Mothering in the Remote Academy: Building Bridges and Negotiating Isolation

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Abstract: In this article, I use Rachel Kadish's feminist analysis in *The Weight of Ink* as a jumping off point to explore the experience of mothering in the academy during the pandemic. The structural gender inequalities that constrain opportunities for Kadish's female characters will be familiar to women in the academy who have long struggled to achieve work-life balance under patriarchal conditions. I argue that such inequalities have persisted in the shift to remote teaching, and that the pandemic experience of mothers in the academy has been characterized by challenges related to both proximity and absence. This, in turn, has implications for the role academic mothers play in helping youth integrate effectively into their university classes and cohorts. I maintain that women's traditional role as bridge builders can contribute to positive outcomes for youth, but institutions must establish equitable faculty workloads in order to support these efforts in a more systematic and structured manner.

Keywords: Pandemic, Mothering, Academy, Gender Inequality, Youth Integration, Labour, Equitable Faculty Workloads

Abstrait: Dans cet article, j'utilise l'analyse féministe de Rachel Kadish dans *The Weight of Ink* comme point de départ pour explorer l'expérience de la maternité à l'académie pendant la pandémie. Les inégalités structurelles entre les sexes qui limitent les opportunités pour les personnages féminins de Kadish seront familières aux femmes de l'académie qui ont longtemps lutté pour parvenir à un équilibre entre vie professionnelle et vie privée dans des conditions patriarcales. Je soutiens que de telles inégalités ont persisté dans le passage à l'enseignement à distance, et que l'expérience pandémique des mères dans l'académie a été caractérisée par des défis liés à la fois à la proximité et à l'absence. Ceci, à son tour, a des implications sur le rôle que jouent les mères universitaires pour aider les jeunes à s'intégrer efficacement dans leurs classes et cohortes universitaires. Je maintiens que le rôle traditionnel des femmes en tant que bâtisseurs de ponts peut contribuer à des résultats positifs pour les jeunes, mais les établissements doivent établir des charges de travail équitables pour les professeurs afin de soutenir ces efforts de manière plus systématique et structurée.

Mots-clés: Pandémie, Maternité, L'academie, Inégalités Entre Les Sexes, Intégration Des Jeunes, Travail, Travail Équitables Pour Les Professeurs

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Introduction

To mark a definitive break between a challenging year of remote teaching during a global pandemic and my inaugural sabbatical, I began reading Rachel Kadish's *The Weight of Ink* (2017). This highly acclaimed novel chronicles the lives of two female scholars whose stories merge across hundreds of years when a cache of antique papers is discovered in a centuries-old home. Professor Helen Watt, a retiring historian, plans to use these papers in order to carry out one final research project, while Ester Velasquez, a female orphan under the tutelage of an aging rabbi in 17th century plague-ridden London, is the author of the treasure trove of material. Despite being separated by a span of almost 500 years, both characters experience the limits of the social and institutional structures that govern their lives. Helen's significant archival find is co-opted by a paternalistic male dean who gives priority access to the papers she has discovered to an up-and-coming male colleague, effectively sidelining Helen because of her age, disability, and gender. Ester, on the other hand, has even less access to the world of scholarships. Though circumstances position her as a female scribe for a rabbi, a rarity for her times, she must assume a male identity in order to pursue the full extent of her intellectual ambitions. Ester's struggles to exist as a scholar and independent woman in a society that saw women as neither inspire Helen to make one final stand against the patriarchal constraints of the academy.

