

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Female Academics with Young Children in South Africa

Samantha Kriger	Faculty of Education, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa	krigers@cput.ac.za
Cyrill Walters	Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa	cyrillwalters@sun.ac.za
Armand Bam	University of Stellenbosch Business School, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa	armandb@usb.ac.za
Jonathan Jansen	Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa	jonathanjansen@sun.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of an increase in research on the effects of COVID-19, this article uses the analysis of survey data of female academics from the 26 higher education institutions in South Africa to identify how female academics with young children coped with academic output during the pandemic-enforced lockdown. A growing body of research documents the influence of children and childcare on the careers of female academics. In this article, we see how female academics who stayed at home during the enforced lockdown period negotiated childcare and home-schooling, and how the lockdown influenced their academic output. An online survey questionnaire was administered, consisting of 12 Likert-scale questions followed by an open-ended section that solicited a narrative account of academic work and home life during the lockdown period. Data on female academics with children under the age of six years was extracted for this study. The quantitative and qualitative data that emerged from our study of 2,018 women academics at 26 universities across South Africa describes how academic mothers felt, and how they struggled to complete the academic work required by their educational institutions. Such academic work directly influences future career prospects. This study highlights the influence that the presence of young children in the home, the pressures of home-schooling, traditional gender roles, and household responsibilities have on the academic careers of women.

Introduction

“Early childhood education is essential in bridging home and school literacy practices” and learning spaces (Sibanda & Kajee, 2019). Recognising and ensuring that the home is a learning space remains a challenge for all parents, especially mothers, whose normative gendered roles often lead to them assuming most of the responsibility for overseeing their young children (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken & Moss-Racusin, 2017). This challenge was amplified during the enforced lockdown induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of “non-essential” businesses, public and private schools, universities, and childcare and domestic services forced most people, including mothers, to work from home. This resulted in numerous work and family responsibilities coinciding, especially where childcare and home-schooling was considered the primary responsibility of mothers (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines & Deaux, 2004). The well-being of mothers, in particular, during the pandemic has been shown to have declined, particularly for those who lost their sources of childcare (Britto, Lye, Proulx, Yousafzai, Matthews, Vaivada, ... , 2017), and the lockdown conditions resulted in stressful home situations for parents (Brown, Doom, Lechuga-Peña, Watamura & Koppels, 2020; Fontanesi, Marchetti, Mazza, Di Giandomenico, Roma & Verrocchio, 2020). For women academics who are also mothers, this threat to their emotional well-being extends into the home and indirectly to the children within the home. Understanding the experiences of women academics during this period could assist with improving workplace and early childhood education policy for better societal outcomes.

This paper is part of a broader study (Walters, Ronnie, Jansen & Kriger, 2021; Walters, Mehl, Piraino, Jansen & Kriger, 2022) which reported that the single most important variable affecting the academic work of mothers is having young children in the home. As one mid-career academic without children of her own observed, “I can’t imagine how my colleagues with young children are managing to be productive in lockdown”. In addition, the prolonged closure of Early Child Development (ECD) centres and childcare facilities during the pandemic had a huge impact on young children and working mothers.

“The ability of a mother to support the health and development of her children is critically dependent on her own health and wellbeing” (Britto et al, 2017). Thus, the pressure – often described as hopelessness – that the women in this study experienced directly influenced their ability to care for their young children and to home-school their school-age kids. There was, therefore, a significant impact on female academics, whose household and childcare responsibilities

increased (Farré, Fawaz, Gonzalez & Graves, 2020). Much of the literature describes the impact children have on mothers who work from home: “trying to make it through daily life during COVID-19 is a narrative echoed by many women in academia” (Nash & Churchill, 2020). Women’s publication counts are suffering, and “evidence suggests that women are submitting fewer papers to peer-reviewed journals than are men” (Nash & Churchill, 2020). This article, therefore, aims to describe how female academics in South Africa have coped with having young children at home along with the responsibilities of work, household chores, and home-schooling during the pandemic.

Research Method

This study was administered in the form of an online survey questionnaire, which suited the South African lockdown regulations. It consisted of 12 Likert-scale questions followed by an open-ended section that solicited a narrative account of academic work and home life during the lockdown period. Following the announcement by government of a state of national disaster to contain the spread of COVID-19, operators of Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes across South Africa were instructed to close on 18 March 2020. The questionnaire was distributed on 1 July 2020, and the survey closed on 30 September 2020. Thus, the survey was completed during the initial stage of the lockdown, when no outside childcare was permitted, and physical movement between homes and workplaces was restricted. From all 26 public universities in South Africa, 2,018 female academics participated.

