Negotiating Spaces, Exercising Agency and Managing Multiple Roles: The Lived Experiences of University of Ghana Women Academics under COVID-19

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Abstract

This article interrogates the lived experiences of women academics at the University of Ghana (UG) between March 2020 and March 2021. It highlights their emotions and care decisions as they navigated through the multiple spheres of their lives – physical, emotional, and financial – while meeting the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It further interrogates the innovative ways female academics handled the state and UG's responses to COVID-19 protocols while endeavouring to meet their career responsibilities amidst an increased familial, institutional, and community care burden. We find that women academics at UG reported to have worked under intense stress and strain to meet their family care obligations and the demands of their jobs as three levels of mothering – biological, othermothering and community mothering – dominated participants' narratives of their pandemic experiences. It is also observed that self-reported productivity levels, including research and writing, dropped drastically for most women academics as demands for care increased, and this lack of productivity resulted in anxiety. This is because the women academics prioritised the safety of their families, communities, and the University over their career progression during the lockdown. Moreover, the COVID-19 restrictions limited extended family members from reducing the care burden on women academics specifically during the lockdown. To deal with the anxiety and stress, some women academics found respite in institutional and social level networks. However, the women academics also acknowledged that working from home was beneficial because they were able to combine their childcare responsibilities with their academic work.

Introduction

This paper analyses the lived experiences of women academics at the University of Ghana (UG) during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021. It further interrogates how women academics navigated state and UG's responses to the pandemic while endeavouring to fulfill their career responsibilities amidst an increased familial, institutional and community care burden. Generally, COVID-19 dramatically increased women's care burden because of lockdowns, school closures, strict physical distancing, and high levels of morbidity and mortality (Burki, 2020). For women academics working in a sector that is inherently male-centric and male-dominated, which made marginal changes in productivity demands even amid a global crisis, it is essential to understand how they navigated the pandemic and the extent to which their productivity levels were affected. Generally, there is no evidence that research and publication requirements of academics, being the most arduous of all the assessment requirements, were revised in cognisance of the impact of the pandemic on academic staff, let alone to consider how such impacts are gendered. In the African region, the context of resource limitations for academic work, socio-cultural demands on women, and high teaching workloads are likely to complicate the ability of female academics to thrive and achieve their career goals. At the same time, women in Africa have been acclaimed for their agency and resilience in handling difficult situations (Tsikata, 2007; Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2011; Chitsamatanga *et al*., 2018). In this paper, we analyse the gender roles played by female academics and how these roles deepen their career vulnerabilities in the wake of the COVID pandemic. In our analyses of primary data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), we explore the interactions between female academics' expression of their gender roles, particularly motherhood (be it familial or social), and their expression of agency in a global crisis. We further interrogate the extent to which such interactions enable their career advancement.

Generally, the global COVID-19 pandemic, associated with quarantines, contact tracing, lockdowns, physical distancing, and school closures, has turned homes into the locus for increased family caregiving and paid work for most women. This shift created both opportunities and challenges for women. Psycho-social reactions, such as increased levels of anxiety, fear, trauma, social isolation, and stigmatisation have been noted among women (Turabian, 2020). COVID-19-related reproductive health issues, domestic violence, and various forms of abuse and exploitation have also been recorded (Alon *et al*., 2020; Anurudran *et al*., 2020;

Turabian, 2020). With classrooms moving into people's living spaces, mothers bear the more significant burden of homeschooling and domestic duties, and must juggle that with their work or studies. The adjustment has not been easy for many women (Alon *et al.,* 2020; Burki, 2020). The intersections of gender, age, position, occupation, and class has had an impact on how the pandemic affected the lives of women.

The gig economy is the most obvious sector with the direst pandemic impact. Naturally, most of the literature on COVID-19 and employment for women has focused on informal jobs, in particular service sectors such as hospitality, health, and tourism. This narrow focus left gaps in existing literature, thereby calling for more research on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education (Tu *et al.*, 2021). In education, the focus has been on pre-tertiary education, staff layoffs and the provision of online teaching (Vlachopoulos, 2020). Few studies address how women in institutions of higher learning, being in supposedly secure and high-status occupations, are impacted by COVID-19, less so examining its possible impact on their productivity and potentially on their career progression. It remains uncertain if COVID-19 has eroded any gains made in gender parity in the male-dominated field of academia, where females generally experience structural and practical barriers to their productivity and career progression. While a couple of studies conducted in the Global North have interrogated how female academics experienced COVID-19, the context in African universities is unknown (Couch, 2021).

Globally, women constitute a small percentage of academics in higher education, with only a small proportion of them attaining positions of power and decision-making (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016). Once recruited, females in the knowledge arena need to manage and cope with the ever-demanding tasks of teaching and grading, writing research grant applications, researching and publishing, mentoring, tutoring, doing committee work, reviewing papers, student research supervision, and community service. Generally, career progression including academic promotion and accessing leadership positions is key to job retention. Reasons for female academics' measured ability to navigate their career expectations and to progress at par with their male counterparts have been dominated by the former's reproductive and familial care burdens, the glass-ceiling of patriarchal institutional cultures, unsupportive male colleagues, insufficient mentoring opportunities and institutional policies which do not favour female academics (Chitsamatanga *et al.*, 2018). Undue stress has been observed among female academics in South Africa,

who find their work more stressful than men, albeit being able to cope better with the demands of intellectual labour than men (Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2011; Mlambo and Mabokela, 2015). They are also more likely to suffer occupational burnout (Bezuidenhout and Cilliers, 2011). Coincidentally, only a few women progress to top managerial positions; there is therefore a lack of a critical mass of females in positions of power to create the needed gender reforms in institutional policies (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016; Liani *et al*., 2020).