The experiences of Helen and Ester will likely resonate with many female academics working remotely during the global pandemic. The structural gender inequalities that constrain opportunities for Kadish's female characters will be familiar to women in the academy who struggled with work-life balance long before our homes became our offices. Additionally, the plague that permeated 17th century London society has striking parallels to the global pandemic of our modern times: there is an eerie familiarity to the way in which Kadish's characters fortify themselves with courage and prayers when venturing out for supplies, while families suffer the loss of loved ones to a plague that is relentless. In this paper, I draw on Kadish's feminist analysis as a jumping-off point for exploring the experience of mothering in the academy during the pandemic. The notion of mothering that I employ here, while drawn primarily from my own lived experiences as a mother of two, also includes the range of mothering practices that I see performed on a daily basis by colleagues from across the gender spectrum and is not limited to people who are biological parents, on the one hand, or female academics, on the other. As a cisgender woman, I acknowledge that my approach to mothering benefits from systems and structures that privilege the alignment of my gender identity with the sex I was assigned at birth. As well, my heteronormativity allows me to move with unearned ease through a world that persistently assumes heterosexual unions and procreative marriage as normative activities, on the one hand, and benchmarks of success on the other. At the same time, these dominant systems and structures also make assumptions of me as a female academic – namely, that I will be nurturing, understanding, and collegial, and that I will carry out a disproportionate amount of service work, including administrative and clerical tasks. Bearing in mind the diversity of identity positions occupied by women working in the academy, then, I want to consider the following overarching questions: What challenges and opportunities does the role of motherhood bring to women in the academy during times of significant social upheaval like our recent lockdown? Are there lessons to be learned from the ways in which we mentor our students, on the one hand, and parent our children, on the other, that can provide better support for all youth? What does our mothering and mentoring work in times of crisis reveal about the structural gender inequalities that persist in institutions of higher learning and that pose a real threat to women's advancement within the academy?

Description of Initiative

The questions I set out here pertain to both youth and postsecondary students and are more richly explored by considering the notion of 'mothering-as-practice' over 'mother-as-person'. While recognizing that the term 'youth' can be understood in a variety of ways, I am using it here to delineate children aged 13-19. Mothering-as-practice may involve such activities as counselling,

mentoring, nurturing, and advising children who may or not be one's own offspring. Attempting to carry out this broad range of functions with youth who are in a heightened state of anxiety due to illness, family duties, and recurring lockdowns has been a challenge, and has added significantly to the caregiving responsibilities mothers typically shoulder. The fact that the bulk of such labour has been carried out remotely has, in many ways, only exacerbated the challenge.

My central assumption here is that structural gender inequalities have not evaporated in the shift to remote teaching; they have merely taken on new, often less noticeable forms. More specifically, I argue that the pandemic experience of mothers in the academy has been characterized by challenges related to both proximity and absence. Under conditions of remote work, we are always around, but rarely fully 'here', either for our employer and colleagues, or with our family members. This can create added strain for academic mothers in terms of doing our jobs well, on the one hand, and being fully available and responsive to the needs of our children, on the other. Additionally, these divergent pressures, and the bifurcated sense of self such pressures provoke, have implications for how much capacity academic mothers have each day to assist with the other youth in their conceptual care: students. An important role of any teacher is to assist students with integrating effectively into their university classes and cohorts; studies show that female academics take on these responsibilities more than men (Baker, 2021; Misra et al., 2021). Yet if academic mothers are stretched to the limit by the competing demands on their time and expertise in the context of pandemic teaching, there is a real concern that such mentorship will suffer. I conclude that women's traditional role as mentors, nurturers, and bridge builders can contribute to positive outcomes for youth, but institutions must establish equitable faculty workloads in order to support the efforts of female academics in a more systemic and structured manner.

Discussion

It is important to recognize from the outset that there is no singular or universal experience of mothering in the academy. Employment status and job security are just some of the factors that can affect a woman's standing in the academy. Equally significant is the reality that people have been impacted differently by the ravages of the pandemic, with some inoculated more or less due to their age, class, race, marital status, and/or disability status (Das Gupta, 2020). The perspective from which I write is marked by the privilege of being a mid-career tenure-track professor within a strongly unionized environment at the time the pandemic hit; in the context of heightened unemployment and job precarity brought on by the pandemic, the material benefits accorded this status are significant. While I live with a chronic disability that presents intermittent challenges, any hardship I experience is mitigated by the race, gender, sex, and class privilege that I embody as a white, cis-gendered, heteronormative middle-class woman. Additionally, as an Anglo Canadian growing up in Treaty 1 territory and now living on Williams Treaty land, I benefit from settler privilege. What this means is that colonial systems and structures work to my advantage, while maintaining the ongoing systemic discrimination of Indigenous peoples across all dimensions of civil society. My experiences of the education system in Canada reflect my positionality, sometimes offering zones of insights but more often creating areas where I need to listen and learn from the experiences of my colleagues and students.