Analysis of the data was preceded by organising it with Atlas.ti 8, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software programme. The narratives were coded according to themes, in accordance with the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Therefore, during the extraction process, each researcher independently became familiar with the entire data set. The codes were suggested by the data itself. Themes emerged, and we reviewed those themes amongst ourselves. Each theme was defined, and finally we produced the analysis from this data.

In reviewing the data, each researcher investigated the responses detailing specific points of interest, which here included childcare, home-schooling, and any further information regarding children. The interpretation of this data then took place, and it was systematically placed within the emerging themes of this study. Lastly, the researchers together reviewed the data to ensure consistent interpretations of the narratives.

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by Stellenbosch University, the host institution, and ethical review was followed by gateway clearance certificates in most of the 26 universities. Confidentiality was maintained and anonymity ensured through removing any personal information that could expose participants' identities and/or their place of work or affiliation.

Results and Discussion

It is evident from the open-ended comments that women were more vulnerable than men to the adverse impacts of lockdown. This, in turn, impacted directly on their children, families, and academic careers. Women who had children at home reported struggling “with the increased pressures of balancing parenthood” and the additional demands of work. The ages of their children were a significant contributor to the “decline in productivity among female academics”. The intense period of the lockdown (Level 5), during which families were confined to their homes, caused the most concern and anxiety among women. Many expressed that during the initial stages of lockdown their lives “consisted for weeks of only childcare, work, eat and sleep and experiences of ‘work fatigue’”, as an experienced academic and mother of a toddler put it.

The Presence of Toddlers in the Home had the Single Most Important Effect on Women's Academic Work

Having young children at home had a direct influence on the levels of stress and the availability of working time for the participants in this study. As one early-career mother of a toddler indicated, “household responsibilities and childcare has ultimately led to less time for academic and research work during the lockdown period”. Another, established, academic reported that if she did not have a pre-schooler at home, “lockdown would've been like a bonus research leave opportunity—time to read and write from home without the distractions of the office”. Across the board, for female academics with young children – whether single or partnered, younger or older, aspiring or established in their careers – the output of any form of academic work was difficult.

As shown in Figure 1, most of the respondents who had children below the age of six found academic work more difficult during the lockdown period, as the demands of caring for them, as well as schools' expectations of home-schooling, took its toll on respondents. Lockdown, for many, meant that they had to be full-time parents, leaving little time for anything else. Women struggled to fit in work, and would often resort to working late at night to keep up with their workloads:

Having a two-year-old toddler has demanded most of my attention during this lockdown period. I have only really been able to do any work when she is asleep at night, and during her short afternoon nap. This has often led to me being exhausted when I try to work in the early hours of the morning with minimal sleep for tackling the next day. (Early-career academic)

The only time I am able to work is late at night after they [the children] have gone to bed. (Mid-career mother with one child in preschool and another in primary school).

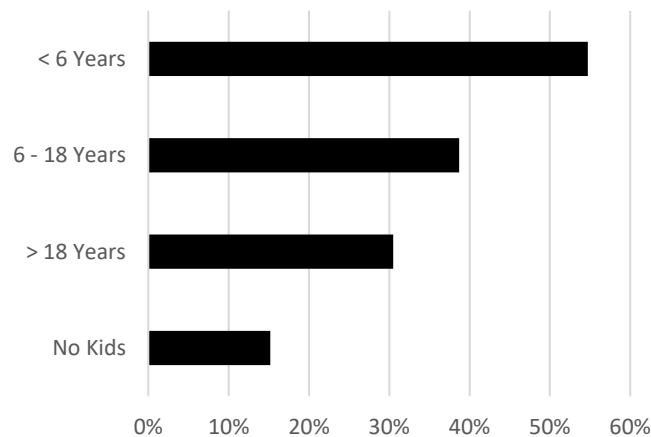


Figure 1: Respondents who found academic work extremely difficult (by age of children)

Mothers Experienced Guilt and Suffered Emotionally Because They Could Not Spend Time with Their Children and Continue with Their Professional Work

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in families across the world experiencing a new range of stressors that threatened their health, safety and economic well-being (Brown et al, 2020). The hopelessness felt during this uncertain time is aptly described by one experienced academic with a child in primary school: “I am an academic, a home-school teacher, a housekeeper, a cook, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a family carer and I am tired. I hope I will survive this pandemic, even without getting the virus”. As the lockdown eased, some mothers were able to get childcare assistance. However, there was still the issue of workspace and of working from home with the rest of the family present. “I was expected to be at home alone this year having been afforded a sabbatical for 2020 with the intention to write up articles and register new projects. The pandemic changed this. Now I am sitting at home with my whole family”, a mid-career mother of a teenager explained.

