

## FOCUS ON FACULTY RESEARCH

### **Caring During Covid: An Exacerbated Burden for Gender-Marginalized Faculty**

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#### **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted university faculty in profound ways, particularly those who are marginalized by gender. While social and institutional injustices have always existed for these faculty, stressors related to caregiving during a global pandemic have exacerbated inequities related to distribution of care work at home and teaching and caring for students. This amplification of inequities has affected the health and well-being of gender-marginalized faculty, as well as their professional careers. The multi-method qualitative research study described in this report, through a survey and follow-up interviews, examined the impact of caregiving on gender-marginalized faculty at Brandon University during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from the study illustrate the problematic nature of caregiving for faculty marginalized by gender, the toll it has taken during a global crisis, and the imperative to equitably recognize, value, and compensate such work.*

The global COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in the Canadian government declaring a state of emergency in March 2020, has had profound and widespread impacts. Various articles have been written demonstrating the inequitable impacts of the pandemic on those who are systemically disadvantaged, including burdens related to health, finances, isolation, and even loss of life. University faculty at Brandon University (BU) and elsewhere have not been immune to such systemic challenges. One such area of challenge is related to caregiving roles, particularly on the part of gender-marginalized faculty. In a 2021 study, Górska, Kulicka, Staniszevska, and Dobija noted that “the pandemic has acutely made visible the fact that female academics’ career progression is jeopardized by factors that have nothing to do with their effort, intellectual skill, and merit, but result from women’s primary responsibility for care” (p. 1555). The same can be said for gender-marginalized faculty at Brandon University, a term we define as all faculty marginalized by gender, including (but not limited to) cis or trans women, and non-binary, trans or Two Spirit individuals.

In the fall of 2020, a subcommittee of the Status of Women Review Committee (SWRC), a joint committee of Brandon University and the Brandon University Faculty Association (BUFA) that is committed to equal opportunities for marginalized genders at the university, embarked upon a study to look at the specific and distinct impacts of the pandemic on gender-marginalized faculty members. Through an online survey followed by individual interviews with BUFA members, gender-marginalized faculty were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their teaching, research and creative practice, caregiving responsibilities, administrative duties, service, vacation/time off, and their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. While we left the definition of caregiving open for study participants to interpret, our analysis aligns broadly with the notion of “carework:” the unequally distributed and gendered work, both unpaid and paid, of caring for family, friends, and others that enables the continuation of life (Misra, 2007). This paper, which focuses on the pandemic-related impacts of this notion of caregiving, outlines the many ways caring for children, adults, elders, and students amplified existing inequities within academe, affecting the work, personal lives and health of faculty marginalized by gender.

## Relevant Literature

Institutional inequities for gender-marginalized academics have been cited in literature for some time. For example, gender-marginalized faculty tend to hold fewer high-ranking positions in academic contexts (Acker et al., 2012; Cook, 2018; Marsden et al., 2012; Snow, 2017), more positions in less prestigious institutions (August & Waltman, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017), more positions as lecturers as opposed to tenure track positions (Acker et al., 2012; August & Waltman; Serrano, 2008; Snow, 2017), and fewer positions in fields such as mathematics and science (Gardner, 2013). According to Gardner (2013), women academics also have lower rates of tenure and promotion, heavier teaching loads, higher service responsibilities, and lower salaries than their male counterparts, and face gendered environments that can be hostile to work in (e.g., where their research and opinions are discounted or where they are not considered for positions with more power). Such inequities certainly contribute to decreased job satisfaction for gender-marginalized faculty, as well as the increased likelihood that they will leave academia both pre- or post-tenure (August & Waltman, 2004; Gardner, 2013; Gonzalez, 2018; Serrano, 2008).

Academic culture has also historically created inequities for gender-marginalized faculty. Influenced by notions of the ideal or universal (male) worker who is entirely dedicated to his work (Acker, 1990; Harris & Gonzalez, 2012; Serrano, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017), academia has undergone what is referred to as “academic/upward drift” (Gardner, 2013), creating a situation in which research and publications are valued above other (more feminized) elements of academic work such as teaching and service. This upward drift, which is linked to inequitable tenure/promotion rates, salaries, workloads, and access to positions, has contributed to a devaluing of certain forms of knowledge, expertise, and work in academe. For example, professional expertise in fields such as healthcare and education, fields that are predominantly occupied by gender-marginalized faculty, is often not highly valued in university contexts (Acker, 1997; Kornelson, 2017). Other forms of feminized knowledge, expertise and work are also devalued, or even denigrated, in academic culture, including qualitative research, teaching, and service work (Harris & Gonzalez, 2012). Such a culture creates inequities for gender-marginalized faculty, forcing them to be more careful about how they spend their time in order to avoid the consequences of engaging in devalued or “institutionally invisible” work (Hill, 2020).

