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# Persistent pandemic: The unequal impact of COVID labor on early career academics

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only highlighted pre-existing inequalities in academia but has also exacerbated them while giving rise to novel forms of disparities. Drawing upon our experiences as women, parents, and early career academics (ECAs) in Switzerland and enriched by feminist theory on reproductive labor and carework, we examine the unequal impacts of the pandemic. First, our analysis reveals how the pandemic disproportionately impacted ECAs, a group already in a position of precarity within academia. Second, we identify the broad range of tasks brought about by the pandemic as “COVID labor”. This essential labor—undervalued, invisible, and often unpaid—had a particularly negative impact on ECAs. Third, looking at various intersections of difference, we emphasize that the experience of COVID labor was far from uniform among ECAs with institutional responses disregarding its extent and unequal distribution. In conclusion, we underscore the importance of acknowledging the long-term consequences of COVID labor on ECAs, particularly those belonging to underrepresented groups. Neglecting these issues may lead to the loss of a wide range of talented scholars for reasons that are not related to the quality of their academic performance.

The authors contributed equally to the writing of this article (authors in alphabetical order).

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## KEYWORDS

academic careers, autoethnography, COVID-19, early career academics, gender inequalities

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the Swiss government to declare a nationwide “extraordinary situation” on March 16, 2020.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in widespread closures of businesses and public institutions as well as the implementation of border controls. Schools and most childcare facilities remained closed for nearly 12 weeks. As Swiss early career academics (ECAs)<sup>2</sup> and parents of young children, we struggled to balance work, family responsibilities, and academic mobility while trying to continue our ethnographic research in a world of social distancing and travel restrictions. The interruption or delay of our research activities had immediate effects on our lives as academics and will most likely have persistent implications for our career development. However, the challenges faced by ECAs during the pandemic have received only limited attention. In this article, we draw upon our experiences as ECAs to offer insights into the unequal impacts of the pandemic on academic careers.

Research focusing on gender dynamics among academics has revealed that even before the pandemic, the allocation of childcare responsibilities was consistently imbalanced with academic mothers shouldering most of the unpaid reproductive labor at home (Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2022). They also take on more teaching and service loads in academia (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, and Agiomavritis, 2011). Furthermore, such tasks are not as highly valued as research and publications in tenure evaluations (Bellas, 1999; van Anders, 2004; Winslow & Davis, 2016). A common thread connects the gendered division of reproductive labor within households and carework in academia: as academic women take on a greater share of teaching and service responsibilities, they essentially assume the role of “taking care of the academic family” (Guarino & Borden, 2017, 690). This illustrates deeply rooted gender norms that associate women with caretaking. Consequently, we view domestic tasks, childcare, academic teaching, and service as interconnected dimensions of carework. A major contribution of feminist theory lies in its ability to frame these tasks as labor and underline that carework often remains unpaid and/or devalued despite its pivotal role for economic growth and the operation of capitalist societies and institutions (Federici, 1975; Federici, 2021; Federici et al., 2020; Silvera, 2021; Simonet, 2018).

The pandemic has exacerbated the preexisting unequal distribution of carework within families and institutions (Bowyer et al., 2022; Frize et al., 2021; Górska et al., 2021; Keyser-Verrault and Pasche Guignard, 2023; Minello et al., 2021; Parlak et al., 2021). There has been a significant decline in women's journal submissions, attributed to the challenges they faced in balancing research and childcare during lockdowns (Flaherty, 2020; Gayet-Ageron et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Krukowski et al., 2021; Minello et al., 2021; Watchorn et al., 2020). An increasing body of scholarship confirms that academic mothers may face an amplified “mom penalty” (Flaherty, 2013) due to the persistent aftermath of the pandemic (recent examples in this journal include Górska et al., 2021; Kasymova et al., 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021).

Against this backdrop, and drawing from our personal experiences, we raise several questions: Which types of labor did the pandemic generate? While previous publications have underlined the increase in carework, specifically childcare and teaching responsibilities, what other tasks emerged due to the pandemic, and how were these tasks valued? Did the pandemic's impact affect all academic women<sup>3</sup> uniformly, or were there disparities? What factors influenced the allocation of additional responsibilities during the crisis? By addressing these questions, we offer three central contributions that collectively build upon and advance feminist theories related to the pandemic's impact, gender inequalities in academia, reproductive labor, and carework.

First, we focus on and document the specific experiences of ECAs. Despite the abundance of articles addressing the pandemic's impact on academia since 2020, the voices of ECAs have not resonated as strongly as warranted, and their unique experience from a position of precarity requires more comprehensive documentation (Kradolfer &

Fassa, 2022). ECAs, a group of researchers with precarious employment, were particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. Reports suggest that ECAs, especially women, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic compared to their tenured counterparts (Cardel et al., 2020; Commission, Research, and Innovation, 2023; Herman et al., 2021; Levine et al., 2021). The stakes were particularly high for ECAs during and after the pandemic, given that they find themselves at a decisive moment in their career. Reduced productivity resulting in a lower publication rate is likely to jeopardize their prospects in academia. In the absence of prior comprehensive documentation of ECAs' experiences, we use autoethnography to share our own experiences as ECAs during the pandemic. Autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016) offers a unique way to produce first-person accounts of the embodied experience of the pandemic. Our approach is inspired by the work of other scholars who have used collective autoethnography to highlight the impact of sexism and/or racism in academia during the pandemic (Beech et al., 2021; Blell et al., 2023; Boncori, 2020; Bowyer et al., 2022).

