

**The Differential Effects of Pandemic Parenting**

Leah Windsor<sup>1</sup> and Kerry Crawford<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Intelligent Systems, University of Memphis

<sup>2</sup> Department of Political Science, James Madison University

**Abstract**

In this essay, we reflect on our early predictions for what life in a pandemic would be like for academic parents and consider what academic institutions must do to help faculty recover from the long-term disruption of Covid-19. In March 2020, we wrote a brief commentary on the differential effects of school closures—related to snow days, holidays, and pandemics—on faculty in primary caregiver roles, urging decision-makers in higher education to account for the inequities we could foresee, based on our research on gender, bias, and academic parenthood. (Windsor & Crawford 2020) In that essay, we observed that reliable, safe, high-quality childcare in the United States is scarce and expensive in normal years, and that the pandemic has exacerbated the childcare crisis. We offer insights into the challenges that working parents face, and policy-oriented solutions that academic institutions can implement to address the pandemic-induced productivity gap.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, pandemic, gender, parenting, work-life balance

### **The Differential Effects of Pandemic Parenting**

At the outset of the pandemic, we urged decision-makers in higher education to address the gendered, pandemic-related inequities we foresaw unfolding, based on our research on gender, bias, and academic parenthood (Windsor & Crawford, 2020). Writing for the Chatham House *International Affairs* blog series on gender equality in the profession, “50:50 in 2020” (Dorman & de Haan, 2019), we emphasized that women, especially traditionally under-represented minority and first generation scholars, began the pandemic already at a strategic disadvantage due to factors like implicit bias and the hidden curriculum. We introduced a new metaphor for the “leaky pipeline” and demonstrated how mentorship provides access to “ladders” and strategies for avoiding the “chutes” (Windsor & Crawford, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened gendered and identity-based inequalities and created untenable choices for women+ with careers and caregiving responsibilities. As a result, more women are submitting fewer publications for review, and leaving the workforce altogether (Viglione, 2020).

Our work on gender and bias in family formation broadly focuses on the ways parenting or caregiving roles disproportionately hinder women’s careers. “Lower order” processes, the behind-the-scenes daily decisions and incidents related to family formation and caregiving, lead to “higher order” observable outcomes, including gender gaps in publications, faculty rank attainment, service assignments, and negotiations. (Windsor & Crawford, 2020; Crawford & Windsor, 2021). Women+ scholars are tenured and promoted at lower rates and paid less than their men peers— not due to a failure to bargain (Bowles et al., 2019). These higher-order processes are well-captured in the literature.

The lower-order processes that contribute to higher-order outcomes existed before the pandemic and persist in the midst of it. To retain diverse faculty, we need better policies to

