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Lived experiences of women academics during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan

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This study explores the experiences of women academics while combining the challenging job of online teaching and familial responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan. The aim is to outline the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on women academics. We employed a qualitative research design and collected data through in-depth qualitative telephonic interviews with thirteen women academics in four public sector universities in Pakistan. The findings show that women academics remained overwhelmed by the workload; lacked support; and endured a tiring struggle to manage their official duties and familial responsibilities. They were stressed and stuck in their children and family care and online teaching and had hardly any time for academic writing. The participants expressed being burned out, depressed, exhausted, angry, and in desperate need of personal time. Since women experienced the lockdown differently than men we suggest that they may be compensated at the time of tenure/promotions.

1. Introduction

The short and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are not equal for men and women academics. Evidence from many different societies shows that COVID-19 has disproportionate impacts on women’s academics (Gao & Sai, 2020). Earlier research confirms that the pandemic has created difficulties for women academics to combine the demand of teaching position in higher education institutions (online teaching load, students’ research supervision, completing their research projects, and writing academic papers) and the increased demand for family responsibilities; cooking, cleaning, elder and child care, children’s schooling and much more (Alon et al., 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020; Zamarro et al., 2020). Early studies show that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected women’s academic publishing (Andersen et al., 2020; Frederickson, 2020) including writing scientific papers and grant proposals (Gabster et al., 2020).

Research studies and media debate suggest that the closures of higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased women’s domestic responsibilities, making it challenging for them to prepare themselves for online lectures (Alon et al., 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). Women academics spend more time cleaning their houses and/or apartments and cooking during the pandemic (Gao & Sai, 2020). The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women academia is felt even more deeply by women academics in developing countries, especially Pakistan. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the teaching and research productivity of women academics in the country (Saafdr & Yasmin, 2020). This paper, thus, aims to explore the lived experiences of married women academics in Pakistan. Some of the broader questions which we attempt to explore include: What were the academic challenges to women after the lockdown? What were the challenges within the domestic spaces? What family and organizational support did they receive?

2. The Study Context

The status of women in Pakistan is not homogeneous. It differs across social classes and the rural/urban divide (Ullah & Ali, 2012). Deeply rooted domestic ideology and/or sexual division of labor has limited women’s role to the private domain of the home. The labor force participation rate for women in Pakistan is very low compared to other countries with similar incomes (Khan, 2017). Despite considerable progress
(growing by more than half) over the past 2 decades, female participation in the formal economy/public domain is still very low, even among women with college and university degrees-only about 25% of women having a university degree work in the public domain (Asian Development Bank, 2016).

It is important to note that the increase in women’s entry into the public domain is very selective: more and more women are engaged in school teaching (Ullah, 2016). Women’s entry into school teaching is encouraged based on biological differences between men and women as well as moral and cultural grounds. Taking care of children is believed to be a woman’s natural role. School teaching for women is approved with the assertion that it is compatible with homemaking responsibilities. It is argued that school teaching enables women to work in the public domain without violating cultural boundaries (Ullah, 2013). The latest statistics show 59 percent female and 41 percent of male school teachers in Pakistan (Academy of Educational Planning and Management, 2017). The presence of more women in school teaching and men in university teaching is justified through school textbooks (school knowledge) and media discourses (Ulla, 2016).

Despite a vivid improvement in women’s participation in higher education—women comprise 50.8 percent of the enrolled students in Pakistani universities and degree-awarding institutions, they remain underrepresented in university teaching and leadership positions (Higher Education Commission Vision 2025 cited in Ullah, 2019). The number of women academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) is unknown as the available data differentiate university teachers into two groups: Ph. D and non-Ph. D faculty. It does not segregate women and men academics. Nevertheless, the number of women faculty and women working as Chairpersons of various departments, as Deans of Faculties, Directors of Research Centers, and Vice Chancellors in HEI is insignificant compared to the number of their male counterparts (Khochar, 2018). In 2019, out of 186 Vice Chancellors/Rectors of Pakistani Universities, only 14 were women. Except for two, these women in VC positions were dominantly in women’s universities. These limited statistics show that HEIs are male-dominated workplaces full of challenges for women academics (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). Our observations and some early media debate (TV talk shows & newspaper articles) suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously challenged women academics’ progress and commitment toward career progression in Pakistan. The forthcoming section skims some of the early studies on COVID-19 and women academics.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinning

Historically, higher education institutions have perpetuated gender inequality (Huang et al., 2020). For women as academics, higher education today continues to be a gendered workplace in which women disproportionately occupy the lowest ranks (Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Read & Kehm, 2016). The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has worsened these long-standing gender inequalities, especially in developing countries where making a career in HEI is already swimming upstream for women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the landscape of higher education worldwide and reshaped almost every facet of academia. The system faced a sudden transition to remote teaching and learning, changes in grading systems, and the loss of access to research resources. Concern over the potential harm the pandemic has brought to female faculty advancement is being increasingly debated. The available data illustrates that the pandemic has disproportionately affected women academics compared to men due to their role in child care and household responsibilities (Alon et al., 2020). As universities, schools, and daycare centers closed, women were called to take care of homeschooling and aged parents (Malisch et al., 2020). The increased childcare responsibilities that have resulted from the crisis overburdened women who already carried a heavier load than men (Schoonbroodt, 2018). Besides, social distancing and stay-at-home orders made it difficult, if not impossible, for informal care providers, like grandparents or other family members, to help with childcare responsibilities (Zamarro, Perez-Arce, & Prados, 2020). Additionally, due to the sudden increase in domestic and academic work during the lockdown, the mental health needs of women academics increased (Malisch et al., 2020).

Academic work requires silence, concentration, and deep thinking which women faculty have been longing for since the pandemic began. For faculty with young children, it is especially difficult to concentrate among the constant interruptions from children. This, in turn, has left few choices for women faculty who find limited time for their scientific writing and recording lectures for online teaching (Minello, 2020). The situation has raised several concerns related to the research productivity of women academics. The representation of women in academia is already low; they publish fewer papers and receive fewer citations than their male colleagues (Huang et al., 2020). Besides, women are less likely than men to be first or last authors (Hunt, 2020) and they are discriminated against during several stages of academic publishing including peer-review, readership, and commentaries (Wu et al., 2020). Preliminary research during the COVID-19 pandemic also echoes these differences related to academic publishing. During the pandemic, women are publishing fewer preprints and have started fewer research projects during this period (Minello, 2020). Megan Frederickson (2020) at the University of Toronto analyzed the preprint servers arXiv and bioRxiv and identified the gender of the coauthors based on their names by using an algorithm. She argues that on average, women are not advancing their research as much as men during the pandemic.

Pinho-Gomes et al. (2020) in their study, published by the University of Oxford, found that women published only 34% of papers on COVID-19 irrespective of their positions as first or second authors. In this study, a systematic search was conducted on May 1, 2020, in PubMed in Medline. References were extracted, irrespective of language, study type, and date of publication. Based on these findings, the author concludes that the reasons for the under-representation of women in the case of COVID-related research could be due to factors such as increased domestic responsibilities of women, access of men to COVID-19 research, and gender discrimination in the peer-review process.

Likewise, in medical journals where women’s first authorship has recently increased from 27% to 37% (1994–2014), COVID-19 is believed to have threatened the progress by amplifying existing gender disparities. The authorship of 1179 medical COVID-19 papers was paired with 37,531 papers from the same journals in the year 2019 (Andersen et al., 2020). It was found that the authorships of women as the first and last authors decreased substantially. Similar trends have been reported in other research areas (Amano-Patino et al., 2020). COVID-19 papers in The Lancet (n = 159) were analyzed (excluding Editorials, World Reports, and Perspectives), and it was found that overall, first, last, and corresponding female authorship was 30-8%, 24-4%, 25-8%, and 22-9% respectively (Gabster et al., 2020). This trend has been verified by editors of at least two journals who confirmed unusual patterns in submissions. The deputy editor of the British Journal of the Philosophy of Science and co-editor of Comparative Political Studies confirmed the low number of submissions by women (Flatley, 2020).

In contrast to the challenges encountered by women academics, men academics have benefitted from the support of their non-working partners at home. Data show that men are four times as likely as women to have spouses who work only part-time or not at all (Lau, 2020). These early studies suggest that for the year 2020, women’s publications will decrease considerably. This is a great concern as survival in academia is based on publications and grants. Women with children may find themselves in disadvantaged positions in the coming years due to their inability to publish scientific articles during the pandemic which in turn could affect their advancement (Minello, 2020).

A study analyzing the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown measures on women vs men and single parents in the UK documents that women and single mothers had been severely affected in economic downturn as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (Zhou et al., 2020).
It concludes that as well as being disadvantaged in the labor market, women are also experiencing gender inequalities at home, where men spend considerably less time on housework and care work compared to women. This inequality is especially pronounced in families with children under the age of 16 (Kan, 2014; Kolpashnikova, 2018).

