



The Impact of Social Pressure on High-Income Working Mothers In Academia

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Abstract

Working mothers are often displayed as superheroes for all that they manage by taking on roles like mother, professional, and homemaker, which leaves them feeling burnout. The purpose of this study is to explain social pressures impacting working mothers, who is inflicting social pressures, and what areas of their life are being impacted. Additionally, it investigates how the pandemic has changed the work-life balance and where they are spending their time. Researchers used an online Qualtrics survey to collect data from two social media platforms. A total of 272 participants filled out the questionnaire and were eligible for the study. Women who are married, live in the United States, work in academics, have at least 1 child, and bring in an individual income of over \$80,000 annually were included in this study. Descriptive analysis and paired t-tests were conducted. The paired t-test was significant for women spending less time working from the office since the pandemic. Additionally, women spent significantly more time with family and working from home. The study found that since the pandemic women were spending more time with their families; however, they are having more difficulty maintaining a work-life balance. This information will help aid workplace policies to establish boundaries for working mothers. Implementing more flexibility for home activities and encouraging disconnecting from work devices are recommendations gleaned to improve this balance. However, societal norms may also need adjustment to remove the self-inflicted stress that mothers feel to be perfect in every role.

Keywords: Social Pressure, Working Mothers, COVID-19, Work-Life Balance

Introduction

Ethical Consideration: The Grand Valley State University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved (approval no. 22-132) this project. It was determined that this project is human subjects research according to current federal regulations and MEETS eligibility for exempt determination under Exempt Category 2, GVSU IRB Policy 911, "Exemption determinations and research ethics standards," and 45 CFR 46.104 when applicable. All participants consented to the study.

An inherently different experience for each individual but underscored by the same gendered expectations placed on them,

mothers often have complex, conflicting relationships between their personal and professional lives after having children. In 2018, the census found that there were roughly 23.5 million mothers working full-time with children under the age of 18 [1]. Despite this enormous and sustained increase in workforce participation by women and mothers, working mothers are still pressured more often than their male counterparts to find and maintain a work-life balance [2]. Additionally, due to the strong emphasis on perfectionism within the United States' culture, women are experiencing increased pressure to perform flawlessly in their many roles and tasks [3]. A 2009 Pew Research study found that 86% of working mothers sometimes or frequently experienced stress in their daily lives when compared to 74% of their male counterparts. Working mothers are often trying to balance being a homemaker and caregiver, while trying to maintain their individual wellness and passion for their careers. When balancing too many roles at once, an individual is more likely to experience burnout. Recent literature suggests that this phenomena and pressure may be acutely felt by mothers working in academia.

Background

It is well-known that women working in academia are underpaid and underrepresented in tenure-track, professorate-level, and senior leadership roles compared to their male counterparts [4, 5]. Females working in academia are often channeled into feminized teaching or administrative roles, bearing the brunt of emotional labor while their progress towards career advancements are stymied [4]. Additionally, a "masculinized work culture" in academia breeds extreme competition and may not be suitable for work-life balance, as academic workloads can require extensive time spent outside of the office on work and research to maintain the expected productivity quota [4]. These disparities between men and women in academic roles can become heightened and increasingly stress-inducing for women who choose to become mothers.

Huopalainen and Satama [6] note that parenthood has historically affected women's careers in academia more often than men, as there is an expectation that mothers fully devote themselves to caring for their children. This idea is reinforced by societal norms, in which women are considered the experts in childcare and maintain the majority of homemaking and household tasks, even when both partners work full-time [5, 6, 7]. However, this creates a dissonance

between personal and professional lives, as the “ideal worker norm” requires individuals to put work above all else [8]. Due to the rigors associated with work in the academic sphere, women often must make trade-offs between work and family life.