Fellow female academics who have grown children sympathised with their colleagues who had younger children. One such established academic wrote:

Fortunately, I have not had the added responsibility of childcare, since my children are all married and no longer stay at home. My children have helped me by sending meals on days which I have not managed to cook because of having to meet deadlines and I am grateful for their help. I really don't know how other women with small children have managed.

Furthermore, many female academics displayed the guilt associated with having to do work from home while trying to take care of their young children:

My children are also still very young and find it difficult to understand that I have to work during the day, so I do spend a significant part of the evenings working in order to compensate. (Mid-career academic with two toddlers and a preschooler)

The time that worked for me to work was evenings and then I was exhausted from trying to make this time bonus time with my 3 littlies. (Experienced academic and mother of an infant, a preschooler, and a child in primary school)

Taking care of a two-year-old child most of the day every day without childcare and limited relief from the child's other parent and his grandmother while being required to work full-time was very difficult at times. (Early-career academic)

I also had to do all the cleaning of the house and cooking and shopping for supplies (with some help from my husband, but he was engaged in his own work at home). So, most of my work took place when the kids were asleep at night between 20:00-midnight which means I was absolutely exhausted most of the time. I found it extremely difficult to get work done as I had both my kids (aged four years and 18 months) at home and had to take care of them and "entertain" them all day and every day. So, have mixed emotions about all of it. Felt "guilty towards my kids when trying to get work done and guilty towards my employer when spending time with kids and on house chores etc." (Experienced academic)

While the time was challenging to most, there were mothers who embraced this time at home with their young children. As one early-career mother of an infant expressed it, "It is great getting to spend so much time with my child, but the reality is that I have to finish my PhD this year and this lockdown has delayed me significantly". And, as an experienced academic without children of her own aptly said of a colleague, "the best thing about lockdown has been the chance to spend more time with her toddlers, but the worst thing about lockdown is more time with her toddlers".

Traditional Gender Roles Led to Mothers Struggling with Childcare During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Gender roles within many couples added to the frustration of women at home:

Even though we are supposedly equal partners in our relationship, the nature of my husband's job, and my child's reluctance to spend time with his dad when mommy is in the house, has meant that I have had to do the majority of the housework, the cooking

and looking after my child. This has left me no time to do research, and minimal time to do the work that absolutely HAS to be done - teaching online and postgraduate supervision. (Established academic and mother of a preschooler)

Gender inequalities remain common between women and their partners in most cultures around the world, and South Africa is no exception (Lee, Ward, Chang & Downing, 2021). These inequalities often impose different allocations and understandings of “work” between women and their partners. “In keeping with traditional gender roles, working mothers still carry primary responsibility” for child-rearing, which often requires “greater demands on their time and energy than on working fathers” (Kern, Kenefic & Stout, 2015).

Some women in this study claimed to share the load of domestic functions with their male counterparts; however, these were a small minority. Most women (81%) who participated in this study claimed that it was more difficult for women doing academic work from home than it was for their male counterparts – a reality already reflected in earlier studies on research productivity (Kern, Kenefic & Stout, 2015). One experienced academic stated, “I am primarily responsible for caring for the children and therefore I spent more time with them and less time working. So, I do think it impacted more negatively on my career compared to my husband's”. Other respondents confirmed this inequality in gender roles:

Both my husband and myself continued to work during the lockdown but also had two small girls at home. As my husband is the primary breadwinner, we prioritized duties and both of us were forced to compromise. However, more of the cleaning, cooking and childcare duties fell to me as his workload increased. (Early-career academic)

Even with both of us [husband and wife] here, sharing the childcare and home-school responsibilities, I have had significantly less time available for work. It is simply not a realistic expectation that I have to work full-time, home-school my kids, buy food and cook, and clean my house - all in the same amount of time that I had available before lockdown and with no outside help. (Mid-career mother of two primary-school students)

Women Received Little Support from Their Employers During the Lockdown

Added to the stresses of childcare, most female academics expressed that they had received little support, guidance, or practical instruction regarding online teaching from the educational institutions where they worked:

The lockdown has emphasised for me how out of kilter my faculty, institutional leadership and managers are with the realities of their broader workforce - particularly that of women. The running narrative within my faculty has been centred around that working from home is a luxury and a privilege (as you are supposed to have more time

not having to travel to and from work), and (as a result) you are supposed to be academically more productive. There seems to be a major problem with this narrative in that “those in powerful positions do not have small children” (Experienced academic with a child in primary school).