Similarly, Gao and Sai (2020) discussed the social isolation and struggles of single women academics coping with the lockdown in unique ways. They believe male voices are dominating current ‘scientific and strategic’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the responses of many institutions to the pandemic are increasingly constructed by masculinist politics. In response to the normalized practices in academia, they document their experiences as single women to draw attention to the suppressed thoughts, voices, and realities of single women who live alone during the lockdown. They believe that virtual learning limits informal learning through spontaneous conversations with colleagues and that human contact is vital for productivity and thinking. Importantly, in conformity with previous research they acknowledge behavioral changes as a result of working from home and blurring boundaries between work and home such as more time spent on cooking and cleaning (Daniel et al., 2018; Gao & Sai, 2020).

Gilea and Onescu (2020), in a critical commentary, analyze the effects of the coronavirus-related practices on their leisure as two single academic women living alone. They documented the social expectations concerning single childless professional academic women during a pandemic and what they should and should not be doing for leisure during the pandemic. They believe that women who are not primarily responsible for the provision of care for children, parents, partners, etc. can already face resentment or belittlement for engaging in regular leisure activities. While this is not a new phenomenon (Henderson & Allen, 1991), it has been amplified during the current pandemic.

The crux of the discussion here is that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women faculty are serious and that the devastating effects of the coronavirus on gender equality could set women back decades by putting 50 years of progress into reverse as the burden of the lockdown and economic crisis has been primarily put on them (Tropping, 2020). Nevertheless, women academics’ experiences in higher education institutions differ across time and space, and, therefore, need to be studied in a different socio-cultural context. This study, thus, draws on data from telephone and/or Zoom and WhatsApp interviews with married women academics in Pakistan to explore their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Material and Methods

The data for this paper is drawn from an empirical study conducted in four public sector universities in Pakistan. An interpretive qualitative research design was chosen as it was deemed most appropriate to examine the lived experiences of women academics during the COVID-19 lockdown. The feminist standpoint was taken as a lens to understand women’s unique experiences as they juggled their responsibilities in two different domains.

1. Participants and Data Collection

The participants worked in four public sector universities. The sample consisted of one Professor, two Associate Professors, six Assistant Professors, and four Lecturers. Participants from all disciplines in the sampled universities were approached through personal contacts and interviews were conducted through telephone and/or Zoom and WhatsApp according to the preferences of the participants. Most of the interviews were conducted during the evening due to the busy work and family schedules of the participants during the day.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were briefed about the process. They were assured that data would be used only for academic purposes. Interviews were carried out based on semi-structured interview guidelines and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes each. The participants were invited to speak about their experiences of teaching and researching during the COVID-19 lockdown. They were also asked to reflect on how they experienced household responsibilities as they worked from home—for example, the time they spent on domestic chores, cooking, washing, and cleaning. They were also invited to speak about responsibilities related to childcare, elder care, and supervision of their children’s online teaching. Finally, questions were asked about how the lockdown had affected their overall wellbeing.

2. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013). The interviews were transcribed and read repeatedly to identify common patterns. In the first stage, codes were generated which were then grouped and/or clustered together (an example of coding is given in Table 1 below). In the final stage, these groups and/or clusters were read again and were reduced to generate themes (see Table 3).

3. Ethical Considerations

Since the sample was small, we are not disclosing the names of the universities in this paper to avoid inconvenience to the participants and harm to their social and professional identity. To maintain the confidentiality of the respondents and keep their names anonymous, we have presented data by using codes such as P1- P13 instead of their names.

4. Brief Profile of the Participants

The demographic profile of the participants is given in Table 2 below. Eleven participants were married, one was single and lived with her parents and one was divorced and lived with her child. Ten participants had children aged 8 months – 14 years. One participant had children aged above 20 and one participant was childless. All married participants lived with their spouses except one who lived separately. The spouse of one participant worked in a university while the rest worked in private and public organizations. Ten participants lived in nuclear families; one lived with her parents while two lived in joint families.

5. Results and Discussion

The interview data yielded two main themes including “academic responsibilities during the COVID-19” and “lockdown and family life.” The process of development of themes through coding is given in Table 3 below. The table illustrates that the participants focused on issues they encountered as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. During the analysis process, similar codes and those repeating several times were clustered together. For example, the code “being in stress” repeated several times during the coding process. The participants expressed themselves being under stress during the different stages of the lockdown in different situations such as the development of online material, performing household chores, online teaching, and taking care of children and elders. The words anxious, anxiety, depression, and burned out were coded the same. The codes were clustered and were reduced to a total of 34 codes presented in Table 3.

