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Academic Single Mothering during a Pandemic

Mothering during the pandemic has crystallized the preexisting gender gap in academia. Whereas previous studies have shown that women with children are significantly less likely to achieve full professorship than their childless or male peers, recent studies have already found evidence of a gender gap in productivity during the pandemic and several articles have been published on this topic by academic mothers struggling with having to juggle childcare, homeschooling, and academic duties from home. However, these papers and studies focus on partnered academic mothers, further exacerbating the invisibility of single mothers. Using my own experience as a single mother to five-year-old twin boys who left an American university for an Australian one during the pandemic, along with experiential accounts by other single academic mothers from the Facebook group “Single Parents in Academia,” this chapter highlights the specific challenges faced by single mothers during COVID-19 in a transnational context, both in and outside of academia. It also suggests avenues for solutions and improved policies to mitigate the single motherhood double penalty through a comparison of the lockdown regulations across three countries (France, the United States, and Australia). Its goal is to give visibility to single mothering, which has been further marginalized by the pandemic and its accompanying media discourse and emergency measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has crystallized many gender, class, and race gaps in mothering practices and widened the preexisting gender gap in academia. Whereas previous studies have shown that women with children are significantly less likely to achieve full professorship than their childless or male peers (Santos and Dang Van Phu; National Center for Education Statistics’ Fall 2018 Survey; Turner Kelly; Exley and Kessler; Guarino; Flaherty), recent studies have already found evidence of a gender gap in productivity during the pandemic (Frederickson; Flaherty). Several articles have been published on this topic by academic mothers struggling to juggle

childcare, homeschooling, and academic duties from home (Staniscuaski et al.; Supiano; Pettit).

However, these papers and studies focus on partnered academic mothers, further exacerbating the invisibility of single mothers. Being a single parent during a pandemic has its own set of challenges. For instance, getting groceries can become nearly impossible when you have more than one child and a COVID-19 law states that only one adult and one child per family may enter a store at any given time, and all delivery slots are full for the next three weeks. It does not help either when a university webinar meant to give practical advice to academic mothers during the pandemic mainly recommends dividing up childcare equally with one's partner. Now, with the closure of schools, mothers have to add homeschooling their children as a third shift to their daily load.

This chapter argues for the (re)inscription of single mothers into both the academic and general mothering discourses and aims to counter single academic mothers' invisibility during the pandemic. I contend that the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of aggravating the preexisting dire state of things, should highlight that more can, and should, be done to bridge the gender gap created by the single motherhood penalty in institutions of higher learning, which paradoxically promote inclusive ideals. This chapter's goal is to give some visibility to single academic mothering, which has been further marginalized by the pandemic and its accompanying discourse. In so doing, I will first argue that this invisibility is currently perpetuated by the publication market around this topic; then, I will delve into the single academic motherhood double penalty, as exposed by members of the Facebook support group "Single Parents in Academia" (hereafter abbreviated as SPA), and describe the specific circumstances to which they are subjected during the shelter-in-place orders. Finally, I will seek to offer practical ways of implementing less discriminatory policies. To this end, I will draw a comparison by highlighting the specific challenges faced by single mothers during COVID-19 in a transnational academic context and will use my own experience as a single mother to five-year-old twin boys having left an American university for an Australian one at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of experiential accounts drawn from single academic mothers' online contributions (through the aforementioned Facebook group) and from my own experiences will serve to sketch avenues for solutions and improved policies to mitigate the single motherhood double penalty. A cross-cultural comparison of the lockdown regulations across three countries (France, the United States [U.S.], and Australia) and of the social and academic support available to single mothers will, thus, help reframe the American response to the pandemic and point to avenues for urgent improvement.

