

**“Set Your Soul on Fire”: A Feminist-Informed Co-Constructed Autoethnography of Sixteen Multidiscipline, Multicultural, and Multilingual Globally-Located Academic Women Exploring Gendered Academic Productivity During COVID-19**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This co-constructed autoethnographic reflection presents the experiences of our feminist-informed research team, COVID GAP (Gendered Academic Productivity), a group of sixteen women who collaborated to investigate reports of reduced academic contributions from women-identified scholars during the pandemic. As insider researchers, we joined together in a virtual space with the shared goal to better understand women academics' lived experiences of the impact of the pandemic specifically as related to their academic productivity. Throughout our work together as a research team, we have reflected on how the pandemic has impacted each of us as academic women and how participation in the COVID GAP research group provided us with the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary scholarship and collaboration. We shared our process of co-creating our research team, our intersectionality as academics, and our gendered experiences of how scholarly productivity serves as currency throughout academia. Utilizing quotes from all members, we unified our voices in feminist accord concluding with recommendations for fellow academic women.*

**KEYWORDS:** Academic productivity, academic women, autoethnography, COVID-19 research, interdisciplinary collaboration, gendered productivity.

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*We did not know it would be the case, but writing and sharing stories of our lives has catalysed us and our educational and academic work. It has catalysed our knowledge and the ways that we are coming to know, see and understand – ourselves, our relationships, our educator roles and our workplaces.*  
(Black et al., 2019, p. 3)

As the COVID-19 global pandemic progressed, a growing consensus emerged suggesting there was a reduction in scholarly productivity by women in academia around the globe (Andersen et al., 2020; Clancy, 2020; Derrick et al., 2019; Muric et al., 2020; Pereira, 2021; Walters et al., 2022). Our collaboration as COVID GAP (Gendered Academic Productivity) focused on exploring mediating factors and understanding the true impact of the pandemic on our fellow scholars. We began to understand that the pandemic both highlighted and further heightened a longstanding gender disparity within academia (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Aiston & Jung, 2015). Although we recognized the presence of systemic bias related to various elements of identity as an influence on academic women's experiences, the focus of our formal exploration was specific to gender. Consideration of other identity intersections contributed to exploring and understanding our own positionality as scholars as presented in this autoethnography.

Sixteen multidiscipline, multicultural, and multilingual globally located academic self-identified women connected in May 2020 through a Facebook group, *I Should Be Writing* (ISBW) with Cathy Mazak, which is a virtual support community for academic scholars (as of 12/2021, this group has been archived). Moving this digital connection forward, our partnership through COVID GAP has already facilitated many contributions to the literature (Bender et al., 2022a; Brown et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Chance et al., 2022; Lambrechts et al., 2021); it has also served as a lifeline to our own academic identities and scholarly productivity throughout the pandemic. We initially joined together in collaboration in response to reports of reduced academic productivity from women during the pandemic (Andersen et al., 2020; Muric et al., 2020). We were curious to understand the genesis of this trend and the ongoing factors perpetuating it. Our intrigue regarding the phenomenon of collaborative research efforts grew as we organically experienced unexpected benefits from our membership in COVID GAP. Writing inspiration, motivation, academic friendships and mentorship, encouragement, and accountability opportunities reached far beyond the initial intention of understanding the multiple gendered impacts of the pandemic.

For this article specifically, we sought to answer the question, how has the particular nature of our collaborative work and experiences in COVID GAP fundamentally made a favorable impact on our own identities as feminist scholars and what lessons can be learned from our experiences. Collectively, we have benefited from our participation in COVID GAP, as doing so has contributed to an increased sense of self-efficacy as related to our capacity to produce meaningful research, enhanced professional identity, and increased productivity. Additionally, these outcomes added academic currency to each of our journeys through academia resulting in advancement and promotion. Recognizing the significant impact of these outcomes, we share our experiences and provide recommendations to our fellow academic women through this autoethnographic co-constructed narrative.

### **Autoethnography**

As an academic contribution, this article is unique for two reasons: it is an interdisciplinary autoethnography, and it is co-constructed. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography, this article is an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of

consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739); we explored the culture of academia from a gendered perspective connecting it to our own identities and collective experiences. Autoethnography is a qualitative tool leveraged to dissect and reflect upon our experiences (of gender in academia) to better understand the larger phenomenon validated through insider stories (Blythe et al., 2013). We are the insiders sharing our stories and experiences as women faculty and graduate students during the pandemic. This storytelling extends our autoethnography across disciplines, languages, and contexts to further support a polyethnography or duoethnography of voices through critical dialogue (Arthur et al., 2017; Norris et al., 2012).