The above 34 codes were then further reduced to six categories based on similarities. For instance, the codes such as pieces of training, resources, time spent on course preparation, and module preparation were categorized as ‘adapting to online teaching during COVID-19,’ Likewise, codes including communication-related to research, fieldwork, and laboratory work were clustered under the category ‘research students’ supervision’ and codes such as publications, funding, and fieldwork were
Table 1
A Sample of the Coding Process.

| Data                                                                 | Coding          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Everyone thinks I am at home, it is easier to work from home, but I think it is more stressful as we are not organized personally. | Stress          |
| Previously, we were on duty from 9 to 4 but now my home is a workplace 24 hours a day. Students can text me on WhatsApp whenever they want and they can send me a message on google classroom any time. | Increased workload |
| I have put on weight. My skin is pale. I have served everyone but I could not serve myself. Students send their research drafts online which are difficult to evaluate; we can’t see everything online, for example, for continuity you need to have hard copies. | Lack of Self-care |
| My youngest is 3 years old and it is an issue to even open a laptop while he is awake. So I mostly work when he takes a nap in the afternoon and I take classes early in the morning when he is sleeping. | Working with kids |
| I am the kind of person who goes to the gym and walks, so for me there were few activities to do during a lockdown The family time has decreased due to work from home as I usually take my classes and meetings and other tasks in my room; I only come out either to cook or clean or eat, so I feel that I am unable to spend time with them like before. | Lack of physical activities |
| At home, online teaching is difficult as kids are also interrupting. My family first did not accept online teaching and they believed that I should give time to my family. | Work-family conflict |
| For research, you need peace of mind and at the end of the day, I am tired and exhausted for which I need 2 to 3 hours of peaceful time which I don’t have at present. | Online teaching and family |
| My husband did support the schooling of children but he over-burdened me in other ways. For example, when the maid washed dishes he asked me to wash them again. I sometimes forgot and this led to conflict between us. | Personal research |

Table 2
Demographic Profile of Participants.

| Marital Status | Age of Children | Family Nuclear | Profession of Spouses |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Married        | 8 months – 14 years | Joint          | Academic              |
| Single         | 15 years and above | 10            | Academia              |
| Divorced       | 1               | 3             | Private               |

Table 3
Development of themes.

| Codes                                                   | Categories/Subthemes                                             | Major themes                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Development of modules                                  | Adapting to Online teaching during COVID-19                      | Academic Responsibilities amid University Closure               |
| Course preparation                                      |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Makeup classes                                          |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Monitoring and approvals                                |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Lack of training                                        |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Lack of resources                                       |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| The pressure to learn new technology for classes       |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Class absences                                          |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Quality of teaching affected                            |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Communication with students increased                   | Supervision of research students during COVID-19                 |                                                                  |
| Lack of resources for research students                 |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Unmotivated students                                    |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Field research affected                                 |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Science laboratories closed                              |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Difficulty in reading long drafts online                |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Multiple tasks/shifts                                   | The Challenge of Personal Research for Women Academic            |                                                                  |
| Fieldwork/publications                                  |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Designing new projects/applying for funding             |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Increase in cooking/cleaning time                        | Domestic Chores                                                  | Lockdown and Family                                             |
| Distance learning of children                           |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Blurring of boundaries                                  |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Concentrating on work with kids around                  |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Work-family conflict                                    |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Self-tutoring                                           | Child care and care of elderly                                   |                                                                  |
| Making children comply with SOPS                        |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Time spent on child care (especially on toddlers/babies)|                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Making elders follow SOPs (masks, sanitizers etc)       |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Lack of physical activities                             | Wellbeing and health of family                                   |                                                                  |
| Conditional support from husbands                       |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Lack of Self-care                                       |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Lack of breaks from work/home                           |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Losing temper                                           |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Excessive screen time                                   |                                                                   |                                                                  |
| Stress, anxiety, depressed                              |                                                                   |                                                                  |

categorized as ‘the challenge of personal research.’ The codes including cleaning, cooking, child care, and eldercare were grouped under the category ‘domestic chores’ while the codes ‘anxiety, stress, self-care, and support’ were categorized as ‘health and wellbeing.’ These six categories were finally reduced to two main themes. The theme “academic responsibilities” emerged from the categories of ‘online teaching,’ ‘research supervision,’ and ‘personal research’ while the theme “lockdown and family life” emerged from the categories, ‘domestic chores’, ‘childcare and care of elderly’ and ‘health and wellbeing.’ These will be discussed below.
1. Academic Responsibilities amid University Closure

This study reveals that public sector universities in Pakistan were unprepared for remote and/or online teaching and learning. In the absence of policies, capacity building, and adequate training, academics had been perplexed due to university closure as a result of the lockdown. The process of switching to a Learning Management System (LMS) was daunting and tiring as teachers were trained from zero. Since online pedagogies are different than face-to-face, the courses had to be entirely redesigned. The majority appreciated and acknowledged the efforts made by their universities in imparting training. Yet, many complained about the burden it entailed. In what follows we discuss the experiences of the participants in dealing with remote teaching and personal research during the lockdown.

