traumatic events need special remedial measures, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on further widening the gender-gap in academia needs to be ameliorated too. Universities in the western context are permitting faculty members to submit Covid-19 impact statements while assessing their performance for career progress.

In Indian context, however, we do not see any such measure taken. Rather amelioration measures are a far cry, when even an acknowledgment of difficulties are not noted. The author has personally noticed how academic administrators and institutional processes often pretend that ‘life is running as usual’, and sideline queries from women faculty members with young children about their needs of childcare, while at the same time shirking from their legally mandated responsibility of providing for childcare to their employees even in the post-covid period.³

The long background : Gender-biased understanding of care-work in policy and practice

The disproportionately adverse impact of the covid period on female academicians, especially those with children, is not a random occurrence, neither is it based only on patriarchal social conditioning. Rather, such occurrences are deeply rooted in the institutional structures and policy frameworks within which care-work is place. The child-rearing labour that women often single-handedly perform, or if they have the financial means or family support then do with the help of other women (in the family such as mothers, mother-in-laws or hired female helpers), is not something that cannot be performed by men or other members in the family. But it is socially accepted as a mother’s or women’s job, and both men and women are conditioned into such ideologies very often. But even when individual woman can look beyond such gender stereotyping, the state policies are still supportive of such misogynist ideals. For instance, when a baby is born to working parents, while maternity leave for the mother is crucial, in Indian context there is no provision for any leave for the father beyond a week or ten days, leaving the mother formally and entirely responsible for early child-rearing. Similarly, behind the provision of child-care leave only to mothers, there is a presumption that a child can be cared for only by the mother (or in the absence of mother, by other women). Nandy and Bannerjee (2017) discuss how the Indian state’s parental leave provisions - including maternity leave and Child Care leave - premised on gendered performance of motherhood in effect “naturalise the maternal, gate-keep the *ideal* (patriarchal) family and, thereby, institutionalise the gendered terrain of citizenship” (p. 64, emphasis original). They argue that given the lack of state support for child care in India, while the provision for CCL is beneficial for women burdened with domestic work, caregiving and paid employment, it comes with serious adverse effects such as reinforcing of the sexual division of labour, placing care-work firmly within the realm of family, as well

³ Many undergraduate and postgraduate level academic institutions, including the university at which this author is employed, run without offering any childcare facilities to their employees, This is despite the fact that all employers employing more than 50 employees are mandated by law to set up creche facilities (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2018).

as penalisation of women employees availing this leave in various ways harming their career progress. (Nandy and Bannerjee 2017)⁴.

Within such an institutional culture, non-recognition of disproportionate adverse impact of the Covid-19 impact on academic mothers is not entirely surprising, but the lack of a shock factor does not take away from the inherent injustice of the situation.

Conclusion: Ways forward for a gender-just academia in India

To ensure that the existing gender gap and exclusion of women from higher education jobs is not further deepened, institutional mechanisms to address the differential impact of the pandemic on women academicians, especially those at early career stage and with young children, are crucially important. And an acknowledgement of this factor and willingness to ameliorate this, we can hope, will lead towards other institutional reforms and measures to make this space more gender-just. In a context where women are already only a small minority and mostly stuck at the lowest levels of academia, failure to take note of how a pandemic affects its women faculty is going to further alienate and marginalise women in higher education. In this context Mickey, Clark and Misra whitely argue that universities should establish procedures allowing faculty members to document the impact of COVID-19 on their careers. Because while such impact will be long-lasting for many at a personal level, institutional memory may not be, especially without any formal recording of the events and circumstances. And loss of institutional memory will only “further marginalize and hinder the careers of women faculty and those from underrepresented racial minority groups -- potentially reversing any progress made in recent years.” (Mickey, Clark and Misra 2020, ‘Measures to Support Faculty During Covid-19’).

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⁴ Hallstein and O’reilly (2012) write that terms like ‘second shift’, ‘doubleday’ and ‘pink ghetto’ (unable to find many options that allow to adjust her child-care needs) have been in discussion for a while now, women in more recent times often find a new problem of how to have it all. In the context of academic mothers, they write that professionally successful women often need to shortchange their desire for mothering, as it is seen that professional success (in the form of tenured jobs, publications etc) is incompatible with demanding and intensive needs of mothering as framed by contemporary ideology of ‘good mothering’ (pp.14-16)

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