Working mothers in academia tend to experience limitations in their ability to travel for conferences, network with peers and research colleagues, and dedicate needed time to advance their current research or pursue new projects [6, 9, 10]. These restrictions associated with the demands of motherhood put mothers at a disadvantage in career advancement. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, when everyone’s ability to travel and work was impeded, mothers were still disproportionately impacted. The erasure of the division between work and home life negatively impacted mother’s ability to balance their responsibilities. Women submitted less papers for publication during the COVID-19 lockdown and found it hard to allocate time to research with the switch to working from home, as their time was now dominated by caregiving and preparing online, teaching coursework [5, 10]. Mothers were found to have spent a significantly greater amount of time on caregiving and familial tasks during the pandemic lockdown compared to fathers, resulting in greater work-family conflicts and burnout [11, 12]. Working mothers have always felt a dissonance between their personal and professional lives, but this conflict may be increasingly felt due to the rising societal pressures they face.

It has been well documented that the neoliberal culture of the United States has put greater emphasis on the individual, favoring competition and perfectionism [13]. The source of these expectations can be self- or other-oriented or come from societal pressures. Overall, perfectionism has been rising within the United States and has impacted all age groups [13]. However, working mothers may bear the brunt of these expectations, as they assume multiple roles in which society requires perfection. In a study of working mothers in the United Kingdom and the United States, Meeussen & Van Laar [12] found that individuals who felt an increased pressure to be a perfect mother experienced less work-family balance, and thus had lower career ambitions. Additionally, increased pressure to be perfect was positively associated with parental burnout among working mothers [12]. Parental burnout is associated with increased parental neglect, parental violence, stress, and feelings of guilt, all of which can negatively impact an individual’s mental and physical health [14].

Due to the increasing pressures felt by working mothers to maintain a façade of perfection in the work and family lives, their careers and overall health have been negatively impacted, in all careers. However, the gendered landscape of the field and the recent COVID-19 pandemic may have compounded these effects on working mothers in academia. This research project aims to add to the existing body of literature by explaining and quantifying how social pressures are impacting working mothers, specifically in the field of academia. The objective is to review individuals’ work environment, work-life balance before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as perceived social expectations, and how these factors affect working mothers in academia.

Methods

Survey Instrument and Data Collection

To explore the impacts of social pressures on working mothers in academia, an online survey was created in Qualtrics to assess women’s perceptions. The cross-sectional survey included 38 questions that gathered data on the mothers’ demographic characteristics, work environment, and time spent working, as well as their perceptions on the source and intensity of social pressures. Questions related to the impact of having children on work were assessed using a 4-point Likert scale (definitely not, probably not, probably yes, definitely yes). Questions related to the impact of social media on mothers’ perception of perfection were measured as yes, maybe, or no. Finally,

questions pertaining to the presence and frequency of feeling societal pressures were measured on a 3-point Likert scale as rarely, about half the time, and most of the time. Responses were collected and stored in a Qualtrics database.

Recruitment

Recruitment was done through convenience sampling via online, social media groups catered toward working mothers or mothers in academia. Five Facebook groups were initially chosen to post recruitment flyers and links for women to complete the survey. However, due to restrictions from group administrators, the researchers did not receive approval to post the recruitment materials and survey links to any of the five initial groups. After an amendment to the Institutional Review Board application and methods, the study timeline was extended, and six additional social media groups were selected for survey distribution: four new Facebook groups and two Reddit subgroups. In the second wave of groups, women were encouraged to share the recruitment posts and survey links among their academic/work circles to reach additional participants via snowball sampling. The survey was open to participants for three weeks in February 2022.

Participants

At the conclusion of the data collection period there were 582 respondents. Participants were excluded from the final analysis if they did not live in the United States, did not work in academics (defined as holding a position at a college, university, secondary school, or elementary school), did not have an individual income of \$80,000 or more, or did not have a child.

Two additional exclusion criteria were used to reduce potential confounding in the study results. Women who were not married ($n=22$) or had had a child before the age of 18 ($n=1$) were excluded from the final sample. This was due to the potential of additional stress caused by social pressure, unrelated to the general pressure women feel as working mothers. Women who are single mothers or were mothers as teenagers may experience additional stress and/or pressure from society, which could inflate results. Of the initial 582 respondents, 311 were excluded based on the aforementioned criteria, as outlined in Figure 1. The final sample size used for analysis was 272, which was adequate for analysis as calculated by an 80% power analysis [15].

