

Daughters of a lesser God: The impact of COVID-19 on female early-career academics' experiences of precarity with regard to working and life routines

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Introduction

This study considers the impact of gender in academia and examines how gender inequality manifests within precarious work in higher education (HE), especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This multiple case study explored 34 academics' experiences of precarity in three universities in London to unravel the challenges these women faced using lengthy, semi-structured interviews and opportunity and snowball sampling. It revealed that the pandemic has intensified insecurities and discriminations - particularly for female academics - stemming from the neoliberal restructuring of the HE sector in Europe. The paper offers recommendations for HR managers and senior leadership teams (SLTs) in educational institutions.

Background

The literature on gender inequality in HE has been widely researched, but recommendations to tackle it usually refer to the higher ranks (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019). Moreover, few studies have examined the additional problems that precarious female 'outsiders' encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK (Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021). This paper argues that women were ostracised, both formally and informally, and exploited due to the ongoing neoliberalisation of the HE sector. Research indicates that HE institutions usually conceal (or cannot record) data on precarious female academics and that official reports often ignore or underrate the phenomenon of precarious work in HE in the UK (UCU, 2016). Moreover, no reliable figures exist for the weakest workers, that is, hourly paid, zero-hours contracts, etc.

The current study addresses a gap in the literature on the challenges precarious female workers in HE institutions in the UK have faced during the pandemic (Wright et al, 2021). As Advance HE (2019) reports that marginalisation and precarity have reigned in academia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems crucial to explore female early-career academics' experiences and potential challenges since researchers report that university academic managers and HR managers have often used inappropriate interventions to respond to the crisis (Docka-Filipek and Stone, 2021). The current study aims to address the following research questions:

- Which are the challenges that precarious female academics faced in HE institutions amid the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to working routines?
- Which are the challenges that precarious female academics faced in HE institutions amid the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to life routines?

Research methods

The researcher used the theories of gendered organisations (Acker, 1990), neoliberalism (Chen, 2013), labour process theory (Braverman, 1974) and feminist theory (Morley, 2014) to carefully examine the stories of 34 early-career academics involved in precarious work in public HE institutions in London. These depicted the gender-specific challenges they faced with regard to working and life routines amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Previous research on this topic is either quantitative (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021) or based on secondary data (McLaren et al, 2020). Utilising qualitative research based on an exploratory, multiple case study approach and interpretivist philosophy (Ponelis, 2015), the study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Using opportunity and snowball sampling processes, mainly due to lack of funding and access limitations (Mujere, 2016), 34 female academics were interviewed after signing an informed consent form that

guaranteed their anonymity. All interviews were recorded via MS Teams and data was analysed using thematic analysis (Gavin, 2008).

Research findings

Drawing on feminist theory and recent studies of the gendered effects of the crisis, this study presents precarious female academics' obstacles amid the pandemic, that is, their inability to fulfil their teaching, administrative and research responsibilities without childcare services. Some of them interrupted their career as they could not reconcile their work and family roles. Participants also expressed their concern about the increased gap in their relative competitiveness with male and childless colleagues (Minello et al, 2021) and offered some preliminary reflections on the experience of the concurrent 'double shift' the lockdown engendered (Crook, 2020).

The study sheds light on different forms of precarity - researchers used the lockdown as a writing retreat and accelerated their career prospects, while academics with teaching responsibilities felt trapped and saw their living conditions deteriorating. Therefore, women hit a 'care ceiling' (Ivancheva et al, 2019), and their capacity to be creative and innovative vanished. They also had to take on the burden of the 'academic housework' as students turned to them rather than their male counterparts for support.

Participants confessed that they were also forced to deliver face-to-face seminars despite their health issues (eg asthma) or those of their immediate family. This deeply affected both their physical and mental health. They complained about their inability to manage their caring responsibilities while being paid, as this had a profound impact on their wellbeing. These women reflected on their labour, caring and affective insecurities as they faced the 'Janus-face of capitalist labour' (Bohrer, 2016) amid the pandemic. This has intensified precarity and instability of income, uncertainty, despair and living in isolation. Finally, they vividly discussed the striking evidence of perceived institutional inflexibility, which tempted many of them to start looking for a career exit.

Implications for practice

HE globally is in a grim state. Precarious female workers have been deeply impacted by the pandemic as they had to carry an immensely heavy burden. Therefore, HR managers and SLTs should try to ensure that HE institutions do not promote a competitive culture, lack of contractual security and continuous mobility, which prevents precarious female workers from having a stable personal life and fulfilling their roles as mothers in supposedly privileged workplaces such as academia (Ivancheva and O'Flynn, 2016).

The current study indicates that SLTs should reflect on and possibly withdraw all temporary COVID-19 measures, which impose considerable pressure on precarious female academics, as these may hinder institutional regeneration in the post-COVID era. HE institutions should prioritise interventions which tackle structural inequalities and ensure that various factors, for example race and gender, do not intersect in institutions to produce negative outcomes for certain individuals, such as women, migrant or ethnic minority academics. It would also be useful to reconsider promotion and tenure criteria (Gonzales and Griffin, 2020). This is because post-pandemic academia should reflect on the boundaries between care and academic work and include care-sensitive criteria in academic evaluations (Herschberg et al, 2018), recognising the invisible work precarious female 'outsiders' often undertake (Górska et al, 2021).

The pandemic has prompted the marketisation and casualisation of the HE system, especially in the UK, leaving precarious female academics vulnerable to managerial

decisions. They were often expected to prioritise teaching and/or research over their health or that of family members and were scared to claim their employment rights. In the name of social justice, this issue needs to be addressed immediately and human rights should be protected.

Universities, especially in the UK, need to offer greater job security for staff, as this is certainly beneficial for the hard-working women who live on insecure contracts and are frequently locked out of career progression as they try to make ends meet and support their families. HE institutions need to understand that high-quality educational provision cannot be sustained when academic staff are suffering. Offering precarious academics, especially women, more secure contracts will serve the institutions' ambitions to demonstrate the quality of their provision as well as have a profound, positive impact on their staff and students' lives, in turn increasing academics' dedication and commitment.

Zero-hours contracts need to be eradicated. HR and academic managers in HE should aim to increase job security, continuity of employment and opportunities for career progression for all staff - especially for women - engaged in any form of teaching and/or research. HE institutions need to 'walk the talk' and promote social justice, fostering inclusion for the most vulnerable members of society, that is, women, migrant and ethnic minority academics. Universities urgently need to invest in the decasualisation of their workforces and start by including workers on non-standard contracts in workplace systems of representation. They should also encourage (via legislation or industry agreements) the diffusion of good practice 'social value procurement' to reduce precarious work. Extended social dialogue is the only way forward. Precarious female academics' voices need to be heard as they confess that they struggle to pay their bills. Their recommendations also need to be taken into consideration to enhance our students' learning experience and boost the quality of research undertaken in HE institutions, especially in the UK.

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