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# Mothering and Motherhood

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# The Remote Professor: Making Academia Work for Working Mothers

*This article explores the intersection of motherhood and academia, highlighting the struggles of working mothers in higher education and offering a model for incorporating remote work into academia. Drawing upon the literature on both academic motherhood and remote work, the author integrates the literature to argue that remote work can offer an innovative path for academic mothers seeking to manage all facets of their responsibilities. Commenting on the greedy institutions of both motherhood and academia, which demand total commitment, the author argues that academia, historically structured to favour men, must evolve to accommodate the realities of modern caregiving, particularly for women. Remote work can provide flexibility, autonomy, and geographic mobility for mothers as they manage the demands of caregiving while meeting the responsibilities of teaching, research, and service inherent to the faculty role.*

*However, creating effective remote positions must be done with care, as it is incumbent upon university chairs and administrators to address biases in determining who is offered remote roles. They must also work to mitigate challenges with remote work, such as feelings of isolation, lack of connection, and under-appreciation. To counteract these issues, academic chairs can support remote employees by maintaining regular communication, making them feel valued, and fostering a departmental culture that supports in-person and remote members equally. Rethinking work structures in academia through remote faculty positions presents an innovative way to ensure all faculty members, not just some, can thrive.*

*It was 2017, and my youngest child, my third, was two years old. I had been in my current position as a tenure-track faculty member at a mid-sized public university for five years. I had my second and third children while on the tenure track. My first child, now seven, had been born while I was in a postdoctoral position. By 2017, I had earned tenure; I should have felt relief and renewed energy to have*

*that milestone behind me, but instead, I was exhausted and utterly burned out. With three kids in five years and a professional life to maintain, sleep and any form of self-care had fallen by the wayside.*

*During the spring semester of 2017, I finally hit bottom. I developed pneumonia, but being out sick was not an option when in-person classes met two or three times a week. I recall walking the aisles of the lecture hall where I was teaching, watching my students complete an exam. I was sick and so very tired (pneumonia has that effect); I was barely able to put one foot in front of the other. But, at that time, I did not think there was anything to do to fix the rut I had fallen into. The only thing I knew to do was to keep pushing and doing things the way I had always done them. I kept teaching large sections of undergraduates, attended department meetings sometimes fraught with complex alliances and politics, published articles, took students to conferences, and served on the faculty senate. I kept my head above the waterline, but the burnout grew below the surface.*

*March 2020. The COVID-19 lockdowns began. My kids attended school and daycare on Friday, March 13, and by Monday, the whole city was shutting down. By this time, I had had my fourth child, and he had been attending a local childcare centre for about nine months. Before COVID-19 hit, I worked hard to reengage professionally after being on parental leave and sabbatical for most of the past year. I was trying to pull threads of research back together while navigating a new form of existence—life with four young children at home.*

*The COVID-19 experience for me and many mothers was one of barely surviving. The pressure to care for the children, be their teacher, and keep them engaged and entertained while maintaining a teaching load, serving as the faculty senate vice-president, and doing this under a constant threat state proved too much for my nervous system. I entered a period of extreme anxiety that paralyzed me. I sought therapy and tried to heal the wound that had opened, but my responsibilities remained the same. I pushed through.*

*When COVID-19 hit, my three older children were attending a tiny private school, and because of their small numbers, the school reopened and maintained some semblance of a regular school schedule. With three kids in school, I now only had a two-year-old at home with my husband and me as we navigated the new normal of work from home. Together, my husband and I became adept at trading off childcare duties, moving from childcare duties to Zoom meetings seemingly without a hitch. To his credit, my two-year-old also developed sophisticated solo-play skills. We made do as best we could.*

*With the pandemic waning, I finally had all four of my children on a regular school and childcare schedule, and they were flourishing. Things on campus were in flux, as some people started returning to campus, eager to return to the life they had known, while others of us did not recognize the people we had become. I could not imagine returning to the life I had before the pandemic. Nothing was the same for me, and every bit of me rebelled against fitting myself back into the work structure*