Data Analysis

This cross-sectional study was designed to investigate the impact of social pressure on working mothers. The data was cleaned and managed using the Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) version 9.4. A descriptive analysis was performed on the survey questions to obtain sample demographics and overall descriptive statistics relating to social pressures. Multiple figures display the frequency and percentages of responses for selected questions. Further analysis via a paired t-test was used to assess differences in women’s utilization of time before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

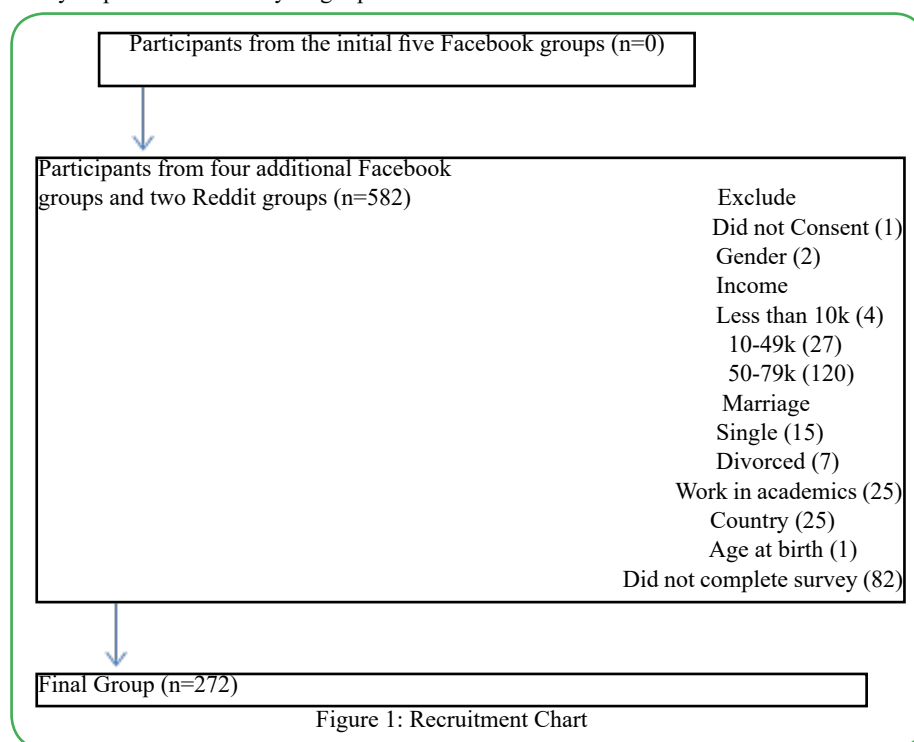
Results

Characteristics of the 272 individuals included in analysis can be found in Table 1. The average age of respondents was 39.46 years. The overwhelming majority of women surveyed had obtained an advanced degree ($n=268$, 98.53%), and were White ($n=228$, 86.04%). Within the sample, 98 mothers (33.82%) had one child, 128 (47.06%) had two children, 38 (13.97%) had three, 9 (3.31%) had four, and 5 (1.84%) had five or more children.

When surveyed about their perceptions on being a working mother, 209 (77.41%) believed that becoming a mother impacted their career ambitions and 188 (61.29%) believed that they could either be successful as a professional or a mother but not both (Table 1). To further examine what could be impacting these feelings, the participants were asked in what ways having children impacted

their work (Table 2) and how often they felt pressured to meet family-related societal expectations (Table 3). 238 respondents (88.14%) believed that having children had impacted how others viewed them in the workplace. Additionally, 73 (27.04%) believed that having children definitely impacted their ability to get promoted or

advance in their career (Table 2). However, it does not appear that productivity had any bearing on these feelings, as 184 women (67.89%) did not believe having children impacted their productivity compared to childless colleagues.



