

Mothering in the academia during a pandemic: Structural gender inequalities and family wellbeing



The COVID-19 pandemic created unique constraints for women around the world in the various roles of their life (for example, in their reproductive roles within the home and productive roles in society). It was particularly difficult for working women and single-parent households headed by women, who faced parenting challenges while juggling to fulfill breadwinners responsibilities.¹ Pandemic era reports from Germany, United Kingdom and the USA suggest that women dedicated more time providing childcare and on home schooling than their male counterparts.¹ Academic life can be very challenging for women who often carry large teaching loads, engage more frequently in community-based research, and also have parenting and care responsibilities.² These challenges can leave them less time - than male academics - for career development opportunities and gaining academic recognition and esteem.^{3,4} Often female academics get channeled into teaching and teaching related administrative work and committee service that is accorded less value. A system of structural prejudices and a masculinised (and racialized) system determine judgements about academic excellence, prestige, and status.^{3,4} The pandemic worsened the longstanding gender biases in research and academia⁵ and widened sexist and racist inequalities.^{6,7}

In light of the gendered structural barriers amplified by the pandemic, Professor Nazilla Khanlou put together a Call for an INYI Journal Special Issue on “Mothering in the academia during a pandemic: Structural gender inequalities and family wellbeing.” Over the years Dr. Khanlou has conducted research promoting women’s mental health and wellbeing, with a particular focus on marginalized women using an intersectionality-informed approach.

I have known Dr. Khanlou since my doctoral studies at York University, and I appreciate her invitation to write the Guest Editorial for this special issue of the INYI Journal. I can fully connect with each of the discussions in this special issue, being an immigrant woman of colour, a medical doctor, an academic and a mother of three.

This Volume of the INYI Journal provides an opportunity to further understand the lived experiences of women in academia and their challenges as they navigate the harsh terrain of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Issue entails two sections. Section 1 includes two research articles and four commentaries related to the special call on mothering in the academia during a pandemic, and Section 2 includes two research articles on mothering by racialized and immigrant mothers.

Section One: Mothering in Academia During a Pandemic

The first research article by *Professor Maggie Quirt*, explores the experience of mothering in the academy during the pandemic using Rachel Kadish’s feminist analysis in ‘The Weight of Ink’ as a starting point to examine structural gender inequalities in postsecondary spaces. The article by Professor Hanneke Croxson and colleagues uses personal narratives to explore commonalities of experiences as mothers who work in academia. Two themes emerged from their study, the

multiple roles and responsibilities and embracing the ‘messiness,’ and family wellbeing.

The first Commentary by *Dr. Marina Heifetz* provides evidence-based strategies for working mothers to support their mental health during the pandemic and beyond. Some examples are self-compassion and mindfulness, self-care including sleep and physical activity time, maintaining social connections and shared responsibilities, and taking time to have fun. The Commentary by *Professor Luisa Santos* is a personal viewpoint on being a mother, an academic and an independent curator during the current COVID-19 pandemic. The story is inspired through an artwork conceived by artists Sara and André under a dictatorship (in 1971) in Portugal that uses humor as a powerful political tool to speak about freedom. The Commentary by *Professor Chang Su and colleagues* is a review of the literature on the challenges faced by academic mothers during the pandemic. It offers practical recommendations that academic institutions can use to support academic mothers enmeshed in work and life. In their Commentary, *Professor Sandra Della Porta and Daniella Ingraio* use a storytelling approach to narrative oral history using reflexivity as analysis to present the first author's lived experience as a mother and academic at the peak of the pandemic.

Section Two: Mothering at the intersections of migration, culture, racialization, and developmental disabilities

In this research article *Dr. Luz Maria Vazquez and colleagues* examine health promotion practices of twenty-eight immigrant mothers of children with developmental disabilities using the Health Promotion Activities Scale. The authors underscore the importance of considering the intersections of motherhood, disability, gendered role expectations and migration when designing health promotion practices. The second research article is from *Professors Chang Su and Nazilla Khanlou* and highlights the impact of social and cultural factors, such as stigma and shame on the mental health of Chinese immigrant mothers of children with developmental disabilities in Canada. The article explains the traditional Chinese cultural beliefs towards

developmental disabilities and the importance of avoidance of shame.

I hope that this Special Issue promotes understanding and further discussions within and outside the academia about the need to support women, specially marginalized mothers and working women, so they can better navigate the challenges in unprecedented times such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

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