*I had before the world fell apart. I could not see myself going back to life as usual. I had to find a way to make a change, and I was willing to try anything. By the summer of 2022, with the support of child care and schools for my kids, I had found a way to make remote work for me. I was not about to give that up.*

*Working remotely, in the way I had crafted my new work and family life, was the only way I could see myself continuing in academia. Moreover, if I worked remotely, I could do that from anywhere. That revelation and the possibilities it awakened changed my family's path forever. The thought of keeping my academic position, now structured remotely in a way in which I could manage my responsibilities, did not enter my mind before the pandemic. Academia demands every bit of you. You go where the job is. Period. But suddenly, this was not the end of the story anymore, at least the way I saw it. On September 9, 2022, I met with my chair and explained what I wanted (needed, really): to continue working remotely and from a neighbouring state. After a decade of trying to make my current location feel like a place I belonged, I realized I could not keep fighting anymore. I needed a change, and they could support me or not. In my case, I was lucky enough to have a chair and a dean who could see the value and possibility of remote employment.*

*With our oldest headed to middle school soon, there was an added urgency to make the change. With the campus beginning to reestablish itself in a new postpandemic mode and my kids rapidly growing, we needed to leap. Plus, moving to a place with family support nearby for our family of six was incredibly appealing.*

*Furthermore, remote work truly worked for me. I enjoyed curating virtual learning experiences for my students in my online classes. This work format also allowed me to find space and energy to devote to deeper thought and research in a way I never could in an office setting on campus. It allowed my introverted self to disconnect and distance myself from the stresses of frequent interactions on campus. I also found I could meet my family's needs with much less stress. Kid wakes up sick? No problem. I will be working from home. No more scrambling to cancel classes and meetings at the last minute to accommodate a disruption. Another child needs an early pick-up? No problem. I can fit that in and still return to work. It was a revelation to see how changing the structure and environment of my work could alter everything in my life. I was never going back.*

Being a mother and an academic is a double-edged sword for many. In myriad ways, the traditional academic position offers advantages that many women caregivers want: a flexible work schedule, a self-directed professional identity, and autonomy to choose much of one's teaching and research focus. However, academia also has its downsides. Women working in academia are frequently underpaid compared to their male counterparts. They take on the burden of much of the emotional and service labour in the academy, and they must compete in a job that constantly demands more and more, no matter how much they accomplish (Pokorski et al.). Historically, parenthood has also affected women's careers more than men's career trajectories in academia, with far fewer women represented in the upper echelons of the academic hierarchy (Huopalainen and Satama). Given these challenges, academia must start taking steps to change. In particular, academia can change by taking advantage of this current time in history, with all the technological advances we now enjoy, to reimagine an academia that works for everyone. We are in a transformational time in academia, and the jury is still out on whether universities will advance into a new era or remain rooted in the past (McClure).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural experiment in academia about the feasibility of completing the work of tenure-track professors remotely. Although remote work in the academy is not new, the scale with which it occurred during the pandemic was. With campuses now in a postpandemic era, the question arises: What lessons can university leaders learn from this large-scale experiment in remote work, and how can we use these lessons to benefit mothers in academia? Of interest is whether remote professorial positions in traditional academic settings can be a path to better support the work and wellbeing of mothers in higher education.

In this article, I explore the challenges that academic mothers face and how remote work outside of a pandemic context can be one avenue to address the strain that female caregivers who are also professors face. I then speak about the role of supervisors and department chairs in supporting remote employees and how their leadership can alleviate many of the challenges accompanying remote work. To conclude, I reflect on how my personal experiences with remote work can help guide institutions into a new era.

## Working Motherhood in Academia

The number of people who earn doctorates is now higher among women compared to men, at 54.5 per cent of all doctoral degrees awarded. However, as one looks down the path of promotion, from tenure track hires to associate professors to full professors to administrators, the numbers shift (McKenzie et al. viii). More women in academia hold non-tenure-track positions compared to those in tenure-track roles. Additionally, many women find themselves in a

holding pattern at the associate professor level, with only 36 per cent reaching the status of full professor (Gabriel et al. 188; Teelken et al. 837). Among tenured women, 44 per cent have children versus 70 per cent of tenured men (American Association of University Women).