In Africa, the progression of female academics has been further impeded by insufficient research funds, inadequate scientific training, high teaching load, lack of relevant professional networks, and constraints from gendered social and familial norms (Tsikata, 2007; Riordan and Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Oti, 2013). At the same time, they may be classified into the upper echelon of the middle class, being high-status urban women in the bottom of the top wealth quintile. Their status as privileged and knowledgeable women also places enormous social and financial responsibilities on them beyond their immediate families, particularly their elderly kinsfolk. Compared with female academics in the Global North, female academics in Africa may be more likely to access kin support and find relatively cheaper domestic services for their domestic reproductive work. However, in a dispensation where the COVID-19 pandemic has evoked intense fear of contagion, mandatory social isolation, and physical distancing rules, many women academics were left on their own to manage caring and family responsibilities (Guy and Arthur, 2020; Fulweiler *et al*., 2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the multiple populations in the higher education ecosystem deserves research attention. The changing dynamics of higher institutions during the pandemic will have lasting effects on teaching delivery and learning requirements and the conditions under which research is conducted (Marinoni *et al*., 2020). The added focus on teaching and learning through distant and virtual platforms has been accompanied with dwindling research funding. Furthermore, students and staff face unprecedented challenges including access to technical infrastructure, competences and pedagogies for distance learning, and the requirements of specific fields of study, while offering opportunities for flexible learning possibilities (Marinoni *et al*., 2020). The shifts that most universities made including campus closures, moving classes online and other efforts to mitigate contagion were also witnessed at UG as it sought to assume its responsibilities to society. The response by the UG was both similar to other institutions across Africa

and was targeted to address its specific features as one of the oldest and one of the larger public institutions in Ghana. The UG, being the premier tertiary institution in Ghana as of July 2020 has a female faculty population of 366, constituting 26% of all faculty. The gender biases in higher education manifesting through the demands of knowledge, labour, social, personal, and institutional barriers to women's career growth and the gendered effects of COVID-19 have greatly impacted women faculty. This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of women faculty members in the COVID-19 era at the UG concerning their family, community, and the university.

In this paper, we analyse the gender roles played by women academics and how these roles deepen their career vulnerabilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We interrogate the extent to which their lived experiences model the normative gender roles of "mothering" (biological or social) and interact with their academic productivity. In a country where most poor people are females, and only about 3% of women 40–49 years old are educated above secondary level, female academics hold special places in their lineages to mentor and "mother" younger family members. This research does not seek to measure women's career progression at the UG during the study period. Instead, the lived experiences of women participants will highlight the challenges and opportunities women faced at the university during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which would impact their career progression in a few years to come.

Contextual Bases of the Study of Family Systems, Feminisation of Care, and COVID-19

African family systems are undergoing rapid transformations characterised by urbanisation, long(er) years spent in education and training for females and employment outside the home - leading to a weakening of lineage bonds of support and care for families (Ocholla Ayayo, 2000; Nukunya, 2003; Oppong, 2006). Traditional fostering practices that provided a secure stream of younger relatives in the home have declined (Afrifa, 2010). Marriages have also become more nuclearised, obligations toward kinship groups have declined and the traditional involvement of the matrikin in caring roles is fast eroding (Oppong, 2004). To fill the enormous gap in family support and care, many middle-class women in nuclear households outsource care and housework to domestic workers and nannies (Tsikata *et al.*, 2012). Until recently, families that engaged professionals or other paid workers to care intimately for the aged or seriously ill at home were frequently stigmatised.

This "outsourcing" is seen as a sign of family dysfunction or downright wickedness (Atobrah, 2009; Agyei-Mensah and de Graft Aikins, 2010). Although historically men contributed materially to the care of kin throughout Africa, the female kin are mainly responsible for providing everyday care (Atobrah, 2013).

Despite the changes in kinship support, "popular culture homogenises the characteristics of an ideal woman as a natural, committed, faithful, and effective nurturer of the species who embraces domesticity, cooks for her family (preferably fresh food daily) and sees to the efficient and seamless management of her home" (Atobrah and Adomako Ampofo, 2016: 178). With COVID-19 domesticating women academics as they work from home, their likelihood of fully resuming their "traditional mandate" and performing normative femininity is high. At the same time, the requirements of academia take no cognisance of women's increased care burden during the pandemic. This is because mothering, othermothering, and community mothering, as Wane (2000) indicated, are rooted in the African philosophy that children belong to their biological parents and the whole community. As such, a "good woman" is expected to also mother the other children in her kin group and in her community without necessarily keeping them under her roof.

At this point, we find it important to reflect on the relationship between the management of the COVID-19 crisis and performance of female academics. In reference to COVID-19 responses and women's increased care burden, Branicki (2020: 873) argues compellingly that "how a crisis is managed has both material and ethical consequences". She decries the inherently military and behaviourist approaches to crisis management, pointing to how such seemingly neutral responses are imbued with masculine logic and punish women. Drawing on the ethics of care analysis by Gilligan (1993), Branicki (2020) calls us to consider the relational aspects of crisis management and the caring relationships and duties required in crises instead of merely focusing on neoliberal and economic interests in crisis responses. She calls for a feminist logic of crisis that takes note of and accounts for women's care provisioning to sustain human connections and keep everyone in the web. For Branicki (2020), "the principal ethical orientation of classical crisis management is egoistic, calculative and broadly utilitarian" (2020: 875). This is unfortunate and corroborates the assertion of Held (2006) that "turning everyone into a liberal individual leaves no one adequately attentive to relationships between persons, whether they be caring relations within the family or social relations holding communities together" (2006: 95).