Structural gender inequalities in postsecondary spaces

Like many institutions in civil society, education can be a space that women and men experience differently in terms of the expectations put on them and the opportunities they are afforded. When Ester Valsquez was scribing in 17th c. London, she had ambition: "What she wished – she could not help it, the wish persisted darkly inside her – was to be a part of the swelling wave she felt in the words of the books and pamphlets lining the tables outside St. Paul's and the piles of fresh-bound quires at the bindery" (Kadish, 2017, p.293). But Ester quells her desire to be a scholar in the same breath as she acknowledges it: "A woman's body, said the world, was a prison in which her mind must wither" (Kadish, 2017, p. 293). While contemporary female scholars face nowhere near the same constraints as Ester, they may recognize similar sorts of societal limitations to their professional aspirations. Indeed, there is a well-worn

demarcation of responsibilities within academia on the basis of gender. Drawing on the work of Misra et al. (2011), Baker maintains that, in postsecondary institutions, female academics do the 'heavy lifting' when it comes to "teaching, advising, mentoring, scholarship, community-engagement, and campus governance" (2021, p.60). Men, on the other hand, "focus more on their research, which earns greater prestige and potential for promotion" (Misra et al., 2011, p.25). The unequal nature of the work that we do, with men predominating in research and women in teaching, as well as the recognition these related but distinct spheres of academic life receive (or not) is reflected everywhere around us. If you are an academic, think back to the last budget presentation you listened to at your institution. Were research monies enumerated as a point of pride? Did your school have a dedicated plan for growing these funds? Now think about any mention of the revenue generated from teaching and mentorship. Do these monies even exist and if so, do they enjoy a feature presentation by your university's budget committee? In Kadish's *The Weight of Ink*, suspense builds throughout the novel precisely because the reader is never sure whether Helen or her rival colleague will publish their research findings first, and thereby bring accolades to the university. To be clear, there is no similar urgency when it comes to these same characters parlaying their research findings into a new undergraduate course. The glamour, we may conclude, lies in research.

Drawing on a sampling of 350 faculty members at an American university, Misra et al. found that "[o]n average, male associate professors spent 37 percent of their time on research, while women associate professors spent 25 percent of their time on research" (2011, p.25). In terms of service, this same study found that "women spent much more time [than men] on service to the university (11.6 hours [a week] versus 7)" (Misra et al., 2011, p.25). The authors call this phenomenon the "gendered gully of service" and note that this can have negative implications when it comes to women's advancement within the academy. They conclude with the following assessment:

While men are not necessarily more productive than women, they are more protective of their research time. Tenured women, on the other hand, devote more time to teaching, mentoring, and service, and particularly to activities that may be seen as *building bridges* around the university (Misra et al., 2011, p.24, emphasis added).

The gendered gully of service, therefore, sets up women to perform more hours of work that advance the successful functioning of the university as opposed to their own personal advancement. When female academics are also parents, gendered expectations multiply and proliferate. It is perhaps not surprising that Kadish conceives of her protagonist, Helen, as a single woman with no children. Had Helen been otherwise, she would have had significantly less free time to explore rare manuscript finds in the English countryside. Instead, she would have been cutting short her archival visits to pick up children from daycare, and the plot of the novel would have stalled considerably.

