

## **Double disadvantages: A comparative exploration of the experience of women early-career researchers in social sciences during COVID-19**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

Despite growing acknowledgement of challenges faced by those working in the higher education sector pertaining gender and career stage, how these dimensions of disadvantages shape women ECRs' experiences in an intersectoral manner remain under-explored. The paper will fill the gap by investigating through an original survey on how women ECRs in social sciences in the higher education institutions of England and Hong Kong have experienced and navigated through the challenges related to physical and mental wellbeing and financial and professional sustainability under COVID-19. Particular attention will be paid to how their mobilities, physical or virtual, are restrained or facilitated during the pandemic and how that, in turn, has contributed to their overall experience. The findings will help inform concrete and bespoke measures to better support this group, which is essential for the higher education sector to "build back better" effectively and equitably beyond the pandemic.

### **Full paper**

Notwithstanding the rhetoric that "we are in this together", there is growing evidence of the differential impact of COVID-19 within and across countries. Within the higher education sector, research has highlighted that women academics are bearing a greater brunt of the

pandemic in terms of burnout and research productivity, whereas early-career researchers (ECRs) such as postdocs and junior faculty members are reported to be facing extra precarity. Despite their being exposed to both disadvantages of gender and career stage, experience of women ECRs during the pandemic has received far less attention in the higher education administration literature and especially the literature on COVID-19's impact in academia.

This paper intends to fill the gap by investigating through an original survey on how women ECRs in social sciences in the higher education institutions of England and Hong Kong have experienced and navigated through the challenges related to physical and mental wellbeing and financial and professional sustainability under COVID-19. The paper chooses to focus on social science disciplines because within the limited number of studies specifically on women ECRs to date, most tend to cover science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Particular attention will be paid to how their mobilities, physical or virtual, are restrained or facilitated during the pandemic and how that, in turn, has contributed to their overall experience. The comparative perspective of England and Hong Kong, on the other hand, is expected to further reveal the similarities and differences of such experiences in two settings marked by different welfare approaches, severity of the pandemic and higher education governance. The findings will provide a timely and important evidence base that captures a comprehensive account of how women ECRs have been affected by COVID-19 physically, mentally, financially and professionally, on which policy recommendations can be formulated that can help advance gender equity and just working environment in higher education governance. Alleviating the ramifications of COVID-19 on women ECRs would also benefit the higher education sector as a whole, whose recent endeavours of "building back better" post-pandemic risk becoming an empty promise if an important part of its workforce continues to be constrained by a lack of resilience, agency and motivation.

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