

Article

Academics in Lockdown: A Gendered Perspective on Self-Esteem in Academia during the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

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Abstract: This qualitative research explores the experiences and sense-making of self-worth of 1857 South African women academics during the enforced pandemic lockdown between March and September 2020; the study was conducted through an inductive, content analysis process. Since worldwide lockdowns were imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, women academics, in particular, have reported a unique set of challenges from working from home. Gender inequality within the scientific enterprise has been well documented; however, the cost to female academics' self-esteem, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, has yet to be fully realized. The findings of the study include negative emotional experiences related to self-worth, engagement in social comparisons, and the fear of judgement by colleagues, which were exacerbated by peer pressure. Finally, the sense-making of academic women's self-esteem as it relates to their academic identity was reported. Beyond being the first comprehensive national study on the topic, the study's insights are more broadly useful for determining what support, accommodation, and assistance is needed for academic women to sustain performance in their academic and research duties at universities worldwide.

Keywords: self-esteem; self-worth; women academics; higher education; academic identity; COVID-19



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed the working environment and job demands of higher education institutions. One of the significant outcomes of enforced pandemic lockdowns has been the 'unprecedented' mass-scale transition to remote and virtual learning methods for universities [1–3]. In addition to the existing stressors of high workloads, publication pressure, a competitive environment, and contract employment, academics have found that the pandemic introduced new pressures: a sudden demand to revert to online teaching, ambiguous boundaries between work and home, a disconnect from students and colleagues, and additional administrative duties [4,5]. The pandemic, and the lockdown period in particular, posed a greater risk for the occurrence of conflict between academic and family roles [6]. Evidence suggest that the pandemic lockdown exacerbated gender disparity as women, even in dual-career families, spent more time in care activities than they did before [7,8].

Gender disparities were present in the higher education sector before the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. It has been expressed that the masculinities inherent in the neoliberal capitalist functioning of modern universities leave little room for the needs of women [9,10]. The resultant effect is that female academic staff members are twice as likely to experience psychological distress in the form of anxiety, depression, and stress [5]. In the initial periods of lockdown, gendered work expectations and altered home

life conditions threatened academics' mental health [11]. The gendered divide in the work and home experiences of women academics was particularly pronounced for those with young children, with implications for their workload, performance, and well-being [12]. During the lockdown, scholars who were mothers struggled to work and felt guilty towards their children when they did engage in work [13,14]; some have suggested that concessions needed to be made with respect to the work performance demands for female scholars during the pandemic lockdown [15]. However, this approach challenges female academics' work identity and the feeling of being a valuable human being with a meaningful role in the university and society [16]. Subsequently, feelings of not 'being good enough' arose, and this affected the female academics' subjective evaluation of their overall worthiness as person.

Feelings of worthiness are reflected as one aspect of psychological health, namely self-esteem: the measure of a person's self-worth or self-value or the way that people feel about themselves, which follows from their sense of worthiness or unworthiness. As a personal characteristic, self-esteem contributes to resilient psychosocial outcomes when people experience adversity [4], providing a buffering effect against negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety and depression [17].

Empirical literature indicates that females generally have lower levels of self-esteem than men [18]. As self-esteem is empirically linked to depression, it may explain why females are twice as likely to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress [19]. This large-scale, qualitative study aimed to capture academic women's experiences and how they made sense of their self-esteem in relation to their academic work during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that the focus on self-esteem is important for academic women as it relates to their achievement of academic and research duties [20] and to their mental health, specifically with respect to depression and anxiety [21]. As it has been contended that "the people that suffer the most during the COVID-19 crisis are those that have relatively low self-esteem" [22], our inquiry aims to highlight the experiences and provide a call to action that ensures well-being in post-pandemic universities. We believe that a concerted effort from line managers, peers, and institutional authorities, in terms of policies and practices, is needed to support academic women's self-esteem after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

This is a segmental report from a larger study of academic women from South Africa's public universities. A survey questionnaire was distributed to all women academics. This study, which focuses on women academics' experiences of self-esteem, draws on data from the qualitative open-ended question part of the survey, which comprised more than 221,000 words. The online survey was opened for submissions on 1 July 2020 and closed on 30 September 2020.