With special focus on the university in Africa, we contend that these spaces that are inherently male-dominated threaten the very existence of women academics. Barnes (2007) argues that "the colonial project was the feminisation of African "maleness". This trend was reversed immediately following independence, and universities became the site for reclaiming manhood. African universities under this "new-men" approach elevate men as thinkers, debaters, athletes and where "boys became men" (Barnes, 2007). Despite the transformations the African university has undergone since independence, there exists both a practical and ideological bias against women faculty. Mama (2006) contends that African universities should be places of knowledge creation and research and should be free of gender inequalities. She argues that in addressing gender disparities in African universities, there are three steps to address issues of gender equity.

The UG's institutional culture is consistent with the patriarchal nature of typical gender roles in Ghana. This culture manifests through formal and informal interactions. In a study conducted in (2007) by Manuh et al. that focused on Universities in Ghana, women academics remarked that they were encouraged to place greater emphasis on their accomplishments as mothers and wives over their academic pursuits. Some women were encouraged to put (Mrs) in front of their official title to reinforce this commitment (Manuh et al., 2007). This culture is still prevalent today as numerous women at the University of Ghana are viewed as (Mrs) as a precursor to their academic position. Debates and discussions about gender at the UG are often relegated to CEGENSA and specific departments and institutes such as the Institute of African Studies that are connected to CEGENSA. This further marginalises female academics as they navigate their careers (Tsikata, 2007). The University lacks a transparent policy to institutionalise gender parity that considers the unique challenges that women face at the UG.

According to Mama (2007), for the UG to address these issues, it must first embark on a three-step process at the institutional and national levels. The first step is to ensure that there is a national and local commitment to gender equity; second, that institutions of higher education should produce gender-competent graduates who transfer this competency to their respective personal and professional lives; the third is to view the university as a site where knowledge is produced that is not influenced by gender bias and norms (Mama, 2007).

The University of Ghana and its Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The UG, founded in 1948, has both a colonial legacy and one that is rooted in the liberation struggle. The university's history, student and faculty activism, and central position in Ghanaian education ensure that students and faculty enjoy a certain level of prestige. The history of the UG positions it as a beacon of hope and prosperity for many individuals, communities, and nations.

Currently, the university as a residential campus has 53,643 students, of which 48% identify as women (UG Enrollment, 2020). It employs 1,248 teaching and research faculty, of which 366 are women with nine being full professors. The ratio of students to faculty (43 students to 1 faculty member) is alarmingly high as it is three times the international standard of 18 students to 1. Women faculty make up 26% of all teaching and research staff, which is grossly low compared to the student population. It appears that this percentage has not drastically increased over the last decade. Tsikata (2007) reported that female faculty were disproportionately represented in lower lecturer grades and made up only 20,3% of the faculty at the time of the study. Mabokela and Mlambo (2015) reinforced the findings of the earlier study particularly in relationship to gendered nature of institutions and impact on women faculty. The socio-cultural characteristics of the University have impacted women's experience. Women in this study lamented about the difficulty they encountered while balancing home and work life. The lack of support services for women academics, such as childcare facilities, buttresses the belief that the University does not prioritize the needs of faculty and staff that are women (Mabokela and Mlambo, 2015). The UG has made little progress in employing female faculty and addressing the gendered nature of its institutions since the Tsikata study was published. The slow progress towards gender parity has influenced female faculty's career progression at the UG.

The conditions of service of UG faculty exclusive of gender includes large in-person class sizes, particularly at the undergraduate level, heavy extension commitments internally, low compensation levels and stringent promotion guidelines. In addition to these common challenges, women often face additional overt and covert discrimination based on gender. Besides their regular responsibilities, women academics typically participate in othermothering in their capacity as faculty members at the UG. The pressure to marry and have children as women academics is part and parcel of women's experience at UG in keeping with the pro-natalist

national cultures of Ghana, noting that they receive conflicting advice from senior colleagues about when and how to do this (Tsikata, 2007). The UG's COVID-19 policy compounded by a male-centric institutional culture does not take into consideration the unique challenges of female academics. Women and men at the UG, despite the patriarchal nature of society, have the same teaching loads, extension responsibilities, and research requirements for promotion.

The university responded to the pandemic swiftly, following directives by the President of Ghana to close all educational institutions. It prioritised the safety of faculty, staff, and students. The UG instituted rigid COVID-19 protocols, which included immediately closing all offices and moving all meetings, correspondence, and work to virtual spaces (UG, Office of the Registrar, 2020). The UG used the mandatory two-week lockdown to organise and construct a COVID-19 response strategy. This included consultations with senior management, directors, chairs, department heads and faculty. In addition, the university offered intensive training on the Universities Learning Management System (LMS)-SAKAI to faculty to enable them to complete the 2019-2020 academic year virtually.

Faculty, staff, and students applauded the swift action by the university. However, as has been reported elsewhere, inequalities of access to technology, lack of network infrastructure in some communities, challenges with computer literacy and financial stressors associated with online teaching emerged (Obonnaya *et al.*, 2020). The UG attempted to address issues of access by supplying students, faculty, and some administrative staff with monthly data bundles from May to August 2020.