Second, we introduce the term "COVID labor"<sup>4</sup> to encompass the additional burden of both practical and mental efforts necessitated by the pandemic context. Our lived experiences highlight the extensive range of tasks created by the pandemic, extending well beyond the well-documented increase in childcare and teaching loads due to the shift to online teaching. Drawing from feminist theories, COVID labor echoes the concept of "reproductive labor" introduced by S. Federici (1975). Reproductive labor is distinguished from "productive labor" to emphasize the difference between paid work and unpaid domestic and caregiving labor, which women disproportionately undertake. We build on such theorizations to underline that COVID labor was mostly unpaid and undervalued, exacerbating the challenges ECA face in securing grants or tenured positions in the future. However, we argue that the additional work necessitated by the pandemic was not limited to carework/reproductive labor and was not always entirely unpaid (e.g., while the teaching workload increased significantly, at least some of it was considered part of academics' paid responsibilities). COVID labor, therefore, transcends the usual boundaries and distinctions between reproductive and productive labor, precisely because the boundaries between reproductive and productive spheres were blurred during lockdowns.

Our third contribution intersects with the first two and highlights inequalities among academics and in the distribution of COVID labor. While most prior scholarship has focused on gender (in)equalities, our argument centers on the fact that not all ECAs faced the same burden of COVID labor for reasons that are complex and diverse. For instance, as scholars engaged in international mobility, a part of the academic career script in Switzerland, and as ethnographers, we encountered distinct challenges. We thus elaborate on diverse and intersecting differences among ECA profiles that create unequal opportunities for advancing their careers.

The article is structured as follows: we begin with a comprehensive exploration of the pandemic's impact on ECAs. Feminist epistemologies underscore the crucial importance of providing a platform for marginalized voices, a foundational premise for conducting research (e.g., Nagy Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser, 2004; Stanley & Wise, 1993). In line with our goal to amplify ECAs' voices, the subsequent sections are empirically driven, each opening with an autoethnographic vignette. We chose to write these vignettes by focusing on the main challenges we encountered at key moments during the pandemic: the lockdown of Spring 2020, the backdrop of institutional responses to the pandemic, and in relation to our career prospects since then. Each vignette serves as "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the lived experience of ECAs, followed by an analysis of the different types of COVID labor we faced at each of these three stages of the pandemic. Drawing on our backgrounds in the sociology of work, gender, and parenting studies (Ballif, 2020; Ballif, 2023a, 2023b; Ballif & Zinn, 2023; Zinn, 2016, 2019; Zinn & Hofmeister, 2022), we critically appraised our experiences together, identifying themes and refining our analysis through consecutive rounds of discussion and writing.

We argue that COVID labor is often invisible and undervalued, despite its essential role within and outside academic institutions, and affects disproportionately academic mothers and ECAs. In conclusion, we urgently emphasize the need to recognize the significant impact of COVID labor on academic mothers and ECAs, and the unequal burden they have shouldered throughout the pandemic. Through our own experiences, we advocate for increased awareness of the gendered implications of this crisis (Bahn, Cohen, and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2020; Boncori, 2020) and aim to contribute to the broader conversation on this issue.

## 2 | THE PANDEMIC AND DIVERSE INTERSECTIONS OF DIFFERENCE IN ACADEMIA

As Swiss ECAs, despite many economic privileges, we have faced precarity and inequalities like many ECAs around the world. The Swiss academic system, like that of other countries worldwide, was already characterized by inherent gender inequalities before the onset of the pandemic. Switzerland is characterized by a “modified male breadwinner” gender regime: if women have a high employment rate in European comparison, only 42% of them work full time (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). The division of domestic labor is highly unequal and the gender pay gap is substantial compared to neighboring countries (Bataille et al., 2017; Madörin, Schnegg, and Baghdadi, 2012). This traditional gender regime also impacts the academic labor market. Despite women's overrepresentation among students in all disciplines, they constitute only 29% of professors in Swiss academic institutions, a figure that has barely progressed over the last decade (Dubach et al., 2013; Federal Statistical Office, 2021). Moreover, female professors are often recruited internationally rather than from the pool of Swiss ECAs (Le Feuvre et al., 2018). Female researchers struggle to reach tenured positions, publish less overall, and have a smaller professional network compared to their male counterparts (Di et al., 2021; Fassa and Kradolfer, 2010). Despite the partial modernization of the traditional gender regime during the 21st century, asymmetries persist. In academia, while many male scholars have partners who reduce their own professional commitments to support their partner's career, female researchers frequently have partners who allocate as much time to paid employment as they do (Dubach et al., 2013). In Switzerland, academic mothers were among those most affected by the closure of childcare facilities during the pandemic. As highly educated individuals are working in the tertiary sector, they were among those most likely to work from home while also caring for their children. On average, they spent more time on unpaid care work than before the pandemic (Bütikofer et al., 2020; Czymara et al., 2021; Lanfranconi et al., 2021; Refle et al., 2020).