Recent Publications on Single Parenting during a Pandemic: A Review of Scarcity

Although single parenting—especially single mothering—remains overall invisible in the media, the pandemic seems to have started countering this invisibility with a few recent publications on the topic. However, the fact that these sparse studies and essays have appeared in peripheral venues still speaks to the marginalization of single mothering, as major publications, such as the *New York Times*, still focus on partnered mothers. In “Single Moms and COVID-19: Lessons in Desperation and Strength,” sociologist and former single mom Marika Lindholm discusses the specific challenges that the current pandemic poses for the eight million single mothers in the U.S. due to the inadequacy of the available political, economic, and social support. She focuses on the four main fears expressed by single mothers on various Facebook groups during the health crisis: the fear of becoming so sick that they will not be able to care for their children anymore; the fear of coparents who have been practicing less strict prevention and distancing measures and who may compromise their children’s health during visitation times; the fear of losing work because their children are home; and the fear of not being able to house and feed their children. Lindholm is also the founder of the social platform ESME (Empowering Solo Moms Everywhere), whose goal is to create a social movement of solo mothers.

Another attempt at rendering visible single mothers’ struggle during the pandemic can be found in “Single Parenting during the Coronavirus Crisis,” subtitled “Strategies for Managing when you’re going it alone,” in which Juliann Garey, a journalist, novelist, and clinical assistant professor at NYU, gives a bullet list of practical advice to help alleviate the mental and physical impact of the pandemic isolation on single parents. Although some of her suggestions can be useful, such as “Find your village” or “Get ahead of behaviour issues,” some of her other points are somewhat problematic and unrealistic for single academic mothers working at American universities. For instance, “Talk to your employer about taking some family medical leave or have a conversation about how to arrange flex time or how to consolidate work tasks during times that are going to align with what your child needs.” As many universities require synchronous remote teaching and meetings, this is hardly achievable. Furthermore, using a timer to let your child know when you should not be disturbed is bound to fail when you have a baby or more than one preschooler at home. Lastly, Garey’s longest entry, titled “Start with acceptance,” recommends resorting to the mindfulness concept of “radical acceptance” to acknowledge one’s lack of control of the situation. Her injunction to learn to let go of expectations is certainly healthy in the short term but is bound to cost dearly to single mothers’ academic advancement;

moreover, accepting an essentially unfair situation is unlikely to promote structural changes in the long run.

In “The Invisibility of the Single Parent during COVID-19,” Toronto-based actress, writer, and singer Athena Reich, who is also a single mother by choice of two young children, argues that single mothers’ exclusion from society during the pandemic has set them back to the sexist climate of the 1950s. She points to the inequity of emergency policies that do not prioritize single parents when daycare centers finally reopen after the lockdown as well as work-from-home arrangements that do not take into account the physical predicaments of sole care providers to young children. Even taking her ten-month-old daughter to the hospital for a COVID-19 test became fraught with challenges when she was told that she would not be allowed to bring her four-year-old sister along. As the second wave of the pandemic is now hitting the Northern Hemisphere, with new lockdown policies and no end in sight to the restrictive measures, this new world order does raise worrying questions about women’s rights and the impact of the lack of childcare options.

Finally, in the “Career” column of *Nature*, an article titled “How I Managed my Work and Personal Life as a Sole Parent during a Pandemic,” academic mama Antica Culina recounts how she left the Netherlands just before the lockdown started, to travel and stay with her parents in Croatia. She discusses the four steps that have helped her alleviate the stress of this extraordinary time: taking time to cope with the stress through pleasurable activities, such as playing the piano; prioritizing and setting daily goals; asking for support; and connecting with those in similar situations. In the last instance, she highlights how a Facebook support group has helped her retain a feeling of connectedness during the lockdown, which, for many single mothers, has meant losing their usual support network and the community they had painstakingly built prior to the pandemic. These four articles are the only ones I have been able to find that focus solely on single mothering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Antica’s piece is the only one dealing with academic single mothering, amid the hundreds of articles on parenting during a pandemic that have flooded the internet and more traditional publication venues over the past seven months. As a member of the same Facebook support group mentioned by Antica, I now focus on the specific challenges encountered by single academic mothers during the pandemic, as recorded through various posts and testimonies in this group. Since it is a private group, I have asked the posters for permission to quote their posts before writing this article.