Age^a, mean, (SD)	39.46	(5.09)
Education^a, n (%)		
Four-year college/university degree	4	(1.47)
Post college/university education	268	(98.53)
Race/ethnicity, n (%)		
Asian, non-Hispanic	10	(3.77)
Black, non-Hispanic	8	(3.02)
Hispanic	14	(5.28)
Other race, non-Hispanic	5	(1.89)
White, non-Hispanic	228	(86.04)
<i>Missing, n</i>	7	
Number of children^a, n (%)		
1	92	(33.82)
2	128	(47.06)
3	38	(13.97)
4	9	(3.31)
5+	5	(1.84)
Has being a mother impacted your career ambitions?^a, n (%)		
Yes	209	(77.41)
No	61	(22.59)
Have you ever felt that you could either be successful in your career or as being a mother but not both?^a, n (%)		
Yes	188	(69.12)
No	84	(30.88)

table 1. to be cont....

Have you ever compared yourself as a working mother to mothers who stay at home? n (%)		
Yes	206	(76.30)
No	37	(13.70)
Maybe	27	(10.00)
<i>Missing, n</i>	2	
Have you spent more or less time with your family since the pandemic? n (%)		
More	222	(81.92)
Same	31	(11.44)
Less	18	(6.64)
<i>Missing, n</i>	1	
Are you struggling with work-life balance (since the COVID-19 pandemic)? n (%)		
Yes	224	(82.66)
No	15	(5.54)
Maybe	32	(11.81)
<i>Missing, n</i>	1	
Are there blurred boundaries within your work life balance?^a, n (%)		
Yes	244	(89.71)
No	5	(1.84)
<i>Maybe</i>	23	(8.46)
<i>Note.</i> ^a There was no missing data for this variable		

Table 1. Characteristics of working mothers in academia, (n=272)

	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably Not	Definitely Not	Missing
Do you believe that having children has impacted how others view you in the workplace?	117 (43.33)	121 (44.81)	31 (11.48)	1 (0.37)	2
Do you believe that having children impacted your ability to get promoted or advance in your career?	73 (27.04)	101 (37.41)	70 (25.93)	26 (9.63)	2
Do you feel as productive at work as other workers without children?	38 (14.02)	49 (18.08)	57 (21.03)	127 (46.86)	1

Table 2. Perceived impacts of having children on work and career advancement

	Most of the Time	About Half of the Time	Rarely
Fit Society's Expectations of a Working Mother	208 (77.04%)	53 (19.63%)	9 (3.33%)
Maintain Schedules for the Entire Family	218 (80.44%)	46 (16.97%)	7 (2.58%)
Maintain a Clean and Organized House	194 (71.32%)	60 (22.06%)	18 (6.62%)
Buy and Cook Healthy Meals for your Children	174 (63.97%)	75 (27.57%)	23 (8.46%)
Spend More Time with your Children	165 (60.66%)	64 (23.53%)	43 (15.81%)

Table 3. Social pressures felt by working mothers in academia (n=272)

The source of these expectations and pressures differed among women. Some pressure may be internalized, as 76.30% (n=206) of working mothers had compared themselves to stay-at-home mothers. However, when presented with a list of potential outside sources of pressure/expectations on motherhood, women indicated all of the individuals from whom they felt pressure. The most common answer among respondents was coworkers, in which 60.29% (n=164) of the sample indicated they received pressure to be a better mother (Table 4).

Half of the sampled women (n=136) said they received pressure from social media and 38.24% (n=104) from acquaintances. Friends (20.59%, n=56), partners (31.35%, n=85), and family (36.40%, n=99) exerted the least amount of pressure on surveyed mothers. These results fit with the existing literature that suggest pressures on working mothers stem from societal expectations more often than from individuals close to the mothers.

	Cause
Coworkers	164 (60.29%)
Social Media	136 (50.00%)
Acquaintances	104 (38.24%)
Family	99 (36.40%)
Partner	85 (31.25%)
Friends	56 (20.59%)

Table 4. If you feel pressure to perform better as a working mother, which individuals have caused you to feel this pressure?

