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Research Article

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Women's Experiences in Academia During the Pandemic: A Narrative Inquiry

Abstract

The academic profession requires a consistent immersion into the realm of ideas, scholarship, and an extended engagement beyond the classroom. In such a context, the distinction between the spaces of home and work is already blurred. Feminist scholarship shows that the responsibility of care in academia is already deeply gendered. The transformation of home into the workspace during the pandemic not only brought attention to the asymmetrically gendered division of labour but also intensified it. This paper explores how academic roles and identities are gendered and how they were experienced during the pandemic through the narrative accounts of six women academics in Delhi. This narrative inquiry focuses on how—in the context of the pandemic—identities and responsibilities for women in academia came to be gendered and engaged with the notion of care in pedagogy and scholarship. Our findings highlight that while some participants were facilitated by the greater flexibility that came with working from home in terms of being able to focus on their health, childcare, and avoiding a career break during pregnancy and postnatal care, they also pointed towards the lack of institutional flexibility in responding to a gendered experience of the workplace and the achievement of their academic goals. This paper underlines the significance of (a) having a physical workspace for a dialogic interpersonal pedagogy, (b) having a distinct professional identity as an "escape" from essentialised care demands at home, and (c) being part of a community of practice which is integral to women's sense of being in academia.

Keywords: Pandemic, gendered workspaces, women in academia, communities of practice

Introduction

The pandemic brought home a stark truth around the double burden of working at home and professional work for women. The interruption brought about by the pandemic not only

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altered daily routines across the board but also highlighted the power imbalance in society. A global increase in domestic violence was reported against women and girls, referred to as the "shadow pandemic" (UN Women, 2020). This paper argues that the transformation of the home into the workspace exacerbated the asymmetrically gendered division of labour within academia as well. Several research studies have shown how research productivity declined for women academics during the pandemic (Kim & Patterson, 2022; Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2020; Wiegand et al., 2020). Apart from research, pedagogic spaces are also deeply engendered with the ascribed caregiving role for women teachers. Class, caste, and disability further coalesce to compound this skew in the working of the academia.

The authors' own context and immersion into the process of negotiating with the changed dynamics during the pandemic led to a sustained interaction with fellow women academics and with the emergent institutional discourse. This paper draws upon the narratives of six women academics as they recollected their experiences of negotiating the professional and domestic space altered during the pandemic. This paper argues that women's experience of the work-home space in academia was marked by gender asymmetries which compounded the uncertainties and precarity created by the pandemic. The narratives also reflect the enabling possibilities that emerged during the pandemic which otherwise remain inhibited on account of structural institutional rigidities.

Literature and Framework

This study is grounded in research that shows how academic roles and identities are deeply gendered and shape the lived experience of academia for women. It is informed by concepts such as "academic identity", "communities of practice", and by the existing literature on gender and academic organisations. Statistics on progression of women within higher education in India reflect a skew where a significantly greater proportion of women can be found at entry-level positions than at senior positions (GoI, 2023). This trend is similar to global and diverse cultural contexts (Morley & Crossouard, 2015). The literature points out that some of the reasons for this disproportionate gap between women who enter the academic profession and those who progress in it may be explained partly by differential family responsibilities. Arguably, women in academia bear a disproportionate burden of family and childcare and suffer a so-called "motherhood penalty" (Ceci et al., 2014). Women's academic mobility is thwarted on account of their restricted access to research funding, and structural constraints to developing academic networks considered integral to

becoming part of the professoriate (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2017). These constraints were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic with studies showing the differential impact of the pandemic on the research productivity of male and female academics which worsened the existing gender gap in academia in both the short and long terms (Weigand et al., 2020; Shalaby, Allam, & Buttorff, 2021). Gender disparities had existed in academia before, but they worsened during the pandemic as female academics performed more housework than men, and "female academics with children especially struggled to reconcile work, domestic and care commitments" (Carreri & Dordoni, 2020, pp. 825–26). The study by Collins et al. (2020) also documents how during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers with young children reduced their work hours by four to five times more than fathers. A consequence of this was that the gender gap in work hours grew by 20–50 per cent in the USA, highlighting the challenges that the pandemic posed to women's work hours and employment.

Apart from research productivity in the context of the pandemic, universities have been argued to be gendered organisations, with entrenched gender discrimination practices (Mihăilă, 2018). The question of "work-life" balance often posed to women achievers from across fields is now called out by many as "sexist" as it fixes the expectation of balancing the time between the home and workplace singularly on women. The sexism inherent in this question, however, is not limited to the one-sided demands on women to strike this "balance". The question—in the way that it is posed—also appears to project that "work" is something that exclusively happens at the "workplace".