Challenges and Solutions: A Case Study of an Online Support Group

Although academic single mothers can appear to be rather privileged when they hold tenure-track or tenured appointments, heralded as the holy grail of job security, their struggles and predicaments are, nonetheless, similar to those of nonacademic single mothers. Furthermore, being an academic does not necessarily entail belonging to a privileged social class, since many academic single moms suffer from precarious employment as adjuncts without any benefits. Even though I was not able to find exact statistics about single mothers' academic employment (which, again, testifies to single academic mothers' invisibility), if being a mother is the strongest predictor of non-tenured employment, then being a single mother is bound to throw additional hurdles on the path to career advancement. In the absence of studies devoted to single academic mothers during the pandemic, looking at an online support group for single mothers in academia provides a valuable case study of the many challenges facing single academic mothers in the wake of COVID-19 as well as potential solutions.

The private SPA Facebook group, administered by Eliane Boucher, has 622 members (as of November 17, 2020) and averages eight new posts a day. Despite the generic term "parents" in the title, it is worth noting that there is no academic single father among its members. At what seemed to be the height of the pandemic (i.e., from March to June 2020), the group was an invaluable source of support for many of us single academic mothers, as it provided a virtual village to palliate the loss of our usual support networks brought about by the lockdown. It offered a safe and supportive space for venting when daily struggles became too unbearable or for seeking advice on how to cope with being locked down with two active toddlers while being required to teach synchronously through Zoom and attend virtual meetings. Compared with another Facebook group for academic mothers, named "Academic Mamas" and comprised of 11,048 members (as of November 17, 2020), the SPA group has consistently been a nonjudgmental, private venue for sharing the specific concerns of single mothers in academic careers. In the "Academic Mamas" group, seemingly innocent posts, such as "should I mention being a mother in my tenure-track job application?" tend to generate heated debates and normative comments revolving around issues, such as breast-feeding vs. bottle feeding or hiring a fulltime nanny. Such comments presuppose being in a heterosexual partnership and draw a divisive line between privileged academic mothers (i.e., white, able-bodied, and healthy women employed in permanent positions, with supportive husbands and extended families) and the less privileged groups.

When discussing the SPA group members' predicaments, I will be using pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. The seven women that will be the focus of

this study are those who have kindly accepted to share their experience for this article. They are also representative of the demographic of the group: six of these women are in academic positions while mothering children under the age of thirteen, while the seventh one left academia recently after being denied tenure. At the time of the interview, four of the women were tenured, one was working as an adjunct, and a sixth one was one on the tenure track. These women ranged in age from thirty-six to fifty-four years. Five of them are Caucasian; one is Latina, and one is African American. One woman was in a heterosexual coparenting relationship with her former partner, one was a single-parenting widow, one was a single mother by choice, one was divorced and the primary custodial parent, and one had sole legal and physical custody of her child. One woman had three children; one had two children, and the other five women had one child each. One of the children had serious developmental challenges. One of the women experienced chronic illness. These women represent a range of disciplines and institutions: two from science and engineering, two from social sciences and education, and one from the humanities. These seven single academic mothers who represent a diversity of situations encountered among single academic parents are as follows: Eliane, Karen, Kathryn, Polly, Jessie, Gemma, and Melissa.

Since March 2020 and the shift to online teaching, members of the group have reported various additional obstacles negatively affecting single academic mothers' ability to perform their work. These obstacles include the following: children being barred from campus (rendering it impossible, in one instance, for an academic mother to access her books and pedagogical materials in her office, as she had no one else to take care of her children); being requested to attend Zoom meetings at inconvenient times, when children need to be fed; and, in a few instances, being explicitly told by one's department chair to make sure that children are not seen or heard during a Zoom meeting.

Most group contributors emphasize the added mental and physical load brought about by the pandemic, as exemplified by Eliane (a divorced mother to two little boys)'s statement that "Since March 23 [2020], like all single parents, I've been playing mom, full-time employee, kindergarten and third-grade teacher, chef, and maid with no one else to tag in." Her situation summarizes the situation encountered by most single parents during the pandemic: childcare centers and schools are closed, and regardless of budgetary constraints, it is not possible to hire a babysitter or nanny due to stay-at-home and social distancing orders.