Even before the pandemic, Swiss ECAs faced an extended period of precarity when compared internationally. In the early 2000s, a neoliberal turn led to the emergence of a “new academic proletariat” within Swiss universities. The number of short-term research positions (doctoral researchers, postdocs, and scientific collaborators), very often part-time, surged, while the number of permanent positions (professorships) remained relatively stable (Bataille et al., 2017; Le Feuvre et al., 2018). Consequently, approximately 80% of research personnel in Switzerland hold fixed-term contracts (Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, 2018). Swiss ECAs not only have more precarious employment conditions than those in other economic sectors in Switzerland but also face a period of precarity lasting from 10 to 15 years (Kradolfer & Fassa, 2022), as they strive to secure one of the scarce tenured positions. This academic career model is commonly referred to as the “survivor model” (Bataille et al., 2017; Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier, 2020; Le Feuvre et al., 2018). In essence, only those who have the (financial, social, and psychological) means to persevere through a series of fixed-term positions may eventually succeed in obtaining a tenured position. Adding to this professional and financial vulnerability is the fact that international mobility is considered a necessary step in the Swiss academic career model, compelling ECAs to relocate frequently (Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier, 2020; Sautier, 2021).

In addition to the inherent precarity associated with early academic career stages, other factors contribute to the varying vulnerability of academics to the impact of the pandemic. While previous publications on the gendered impact of the pandemic in academia have often focused on differences between publication rates of men and women, the category of “academic women” is heterogeneous and not all of them have been affected in the same way. For example, research conducted in various countries suggests that women with dependent children experienced a disproportionate decline in publication output compared to women without children, who, in some cases, even saw increased productivity (Di et al., 2021; Krukowski et al., 2021; Minello et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2020). Even among academic mothers, the impact of the pandemic varied significantly with factors such as the age, number, and health status of children playing a critical role (França et al., 2023; Myers et al., 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021). Academic mothers with disabilities were affected in ways that non-disabled mothers were not (Wagner et al., 2022).

Therefore, an analysis that takes into account diverse “intersections of difference” (Sullivan & King Thorius, 2010) is crucial to capturing the unequal impact of the pandemic (Wright et al., 2020). Blell et al. (2023) deploy such an

analysis to show how women of color have been uniquely affected by the pandemic in UK academia, particularly those “having caring responsibilities in addition to a lower salary, higher student loan debt, immigration-related costs, and less inherited wealth” (2023, 8–9). For an even more nuanced and detailed perspective, we believe that an analysis of how the pandemic exacerbates inequalities among academics marked by diverse intersections of difference should encompass both structural elements, such as gender, race, and age, as well as social and economic conditions like job precarity or health status. People’s individual circumstances and coping mechanisms played a significant role in shaping their experience during lockdowns. Consequently, the impact of the pandemic was influenced by a multitude of factors, including workload (particularly the teaching-to-research ratio), job security, control over working hours, parenting status (single or co-parenting), and individual and family health conditions. The combination of these factors, and the way they intersect, creates complex and interconnected systems of inequalities, resulting in significant differences among (female) researchers. As women and parents, we occupied a marginalized minority position within academia when the pandemic unfolded. This was further compounded by the fact that Swiss ECAs grappled with a double challenge—precarious employment and transnational mobility (Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier, 2020; Sautier, 2021). However, we also had certain privileges within social hierarchies in Switzerland: we are both cisgender, living in heterosexual relationships, non-disabled, white, and Swiss citizens. Thus, a thorough and nuanced analysis of “intra-categorical complexity” (McCall, 2005, 1773)—the complexity and diversity of lived experiences within social groups—is necessary to understand the full extent of the pandemic’s unequal impact on academic careers.

### 3 | LOCKDOWN: TIME, SPACE, AND COVID LABOR

*It's 12:55 p.m. on a Friday in early April 2020, and I have 20 min to finish preparing my two-hour lecture. I teach online to bachelor's and master's students at a university in French-speaking Switzerland every week. The room that serves as my home office is filled with chaos, the sound of the 10-month-old baby's cries piercing the air and our other child shouting from the bathroom across the apartment. Knowing my husband is taking care of the kids, I do my best to tune out the noise and concentrate on my lecture. The government declared Switzerland to be in an “extraordinary situation,” leading to the closure of schools and childcare facilities, and the shift to distance learning and teaching for universities. Every Friday afternoon, I find myself teaching via Zoom from my home. At 1:15 p.m., it's not just about being prepared to teach my subject, it's about looking good and feeling ready despite the challenges and exhaustion brought on by the pandemic and the chaos of balancing work and family life. The pandemic turned our family organization upside down by brutally depriving us of the last support we had thanks to the school and daycare. Taking care of our children 24/7, especially with our infant waking up multiple times a night and crying frequently during the day, is an almost insurmountable task, both stress-inducing (how can we succeed without breaking down?) and filled with guilt (we could always do better at work and with the family). Balancing work and childcare requires constant planning and coordination. Although my husband and I have some degree of flexibility in our schedules, we are faced with the persistent question of who will be able to dedicate time to pressing work issues and who will take care of the kids, handle household chores, and prepare meals. The aim was to alternate between work and childcare, but the reality often deviates from the plan, with work extending into the weekend and night. The pressure of trying to manage work and family life is overwhelming, the days are long, and the weekends are filled with work, leaving little room for rest, but I press on, determined to find a way to make it all work. (Isabelle Zinn).*

This autoethnographic vignette vividly illustrates the extent of stress induced by the lockdown, laying bare the disruptions it caused in the delicate balance between work and family life. It describes the type of tasks that emerged at the onset of the pandemic and the first lockdowns, including the spatial and temporal reorganization of productive and reproductive labor.