Secondly, this article is a co-constructed auto/duo/polyethnography because it includes accounts and narratives from all sixteen co-researchers as presented by seven members of COVID GAP who authored this article. Responses to our guiding questions from team members are indicated with italics. We adopted this approach to “collaboratively writ[e] about a common experience that both captures the essence of the relationship between/among people and how the writers experienced the common experience similarly and differently” (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012, p. 148). The recommendations presented within are constructed from our collective experiences as women academics, collaborative researchers, and our isomorphic experiences parallel to the phenomena explored.

Direct quotes from our reflections are presented in italics and serve as exemplars of our collective experience. These quotes are included in the review of productivity before and during the pandemic as both firsthand observations of systemic bias within academia and to emphasize the pre-existing literature. We share our reflections of the process, our own social location and diversity as academic women, and how scholarship serves as currency within academia.

### **Gendered Academic Productivity**

Manuscript submission and publication rates are necessary metrics to understand academic productivity. The number of publications, specifically in peer-reviewed journals, are assessed for rank and promotion through impact factor and h-index (Pendlebury, 2009). Utilized as the measure of research, a form of academic currency, scholarly productivity is tied to the inward and outward perceptions of academic worth. It typically impacts the perceived success of scholars and may subsequently impact their job security and long-term career trajectories (Grapin et al., 2013). Ongoing gender disparities in publishing of research outputs remain a concern across academia (Elsevier, 2017).

In two large-scale studies on productivity prior to the pandemic, Helmer et al. (2017) and Severin et al. (2020) found that women face bias during the review of scholarly publications and grant applications, affecting their success rates. Djupe et al. (2019), who reviewed publication rates associated with preeminent political science journals to understand the intersection of gender on productivity, resolved that “there is no evidence that women’s work is rejected more frequently than is men’s work” (p. 5). Rather, Djupe et al.’s (2019) analysis suggested that noted differences may primarily be due to variable *submission rates* across genders. These findings align with similar analyses of gender productivity within other fields as well (e.g., Dolan & Lawless, 2020) and are consistent with ongoing concerns of academic productivity during the pandemic. Also of note, past research indicates that women are less likely to be invited to co-author papers (Teele & Thelen, 2017), are held to higher writing standards (Hengel, 2022), and, on average, spend about six months longer engaged in peer-review processes (Hengel, 2022) compared to their male peers. These factors impact submission and publication rates, decreasing opportunity for women to gain academic currency.

These correlational findings between gender and productivity are situated in a broader context of inequity. Though historical improvements are documented, increased efforts to achieve gender equality within academia remain warranted (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Aiston & Jung, 2015). COVID GAP members still struggled to *show the faculty who believed I would fail that being a woman, a parent, an educator, and a PhD candidate does not equal failure*. This framework of systemic bias is especially important in understanding the differential impact of the pandemic on members of academia. When reductions in resources or employment opportunities are made, those already in precarious positions due to a lack of scholarly currency and similar factors are most vulnerable and at the highest risk of losing their jobs. Relatedly, when additional responsibilities are required of faculty, those feeling this vulnerability are more likely to comply in fear of professional retaliation and consequence. In actuality, this cycle further distances professionals from gaining academic currency from scholarship to leverage their positions due to overwork and burnout (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2020).

### **During the Pandemic**

Though reports suggested a cumulative increase in scholarly productivity since the onset of the pandemic, an examination, for example, within U.S. medical journals revealed that women's share of authorship decreased by 19% overall (Andersen et al., 2020). In a similar but global study, Pinho-Gomes et al. (2020) found that women are under-represented as authors in many scientific areas and in senior authorship positions. In publications regarding the pandemic or that included the pandemic as context, 34% of authors were women, but only 29% of those were in senior authorship positions (i.e., first or last authors depending on the discipline). Pinho-Gomes et al. (2020) observed this results in a disproportionate impact, especially on early career researchers. Vincent-Lamarre et al. (2020) and Cui et al. (2021) found the effect to be particularly pronounced at top-ranked research institutions.

A global survey of principal investigators (n=4,535) conducted approximately one month after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic revealed that women-identified scientists experienced a substantial decline in time they were able to devote to research; this was especially noted for those with young children (Myers et al., 2020). The results from our own examinations of academic women as partners (Brown et al., 2021) and as parents (Bender et al., 2022a) during the pandemic mirrored these findings. Many of our academic women participants prioritized family and relationships over productivity or found the increased burdens of quarantine and social distancing, including childcare, did not provide space for the prioritization of scholarship beyond essential job requirements and basic needs in the home (Bender et al., 2022a). These findings suggested that the challenges associated with navigating the pandemic disproportionately and negatively affected women, heightening pre-existing systemic bias within academia.