A constructivist worldview was applied to the study, which holds knowledge as multiple or relative truths as individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live [23]. This approach allowed the researchers to identify and extract themes from the rich qualitative descriptions of academic experiences as well as to integrate those themes into meaningful descriptions [24].

2.1. Research Setting

The higher education sector in South Africa consists of 26 public universities, with the universities being situated among the nine provinces of the country. The largest institution has an exclusive offer of distance learning, while all other universities offer residential or hybrid learning environments. Women are historically underrepresented in South African universities in the area of permanent academic staff [25]. While transformation initiatives have succeeded in creating a greater representation of women in higher education, increasing from 42% in 2005 to 47% in 2015 [26], overall, women still hold lower-ranking positions compared with their male counterparts.

The survey was conducted during the initial stages of the pandemic's enforced lockdown in South Africa, although the recounted experiences stretched from the stages of hard lockdown ('Stage 5', since 27 March) to the gradual easing of the lockdown at the end of September 2020 ('Stage 2', since 18 August). During all these stages, however, universities were closed for face-to-face teaching, and only minor exceptions were granted institutional permission for some professional fields (e.g., medical student practicums) and laboratory work. We argue that the findings obtained in 2020 are still relevant as most South African universities have not seen a full return to the campus, with online and hybrid learning processes replacing the pre-COVID pandemic face-to-face interactions [27].

2.2. Sample Characteristics

The majority of the participants had been in academia for 10 years or less (0–5 years, 29.8%; 6–10 years, 24.8%); we observed that 19.4% had been in academia for 11–15 years, and 26% had been in academia for 16 years or more. Responses from all 26 universities in South Africa were received, which ranged from 2 to 287 responses received per university. In terms of reporting the findings, we used two identifiers to provide a richer description. These were the participants' parental status and academic career level. For the career level, we classified women who had been in academia for less than 5 years as early-career academics, those having more than 5 years but less than 10 years as mid-career academics, those having more than 10 years but less than 15 years as experienced academics, and those having more than 15 years of academic experience as established or senior academics.

2.3. Ethics and Research Strategy

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the relevant university. The ethical review was followed by gateway clearance certificates in most of the 26 universities. In one case, the research team was simply given permission by the university management to directly contact women academics on the campus. However, in most cases, institutional representatives invited women academics from the respective universities to participate via e-mail correspondence. Respondents for the survey were asked to state their written consent at the start of the data gathering process.

2.4. Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was performed using an inductive approach to extract emergent themes from the open-ended responses. A total of 1857 respondents provided written responses to the open-ended portion of the survey, which were extracted to provide the textual dataset for this study. In consideration of the large sample size and open-ended nature of the qualitative question, the aim was to identify common experiences among the group. A content analysis approach was therefore best suited for the study as it allowed the researchers to explore and interpret the experiences of self-esteem rather than assess responses as answers to probing questions or issues identified from the literature review a priori. As such, the approach reflects an analysis of the subjective expressions of women academics to develop a deeper understanding of their common experiences [28].

Coleman and Unrau's [29] six-step framework for qualitative data analysis was used, and the analysis was conducted by all four researchers using ATLAS.ti 8 software. In the first step, all written responses to the open-ended question of the survey were prepared. Anonymity of the respondents was maintained by removing any personal information that could expose the participants' identities. As part of this process, the researchers read through the entire dataset independently to familiarize themselves with the data before commencing the reviewing, coding, and interpretation.

In step 2, by reviewing of the data, researchers individually scrutinized the data for responses that related to the theme of self-esteem. The data was therefore explicitly filtered for explicit references or codes related to 'esteem', 'regard', 'worth', and 'value' as they related to the definition of self-esteem. Further exploration of the responses included references to 'competence' and 'performance' or lack thereof, reflecting participants' experiences

of feeling worthy (or not). Units of meaning (i.e., words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs describing the self-esteem phenomenon) were then extracted from the filtered responses to constitute the dataset for further analysis.

In step 3, inductive first-level coding was performed by each researcher to identify similarities and differences across the dataset and label the units of meaning accordingly. Each researcher reviewed the responses to note specific points of interest and possible themes. The researchers then compared their codes to categorize meaning units with similar themes. This also served as a data validation step to ensure the internal validity of the analysis. This was followed by second-level coding in step 4 to identify differences and similarities between codes and consolidate categories as needed.