One explanation for this decline in the representation of mothers is that both academia and motherhood are "greedy institutions" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel 12). As described by Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel in their book on academic motherhood, those in academia, particularly those on the tenure track, are expected to give their unfaltering loyalty to the institution and the profession and to devote their time and energies to the pursuit of one goal–progress along the career path (12). To have other interests in one's life is viewed by colleagues and administrators as a lack of commitment and not in line with the ideal worker ideology. This situation particularly impacts mothers, as colleagues often perceive the birth of a child as a sign of decreased commitment to their careers. In contrast, men do not face this bias when they have a child while on the tenure track (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 12).

Thus, as women carefully consider and time the birth of a child and how it will fit into their professional goals, they simultaneously try to demonstrate their unfaltering commitment to their chosen profession. However, once motherhood arrives, they now have another set of cultural expectations to live up to—that of the ever-committed mother willing to work tirelessly for her child's success. Over time, motherhood in the United States (US) has become equated with the image of the ever-sacrificing female figure who is present and attuned to their child's every whim, always offering up their own needs for the good of their child and doing so without complaint (or help). Catherine Verniers and colleagues describe the cultural ideal of intensive motherhood in this way:

> "Intensive mothering" [IM] refers to a cultural model of appropriate mothering structured around three principles: First, children are considered sacred, innocent, and inherently loving and trusting, and as such, should be protected from the "corrupt" outside world. This is achieved through intensive methods, which represents the second pillar of IM. More precisely, appropriate childrearing is emotionally absorbing: children must receive continued and unconditional maternal love, evidenced by permanent loving attention. The method is inherently child-centered; that is, the only proper conduct is to follow the child's lead. Appropriate childrearing is labor-intensive and time-consuming. Thus, a mother's day-to-day job is to educate herself as to the latest knowledge regarding her child's development. However, given the uniqueness of each child, she must also learn to identify the unique needs of her child and to adapt her response to her own child's needs and desires. Intensive methods are expert-guided,

first because mothers must educate themselves based on expert advice, and second, because they have to consult qualified professionals should particular problems arise. These recommended methods are financially expensive: besides the cost of having recourse to expert-guidance (including, but not limited to, pediatricians, child psychologists, and psychiatrists), the right toys, the richest activities, and the best learning experiences, intensive methods imply lost wages since mothers are expected to cut back their paid work hours to spend more time with their children. Third and finally, according to the IM cultural model of appropriate childrearing, mothers are primarily responsible for fulfilling this mandate. Motherhood is deemed to be an instinctive and deep-seated drive in women. Fathers, as a result of their perceived incompetence, can only provide additional help. (2)

The demands of intensive mothering are just as insidious as those of academia, implying that if mothers do not entirely and utterly commit themselves to their children's needs, they are failures. Thus, cultural expectations can put academic women in an impossible position. They are pulled in two opposite directions: in one direction towards their sacred cultural duty as a mother and in another to their all-demanding careers away from their children. They are often unable to satisfy either set of demands to their satisfaction. Even when they know the problems with both institutions, the cultural pressures can still be detrimental (Pokorski et al.).

As women juggle the mounting demands of academia and motherhood, the negative impacts build up. Mothers experience delayed promotions and lost opportunities for project funding, leading to fewer papers and narrower collaboration networks than male counterparts, if they do not opt out altogether (Khan). Ultimately, the attrition rates in academia are higher for women than men, especially as many women opt to leave tenure-track positions for ones they feel are a better fit for caregiving (Gabriel et al. 196). The choices mothers make at each juncture of their journey as both academic and mother can lead to disadvantages that snowball over time (Derrick et al.)