As a logical consequence of this added load, most academic single mothers in the Facebook group also report the extreme feelings of loneliness caused by being in lockdown with children and having no other adult to talk to. Moreover, academic careers usually require moving away from one's family and friends because of job scarcity, which also makes the perspective of

becoming sick all the more worrying. Kathryn (a divorced mom of a special needs teenager, who herself suffers from a chronic pain condition) comments about a friend who has quarantined with her husband and how it has helped her so much to have another adult to sit down and talk to every night. Kathryn, though, does not have such a luxury: “I have no other adult to talk to, to help take out the garbage, or make dinner, or monitor the homework, or come up with creative ideas of fun things to do together. My son and I are so tired of talking to each other.” The lockdown has, thus, crystallized the isolation that comes with both single mothering and the academic career, which, in pre-pandemic time, could be compensated with a circle of friends or various social activities.

This feeling of utter isolation has been worsened by the emergency response and rules: 100 per cent of SPA members note how most COVID-19 guidelines are geared towards partnered mothers, exacerbating the preexisting invisibility of single mothers from public discourse and policy. Kathryn, who at some point developed an illness with similar symptoms to COVID, explains the following:

All the instructions for how to manage COVID at home assume another adult is there. When I got sick, I stayed in my room as much as I could, but I could not isolate completely. My son managed to feed himself with frozen pizza and snacks and sandwiches, but I had to get my own tea and clean up after myself, and it was exhausting. I made arrangements with a friend that if I got so sick and had to be hospitalized, they would take him. But they hesitated. It meant possibly exposing their family. We agreed that if it came to that, he could stay in their guest house, where they could take care of him, but also keep themselves safe.

Kathryn’s statement highlights the glaring omission of public discourses and an emergency response that fails to include single parent households, creating extreme stress and desperation for both parent and children.

For SPA members whose position involves high research expectations, finding time for research proves even more challenging than delivering remote teaching. Most single academic moms in the Facebook group report having given up on all screen time limits for their children and having had to adjust their definitions of “productivity,” according to the extraordinary situation. Polly, a single mother by choice of three, notes that the lockdown has been particularly challenging, as it has meant being stuck indoors with her three young children, without any possibility to find relief. Whenever she voices her exhaustion, she feels stigmatized by being implicitly or openly reminded by her relatives and friends that she chose to be a single mother. She writes: “I’m realizing I have too much on my plate.... I spent the day surviving with the

three kids indoors today again; winter is still hanging on here, which makes the days isolating so much longer. Such a struggle getting university work done and holding everything together here with the kids.” Most SPA members, like Polly, report that COVID-19 has exacerbated the daily struggles they experienced before the pandemic, such as having to cut down on their sleep hours to get work done. Here, “work” mostly refers to teaching preparation and grading and some administrative tasks, since working on research has been turned by the pandemic into a rare privilege of the childless or partnered academics.

In addition to the various issues already listed, single academic mothers of children with special needs have experienced additional struggles during the lockdown, although it is probably no different from most single parents to special needs children, whether they are academics or not. Gemma says the following: “Last year, my son was diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety.... He ... can be extremely challenging; his socio-emotional development lags behind his intellectual development by several years.” The day before it was announced that schools would be closed for the rest of the academic year, Gemma finally heard that her son would be getting special help, which, of course, has been put to a stop. Although a few SPA members describe a kind of honeymoon period when schools and campuses closed and they were granted an extra week after spring break to switch to remote teaching, once the school started assigning work, things started to change. As Gemma explains, “The anxiety associated with evaluated work, coupled with deadlines, are things that do not work well for a nontypical kid.” Overall, SPA members’ experiential accounts reveal the precariousness of the single academic mother’s pre-COVID-19 life, whose collapse the lockdown has precipitated. As many posts and discussions by partnered academic mothers on the “Academic Mamas” group have revolved around the impossibility of retaining academic productivity while caring for children during the lockdown, one can only hope that the pandemic may eventually increase awareness of the impossible demands made on single academic mothers in non-COVID-19 times.