Step 5 involved the interpretation of the data and required the researchers to develop a conceptual classification system that determined the relationships between the main themes. Finally, in step 6, the findings were reviewed by the different researchers to confirm the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

3. Results

The study explored how women academics experienced and made sense of their self-esteem. Participants described different ways in which their self-esteem was affected by their academic working conditions during the pandemic. Four themes emerged from these descriptions: negative emotions related to self-worth, social comparisons and fear of judgement, peer pressure, and the relationship between self-esteem and academic identity. Table 1 provides a summary of the themes, subthemes, and codes. Extracts from participant responses are included to illuminate the themes.

Table 1. Self-esteem sense-making themes, subthemes, and codes.

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Negative emotions	Incompetence	Inadequacy
	Out of control	Overwhelmed, doubt, Suicidal thoughts, mental breakdown
	Desperation	Competition, inequity of care burdens,
Social comparison and fear of judgement	Left behind	Facade that everything is okay. Soldiering on, prove own worth
	Lack of accommodation/empathy	Little tolerance, asking for help seen as weakness, embarrassment
Peer pressure	Sensitivity to feedback	Coping with increased workload, lack of support, performing at home and work.
	Performance pressure	Helplessness, disappointment
Academic identity	Underperforming in career goals	Feeling like a failure
	Upholding sense of professional self	

Source: authors' own work.

3.1. Theme 1: Negative Emotions Related to Self-Worth

Negative emotions regarding self-worth were expressed by women academics throughout the survey and can be observed across the other thematic findings. Inside the all-consuming demands on an academic woman, a single event could impose feelings of inadequacy:

Every course has had to be radically redeveloped (and dumbed down), and I constantly grapple with technology-fails. This has diminished and undermined my sense of who I am as an academic/professor, and the quality of knowledge I am able to convey to students. I now appear foolish and incompetent, and nothing seems to work effectively. (Established academic with no children)

“I feel totally out of control,” said one senior academic with one child in primary school and another in high school; another experienced scholar without children reported that the constant deadlines and increasing workloads “left me feeling unhelpful, inconsiderate and at times lazy” when falling behind on one or other obligations. As a result, many women began to question their own worth:

I experienced doubt in my self-value, and this got to me sometimes. (Experienced academic with no children)

What the findings demonstrate, however, is the depth of the feeling of inadequacy in the lives of academic women during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected in this short, powerful statement:

This lockdown has intruded into my very soul. (Mid-career academic with no children)

When such overwhelming emotions took over, several women in this study considered extreme responses:

It is due to these meds and the therapy I am under that I have not jumped off a building. (Established academic with a child in high school)

When it comes to this point, the person’s situation is dangerous because she is drained of all meaning and purpose, in work and even in life:

I am not sure of my value any longer. (Established academic with one child in primary school and another in high school)

Yet another respondent, a mid-career academic with no children, wrote, “I have suicidal thoughts constantly.” Another experienced mother of two high school students reported, “I was really down . . . crying over the smallest things.” For several respondents, the pandemic was experienced as an increasingly desperate situation:

There is no number of words that can describe my feelings at the moment. (Established academic with one child in primary school and another in high school)

When this point is reached, everything else takes a backseat and academic satisfaction is lost:

I am not as concerned about my research and work as I am about my mental health . . . (Early-career academic without children)

I do not experience joy in my work context at this stage. (Established academic without children)

Some women revealed the emotional health costs with remarkable candor:

I had a mental breakdown. (Experienced academic and mother of two young teens; this was her comment in full.)

3.2. Theme 2: Social Comparisons and Fear of Judgement

As has been found in related research on women’s academic work during the pandemic, some academic women compared themselves with other academics whom they perceived to be doing better, sometimes pointing to the different ways in which they were privileged in the lockdown and therefore able to continue their work:

I feel I am going to be left behind in terms of growth compared to [those who are] males/single [or] with grown up kids. (Mid-career mother with a toddler)

When a crisis like this comes along, male academics get on with the business of research. (Experienced academic with two school-aged children)

It grates me to think that I must compete when there are such disparities between academics with children and those without. (Early-career academic with a kindergarten)