The workload also increased, as face-to-face teaching is vastly different from online teaching. Many institutions failed to consider the time and adjustment this would have on those teaching. At one university, additional support had to be offered to female colleagues who had kids and were struggling with their workload during the lockdown period. “Staff members with kids simply said they cannot work and the rest of us just had to take over work, which meant work consumed majority of my hours during the week and weekends,” complained one early-career academic without children.

There were no agreed guidelines across the institutions we studied on how academic employees were supposed to do their paid work and manage their caring responsibilities at home. This put an enormous amount of pressure on female academics, since they had to divide their time within the household. As one mother indicated:

In addition to being an academic and in a leadership position within my department, I am now also a housekeeper, a child carer, a primary school teacher (for which we as parents are both ill-equipped), and a support structure for the extended family affected by the pandemic - including aged and vulnerable parents. Even though I have a very supportive partner, I am still the primary carer. There has been no institutional support or much recognition for this. (Experienced academic with a child in primary school)

This is a clear indication of the adverse pressure on working mothers to juggle work and home, and such pressure was clearly a contributing factor to the stress and emotional disturbances they experienced during the pandemic.

Mothers Underestimated the Impact of Childcare and Home-Schooling on Their Academic Work

During the lockdown period, all schools were closed, and parents of school-age children were held responsible for home-schooling their children. The “demands of caring for toddlers, together with schools’ expectations of home-schooling, took a toll on mothers” in this study. As noted earlier, the data make clear that the “age and educational stage of children were significant factors determining the decline in productivity among female academics”. The percentages on Figure 2 indicate that childcare and schoolwork demanded the most time from respondents. Housework, cooking for the family, and grocery shopping took up slightly less time.

