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Women and burnout in the context of a pandemic

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Abstract

This article presents the lived narrative of a female academic with children working in a British university and trying to cope with a completely new way of work and life in the context of the pandemic. The overall aim of the article is to offer a gendered account of burnout—specifically how women may be experiencing burnout at multiple levels, and the efficacy of their subsequent coping strategies. The narrative provides insights into how a range of coping mechanisms such as disengagement, denial, and energy conservation are deployed to deal with the increased responsibilities at work and home as a result of the pandemic. Existing research has viewed burnout as gender neutral, leaving a gap in the literature on the significant differences in both men's and women's experience of burnout as well as their coping behaviors.

KEYWORDS

burnout, coping, mothers, pandemic, second shift, women

1 | INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, in response to a global pandemic many organizations were forced to ask their employees to work remotely from home for the foreseeable future. Subsequent escalation of the pandemic led to the closure of schools and a transition to “distance learning” for students across the United Kingdom. With schools closed, many working parents had to either try working from home while tending to their children or in some instances take a leave of absence from work. However, a recent *New York Times* report highlighted that the closing of

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schools had a significantly higher effect on working mothers since they still continue to bear the brunt of most childcare obligations (Wang & Inoue, 2020). Thus, the key challenge for women in particular has been to combine homeworking with a considerably expanded “second shift” of looking after children (in the absence of schools or childcare facilities) as well as undertaking a majority of the housework (given reduced potential for outsourcing domestic services such as cleaning, cooking, etc.). So far, no research emerging on the pandemic and lockdown specifically has investigated how the gendered distribution of various activities (such as homeschooling and domestic chores) alongside working from home may be signaling an unrecognized backslide to traditional gender inequalities of the 1950s. Using the lived narrative of a mother working in academia, we unpack the potential disadvantages a working female with children experiences at work and home when the distinction between these two “spaces” is increasingly blurred. More importantly, we offer a gendered account of burnout—specifically how women may be experiencing burnout at multiple levels, and the efficacy of their subsequent coping strategies.

2 | GENDERED BURNOUT?

Women continue to shoulder a majority of housework and childcare responsibilities despite increased female participation in full-time paid employment (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). Societal gender expectations, whereby domestic responsibilities are still seen as the sole/primary preserve of women, create severe pressures on working women to negotiate and balance home and work commitments (Craig & Sawrikar, 2009). For example, Wheatley's (2013) research highlights that gender inequality at home still exists as women try to juggle full-time employment with household duties such as the school run and childcaring. In order to meet these domestic/home obligations, and reduce the tension between home and work responsibilities, many women either move into less demanding jobs or scale down to part-time/reduced hours work (Connolly & Gregory, 2008). Therefore, for men home is recognized as a place of healing and recovery while for women it is usually a source of additional unpaid work (Dobbs, 2007; Harris, Foster, & Whysall, 2007; Wheatley, 2013). This domestic landscape runs parallel to the work context whereby a lot of extant research stresses that women are exposed to more work-related pressures and stresses compared to their male colleagues, including coping with sex discrimination (Doyle & Hind, 1998), lack of promotion and provision of organizational support (Knights & Richards, 2003), and even gender stereotyping and harassment (Foley, Oxenbridge, Cooper, & Baird, 2020). All these workplace stressors can generate immense pressure on women and contribute to burnout.

Workplace burnout has been perceived as a critical mental health problem that leads employees to experience emotional and physical exhaustion, anxiety, and unproductiveness (Leiter, 1991). Maslach and Leiter (2006, p. 45) conceptualized job burnout as “a psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job.” Commonly, individuals who experience burnout have been subjected to extensive job-related pressures, and subsequently exhibit negative behaviors toward work and colleagues, as well as deploying coping mechanisms such as cynicism and disengagement to distance themselves from these workplace stressors (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Empirical evidence had highlighted the organizational implications of burnout such as a loss of creativity and commitment (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Moore, 2000), disengagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), absenteeism (Firth & Britton, 1989), and declines in job performance (Maslach & Jackson, 1985). Moreover, research across a range of different organizational and occupational contexts such as police workers (Burke & Deszca, 1986), nurses (Firth & Britton, 1989), and teachers (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986) found that burnout was linked to turnover intentions and sometimes actual turnover. Crucially, the impact of burnout extends beyond these organizational-related behaviors and also has a severe effect on interpersonal behaviors such as use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco (Burke & Deszca, 1986)—signaling spillover effects at the family, community, and societal levels.