When I share my burden with my HOD [Head of Department] (does not have children and is single), she simply compares me to another female academic in another department who has a child and 30 Masters and PhD students and is amazing. That is, if she can continue to be amazing, why can't you? (Established academic with a kindergartener and a child in primary school)

University lecturers entered the lockdown period with a strong sense that they needed to project and protect their sense of themselves as professionals over the course of the pandemic. Two women explained:

One of the biggest issues with lockdown has been my need to keep everything going and not to show that I am struggling to juggle everything. I know, come time for promotion, none of the men, and also not the women without young children or older children that require special attention, are going to give me an inch of slack. It will be "well you know, such and such did it, why are you not able to?" (Established academic with a child in primary school)

Whether single parents or not, working mothers have been under immense stress to continue as if this is a 'new normal.' This is a facade and negates the difficulties we are trying to live through. (Established academic with a pre-schooler)

Both of these academic women were aware of being observed, and indeed of being judged, and therefore expressed the need to demonstrate that they were successfully coping.

This only compounded my sense of incompetence and anxiety . . . but I soldier on until I break or get fired. (Established academic with one child in kindergarten and another in primary school)

The commitment to soldiering on and showing strength was a consistent theme in our data, even when the evidence of emotional stress and diminished self-esteem was shared in the same breath; this is indicated by this report from another respondent:

I believe that I am emotionally strong and capable of handling this transition. I have always been on top of my workload and I know that I am a strong performer but there are many times now when I feel overwhelmed, almost incompetent. (Mid-career academic and mother of a child in primary school; emphasis added)

Even as academic women shared their feelings of diminished worth, they also revealed another element in their aspirations: the desire to present themselves to colleagues and seniors as qualified for the job or, as one mid-career mother of two put it, "to prove my worth as an academic." This was especially the case for newcomers or those who were on probation:

I am new to a permanent post, so I feel I worked extra hard to prove myself. (Early-career mother of a senior high school student)

Some lamented that the pandemic lockdown had taken away the opportunity to demonstrate such worthiness in real life:

Being at home and not at the faculty, I have also not been able to prove myself useful to the department. In effect, COVID-19 may have erased my academic future. (Early-career academic with no children)

3.3. Theme 3: Peer Pressure

The responses from women academics suggested that feelings of low self-esteem were not simply a consequence of impossible academic workloads or social comparisons, but the result of how women were made to feel about themselves and their academic work. As one lamented,

I am going to be made to feel more worthless in my department . . . Oh, this is painful. (Mid-career academic with two adult children).

Self-esteem, in this context, could wax and wane in relation to the effects of the words of others:

I also became so focused on what I was doing that my self-esteem was linked to their feedback and kept going up and down out of proportion to their actual feedback. If I received negative feedback, I became very depressed and struggled for a day or two to regain momentum. (Mid-career academic with no children)

There are two observations that can be made from these responses. First is the fact that low self-esteem is a product of what happens in the work environment and, specifically, from the actions of colleague(s). Second is that those feelings of self-esteem can rise or fall depending on collegial actions.

According to the respondents, their managers were relentless, and the application of performance management instruments continued without regard to the demanding and intersecting workloads of the academic women:

I once tried to ask for an extension in a Zoom meeting and was told this was an excuse and that we should be grateful that we have jobs and can work from home. This hurt me so much I cried for hours. (Mid-career mother of two young children)

Apart from managerial feedback, reviewer feedback may also have had a negative influence on feelings of self-regard:

I had the worst feedback from a journal regarding an article I submitted. When I read the article, I didn't know whether I should laugh or cry. If my student submitted something like that to me, I would say please redo ALL your education . . . But at the time, I guess, I was so exhausted, I didn't care. (Experienced academic with an infant and a pre-schooler)

These responses suggest that there is a divide between how academic women would like to perform as academics and what is actually possible within their current circumstances.