The traditional activities of academia can be demanding for mothers trying to carry out a professional life and meet the expectations of intensive motherhood. The heavy demands of teaching, maintaining a research pipeline, and attending distant meetings and conferences all place unique challenges on mothers with young children (Pokorski et al.). As noted by Karolina Lendák-Kabók, "The structure of the university itself is simply not friendly to aspiring female academics with families" (1143). The outcome of all of this may well be a hit to the personal wellbeing of mothers, and evidence is mounting that this is indeed the case.

Although mother academics are frequently reluctant to state their own needs in the office due to a fear of increasing bias against them, when asked

directly by researchers, they often state a longing for more time to fit in all their responsibilities, including self-care (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). They also state a desire for time to think, a task critical to the creativity that research requires (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Mothers in academia frequently feel the brunt of too little time to attend to family; when they do, they are overshadowed by thoughts of not attending to work (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). This conflict between work and family is particularly prevalent among early-career academics, although mid-career faculty are not immune (Hardy et al.). The challenges academia presents for working mothers frequently lead to mothers opting out of tenure-track work altogether. Those who remain are torn between the competing institutions of motherhood and academia. This is commonly unsustainable, leading to burnout and depleted mental wellbeing (Hammoudi Halat et al.). Thus, it is incumbent upon academia to begin to imagine a world where we can be both mothers and academics and not sacrifice our mental health or wellbeing to do so.

## The Remote Option

One option academia could consider is offering fully remote, tenure-track professor positions to support female academics with caregiving responsibilities. Before the pandemic, many in higher education considered this option inconceivable. However, given the enormous changes wrought by the COVID -19 pandemic, remote teaching has become a much more feasible solution if only leaders in higher education could see its full potential.

Positions in higher education have long been heralded due to their perceived level of autonomy and flexibility. Many academic mothers point to how their work supports their family life, as they can choose their schedules and research pursuits. However, for many working mothers, autonomy and flexibility may seem like broken promises once they enter the tenure track.

As Phyllis Moen explains with her concept of "career mystique," there is the prevalent but false perception that those who "clock in" visibly will be rewarded with promotion along their career path. Although a host of structural issues make this belief false, there is pressure, especially on newly hired tenure-track faculty, that they must prove their value by showing up and being visibly invested in their role. When women have children, this pressure can become even more paramount; for now, they must doubly prove their commitment to overcome the biases against them (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). For some mothers, this means choosing to forgo a full maternity leave so that they can teach an in-person class at the beginning of the semester, timing babies to be born in the summer months, or hiding their pregnancies and family life from professional view. Thus, mothers on the tenure track may not experience a flexible schedule, as they are under immense pressure to noticeably be on

campus, completing their work and demonstrating their commitment to their faculty roles. Nevertheless, flexibility remains one of the most important structural changes an employer can make to support working mothers (Capone et al.; Lebron et al.).

Working as a remote faculty member may be one way to realize true flexibility and autonomy in one's work life. Remote work offers the opportunity to more fully embrace one's authentic self, to create uninterrupted time for thinking, and to integrate multiple roles more fluidly (Allen and Birrell; Boccoli et al.; O'Meara and Cooper). Remote work also allows mothers to limit commute times, so school and childcare drop-offs can happen without the additional pressure of arriving at an office at a set time (Rodriguez Castro et al.). Additionally, parents can pick up children when needed rather than when the traditional work clock dictates. Tenure-track faculty may feel undue social pressure to remain in the office until 5:00 p.m. However, with a remote work option, the pressure for face time at the office is removed, and mothers can create a schedule that truly works for them and their families (Casper and Buffardi; Kossek et al.).

Other researchers have noted that working remotely increases the time available for family or personal pursuits (Murmura and Bravi; Pirzadeh and Lingard). Gabriele Boccoli and colleagues found in a survey of over fifteen hundred remote employees in Italy that feelings of job autonomy contributed to a better work-life balance. Results also indicated a positive impact of temporal flexibility on work-life balance. Temporal flexibility and job autonomy positively influenced work engagement and job satisfaction, with no apparent gender differences emerging. Similarly, Samantha Alexandra Metselaar et al. found in a prepandemic sample of Dutch government employees that working from home (but not in other locations) increased perceived work performance through autonomy and work-life balance satisfaction. Research of this type has yet to tackle remote work in academia.