However, the pandemic has, for some SPA members, had a bit of an upside, which could pave the way for some (limited) solutions. For instance, Eliane and a few other single academic mothers point out that quarantine has paradoxically brought them more alone time because their custody schedule has shifted to closer to a fifty-fifty summer schedule thanks to school closure. If family courts could push more strongly towards implementing shared custody whenever possible and urge fathers to remain equally involved as mothers are in their children’s upbringing, some single academic mothers’ fates would be vastly improved. To many academic mothers who are 100 per cent solo, either by choice or because of a former partner who has relinquished his parental duties, having a few childless days or weeks at regular intervals

can sound like a dream. However, it also comes with a whole other set of worries. As Eliane says:

The uncertainty about whether sending your kids off to their other parent right now might mean you don't see them for a much longer time than anticipated. We've had to worry about travel from the state I live in, to the state my sons' dad lives in, being cut off. Will they be able to travel back home? We also have to worry about what happens if one of us, or the boys, starts to show symptoms.

So, while having a coparent with whom to share some of the parenting burden during the pandemic may seem like a welcome relief, it can also come with its added set of stressors.

Furthermore, coparenting during the pandemic brings a new set of challenges, as several academic moms report the added difficulty of having to negotiate school decisions with a coparent who may not agree, such as sending the children back to school or choosing the online homeschooling option, when such a choice is possible. Eliane had to get lawyers involved when her ex-husband refused to compromise. Another stressful aspect of the pandemic for single mothers who share custody with an ex lies in the risk of exposure at the other parent's house, with a lack of open communication resulting in uncertainty about how many people the children are being exposed to during the stay-at-home orders. Yet for some single academic moms who usually share custody with a coparent, the pandemic has meant shifting to having the children all the time for various reasons. For instance, Kathryn reports the following:

My son's father is a physician who works in the ER.... When the hospitals here started seeing COVID patients, we moved my son to my house full-time. Our assumption at that point was that his dad would either be working overtime, exhausted, sick, or quarantined due to possible exposure....We didn't discuss specifics; we just knew this is what we had to do, and it wasn't safe for our son to be at his dad's house anymore. We planned that they would see each other for outdoor, at-a-distance activities when possible, but we didn't know if that would be once a week or once in three months.

She also highlights an unexpected turn brought about by the extraordinary situation, in that she now must depend on her former partner, with whom she has "a really complicated relationship," to do her grocery shopping and errands. She talks about the uncertainties regarding the lack of guidelines for when it is safe for healthcare workers to spend time with their children and at what kind of a physical distance. Kathryn points out the following: "We have a lot of tension around that, which I expect will only get worse if this goes on for

six months, a year, two years. Will my son ever have a normal relationship with his dad again? Will his dad continue to be safe and healthy?”

One aspect that the pandemic has definitely highlighted is that the notion of work-life balance is a myth for mothers, especially single ones. In academia, before the pandemic, it was hard to maintain a separation between work and family life, since meeting publication deadlines, preparing for class, and grading more often than not have to happen on the weekend or at night after the children are in bed. Single academic moms of young children seem to be struggling the most with the conflicting demands of home schooling and teaching remotely, as children under a certain age cannot realistically be expected to entertain themselves for more than a few minutes at a time and cannot remain focused on their online classes without adult supervision, which is expected to happen at the same time as their mothers' working hours. Karen (a widowed mom to a preteen boy) describes her lockdown with her preteen son as follows: “The two of us navigate homeschooling while I'm trying to manage a pretty large (twenty-plus faculty members) department, teaching a graduate seminar via Zoom, and keeping my sanity.” Even though older children can be relatively more self-reliant, the mental load of having to juggle children's homeschooling schedule and making sure they do not fall behind, while also working full time, is recurrently described as taking a toll on single mothers' mental health. Karen adds: “I think about [my son] and other kids of academics that they are more likely to be ‘okay’ than those families who are truly struggling. I think I'm struggling but recognize that I'm super fortunate right now.” This acknowledgment of relative privilege among less fortunate single mothers is a recurring motive in SPA posts and comments.