The transfer of childcare responsibility from collective structures or private individuals to parents during lockdowns has burdened working parents with a *simultaneous* “double shift”: caring for children while fulfilling work obligations without any opportunity for respite between these demanding tasks (André & van der Zwan, 2022; Bühler et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Czymara et al., 2021; Nagy et al., 2023; Refle et al., 2020; Steinmetz et al., 2022).

This supplementary responsibility has added another layer of complexity to the already intricate juggling act of working parents, leading many to feel “trapped” or “suffocating” (Collectif d'analyse des familles en confinement, 2020) in a “never-ending shift” (Boncori, 2020). The (impossible) task of fulfilling work obligations and care duties *in the same space and time* created a whole range of material and mental labor that few testimonies have explicitly addressed. The fusion of personal and professional realms—and the blurring of reproductive and productive spheres—has transformed family spaces into areas allocated to paid work. For many parents, it was challenging to set clear boundaries when there was no longer a clear separation between the personal and the professional (Czymara et al., 2021; Couch et al., 2020; Boncori, 2020).

The labor of reorganizing one's space and schedule involved practical tasks, including acquiring the right equipment (at least a computer, ideally an office chair) as well as finding a spatial arrangement that allowed for both the necessary focus on work and the mental availability to attend to the children's needs. It also caused emotional upheavals. Far from offering “internal stillness” as experienced by some (Miller, 2021), the lockdown for us was accompanied by mental fatigue and a sense that “normal” no longer existed. As parents of young children, the ceaseless demand for coordination and planning stripped us of any moment for respite. This rhythm meant that one parent was tending to either paid work or chores while the other attended to the children, leaving little time for self-care. In addition, our aspirations for an equitable distribution of reproductive labor with our partners necessitated meticulous planning and organization for the day ahead. This constant workload led to significant tensions when one parent felt shortchanged by the arrangements made. The nature of researchers' work exacerbated this challenge: immersing oneself in writing a scientific article requires mental availability and ideally an uninterrupted stream of focused writing sessions. Intrusions disrupt the flow of writing and brief and sporadic work intervals prove inadequate for achieving the level of concentration essential for effective writing (Couch et al., 2020). Both of us found ourselves confined to a singular space—our homes—a circumstance that triggered significant upheavals in the orchestration of work and family dynamics. The hours allocated to tasks, such as meal preparation, infant care, homeschooling, cleaning, and grocery shopping, all while working from home, disrupted the demarcation between productive and reproductive labor. This has effectively rendered the traditional division of spheres no longer applicable.

The COVID labor of reorganizing time and space has been utterly ignored by academic institutions despite being a prerequisite to academic work under lockdown. Furthermore, the fact that these spatial and temporal negotiations were heavily constrained by the size of one's housing and household was largely invisibilized. When the media reported on family life under lockdown, it was the lives of privileged upper-middle class families, who spent their lockdown as if in a vacation home, without any sign of illness, but with plenty of room to spare (cf. Auðardóttir & Rúðólfssdóttir, 2021). This romanticization of lockdown existence stood in stark contrast to our daily reality as ECAs sharing a living space with our family, even though we enjoyed many privileges compared to others, including the very fact of having secure housing. COVID labor did not occur in a vacuum but is woven into a complex fabric of structural factors and economic conditions.

Some voices such as Couch et al.'s (2020) and Miller's (2021) have emphasized the opportunities brought about by the radical shift in time and space caused by lockdowns for work–life balance of academic mothers. Traditionally, academic institutions are perceived as “care-free zones” where parents hide their caring identities to embody the ideal neoliberal academic who pursues their career without personal constraints (Lynch, 2010). The lockdown experience has shattered these rigid boundaries, making it nearly impossible to maintain such strict separation. Who has not experienced the abrupt appearance of a colleague's child on the screen? An infant crying in the background during a professional meeting? A colleague making a presentation from their bedroom, kitchen, or couch? What was once an unimaginable and stressful scenario has become more common during lockdowns. Due to the pandemic, some of the facets that jointly define the identity of academic mothers have become more visible, leaving room for more human aspects in a profession that values research productivity above all and privileges a certain type of researcher, one who is always available and detached. These new arrangements have shown that we are not one-dimensional researchers but multifaceted humans (Beech et al., 2021), breaking with the ideal of the lone male researcher. Consequently, a specific sense of resilience could potentially emerge, rendering the pandemic a juncture for professional recalibration

(Miller, 2021), an opportunity to “acknowledge the value of the ‘whole’ person and their ‘lived experience,’ not just the dimension which is paid” (Couch et al., 2020, 273).

