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Carrie N. Baker  
*Smith College*, [cbaker@smith.edu](mailto:cbaker@smith.edu)

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Amplification of Structural Inequalities: Research Sabbaticals During COVID-19

Carrie N. Baker

Program for the Study of Women and Gender, Smith College

### Abstract

With the closing of schools and child care centers, the pandemic has significantly increased parents' caregiving labor, especially mothers, who do much more caregiving than fathers. The pandemic is hitting communities of color particularly hard, placing a heavy burden of stress and caregiving responsibilities for ill family members on Black and Brown women. In this essay, I examine how the pandemic is influencing the ability of female faculty members to engage in research and writing during sabbaticals, with particular attention to the impact of parenthood status, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic background. I argue that the pandemic is amplifying pre-existing structural inequalities that have negative impacts on female faculty members' ability to conduct research during their sabbaticals. In my conclusion, I will examine some institutional responses to the crisis and their potential to enhance faculty sabbatical research during the pandemic.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, Sabbaticals, Research, Structural Inequalities

## Amplification of Structural Inequalities: Research Sabbaticals During COVID-19

*“To do the kind of thinking and writing required for research, we need focused, uninterrupted, sustained time to concentrate. We need to have head space. As Virginia Woolf said, you need a room of one’s own, where you can close the door and no one comes to interrupt you. That means knowing that your kids are safe, and well looked after, and occupied. If you are worrying about the kids, or even part of your mind is occupied by what they are doing, then it’s hard to get in that head space.”*

–Ambreen Hai, English Professor, Smith College (2020)

The pandemic is having a significant impact on faculty members’ ability to conduct research and produce scholarship, especially research requiring travel, in-person interviews, or lab work. Scholarly associations have canceled conferences, universities have restricted faculty from traveling, and research libraries and archives have closed. Pandemic-related difficulties in conducting research, however, are not falling evenly on all faculty members. In this essay, I will reflect on how the pandemic has compromised the ability of female faculty members across disciplines to engage in research and writing during their sabbaticals in 2020, both the spring and the fall. I will pay particular attention to the impact of parenthood status, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic background on women faculty members’ sabbaticals. In conclusion, I will examine governmental and institutional responses to the pandemic and make recommendations on how to support female faculty members’ sabbatical research during the pandemic.

Before delving into these issues, I must first note that sabbaticals are available only to tenured or tenure track faculty (if at all). At all US higher education institutions, 73% percent of instructional positions are off the tenure track and without access to sabbaticals (American Association of University Professors, 2018). These contingent and adjunct faculty are disproportionately women and people of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). As a

result, women and people of color are already at a disadvantage in conducting research, which is the primary route to stable, permanent employment in US higher education.

For those who do have access to sabbaticals, the pandemic is amplifying structural inequalities that have a negative impact on female faculty members' ability to conduct research during their sabbaticals. With the closing of schools, summer camps, and child care centers, the pandemic has significantly increased parents' caregiving labor, particularly for mothers, who do a disproportionate amount of caregiving labor (Coury et al., 2020). The stress of COVID-19 can sap anyone's emotional and psychic energy away from a focus on scholarship, but these extra caregiving responsibilities can compound the effect, reducing even further the amount of time and energy available for research and writing. While these obstacles apply to faculty engaging in research at any point in time, they are particularly harmful to research and writing during sabbaticals when the expectation is that faculty engage in sustained, in-depth research that requires uninterrupted, focused time to work.

Research on the gendered effects of caregiving responsibilities has shown decisively that women are more negatively impacted by pandemic-related school and daycare closings than men. Across the workforce, parents have nearly doubled the time they are spending on childcare and household tasks since before the coronavirus outbreak, with mothers spending significantly more time on average than fathers—15 hours per week by one study (Krentz, Kos, Green & Garci-Alonso, 2020). In response, mothers with young children reduced their paid work hours four to five times more than fathers during the first few months of the shutdown, resulting in growth of the gender gap in work hours by 20 to 50 percent (Collins, Landivar, Ruppannerm & Scarborough, 2020).

Within higher education, some preliminary studies have suggested that the pandemic is having a greater effect on the scholarly productivity of women than of men (Fredrickson, 2020a; Fredrickson 2020b; Willey, 2020). A study of 4,500 top scientists in the United States and Europe found a “sharp decline” in research during the pandemic. While gender was a big factor, with female scientists reporting a 4.2% larger decline in research time than male scientists, child-care problems were the biggest factor. Scientists who reported a dependent under 5 years old experienced a 15.8% larger decline in research time (Myers et al., 2020). Another study revealed that women’s representation as first authors of COVID-19 research was particularly low for papers published in March and April 2020 compared to publications in the same time period in 2019, providing evidence that the research productivity of women has been affected more than the research productivity of men (Anderson, Nielson, Simone, Lewiss, & Jagsi, 2020).

Recent research on faculty perceptions supports the view that the pandemic may be widening the gender and parent productivity gaps. A survey of scholars in political science and international studies revealed a broadly shared perception that child care responsibilities were having a negative impact on their scholarly productivity, with women experiencing greater impacts (Breuning, Fattore, Ramos, & Scalera, 2020). Professor Ambreen Hai speaks to how childcare responsibilities can interfere with research activity. “In the humanities, the kind of writing we do is deeply analytical, and involves a lot of deep thought, and being able to hold a lot of things together in your head. What that means is that if there’s stuff going on in the house in the background and someone interrupts you, then those thoughts are gone, they scatter into bits like shards. It’s broken. And you have to start over again” (Hai, 2020).