Carreri and Dordoni (2020) argue that the way in which people reconcile work activities, care responsibilities, and social life is not a private experience but is the result of complex interdependencies between economic and socio-cultural contingencies. Hence, the same question when posed to men does not always do justice to women's lived experiences, since spending an equal amount of time—even at home—has different implications for the two genders. As the authors of this paper focused on the pedagogic experiences of the students and faculty in the context of online teaching–learning during the pandemic (Nag & Navani, 2023), women faculty members often shared anxieties around the pandemic's adverse impact on their academic growth and scholarship, and the increase in the intensity of continuous care that they were expected to provide to students.

Informal interactions with women academics pointed towards a blurring of the boundary between the home and the academic workspace, implying decreased time and space for the scholarly pursuits of reading, writing, and dialogue with peers. Most women academics addressed the demands of care in the professional space in the absence of supportive or enabling processes or structures amid a disabling neoliberal academic ethos, with its overt emphasis on productivity and efficiency (Giroux, 2014). Carreri and Dordoni (2020) argue that the organisational culture of the university within a neoliberal context increased the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on boundary management and intimate relationships, exacerbating social inequalities not just between women and men, but also between women with and without children.

Both the discourses in research as well as popular perception acknowledge that women with childcare responsibilities are at a greater disadvantage in academia. The gendered expectations from women academics are reflected not merely in terms of changes in research productivity but also in the extended caregiving roles attached with student support that women academics performed during the pandemic. Crabtree and Shiel (2019) refer to this phenomenon as "playing mother". They highlight how women in academia often perceive themselves to be regularly channelled into feminised teaching and administrative roles as opposed to elite and masculinised research routes (considered more advantageous).

Data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 showed that the total number of teachers at the university level was around 2.5 lakh, out of which 61.6 per cent were males and 38.4 per cent were females. At the college level, the number of teachers was 11.8 lakh with 55.6 per cent male and 44.4 per cent female (GoI, 2023). Access to research funding and opportunities is significantly greater within university departments as opposed to colleges, creating a distinct gender asymmetry within the access to research opportunities and funding.

The channelling of resources and opportunities by gender—accompanied by the "affective intensity" (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019) of academic work which entails emotional labour in teaching and student support—make for essentialised gender roles in academia. This results in women frequently performing key "mothering" duties and "housekeeping" academic roles, particularly considered a norm at the undergraduate level (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; Grove, 2013). Drawing on the conceptual lens of gender and academic culture, this paper attempts to

explore and engage with women academics' experiences of the blurring of the boundaries of professional work and care work and the public and private during the abnormal times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This paper adopts a narrative inquiry design. Data was collected through in-depth and unstructured interviews with six women liberal arts faculty members in different universities across Delhi. This paper explores how the material changes in the nature of how work is organised, the new (dis)balance, and home life affected women's experience of academic roles and responsibilities in the context of the pandemic and their experiences of academia at large. Unstructured interviews enable respondents to be able to talk about their experiences freely, authentically, and emotionally with possibilities of depth and richness in their accounts (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Based on an interpretivist paradigm, this paper attempts to understand women's experiences and the gender asymmetry in academia, and the complex ways in which women academics negotiated and coped with the altered work-home context during the pandemic.

The authors approached these women academics through their own professional network with an explicit focus on identifying participants who had spent 7–10 years in academia in formal employment or as active researchers in social science and humanities. Four interviews were conducted over Zoom call and the other two interviews were in person. Both authors conducted and recorded three interviews each during December 2022 to June 2023; these were later fully transcribed and analysed. Connecting with participants through researchers' own professional network required a reflexivity where the possibility of shared or overlapping contexts with the participants did not lead the researchers to assume a certain givenness of the participants' articulations, meanings, and assumptions. However, their prior familiarity with each other and a shared context also enabled a conversational space, particularly in the conduct of online interviews. Some of the participants extended the interview and continued retelling their deeply personal experiences and affective responses to the socio-emotional context of the workspace, as they had received and understood it.

Of all the potential participants that the authors approached, those who responded and agreed to participate in the study happened to be first-generation academics. The term "first-generation academic" is used here to refer to individuals who do not have parents or family

working in the domain of research and teaching in higher education institutions. In the context of the home becoming an important space to reconfigure professional responsibilities, we argue that it is critical to acknowledge and document the ways in which the absence of a distinct cultural and social capital attached with being a first-generation academic can become a disadvantage. Both the authors are also first-generation academics and the conversational space that emerged between us often echoed the undulations of life in academia that we have experienced together.