In pre-pandemic times, academic mothers were already working flat out. Dominici et al. maintain that "women academics who have children still shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities" and that these individuals "are likely to have personal obligations that they cannot delegate to others" (2009, p.25,26). The timeless nature of this truth is reflected in Kadish's character Ester, who desires to remain single and childless, despite being courted by multiple suitors in London's high society. Ester realizes early on that assuming the role of motherhood will significantly impact the time she can give over to constructing her philosophical arguments and theological treatises, and is adamant that such a reality will not come to pass:

> The prospect of sheeplike Alvaro HaLevy and a house full of his children, their eyes trained on her while she pretended to be what she was not, made her walk faster. She couldn't marry Alvaro. She would come to punish him out of her own discontent. She was unnatural; so it must be (Kadish 2017, p.232).

Unlike Ester, many contemporary female academics do attempt to 'have it all', combining their scholarly work with the experience of raising a family. Before COVID, a

typical teaching day for me would involve walking the dog before the sun was even over the horizon, preparing breakfasts and packing lunches, accompanying kids to the bus stop, then hurrying back to get myself ready for work. Driving to campus, I would listen to a subject-matter podcast or rehearse my lecture. Arriving at my parking spot, I would dash to the lecture hall (…only to wait while the previous male lecturer went over time..), set up my slide deck, then turn to the line-up of students. Three hours later, the whole process would unfold in reverse, though with a quick trip into the grocery store and a stop at the dog sitter added into the mix. I remember being exhausted most nights, even without the diagnosis of anemia that would follow some months later. Who has time for anemia when you are a busy academic mother?

In addition to the physical toll that such a frenzied lifestyle can exact, there are emotional consequences as well. Academic mothers "are caught, tethered among a myriad of roles, constantly wondering if they are spending 'enough' time 'being' any of these" (Burk et al., 2021, p.226). I will return to a discussion of competing responsibilities and the stress this can put on academic mothers in due course. For the moment, it is important to note that the imbalance of women's and men's labour in academia has a long and persistent history, and that the consequences of this disparity have a noticeable impact on the quality of life for mothers in the academy.

Structural gender inequalities and the shift to remote learning

The discrepancy between the work required of female and male academics has persisted through the pandemic. As post-secondary institutions navigated the 'new normal' of the pivot to remote learning across virtually all faculties and programs, activities related to teaching, advising, mentoring, and campus governance took top priority. Instructors who had previously considered the compilation of a coherent PowerPoint slide deck to be the pinnacle of their technological skills were now being required to master new platforms for e-learning, often within a short period of time. As Burk et al., note, the work was formidable:

> For many educators teaching in the traditional classroom, [the abrupt shift to remote learning] required substantial overhauls of course planning and design. The time commitment required to rewrite syllabi, reformat assignments, and develop online lectures was significant for instructors. This unideal and unfortunate necessity was increasingly challenging for faculty forced to swiftly adjust to distance learning technologies that were new and unfamiliar to them… With this transition, faculty were asked to be patient, caring, and compassionate with students (Burk et al., 2021, p.226).

Indeed, the need for 'patience, care, and compassion' was clear everywhere at the institution where I teach. Students unsure about course or program requirements in this new landscape required more counselling, mentoring, and support, often outside the bounds of class time, which many of us tried to accommodate by increasing our office hours. Then there were the students whose personal and scholarly lives were upended by the pandemic, with many assuming full-time caregiving responsibilities for sick parents, siblings, or children. These students needed to be accommodated with the utmost compassion and flexibility; remediating courses and supervising individual course completion plans therefore became an additional task related to pandemic teaching that required a significant time investment. I also found myself providing more academic advising and support to alumni than ever before, as many former students considered graduate studies to be a safe place to ride out the pandemic. Over the period of remote learning, I wrote more reference letters than ever before and counselled students about other options in cases where graduate school offers were not forthcoming.

