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WORK

Female professors have less time to research in the pandemic. It could force them out of academia, experts say.

With kids at home, female caregivers are at a major disadvantage



From left to right: Erica De Bruin, Aide Macias-Muñoz (Lynne De Bruin; Rubi Macias; iStock; Lily illustration).



Aide Macias-Muñoz is often confronted with the accomplishments of her male colleagues. They regularly post on Twitter, celebrating a new publication — or their second one that month. At home in the pandemic, many seem to be churning out more papers than ever.

She's happy for them, she said. Truly, she is.

But she can't help thinking of her own research — and the gap in her curriculum vitae that, every day she spends at home with her 20-month-old daughter, grows just a little bit wider.

Macias-Muñoz is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California at Santa Barbara who studies the eye evolution of jellyfish. Without day care for her daughter, and her husband working long days at the hospital as an emergency room physician, she decided to start applying for jobs in the fall, approximately one year earlier than she had planned, rather than continue to bolster her resume with new research. She would have little time for research in the foreseeable future anyway, she said, and she feared competing with colleagues who had used their pandemic year to do even more work than usual.



positions, she said, with no luck. After one rejection, she asked for feedback. To be a stronger candidate, she was told, she needed to publish more articles.

Very early on in the pandemic, editors of academic journals began to notice a disparity between the number of men and women submitting papers for publication. With kids at home from school and day care, many theorized, female academics had been saddled with the majority of the domestic responsibilities — leaving them with scant time to pursue their own research.

[[Women academics seem to be submitting fewer papers during coronavirus. ‘Never seen anything like it,’ says one editor.](#)]

A year later, several [surveys](#) and studies have shown that female academics with children have significantly less time to devote to research than their male colleagues, including men with children. According to a study of 3,210 professors [published](#) on Wednesday, 69 percent of female caregivers said they have spent less time than usual on peer-reviewed articles and conference preparation during the pandemic. Only 56 percent of male caregivers said they have had less time for that kind of work.

Many schools and departments have taken steps to address the disparities that have cropped up during the coronavirus. Some have been soliciting “impact statements” as part of their tenure or annual review processes, asking professors to expound on how



University administrators were extremely “forgiving” early in the pandemic, said Erica De Bruin, a newly tenured professor of government at Hamilton College. In her experience, she said, they seemed to recognize that caregivers could not dedicate nearly as much time to research. But by the fall, she said, high expectations had returned, even though the situation at home had not changed for many female academics.

[[The pandemic set women’s equality back another generation, a new report says](#)]

Especially before they are granted tenure, academics are expected to publish a certain number of articles per year, said Meera Deo, a professor at the Thomas Jefferson School of Law and author of “[Unequal Profession: Race and Gender in Legal Academia](#).” If universities don’t adjust those expectations for academics impacted by the coronavirus, female caregivers, especially women of color, could start leaving the field, Deo said.

“The profession as a whole was not very diverse to begin with. If we start sliding backward, we risk [academia] becoming even more male and even more White.”



Meera Deo in 2018. (Photo by Meera Deo)

When academics know they are falling short of research goals, the anxiety can be all-consuming, said Deo, who has been researching the disproportionate effect of the coronavirus pandemic on female academics. If they don't increase their output, Deo said, women worry they will soon be out of the



“On your CV, you can’t say, ‘I didn’t get things done this year because day care was closed,’” said Ling Chen, an assistant professor of political economy at Johns Hopkins University, who is not tenured.

In an alternate reality, one in which Ling didn’t spend this year at home with her 3-year-old daughter, she probably would have published two articles, submitted two more and finished at least a third of her book, she said. Instead, she was only able to submit one article. She hasn’t touched the book.

“My CV will reflect the gaps,” she said.

[[Millions of parents will get \\$3,600 per child this year. For working moms, it’s a ‘total game changer.’](#)]

While the stakes aren’t quite as high for tenured professors, many of them have also been struggling. Tara Warner, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, has been tormented by the papers she hasn’t been able to write and the funding she hasn’t been able to apply for. For the past year, Warner has been the primary caregiver for her two children, ages 6 and 8, and has been overseeing their virtual learning. The first in her family to go to college, she said, much of her self-worth is tied to her job. When she isn’t succeeding —



everything, she said.

Warner tries to split the caregiving work evenly with her husband, who is also a professor. But it never seems to work out that way, she said.

Caregivers aren't the only ones disproportionately affected by the coronavirus, Deo said. Young women, and especially women of color, are often left with more teaching and mentoring responsibilities. Students tend to feel more comfortable seeking out young female faculty, Deo said, showing up to their office hours or asking to chat over coffee. As students have been struggling in the pandemic, Deo said, this kind of labor has ballooned. In her interviews, Deo said, female faculty say they sometimes feel like "therapists."

During the pandemic, De Bruin has spent approximately triple the amount of time in office hours, she said. And while she loves working with students, she added, this kind of labor is seldom rewarded by institutions. They are more interested in research and publications.



Erica De Bruin with her kids last month. (Photo by Sam Rosenfeld)

De Bruin has been open about her child-care responsibilities since the beginning of the pandemic, she said. In her coronavirus impact statement, De Bruin explained in great detail how her caregiving responsibilities had shifted, detailing day-care schedules and her new late-night work routine. When she described her situation to several senior members of her



her underclassmen advisees.

“That was something concrete that really helped me,” De Bruin said.

[[Roads, trains and day cares: Experts say economic recovery hinges on child-care infrastructure](#)]

She fears that kind of help may not be accessible to many of her female colleagues. De Bruin’s department voted to grant her tenure in October. If she hadn’t been so close to tenure, or so sure she was going to receive it, she said, she would have been far more hesitant to offer up an image of herself as an overburdened mother.

“I would have been nervous that people would have unintentionally formed perceptions, thinking I couldn’t do the job,” she said.

Some schools have also extended the “tenure clock” for professors. At these schools, all untenured professors have generally been given the option to push tenure back by one year, so they have time to do additional research.

For many caregivers, it is an imperfect solution, Deo said. If they delay, they know they’ll be competing against those who have had even more time than usual to strengthen their resumes.



off. Her daughter wasn't sleeping well. She felt exhausted and guilty, she said, constantly thinking about all the research she couldn't do.

But if you leave, Macias-Muñoz said, the structures within academia make it hard to come back.

“Once you're out, you're out.”

Her most viable option, she said, was to submit her applications early and hope for the best.



Caroline Kitchener

Caroline Kitchener is a staff reporter at The



Atlantic. She is the author of "Post Grad: Five Women and Their First Year Out of College."

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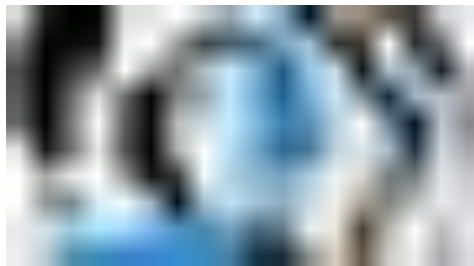
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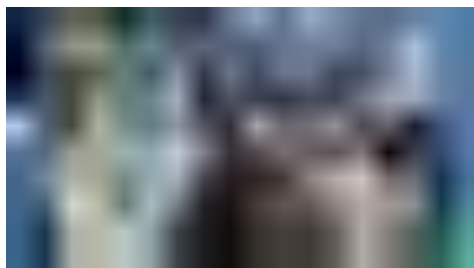
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