

## **Gendered implications of disrupted mobilities for female academics during COVID-19**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

This paper explores ways in which COVID-19 disrupted established patterns of mobility in the lives of female academics at UK universities and examines gendered implications of this disruption for another form of mobility – that of career progression. Drawing on diary and interview data collected for *Dear Diary: Equality* implications for female academics of changes to working practices in lockdown and beyond (Carruthers Thomas, 2022) the paper explores participants' experiences of working from home and homeschooling; of transitioning to digital pedagogies and virtual communications. It also highlights the challenges of an intensified mobility across professional and personal roles during this period. For many, the negative impact on research capacity and productivity has implications for future career progression. For some, the hypermobility of virtual academic spaces offered unanticipated career benefits. The longer-term implications for female academics' career mobility are complex and should be tracked in future.

### **Full paper**

This paper explores disrupted mobilities in the lives of female academics at UK universities during COVID-19 and points to gendered implications for another form of mobility – career progression. It draws on data collected by Carruthers Thomas (*Dear Diary*, 2021) using diary and interview methods, to investigate the

experiences of 25 female academics between March 2020-September 2021.

In March 2020, paid labour moved into the household. Gone were the commute and corridor conversations. The pressures of working from home, homeschooling and care particularly disadvantaged working women (Ascher 2020, Connolly et al. 2020, Ferguson 2020) as a blurring of work/home boundaries, identities and roles exacerbated an already unevenly distributed burden of care.

University teaching, research and administration moved online. Carruthers Thomas previously reported (2020) that female academic and professional services staff in one post-92 UK university, were less likely to have access to dedicated working space at home and more likely to take primary or sole responsibility for homeschooling, household tasks and others' care needs. The same study found that female academics, particularly those with school-age children, experienced difficulties in sustaining research and writing for publication (see also Boncori 2020; Fazackerly 2020; Kitchener 2020).

Pre-pandemic, many academics made use of informal working from home arrangements which in principle provided flexibility and an environment that fosters deep concentration and focus (Couch, O'Sullivan and Malatsky 2020:1). But as Couch *et al.* argue, female academics often employed it as 'a strategy to manage the demands of ...multifaceted roles as academics, partners, mothers and "family managers"' (ibid: 3). *Dear Diary* participants' accounts imply that increased tensions between professional and domestic roles during the pandemic neutralised the flexibility advantage and made deep concentration and focus impossible:

*You're wearing multiple hats all day long, looking after children, doing all the extra work that was surrounding our home. My husband's a keyworker. He didn't have that. Somehow it felt like it was all upon me to do that work. You can't write if you're burnt out and exhausted.*

*I hadn't realised before how much my commute had functioned as me-time, as time to adjust and recalibrate from academic to mother. Working from home and all hours to blend home-school with*

*academic work, the switching required is constant, immediate and exhausting.*

The technology which made working from home feasible, strengthened the norm of the ideal academic 'assumed to be available 24/7 without ties or responsibilities' (Lynch 2010: 57):

*I did feel a huge responsibility for those students and was very responsive whatever time of day or night. I'm cooking the tea and an email would ping on your phone saying, "How do I answer this question?" And I'd be thinking, "Right, I need to get back to so and so after tea."*

Data reveal a negative impact on research productivity for most:

*Writing for publication, absolutely no chance. You're looking at little blocks of time in-between feeding everybody and I can't write like that.*

Publications are the currency of academic reputation and career progression. REF2021 continued with only minor modifications; the next REF cycle has begun. Participants expressed unease about longer-term implications for their career mobility:

*If you've spent eighteen months putting a huge amount of energy to supporting people in your institution, but you've not done the writing and the publications – then when it comes to promotions and people's careers, how far will that be valued versus writing and publications?*

*I know that having "nowt in the pipeline now" will mean that the COVID impact will show in my professional track record for the next couple of years at least.*

The hypermobility of virtual academic spaces during the pandemic brought unanticipated career benefits for some. Online conferences, seminars and networking did not require funding or complex childcare arrangements to attend, at least not for those with digital privileges.

*I've done so much networking and online, writing groups and reconnected with old colleagues and one of the papers that I've written is with them.*

*I have really flown in terms of my reputation ... I found there were almost more opportunities available. I'm now leading a network around climate justice which wouldn't have come together in the pre-Zoom world.*

In conclusion, working from home during the pandemic disrupted established patterns of mobility exacerbating a gendered burden of care and tensions between competing roles. The longer-term implications for female academics' career mobility are complex and should continue to be tracked.

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