Despite these challenges, the state of the pandemic obliged the university to announce on 23 December 2020 that the mode of instruction for the 2020-2021 academic year would be entirely online (UG, Office of the Registrar, 2020). The University focused on ensuring that teaching and learning continued without disruption during this crisis, which may have created voids in other critical areas, including culturally constructed gender differences.

Research Methodology

Data collection

This study collected the lived experiences of women academics at the UG between March 2020 and March 2021. The research used virtual (Zoom) FGDs and in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data. Respondents were initially contacted via email,

telephone, and WhatsApp. After receiving assurance of participation in the research, a follow-up email was sent with a confirmation and Zoom meeting link. The sample size comprised 15 women academics in the College of Basic and Applied Sciences (CBAS) and the College of Humanities (COH). Three FGDs were held: two with women in the COH and one in the CBAS. All the interviews and FGDs were conducted between 21 April and 4 May 2021. Respondents were purposely sampled from these two colleges because of the differences in teaching and research experiences as well as the number of undergraduate and graduate students. While science academics were mainly involved in laboratory-based research and experiments, academics from the humanities were mainly involved in humanistic research. We ensured that respondents were selected from different departments within the two colleges. This approach was intended to safeguard respondents' confidentiality and privacy due to the personal nature of the questions. We also wanted respondents to have no inhibitions in responding to the questions. However, members in one FGD were familiar with each other and had no issues engaging in discussions at a personal level. Although all respondents were assured that participating in the study was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study at any point in time if they felt uncomfortable with the process, none of the respondents opted out. Rather, most respondents expressed their delight at how the process enabled them to take stock of their COVID-19 experience. For some respondents, participating in the interviews gave them an opportunity to vent their issues and to find comfort in knowing that others also shared in their experiences. The diversity of the women is represented by women at varying stages of their career at UG.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured questions focused on women's lived experiences during the three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 - before, during, and after the lockdown - and how their experiences impacted their career productivity. The transcribed interviews were analysed by mapping out the similarities and differences in the information and subsequently grouping them into themes. The two broad themes are 1) *mothering and care responsibilities* and 2) *academic work stresses and adjustments*.

The first theme, which centres on mothering and othermothering, highlights the challenges women academics face due to the structural systems present in society. This theme considers issues pertaining to family, care burdens and forms

of motherhood both at the family level and beyond the family space into "other" spaces. The second theme looks at adjustments and coping strategies of the women academics in their work.

Demographic Description of Respondents

The demographic description of the respondents is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic descriptions of respondents with pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Age Group	College	Seniority
Adeze	40s	CBAS	Senior Lecturer
Adjoe	60s	COH	Associate Professor
A'isha	40s	CBAS	Senior Lecturer
Ama	50s	COH	Senior Lecturer
Afia	40s	COH	Associate Professor
Afrya	40s	COH	Senior Member
Eua	50s	COH	Professor
Halimatu	30s	CBAS	Lecturer
Laboni	40s	COH	Lecturer
Fifime'	40s	COH	Senior Lecturer
Maji	40s	COH	Lecturer
Naa Ajeley	50s	COH	Senior Lecturer
Nana Yaa	40s	COH	Senior Lecturer
Taani	30s	CBAS	Lecturer
Yaa	40s	CBAS	Senior Lecturer

Most of the women in the study were married with at least one child.[2] 12 of the 15 women were married and 14 had children. Two women were divorced and one woman was single. Eight of the women had two to three children while three of the women had four or more children.

2 We chose not to indicate the marital status and number of children for each respondent because we wanted to conceal the identity of respondents.

Findings

The results show that the women academics were confronted with challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic in multiple ways. They swiftly adjusted to managing increased responsibilities at home and in their community and ensured a work-life balance while engaging in other social activities. The women who participated in this study tackled and experienced COVID-19 through a unique cultural and gendered lens. They shared their lived experiences navigating COVID-19 in a largely male-centric institution and society. This study does not provide conclusive findings that can be blindly applied across Africa. Instead, it provides a window into the lives of women academics. It juxtaposes their experiences with current literature and the social and cultural understandings of gender in Ghana. This section discusses the findings under two broad themes, namely *mothering and care responsibilities* and *academic work stresses, adjustments, and coping strategies*.

Mothering and Care Responsibilities

Familial Mothering

Among both matrilineal and patrilineal societies in Ghana, there is ample evidence in history, popular culture, and oral traditions to situate the role of mothers and wives. Despite deep respect, admiration and at times unrealistic expectations of wives and mothers in Ghana, family dynamics have evolved to meet the demands of globalisation (Oppong, 2006). In addition to globalisation shifting family dynamics, Ghanaian and Africanist feminists have shifted the patriarchal needle in Ghana through their academic and activist careers (Mama, 2020). This study reinforced the importance of motherhood in Ghana as more than half of our participants attested that being wives and mothers is central to their identity. Ama is married to a pastor and has achieved success in her career at the UG. However, according to her, her role as a wife and mother is paramount to her identity.

> *Besides my career, which is going out to school to work, I also have responsibilities: family life, if I may put it that way. I was born in a very traditional home. I learned from my mother that I must be a good wife, ensure that there is food on the table always, keep the house clean, and most importantly, do my cooking* (Ama, COH).