But an increase in student requests for mentoring and support represented only some of the extra demands placed on the shoulders of female academics. As the pandemic persisted, and postsecondary institutions struggled to adapt to the changing circumstances of any given day, collegial governance activity necessarily increased. Participating in the governance life of the university is one pathway for faculty to carry out the service obligations of their job, but as Misra et al. (2011) point out in the quote above, female academics tend to do more service work than their male counterparts. In a

time of heightened collegial governance activity, female academics are burdened with extra service work beyond the disproportionate share they are already performing. Moreover, the gulf between how the pandemic has affected female versus male academics is further exacerbated by a lessening of the workload for faculty whose primary contribution is research. While it is true that some research programs were able to continue during the pandemic, it is also a reality that many studies, projects, and research-related travel plans were stalled by the various lockdowns that different countries experienced. Thus, the institutional work required in the academy in a time of COVID has arguably had different implications for male and female academics, increasing the overall workload for some and decreasing it for others.

Mothering in the academy in pandemic times

Minello et al. recognize the destabilizing effect of the pandemic for female academics with family responsibilities when they state that "[a]cademic mothers, more than childless people and fathers, had to find new balances, reorganize their work, and discover new resources" (2021, S83). The further observe that "[t]he lockdown has exacerbated gender disparity, since women, and especially those with children, spent more time in care activities than they did before" (2021, S83). In real terms this readjustment manifested as hours reallocated from intensive academic tasks, like professional development and research, to housework and childcare. Langin in her study of academic mothers cites "a global survey of 20,000 Ph.D. holders" conducted at the beginning of the pandemic which found that "mothers… suffered a 33% larger drop-in research hours compared with fathers''; moreover, "mothers took on more household and child care duties than fathers" (2021, p.660). Not surprisingly, the reduction in hours available for scholarly work impacted the professional output of female academics. In their review of publishing activity during the initial stages of the pandemic, Squazzoni et al. found that from February to May 2020, "women submitted proportionately fewer manuscripts than man" and noted that "the deficit was especially pronounced among more junior cohorts of women academics" (2021, p.1). For many female academics, just getting through each day without falling further behind

was an accomplishment; the ability to advance long-term projects in the name of professional development often seemed beyond our reach.

Burk et al. expertly capture the complexity of a typical pandemic workday for academic parents in their insightful piece on "pandemic motherhood and the academy":

> Academic mothers (and fathers who serve as primary childcare providers) find themselves simultaneously creating curriculum, reviewing assignments, collecting data, developing reports, answering emails, mentoring students, printing coloring pages, explaining third-grade science, preparing meals, rocking babies, caring for aging parents, attending virtual meetings, and trying to protect their families from a deadly virus which causes life-altering sickness (Burk et al., 2021, p.226).

As this quote illustrates, most of the emerging literature exploring the experience of remote teaching for academic mothers during the pandemic has emphasized the challenges associated with providing care for young children during the course of an at-home workday (Burk et al., 2021; Minello et al., 2021). Indeed, it can be an almost Herculean task to deliver a lecture or attend a faculty meeting while also attending to the needs of children. I recall an experience many years ago when my eldest daughter was eight months old. As a graduate student on a major collaborative research initiative, I was invited to moderate a panel at one of our conferences. The session coincided with nap time, and so I moderated while rocking a sleeping baby in my arms. Curiously, even though the conference itself was on caregiving, there were mixed reactions to my 'performance': some colleagues appreciated that I 'walked the walk' by embodying my caregiving duties, while others dismissed me as categorically unprofessional. All of the feedback – both positive and negative – came from women.

As my experience shows, expectations around how an academic mother should look and act are by no means always straightforward. This is true across the life course of mothering. The work required of parenting youth, while arguably less physically taxing than looking after young children, can nevertheless also make relentless

demands of academic mothers. This is particularly true when the task at hand involves parenting youth with mental health issues exacerbated by social isolation; in the absence of in-person support from friends and networks, youth may look to mothers to assume a role that is as much psychologist as it is parent. To make matters more complex, the shapeshifting required in order to respond to the mental health needs of the moment is not limited to our own children; in the course of the pandemic and associated lockdown, students reached out for mental health support as well. For many of us, this sensitive work required expertise that we did not have, or that we were not trained to do, and that realization added stress to an already taxing situation.