However, reading the autoethnographic vignette through the critical lens of the sociology of work raises concerns regarding the paradoxical outcomes of this newfound flexibility, particularly for women (Chung, 2022; Lapeyre & Silvera, 2022). Flexible work arrangements, such as working from home, create porosity or erase the boundaries between the spheres (Linhart, 2021). This superimposition of the private and the professional and the fact that employees move from the work to the private sphere without any buffer zone can foster mental exhaustion. To truly establish a new paradigm that recognizes and appreciates the contributions of all researchers as multidimensional human beings, irrespective of any structural, social or economic differences, academic institutions must actively confront and dismantle the inequalities that the pandemic has both exacerbated and given rise to.

#### 4 | INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES AND THE INVISIBILIZATION OF COVID LABOR

*On August 3, 2020, my partner, our two children, and I embarked on a journey to Great Britain to start a postdoctoral fellowship I had been awarded. Despite having moved 13 times before, this relocation was by far the most stressful because of the ongoing pandemic. Until the last minute, we weren't sure if our flight would proceed, if the borders would be open, if our belongings would arrive safely, or if the house we had rented from afar would actually exist. We had to sever all ties with our life in Switzerland to avoid paying twice for everything, such as canceling our childcare contracts, subletting our apartment, and terminating our phone contracts. On the day of our departure, I was terrified at the thought of being stranded between two countries without a place to call home. In the months leading up to our journey, I contacted the organization funding my scholarship to inquire about emergency assistance should we become stranded due to the pandemic. Unfortunately, they were unable to provide any help because, they said, it was my responsibility to manage our travel arrangements.*

*Four months later, on January 4, 2021: The British government announced the closure of schools for an unspecified duration, which ended up lasting nine long weeks. The news left me feeling suffocated with anxiety. I had only 28 days left to complete a grant application, a highly competitive process where only the best candidates were awarded funding. Additionally, I needed to work on my current research project. Unfortunately, my work time was now halved, as I had to home-school my child alternately with my partner. I felt overwhelmed, wondering how I could complete my application with the same quality as the other candidates under these circumstances. I reached out to my funding institution in Switzerland for assistance. There would be no additional time granted for submitting my application, nor was any extension foreseen for my current research project, which would inevitably suffer from several weeks of delay. At that time in Switzerland, the schools were open as usual, so from a Swiss perspective, the circumstances may have appeared almost normal. (Edmée Ballif).*

The precarity of researchers (like that of many other categories of workers) has been exacerbated by the pandemic as illustrated by this autoethnographic vignette. In the context of the pandemic, obtaining new contracts and funding has become more challenging, as campus closures have made the circulation of information, networking opportunities, and access to support. This precarity has also been intensified by the volatility of the international context, which has hindered people from moving to another country to provide help or seek assistance (e.g., to be closer to family). ECAs were already in a precarious work situation because of their short-term contracts, which in Switzerland often imply limited social protection rights (Le Feuvre, Bataille, and Sautier, 2020). This precarity led to particularly high anxiety among groups of ECAs who are already a vulnerable minority, such as women, migrants, or those whose health conditions made travel high risk (Cardel et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2021; Levine et al., 2021).

Starting in the spring of 2020, Swiss academic institutions implemented exceptional measures to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. The Swiss National Science Foundation offered opportunities to extend research project fundings. Some universities extended expiring fixed-term contracts by a few months. However, these offers came with conditions and were only valid for a very limited period, thus not fully addressing the impact of the pandemic. While professional associations in the United States, such as the American Anthropological Association, provided emergency financial support, to our knowledge, no emergency aid has been established for the 80% of

researchers in fixed-term employment in Switzerland. This lack of support left individuals already in vulnerable situations to grapple with the material repercussions of the pandemic entirely on their own.

The vignette describes several types of COVID labor related to the pandemic. Childcare, the practical organization of academic mobility, and the writing of research projects all became more laborious and time-consuming. Based on the example of Swiss institutions, we argue that the distinct vulnerability of ECAs and their shouldering of COVID labor, alongside the variations that exist among ECAs, were largely overlooked. This observation aligns with what Górska et al. observed in Poland: “academia does not have adequate coping mechanisms to deal with the extra burdens and additional workloads that fall on some groups of academics” (2021, 1556)—conclusions that have also been reached in relation to the American (Levine et al., 2021) and Australian academic contexts (Nash & Churchill, 2020). Detailing these tasks of COVID labor is a crucial contribution to feminist analyses of academia as it illustrates how tasks that fall outside of what is traditionally considered carework or reproductive labor affect researchers unequally along gender and parental status lines.

Childcare has been the only form of COVID labor to receive institutional recognition albeit in a limited way. In March 2020, most Swiss universities announced that the time spent on childcare and homeschooling during the 8–12 weeks<sup>5</sup> when schools and nurseries were closed could be counted as working time. This measure, while commendable and appropriate at the time, does not consider the actual duration of the issue. School and daycare facilities in many places continued to operate at reduced staffing levels (accepting therefore fewer children) or simply went out of business after the Spring 2020 lockdown. Even after schools had been reopened, childcare facilities continued to operate under strict exclusion criteria, often refusing to accept children exhibiting symptoms as mild as those of a common cold. Grandparents and relatives sometimes considered “at risk” have not necessarily resumed their role in supporting working parents. During the first two years of the pandemic, many classrooms across the country were quarantined for 10–14 days when COVID-19 cases were detected. The number of COVID-19 cases in children exploded in September 2021 following the start of the school year. In early December 2021, one-third of all quarantined persons in Switzerland were children.<sup>6</sup> These quarantines had a profound impact on family routines: if a child tested positive for COVID-19, they were in isolation at home and were not supposed to take part in family meals (nor in collective activities) but had to eat alone in their room.