The personal lives of gender-marginalized academics are also somewhat unique in that they tend to live “linked-lives” when it comes to career and family, each impacting the other (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016). In spite of typically working a 55-hour work week (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005), many gender-marginalized faculty engage in what Snow (2017) refers to as the “second shift,” caring for elderly family members and/or children after work in their personal lives, and taking responsibility for a disproportionately higher amount of household duties than their male counterparts (Acker et al., 2016; August & Waltman, 2004; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Snow, 2017). This can make it more difficult for gender-marginalized faculty to achieve the increasing expectations of university contexts, forcing them to continuously negotiate career and personal lives (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016; 2017). For many, sleeplessness, fatigue, guilt, stress, loss of leisure time, and mental health concerns are the result, particularly for those new to academe and trying to get tenure (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Chambers, 2017; Gereluk, 2020; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Snow, 2017; Stoesz, 2020).

Recent literature on the impact of COVID-19 on gender-marginalized faculty has pointed out that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing institutional and contextual inequities in academe. According to Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021), women academics with children have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due largely to the traditionally gendered and unequal distribution of caregiving and household labour. This disproportionate distribution has hindered the productivity and research capacities of gender-marginalized academics, causing

what many are referring to as a #coronapublicationgap (Oleschuck, 2020). While many male faculty members have reported having more time to engage in research during the pandemic, regardless of their family situations, gender-marginalized academics have paid a penalty for being mothers as their research and publications have suffered (Górska et al., 2021). They have also seen an increase in the “invisible academic work” (Górska et al., 2021) or “institutionally invisible work” (Hill, 2020) that they have traditionally been expected to assume at greater rates than their male counterparts as they have navigated new ways of teaching and supported students through transitions to online learning (Górska et al., 2021).

## Methods

A multi-disciplinary research team, with representatives from a variety of faculties across Brandon University including Science, Education, Music, Health Studies, Arts, and Student Services, collaborated on this multi-method qualitative research project to identify how the global pandemic has affected the research, creative practice, teaching, and service of faculty marginalized by gender. Phase one of the study included an anonymous online survey sent from the university faculty association to all members. Respondents provided consent for the survey then answered open-ended questions that addressed the impact of the pandemic on their research and creative practices, caregiving responsibilities, vacation, administrative duties, teaching, well-being and supports. The survey was open to respondents during the month of December in 2020. Preliminary analysis of the survey responses guided the creation of prompts and questions used in the individual interviews that made up the second phase of the research.

Respondents were offered an opportunity to participate in the individual interviews at the end of the survey. Any interested individuals identified themselves to a research team member who was not a member of the faculty association. This research team member conducted all the individual interviews and anonymized the interview transcripts to ensure the remaining research team members were not aware of participants' identities. The semi-structured interview questions included similar questions to the survey, but with more prompts to promote deeper responses from the participants. Additionally, a question was asked within the interview to better understand the impact of the pandemic on academic service, which the research team felt was missing in the original survey. Zoom technology was used to record and transcribe the interviews, which each lasted approximately one hour. Analysis for both the surveys and interviews occurred individually, with members of the research team coding independently, then joining together to identify key themes and insights collaboratively as a group. This manuscript focuses on one of the overarching themes identified in both the surveys and interviews: the impact of caregiving responsibilities on gender-marginalized faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the full report, see (Chamberlain et al., 2021).

## Participants

Most of the survey respondents were Assistant, Associate, or full Professors (n=26). The role of the other respondents is identified in Table 1. Respondents came from a variety of Faculties within the University and had varied years of experience (see Table 1). Most participants identified as women and one identified as queer femme. Six participants identified as Indigenous, Black, racialized, a person of colour or a visible minority, while all other participants did not.