Adapting to Online Teaching during COVID-19

In an attempt to halt and contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, education institutions, including universities, in Pakistan were closed in March 2020. Teachers were confronted with the need to adapt to online teaching and several challenges were experienced during the transition period. University closure had converted the home into a workplace and the participants performed several shifts a day. The boundaries between work and the home had been blurred and they found themselves available to students and university administration round the clock to meet the demands of online teaching. It was especially challenging for those having insufficient physical or personal space (small homes/apartments).

Those familiar with the use of gadgets adapted easily and enjoyed the process of learning, while for others the pressure to learn new technology in a short period of time was unrealistic. As P1 stated; “Seasoned teachers like me are more comfortable in speaking to students, not reading from slides.” Also, the need to reconstruct the classroom environment virtually was a challenge due to reasons such as lack of experience, inadequate resources, and frequent interruptions at home.

The amount of time spent on preparing and delivering online classes was an issue for many participants. Many mentioned that they spent 4-5 hours preparing a 03 credit hour lecture which included preparing slides, planning activities, and assignments, uploading assignments, finding reading materials, and recording audio sessions for students who could not attend the Google meets. Some spent extra time finding relevant documentaries and YouTube videos to make the classes more lively and engaging. Often, extra classes had to be arranged for further clarity. Additionally, the class time took well over 3 hours for each course. As P6 explained; “A three-hour class a week would often take five hours or more for a single course and having a workload of 4 courses; I was on the run all week.” The process of assessment was also difficult and many students missed their exams causing further distress. Frequent monitoring by QEC was considered distracting and intimidating for teachers as they struggled through the new process. As P2 in this study stated; “The process of monitoring and approvals was difficult and we were exhausted and stressed out.” Besides, for those participants who were in administrative positions such as department heads and master trainers, it was especially challenging to deal with additional administrative and academic responsibilities. Participants from the science disciplines had additional issues such as limited or no access to laboratories and the need to use a whiteboard to explain concepts to students. One participant explained,

When we first shifted to online teaching, I think the major challenge was the absence of the whiteboard. We are not used to writing and drawing things with a mouse. So to resolve this I used my handicap to make a movie of myself while writing on my daughter’s small whiteboard and I played the video before giving my lecture on Google meet. (P6)

Dealing with unmotivated students was another challenge. Students were initially uncomfortable with the online mode of teaching and lost interest in classes. Those from rural areas faced genuine issues related to internet connectivity and many did not have access to computers. Many others were unwilling to cooperate and participate, and in many cases, half the class was absent and those who were present lacked motivation. Since cameras were off due to security reasons, teachers could not tell who was attentive and listening. As one participant stated;

Delivering a lecture to unresponsive students who had muted cameras and microphones was frustrating. I had no idea if they were listening to me or watching a movie or scrolling through Facebook. I felt like I was speaking to the walls. Delivering 1.5 hours of the lecture was like walking on trail 3 [one of the many lively and challenging uphill trails in Margalla hills of Islamabad]. It was exhausting and stressful. (P10)

Further, students often sent incomplete work, through several attachments, and often without names, causing agony for the teachers to find assignments from the bulk of emails. In women academics’ view, the entire process was frustrating and disturbing. They felt unhappy, unproductive, and exhausted. They believed the quality of teaching had been affected due to working from home with limitations and interruptions, the struggle to learn a new system within a limited period, and the fear of catching coronavirus. The increased responsibilities and the struggle to adapt to online teaching were particularly stressful for women academics.

Research Students Supervision during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly interrupted supervisory roles. The closures of education institutions forced supervisors and supervisess to conduct their research work from home. Remote/online supervision was reported to be a mixed bag of good and bad experiences. This was not a major issue for those participants who had previous experience of working through online modalities. Many already had developed some best practices, like forming WhatsApp groups. One of the participants (P11) had a positive experience of introducing digital ethnography to continue the fieldwork assignments of her students. She stated, “It gave them a fair idea what kind of challenges anthropologists are facing to conduct personal interviews and what alternate methods can be employed during a pandemic to overcome this limitation.” However, for participants who preferred to meet students in person and were accustomed to evaluating hard copies of drafts, shifting to online work was a challenge. As P1 stated; “for continuity, you need to have hard copies.” Some also reported issues faced by students due to the unavailability of the internet for access to e-resources. The female students were unwilling to work on their thesis due to the increased responsibilities of domestic chores at home.