A type of COVID labor that was utterly overlooked by academic institutions was the organization of academic mobility by ECAs. In Switzerland, international mobility is considered a hallmark of scientific excellence in most disciplinary fields, and therefore, a prerequisite for accessing grants and competing for advanced and tenured positions. While geographical mobility is a worldwide trend (Herschberg, Benschop, and van den Brink, 2018; Geuna, 2015), the Swiss academic market is one of the most internationalized regarding both in- and outbound geographical mobility (Afonso, 2016; Sautier, 2021). This criterion was already in conflict with a balanced family life before the pandemic and remains a major obstacle to the feminization of professorial positions (Ackers, 2004) as well as a cause of financial and personal precarity that particularly weighs on women ECAs (Sautier, 2021). In times of health crisis, organizing mobility has become a thorny challenge, as E. Ballif expresses in her vignette (see also the testimonies of Ammann & Richter, 2021). Planning an international move in a context where air travel was scarce and expensive, where entry requirements to countries could change overnight, and where many administrations were operating at a slower pace became a delicate and time-consuming task. The COVID-19 tests that had to be taken to travel also consumed significant resources in terms of time and money. It should be noted that, even before the pandemic, the concrete tasks and costs related to such a move were not recognized by Swiss funding institutions; research plans generally made it seem that researchers would be able to devote themselves to their research from the first day of their mobility. The fact that academic institutions have so consistently overlooked the significance of this type of COVID labor is well illustrated by the example of the Swiss National Science Foundation, which stipulated in spring 2020 that their grantees could only work from home for a period equivalent to one-third of the duration of their fellowship.<sup>7</sup> For a 12-month mobility, a grantee would have to change institutions after 3 months if working from home was imposed. Since the closure of university buildings was often uniform across a national territory, this would have required another international move—with no guarantee that the new host country would not impose home office later on.



Swiss ECAs *with children* had to face the additional burden of organizing international mobility for a whole family. Relationships with school and out-of-school institutions were more difficult and unpredictable due to the pandemic context. Swiss researchers living abroad sometimes faced much longer and more significant school closures than in Switzerland. E. Ballif had to cope with 11 weeks of closures during the 2020–2021 school year in Great Britain. Children being at home due to quarantine or isolation became a source of stress, largely owing to the unpredictability of events: the inability to foresee whether you would have a day of uninterrupted work or if the child might fall ill or require quarantine at home added to the strain.

One's disciplinary and methodological orientation also had a significant impact on the extent of COVID labor. In our cases, working with qualitative methods created additional work in the pandemic context, as these methods often rely on direct and close contact with a social group, sometimes over an extended period. Lockdown, social distancing, restricted access to public places, and the cancellation of large events resulted in the disappearance of many research sites. Such disruptions and delays in research plans did not affect only ECAs but had a particularly devastating impact on their careers, given that ECAs have fixed-term contracts and are under constant pressure to publish and apply for further funding. While the challenges posed by the closure of campuses for laboratory research have been widely noted (Radecki & Schonfeld, 2020), the impact on ethnographic fieldwork has received less attention. Unlike laboratory work, fieldwork often could not resume as soon as university buildings reopened as restrictions on social life persisted. In Great Britain, researchers in the social sciences and humanities reported in spring 2021 that the pandemic restrictions had more negative effects on the time available for their research compared to their colleagues in other disciplines (Myers et al., 2020; Vitae, 2021). Thus, some ECAs may have been more affected in their research plans depending on their discipline and methodologies—which is most likely a gendered phenomenon. There is indeed a correlation between academic discipline, research methodology, and gender. Studies have consistently indicated that women often lean toward social sciences and humanities disciplines as well as qualitative research methods (Ashmos Plowman & Smith, 2011; Grant et al., 1987). In Switzerland, the humanities and social sciences encountered an unprecedented decline in funding applications during the spring of 2020, in contrast to other disciplines,<sup>8</sup> which is most likely linked to the higher proportion of women in these disciplines. Many institutions suggested that researchers redirect their research to alternative field sites. For ethnographers, embarking on a new fieldsite typically demands a significant conceptual and theoretical overhaul of their research. The resulting COVID labor often entailed extensive revisions to the research project, navigating the complexities of gaining access to new fields, and acquiring proficiency in novel methodologies, such as cyberethnography or online interviewing. This COVID labor extended well beyond the spring 2020 lockdown and has been neither acknowledged nor compensated by funding institutions.

The invisibilization of COVID labor linked to childcare, mobility, or modifications of research plans particularly affected categories of ECAs who were already in the minority and precarious within the academic world due to their gender, parental status, race, health status, or other factors. The fact that academic institutions in Switzerland neither recognized nor compensated for COVID labor made some people's situations more fragile than others'. Unless compensation mechanisms are put in place, the cumulated disadvantages induced by COVID labor experienced by specific groups of academics, including mothers, are likely to affect their long-term career prospects and generate a decline in diversity among those who secure a stable position.