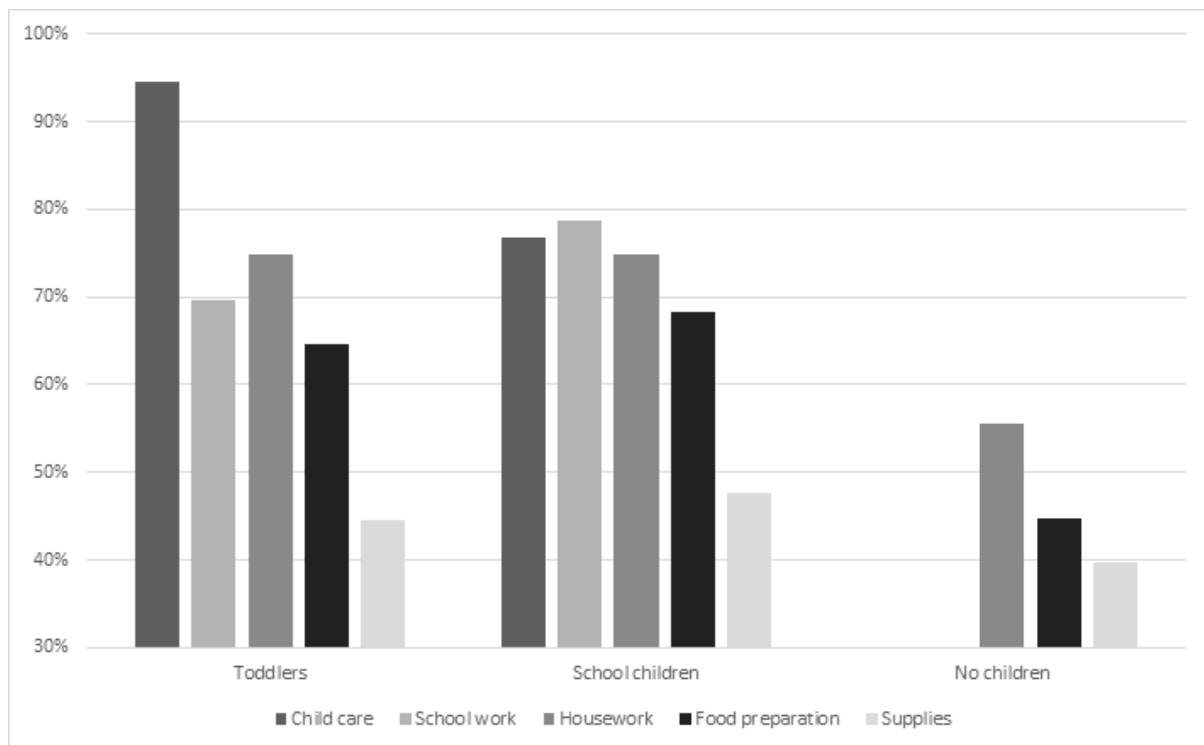


Figure 2: The influence childcare has on female academics within the home during lockdown.

Taking care of toddlers, “teaching online, nurturing vulnerable students, comforting anxious children, and finding time to do research and writing” became too much for a majority of the respondents. Trying to juggle all the responsibilities within the home was extremely difficult for most. In addition, parents found it hard to provide adequate stimulation for their young children during this time (Muhdi, Nurkolis & Yuliejantiningasih, 2020), which many mothers said was unexpected, and which demanded a considerable amount of time and effort from them:

Home-schooling of children was a constant, massive demand on energy and time since you cannot just leave them to do it by themselves (that's why we normally use schools and teachers after all). (Early-career academic with three children in primary school).

This in itself is a tedious task, as much of the responsibility fell on the mother during this time:

Given my child began grade one this year, substantial work was required to help him keep up with reading, writing and basic mathematics. We tried to split this work, but my husband found it very difficult to teach due to his and my son's relationship (he is a playmate, I am more of a carer and disciplinarian). As a result, we split the day. I did home-schooling in the morning, and worked [academic work] in the afternoon. My husband took over afternoon care duties and mostly managed supper and worked in the morning. (Experienced academic)

Many respondents described how home-schooling took up much of their time during the lockdown period:

The most significant impact of the lockdown was the time spent on home-schooling [my grade three daughter]. At the age of eight, she needed supervision throughout her tasks and could not be left to complete work by herself. (Experienced academic with another child in high school)

The greatest impact was that I had to home-school my grade one child from April. (Experienced academic)

There is more stress for women because everything is on our plate. For example, I have to do house chores, help my three children with their schoolwork, to teach online and to focus on my studies. The lockdown is a very difficult period for me because as a single person with a school age child I have to do lots of homework. (Early-career academic)

Since I had to home-school my children, and had additional household chores during Level 5 lockdown, this decreased my working time somewhat. (Mid-career academic with a preschooler and a child in primary school)

Since lockdown, my seven-year-old son has been doing his schoolwork from home; I would go to school on Monday to collect schoolwork and return it on Thursday. And since June 1, they have returned to school and now I have to transport my son to and from school every day as I am nervous about using public transport for now. (Experienced academic)

While some schools had booklets of notes that parents had to collect, and children had to complete at home, others had online lessons and resources that required electronic devices. Many parents did not have “spare” devices or laptops that their children could use. Thus, parents had to share the laptop that they would normally use for academic work with their children:

The online schooling of two children meant that they use my computer and laptop to work and simultaneously required help with the actual work. (Mid-career academic)

Despite having a supportive husband who has helped hugely with home-schooling our daughter, I found the constant interruptions, having to remember my child's online zoom class start times ... exhausting. (Mid-career mother of a child in primary school)

This lack of equipment caused stress and disrupted many women's academic output during this time. Many female academics struggled with additional problems while home-schooling their children:

Due to the fact that I have a chronic disease placing me in a very high-risk category, it is likely that I will need to home-school until end of the year as my doctor advised that myself and members of household should self-isolate regardless of the lockdown level due to the risk I face. Home-schooling means that I prepare an hour each night for the next day's home-schooling and home-schooling takes from 08h00 to 13h00. (Experienced academic with a child in primary school)

Home-schooling was, therefore, a huge challenge for most women with young, school-age children, and it took up much of their time during the lockdown period. Many female academics expressed that this, among other factors, caused them to make very little progress in their academic work.