Extant burnout research has focused on a range of “helping” and human service-oriented professions such as military workers (Morgan et al., 2011), police workers (Burke & Deszca, 1986), social workers (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007), and teachers (Hultell & Gustavsson, 2011) but paid very limited attention to gender-related issues (Pretty, McCarthy, & Catano, 1992). Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001) point out that human service and helping occupations involve high levels of job demands and low levels of job resources that lead to the development of burnout without acknowledging the disproportionately high numbers of women working in these type jobs. Furthermore, previous research has highlighted that emotional exhaustion can contribute to burnout in the work context where there is increased pressure from management to adopt high-performance work systems (Danford, Richardson, Stewart, Tailby, & Upchurch, 2004; Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000), such as in academia (Doyle & Hind, 1998) and law firms (Jackson, Turner, & Brief, 1987) once again without looking at differentials between male and female experiences. The limited research that does explicitly account for gender differences when researching burnout reports contradictory findings whereby women experience higher levels of job demands compared to their male counterparts but similar levels of burnout (e.g., Friesen & Sarros, 1989; Pretty et al., 1992).

This view of burnout as gender neutral is surprising given extensive evidence in the literature that emphasizes that women and men do not share the same work experience, that is women face more sex discrimination than men (Knights & Richards, 2003), are offered unequal opportunities in term of promotion and advancement (Moreau, Osgood, & Halsall, 2008), continue to battle with a gender pay gap (Smith, 2009), have difficulties accessing managerial positions (Liff & Ward, 2001), and lack support when trying to combine their career with family care responsibilities (Conley & Jenkins, 2011). All these documented experiences serve as indicators and manifestations of work stress (Barnett, Biener, & Baruch, 1987). Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach's (2009) review also explicitly highlights that burnout needs to be recognized as socially constructed, manifesting variably in different contexts and functioning in response to a range of different events or practices. Against this backdrop we reaffirm that women's work experiences and stresses are higher than their male counterparts and crucially extend this reasoning to argue that this results in a highly gendered experience of burnout.

Within the feminist theoretical paradigm there has been a call for feminist researchers and mainstream gender analyses to “rethink gender as a complex and relational frame of reference” (Kenny, 2007, p. 94). A majority of the limited research on women's burnout adopts a structuralist approach that focuses on offering an analysis of women's experiences as broadly shared instead of situational/embedded. For example, Purvanova and Muros' (2010) meta-analysis of gender differences vis-à-vis burnout offers the generalized conclusion that there are no male-female differences in terms of work burnout. However, their meta-analysis does not take into consideration the complexities and nuances of gender with respect to the individual level of burnout. Therefore, in this article we offer an understanding of burnout that unpacks this individual level of analysis by considering the continuous interaction of work and home spheres. Furthermore, we argue that extant burnout research does not explain, or capture, the interplay between macro and meso levels that may cause and/or precipitate women's burnout at the individual level. Below we provide a powerful first-hand narrative of a female academic with children working full-time in a British university and trying to cope with a completely new way of work and life in the context of the pandemic. Given our emphasis on drawing out the idiosyncratic and embedded experience of women we engaged in purposive sampling and contacted a mid-career female academic from within our larger professional network. She is a mother to three children of very different ages and thus with very different care needs. Crucially, she originally comes from a Southern European background, characterized by relatively more traditional family structures and a greater burden of domestic labor being undertaken by females, which results in skewed female representation in the external labor market (González, Jurado, & Naldini, 1999; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018). Our participant's lived experiences of juggling atypical work stressors (such as increased teaching and reduced research support during the pandemic) as well as atypical home stressors (such as increased childcare and domestic responsibilities) offers a powerful gendered perspective on the manifestation and experience of burnout

during this atypical time and the dual coping mechanisms that are triggered on the increasingly fluid home and work fronts.

3 | WORK BURNOUT: "IT WILL BE DIFFICULT YEAR!"

At the end of September, the new academic year will start. The university is preparing ... most of the teaching is going to be held online ... [but] actually they change their mind quite often. For now, we're scheduled for both online and face-to-face teaching ... we are supposed to do one-hour face-to-face actual teaching on campus. I'm really hoping that the situation changes and we skip the face-to-face teaching. A lot of colleagues asked, given that now we are asked to work from home, whether we can use our research allowance money to buy equipment like screens. I particularly asked if I could use my own research allowance money to buy cartridge for my printer, A4 paper. But we have been told they won't pay for equipment or even buying a better bandwidth at home, even though it's supposed to be our money! I can see in departmental meetings; some people have problem with their Internet. You can see, when we're in meetings, they get cut off, and so imagine if that happen when you are teaching, if [the university] doesn't pay for these extra expenses. At the end of the day ... you're let down and you're feeling you're not supported and this will all have an effect on students which we will have to deal with.