For analysis, the approach adopted was to create narrative case profiles (based on the interview transcriptions) of all respondents and attempt to situate their lived experience of the pedagogic and "work" spaces during the critical period of the pandemic. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and their identities have been changed to ensure confidentiality. The findings are presented through a narrative account of each respondent's experience which includes a brief biographical account of their life journey. This is presented in keeping with the criteria of sociality (involving the personal, social, and cultural); temporality (aspects of time such as the past, present, and future as one tries to make sense of one's experiences while retelling), and place (place and environment) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This paper concludes with a discussion and reflection on the two critical themes that emerge from each participant's narrative: (a) how women academics experienced the boundaries of professional work and care work, and (b) the construction of or the blurring of boundaries separating public and private life for women academics during the abnormal times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Experience of the Pandemic and the Academic Life: A Narrative Account

Sunaina

Sunaina has been teaching at the Education department of a university in Delhi for a decade. She is single, lives by herself, and has an extended family in Delhi. Prior to the pandemic, her life routine (like that of many other academics) was organised around the physical requirements of taking face-to-face classes and being present on the campus. What changed during the pandemic was not merely a shift to an online mode of interaction but the axis around which everyday routines were organised:

> One is used to going out physically, taking classes, a lot of it (life routines) is also around it… Things that you get used to doing while going out physically for an interaction or

> communication to your workplace. You hang around in your workplace, chat with people, go out with them, talk to your students, discuss with them... During the pandemic it was not just the change of the mode from physical to online... The changeover was very difficult… You are missing out on so many things. (personal interview, 25 March 2023)

Sunaina's account focused on differentiating between the "advantages" and "disadvantages" of this change in everyday routines. Sunaina suffers from dysmenorrhea, a condition involving extremely painful monthly periods. She underscored that challenges pertaining to women's health are difficult to articulate in workplaces and despite the awareness, are rarely acknowledged. Hence the work-from-home of the lockdown was a relief:

> Being a female, one very big advantage [during the pandemic] was that I did not have to take leave when I had periods. If I had just one class, I didn't have to take leave, I could take rest, take class and rest again. (personal interview, 25 March 2023)

Working from home allowed Sunaina to balance some of her domestic and professional tasks better as the travel time and exhaustion due to long hours spent navigating the city's traffic got saved. Yet, this significant advantage did not make working from home a preferred choice for her as an academic. The disruption of her routine and a sense of extended time added to her exasperation of having to learn or relearn how to manage time, scheduling, and newer ways of working. The loss of the "workplace" triggered feelings of anxiety:

> One lost out on all that moving around, having that feeling of a space—of a workplace … Because you don't have any colleagues, you don't have a physical space… You don't have a blackboard, you don't have a chalk, you don't have a desk, you don't have faces. It is a completely faceless workplace in which you are working. So, this becomes very difficult… (personal interview, 25 March 2023)

Sunaina constantly emphasised the significance that teaching face-to-face in a designated "workspace" had for her, especially as she relates to things spatially. The visual associations of a physical classroom became difficult to recreate in the online mode. She missed interactions with her students that she had grown to value and enjoy:

> I can find out face-to-face, if my students are understanding or not. At what point they are getting bored, something is exciting them, confusing them, from their expressions. But when you are online, in WhatsApp mode or another, where most of them do not switch on their videos, you don't even know if they are listening to you. The feedback system in communication is so important. (personal interview, 25 March 2023)

With the changed spatial arrangement, Sunaina shared that she felt "lost in an ocean of names (without faces) and documents". Along with the loss of associations, the "loss of movement" was critical as it had been of significant pedagogic advantage to her in a classroom where she could pick up the chalk and draw a diagram while she continued her interaction with the students. The physical act of redrawing the same line over and over again could become a way of emphasising an important point.

Sunaina acknowledged that teachers were initiated and exposed to new technology-based tools for teaching and communication—some of which they continued to use even after they returned to the physical classroom. She also reflected on how male colleagues experienced the pandemic given their different acculturation to the domestic space and wondered if their challenges were more around "getting restricted". In her own case, while she felt that the possibility of working from home helped her better negotiate the health challenges specific to women as they were rarely understood at work, the overwhelming feeling was still of experiencing a "loss of workspace" where she could be out, interacting with an academic community beyond class hours, and have a routine (personal interview, 25 March 2023).

Mayuri

Mayuri has been an ad-hoc[1] teacher of Political science at an undergraduate college in Delhi since 2017. She is married and lives in an extended joint family. She introduced herself as a first-generation academic and framed her experience of teaching during the pandemic by beginning with this context:

> One of my extended family members has forayed into university teaching. We do have people who teach at the school level. I am the only one who harboured that ambition to

[1]"Ad hoc" faculty are not tenured and appointed for a short period of time, usually for less than a year.

> retain and sustain herself in teaching at university level... Nobody was there to guide me… My family members had seen the world of academia from outside… I was seeing it from inside. (personal interview, 17 December 2022)

Mayuri's struggle in a non-tenured position and finding balance between home and work existed prior to the pandemic but compounded during the lockdowns. She emphasised that inhabiting the world of ideas as a woman academic in a contractual position is a major struggle. She felt she had no choice but to be "doubly efficient" in her teaching and in organisational or administrative tasks particularly being an ad-hoc teacher as she did not want her marital status to be seen as a professional constraint. She extended this narrative while talking about her anxiety and professional precarity, recalling transitions and sudden changes in routines and roles, the blurring of the boundary between time at home and the time at work being a critical one:

> There were a lot of dynamics in the family… You have to kind of train your family to understand your needs and everything. So, it took some time. It took the first semester to figure out how to go about things and by the time we understood it, we also found ourselves struggling with the thing that... Oh my god, I mean, sitting at home and trying to work and trying to then also contribute to your household and ensuring that people who are sick in the household, to take care of them also. It was quite a madness. It was quite chaotic. (personal interview, 17 December 2022)

The location of one's home as a site for teaching and academic engagement constrained the degrees of freedom not just for Mayuri as an individual but also, significantly so, for others in the household, which added to the demands on her:

> I was living in a household [in a flat] where there were six adults and one infant who was just about a year old. And in those circumstances, expecting family members to adjust their schedules, change their spaces, and to cooperate with us in whichever way possible was a lot of demand… But over time, this also took a toll on all of us. (personal interview, 17 December 2022)

As a woman, the guilt of constraining others' freedom and the sense of occupying space weighed heavily in Mayuri's recollection. It makes one wonder if the men in her position would experience guilt in this way. A distinct sense of loss also emerged from the lack of time for uninterrupted and academic reading and publication, which Mayuri contrasted with that of her male colleagues:

> I do not remember if I could read with peace of mind even once during the lockdown phases. But my male colleagues published frequently. So, I know that things were experienced differently by me and them and that made my sense of research loss even more frustrating. (personal interview, 17 December 2022)

Despite the constraints—as in the case of Sunaina who was able to attend to her health during the time of work-from-home—Mayuri looked at this time as "caring for herself". While Sunaina missed having a schedule, Mayuri, on the other hand, started a new one:

> I started going for walks, focusing on my eating which the hectic college life had made impossible. I found time to engage with online research or training workshops, conferences. I did a lot of FDPs[2] during that time because I simply got the flexibility to work from home and online. (personal interview, 17 December 2022)

Mayuri talked of the inability to create a vibrant pedagogical space online since her students—in her own words—were "all over the place". She articulated that her pedagogic ideal which emphasises the centrality of the teacher-student relationship in the undergraduate space was jeopardised during the pandemic:

> Students were all over the place. We had no other choice but to address their questions on WhatsApp, take their phone calls… We could not meet them in person. Almost three batches went who you hardly got to know. My class strength was 80–100 on an average. How could we have personal engagement with students in a class like that online? (personal interview, 17 December 2022)

[2] FDP stands for faculty development programme.

The disruption in the teaching process was reflected in the disjunct between teachers' pedagogic ideals and their actual practice. From a purposive and engaged pedagogic ideal—which focuses on the student holistically as a cognitive, affective, and social being—their experience became one that was technical and instrumental. The analogy of "speaking to a wall" comes up often in this context when academics introspect on what was actually achieved by way of "regular" teaching in the online mode. Mayuri termed the students as "silent spectators" (personal interview, 17 December 2022), signifying the dilemma posed by the online space in the context of the pandemic which reduced pedagogy to a passive process or to a "banking model" (Freire, 1970).

Mayuri's narrative illuminates the precarity she suffered as an ad-hoc teacher with no certainty of tenure and therefore subjected to a deep ambiguity in the prospect of getting sabbaticals for research in the near future. As we shall see in all the other narratives, the blurring of work-home boundaries reduced the attention, time, and resources available for women academics to undertake research—a significant aspiration and professional demand in academia.

Mrinmoyi

Mrinmoyi teaches Political science at a private university in Delhi. She earlier worked as an ad hoc teacher at an undergraduate college in Delhi for four years. She is married and was living in a joint family during the pandemic. She also gave birth to her first child during the pandemic. She began by sharing that initially, she saw academia as a place where irrespective of gender, one could intellectually engage with the realm of ideas and inhabit contemplative spaces. It was only gradually that the power equations became visible to her. She remarked that "one enters thinking it [academia] is a safe space for women, but it is not like this... It slowly starts catching up" (personal interview, 7 June 2023). She shared how after embracing motherhood—which she emphasised that she enjoyed—she was unable to give sufficient time for research and writing. She also felt that this was not the case for male academics who had also recently become parents. Since she saw the university as a place primarily for engaging with ideas, her regret regarding the temporary lag in her scholarly pursuit was a recurrent theme during the interview.

The time at home did allow Mrinmoyi to initially begin work on her writing which she had struggled with earlier while balancing home, work, and the daily commute. "During the

pandemic, I was able to publish, but [that was] before the baby." (personal interview, 7 June 2023) She shared that having a child during the pandemic allowed her to recover from the labour of childbirth, tend to the child, and take classes online without having to pause her career by way of a long maternity leave, which she would have had to take otherwise. She reflected on the asymmetry where embracing parenthood did not entail professional sacrifices from men as it did for women, who are forced into career breaks:

> I am happy to be a mother but in last two years I have hardly been able to give any time to research, and that would also be the case with many women who have given time to motherhood which is not the case for men… In place of me, if it was a man, they would still give these two years to academia and academic writing and have papers published. (personal interview, 7 June 2023)

Mrinmoyi reiterated that online teaching during the pandemic still allowed her to resume work earlier and to remain connected to academic conversations through online spaces. As a woman, however, the loss of the physical space of the classroom also meant a loss of possibility to sometimes "escape" from familial roles:

> As teachers, many of us love being in the classroom. For many it is also an escape from the everyday reality of home… [In the pandemic] many of us were stuck in [extended] families, where we would never otherwise choose to be. (personal interview, 7 June 2023)

Mrinmoyi elaborated that "going out" of the home to work was something that both her family and the domestic work staff understood. On the days when she had to go to the university, her rush, her silence in the morning, her business as she got ready were all "acceptable". However, this loss of the opportunity to "escape" intensified conflicts at home where suddenly, family arrangements changed from nuclear to joint ones in a small city-based accommodation.