The need to be a good mother and responsible wife resonated with many of the participants. Some told stories about prioritising their husband's work over their own at the beginning of the pandemic. This translated to women coming home and taking a back seat to everything and everyone. Women who pre-COVID-19 would spend most of the workday in the office were suddenly faced with familial expectations that dictated they perform most of the domestic duties. Laboni, whose husband is also a pastor, during the early period of the lockdown, spent most of her day caring for her children. Her husband spent most of his workday in their joint study revising strategies to reach his congregation. She supported his efforts but also recognised that she had to complete her work at UG and so devised a strategy to carve out time for her academic work. She timed her work to coincide with the time her husband was taking a midday break.

The triple burden of homeschooling, extended family caregiving and academic responsibilities impacted women with young children. Academic responsibilities were often relegated to a secondary or third position. The traditional role of women in Ghana necessitated that all but four women in the study with young children were burdened with additional familial care responsibilities. These included, but were not limited to, homeschooling diverse-aged children, providing several cooked meals daily and managing the household. Afrya described her experience as overwhelming but necessary. She says,

> *I was cooking so much I got to a point where I was depressed but I had to ensure that my family was fed well and consumed healthy foods* (Afrya, COH).

Women in our study discussed their multi-mothering duties during COVID-19 and the imposition on their financial, social, physical, and emotional health. Even though most of the women were married and lived with their husbands, they felt obligated to cook three meals a day – to ensure the health of their family – and stock the pantries of their mothers, aunts, church members and other needy community members.

Familial responsibilities among women in the CBAS and COH did not differ much; in fact, the experiences of non-Ghanaian respondents were also similar. Fifime, from a neighbouring African country, had similar experiences to her Ghanaian colleagues. During the first week of COVID-19, she had to juggle being a single mother with a sudden family illness and academic responsibilities. She said:

> I was at the hospital with my sister, so I had to leave my children and could not cook anything. It was very difficult for me as I was shuttling between

> the hospital and home. Sometimes I would ask one of the Visiting Scholar colleagues to cook for the children" (Fifime, COH).

Afia is a senior lecturer, and like her colleague, Fifime, she plays a central role in her extended family. During the pandemic, her father-in-law passed away and she planned his funeral while managing familial, social and academic responsibilities.

Homeschooling placed burdens on women (mothers) who suddenly doubled as teachers. The opening of the Ghana Education Service schools was initially viewed as a positive move by some of the participants but swiftly became another obstacle for women academics. The phased opening, double-tracking Senior Secondary School system and early closing times obliged women to pick up their children in the early afternoon. This burden impacted their ability to be fully present in the office beyond the afternoons, and some of their male colleagues misunderstood their actions, suggesting that they were not being productive at work given the time required for research collaborations and team meetings. The assumption that they were leaving the office to shirk their academic responsibility underlies these criticisms. Additionally, women participate in othermothering of students, faculty, and staff in ways that their male counterparts generally do not participate in. Willey (2020) suggests that rigid social and workplace policies that present a one-size-fits-all approach to promotion harms mothers and caregivers.

Positively, several women discovered that the initial lockdown allowed them to deepen and explore familial relations. Eua, one of a few women whose children are over 18 years, discussed the benefit of this experience for her family. She said:

> *I have three adults at home, so the family dynamic was very good, and we started doing things together....I think we changed our family dynamics for a while because for once, I was not travelling all the time, so I was able to spend some time with the family together* (Eua, COH).

Ama also remarked that she enjoyed her time with her family during the lockdown. She said:

> *In a way, I think there was much bonding during that time. We would meet every evening to fellowship, sing, pray, read Scriptures, and sometimes join the children to cook. We were doing things together. We also played basketball and did gymnastics together. So, I think that we enjoyed each other's company* (Ama, COH).

The benefit of re-connecting as a family (immediate and extended) was highlighted among most respondents.

Social Mothering – Othermothering and Community Mothering

Community mothering in Ghana is an expectation, a responsibility, and a sense of pride for many Ghanaian women. Community mothering has cultural connections to collectivism, which is deeply rooted in Ghanaian culture. It also serves to reciprocate for women's support received from community mothers during different periods of their lives (Waterhouse *et al.*, 2017). During the COVID-19 period, there was a heightened level of community mothering. Most of the women in the study hold significant roles in their immediate and extended families. These women are mothers in their churches, associations, and the larger community. Three of the women in COH and CBAS FGDs are married to pastors. As pastors' wives, they have real and imagined motherly responsibilities. Clergy wives in Ghana play multiple roles, including counselling, group leading, singing in the choir, preaching, cleaning the church as well as welcoming and serving guests (Kyere, 2019). The combination of being an academic, first lady, mother, and wife places additional pressures on women.

The women in the COH group provided community mothering support to their extended families. Several ensured that their guardians and in-laws had foodstuffs to last them through the initial lockdown. Laboni, who lives in one of the COVID-19 hotspots, reported a heavy military presence in her community which complicated life during the lockdown. She ultimately participated in community shopping for those in her immediate circle. When she went to the shop, she would purchase enough food for multiple families. Much like her colleague, Afia, and other women in the study, she expressed excitement and a sense of pride in supporting her extended community.

Respondents were compelled to provide financial and material support to needy people they knew because of their secure income. All but two of the women reported purchasing foodstuffs for members of their extended community. Afia and Maji created care packages for needy church members, elderly or disadvantaged family members and economically challenged families in their immediate community. All the respondents sent mobile money to non-family members who were in desperate need during the COVID-19 period. Eua, when asked about her financial commitments during this period, remarked:

> *They were people who were supposed to be working but because of COVID-19, they couldn't work. But I thought to myself that those were temporary crises, and we will spontaneously deal with it* (Eua, COH).