All participants in this research believed that the time spent on research students had increased significantly after the lockdown. The majority of our participants were available for their students round the clock and students were encouraged to contact them on WhatsApp, phone, and email whenever needed. Formal meetings if needed were mostly held on Google meet. One participant stated;

Before COVID-19 I often met research students once a week or when needed to discuss anything. But after lockdown, I feel I am available for them 24/7. They can call and text me any time and I have to assist them instantly. (P5)

This new way of teaching and supervising from home invaded personal space and control over one’s time and had overburdened the academics. They managed their job and home responsibilities at the cost of their time and energy. However, they acknowledged that the flexibility was offered to students considering their vulnerable conditions and was not something imposed by the universities.

They also explained the difficulties faced by students in conducting empirical studies and how they changed methodologies to overcome this. Some changed their sources of data from primary to secondary and carried out content analysis instead of interviews. Nevertheless, students
of science were stuck as labs were closed. This is reflected in the statements of one participant who explained;

Our Ph.D. and MPhil students are in the middle of nowhere as they cannot complete a thesis without lab work. University has allowed students to come and work in labs on a rotational basis once a week but our experiments are different. Our students have to work for 2-3 days when they have to process an experiment. (P7)

Since none of their students were in the writing stage and they had just started their laboratory work when the lockdown started, all they could do was to write reviews. Interestingly, we can see here a mix of discourses concerning research suppression during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the students and teachers (with sufficient hardware and bandwidth) coped with changing modes and schedules. However, it was/is very challenging for those who had limited resources and obligatory domestic responsibilities.

The Challenge of Personal Research for Women Academics

Managing the demand for online teaching, online supervision, and domestic responsibilities disproportionately affected women academics’ independent research and scientific productivity Personal research was the most neglected and ignored area during the lockdown for participants from all four universities. They acknowledged that increased academic activities related to online teaching and domestic responsibilities as a result of working from home had overburdened them as they navigated through these spaces. It was explained that research needs peace of mind and concentration while they had no personal time of their own for reading and writing. One of our participants stated;

I was a regular reader before the COVID-19 pandemic. I used to read commentaries and research articles; I always had a book on the shelf for reading. But from March onwards I have not been able to read anything except for preparing lectures. (P9)

Likewise, two participants reported that they had received comments from reviewers on their papers but had not been able to revise them. However, three participants acknowledged that they had worked on personal projects. One was a department head and Assistant Professor in University 2 and she reported that her research was on track, and she had made good progress despite her busy academic and administrative activities. Sharing the experiences, she stated,

I think I utilized the COVID-19 lockdown very well. I revised several manuscripts. I completed some pending papers and resubmitted them and I started and completed one new project. Now I have two papers that are ready for submission. Whether these will be published or not is a different story, but on my part, I have been productive. (P10)

This participant believed that since all social activities were suspended and her son was old enough to take care of himself, she was able to work on her projects. The second participant P11 stated; “As far as professional growth is concerned, I would say it was accelerated surprisingly as university timings were relaxed and I could work on some of the pending projects.” She believed the recent COVID-19 breakdown had opened ways to think about human interaction and family relationships differently. Another participant who was a Professor (holding an administrative position) reported that she was able to revise previous manuscripts that had been reviewed and returned but was unable to initiate any new project due to academic and administrative responsibilities.

In summary, it can be argued that experiences, research opportunities, and outcomes were not the same for women academics as they were for men. A simple analysis of research productivity of women academics adequately accounts for critical factors such as age, class, marital status, and other structural conditions, including physical space, home environment, and other connected systems and power structures.

2. Lockdown and Family Life

One of our key concerns was to understand women’s experiences of family responsibility simultaneously with their teaching and research during the lockdown. The discussion above clearly manifests the predicaments of the participants in dealing with academic responsibilities while working remotely. In this theme, we discuss the dilemmas faced by the participants in reconstructing their homes as they experienced the lockdown.

Domestic Chores

All participants complained of increased responsibilities during the lockdown; however, those with young children were the most burdened. The availability of full-time housekeepers provided some relief in domestic tasks such as washing and cleaning. However, they acknowledged an increase in cooking due to the closure of restaurants. It is reflected in a response from a Lecturer and master trainer, who stated, “Household chores have overburdened me the most; I was not used to it before. Making three meals each day along with multiple snacks was difficult” (P3).

The need to do frequent laundry and cleaning was acknowledged by the majority who believed their responsibilities had increased due to the need for cleaning and disinfecting surfaces several times a day. Those who did not keep their housekeepers due to COVID-19 had to experience an extra burden. They spent several hours on household activities which took only a few hours a day before the pandemic. For those participants who had infants and toddlers, it was important to use the time wisely. They completed tasks such as online classes, cleaning, and cooking when the children were asleep.

Only a few of those living in nuclear families acknowledged the support of their husbands in fulfilling household tasks. There was no evidence of men getting engaged in cooking or major cleaning activities. Instead, they expected the women to keep the house clean. Four reported that even if their husbands offered to help in cleaning they declined the offer. One participant stated; “Since he does not know how to do things, it creates more problems” (P8).