The Perils of Proximity

It seems fair to say that the global pandemic altered our working days and home lives in ways that perhaps no one could have anticipated. On the plus side, many of us had the opportunity to be more physically present for our families than we have been in years. Other bright spots emerged which should not be overlooked: the lack of a daily commute was 'found time' for many, while a reduction in burnout overall, attributed to the shift to working from home, was a finding from early on in the pandemic (Fukumara et al. 2021, p.223). At-risk and special needs kids who may benefit from close care and supervision could, in theory, be monitored more easily; we were all 'here', an arm's reach away from one another physically, even if increasingly preoccupied mentally.

At the same time, families may have faltered. Relationships that were never meant to be so cloistered felt the impact of an almost tyrannical togetherness. Youth, children, and spouses alike oftentimes felt smothered by such relentless proximity. Perhaps not surprisingly, separation and divorce rates began to climb. In December 2020, the BBC reported the results of a UK survey which "found that nearly a quarter of people felt lockdown had placed additional pressure on their relationship". Similar findings were recounted "in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and the Chinese cities of Xi'an and Dazhou [which saw] … a rise in divorce applications" in the early days of the lockdown (Ailes, 2020). In Canada, the CBC reported in May 2021 that broken marriages had become the pandemic's "other toll" (Cotnam, 2021), with divorce rates increasing by as much as 30% globally (Lloyd, 2021). At a time when individuals needed comfort and support, relationships were breaking up and family units were breaking down. This has had significant consequences for youth mental health in the midst of an already challenging global pandemic.

Our relentless closeness had other consequences as well. Often, the expectation that we were perennially 'here' (the state of 'being' that Burk et al. draw attention to) came with the unchallenged assumption that we were always also available and would know how to fix any problem or make things instantly better. In their study of working from home during the pandemic, Fukumara et al. corroborate this point when they observe that "the physical proximity to family led to increased distractions from work for many" (2021, p.227). They further reveal that "the most frequently mentioned example [of a distraction] was interrupting work to address other family members' needs" (2021, p.227). During the lockdown, more than ever before, I was the finder of lost ear buds and the point person for our grocery inventory. On a more serious note, I became an unofficial and totally unskilled therapist for friends, family, and students, trying my best to help people out of the various darknesses they inhabited – spaces that were familiar to me as well as I struggled with the personal impact of the pandemic on my own family life. As overtaxed as I was, I found it exceedingly difficult to say 'no' to my kids, my students, or my colleagues; a consequence of being perennially present is that one seems always available. And with my commuting time freed up, I often rationalized that I could and should be doing more. As a result, I was forever present but also, in a sense, more absent and distracted than ever before, and feeling a constant, unsettling pressure to be productive, both personally and professionally, from sunrise to sunset.

Negotiating absence

Paradoxically, with work and family ever-present, in the long months of working from home, I noticed absence everywhere. Colleagues I have long relied on for my own support and mentorship seemed distant, reduced to two dimensions by the confines of the Zoom grid or existing only as disembodied voices on the other end of a phone

call. And while my kids were home with me, they often retreated to their rooms to carve out some limited space of refuge and independence for themselves. At times, absence intersected with anonymity. 'Going dark' allowed me to multitask to an unprecedented degree, washing dishes with my camera and audio off during town hall presentations, or executing a school pick-up while also listening to a virtual meeting. Consequently, my attention span was in a state of constant bifurcation as I pondered curriculum revisions but also what to make for dinner. I was caught, as they say, betwixt and between.

Studies show that this is not the best way to operate. In his influential 2016 book, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, Cal Newport notes the downside of multitasking. While we may feel that we get more accomplished when we cover off multiple tasks simultaneously, the reality is that we are working at a superficial level in terms of focus and analysis. Equally concerning is Newport's finding that such superficiality affects our ability, over time, to return to deeper levels of engagement. As Newport points out, "there is increasing evidence that this shift toward the shallow is not a choice that can be easily reversed. Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness and you permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work" (2016, p.16). A legitimate concern for mothers in the academy may well be the lasting consequences that our long duration of shallow work will have on our future capacity for deep work and sustained analytical thinking. Put another way, our increasing absence from full engagement will have consequences.