Another advantage remote work may offer mothers is geographic mobility (Toner et al.). Academia is notorious for demanding workers to be fully mobile to achieve success (McLean et al.). With fewer tenure-track jobs available, the adage typically applied to newly minted PhDs is to "go where the job is." Unfortunately, this frequently means uprooting an established home to relocate to an area devoid of connections and family support. As academic mothers find themselves juggling career and family responsibilities, having a support system in place to handle child-rearing demands becomes vital for family functioning, especially given the state of childcare in much of the US (Chaudry and Sandstron). Working remotely from a location of one's choice can allow academic mothers to settle their families in an area that offers essential social and family support, factors crucial for parents' wellbeing (Nomaguchi and Milkie). Remote work options also support dual-academic

families, as universities are notorious for failing to support dual-career couples adequately. Later in life, remote work can also allow grandparents to live closer to their grandchildren (Wood).

Remote work may offer academic mothers a path to crafting a situation that better allows them to integrate multiple roles. Boccoli et al. note that transitions between employee and family roles may be smoother when working from home, reducing stress and burnout and improving psychological wellbeing. Ideally, working from home can allow one to engage more fully in both a work role and a personal family role so that competition between the two roles is reduced.

Although there is evidence that some employees experience remote work negatively as a blurring of boundaries between work and home (Kangas et al.; Yucel and Chung), others may experience this blurring as a positive trade-off for balancing competing demands. As Sean O'Meara and Cary Cooper highlight in their book about remote workplace culture, one of the true benefits of working remotely is achieving work-life integration rather than attempting to distribute demands evenly in some grand scale of work-life balance. Work-life integration, for example, means being able to leave work to pick up kids after school rather than being stuck in traffic with overstimulated and hungry kids late in the day, which puts the whole family in a drained emotional space (O'Meara and Cooper).

Decreasing burnout may be one of the most critical aspects remote work can offer faculty mothers. Jack Thomas McCann and Roger Holt report in their study of 650 online instructors from around the US that they were less stressed and had fewer burnout symptoms than their counterparts who taught in traditional face-to-face formats. Similarly, Paul Franco and Michelle D'Adundo observe that people working from home in the general United Kingdom population reported increased quality of life due to more time with family, less commuting, and a more comfortable work environment.

## Organizational Support for Remote Work

In reviewing the literature on remote work in general and academic remote work specifically, one critical element leading to worker satisfaction with remote work is the degree to which their organization supports such work as a viable option (Allen and Birrell; Dhir et al.). In academia, this support tends to come directly from the faculty member's chair and directly and indirectly from the college dean. Postpandemic, there has been a push from administrators in higher education to provide increased flexibility and support for students, mainly as universities compete more and more for fewer students. Providing students with online learning options is viewed as an equity issue that enables diverse learners to access education. The focus is on "designing learning to fit

students' lives rather than requiring students to adapt to university schedules" (Broadbent et al. 16). If universities are willing to support students in this manner, why not support faculty needs similarly? Indeed, faculty who feel supported are also more effective educators and employees (Gabriel et al.; Hammoudi Halat et al.).

Department heads play a pivotal role in determining the success or even availability of remote faculty positions. Due to their direct role in overseeing faculty, researchers estimate that department chairs make 80% of the decisions at a university (Gabriel et al. 196). Thus, examining the chair's attitudes and behaviours around remote work is critical for understanding how such work is implemented within a specific university environment.

One of the most frequently cited drawbacks to remote work for employees in all sectors are feelings of isolation, lack of connection to the workplace, and, for some, feeling underappreciated and undervalued (Toner et al.). To counteract these emotions, department chairs can offer critical levels of social support, which, in turn, can buffer against detrimental outcomes such as the desire to seek alternative employment (Capone et al.). They can offer this support to remote employees by regularly communicating, making employees feel valued, providing equipment and resources, showing interest without micromanaging, listening to remote workers, and showing empathy (Allen and Birrell).

