

Mothers in Academia: overworked and in greater precarity

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Overworked and in precarity: these two words summarize the situation of mothers currently pursuing an academic career in these times of COVID-19. As we all know, the health crisis has led the government to close daycare centres and all educational institutions in Quebec, from elementary school to university, for a long period of time. Students are in mandatory confinement at home.

In Quebec (Canada), university administrations, supported by Minister Roberge (Radio-Canada, March 26, 2020), are asking their professors to get to work right away developing distance education programs to facilitate further learning. These requests represent an assertion by both university administrations and Minister Roberge that teachers must continue to teach and that students must continue to study. The difference is that from now on, all teaching will be conducted at a distance. Since all Quebec universities already offer this mode of instruction, they only have to increase the pace to increase the quantity, but other than that, it's business as usual.

It's true that being confined to our homes will safeguard our physical health, as well as that of our students and our loved ones. But what about the impact of this confinement on the mental health of female professors, and on their careers in academia?

For female professors, as for working women in general, maternity is something to be kept hidden so as not to impede the work (Bui-Xuan, 2012, Gatrell, 2013). For female professors who currently have children confined to the home and who have no choice but to care for them, regardless of their age, the current situation accentuates the problems involved with reconciling work and family life. Chances are that female professors with dependent children will be at a disadvantage compared with their colleagues who do not have children and who can therefore pursue their activities under more favourable conditions. Childless colleagues suddenly have extra time due to cancelled activities. They can use this time to transform their courses to online format or to advance their publications. These colleagues

¹ These professors are members of the Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Committee of the Têluq Professors' Union. We would like to thank researcher Naomie Léonard, who supplemented the literature review for this text.

are not always aware of the extent of the problems experienced by their peers who have responsibilities associated with the care and upbringing of children.

In a few words, the current pandemic is increasing mothers' family and professional responsibilities. It must be borne in mind that it is still usually the mother who bears the greatest burden when it comes to raising and caring for children (Rose, 2016). This additional burden only serves to aggravate the excessive workload already identified among university professors. (Leclerc et al. 2017). The results of a survey conducted in the spring of 2018 by a research team at UQAM² indicate that 75.6% of professors feel that they are constantly behind schedule or dealing with urgent situations, and that being late, overdue and racing against time is a constant battle waged between themselves and their work.³

Even for those of us who offer only online education and are therefore used to designing courses and supervising students at distance, the teaching workload has increased, because we have to adapt evaluation methods to the new situation of generalized confinement. We are struggling to cope with this, even as our children become fed up with the confinement and are placing increasing demands on our attention. In short, we are moving at a slower pace than our colleagues who do not count with these family responsibilities.

Unsurprisingly, this overwork and its negative impacts on female professors' careers are largely underestimated, as the performance evaluation criteria implemented in universities contain gender biases that disadvantage women in academia (Cidlinská, 2019). Studies indicate that female professors with children are more likely to receive negative evaluations than their female colleagues without children or their male colleagues with or without children, both in teaching and research (Doucet, Smith and Durand, 2012; Wagner, Rieger and Voorvelt, 2016). We also know that women who pursue an academic career ('female academics'? Women who pursue an academic career have more difficulty accessing stable employment, and that this phenomenon is furthered when they have children. Moreover, they tend to have lower salaries and fewer opportunities for promotion than their female colleagues without children or their male colleagues with or without children (Doucet et al., 2012). Our point is hence quite simple: the current health crisis may further destabilize

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³ Namely, 246 of the 328 professors who responded to the survey (response rate of 29.8%–55% female and 40% male). See Hervieux, G. (2020). *Constats de l'enquête sur la qualité de vie au travail du corps professoral à l'UQAM : un déraillement évitable ?* Bulletin de liaison du Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, No. 310, January 2020, Online: https://spuq.uqam.ca/documents/x_documents/528_spuq-info_310.pdf.

the working conditions of female professors already struggling to balance work and family life.

Like our colleague Julie Myre-Bisaillon of the Université de Sherbrooke, we were at first doubtful to the idea that life should go back to the way it was, yet life is no longer what it used to be (La Tribune, March 24, 2020). Today we are beginning to understand that life should not go back to the way it used to be. The pandemic that is turning our lives upside down is an opportunity to step back and reflect on our working conditions. It is a time to reflect on what our academic communities have become and what we would like them to be in order to foster the personal, professional and social development of all professors, without exception.

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