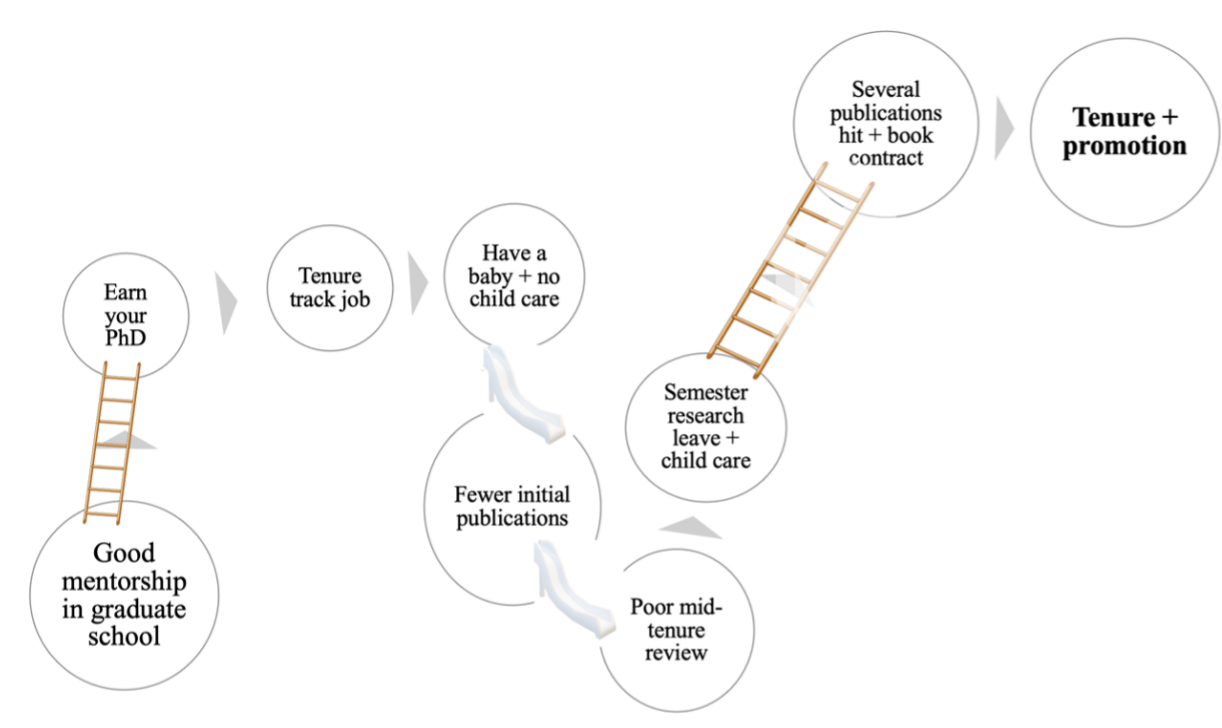
accommodate those who have been the “shock absorbers” of the pandemic (Grose, 2020; Crawford & Windsor, 2020a). In our book, we argue that children are a public good (Crawford & Windsor, 2021). Parents derive unique joy from their own children; however, in the United States, they assume the bulk of the financial responsibilities related to parenthood, with very little support from society. Childcare is a key factor constraining women’s advancement; academia often relocates scholars far from family and support networks. The pandemic has upended childcare, with children out of school for many months or more than a year. In the “Before Times”, reliable, safe, high-quality childcare in the United States was already scarce and expensive, and the pandemic has exacerbated the childcare crisis and set academic parents – especially mothers – back (Deryugina et al., 2021).

Academics—and any other professionals—with the flexibility to work remotely enjoy a privileged position. Yet the informalization of labor, and the compounding emotional and cognitive labor, that women of color have disproportionately borne during the pandemic mirrors the racial and ethnic health disparities minority communities have experienced. According to the Centers for Disease Control, Black people have died at 1.4 times the rate of white people from COVID-19, and minority women are more likely to be caregivers and to have lost a loved one in their support system during the pandemic (Torres & Torres, 2020). Black women have also experienced the additional trauma related to the deaths of George Floyd and many others, taking on additional responsibilities related to addressing the causes and consequences of structural racism (Tevis, 2021). As Laster Pirtle (2020) writes, “Racism and capitalism mutually construct harmful social conditions that fundamentally shape COVID-19 disease inequities” (Laster Pirtle, 2020, p. 504).

Non-neurotypical academics and those with disabilities have also been unduly penalized by the pandemic. As Hope (2021) notes, the pandemic has invited a surge of innovations and adaptations for scholars and students with disabilities. Universities have reported increases in requests for faculty accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act, while faculty have reported challenges in gaining “reasonable accommodation,” as age and pregnancy alone, for example, are not disabilities.

While faculty without young children often herald snow days as bonus research or rest days, academic parents must accommodate rowdy children who are out of their normal routine (Windsor & Crawford, 2020). But snow days and three-day weekends are temporary inconveniences. Sustained quiet work time is rare, and parents’ emotional and psychological health is suffering in the pandemic (Dubin, 2020). Men+ have reported experiencing what we term “gender shock,” or the sudden awareness of the depth of cognitive and emotional labor and active caregiving typically borne by women+ in the home (Windsor & Crawford, 2021). The burden of women+’s labor has grown on the same exponential curve as Covid-19 cases in the U.S. (Breuning et al., 2021)

We focus in our research on the Academic Chutes & Ladders, the very real inequities and vulnerabilities that make it more difficult for women+ and parents of all genders to ascend the ranks of the academic profession (Crawford & Windsor, 2020a). Figure 1 demonstrates a hypothetical path from graduate school to tenure that illustrates how family formation in a non-pandemic year can affect the academic trajectory. Mentorship and more equitable policies are ladders that can help academics avoid the pitfalls and chutes, and early evidence demonstrates that more junior scholars are accessing informal mentorship even given the challenges of all-virtual conferences and networking (Windsor & Crawford, 2021).