As Burk et al. note, "although challenges related to motherhood in academia were pervasive prior to the 2020 health pandemic, work, life, family, and leisure have all become increasingly difficult to navigate during it" (Burk et al., 2021, p.229-30). Many of us have had to take on more roles in addition to what we previously held: caregiver to extended family members ill with COVID, armchair psychologist to youth struggling with confinement and isolation, social convenor organizing virtual family visits. Readjustments were necessary. As we attempted such navigation, we asked ourselves myriad questions: What are effective ways of working remotely, both for ourselves and for the youth that we

serve? In what ways can we provide connection for individuals living in isolation? And how can we change the systems and structures around us to promote equitable workloads and good mental health for all?

The Search for Solutions

For female academics with children who were already juggling the work-life balance prior to the shift to remote learning, questions related to mothering in the academy in the midst of a pandemic have required a rethinking of the traditional ways in which we support our students and families. Creativity and innovation have been necessary to produce a 2.0, pandemic-friendly version of the responsibilities we were typically charged with pre-COVID. Underscoring it all has been the imperative to resist isolation, not only for ourselves, but for our students, kids, and family members as well.

Academic mothers and the bridges we build

Creating and maintaining connections can provide an effective antidote to isolation. Armed with this knowledge, academic mothers built bridges, as women often do. At home, we counselled aging parents on how to use Zoom, and taught ourselves the fundamentals of the latest video games our kids were playing. We compiled video messages to celebrate milestone occasions and sent Canada Post's free postcards to the far-flung corners of the country. We sang out birthday wishes from sidewalks, met in driveways and garages, and went for (many, repetitive) socially distanced walks. "At school" (that is to say, connected to our Zoom grids), we provided virtual icebreakers to encourage students to get to know one another, and polled participants about the appropriateness of pineapple on pizza. On the more challenging days, we were confronted with a grid of darkened rectangles, each one obfuscating the story of a student dealing with challenge and, often, heartbreak. Whether it was an impending eviction, financial troubles, relationship breakdown, ill parents, or a diagnosis of COVID, many postsecondary students faced significant obstacles while learning from home and needed support and a sense of connection. We worked with these students, extending deadlines, sharing information about remediation options, and providing the number for counselling, time and again. But mostly

we just listened, doing all we could to let the students know they were not alone.

Recognizing and valuing academic mothers' hidden work

These informal and unstructured initiatives, while important, cannot comprise the totality of efforts to address the challenges facing academic mothers working in pandemic times or under stressed conditions more generally. Systemic practices, behaviours, and mindsets that relegate women's labour to the periphery and devalue the work of female academics generally must be met with corresponding system-wide remedies.

O'Meara et al. (2021), in their report to the American Council on Education, maintain that equitable faculty workloads are possible with careful consultation, planning, and commitment. Drawing on findings from a five-year study involving 51 academic units across 20 different public universities, the authors identify six conditions that are important for establishing and maintaining equitable faculty workloads: transparency, clarity, credit, norms, context, and accountability.

Transparency is critically important so that "faculty members have a sense of the range of effort in teaching, mentoring, and service by relevant appointment or career stage" (O'Meara et al., 2021, p.11). When disparities emerge, "awareness of those inequities can sensitize faculty members to the reality that some faculty members are called upon more than others to do certain tasks" (O'Meara et al., 2021, p.11). Clarity is also deemed of particular importance by the authors of this study because faculty, particularly junior hires, may not have an accurate sense of what their position requires of them. Building on insights offered by Fox et al. and Heilman, O'Meara et al. maintain that "clearly understood benchmarks or expectations, rather than subjective guessing, mitigate the operation of prejudices" (2021, p.11).

After practices have been put in place to identify work and clarify expectations, a system of accounting for the diverse forms of labour carried out by faculty members needs to be adopted. Such a system would "provide differential credit for work of higher or lower effort" and can help "faculty members feel as though their contributions are valued" (O'Meara et al., 2021, p.12).