Some participants believed that working from home had reduced family time as women were busy either doing domestic work or academic tasks round the clock. They did not have time to sit and chat with their families. One participant who did not have children stated, “I usually take my classes and meetings and perform official assignments in my room, I only come out either to cook or clean or eat so I feel that I am unable to spend time with them like before” (P8).

Nevertheless, despite the increased work at home, three participants believed the pandemic had brought positive changes in their lives. They acknowledged and appreciated the time saved every day as a result of working from home. For example, getting ready for work, driving, and preparing lunch for their families and themselves consumed time and energy. As one participant stated, “The ground reality is the burdens have been decreased as I no longer have to prepare clothes, shoes, matching accessories every day for my class. This also needed time and energy” (P9). Some were of the view that the lockdown had allowed families to reunite and spend quality time with each other and eat healthy food.

Child Care and Care of the Elderly

Childcare was predominantly believed by all the participants to be women's labor, irrespective of the ages of their children. The data show that child care was an area that had truly exhausted the participants, especially those having infants and toddlers as they desired personal space and self-care. Where previously the kids were looked after by babysitters or were at daycare centers, the lockdown had the mothers taking care of the kids personally. Only two participants who had children aged infants and toddlers reported having full-time babysitters at home. Yet still, the mothers were considered “available” at all times and the kids spent most of their time with them.
Besides, responsibilities regarding the care of school-going children had also increased. The participants found it difficult to motivate the children to keep clean and they struggled to sanitize and wash their hands. It was challenging to explain the severity of the pandemic to them, and the need to stay indoors, and limit screen time. Since the children were learning remotely, they too needed supervision, and the participants found self-tutoring a difficult job as children refused to comply due to distractions such as toys, television, and food. Besides, the academic workload of mothers also affected children. Some mothers could not give quality time to their children due to their workload. For example, P11 explained that her children could not participate in their online classes due to a lack of supervision. She explained: “Being a working mother, my children had to compromise on their learning as they could not interact with the class fellows and teachers during live classes.”

Nevertheless, some participants deeply acknowledged the support provided by their spouses and older children. As P9 explained that her husband offered to take care of the infant while she took online classes. She also appreciated the role of her 10 years old daughter who stayed in the room with the baby. This gave her peace of mind as she worked on her academic activities. Similarly, P1 acknowledged the role of her elder son in providing support to the younger one in his online schooling. Likewise, P3 explained that her husband took care of the online teaching of the children early in the morning, as she woke up late due to working late hours at night.

Eldercare was not a major issue as the majority of the participants lived in nuclear families. However, they did acknowledge the stress and anxiety felt for their parents and in-laws who lived separately. Additionally, there was a reluctance to meet aged parents and relatives due to the fear of corona infection. One of the participants stated, “I could not arrange my parents’ routine visits to hospitals for the fear of COVID-19.”

Three participants in this study lived in joint families and they explained the challenge of convincing the elders in the house to stay at home and comply with health guidelines regarding COVID-19. One participant explained: “The elder male members would go out for religious activities no matter how much you tell them to stay home.” (P12). Convincing elders to wear masks and use sanitizers was difficult, especially as many elders considered it a waste of money. These participants reported that educating the elders about the threat of COVID-19 and non-compliance often led to aggression and frustration. Besides, the participants were also responsible for taking care of the food and medication of the elders while they were sick.

Wellbeing and Health of Women

The participants were burned out, depressed, exhausted, angry, and in desperate need of personal time. According to the majority, the entire process of online teaching had been a nightmare. They strongly believed that their mental health had been impacted seriously as they were expected to constantly work throughout the semester without breaks, especially at a sensitive time where families needed their support too. As P11 stated; “It was a big trauma full of uncertainty and fear.” While P13 explained “the lockdown made me crazy. I feel exhausted and desperately need some time for myself.” Many participants related to this sentiment about lack of personal time, mood swings, and feeling restless and disorganized. One participant explained this as follows:

“Well-being at a personal level is rest and peace of mind. Sleepless nights and burdens have increased due to the increase in administrative and academic tasks along with the need to care for young kids. As a result, my self-care has deteriorated; I have put on weight and my skin is impaired. So I have served everyone but neglected myself.” (P4)

Many participants echoed the same words and wished they had time to sleep well, to exercise, to visit a salon, and be able to enjoy some personal time. They explained as working women they spent quality time at work as this maintains their physical and mental health. Others believed their mental health has been affected due to reduced human/social interaction. As P12 stated “Being unable to meet friends was also uncomfortable because with friends is a cathartic experience, and physical presence does matter.” Likewise, P10 explains;

I am the kind of person who does not sit at home. I visit malls, I go hiking, I visit friends and on weekends I plan a busy schedule with my family. Now staying home 24 hours a day, I have been stressed. I can’t go to the parks. I can’t meet anyone.