**Table 1**  
*Demographics of Survey Respondents*

Demographic	Number of Respondents
<b>Rank or Classification</b>	
Professor (Assistant, Associate or Full)	26
Instructor	2
Instructional Associate	2
Administrative Associate	3
Professional Associate	2
No Response	1
<b>Faculty</b>	
Arts	13
Education	7
Health Studies	4
School of Music	2
Science	6
Student Services	3
No Response	1
<b>Years at University</b>	
0-1	7
1-5	5
6-10	7
10+	15
No Response	2
<b>Note:</b> While traditionally we refer to “faculty” as those members of BUFA working in the Faculties of Arts, Science, Education, Music or Health Studies, for the purposes of this report, we use the term “faculty” more broadly to include all BUFA members in teaching and non-teaching roles at BU.	

Individual interviews were conducted with eight people offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms. The only demographic information collected from interview participants was their role and positions in the university. At the time of the interviews, Amanda and Tannis were both Assistant Professors in tenure-track positions, whereas Mary, Rachel, Vicky, and P03 were tenured Associate or Full Professors. Julie and Christine were both faculty within student services.

### Results

Caregiving responsibilities for gender-marginalized faculty at Brandon University were profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the survey respondents, 25 out of 36 described an increase in their caregiving responsibilities and/or higher levels of stress related to the well-being of both their family members and students. Moreover, all 8 of the participants who chose to be interviewed for the study reported increases in caregiving responsibilities that impacted their physical and mental health, and their ability to balance their work lives (particularly their research) with their home/personal lives. Despite being open to sharing their struggles on surveys and in interviews, several participants in the study expressed a fear of acknowledging the impact increased caregiving was having on their research and work performance. Mistrust and worry about judgement at various levels of the institution (including for achieving tenure and/or promotion) was a common thread in participant comments.

## **Childcare**

Caring for children was a primary stressor for gender-marginalized faculty members with young families. In addition to the University pivoting to online learning in March of 2020, daycares and schools were also impacted, throwing many families into chaos. Many participants in the study indicated that they bore a greater percentage of the burden this placed on their families, frequently having to deal with their own move to online teaching and the remote learning of their children simultaneously. One survey respondent described the impact of caring for children the following way:

Childcare responsibilities increased substantially by having children unexpectedly out of school for most of spring and then having little options for summer shared caregiving. In addition, childcare responsibilities have increased in the fall due to needing to take children out of school for any sniffle and not being able to rely on after-school or before-school options. We also used to be able to call on extended family for childcare on Professional Development days and this is no longer possible. (Survey #27)

Several participants echoed these sentiments, including the inability to have grandparents (or other family members at higher risk of severe COVID outcomes) care for children. Such burdens were even more intense for faculty members who were the parents/caregivers of children with physical or learning disabilities as evidenced in the following comment:

Ugh. I have a son with special needs who did not react well to the sudden shut down of school in the spring. It was awful. As a single parent, juggling work and him at home would have been impossible if I had not qualified for additional provincially funded respite assistance. As it was, I had to take far more time off work when he was sick. . . While my Dean was always understanding and supportive, I still felt guilt, you know? (Survey #20)

Comments such as the one above stood out in the data, making clear not only the inequitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities, but also the range of responsibilities that existed amongst gender-marginalized faculty members.

Participants in the study described several of the impacts that increased childcare responsibilities had on them personally and professionally. General physical symptoms such as fatigue, brain fog, and difficulty focusing were identified, as were the impacts of dealing with the remote learning of children as a “draw on time, emotional energy and my teaching abilities” (Rachel Interview). Several participants described the difficulties they encountered trying to conduct research, think deeply and write alongside of children engaging in remote learning at home, coping with frequent interruptions throughout the day. The result of such interruptions was a perceived decrease in research outputs, something that caused participants significant stress. Finally, mental health concerns surfaced in relation to the burden felt by gender-marginalized faculty dealing with increased childcare responsibilities. With childcare taking up more time, participants noted that they had less time available for self-care and physical activity, further exacerbating stressors. One participant even reported deteriorating mental health that led to self-harm.

