

Wednesday late afternoon session Track A, Wednesday, Sep 24 2025, 14:00-15:30

Location: Main Hall

Session: Power Dynamics

Chair: Dejan Jontes

OR-35

Unequal Burdens: Power, Gender and the Impact of Covid-19 on Women in Academia

Giulia Inguaggiato¹, Claudia Pallise Perello¹, Petra Verdonk¹, Pamela Andanda², Mariette van den Hoven¹, Linda Schoonmade³, Natalie Evans¹

¹Amsterdam UMC, Netherlands

²University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

³Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands

The Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a stress test for existing institutional and societal structures, exposing and intensifying deeply rooted power imbalances. In academia the crisis has exacerbated and revealed pre-existing inequalities; women researchers have been disproportionately affected, not simply due to individual circumstances, but as a consequence of structural inequalities embedded in the academic system. This study systematically scopes the qualitative literature on the experiences of women researchers during the Covid-19 pandemic, interrogating how they navigated and responded to the crisis.

The analysis reveals how gendered power structures operating at the intersection of institutional expectations, household responsibilities, and socio-demographic positionalities, have exacerbated existing inequalities in the academic system. Increased unpaid and paid care responsibilities, often rendered invisible and undervalued, and consequential loss of research time have significantly hindered women's professional advancement. These effects are not uniform but are determined by intersecting factors such as parenting status, employment precarity, and socio-economic background, demonstrating how multiple axes of inequality converge in crisis contexts.

Three overarching themes emerged from the synthesis: gendered professional expectations, conflicting identities, and coping strategies. These themes highlight the gendered allocation of academic labour, particularly the disproportionate expectation that women engage in care, teaching, and service work. These forms of labour are essential to the functioning of academia, especially in times of crisis, yet remain undervalued and unrewarded in the dominant research assessment system. Such practices reflect and reinforce hierarchies of power that prioritize measurable outputs and individual achievement, while devaluing relational and collective forms of academic labour.

The study reveals that these gendered dynamics contribute to feelings of alienation and burnout among women researchers, who are often caught between institutional demands and societal gender normative expectations. In this context, coping strategies are not merely personal acts of resilience but also reflect broader negotiations with power within an inequitable system.

The current division of labour in academia reflects gendered power dynamics that operate both within academic institutions and the broader social context. These dynamics are reinforced by research assessment criteria that prioritize productivity, often perpetuating structural (gender) inequalities. Meanwhile, essential yet undervalued tasks such as pastoral care, teaching, and service work remain critical to the functioning of academic systems, particularly during times of crisis. To foster greater resilience in these systems, it is crucial to recognize and support those who take on, or are assigned, these indispensable tasks. This includes making mentoring, education and pastoral care work explicit, valued, and rewarded responsibilities for all academics. Additionally, shifting institutional priorities to value team-based contributions over the individualistic pressures of the 'publish or perish' model can help create a more equitable academic environment.