

York University's 6th Lillian Meighen Wright Maternal-Child Health Learning Academy. Maternal-Child Health and Wellbeing in a Global Pandemic: Promotion, Prevention, Intervention

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This is an invited Commentary

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On July 18 and 22, 2022, students, researchers, service providers, and members of the community participated in York University's 6th Lillian Meighen Wright Maternal-Child Health Learning Academy. The focus of the biannual event was “*Maternal-Child Health and Wellbeing in a Global Pandemic: Promotion, Prevention, Intervention*”. This two-day event was organized by the Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health and the Lillian Meighen Wright Scholars Program Academic Lead, Dr. Nazilla Khanlou, and the Student Co-chairs of the Program, Bianca Bondi and Ilana Shiff. Funding was provided by the Lillian Meighen Wright Foundation.

The event consisted of panel speakers and poster presenters from different institutes in Canada and internationally. Presenters applied interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches to understanding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal-child health and wellbeing. The Learning Academies aim at reflecting contemporary debates on current health related issues, equity and global impact. The 1st Academy (2011) focused on methodological approaches; the 2nd Academy (2013) examined lab to community-based research; the 3rd Academy (2015) analyzed

maternal-child health across disciplines from local to global levels; the 4th Academy (2017) focused on the international context of disabilities in maternal-child health, and on parenting; and the 5th Academy (2019) examined two themes: maternal-child health and gender-based violence and trauma-informed approaches. The focus of the 6th Academy reflected a rigorous discussion and learning for the future potential of maternal-child health in the context of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Learning Academies provide a space for diverse sectors to exchange experiences and perspectives, including academia, community, practice and policy.

Panelists and poster presenters in the 2022 event highlighted how the pandemic has created specific complex challenges for mothers, families, and their communities. As the event organizer, Nazilla Khanlou (York University) explained:

The ongoing pandemic's impact is gendered, placing women in increased disadvantage through its different waves. Mothers have had to manage multiple roles throughout the pandemic, with increased demands on their time and personal resources. Cross-systems support and gender-specific policies and

practices are needed to best support maternal-child health and wellbeing. The Learning Academy will contribute to co-learning in support of best practice, policies, and action (Khanlou, 2022).

A key challenge that societies across the globe are facing is gender-based violence, the “shadow pandemic” as described by the United Nations Women (2020), which has been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting women, girls and children worldwide. Panelist Dinoba Kirupa (Council of Agencies Serving South Asians) explored gender-based violence (GBV) within the Canadian South Asian community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kirupa analyzed the issues that have exacerbated an already pervasive problem, and highlighted the need to address its root causes. The panelist discussed intersectoral issues related to public awareness of GBV, strategies to improve service delivery so agencies better help to ameliorate frontline concerns in uncertain times, and how they can better meet the needs of GBV survivors. She argued that “systemic issues have further disempowered already marginalized groups as the pandemic has exposed major cracks in our systems, which Canadians were not prepared for” (Kirupa, 2022, p. 8).

Panelist Jacqueline Getfield (Ontario National Alliance of Black School Educators) analyzed her doctoral research to explore the theme of the relationship of family and parental involvement and children’s success in education/schooling. She argues that, in the case of Black mothers, the positive relationship attributed to parental involvement and students’ success has not been proven. Getfield highlighted how unequal power relations in the education system impacts on that relationship. She argued that “educators continue to actively exclude some mothers from school meetings and discourage others from engaging in their children’s

education/schooling”. Her analysis focussed on the intersection of racial justice and disability.