Not coping with the increased workload is seen as a sign of weakness that can be pounced upon, as one woman found:

My experience in higher education is that being overwhelmed (expressing it) is covertly perceived as a weakness and an impediment to achieving results. There has been no adjustment to expectations. (Early-career academic without children)

Faced with this kind of pressure from peers and managers, it was difficult for women to make their struggles known. One woman's keen observation was certainly shared by other women at different institutions:

I suspect the other women in my Faculty were less open about the research difficulties they face because they've learnt that admitting to any difficulty makes them look weak, and it opens them up to being taken less seriously in their careers. (Early-career mother of a pre-schooler)

As a result, when women complained, there was little tolerance for their plight, as another respondent related:

I feel too embarrassed to tell them I need to home school my kids in the morning. I am also worried that colleagues and students may complain that I am spending working hours home schooling. All this adds to my mental anxiety. (Established academic and mother of a kindergartener and a primary-schooler)

As their home pressures were brought to bear in their professional setting in this way, women with children felt that the pandemic had created or exacerbated a gender bias in academic work. As one early-career mother of a pre-schooler explained, the pandemic lockdown "put me in my place as a woman". Another participant explained:

We were doing so well with this gender equality and equity stuff. Then BAM! Hello dark ages! Here's a club, beat me and take me to your cave! (Experienced academic and mother of an infant and a toddler)

3.4. Theme 4: Link between Self-Esteem and Academic Identity

The importance of achieving a set career goal was linked to feelings of self-esteem by respondents, with one mother of a young high school student stating that “failing to reach my academic goal really affected my self-esteem”. An early-career academic with a pre-schooler similarly expressed “feeling worthless because of not being able to make enough time for research”, while another with no children wrote: “I feel like an underperformer”.

Others expressed a sense of diminishing prospects for a university career:

My academic career for 2020 has been a complete failure. (Early-career academic with a child in primary school)

Even in the descriptive accounts of their research lives, the women in this study often described a missed deadline in emotional terms; in the words of an early-career mother of two primary school-age children: “I have failed to complete a research paper . . . progress disappointing . . . drains me emotionally . . . slower in my marking . . .” (emphases added).

Not being able to take hold of the situation and steer work towards set goals engendered a sense of helplessness in the situation:

I feel like I should be able to do the work but I’m not myself emotionally. (Early-career mother of a pre-schooler)

Feelings of low self-esteem are often very subjective, and they are not necessarily related to an academic’s actual performance, as in this woman’s account:

I’ve got two students through their Master’s degrees. I have submitted a book chapter, and I have been nominated for two awards . . . I feel that is not enough. (Mid-career mother of a child in primary school)

Unable to prove themselves by both subjective and objective standards, respondents expressed a sense of being a failure at everything, even if this was not objectively true. A selection of responses reveals this pattern when respondents wrote, “I feel”:

Like I’m failing at everything (Early-career mother of a kindergartener and a child in primary school)

Like I am constantly failing (Early-career academic with a toddler)

Like I am chasing my tail (Experienced academic with no children)

Like quitting (Early-career academic with no children)

Like I should be able to work (but can’t) (Early-career mother of a pre-schooler)

Like I am putting [in] double hours but getting less done (Established academic with no children)

Like I need a break or burnout (Experienced academic with no children)

Like I have failed here (work, home), I simply didn’t have enough time (Experienced academic with two adolescent children)

These expressions are hyperbolic, perhaps; however, the feelings of failure and disappointment are very real for the women who found themselves in a state of emotional freefall, where they were simply unable to imagine a way out of feeling overwhelmed.

However, participants did not always feel this way. They had a very strong sense of their professional selves before the pandemic, and they desperately wanted to uphold these images of themselves. As one academic indicated:

I worry that the lockdown will hinder my academic progress and impact on my reputation as a reliable and capable staff member. (Early-career mother of a toddler)

Another respondent, a mother of two young adult children, spoke of anxiety about not performing and therefore of feeling like “less of an academic”, rendering her situation in the pandemic as “worse than before”. Such a “before-the-pandemic” picture was present

in many other accounts, including one account which detailed how the pandemic changed a confident sense of self:

Part of how COVID has impacted, and will continue to impact me, my work, my sense of a professional self: I am not who I was before March (the month of the lockdown announcement). I feel different, as a teacher, as a writer, as a researcher. (Mid-career mother of two teenagers)

Invariably, the pressure of increasing workloads and the pressure for academic performance mean that academics sometimes had to take shortcuts so as not to fall short of institutional expectations; however, they were not unaware of the risk, as one respondent conceded:

I do worry about the quality of work I am submitting. (Mid-career academic without children)

Nevertheless, the respondents' personal and professional confidence was undermined in the struggle to keep up with work and perform well. As one respondent mentioned:

I am irritated with myself that I cannot complete tasks to a standard that I would like and what I deliver under normal circumstances. I am embarrassed at the quality and amount of work that I deliver. (Experienced academic with an infant and a toddler)

I am undervaluing my contributions because my self-esteem has taken a knock. (Mid-career mother of a child in primary school)

In this knot of concerns, the participants reveal the tight relationships between work performance and well-being and between anxieties of job security and emotional incapacitation. The intense emotional expression of, in the words of an early-career academic with a pre-schooler, feeling "very disappointed in myself," is nevertheless one that locates the problem with the respondent as an academic rather than in the environmental conditions of academic work. The problem is, therefore, internalized, as another academic also expressed:

I feel I have let down a lot of people. (Mid-career academic without children)

The sense of letting oneself and others down as well as the inability to prioritize one's desired identity as an academic came at a cost to well-being, as participants related:

I am an academic, a home school teacher, a housekeeper, a cook, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a family carer. And I am tired. (Experienced academic with a child in primary school)

I am proud of what I was able to accomplish, but I also need to acknowledge that it came at a price (own health, family's wellness, feeling guilty over not meeting the demands of any of the roles as I would have wanted). (Mid-career academic with a toddler and a child in primary school)

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how women academics experienced and made sense of their self-esteem in relation to their responsibilities as teachers and researchers in higher education during the course of the pandemic. The findings indicated that our sample of academic women experienced an increase in work as well as role demands. It is well established in the literature that there is a link between a person's workload and their sense of self-esteem [30]. With an increase in workload and peer pressure, there was something in the impact of the pandemic-enforced lockdown that made an already bad situation qualitatively worse; it is proposed that this difference was the existential threat of a global pandemic and the anxieties that it provoked. This is in line with terror management theory, which indicates that when anxiety about mortality is evoked, an anxiety buffering process is needed [16]. Self-esteem is one such buffering process, which mitigates the existential terror by imparting a sense that someone is a person of value living in a meaningful world [31].

For academic women who identify with the role of being an academic, such value may be verified by successful research, teaching outputs, and student support. Based on

the responses from participants in this study, it appears that the objective escalation of workload as academic women attempted to carry out working in their home space, where the whole family (and often extended members of the family) was contained for months, drained their self-esteem resources. This was evident from the emotional experiences of the participants.

Some participants indicated that they were not coping and felt overwhelmed, out of their depth, and incompetent. In line with the dimension of efficacy-based self-esteem [32,33], participants doubted their competence and efficacy during the pandemic lockdown. Perceived failure to prove their competence impacted their sense of worth, which led to some dire consequences, including suicidal thoughts, depression, and mental breakdown. These observations offer a first call to action to university authorities and line managers, i.e., to ensure that adequate rest, feedback, and time be provided to women academics to reestablish their self-esteem resources and academic identities.

Fears of failure and judgement were exacerbated by social comparison behavior. Research published as early as 1954 has suggested that humans have a tendency to compare themselves with others in order to assess their worth and their abilities [34]. When comparing oneself to those who perform 'better', an upward social comparison is made, which can lead to envy and negative feelings [35]. As demonstrated, however, such feelings of self-blame and low self-esteem can be felt regardless of the levels of productive work, in part because of the relentless pressure of some managers to disregard both the circumstances and the actual value of women's academic labor.

Such refutations of the women academics' worth negatively impacted how they saw themselves as academics. The social comparison seemed to only focus on academic achievement, as a lack of recognition of other life roles were not evident in the feedback provided from managers and peers. In fact, the academic women in this study answered that they could not voice feeling overwhelmed or not coping as it would be construed as a weakness; this elicits the need for impression management, and hence, the need for keeping up the facade of being able to cope and perform [36]. This may be due to the comparison of the respondents' self with the ideal academic, i.e., someone devoid of commitments outside of work (see [9]). Some participants were sensitive to this gendered nature of work and felt that they had to do more to prove themselves worthy in terms of academic performance, even if it meant maintaining a facade and soldiering on. It is important for institutions of higher education to continuously monitor and evaluate how institutional policies and practices may reinforce a masculine culture, which is concomitant with academics who have no care-giving burdens.