Mrinmoyi added that during this extended time at home, she remained in touch with her colleagues via texts and calls, she was able to participate in university meetings and activities online, and she was able to work on her writings initially. It was being confined to the "home" that became restrictive and challenging.

Roshni

Roshni has been teaching English literature at an undergraduate college in Delhi for over 12 years. She is a single mother of a child with special needs. She talked of her academic journey being tied to her personal one and the compromises she had to make when deferring her career goals to save her marriage. Her former spouse's doctoral research was contingent on her deferring her own PhD. During the interview, her stoic demeanour gave way to a painful recounting of the personal circumstances due to which she had to discontinue her MPhil. She felt her academic credentials were belittled within the home space even as she coped with the responsibilities of running a home, motherhood, and a full-time college job. Post-divorce, during the pandemic, she enrolled in a PhD programme since she could complete her course work online without jeopardising her childcare responsibilities.

Roshni talked of how, over the years, she actively took on the role of a mentor to her students. As care work in the context of pandemic became integrated with her role as an examination supervisor, it changed the nature of her student interactions and took a toll on her:

> I was in charge of examinations during the lockdown period, so I used to attend calls of students till 11:30 at night. And they used to start calling from as early as 6:30 am and after a while it was overwhelming… I developed a persistent headache and felt depressed… I had to see a doctor. (personal interview, 8 December 2022)

The doctor advised her to use a headset with her phone to manage the physical symptoms. Yet, merely switching to a headset could not resolve what she was experiencing. She struggled with her mental health amid the constant demands on her time from the students and the college management's administrative expectations from her. In the absence of childcare, with the complete responsibility of her home and her nascent PhD work upon her, Roshni's workload during the pandemic was imminently demanding and difficult:

> I was just very busy surviving the pandemic. I didn't have time to think… I was half-dressing and on call, feeding my son [and] on call. It was mostly like that. And then struggling through [online] classes because my son's daycare was closed. He has to be in

> the house and he's making [a] noise, he's very hyper, so he's dragging the chair, so my concentration is half there, half is in the class. I'm not able to concentrate. It was really a struggle for me. (personal interview, 8 December 2022)

Roshni highlighted her struggles in the face of the systemic delays in responding to the pandemic, during which teachers were left on their own to run classes. Her pre-existing connection with the students helped her initially. However, as a new batch of students joined college online during the pandemic, "all hell broke loose. We had a few instances of students playing rude music, using abusive language. These were only students that we did not see face to face, that we had never met." (personal interview, 8 December 2022)

The pandemic reinforced the significance of social interaction, human relationships, and the bond between a teacher and their students for Roshni. She faced sexism and insensitivity when some students morphed photographs of fellow classmates and teachers and displayed them during an online class. Roshni reflected on the inert online space which:

> dehumanised the classroom enough to lead to such overt abuse and sexism. Unless you form that bond you can never actually respect a person who's behind the screen. You cannot respect a screen on your phone. An entity that you've never seen… You just think of her in many other ways, lewd ways, rude ways, and whatever way you feel like. (personal interview, 8 December 2022)

Like Mayuri and Sunaina, Roshni also emphasised how the pandemic disrupted the space for collective academic endeavours. An example was the discontinuation of the college's reading club:

> Before the pandemic we actually had a vibrant reading club… We used to organise that with students entirely voluntarily. We [teachers and students] read, sit together, and discuss what we read. We used to exchange ideas also. But somehow, that tradition just went after the pandemic. Now we are like, *kaam khatam karo, ghar jao.* [finish work and go home] (personal interview, 8 December 2022)

The pandemic-induced disruption appeared to be strengthened by an increasing focus on assessing the worth of academic contributions through the lens of the quantity of individual research papers:

> I had the responsibility of the entire household, of my child also. Whatever time I get, somehow, I have to read something and then if I write something I just feel I should have read more. I'm not very comfortable with what I've produced. So, I just felt the quality was suffering... Just to publish a paper for the sake of it is something I did not like. So yes, somewhere I feel that as a woman it has affected me more. And compared to my ex-husband, who [is] also in academics... He used to just go home, be on his laptop. For me it was not like it was for my husband. (personal interview, 8 December 2022)

Roshni emphasised how the focus on "productivity" distorted quality and inhibited collegial academic culture.