## **Adult/Elder Care**

Participants in the study described a variety of situations in which they experienced increased caregiving responsibilities for adult family members and friends. One category of

adults requiring additional caregiving during the pandemic was that of adult children as evidenced in the following statement:

I do not have young children, but my adult children have really struggled with the pandemic in terms of finding work, dealing with online learning, etc. The added burden of their struggles was difficult for me as a mother. I tried my best to help them negotiate the pandemic, on top of what I was dealing with. My partner and I do not divide this type of emotional labour equally in my household; The weight of their struggles was born primarily by me. (Survey #3)

In addition to adult children, participants noted that many other adults in their lives (e.g., partners, siblings, friends, parents, grandparents) also had a variety of needs related to the pandemic or their personal health that required additional caregiving (e.g., stress due to unemployment, recent surgeries or medical crises, adults with disabilities, isolated parents and grandparents). One survey respondent wrote the following:

My Mom lives in a care home. I am her essential visitor. They only allow us to come in from 1-4 pm from Monday to Friday. That's right in the middle of my day. . . So, many days I visit my Mom in the afternoon and work in the evening to make up for it but that means that my personal time gets whittled away to very little. (Survey #8)

Data from the study suggested that while all adult caregiving added additional pressure for gender-marginalized faculty, the well-being of elderly family members was as significant a concern as caring for children, likely due to the vulnerability of this demographic in relation to the COVID virus. Some faculty described their attempts to support elderly family members who were isolated during lock-downs, bringing them groceries and checking in on them, while others described an immense amount of worry about the well-being of elderly relatives living at a distance. According to participants, such stress and anxiety affected their mental health and productivity.

Grief and loss also affected some of the respondents in the study. Two respondents reported a close elderly family member dying. One noted that they had little time to grieve and to process the loss with the added pressures of moving to online teaching and other factors impacting their time. Responsibilities related to funeral arrangements and estate planning were added to the already heavy loads of these faculty members, something that was further complicated by pandemic restrictions.

### **Care for Students**

Most of the participants in the study described an increase in the amount of care needed by students during the pandemic. On top of moving to online instruction, the faculty who participated in the study felt compelled to support their students by providing more contact time with students, being flexible and accommodating, extending deadlines, altering assignments, and providing extra help. In her interview, Rachel provided a good description of why this was necessary, the amount of work she engaged in to support students, and the impact this had on her teaching capacity:

A lot of worry and anxiety about students. I would say yes. And it's mostly to do with supporting students who are in all sorts of dire pandemic-related predicaments. They're either directly pandemic-related, where I've had students who caught COVID and their whole family caught COVID, and

COVID was running through their community, their remote community, and so it slowed down their ability to complete the course. I've had other students who are having financial problems because they've lost their job and so I'm having to support them in getting through the course and those circumstances and make adjustments in some cases to deadlines. I have students who are ill, in other circumstances, who need adjustments to the course and if there wasn't a pandemic on, they might be able to be doing better but it's not safe for them to be out moving in the world. I have folks who are new parents, who are having challenges with new babies and trying to get coursework done. And I, you know, feel very strongly about wanting to support all the students and so that's really messed with my ability to follow normal teaching timelines, the ability to do all of my marking at once, my ability to get all of my marking back, get all of the grades in on time (Rachel, interview).

In addition to teaching and supporting students academically, participants in the study also spoke about the need to care for students' emotional and mental well-being. Many of the respondents described how they felt a moral obligation to check in on students and make themselves available to students for support. One survey participant said the following about the ways in which they cared for students and the impact this had on them personally:

The boundaries are very fuzzy. Students contact me at all odd hours, and again as my work/home boundary is tarnished, I tend to answer students on weekends, [at] midnight, early in the morning. In some cases, since students are not in physical contact with me, they become rude and hostile, which I have successfully managed the unacceptable behaviors. In addition, I am becoming more of [a] therapist for isolated students. For some, I am their only external source of communication, and I feel responsible for their mental health well-being. I feel overworked and underpaid. (Survey #10)

Several of the participants in the study mentioned the deterioration of home/work boundaries, noting that this had a negative impact on their own health and well-being. Many of the participants also indicated that they experienced significant stress and anxiety in relation to struggles their students were experiencing, and that caring for students at this time required a significant expenditure of time and energy over and above their usual teaching responsibilities. While this ultimately benefitted the university in terms of retaining and supporting students, it frequently had a detrimental effect on gender-marginalized faculty who engaged in sound educational practices, educating the whole student within the extreme context of online learning in a pandemic.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study illustrate that the gender-based inequities that are well-documented at other academic institutions are also shaping the lives and careers of gender-marginalized faculty at Brandon University. Faculty members who are marginalized by gender have long been known to spend more time engaging in teaching and service, work that is not valued as highly as research and publications in academe (Gardner, 2013; Harris & Gonzalez, 2012). This study highlights what "invisible academic work" (Górska et al., 2021) or "institutionally invisible work" (Hill, 2020) looks like and how it inequitably affects gender-marginalized faculty. Success in academe is not typically measured by how many students one has successfully mentored (Larson, 2008), and the caring and emotional labour that can play an integral, gendered role in teaching are not always institutionally perceived or celebrated (Larson,