**Figure 1***Chutes and Ladders in Academia*

Mentorship is essential for supporting women+ and scholars of color, especially through the pandemic. In the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, the National Science Foundation has invested in the ADVANCE (Organizational Change for Gender Equity in STEM Academic Professions) program. Since 2001, NSF ADVANCE has supported programming to advance women in science; this program should be expanded and extended to support women+ in the humanities and social sciences. In our discipline (political science), the NSF has supported mentorship programs such as Journeys in World Politics (for scholars of International Relations) and Visions in Methodology (for women+ using quantitative methods), but these programs are limited in scope and not institutionally transformative in nature.

The effects of pandemic-related disruptions are especially severe for graduate students on the job market, pre-tenure faculty, and contingent faculty, all of whom are already vulnerable to

fluctuations in campus budgets, the scrutiny of hiring or tenure and promotion committees, and the academic job market (Zahneis, 2020; Windsor & Crawford, 2020).

Individualized hacks instituted by creative – and desperate – academics, including online support groups and Twitter threads discussing best practices for online teaching, are insufficient to overcome the structural obstacles to success that parents and caregivers, especially women+, have historically faced in the academy, and which are exacerbated by the pandemic. Academic institutions, not individual academic parents, must find ways to address the long-term consequences of the pandemic-related dislocations. More broadly, academic institutions must move beyond *normalizing* parents to *embracing* them by addressing issues of implicit bias and structural inequalities to increase gender equality in academia (Windsor & Crawford 2020)

In designing policy accommodations, universities must consider the differential effects of the pandemic on parents and caregivers – especially those with young children and children with special needs. As a response to the pandemic, some universities have extended the tenure clock for all pre-tenure faculty. While well intended, this policy will have divergent effects on academic parents, especially those with young children, and academics without caregiving responsibilities. Academic parents are falling even farther behind than before the pandemic started, and another year might get them back to where they were before the pandemic – but certainly not ahead. Academics who are not caregivers effectively have a bonus year to catapult their research agendas. A fairer policy suite would be to extend the tenure clock for parents with young children for an additional year, offer childcare subsidies, and/or reduced teaching loads and service responsibilities to help offset the burdens of the pandemic.

We echo the suggestions made by Becker-Blease for bridging the publication gaps for women+ and minorities (Becker-Blease, 2020). These include special journal issues featuring

early career scholars, with flexible and generous deadlines; training to reduce reviewer bias; and inviting women to serve on editorial boards and submit invited articles. To these we add offering a semester of research leave post-pandemic for academic parents, especially those with young children; omitting student evaluations of teaching, which reliably demonstrate gender and racial bias, from faculty evaluations (Peterson et al., 2019); offer additional sick days for academic parents, especially at institutions without paid family leave; and create opportunities for formal professionalization, such as virtual practice job talks, for scholars on the job market (Lupton, 2020).