Pre-pandemic research suggests that childbearing and family structure may disproportionately influence female scholars’ research productivity. This research suggests that

women in academia take on more domestic responsibilities than men, even in dual-career academic couples (Derrick et al., 2019). Another study showed that having children led to a significant decline in the number of publications by female scholars on average, while not affecting the number of publications by male scholars (Lutter & Schröder, 2020). Family division of childcare labor may be a factor in this discrepancy. A study of physician-researchers revealed that female researchers were more likely than their male counterparts to have spouses or domestic partners who were employed full-time (Jolly, Griffith, DeCastro, Stewert, Ubel, & Jagsi, 2014).

A pandemic-related decrease in the availability of child care and schools going online are likely to have a negative impact on female faculty members' ability to conduct research during their sabbaticals. Sabbaticals are a time meant for focusing exclusively on research and writing. Universities have high expectations for faculty productivity during sabbaticals, including conducting research, writing articles or a book, and publishing work. Lack of childcare can significantly hamper a faculty member's focus on research. As a result of the pandemic, 18% of child care centers are now permanently closed, and many more are on the brink of insolvency. According to a study by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2014), 40% of U.S. child care centers say they'll close permanently without public assistance. Furthermore, many schools operated partially or fully remotely in the fall, and will likely do so in the spring as well, which leaves parents to supervise their children's education. The demands will likely detract from scholars' ability to engage in research.

To aggravate matters, the already-high cost of caring for children is rising even higher. Over the past two decades, the cost of child care has more than doubled, while wages have remained mostly stagnant (Schochet, 2019). The average cost of child care in the United States is

over \$9,000 per year (Child Care Aware of America, 2019, 44). Decreased enrollment resulting from social distancing and increased costs for cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment and additional staffing will likely push the price of child care even higher. Single parents, who are over 80 percent female, are particularly hard hit by child care costs (Grall, 2020). Faculty members from low-income backgrounds who do not have significant savings are much less likely to be able to afford these extra expenses for child care that would enable them to focus on their research.

All of these factors are amplified for women of color. The pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on communities of color, with higher rates of illness and with more severe consequences of the virus (Artiga, Garfield, & Orgera, 2020). As with child care, the tasks of caregiving for ill family members tends to fall disproportionately, which may further burden female faculty members of color. The dual crisis of COVID-19 and racist police violence in the country, so compellingly exposed by the Black Lives Matter movement, is taking a toll on many women of color in the academy that may impact their ability to engage in research and writing during their sabbaticals, a time when they need to be able to have a laser focus on their research.

Women who scale back or drop out of the workforce to take care of children or ill relatives will suffer consequences for years to come, says University of Michigan labor economist Betsey Stephenson in *Politico*. “Caregiving responsibilities erode a women’s career” (Stanton, 2020). Scaling back or working part-time work because of extra childcare responsibilities will have a long-term impact on women’s careers, says Stephenson. “I think the impact of the child care crisis on women’s outcomes is going to be felt over the next decade” (Stanton, 2020).

Despite these tremendous impacts, policy makers are not stepping up to help address the caregiving gap. In the coronavirus aid packages, Congress has fallen woefully short of filling the need to stabilize the child care sector and support parents in accessing care for their children (Child Care Aware of America, 2020; CLASP, 2020). States are also not adequately addressing the child care crisis. The Maryland plan for reopening, for example, makes only passing mention of child care (Hogan, 2020). The Governor of Massachusetts issued guidelines for reopening child care that called for reduced class sizes and increased cleaning, but offered nothing to set off the loss of revenue from reduced enrollment and increased staffing costs for cleaning, which will likely lead to centers closing or raising tuition. Nevertheless, the Governor provided no government funding for child care providers to make these transitions or for parents to afford more expensive care (Sabadosa, 2020).

Institutions of higher education are responding to the burdens of the pandemic on faculty members in varying ways. Florida State University prohibited employees from caring for children while working remotely. After a backlash, the university changed the policy (Fortin & Taylor, 2020). Smith College, on the other hand, has granted all tenure-track and tenured faculty teaching during the fall of 2020 an extra one semester of teaching time credit toward a future sabbatical. The College is offering course reduction options, allowing faculty members to work part-time for reduced pay, take a half-sabbatical through accrued sabbatical credit, or “owe” a course to be paid back in the future, in order to accommodate the demands of childcare or other obligations. In addition, Smith is automatically granting all tenure-track faculty members a one-year extension of their probationary period and allowing faculty members to petition for an additional one-year extension of their probationary period due to a significant disruption in research caused by COVID-19 (McCartney, April 3, 2020; McCartney, June 11, 2020;

McCartney & Thurston, 2020). Finally, Smith put in place policies to help parents with their childcare needs, including childcare grants, a parent and guardian online network and resources, and a program with the local YMCA to provide a safe space and supervision of children learning remotely (Szmyt & Visentin, 2020; DeSwert, 2020). These additional supports for parents to purchase child care services, in centers or in their homes, allow parents the option of remaining fully engaged in their research if they so choose.

Institutions that want to support female faculty members must engage in institutional transformation to ensure inclusion, equity, and justice in higher education. In addition to providing extensions on probationary periods, flexibility in the use of sabbatical credits earned, and extra credit toward future sabbaticals, universities and colleges should provide additional support for faculty members to meet the increasing costs of child care. During these difficult and chaotic times, colleges and universities can act on their stated commitment to inclusion, equity and justice by enacting these measures to counter structural inequities and ensure the representation and advancement of women in the academy.

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