## 5 | THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID LABOR

*January 2021: I am preparing my application for a postdoctoral fellowship with the Swiss National Science Foundation. As a woman with children, I am aware that my chances of pursuing an academic career were already statistically diminished. But the pandemic has further compounded the inequality, as I have to homeschool my oldest child part-time. I can't help but think of myself as a sprinter running a race with weights attached to my feet (in this case, the homeschooling labor to be performed) and yet trying to finish among the best. I wonder if the pandemic will deal a fatal blow to any hope of success in academia.*

*As I put together my application, I am struck by the total absence of questions about the pandemic's impact on my research work. I am not asked about any delays or difficulties I may have faced due to the pandemic. There is no indication of whether and how the pandemic will be factored into the evaluation process. It was as if they didn't want to see the obstacles that I face every minute of every day. I recall the words of someone familiar with the evaluation process, advising against mentioning any "family constraints" in my application, as it could potentially "piss off" some reviewers who think care duties should not be mentioned in a grant application. However, if the obstacles I face are not visible, how could I expect them to be considered in the evaluation of my application? Should I agree to participate in this general blindness? I decide to devote my cover letter to describing the impact of the pandemic on my work. It was a risk, as I was uncertain about how it would be received. In June 2021, I received the news that I had been awarded the grant. I will never know how my cover letter was received or considered. (Edmée Ballif).*

As early as 2020, we were concerned about the long-term impact of the pandemic on our career prospects, as echoed in this vignette. Beyond the shock and stress of lockdown life, we wondered how our chances of obtaining grants and positions would be affected by the time we had to devote to COVID labor. As young researchers, we were acutely aware that we were in constant competition. Not a month went by without us having to prepare an application for a position, a grant, research funds, or an administrative role. These applications put us in direct competition with colleagues whose careers were less affected than ours by the pandemic—and unfortunately, with others who have suffered more than us.

What this vignette prompts is a reflection on the long-term consequences of invisibilizing COVID labor and overlooking intra-categorical differences among researchers. While funding institutions around the world have often offered grant recipients (usually those with stable positions) more time to complete their research, for ECAs the competition appears to continue as usual. Neither interviews for academic positions nor grant applications we have completed since 2020 have made any room for an assessment of the impacts of the pandemic on our track record. In other countries, some universities have granted an extra year to people on tenure track. Similar discussions have taken place at the local level in Switzerland. However, this measure, which is identical for all tenure-track candidates, does not consider the very different obstacles encountered by each individual and is therefore only marginally adequate for limiting inequalities within a certain group of researchers. Blell and colleagues (2023) provide a detailed description of the unequal effect of the decision to freeze promotions decided in 2020 at UK universities on women of color. Such a blanket decision ignored the persisting gender and racial pay gaps and acted as a further barrier to the promotion of women of color.

Similarly, the fact that academic institutions have focused their response on a very narrow definition of what COVID labor consisted of—mainly, additional childcare tasks—and on a single indicator of the gendered impact of the pandemic—the decline in journal submissions—sidesteps the long-term impact that the pandemic has on female ECAs. We agree with Pereira (2021) that the analysis of the impact of the pandemic on academic careers must go beyond a narrow comparison of men's and women's publication rates. Publications are not the only indicator of the impact of the pandemic and perhaps not even the best. Aware of the importance of publications in an academic career, some female researchers may have managed to submit articles during the pandemic to the detriment of other tasks that are less easily captured by statistical indicators (and usually devalued), such as networking activities, conference participation, organization of scientific events, institutional commitment, mentoring, service to the community, and outreach activities (Nalden and Byrom, 2020; Watchorn et al., 2020). When the Swiss National Science Foundation, for example, reassures the public that there has been no decline in the proportion of women applying for grants since spring 2020,<sup>9</sup> it contributes to the invisibility of the tasks that women have given up prioritizing grant applications. Because a grant represents income, it is likely that this task has been prioritized. According to a British survey, ECAs spent more time in spring 2020 writing and applying for grants than before (Nalden and Byrom, 2020). While the decline in article submissions by women in 2020 is very concerning, it is important to note that it likely only represents the tip of the iceberg. The slowdown in research projects and networking has long-term consequences for young researchers whose future careers are at stake. No data have been collected or produced for several months, and the decline in publication is likely to be even more severe in the years to come.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

With short-term contracts and frequent job applications making them less able to resist or engage in “renegade acts” (França et al., 2023, 38) than their tenured counterparts, the pandemic has hit ECAs in a position of precarity. The repercussions on ECAs were particularly severe as this category of researchers needs to add quantifiable outputs to their CVs to progress in their careers or else risk the potential loss of their job and career prospects. Through our autoethnographic analysis, we contribute to the growing collection of voices of academic mothers and raise awareness of the unique struggles faced by ECAs during the pandemic.

Our analysis highlights various types of undervalued and often unpaid labor in academia, including the spatial and temporal organization of work, academic mobility, and the (re)definition of research designs. Using autoethnography and thick description allowed us to highlight that COVID labor extended beyond caregiving responsibilities that academics, particularly women, were already shouldering before the pandemic. Like feminist theorists have pointed out regarding reproductive labor, COVID labor has been essential for the continuity of work in academic institutions. Making COVID labor visible along with other forms of unpaid labor—academic and domestic—pursues the work of feminist scholars and eventually results in increased awareness to the range of longstanding inequalities in academia. Overlooking its significance, however, demonstrates once more that academia and society more generally still do not account for gender as an organizing principle and largely continue to consider workplace cultures to be genderless (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001).