Many of the individuals who requested support were extended family members, former domestic workers, gardeners, junior colleagues, and friends in need. Afia sent money via mobile money outlets to the teachers at her children's school. Notably, during the school closures, staff of private schools in the country did not receive their salaries so they relied on support from their extended community. Nana Yaa explained that senior members in her department collected donations for junior staff members. Historically, the salary of junior staff is low; however, they often have similar responsibilities as senior members. The burden increased for single parents who had a single source of income.

An additional financial burden was from new modes of movement using public transport. Travelling on crowded public transport systems such as *trotro*[3] (minibus) was viewed as dangerous, hence the respondents resorted to taxis and ride-hailing transport services such as Bolt and Uber. Fifime used to take a *trotro* to the Madina Market (one of Accra's most popular outdoor markets) before the pandemic. However, she stopped using it, shifted to the Accra Mall for foodstuff, and even purchased a bicycle.

Several of the women working at the UG got involved in othermothering. Fifime as a single mother was still expected to othermother family, students, and the community. She reported that a cousin asked for a substantial loan to purchase items for their provisions shop. Despite her own circumstances, she loaned money to her cousin. Naa Ajeley was an administrator for international students. She had to othermother two international students who stayed in Ghana during the initial stages of the pandemic. She stated,

> *Twice in a day throughout these two weeks that they stayed in Ghana I had to support them like a mother would. One needed to call the COVID-19 hotline to see if they had symptoms and if they were positive or needed to take a sample to determine if they were positive. All this responsibility fell on my shoulders as a mother* (Naa Ajeley, COH).

Women at the UG are routinely identified as Auntie, Madam, or Mama, thus creating a sense of motherhood in the academy. Datta and Lund (2018) mention similar experiences in their careers as educators. However, male counterparts are identified by their titles and professional achievements (Tsikata, 2007). During this period, women in the CBAS who had projects with individuals who worked in their laboratories othermothered their younger colleagues. A'isha had several non-Ghanaians who

3 Privately owned commercial minibuses that travel fixed routes in Ghana.

worked in her lab. They could not return home and were naturally frightened about the impact of the pandemic at home and in Ghana. She had to be a mother figure to ensure that they were safe, not exposed to COVID-19, and mentally and emotionally supported. Some of the respondents othermothered women colleagues who experienced challenges during that period. Nana Yaa served as the primary support for a colleague who had two small children and contracted COVID-19 in March 2020. She was by her side from the very beginning of the transmission through her follow-up appointments until she tested negative.

Academic Work Stresses, Adjustments and Coping Strategies

When the lockdown was instituted in the Greater Accra and Greater Kumasi regions, the initial reaction of the women academics was to rest. Some had been combining administrative duties with teaching, research, and supervision. Others had been experiencing health challenges that impacted their academic work, and the lockdown provided an opportunity to rest, recuperate and de-stress. The lives of many of the women interviewed were so overstretched that it was affecting their productivity. Ama described her pre-COVID-19 life as,

> *Before the lockdown, I observed that I was exhausted and was breaking down. I don't live on campus. So, every morning, I rush out of the house to get to campus. By the time I settle down, I'm already tired....So, when the lockdown was implemented, I found it welcoming because I needed a break* (Ama, COH).

Combining academic work with administrative responsibilities is a tedious task that could impact the health of both women and men. Eua reported that the lockdown allowed her space to recuperate from a long-standing chronic health challenge. She explained,

> *I was very ill at the beginning of the lockdown. So, to me, the lockdown was a moment of rest because I had just had a treatment for a long-standing chronic problem....I also started to exercise and that was the positive side of it* (Eua, COH).

Unfortunately, the dynamics changed when the lockdown ended and academic work at the UG resumed. Teaching was remotely delivered through virtual means, although schools remained physically closed. Those women with young children were saddled with the double burden of caring for their young children while at the same time fulfilling their online teaching duties. They helped their children with

their online work and assignments and cared for sick members of their immediate and extended families. Thus, they adopted coping mechanisms to ensure a work-life balance. In terms of teaching, although the respondents had received several weeks of training in the use of the SAKAI LMS, faculty found it daunting and overwhelming. Some women were being introduced to the rudiments of virtual teaching and still had to deal with distractions from home. For women in the CBAS, the practical and laboratory-based nature of the sciences made it almost impossible to deliver lectures online. That posed many challenges to the women in science. A'isha recounted her experience:

> *My undergraduate course was a practical course that needed to help the students develop skills....I had to come up with ways of ensuring that they would be able to have those skills* (A'isha, CBAS).

Almost all the women interviewed had in one way or another encountered some challenges because of the pandemic. These challenges surfaced in all spheres of their lives, including family, academic and social spaces. Academically, the women were most stressed given the fact that they had teaching and research deadlines. The semester was shortened to eight weeks with six weeks allocated for lecture delivery and the remaining for examination. Time spent on academic work preparation doubled and this introduced another level of work-related stress. However, with time, most women found alternative ways to adjust to the challenges by holding discussions and delivering lectures synchronously via online and virtual platforms such as Whatsapp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, while uploading lecture slides and notes onto the SAKAI LMS platform.