Most of the stress reported in the SPA group ultimately arises from universities not acknowledging the impossible situation in which single mothers find themselves, as a result of the conflicting demands of having to care for their children and homeschool them full-time while continuing to work full-time. In practice, the switch to remote teaching has often meant working more than full-time, since countless extra hours have had to be devoted to urgently redesigning classes meant for face-to-face teaching. When asked if her college is supportive of parents, Melissa (a single mother of a twelve-year-old boy and a teacher at a small liberal arts college) answers:

At best, I think [my university is] negligent in that regard. They have not been particularly accommodating of school pickup times when scheduling faculty meetings, for example, and when taking applications to be able to teach remotely this semester, childcare was not one of the accepted criteria. There are very few single parents on my campus, though, so for many of them, it is not an issue because the spouse takes care of that. We do have maternity leave, but I do not think it is paid unless you have accrued sick days enough to cover it. I

am also pretty much forced to do Saturday events once a month, and there were evening events in my early years there, and that was a huge challenge. I have eschewed as many evening events as I can because of childcare issues, although now I can do them more because my son is old enough to stay by himself.

Yet some single academic moms have been able to see some silver linings to the pandemic, such as Kathryn's remark: "There is so much to be grateful for. My son's school has done really well with Zoom classes. We have a comfortable house and plenty of food.... The slower pace at home is so much better for my body, and everything going online means that I now have access to all kinds of things that I would have been too exhausted to get to in person." So, for minority groups, such as those single academic moms suffering from chronic illness, disability, or ill health, no longer having to commute and to perform professional duties face-to-face can be experienced as a relief. Or, in cases of troubled teenagers, the lockdown can alleviate ongoing worries, as another group member, Jessie, a single mom of a ten-year-old son, reports:

This period has been mixed for us. In some ways, things are so much easier. I don't worry about him [her son] getting in trouble at school. We spend more time doing cool stuff together.... But I am so tired. Even though it has always been just the two of us and I have to do all the things all the time, it just feels so much harder now. [Yet] I am incredibly fortunate. We are both introverts, so the isolation isn't that hard. He is old enough to keep himself occupied for hours reading or looking up nerdy stuff online. I still have a job. I can work from home. We are both healthy. We have counselling support either online or by phone regularly.

From this perspective, the pandemic can also provide an opportunity for single academic mothers to live a slower-paced life and spend more time with their children. One of the upsides of the pandemic noted by many is certainly the ability to take part in an increased number of major international conferences, since the switch to online venues has removed the financial and logistic headaches of organizing childcare for several days in a row during conference travel, which is usually an important barrier to single academic mothers' career advancement. So, overall, although the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have exacerbated single academic mothers' feelings of invisibility and marginalization—along with their daily struggles to meet the research, service, and teaching expectations required for promotion and career advancement—the few silver linings that are emerging have started to pave the way for improved policies, which will be the focus of the next section.

Urgent Avenues for Improved Policies in the Wake of COVID-19: A Transnational Comparison.

So far, we have seen some of the ways in which the pandemic has crystallized and exacerbated preexisting issues for academic mothers in the U.S., especially single mothers. Based on the posts discussed above from the SPA Facebook group—along with articles published in mainstream media in Europe, Australia, and the U.S.—academic single mothers in the U.S. seem to have been, by far, the most severely impacted by the pandemic. This is no surprise, as it comes in the wake of a complete lack of a decent family policy, as my pre-pandemic experience at an American university revealed. A cross-cultural comparison of the social and academic support available to single mothers before and during the pandemic can, thus, help reframe the U.S. response (or lack thereof) and point to avenues for urgent improvement.