Our departmental group meetings with the Head of the Department are more information dissemination even though they are supposed to be a consultation. Whenever someone raises concerns, he promises to take it to the higher committees, and come back with an answer. But usually it's a negative answer. "No, you cannot use your research money!" "Funding cannot be used for buying equipment!" "No, you cannot do that." So, nothing is achieved ... I think the Head of the Department wants to show that they're concerned about our wellbeing and show that they care about how we do family wise. If somebody got COVID, or someone's family member was unwell, he pretends he cares. But he has also made it clear that, "Okay, I can transfer your questions to the higher-level, but don't anticipate much." I think he has set the expectations.

There is massive pressure and uncertainty [with respect to] the workload. We are told that our workload is going to be more full and more demanding than it used to be. We know we're going to be teaching more. This has been said officially. But I feel that we are being exploited in a sense. It's like you have to go to the war. But at least you take good care of your soldiers because you ask them to go the extra mile, to do all this kind of extra effort.

They have let us know that there will be cuts in research and conference money. They froze, immediately, our sabbaticals. Actually, I was scheduled to take one during the autumn-spring term, but we got official notification that even though you were entitled to it, now it's frozen. They told us research is not going to be a priority because we know staff will be engaged with more teaching. My colleagues have asked, "Okay, what about promotions? Because this will affect especially lecturers, senior lecturers. Will you change the promotion criteria since these people won't be given much chance to do research?" The Head of the Department's answer was, you know his answer was not a real answer, and all of us I think thought they were just making fun of us. I generally don't ask in meetings, probably I don't anticipate much.

Yes ... it's a difficult period for universities and they're going to lose lots of money so we [have to] expect change ... I would agree with us having more workload. That's fine, it's a crisis situation. However, I strongly disagree with the idea that we're not consulted, or even if we're consulted, they're not taking our health and safety into account. Now I know that a lot of colleagues are kind of vulnerable population and a lot of people *feel* that they are vulnerable. But they ask students, "Are you willing to do your degree from a distance? Would you be willing to come on campus?" Basically, they try to understand how many people are going to be on campus, things like that. And it all depends on the students' answers. *We're never asked*. And for me this is an indication that they don't value the humans who are actually working for them.

4 | COPING MECHANISMS AT WORK: DISENGAGEMENT AND DENIAL

I feel, there's nothing I can do. So, basically, I feel I am in the denial period. The university wants us to teach in person, and I'm still in denial period. I have asthma and I have to take public transport to arrive at campus. And I totally refuse [to accept] this idea. It's beyond me, right now, to think that I would have to take public transport, tube, and rail to arrive at work. And please tell me how can I teach ... how can I speak with a mask on?

It's really disappointing but I refuse to accept what they are suggesting ... I refuse to go along with no research plan. I just refuse. To be honest, I am continuing with my preoccupation of being a good researcher because that had been my plan and I still know that both within the university, or outside this university, ultimately they're going to prefer people with good research skills. So, I'll stick to my plan, and I will try to minimize the effort that they want us to put in teaching. So, basically, I cannot refuse teaching more hours, but I will try to minimize from the effort in designing courses. My effort ... I will only keep it to a level where I feel I'm still doing my job professionally, but I won't go the extra mile that they wish us to go.

Generally speaking, I believe that resisting to these kinds of changes is important. But especially right now I need to save energy. So, I don't respond to these changes. What's the point? I don't fight back. I fight back by just letting them [the management] know that I'm totally disappointed, but they already know. So why air any emotion to them? Why bother? Overall, I would say that I keep my energy, I save my energy.

5 | BURNOUT AT HOME—"MY HUSBAND HOOVERS MORE!"

Cooking is only me. Cleaning is only me. Home schooling is me. I'm responsible for overseeing that my son has done his homework or he doesn't bother. Women have to do more cooking anyway, the division of housework in my case is not equal anyway. But since the pandemic we are more at home, so there is more cooking, no deliveries, takeaways, not buying ready-made food. So, much more cooking and much more cleaning. I always did most of the housework, I always prepared the breakfast, I always did the cooking, so nothing has changed. But just because of the pandemic it's so much more work that is needed, and we don't go out. We used to go out for breakfast on Saturdays, but now this has changed and this has brought more work [for me].