The incidence of COVID-19 introduced another challenge of meeting virtually. Management meetings, student supervision meetings, research collaborations and university meetings were all scheduled online. Initially, these virtual meetings were seen as a convenience. Unfortunately, the frequency of the meetings became overwhelming, and this increased the work burden for women academics, especially when they tried to combine childcare responsibilities with such meetings. To be able to deal with the increasing workload, some of the women worked during the day between domestic duties and continued at night when everyone slept. The incidence of COVID-19 introduced a lot of anxiety in the women. First, they were thinking of their children, their elderly parents, their work and lastly themselves. Some were primary caregivers to their aged parents and were very worried how the aged folks were going to cope and pull through the pandemic given the fact that

they had underlying health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart conditions. The women also had to think of the welfare of their family and ensure that they were protected and kept safe from COVID-19. For those who were directly responsible for students' welfare, it added another level of responsibility. In all these situations, they struggled to combine both mothering and care responsibilities with teaching. The stress resulted in some women developing health issues and showing extreme anxiety. Their anxiety was compounded by the inadequate and false COVID-19 information peddling within social media spaces.

To help them deal with some of the stresses, some of the women joined online social support groups. Ama, Eua, and Adjoe mentioned their participation in an online health and wellness group that supported them during the pandemic. This online group encouraged members to set goals for exercising and promoted healthy eating. Ama says about the group:

> *When we started this 21-day exercise, I identified a lady who was involved in a dance workout in her home. So, I decided to join her. And it has helped me. Instead of staying home all the time, I work out with her twice a week* (Ama, COH).

While studies have shown the relationship between social networks and improved mental health among students (Elmer *et al.*, 2020), we also observed a positive correlation among our respondents. The incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted research activities and funding opportunities, especially human-centered research. The women academics could not go out to the field to collect data because they did not want to be exposed to the disease, since they were the primary caregivers at home. Alternative means, including virtual, online and social networks were deployed to collect data remotely. Most of the discussants mentioned that they were not successful in winning research grants because several donor agencies had suspended funding. The few who were lucky to be on funded projects kept on receiving constant reminders from the funding agencies who claimed they were empathising with them and yet were indirectly checking on work progress, and these constant reminders of timelines introduced another level of stress. Others were just not in a reasonable frame of mind to write funding proposals nor to conduct any research.

COVID-19 in Africa created opportunities for some of the discussants to receive invitations to collaborate in research projects. However, there was the general perception among the women academics in the COH that these collaborations were

unbalanced. According to them, these invitations are a false display of interest in the developing world's management strategies in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. Naa Ajeley shared her views:

> *I noticed the audacity of some UK colleagues who never got in touch, never did anything...all of a sudden, they knew that you were alive.... And you needed to be available because they want to talk about Africa, and they want to look at what was going on, the African exceptionalism in terms of the fact that we're not dying like flies, as initially predicted by Melinda Gates. So, it's an interesting mixed bag for me, because, for me very much the opportunism of the industrial West and how we perceive Africa and African scholarship was very evident when their researchers could not parachute onto the continent, and come and do a one week and take data and go out there and write and have the theories and then expect us to quote them*" (Naa Ajeley, COH).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the university also meant that administrative responsibilities were suspended, freeing women of their administrative responsibilities and allowing them to focus on their academic work. Afrya, who was involved in an inactive project before the lockdown, said she used the period to revive her archiving project. Other women academics saw the lockdown as an opportunity to complete unfinished academic papers. For example, the periods between 30 March 2020 (when the lockdown took effect) up to 14 April 2020 (when remote teaching began) and from July 2020 until school reopened in January 2021 were the most fruitful for some of the women academics to do their academic writing and learn new methods of conducting virtual research. Laboni recounts her experiences:

> *During that time, I had to think of something else. So, I decided to read a bit on new methods, and I realised that I could use cyber-ethnography. I thought it was useful and I could do something while locked down. So, I did something in religious activities, especially the Christian religious activities during and after the lockdown* (Laboni, COH).

However, delays in procuring reagents and consumables for laboratory work impeded the activities of the science researchers because all departments and units in the university were working at half capacity and it required several bureaucratic processes and approvals to purchase the items. From all the discussions, the women acknowledged that by working from home, they were able to combine their childcare responsibilities with their academic work. Overall, the women viewed

working-from-home positively because it created an opportunity to have a work-life balance.

Concluding Discussions and Recommendations

Discussion

The UG over the last 60-odd years has transformed into an internationally recognised and highly regarded institution. However, the university has shown very little progress in addressing the gender gap, especially for university faculty and staff. The findings of this project are consistent with the findings of Tsikata (2007) over 14 years ago which highlight the gendered nature of institutions at the UG. The progress over this period regarding employing women faculty is a mere six per cent which equated to less than 0,42% of women hired yearly over the period.

This research has revealed that gender-based inequality and systemic inadequacies at the UG in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded the gendered nature of women's employment at the university. The lack of cognisance of the gender differentials in the institutional response to the management of COVID-19 was apparent in the data. No specific measures were put in place to address the unique experience of women academics in Ghana during this period. The gendered nature of Ghanaian culture both supported the community and burdened women faculty and administrators at the UG.

The findings uncovered two interrelated themes that affected women academics in Ghana: that women were impacted by the transformation of family systems and the feminisation of care in Ghana, and unequal work dynamics exist in academia. These findings are synonymous with other research which shows that shifts in household labor, childcare, eldercare and physical confinement have increased the mental health needs of students and faculty's mental health needs and reduced the time available to perform academic work (Miller, 2021).