Conclusion

The results of our study highlight the continuing challenges of combining work and childcare experienced by South African women in academia. Our results also suggest that South African institutions need to find suitable ways of supporting female academic staff in reconciling work and family challenges, especially those mothers with children under six years of age. This study has shown the overlooked importance of early childhood development (ECD), and how academic mothers struggled with childcare and their children's education during the lockdown period. Having young children in the home during a pandemic greatly affected the output of women academics. In addition, the responses indicated that many mothers underestimated the immense value and contribution childcare, and early childhood education plays in the development of their young children. Forced with suddenly having to care for and home-school their own children, with little or no additional help, mothers have seen the value of ECD. In addition, the responses indicated that many mothers underestimated the immense value and contribution childcare, and early childhood education contributes to the development of their young children.

Overall, the results of our study highlight the continuing challenges of combining work and childcare experienced by South African women in academia, and a lack of institutional policy support during the pandemic, which lack reinscribes and privileges a male "ideal" worker. Our results also suggest that South African institutions need to look to their international counterparts to find suitable ways of supporting female academic staff in reconciling work and family challenges during the pandemic, especially those mothers with children under six years of age.

To conclude on a positive note, the pandemic has also forced some mothers to reconsider their workloads and caused other to appreciate the time they have spent with their families:

I am definitely considering reducing my responsibilities at work post-lockdown and wrapping up in the next few months to take a much-needed break early next year in whatever form that will be so that I can focus on my wellbeing and my child.
(Experienced academic with a primary school-age child)

What was wonderful and a great blessing is that I spent more time with my husband and children; we enjoyed more coffee and meal breaks together and we had more time for meaningful conversations. We also exercised together. I am very grateful for these special moments with my boys. (Established academic with one child in primary school and another in high school)

References

- Borelli, J. L., Nelson, S. K., River, L. M., Birken, S. A. & Moss-Racusin, C. 2017. Gender differences in work-family guilt in parents of young children. *Sex Roles*, 76(5–6): 356–368.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77–101.
- Britto, P. R., Lye, S. J., Proulx, K., Yousafzai, A. K., Matthews, S. G., Vaivada, T., Perez-Escamilla, R., Rao, N., Ip, P., Fernald, L. C. H., MacMillan, H., Hanson, M., Wachs, T. D., Yao, H., Yoshikawa, H., Cerezo, A., Leckman, J. F., Bhutta, Z. A. & the Early Childhood Development Interventions Review Group for the Lancet Early Childhood Development Series Steering Committee. 2017. Nurturing care: Promoting early childhood development. *The Lancet*, 389(10064): 91–102.
- Brown, S. M., Doom, J. R., Lechuga-Peña, S., Watamura, S. E. & Koppels, T. 2020. Stress and parenting during the global COVID-19 pandemic. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 110(June): 104699.
- Farré, L., Fawaz, Y., Gonzalez, L. & Graves, J. 2020. How the COVID-19 lockdown affected gender inequality in paid and unpaid work in Spain. IZA Discussion Paper, 13434.
- Fontanesi, L., Marchetti, D., Mazza, C., Di Giandomenico, S. D., Roma, P. & Verrocchio, M. C. 2020. The effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on parents: A call to adopt urgent measures. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12: 79–81.
- Fuegen, K., Biernat, M., Haines, E. & Deaux, K. 2004. Mothers and fathers in the workplace: How gender and parental status influence judgments of job-related competence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 60(4): 737–754.
- Kern, C. C., Kenefic, L. S. & Stout, S. L. 2015. Bridging the gender gap: The demographics of scientists in the USDA Forest Service and academia. *BioScience*, 65(12): 1165–1172.
- Lee, S. J., Ward, K. P., Chang, O. D. & Downing, K. M. 2021. Parenting activities and the transition to home-based education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 122(October): 105585.
- Muhdi, Nurkolis & Yuliejantiningasih, Y. 2020. The implementation of online learning in early childhood education during the Covid-19 pandemic. *JPUD - Jurnal Pendidikan Usia Dini*, 14(2): 247–261.
- Nash, M. & Churchill, B. 2020. Caring during COVID-19: A gendered analysis of Australian university responses to managing remote working and caring responsibilities. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(5): 833-846.

Sibanda, R. & Kajee, L. 2019. Home as a primary space: Exploring out-of-school literacy practices in early childhood education in a township in South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 9(1): 1–10.

Walters, C., Mehl, G. G., Piraino, P., Jansen, J. D. & Kriger, S. 2022. The impact of the pandemic-enforced lockdown on the scholarly productivity of women academics in South Africa. *Research Policy*, 51(1): 104403.

Walters, C., Ronnie, L., Jansen, J. & Kriger, S. 2021. “Academic guilt”: The impact of the pandemic-enforced lockdown on women’s academic work. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 88(September): 102522.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>