Since the pandemic my husband tends to Hoover more often than he used to. In the past he was only hoovering the living room, nowadays he realized that he needs to Hoover more rooms and more often because we are indoors all the time. He also spends more time with the little one now as she doesn't go to school. If there is an important meeting that I can't miss I have to make sure to let him know a few days in advance or a week in advance that he needs to keep the little one busy for that one hour or so, so she doesn't enter my room. And he respects that. So, in that sense, he has been more responsible. But overall, our arrangement is about 90% me being responsible for all this care and him about 10%. I'm taking care of the children in the sense of ... I know the time that she's going to need her food, anticipate every day, every single moment. So, even when I have arranged a meeting and he will be looking after her, I make sure I have prepared her food first.

With my partner there is no discussion on the distribution of work, there's a kind of silent resentment. I use to say "I expect from you to put your dirty dish into the dishwasher ... I expect from you when you leave the kitchen to leave it clean." But after three and a half months of this pandemic, I have established a new routine. I do everything. But there is resentment. I expect them to be thankful. So, a lot of time we fight because I feel they're not thankful for what I'm providing. Since the pandemic my work-life balance has been worse. I have no breaks and work until midnight or have some breaks during the day and work again over the weekend. I am working more hours. But I think at the same time, it's kind of a coping mechanism. For a long period, I got quite stressed with the virus, so I didn't want to go out. Okay, I think I could have played more with the kid, with my toddler, but I don't, because I'm working more. I have a feeling I'm paying less attention to myself as time progresses.

6 | COPING MECHANISMS AT HOME—CONSERVATION OF ENERGY

Obviously, I'm not happy with the distribution of work at home. Who would be happy with not sharing responsibility? But a lot of energy goes into negotiating every small thing. For example, I negotiated for one hour with my husband to do breakfast today, which takes a lot of my energy. And I know that tomorrow I will need to do it all over again if I want him to make breakfast again. It's not like the other person is learning. Tomorrow we will need to negotiate from scratch. So, that is what has kept me from resisting. Keep the energy. You know, after the accumulation of experience with your partner, years and years, you just stick to this basic rationale: keeping energy. You cannot constantly be fighting about why are you not cooking or why you are not cleaning up. You end up more miserable after a fight. In the past I remember having fights at home about housework, but it was taking up so much of my energy that I would have a miserable weekend and I couldn't do anything. So why be resentful ... why make resentful comments ... it will just spoil my mood.

I honestly feel on a daily basis that I need to keep my energy, because my energy has to go to work, to cooking, to so many extra things that need to be done. And I cannot fight all the time, I cannot negotiate all the time, so in that general spirit I have decided it's not the most important, because I need to focus. So, I'm saving my energy and not resisting and just having to do more stuff by myself, and being overloaded all the time. The thing is I have to perform even if I'm not happy, even if I'm tired or burnt out.

7 | CONCLUSION

Our interviewee's first-hand narrative highlighted both increased responsibilities at work and home as a result of the pandemic, as well as the application of a range of coping mechanisms such as disengagement, denial, and energy conservation. This account furthers Jick and Mitz's (1985) findings that women demonstrated significantly more psychological and physical manifestations of stress than men. Crucially, we highlight the increased psychological manifestation of stress and burnout for women in response to a significantly enhanced "second shift" because of the pandemic and lockdown context. Extant work has not highlighted significant differences in men's and women's coping behaviors. There is some indication that women are more likely than men to use emotion-focused rather than problem-focused coping mechanisms (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) as well as more avoidance and symptom-focused coping (Stone & Neale, 1984). However, generally, the evidence for gender-based differentials in the manifestation of stress is ambiguous in current work. Our individual account highlights that women in having to generate coping mechanisms on two fronts—work *and* home—can significantly enhance avoidance-based coping behaviors. This is especially problematic because it not only reduces individual-level agency and maintains systemic gender inequalities, but is also likely to exacerbate meso-level implications of burnout such as loss of creativity, job performance, and productivity.

The ongoing pandemic, and its unprecedented impact on our personal and professional lives, has created a whole new host of challenges and opportunities. Both authors of this piece quickly realized that they were experiencing relatively more opportunities (i.e., more time to focus on outstanding research, initiating new projects centered on the pandemic, devoting more care and energy to diet and exercise regimes, and so on) than challenges. Ours was clearly an atypical experience that was evident when we interacted with our predominantly female personal and professional circles, whereby many women around us were struggling to cope with the increased fluidity of personal and professional spheres, on considerably more constrained resources, while sacrificing their physical and mental health. Therefore, this piece is an acknowledgement of our own minority experience, underwritten with privilege—the privilege of not having any care responsibilities, the privilege of still having a job, the privilege of having ample/unshared physical space, and the privilege of enjoying continued physical and mental health and wellbeing. More importantly, this piece is our silent salute to all the women around us who continue to cope with the silent, second shift while making sandwiches.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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