Pressure to maintain a flawless façade and meet expectations may lead to parental burnout. Among survey respondents, the large burden related to societal expectations translated to feelings of burnout. Only one individual (0.37%) indicated that they had never felt burned out or defeated while balancing work and family

responsibilities (Table 5). In contrast, 52.94% (n=144) of mothers had experienced severe burnout, 39.34% (n=107) experienced moderate burnout, and 7.35% (n=20) experienced slight burnout. As evidenced in literature, this can have negative impacts on the overall health and well-being of mothers and their children [12,14].

	Cause
No burnout	1 (0.37%)
Slight burnout	20 (7.35%)
Moderate burnout	107 (39.34%)
Severe burnout	144 (52.94%)

Table 5. Have you ever felt burnt out or defeated while balancing work and family responsibilities?

These feelings of burnout could have been heightened by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. 81.9% (n=222) of participants stated that they were spending more time with their family but 82.6% (n=224) of working mothers are having difficulty with work-life balance since the start of the pandemic lockdown (Table 1). Table 6 indicates that academic mothers were working fewer hours after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, mothers were spending more time working at home than working in the office. 89.71% of participants said there are blurred boundaries within their work-life

balance (Table 1). The question "How much total time do you spend working" was administered to the mothers. The results from the t-test were significant for this question, demonstrating women worked less after the pandemic, pre-test (M = 4.71, SD = 0.52) and post-test (M = 4.51, SD = 0.69); $t(df) = -5.73$. The question "How much time have you been spending with your family" was also asked. The results from this t-test were significant, demonstrating that women were spending more time with their families since the pandemic, pre-test (M = 3.52, SD = 1.24) and post-test (M = 3.81, SD = 1.19); $t(df) = 6.42$.

	Pre-Test	Post-Test	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	t-test, (p)
Q1: Total time spent working	4.71 (0.52)	4.51 (0.69)	-5.73, (<0.001)
Q2: Time spent working from the office	3.57 (1.13)	2.32 (1.37)	-16.44, (<0.001)
Q3: Time spent at working from home	2.09 (1.06)	3.16 (1.31)	13.59, (<0.001)
Q4: Time spent with family	3.52 (1.24)	3.81 (1.19)	6.42, (< 0.001)

Figure 6. Paired T-Test of time spent by working mothers pre and post pandemic

Discussion

The descriptive findings from the current study confirm and add to existing literature surrounding societal pressures and expectations placed on working mothers in academia. Over 60% of respondents believed that they could either be successful as a mother or successful

in their careers, but not both. This highlights a trend seen in the literature about how working mothers are still expected to handle the majority of the household and child-rearing tasks, despite having the same burden of work as their partners [6, 9,10]. In particular, the majority of working mothers in the study continue to feel pressured

to fit into societal expectations of working mothers, by maintaining schedules for the entire family, keeping a clean and organized house, buying and cooking health meals for their families, and spending more time with their children.

The ideal worker norm, which believes professionals should put work before all else, conflicts with these expectations of women [8]. When working mothers are expected to meet similar productivity quotas as men or their colleagues without children, it can cause women to feel as though they cannot meet expectations in one or both of their personal and professional roles. These two contrasting expectations may be the reason why so many of the participants in the current study thought that having children has impacted how they have been perceived in the workplace, negatively impacted their career ambitions, and inhibited their career advancements through promotion.

The women surveyed most often noted that coworkers, social media, and acquaintances were some of the main sources of pressure within their social circles. This suggests that outside, societal pressures had more impact on working mothers than close connections such as family and friends. This fits with the existing literature that noted an increase in societal expectations of perfectionism and the negative impact related to mothering found by [12, 13].

Further, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic did not lessen these expectations on working mothers. While all areas in academia were impacted by the pandemic and lockdown, men were able to capitalize on the additional time spent at home while women watched the boundary between work and homelife grow more porous [5, 10]. Nearly 90% of respondents had experienced a blurring of the boundary between their work life balance, and 82% were struggling to maintain that balance after the lockdown. Working mothers were also spending more time with their children and families during the pandemic and were devoting significantly less time to work. This is consistent with previous literature by Stefanova et al. [11] and Meeussen and Van Laar [12], which found that mothers were spending more time on familial and caregiving tasks during the pandemic, resulting in a greater conflict between work and family.