Ekta

Ekta currently teaches Social science at a private university in Delhi. She has earlier taught in public as well as private universities within and outside Delhi. Ekta is married and has a young son, who was a year old when the pandemic began. Ekta began by sharing the struggles she faced to find a permanent faculty position as "a young woman who spoke her mind and was expecting her first child". She expressed frustration with what she termed as the "overtly patriarchal nature of educational institutions" which seldom recognised the challenges of women (personal interview, 10 June 2023).

Life during the pandemic was particularly difficult for Ekta. At the time she was living in the university's campus residence along with her partner, her toddler child, and her partner's parents. She experienced this as a particularly challenging time in her life as she struggled to cope with the demands of the university, parenting, and household chores. She began by calling this period "hell"—a sentiment also echoed by other respondents in this study. She felt that far from recognising the challenges of this time, the university saw this as an opportunity to push the faculty to "produce more":

> It was hell… [we were told by university authorities] that while this is not a situation we have chosen for ourselves, and the world is falling apart, let us use it as an opportunity—we can publish more!! Because we are teaching online! Notwithstanding the fact that there was no assistance for household labour, almost all of us had children who were so young, and that somebody needed to constantly monitor them… There were people falling ill, shortage of oxygen, people dying, it was such a state of constant panic, especially with children who had not been vaccinated completely… I can't even mention how deeply anxious that time was and yet, you have to work, you have to produce! (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

Ekta felt that the insistence of universities to expect the faculty to go beyond the requirements of teaching and expect them to publish invisibilised the challenges that the pandemic posed for all—but particularly for women who were trying to balance multiple responsibilities. In her case, she was still recovering from a difficult childbirth labour experience, breastfeeding her child, and suffering from severe backache after the pregnancy:

> I was cleaning, cooking, my partner would supplement with washing dishes, getting the kid ready, there was too much on our hands. With a backache I was sitting in on my classes… I was breastfeeding at the time. Everything was closed… [I was] also sewing clothes for him. (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

Ekta recalled feeling extremely anxious, overwhelmed, and vulnerable as she was still on probation and had struggled to secure the position while pregnant:

> I was so very anxious. I wasn't even past my probation. So, I was waking up till 1–1.30 in the morning, trying to do household chores, preparing for the lectures, teaching and corrections, and doing my own research work alongside… [I] was barely getting enough sleep with a child who was also teething, so [was] extremely irritable… I remember that I was so exhausted at that point of time that I was slurring in my lectures… And that is

> when I broke down, because this was now my physical body just giving up on me. (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

Echoing the experiences of Mrinmoyi and Mayuri, Ekta also shared the challenges of staying with one's in-laws during lockdown, who she felt did not always understand her work-related responsibilities. She worried that they would misunderstand her taking the time off household chores for lecture preparation as trying to escape her household responsibilities. Additionally, she was consistently required to check on her immediate and extended family by way of regular communication:

> The amount of family communication increased massively during the pandemic, which we cannot opt out of, because apparently, women cannot… So, they were the ones constantly asking everybody "are you alright, please stay inside, what is happening, oh now someone's birthday so everybody get on a video call..." It was something. (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

What Ekta found particularly intriguing was the fact that most of her male colleagues did not experience similar challenges:

> Clearly not everybody was as vulnerable as I was. They [men] were complaining about why is the table tennis room, the badminton court being locked, why are we not allowed to go for jogs…which did not even feature in the first fifty things which were on my mind. We were not equal—we were nowhere close. (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

As Ekta shared her experiences of the unequal distribution of burdens, she pointed out that the domestic workers were allowed entry into the residential premises only after men wrote about this on the residential society's group email chain. She believed that it was only when the extended lockdowns made it necessary for men to share the burden of domestic labour did the conversation on allowing domestic workers to resume work in the houses begin:

> I think one of the male colleagues wrote on the email chain saying that I am tired of cleaning and mopping. Because eventually, it fell upon men as well… and then they realised that this cannot hold for very long. (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

The differential impact of the pandemic on male and female academics did not end with responsibilities being unfairly distributed. Ekta added how the pandemic became a productive time for several male colleagues:

> Men managed to publish, I can't even tell you how much they managed to publish during the pandemic and given my own experience, I can assure you that that must not have been possible without the women in their lives taking the load off them… These are colleagues who have children, one younger than mine… In the first six months of the pandemic, he published eight papers… It is unimaginable! And all of those [were published in] Scopus indexed [journals], all of those extremely well-written papers, co-authored with a number of other eminent authors, meanwhile here I was, not being able to finish cleaning of the house and cooking, which was taking forever, and not everybody was happy, everybody wanted a different thing. (personal interview, 10 June 2023)

Ekta reflected that while she had realised very early how patriarchal the university space was, the context of the pandemic brought out these dividing lines far more clearly.