As I now move on to a more autobiographical perspective, let me briefly introduce myself: I am a single mother of five-year-old twin boys, who is originally from France and recently moved from the U.S. to Australia to take up a new position at the University of Sydney amid the pandemic. Since my sons' birth five years ago, we have spent, overall, two years in France, one of those years being a leave without pay that I had to take because of the lack of paid maternity leave at my former U.S. institution. Even though I was privileged to be an assistant professor on the tenure track at a major research university, there was just no paid maternity leave in 2015 at that institution. As I needed to spend the last few weeks of the pregnancy on strict bed rest (and, later, in hospital) and because the babies were born prematurely, which entailed a lengthy stay in the NICU and a series of health issues during their first year, it was not possible for me to just continue working normally. To stop the tenure clock and prevent my temporary lack of research productivity from having a negative impact on my tenure case, I was offered a leave of absence at a time when I would have needed money the most. I am aware that this is still a privilege, as many less fortunate young mothers without job security would have lost their employment if they had had to be away for so long.

This transnational motherhood adventure has put me in a privileged position to experience and compare maternal policies across the three countries where we have lived: France, the U.S., and Australia. The amount of support I received from the French government, through various social policies aimed at increasing the country's birth rate, was beyond what I could have expected and stands in stark contrast with what is available to single mothers (and mothers in general) in the U.S. It involved, among other benefits, eight weekly hours of free home help with childcare and house chores during the first twelve months of the babies' lives, weekly home visits by a pediatric nurse, virtually free daycare centres, and school (*école maternelle*) starting at two and a half years

old and running from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with inexpensive after-school care until 6:45 p.m. The onset of the pandemic, thus, came as a shock to French parents, since daycare centres and schools had to close during the strict lockdown, which took place from 17 March to 11 May 2020 (Charrel). By contrast, in the U.S., the pandemic has only highlighted preexisting pitfalls of American family policy, since even in pre-pandemic times, having a career and a family was already a struggle for most women. The closure of daycare centers, preschools, and schools for an indefinite length of time in most U.S. states in the wake of COVID-19 has created conundrums and major obstacles for women, setting them back to half a century ago, when they had to struggle to maintain a career while having children. Now, eight months into the pandemic, the gap between academic mothers and their childless or partnered peers has only widened in terms of research productivity (Frederickson; Flaherty; Staniscuaski; Supiano; Pettit). The situation in France has not been much better, with the difference that various provisions are made by the government to palliate, through subsidies, defective fathers who shun their financial and visiting duties. Those subsidies (for instance, the *Allocation de Soutien Familial* paid to single parents by the *Caisse d'Allocations Familiales*) has helped some single academic mothers hire babysitters. However, like nearly everywhere, some single mothers in France have reported being unable to do basic grocery shopping due to entrance to supermarkets and stores being restricted to one child per adult¹—a policy that displays complete ignorance of single parents' predicaments. However, the strict lockdown orders only lasted for two months there, and schools and daycare centers have now reopened, unlike in the U.S.² And despite the new lockdown implemented in France on October 30 2020, daycare centers and schools will now remain open, as they are deemed essential services. In contrast, in my former state of Hawai'i, the Honolulu school where my children would have started kindergarten has been closed since March.

Overall, I can say that I lucked out by moving to Australia amid a pandemic because schools never completely closed in my home city of Sydney. Even at the height of the pandemic, my children were able to continue attending school in person because unlike what was happening in France and other European countries, the definition of "essential workers" included single-parent households, insofar as a single parent cannot afford not being able to work. As this is a rapidly evolving situation, Sydney may be headed to another, stricter lockdown. However, even if schools and childcare possibilities closed completely, my university offers the option of taking a fully paid carer's leave³—as do most employers in Australia—which would make the situation manageable.

So far, in Australia, I have mostly been in awe at the fact that my situation as a single mother of two is not only taken into consideration but valued. For

instance, having remained productive (as far as research and publications are concerned), despite such heavy caring responsibilities, is recognized as an asset, and I can apply for one of the university's equity prizes granting awardees a full year of teaching relief to focus on their research and receive targeted mentoring to advance their careers. I can also apply to prestigious early career research grants because, even though I received my PhD more than five years ago, I get to take off two years per child, three months per international relocation and additional time off for being the sole carer for my children, which adds up to shifting my PhD award date by several years.