When considering the specific needs of faculty mothers, supervisors play an important role in lowering the experience of work-nonwork conflict. Research by Hilpi Kangas and colleagues suggests that focussed support around family matters, known as family social supportive behaviours, can be more effective than general social support in reducing employee-work-family conflict. Such behaviours include displaying empathy and understanding when employees face family demands while working.

Notably, such family-supportive behaviours by supervisors increase remote workers' control of their boundaries, one of the main determinants of burnout (Kangas et al.). Supportive supervisor behaviours also buffer against negative work experiences. Department heads can reinforce healthy coping skills, allowing faculty to handle work-related challenges better and improving wellbeing (Capone et al.).

## Creating a Culture of Remote Work: What Can We Imagine?

Remote work is not a panacea, and such a simple solution is unlikely to remedy the enormous challenges mothers in academia face. Employees vary dramatically in their preference for this form of work (Qureshi et al.), and remote work can exacerbate issues of marginalization and underrepresentation, increasing the exclusion of minoritized populations (Qureshi et al.). Although

many remote workers report a decrease in microaggressions and an increase in psychological safety when they work remotely (Lebron et al.), there is also evidence to suggest that microaggressions carry over to remote situations in equally insidious ways (Lopes et al.). Furthermore, there are also potential issues around which faculty chairs, deans, and other administrators are willing to support in remote roles. Traditional privileges around gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, among others, are unfortunately also likely to limit those who can access remote roles and those who cannot.

It is also possible that being a remote employee and a mother will increase negative biases about the woman's commitment to her professional role, thus stymieing her opportunities for promotion. For example, by not being physically present in department meetings that take place in person, remote workers may lose their voice in departmental decisions. The onus for negating such eventualities lies in department leadership creating a culture valuing all department members, whether in person or not.

Nevertheless, what remote work can do is allow us to rethink traditional notions of time and space in higher education (Qureshi et al.) and, in so doing, reimagine some of the structures that limit the well-being of academic mothers. As noted by Allison Gabriel and colleagues, what would happen if we allowed mothers the creativity and flexibility to imagine a work life that worked for them rather than requiring that they work only within a highly patriarchal system? Critically, the accessibility "provided by remote and part-time employment has been identified as a feminist issue that accommodates female academics to balance work and family caregiving responsibilities" (Toner et al. 683). Thus, by rethinking the structures of academia often seen as unbending, we might create a future wherein everyone can thrive, not just some.

*In my experience, remote work has offered a path supporting my academic career and life as a mother of four more thoroughly than anything I ever experienced working on campus. As a remote faculty member in a tenured position, I teach my high-enrollment undergraduate courses online but have been given the flexibility to manage my class sizes by teaching in blocks of seven weeks rather than the traditional sixteen-week semester. I also meet regularly with students in my virtual research lab, exploring and discussing meaningful ideas for research. Remote work has allowed me to pause when necessary to think and explore creative avenues for research ventures. As noted by other academics in remote positions, the ability to think uninterrupted is one of the great benefits of working remotely (Gabriel et al.).*

*In my sphere, remote work has allowed me to integrate work and family rather than fighting untenable structures that pitted one against the other. I can handle unexpected issues with my children and then flow right back into handling a teaching-related email or pop into a Zoom meeting. There is no longer the same stress*

*and friction between my roles as a mother and faculty member as there once was. To me, this has been the greatest revelation of all. As Amy Allen and Lori Birrell write, "Looking ahead, employees and managers alike should leverage these experiences (of the Pandemic)—the good, the bad, and in-between, to establish new norms that prioritize the needs of individuals and recognize that work will not and should not look the same as it did in February 2020" (413). I hope my remote work experiences can allow others in similar situations to rethink their work structures in a way that works for them and that university leaders will support the self-determination of their employees.*

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