Vaidehi

Vaidehi teaches history at a university in Delhi. She is a single mother and lives with her child and her sister. She referred to how as a single mother, it is critical to map her time and work. Striking a "work-life balance" for her is tricky as she mentions that for a long time in her career she did not have enough work despite having a PhD, and when she finally had a full time tenured job, there were expectations from her to contribute as much or more than other colleagues and to prove herself. "When I joined the university," she recounted, "I felt I should never say no to anything. And that it's more like a test for me to prove to myself and to others also that, you know, she's capable" (personal interview, 7 December 2022).

Like the other participants, Vaidehi refers to her personal journey influencing her academic goals. She emphasised the distinction between a detached scholar versus an educationist (her avowed identity) who values "nurturing young people":

> This is perhaps because of my personal experience of having a family where I had to attend to every nitty-gritty kind of need, giving me a foundation to be able to interact with students at their level. I've never seen myself as an academician in an isolated scholar sense… I've always somehow felt more like an educationist. (personal interview, 7 December 2022)

Vaidehi's sensitivity to social markers as well as to the perceptions of her fellow academics seem to have played a significant role in how she viewed herself professionally:

> I come from a particular background [tribal] and people have a tendency to look at you with a certain lens... There would be preconceived notions about you, your skill, your ability to do things. So initially I used to feel quite reluctant and also conscious… I was also not very familiar with certain kinds of discourses and would hesitate to speak for the fear of saying the wrong thing during faculty discussions or larger academic gatherings… I wondered if I was being judged … The fact that I don't come from an English education background added to the list of inhibitions I carried. (personal interview, 7 December 2022)

Vaidehi observed how individuals—without necessarily realising it—would create an atmosphere at the workspace which made her feel like she didn't belong. In this context, as she worked diligently on her scholarship, the classroom emerged as a space to recover her voice, overcome doubts about her academic worth, and survive what she calls a "ruthless" academic ethos. For her, the pandemic—marked by self-confinement, distance, and the impersonalisation of learning—disrupted what was the most meaningful and worthwhile aspect of her academic identity.

Like Ekta and Mrinmoyi, Vaidehi reflected on the gender dynamics altered by the pandemic along with the conflation of the private space with the professional:

> So, you are cooking, and you are also having a class. So that was the most difficult thing, I think, but women manage it better because society has forced women to become multitaskers. For women, perhaps it was in some sense easier in managing the responsibilities than men. Because, you know, suddenly men are put in one kind of a space and forced to live indoors which they are not used to, perhaps [laughs] (personal interview, 7 December 2022)

Vaidehi's ownership of the mentor role played a significant role in shaping her response to the pandemic. She recounts how her experience as a mother enabled her to reach out, empathise with her young students who were away from their family, and extend emotional and psychological support outside of the online classroom:

> I used to spend hours talking on the phone with some of my students and it was more psychological and at times also financial. The ones who were living on their own without the family support were facing problems where I, as a teacher, could step in. I'm not a psychologist, but it was very reassuring for students, and I think I was able to do good because of my motherly experience and this is what I think was missing for many students… For them to hear not just a teacher talking about courses, classes, and all but also comforting them and speaking and listening to their worries and concerns and advising them on certain matters. (personal interview, 7 December 2022)

This role of care and mentoring required sustained effort on Vaidehi's part to create a personal engagement and to retain the "human touch" within the online class:

> In online mode, unless you personalise [it] somehow, your interaction with students, it's difficult to hold their interest. But I guess I did manage to sort of, you know, maintain that more personalised kind of an interaction. (personal interview, 7 December 2022)

Vaidehi recounts that despite these efforts, when she came back to the campus, she would walk past smiling students without recognising that she had taught them. Despite her efforts, her entire teaching experience during the pandemic remained "very impersonal". However, she reiterates how the pandemic reinforced her pedagogical idea of an "educationist"—one that she would nurture in her academic journey:

> I want to do more student-oriented activities and not talk only about books but also about life experiences… Engage students with questions of how they think and their worldview, all of these are very important. No matter how highly qualified you are, everything boils down to who you are... Not only [do I want] to impart knowledge that is needed for them to go out there in a world as a career person, but [I] also [want them] to know more about themselves, be more sensitive about their space and society where they live in, and how they can be a better version of themselves. (personal interview, 7 December 2022)

This moment of defining a professional goal with clarity seems to reflect an attempt to reconcile the internal conflict on how Vaidehi wants to view her academic identity. The chaos of the pandemic reassured her and validated her personhood in relation to her vocation as a teacher. Her avowed commitment to the position of "teaching as care" emerged over the years and was strengthened through her engagement with her students' lives during the pandemic. It affirmed for her an academic project which she owns most authentically, with pride, outside of and amid the competitive and individualised academic ecosystem that seems to penalise or decimate her "being" on account of a relative lack of access to certain discourses, mannerisms, and academic networks—what she terms as "contextual disadvantages".