Overall, these societal pressures have led to greater feelings of parental burnout among working moms. Of the women surveyed, over 92% had experienced moderate or severe burnout while balancing work and family responsibilities. Expectations of perfection placed on working mothers by society have been associated with parental burnout and can negatively impact their mental and physical health [12, 14]. Therefore, it is important to continue to identify sources of societal pressure and how they impact working mothers.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of the current study are the sample size and the use of social media to recruit participation allowed for a random sample of women from across the United States. However, one limitation is that income and cost of living may vary. In future studies, it would be ideal to select an alternative variable for income when classifying if women are high earners for their families. Due to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 83.82% of the participants of this study were white while only 3.68% were Asian and 2.94% were African American. An income in the range of 50 to 79K could potentially increase the diversity in the sample. Another limitation is that this study did not ask participants if their spouse was a stay-at-home parent. For high-earning mothers, a partner who takes over household and childcare responsibilities would help them to avoid burnout compared to a dual-earning family.

Public Health Implications

During this study, researchers asked participants how they related to the quote “We expect women to work like they don’t have children and raise children as if they don’t work”. Almost all participants related closely to this quote and felt that it is a constant battle between the two roles. A few stated that the pandemic made it increasingly

difficult as childcare became less reliable and colleagues were using the lockdown to write publications and receive raises while working mothers were unable to work extra hours. Some academics are being told to put families first but then given unmanageable workloads. Particularly since the pandemic, mothers have been expected to be available at all hours. They often feel that society does not reward raising children the same way it recognizes careers. Most mothers do admit that this pressure comes internally to be successful in both roles. Mothers who tended to relate to this quote less stated that they put strict boundaries between work and family and have flexible family-friendly work environments.

The current findings show a need for flexibility and a stronger sense of work-life boundaries in the workplace for mothers. Indeed.com released a report in 2019 on what mothers need from employers to be successful [16]. They found that giving both mothers and fathers flexibility to take time off when their children are sick or attend activities for their children will help school-aged children’s parents. This report also found that parents being able to participate in remote work would help reduce stress and burnout. Due to the one-size-fits-all model of employment, 90% of mothers wait until their children leave for college before focusing on their careers [16]. These are potential areas of improvement for workplaces who want to limit the effects of parental burnout in their workforce.

Future Directions

Continuing studies could investigate the impact of factors such as support and availability of childcare and how those influence a mother’s likelihood to have success in her career. In addition, future research could explore preventative measures for burnout. The current study looked only at high-income (making 80,000 or more each year), married women in academia. Future studies could look at the differences between mothers who earn less than 80k and women who earn more, or include single and divorced mothers, to describe the potential different causes of burnout within these groups. Additional research in the area of societal expectations and parental burnout will continue to be needed so that working mothers can receive the support they need to flourish in their many roles.

Conclusion

The current study surveyed high-income working mothers in academia about the source and impact of societal expectations on their lives pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Results of the study suggest that many women working in academic roles have been negatively impacted by both social pressures and ideals of perfection on their personal and professional lives. The majority of mothers held the belief that they could succeed as a mother or working professional, but not both. They felt pressure from their social circles, including coworkers, social media, and acquaintances, to fit into society’s expectations of a working mother by maintaining a flawless home and family life, while excelling in their career. These beliefs were held, despite the feelings that being a mother negatively impacted their career ambitions and ability to progress in their work. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused many mothers to spend more time with their families on caregiving tasks and less time on work, further blurring the divide between work and home life. Working mothers found it harder to maintain a work-life balance and more 90% of those surveyed had experienced moderate or severe parental burnout. Parental burnout can negatively affect the lives of the individual and their family, and more resources should be allocated to working mothers so they may thrive in their many roles.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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