Many attributed the stress in their lives to the double burden of home and work without breaks. One participant who is a clinical psychologist and has been providing help to the university students as a member of the counseling committee stated;

I share the stress and burden of those patients who come to me seeking help. This affects me; I become irritated, I get angry, I feel depressed, I feel I am doing the same thing again and again without breaks so this is a burden and I feel the need for a break. (P8).

The feelings of being angry at children and arguments with husbands were reported by several participants who related this to their mental health after the lockdown. As P3 stated;

I feared that my relationship with my husband would be affected at some point as he had overburdened me by keeping constant checks on me. I could not do things independently. I was not allowed to share a car ride with anyone. If people came to meet us at home I could not meet them.

Lack of understanding and support from family also contributed to the stress as some were criticized for spending too much time on laptops and mobiles. Excessive screen time was also a problem for many and affected their vision. Others believed working from home and the double shifts had led to more serious conditions such as back pains and headaches. The participants had dealt with the stress in their ways. While some had taken refuge in prayer or spirituality, others sought support from psychiatrists through university services.

6. Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, we unveiled the lived experiences of women academics as they navigated their way through the newly introduced remote-online teaching system during the COVID-19 pandemic while still performing the responsibilities of home and domestic care. Concerns about both the academic work and personal and/or family life of married women academics are raised by this study. Work-family balance has already been an issue for working women and has been largely attributed to gender inequalities in societies and has been debated widely (Rivera & Tilcsik 2019; Roos et al., 2020). However, as this paper illustrates, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has further deepened gender inequalities as women continue to take several shifts in meeting the demands of academia, household responsibilities, and care for the family. Unfortunately, the support offered to the academics in overcoming this burden was not sufficient and often conditional (Kan, 2014; Kolpashnikova, 2018). The majority had lost their housekeepers due to safety concerns and limited support was offered from in-laws and husbands. Even in the presence of full-time housekeepers, husbands, and in-laws where available, women were mainly responsible for childcare, cooking, and supervising other household activities (Alon et al., 2020). This burden appears to have affected their mental health leaving them depressed and unhappy.

Importantly, women seemed to be perplexed, exhausted, and burned out as a result of increased workload, lack of rest and peace of mind, and lack of personal time for pleasure and self-care. They worked round the clock to meet deadlines, attend meetings, take remote classes, and connect with their research students. These findings offer new insight into the existing theories on gender inequality in workplaces. The findings illustrate that challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic can further deepen existing inequalities, especially in gender-segregated so-
cieties like Pakistan where domestic chores remain the responsibility of women despite their contribution to the labor market.

The study raises serious concerns about the impact on women’s academic work. Due to the increased burden of online teaching and domestic activities, the participants seemed to have neglected their personal research (Minello, 2020). This is a major dilemma as women already publish fewer papers compared to men (Huang et al., 2020; Hunt, 2020) and several months of lockdown have brought a huge gap in their academic career in regards to publications. The pandemic has not only adversely affected small-scale feminist and critical qualitative research but has also threatened the promotion of women academics. Since publications remain an important component of promotions, this will affect women negatively in the years to come. Importantly, those who are on the tenure track are likely to suffer more as their annual reviews are based on publications, attending conferences, besides the teaching responsibilities and contribution to curriculum development. In summarization, it can be argued that the personal and professional costs for women academics appear to be particularly high.

In light of these findings, we suggest that since women experienced the lockdown differently compared to men in academia, they should be compensated in some way for the time and energy they spent in fulfilling their double roles. In the US, for example, a one-year tenure clock “pause” is being debated, to allow tenure-track academics to work more effectively towards their tenure (Oleschuk, 2020). Others are considering counting the pandemic lockdown and university closure, towards paid leave of women from work so that their tenure performance is not affected. This means the new equality and diversity procedures need to be designed to enable women academics to meet their promotion demands. In Pakistan, similar initiatives could be taken to protect the women's academics on TTS by simply complying with the pre-pandemic review standards for the year 2020. In particular, those who would be reviewed for tenure need flexibility from universities in the form of extra time to prepare for tenure and leniency in dealing with their cases for the pandemic period. Besides, the efforts they have made in learning a new LMS system in a short time and in implementing it may be counted as a contribution in their reviews for tenure and annual increments. Importantly, women need the support of men in household domains. Hence, it is time for men to step up to share the burdens of household chores and childcare.

Study Location

This study was conducted in Islamabad Capital Territory, Rawalpindi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the study participants for participating in this study.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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