Discussion and Reflections

As we undertook the project of speaking with fellow women in academia, at one level we were also responding to our own experiences and academic journeys. Our personal reflections were marked by nostalgia, regrets, frustrations, the struggle to not be invisibilised, as much as by our excitement of being in and cohabiting a world of ideas and going on an intellectual pursuit. The life stories and experiences of teaching–learning and surviving the pandemic reflect how the patriarchal context of one's social life deeply engenders one's

experience of the professional space. At the same time, one's specific location in the social hierarchy and access to cultural capital marks the varied ways of this engendering.

The terms "physical workspace", "outside", and "movement" emerged as salient keywords across narratives, with a recurrent emphasis on the pedagogic importance of establishing a personal connect with students and having access to academic networks for professional growth. The workspace was experienced as an important site to "escape" from the restrictive familial space on one hand, and as a space for nurturing women's professional identities on the other. The findings of Carreri & Dordoni (2020) and Collins et al. (2020) echo the struggle that women academics faced across the globe—of how the patriarchal social division of labour at home limits their professional growth. Participants were careful to emphasise that while the significance of the "world outside" may be common across genders, it holds a particular significance for women for whom the home is a space of asymmetrically distributed labour of multiple kinds. Home was not a space of "non-work" or "less-work", or a space where women's involvement was one "of offering assistance", as was the case with men. Women were more likely to be handling all or major responsibilities of managing the house and providing care, as is reflected in the narratives of this paper.

Feminist scholarship points out that recognising productive labour for the market or capital accumulation as "work" often renders the labour performed by women at home invisible—reproductive labour as well as care work (Jain & Banerjee, 2008; Adams, 2022). Similarly, one can argue that the imagination of "productivity" in the neoliberal academic context renders pedagogic and care work redundant—a dilemma that the narratives in this paper also allude to.

Besides an escape from home, a distinct workspace for women in academia also provides them spaces for academic conversations such as reading clubs and both formal and informal meetings with colleagues and students, which are crucial to feeling part of "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As social participants who make meanings, in the words of Etienne Wenger (2010), "the social world is a resource for constituting an identity" (p. 181). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), full participation requires "access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation" (p. 101). The narratives of first-generation women academics in this paper reflected how self-doubts, anxieties, and the desire for an egalitarian workspace permeated the professional realm and their need to contribute to

scholarship in their academic disciplines through active participation in academic communities. During the pandemic, a prolonged disconnection from these interactional spaces intensified their self-doubts and anxieties.

In recounting the experiences of their academic journeys, women academics spoke about how self-doubt can persist and how the absence of social and cultural capital can decelerate academic progress, impact one's self-esteem, and foster the imposter syndrome. This is not unique to participants in this study since existing research also highlights that not feeling a sense of belonging and the prevalence of the impostor syndrome is often deeply gendered in higher education spaces (Breeze, Addison, & Taylor, 2022; Muradoglu et al., 2022). Such experiences need to be researched and studied from an intersectional perspective in the Indian context.

Negotiations around time and space during the pandemic featured prominently in most narratives, sometimes as facilitative but often as challenging. For instance, lockdowns enabled two participants to finally write and publish their research since they saved time otherwise spent on commuting to work and multitasking at home. For other participants, this saved time enabled them to focus on their health which they had put on a backburner in the hustle of working at home and in the university. For Mrinmoyi, the lockdown enabled her to resume teaching immediately following the delivery of her child, preventing a break in her career trajectory. This partial relief experienced during the time of the pandemic points towards the lack of institutional flexibility for women and to the non-recognition of their reproductive roles and health needs which—as some responses show—ends up penalising women in academia and making them feel particularly vulnerable when they take leaves for menstruation, pregnancy, or childcare. The narrative accounts in this paper also beget reflection on the precarity of academic life through unfair and often exploitative employment contracts or institutional structures, which is exacerbated by expectations from the faculty to work on student support, research, and writing beyond formal working hours. This in itself skews women's career progression since social or family roles and responsibilities continue to remain deeply engendered and inequitable.

The lockdown also impacted the ideational lifeworld of women academics by interrupting their writing and publishing. Their mental health was also impacted since their professional and personal responsibilities became overwhelming.

The narratives in this paper reflect how first-generation women academics additionally struggle with gaps in their family's understanding regarding the nature of academic work—i.e., having to straddle multiple responsibilities such as teaching, administration, care, research, and writing. When families unfamiliar with the demands of academia struggle to appreciate the professional demands on women's time beyond teaching hours, it creates an additional layer of challenges for them. Meeting professional expectations of publishing in good journals, conferencing with peers, dedicating time to writing then become sites of persistent negotiations. Further, the space and time that women academics negotiate successfully is accompanied with the additional burden of guilt at causing inconvenience to others around them. Recognising that academic aspirations are tied to the normative ideals of success, one also notices how each participant calibrates her goals in her own way, as professional aspirations are circumscribed by their contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the human race into a space of deep anxiety and uncertainty. Each of the narratives in their own unique way signpost the participants' resilience and reflective engagement in consciously shaping their academic identities and gendered roles. These issues beckon sustained engagement and inquiry in the post-pandemic world.

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