The next of the six conditions that the authors identify is norms; by this, they mean the habitual, day-to-day management of the work of the department that may have evolved to the benefit of some professors over others (for instance, giving seasoned professors their preference for what time of day they teach, or how much they teach during the summer term). Drawing on the work of Erez et al., O'Meara et al. maintain that "everyone doing their fair share and having access to the same opportunities within a group's collective work facilitates equity norms, social responsibility norms, and norms of reciprocity" (2021, p.13). Context is also important to the discussion on enacting equitable workloads. Every professor has her unique set of expertise and skills; these differences must be recognized within any system designed to make workloads fair. As O'Meara et al. note, "the goal here is to recognize that different faculty members have different strengths and interests, while also assuring that every faculty member puts in a similar amount of effort toward shared departmental goals" (2021, p.14). The final condition that the authors emphasize is accountability. Creating systems (such as small committees) where participants cannot hide but rather must do the work required of them is also important. O'Meara et al. cite studies from Curcio and Lynch; Dominick, Reilly and Mcgourty; and Stewart, Houghton, and Rodgers to bolster their claim that "greater accountability also serves a normative function, as individuals who care about their colleagues' opinion will want to perform better if they understand their performance is being observed and/or evaluated" (2021, p.15).

Taken as a whole, the six conditions that O'Meara et al. identify to make workloads more equitable would go a significant way towards reducing some of the challenges that mothers in the academy experience on a daily basis.

Conclusion

The task, throughout the long months of the pandemic, has often seemed to me to be about creating just enough space and distance within families and virtual postsecondary spaces to allow youth to grow. Poised on the cusp of independence, so many of our teenagers have been stunted in their growth, sheltered when they

should be socializing and cautious when they deserve to be carefree (at least within reason). Academic mothers have watched this 'arrested development' with concern. We know that, in institutions of higher learning, our students are on a stimulating journey that invites them to challenge what they think they know and discover new areas of academic interest. In order to do this, students need to be surrounded by a community that nurtures intellectual curiosity and reduces, as much as possible, the distractions that get in the way of this journey of discovery. The pandemic has challenged our ability to do that, putting formidable constraints on our ability to collaborate, integrate, and innovate. Furthermore, this notion of 'arrested development' that concerns us with respect to our students applies to female academics as well, as many remain mired in the gendered gully of service. As much as we seek to make possible the conditions for our students to advance and flourish, so too must we take an honest and hard look at the practices we engage in that relegate us to spheres of academic activity that carry disproportional workloads.

If we are to support both youth and mothers in the academy, we need to formalize the work that female scholars do in terms of teaching, mentoring, and counseling. Currently, much of this labour is hidden from recognition, appreciated by students but largely unacknowledged by university administrations. To counter this, we need to develop policies that recognize, quantify, and compensate academics for the support work they provide. This should be connected to broader gender equity initiatives. Hideg & Priesemuth (2021) have suggested that better job flexibility for both men and women, implementing fathers-only parental leave, and discouraging an overlong work day for employees across the board are all ways that gender equity in the workplace can be improved. In academia, we must also look at the types of labour that female and male academics routinely provide and adjust our institutional practices and expectations accordingly. This may mean striving for gender parity on departmental and faculty-level committees, formalizing advising and mentoring tasks so that all faculty members contribute equally, strengthening gender equity in provisions in our collective agreements, and cycling colleagues routinely through administrative positions.

By being purposeful in our quest for gender equity, we may create the conditions that improve outcomes for youth and parents alike. As the wife of the rabbi's patron counsels Ester upon learning of her unconventional desires, "look for any window that opens, Ester… any crack through which you may lever yourself" (Kadish 2106, p.236). As those caring for subsequent generations, we must open those windows, letting in the light for those who will come after us. And the bridges we build must be maintained, to the best of our ability, through compassion and care, yes, but also through structural change. In this way, we can learn from our pandemic experiences of proximity and absence and commit to being there for our students in the best way possible.

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