So, what would it take for American higher education institutions to become less discriminatory towards mothers, and specifically single mothers? The ongoing pandemic could be the opportunity to start acknowledging the long-standing gender gap in promotion and employment and implement crucial measures: paid maternity leave for all (regardless of their permanent or adjunct work status) and paid carer's leave for those academic mothers who temporarily find themselves without childcare solution and have children under a certain age. Inspired by the Australian model, another step could be the acknowledgment of motherhood as a strength rather than some shameful fact to be concealed at all costs. By that, I mean that academics who are mothers—and, even more, single mothers—should be able to make the case in their promotion and job market research narratives as well as their CVs that their caring duties are in fact a testimony to their exceptional productivity, which is part of the standard grant and promotion application in Australia under the heading “research outputs relative to opportunities” and “statement of career breaks.” In the immediate crisis, another step that some universities could take would be to make asynchronous teaching possible whenever childcare duties are bound to make synchronous online teaching delivery challenging. Beyond institutional policies, what academia as a whole could do, once the pandemic is over, is to retain the possibility of delivering conference papers remotely, thus increasing single academic mothers' chances to participate in major international conferences and accept invited talks.

Thus, the pandemic has highlighted the preexisting gender gaps in academia, just like in other professional spheres, and has further marginalized single academic mothers in most U.S. institutions. As adjuncts are now being on the frontline of massive redundancies in the wake of the budget crisis brought about by the pandemic, if no immediate action is taken, it, unfortunately, does not seem that such extraordinary times will have enabled more supportive and family-friendly academic policies and practices. With no perspective in sight of a return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy in most of the U.S. and the world, the productivity gap between academic mothers and their male or childless counterparts is likely to widen steadily. Single academic mothers are likely to become increasingly at risk of being denied tenure and other promotions when

they do hold a permanent position. It, thus, appears urgent for many American higher education institutions, and for academia as a whole, to reframe their policies to consider minority groups that have been severely affected by the pandemic, especially since institutions of higher learning usually promote ideals of inclusiveness and equality.

Endnotes

1. I am here paraphrasing the title of Mary Ann Mason's famous 2013 essay, "The Baby Penalty."
2. I am here reporting information from Facebook posts by seven French single mothers—three of them members of the FB group "Game of Twins: Parents Solo de Twins" and four of them members of the FB group "Mamans 100% Solo de Jumeaux."
3. See <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2020/health/coronavirus-schools-reopening/> for a map of school openings and closures in the US state by state.
4. See The University of Sydney's Enterprise Agreement 2018-2021, <https://intranet.sydney.edu.au/employment/enterprise-agreement.html>, as well as <https://www.sydney.edu.au/policies/showdoc.aspx?recnum=PDOC2016/423&RendNum=0>. Article 11 in the University of Sydney's Paid Leave Policy:
 - "Personal leave (1) Sick and carer's leave form part of a staff member's personal leave entitlements and allow a staff member to take leave:
 - when they are not fit for work due to personal illness or injury;
 - or (b) to provide care or support to a member of their immediate family or household due to a personal illness or injury or an unexpected emergency."
 - Additionally, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the following amendment has been made to include adjuncts:
 - "Recognising the loyalty and commitment of our casual staff, measures have been introduced today to support them if they are required to self-isolate, become ill with Covid-19, or have to care for someone who is required to self-isolate or becomes ill with Covid-19.
 - The measure includes access to special paid leave for self-isolation or illness due to COVID-19, or in the event the campus is closed, and they are unable to work from home. The special paid leave will cover any rostered hours that they have to miss in a 10 working day period." (13 March 2020, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/03/13/university-of-sydney-update-regarding-covid-19.html#:~:text=The%20measure%20includes%20access%20to,a%2010%20working%20day%20period>).

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