*Dr. Leah Windsor is a Research Assistant Professor in the Institute for Intelligent Systems at The University of Memphis and runs the Languages Across Cultures lab. She studies linguistic aspects of political communication in international relations, and gender and bias in family formation in academia.*

*Dr. Kerry F. Crawford is an Associate Professor of Political Science at James Madison University in Virginia. In her research and teaching she focuses on International Relations, human security, gender in war and peace, and parenthood in the academy.*

### References

- Becker-Blease, K. A. (2020). Ten Steps to More Equitable Academic Publishing in the Pandemic. *ADVANCE Journal*, 2(2). Accessed April 20, 2021.  
<https://www.advancejournal.org/article/18061-ten-steps-to-more-equitable-academic-publishing-in-the-pandemic>
- Bowles, H. R., Thomason, B., & Bear, J. B. (2019). Reconceptualizing What and How Women Negotiate for Career Advancement. *Academy of Management Journal* 62(6): 1645–71.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2017.1497>
- Breuning, M., Fattore, C., Ramos, J., & Scalera, J. (2021). The Great Equalizer? Gender, Parenting, and Scholarly Productivity During the Global Pandemic. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520002036>
- Crawford, K. F., & Windsor, L. (2020a, May 14). We Need to Talk: Gender, Bias and Best Practices for Supporting Academic Parents. *International Affairs Blog*.  
<https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/we-need-to-talk-gender-bias-and-best-practices-for-supporting-academic-parents-1d833d34f5a>
- Crawford, K. F., & Windsor, L. C. (2021). *The PhD Parenthood Trap: Caught Between Work and Family in Academia*. Georgetown University Press.
- Deryugina, T., Shurchkov, O., & Stearns, J. E. (2021). *COVID-19 Disruptions Disproportionately Affect Female Academics*. w28360. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28360>
- Dorman, A., & de Haan, L. (2019, December 4). Announcing the 50:50 in 2020 Initiative. *International Affairs Blog*. <https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/announcing-the-50-50-in-2020-initiative-fbcc039f3d4e>

- Dubin, M. (2020, July 6). "I Am Going to Physically Explode": Mom Rage in a Pandemic." *The New York Times*, sec. Parenting. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/parenting/mom-rage-pandemic.html>
- Grose, J. (2020, October 14). Mothers Are the 'Shock Absorbers' of Our Society. *The New York Times*, sec. Parenting. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/parenting/working-moms-job-loss-coronavirus.html>
- Hope, J. (2021). COVID-19 Pandemic Leads to Challenges, Innovation. *Disability Compliance for Higher Education* 26(10): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dhe.31043>
- Laster Pirtle, W. N. (2020). Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States. *Health Education & Behavior* 47(4): 504–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120922942>
- Lupton, D. (2020). IR/CP Virtual Practice Job Talks. Colgate University. *IR/CP Virtual Practice Job Talks*. <https://sites.google.com/colgate.edu/ir-virtual-practice-job-talks/home>
- Peterson, D. A. M., Biederman, L. A., Andersen, D., Ditonto, T. M., & Roe, K. (2019). Mitigating Gender Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching. *PLOS ONE* 14 (5): e0216241. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0216241>
- Tevis, T. (2021). By Obligation and by Choice: Taking on Extra Responsibilities during COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement. *ADVANCE Journal* 2(2). <https://www.advancejournal.org/article/18872-by-obligation-and-by-choice-taking-on-extra-responsibilities-during-covid-19-and-the-black-lives-matter-movement>
- Torres, S., & Torres, E. (2020). Healthcare Bias and Discrimination. *Contexts* 19(4): 96–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504220977953>

Viglione, G. (2020). Are Women Publishing Less during the Pandemic? Here's What the Data Say. *Nature* 581(7809): 365–66. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01294-9>

Windsor, L. C., & Crawford, K. F. (2020). Best Practices for Normalizing Parents in the Academy: Higher- and Lower-Order Processes and Women and Parents' Success. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53 (2): 275–80. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519001938>

Windsor, L., & Crawford, K. F. (2020, March 23). Snow Days, Holidays and Pandemic Quarantines: Why We Need to Be Looking after Parents. *Medium*.  
<https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/snow-days-holidays-and-pandemic-quarantines-why-we-need-to-be-looking-after-parents-a3dc38413548>

———. (2021, March 8). Women and Minorities Encouraged to Apply (Not Stay). *Trends in Genetics* 2021. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3800170>

Zahneis, M. (2020, March 18). The Covid-19 Crisis Is Widening the Gap Between Secure and Insecure Instructors. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Covid-19-Crisis-Widens-Divide/248276>