Three panelists focused their analysis on exploring the theme of mothering in the context of the academy, during the COVID-19 pandemic. They used the methodology of personal narratives and oral histories, to explore their experiences of mothering. Maggie Quirt (York University) analyzed the structural gender inequalities faced by women in the academy, mothers “who have long struggled to achieve work-life balance under patriarchal conditions” (Quirt, 2022, p. 7). The “balancing” of work and life and the lack of institutional supports were recurring issues analyzed by the panelists. Hanneke Croxson (Dalhousie University) recognized that even in a context of a position of privilege that full-time academics enjoyed during the health crisis, lack of supports impacted her life and that of their families. Sandra Della Porta (Brock University) pointed out something that we all need to recognize: challenges of mothering in academia were not new. She added that “layering on the struggles of a global pandemic shone a glaring light on the inequities that persist for mothers working in the academic space” (Della Porta, 2022, p. 10). Panelists used reflexivity as analysis and to make meaning of their relationships at various levels (friends, community, work place) to reflect on their lived experiences. As described further below, an entire INYI Journal Issue focusses on the theme *Mothering in the Academia during a Pandemic: Structural Gender Inequalities and Family Wellbeing*, and the three panelists had papers in it

(<https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/issue/view/16>).

Finally, two panelists presented hands-on type of initiatives to address the impacts of mental health (Pillai) and substance use (Motz) among vulnerable populations including infants, young children, youth and adults. Rebecca Pillai Riddell

(York University) presented the Digital, Inclusive, Virtual, and Equitable Research Training in Mental Health Platform (DIVERT Mental Health: <https://divertmentalhealth.ca/about/>) initiative, designed to address issues of accessibility and inclusivity in mental health services. Mary Motz (York University) presented a holistic model, the program Breaking the Cycle, which is an early intervention and prevention program that supports the well-being of infants and young children who have been exposed to substances in the pre- and postnatal period. Motz discussed the many challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to their program which was reflected on service delivery impacting families.

The event also included 11 posters (see Booklet, 2022, pages 15-22, <https://nkhanlou.info.yorku.ca/files/2022/07/Booklet-LMW-6th-Learning-Academy-July-2022.pdf?x46752>). Poster presenters included researchers from York University, Brandon University, and from international universities including the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and the Federal University of Paraiba, in Brazil, and the Aga Khan University, in Karachi, Pakistan. The themes presented in the posters included: a) service providers' engagement, and challenges posed by social distancing pandemic measures; b) health related stigma during the pandemic; c) vaccine intention and related anxiety in postpartum women; d) Pakistani-Canadian youth's perception of mental health; e) maternal health quality and social supports; f) virtual services for refugee mothers; g) impacts of the pandemic on the health of women with breast cancer in Brazil; h) maternal mortality in Brazil; reproductive planning in Brazil; i) parental stress and coping strategies of parents of children with developmental disabilities; and j) mental wellbeing of adolescent mother affected by intimate partner violence.

I invite you to read the following full journal articles about some of the research presented in

the event. See INYI Journal, Vol. 12 No. 1 (2023): *Mothering in the Academia during a Pandemic: Structural Gender Inequalities and Family Wellbeing*:

- Maggie Quirt. *Mothering in the Remote Academy. Building Bridges and Negotiating Isolation.* <https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/99>
- Chang Su and Nazilla Khanlou. *Effects of Stress, Social Support, Experience of Shame, Loss of Face and Mental Health on Chinese Immigrant Mothers of Children with Developmental Disabilities in Canada.* <https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/92>
- Sandra Della Porta and Daniella Ingrao. *The Intersection of Motherhood and Academia During a Pandemic: A Storytelling Approach to Narrative Oral History.* <https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/96>
- Hanneke Croxson, Margot Jackson, Mary Asirifi, and Holly Symonds-Brown. *Sharing Stories of Mothering, Academia and the COVID 19 Pandemic: Multiple Roles, Messiness and Family Wellbeing.* <https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/98>

Visit the INYI Journal to access other articles on the same Issue: <https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca>

An overview of our 6th Annual Meighen Wright Maternal-Child Learning Academy is available via an online summary video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9sFelse8Dw>), as well as online event details, including biographies and abstracts (<https://nkhanlou.info.yorku.ca/files/2022/07/Booklet-LMW-6th-Learning-Academy-July-2022.pdf?x96015>).

I hope that the research and personal experiences analyzed in the event make visible the differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic among marginalized sectors of the population. A key learning lesson from this and previous health emergencies is the need to address gender inequalities, including gender-based violence and socioeconomic impacts.

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