2008; Rose & Adams, 2014). Yet, whether or not women faculty conform to prevailing gender stereotypes, including displaying care and sensitivity, impacts how they are evaluated by students (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022). At the same time, caring for students is made more difficult by online teaching environments, which disrupt the relational dynamic and produce a “tyranny of availability” (Rose & Adams, 2014). Together, the intensified caring expectations placed on gender-marginalized faculty served to negatively impact them as they found they had less energy to engage in work that garnered higher institutional value, which ultimately translates to job security, accolades, and pay. One participant in the study said, “I no longer have time to do research. Too busy preparing for courses, performing pastoral functions for students, and being stressed about the pandemic” (Survey #32). Moreover, the greedy nature of “academic/upward drift” (Gardner, 2013) and institutional expectations about research and publication left participants feeling vulnerable as expressed in Rachel’s statement:

The scholarly side has definitely suffered. And I’m scared to say this stuff, I’m scared that administration is going to hear women and women-identified scholars as not being productive during this and we’re, you know, we’re a liability somehow to the university, so it is scary to even come out and suggest or admit that I haven’t been as productive as I normally might be (Rachel, interview).

Fear about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job security and career advancement permeated the comments of several participants, particularly those early on in their careers, and they anticipated judgement rather than support from the academic institution. Such comments illustrated the complex ways in which caregiving affected not only the careers of participants, but their sense of peace, their stress levels, and their feelings of self-efficacy.

Findings from the research study also illustrated the extent to which gender-marginalized faculty members’ personal and work lives are linked, as other studies have previously underscored (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016). During the pandemic, participants didn’t engage in a “second shift” (Snow, 2017), but rather a “parallel shift” as they juggled their work lives, including complicated teaching assignments and struggling students, and caregiving responsibilities for the children, adults, and elders in their lives. Amplified by pre-existing inequities related to the distribution of household duties (Acker et al., 2016; August & Waltman, 2004; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Snow, 2017), participants in the study experienced extreme fatigue, guilt about not doing enough at home or at work, stress about the inadequacy of their research agendas and/or achieving tenure/promotion, and disproportionate anxiety and stress about the well-being of family members. All parts of the linked lives lived by gender-marginalized faculty members in the study were impacted by the pandemic, resulting in not only a linear increase in stress, but one that was compounded or exponential in nature.

Finally, the research study conducted at Brandon University both aligned with and extended points raised in earlier research pertaining to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender-marginalized faculty. On one hand, participants indicated that those with children endured multiple stressors that disproportionately affected them, as was clear in the work of Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021). What was evident from the participants in this study, however, was that such stressors were even more significant for gender-marginalized faculty who had children with disabilities and/or health concerns. Additionally, the participants in the study experienced significant impacts in dealing with adults and elderly parents or grandparents as well. For the participants in this study, disproportionate impacts existed for all forms of caregiving, not just caregiving related to children. The study also aligned with previous work that suggested the gendered nature of the transformation of academic work has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Górska et al., 2021). The critical caring that gender-marginalized faculty performed during a global public health emergency, for family, friends, and students, and by extension for the community and university, took a significant toll on these faculty members,



while it benefited the people around them. The study offers an opportunity for university communities to consider not only the gendered nature of how academic work is being transformed, but also how better to support each other in times of crisis, and how better to recognize and compensate the work that gender-marginalized faculty do.

## Conclusion

The experiences of gender-marginalized faculty at Brandon University during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate why pre-existing institutional inequities and the gendered nature of the transformation of academic work are extremely problematic. Pre-COVID, gender-marginalized faculty at Brandon University, like elsewhere, participated in teaching and service work at greater levels than their male counterparts and took on a disproportionate amount of care work in both their closely linked home and work lives. For these faculty, the pandemic was an extreme stressor, a detonator of sorts, that compounded the multiple impacts of institutional inequity in profound ways. Only time will tell what the long-term effects will be for these faculty members. If institutions *care* enough to *care* for gender-marginalized faculty as they continue to *care* for their students, it must remain a topic of study and be considered both in the overall well-being of gender-marginalized faculty and in tenure and promotion processes.

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