Family structures in Ghana, particularly in urban communities and among the middle-class, have transformed over several years. The findings suggest an increase in the feminisation of care in Ghana during the pandemic. The feminisation of care is consistent with the gendered social roles in most Ghanaian families. Previously, families enjoyed support from extended members but now families in the urban centres are more nuclearised, thereby denying women the traditional support from female kinfolk. This was also worsened by the social and physical distancing rule

instituted in response to the pandemic, which further barred female academics from accessing domestic care services. The risks of COVID-19 outweighed the need for additional support, and many women were left to shoulder all domestic burdens. Women who had more than one child under 16 in the home or elderly parents were particularly impacted by the changing family dynamics. Afrya has four children, all under 18, with the youngest being six years old. She was responsible for supporting her family, her sister's children (while she was stuck outside the country), her elderly mother and her in-laws while at the same time working on launching a new project at work. She ordinarily would have employed in-home support, but the fear of COVID-19 both on her part and the part of those being employed made it impossible for this to come to fruition. The transformation of the family structure in Ghana can be viewed as a move towards greater equality and independence; however, the conditions on the ground tell a dramatically different story. This move has increased the burden on women living in urban centers. They are expected to perform historical gendered roles without the historical support systems.

Gender-based inequality in academia compounded the stress that women in the study faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Malisch *et al.* (2020) observed that while women in academia hold contingent positions and experience higher-than-average teaching loads, they are also assigned more remedial and introductory courses and counsel more students, including students needing additional support. In addition, students approach women faculty more for mental health support and expect them to be more nurturing (Malisch *et al.*, 2020). The patriarchal nature of academia is embedded in the institutions, attitudes, and systems at the UG. The imbalance in the number of female faculty compared to their male counterparts is representative of the gender-based inequality in Ghana. Of the 365 employed as faculty, only nine are full professors. The university does not have policies that take into consideration the gendered nature of the Ghanaian society. At the same time, women faculty are strongly encouraged to get married and have children. Women who are not married or have children are covertly viewed as incomplete. In comparison, women with children and domestic responsibilities are not afforded accommodation beyond the mandated maternity leave. The promotion guidelines do not consider discipline-specific guidelines, much less socially constructed gender roles.

The response of the UG to the pandemic was also gender blind. The policies focused on student continuity and left little room for special populations. Several of the women reported being overworked but feeling the necessity to continue to meet the demands of the university. Yaa recounted that she applied for nine grants during the COVID-19 period and did not win any. She remarked that one needs to publish findings at some point, and her inability to produce as many publications as some of her male colleagues hindered her ability to be successful with the grant applications. The paucity of women faculty at UG also results in the same women being overworked as there is an effort to ensure a gender balance on most committees, workshops, and conferences. However, this seemingly forward-looking gesture further oppresses women faculty who have the same promotion, teaching and extension requirements as their 882 male colleagues. The COVID-19 period heightened gender inequality and deepened gender cleavages at UG.

Much of the current research on COVID-19 and higher education is located in the Global North. The research team felt that it was essential to provide a vehicle to allow the voices of African and Ghanaian women to be heard. The lived experience of women in the study varied based on their position at UG, their husbands' roles in the family, number of children, extended family commitments and their role in religious institutions or other non-UG associations. Some of the women did not have stable support for childcare or care for elderly parents, which they reported impacted their academic productivity. These women are not likely to have had the time to develop their academic work during COVID-19. However, some of them were able to push through the struggles and engage in academic work, including writing, researching, international collaboration and speaking in workshops and on panels online.

The post-lockdown period brought some respite from consistent domestic duties for women academics, but it also introduced tensions in the academic space. Most women who had school-aged children had to leave work early to retrieve their children from school. This impacted their productivity but also caused tensions with their male colleagues. In a university with only 26% women faculty, these tensions can stall a woman's academic career. The challenges that women faced during the pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown periods were transformed into opportunities for most women. Several women are involved in COVID-19 testing and research and hope to contribute to the body of knowledge about COVID-19, the crisis and Africa. COVID-19 further exposed gender cleavages in the academy in general and in Ghana in particular.

Limitations

This project identified several limitations that emerged due to the time constraints, COVID-19 restrictions and resources. The sample size was limited because of the need to collect data in just two months. This reduced our ability to buttress the findings with quantitative data from a larger, more representative sample. The resource limitations and COVID restrictions forced the team to focus on a small sector of the university ecosystem. We chose the lived experiences of women at the UG as a focal point, which meant that the team did not have the capacity to include men in the study. COVID-19 restrictions meant that the in-depth interviews and FGDs had to be conducted virtually, which made it difficult to assess body language.

Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for future research and policies to close the gender gap at the UG. The following research areas would expand the literature on women academics in Africa: (1) The relationship between the gendered nature of universities in Africa and development; (2) Linkages between the feminisation of men during colonialism and the repression of women academics; (3) The role of other- and community mothering in academic success, career promotion for junior faculty and elevating the university internationally; and (4) Mental health, social networks, and African women academics.

During ordinary times, women academics at the UG are obliged to navigate a male-centric and gender-blind institution while adhering to (or actively fighting against) socially constructed gender roles. COVID-19 exacerbated the burden that women academics must traverse in their private and public lives. The pandemic blurred the private and public spaces such that women had to contend with gendered notions of womanhood while mothering, othermothering and developing coping strategies to meet their academic responsibilities and non-academic challenges. The experiences of women in the study are not necessarily representative of all women academics in Ghana or Africa; however, their lived experiences can be used as a yardstick for future research and university policies.

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