The amount and nature of COVID labor can only be understood with a particular focus on the many factors of inequalities between and among categories of researchers. Analyses that consider intersections of differences regarding the impact of the pandemic have provided crucial insights into how some categories of women were disproportionately impacted. In addition to the significant impact of sexism and racism on career trajectories, our experiences add parenthood, job (un)stability, international mobility, and disciplinary and methodological background to the list of social factors and disadvantages that influence one's ability to meet academic standards of excellence. Blell and colleagues (2023, 9) underline, “different forms of disadvantage can have a substantial cumulative impact if no measures of redress are taken”. Therefore, it is crucial for academic institutions to recognize and address the challenges faced by underrepresented groups in academia, including academic mothers, to ensure equity and diversity in the field.

More than three years after the onset of the pandemic, it is frustrating to observe that COVID labor and its unequal distribution among ECAs are still largely overlooked in institutional responses to the pandemic—if and where such responses still exist. While a few academic institutions have implemented measures, there is still an opportunity to mitigate the effect of the pandemic. This could involve the development of additional funding tools specifically tailored to the categories of ECAs most impacted by the pandemic or conducting research on the effects of the pandemic on young researchers, particularly examining the impact of gender, race, and parenthood. The assessment of applications for positions or fellowships should better account for such inequalities. In Switzerland, unions are currently spearheading a political campaign to create more tenured jobs in academia.<sup>10</sup>

In recent times, some funding institutions have included a calculation of “net academic age” within their grant application processes. This measure offers transparency by incorporating periods of sick leave, parental leave, and other non-academic intervals, making certain inequalities more visible. The calculation of net academic age should also consider the influence of COVID labor, particularly the administrative demands of academic mobility. Moreover, academic age should be used as a criterion for determining eligibility for positions and fellowships. The concept of net academic age is a step in the right direction for addressing such inequalities in academic careers. However, it is important to note that the calculation of academic age has its limitations. For example, it might require disclosure of personal information, such as medical history, which some may be hesitant to do when applying for a position. Moreover, it does not account for structural factors, such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, ableism, or the challenges faced by those belonging to other minority categories. As a result, it is imperative that we engage in a more profound reflection on equal opportunities within academic careers.

The pandemic forces us to think about new ways of working, including in academia, and to challenge institutions from a feminist point of view. It is an unprecedented opportunity for academic institutions to lay the groundwork for a fairer and more inclusive academy by questioning the traditional, white male dominated, model of careers and the way universities operate (Beech et al., 2021). We believe that academic institutions, in Switzerland largely publicly funded, should set an example. During times of crisis academic institutions should play a pivotal role in paving the way for a more egalitarian society. Without such measures, we risk regressing in our efforts to achieve equal opportunities and a more representative community that can effectively address societal challenges. The upcoming generation of scholars is likely to be even more male, white, and childless than previous generations. The mass exodus of ECAs from minority groups poses the risk of a persistent or a “secondary pandemic” (Cardel et al., 2020), resulting in the exclusion of women, mothers, and ethnic minorities from the academic pipeline.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The authors contributed equally to the writing of this article (authors in alphabetical order). While a previous iteration of this work has been published in French (Ballif & Zinn, 2023), the current article presents new insights and arguments.
- <sup>2</sup> We use this category to refer to individuals who are in the initial years of their academic appointments, typically after completing their doctoral degree or postdoctoral training, and are striving to establish themselves as tenured researchers or scholars. The exact definition of “early career” stage varies depending on disciplinary norms, institutional policies, and geographical contexts. In Switzerland, for instance, ECAs typically face up to 15 years of precarious employment (Kradolfer & Fassa, 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> We use the term “women” in alignment with the vocabulary frequently used in the literature on gender and work. However, even if this is not the focus of this article, we are critical of a binary conceptualization of gender. Queer and nonbinary individuals in academia have faced specific challenges during the pandemic (see, e.g., Brewer, 2021; Pennell et al., 2021), which underline the importance of examining intersections of difference in academia.
- <sup>4</sup> We borrow the concept of COVID labor from Twamley et al. (2023) who introduced it to describe the—unpaid and undervalued— “work involved in living through and adjusting to a pandemic” that British parents performed on a daily basis. Similarly, we consider that the transition to a new context of heightened risk and shifting guidelines during the pandemic translated into various forms of COVID labor among academics.
- <sup>5</sup> All schools remained closed for 8 weeks, with secondary school teaching limited for another 4 weeks. These were the minimum periods imposed by the federal government, while cantons made local decisions regarding longer closures, including those for day care centers (Refle et al., 2020).
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/19h30/video/les-enfants-particulierement-touche-par-la-cinquieme-vague?urn=urn:rts:video:12688419>.

<sup>7</sup> In the fall of 2021, this requirement was extended to one-half of the fellowship term.

<sup>8</sup> <https://data.snf.ch/stories/women-submitting-fewer-grant-proposals-en.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://data.snf.ch/stories/women-submitting-fewer-grant-proposals-en.html>.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://campaign.petition-academia.ch/> and <https://vpod.ch/campa/stablejobs-betterscience-en/>.

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