The impact of the lockdown on academic women's sense of identity as academics surfaced as a theme. Research suggests that women in high-level professional jobs struggle to achieve workplace recognition and collegial acceptance [37]. While the academic women persistently had to prove themselves worthy as academics, these women experienced that they had to prove themselves equally effective as carers, domestic workers, teachers for their children, and so forth during lockdown. Fisher et al. [6] indicated that the pandemic period posed a greater risk for conflicts between academic and family roles. Participants struggled to fulfil some of these roles according to the high standards set by themselves and others, which negatively impacted their overall self-esteem. Furthermore, women academics' identity of being a mother and a professional is often experienced as antipoles [38], which creates a paradox in juggling self-esteem resources.

Ceci and Williams [39] reported that the impact of motherhood on women's academic careers seems to outweigh all other factors contributing to women's underrepresentation in science. In a comparison, senior women academics without large teaching loads reported positive emotions and that productive time had been spent on research and teaching. The motherhood penalty in academia has only recently been acknowledged in the academic community, and the development of effective actions and policies towards solving the problem is scant [40]. Evidence indicates that academic mothers were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis during the pandemic lockdown [41]. However, not all

scholars agree that motherhood is the problem. Docka-Filipek and Stone [11] found that gender, independent of parenthood (and other factors), had a negative impact on the mental health of academic women during the pandemic. It is argued that this may be a result of women taking on more care burdens at the university during the pandemic, as suggested in the research of Guarino and Borden [42]. In the present study, we acknowledge that most participants struggled to maintain high levels of self-esteem, irrespective of parental responsibilities. Thus, we suggest further research in this regard.

Various participants expressed that the pandemic lockdown had negatively impacted their career progression due to the lack of performance and outputs in 2020. Staniscuaski et al. [43] likewise reported that the pandemic will have long-term effects on the career progression of women; even the greater time spent on domestic responsibilities adds to inequity [44]. The reduced time dedicated to paid work leads to fewer opportunities for advancement as a “successful position” in academia often involves working long hours. This inability to dedicate hours to making the most of academic opportunities contributes to the gender gap, especially at the height of women’s careers.

Recommendations and Limitations

Three broad strategies of support are required. First, changes in institutional policies must take account of and make provisions for the emotional health needs of academic women, including offering counselling and mentorship resources for those reporting feelings of low self-esteem. Systematic psychological self-care must also be valued and given a high priority in institutional policy [45]. Furthermore, institutions can proactively support team research/science, which serves to provide continued momentum and productivity when individuals need to engage in caretaking responsibilities [46]. Changes in institutional planning and, particularly, in performance management plans, must be made to moderate them in line with exceptional life events—such as a global pandemic—so that the pressure to perform according to metrics set for pre-pandemic times takes account of the realities of performance demands under lockdown conditions [15]. Third, recognition and appropriate priority should be given to how work and family life evolves throughout the academic career [47]. The university, therefore, has a responsibility to evaluate and delegitimize the organizational processes that produce gendered inequalities [48]. This includes supporting academics when they start families, providing equal pay and equitable research laboratory start-up funds, making current ‘women-friendly’ policies the norm rather than the exception, and embracing the multitude of roles fulfilled by academic staff [46].

Our research focused on the experiences and sense-making of self-worth at a particular time of crisis in higher education. While one can argue that the height of the crisis has passed, the aftermath of the damage to the self-esteem of women academics is still a reality. The findings are useful for determining what type of support, accommodation, and assistance is needed for academic women to sustain their performance in their academic and research duties. Furthermore, the results revealed a strong emotional content, which is often linked to having an impact on mental health. Future work should focus on expanding the understanding of the prolonged pandemic and how it is affecting female researchers at different points in their careers, across different countries, within different disciplines, at different institutions, and belonging to different demographic groups. The surfacing of new impacts creates the need for targeted and nuanced approaches on a global scale as the worldwide academy rebuilds and reawakens to the challenges ahead.

While our inquiry focused on the individual experience of self-esteem as a psychological phenomenon, a sociological perspective including individual, institutional, and contextual influences is warranted. Patterned social forces provide a characteristic set of experiences that are actively interpreted by individuals as the self-concept is shaped. This will be required to effectively defang systemic issues affecting women academics within higher education and to protect the gains made by women academics within the scientific enterprise.

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