As COVID GAP explored the lived experiences of the targeted population being reported to have a reduction in academic productivity during the pandemic, we found ourselves having an antithetical experience. *There is a lot of irony in the study of women and academic productivity during a pandemic* while being an insider researcher. By creating our virtual connection, it allowed us to develop a *sense of collaborative work, a sense of sorority, the absolute delight of getting to know women from diverse fields and how we engage and conceptualize research*. In our call to investigate reports that women were not productive, we have been able to produce through collaborative partnerships and shared workload for the benefit of all. *Our ability to support, carry, lead, breathe, partner, mentor, negotiate, and ultimately complement our skills, experiences,*

*passions, and strengths to create our research team has been a motivation and highlight during the pandemic.*

## **Methodology**

Prompted by the claims of a reduction in women's scholarly productivity as described, the first author posted a solicitation in ISBW for collaborators to investigate the lived experiences of women and non-binary scholars. The goal was to understand why women across the world might be less productive during the pandemic rather than confirming any particular trend. Recognizing the unique situation brought about by the pandemic, the thought of *wanting to move into more gender-based research, and ... that the topic of how COVID is impacting women in unique ways is an important issue to study with far-reaching implications for work, family, and relationships in general* was at the forefront of our project.

Each member of our research team self-selected into the ISBW group with overlapping motivations as presented later in this article. Though over 30 members initially responded to the call for collaboration from the first author, as we developed and refined our shared research goal in a separate Facebook group, 16 academic women merged our collective aspirations to both understand this growing (and detrimental) phenomenon of reduced scholarly contributions by women, and for the opportunity to gain *connection and collaboration across states, countries, and disciplines*. Grounded in our own previous professional experiences, each member of our group also hoped our collaboration may result in scholarly outputs increasing our access to academic currency. As scholarly productivity is evidence of worth for rank and promotion, we define this academic currency in relation to Watermeyer and Tomlinson's (2021) description that academia is now more determined by distributive citations and publications rather than by intellectual capacity. Our motivations are all ultimately centered around the necessity to demonstrate both competency and excellence through publications for career advancement. Although the process was not completely problem-free, the rewards exceeded our intentions.

## **Participants**

The COVID Gendered Academic Productivity (COVID GAP) group includes a collective of 16 multinational, multicultural, multilingual, multidiscipline academic women from 11 disciplines, both graduate students and faculty, in various stages of professional development ranging from doctoral students at the beginning and end of their graduate studies, to faculty across ranks and with varying administrative experience. These sixteen women in academia (who are further introduced below) were responding to a call to action regarding an observed phenomenon -gendered academic productivity- now seemingly exacerbated by the disruptive nature of the pandemic that needed further investigation. The sixteen members of the collective represent academic women from Great Britain, Qatar, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, and across the USA.

We started with initial meetings to talk about what we were going through and how best to approach and create a research design that was culturally and linguistically equitable and efficacious when creating our survey instrument. We negotiated wording, meanings, cultural norms, and accommodations for a diverse population with the collective goal of disseminating our instrument and conducting our research on a global scale with a design that both reflected the cultural and linguistic diversity of our collective and targeted participants. Moreover, we scheduled monthly virtual meetings to check for progress on the first stage of data collection for the large group. We continued meetings to go over research design, negotiation of subgroup creation, and

work on subsections of academic interest according to members, research focus and interests. During these monthly meetings we critically examined the process of data collection, discussed and recorded observations regarding the nature and scale of responses, and proceeded to co-create the various subsets of collaboration alongside the main project.

## **The Research**

COVID GAP surveyed members of ISBW for our first phase of research in the summer of 2020. Respondents (n=101) provided professional and personal demographics and answered 8 open-ended survey questions about the impact of the pandemic on their academic identities, specifically as it pertained to their scholarly productivity. We intentionally utilized this qualitative method of data collection to gain rich insight into our colleagues' experiences without burdening participants with interviews during the pandemic. COVID GAP reviewed the collected responses and organized them into three topic-specific subgroups. Each group looked at different aspects of the dataset and identities of the participants. The first subgroup focused on an examination of scholarly productivity consistent with our overall research goal (n=101; Lambrechts et al., 2021). The second subgroup conducted a thematic analysis of responses from participants who identified as partners (n=67; Brown et al., 2021) and a second analysis of those who identified as parents (n=51; Bender et al., 2022a). The third subgroup focused on graduate student support and productivity throughout the pandemic (n=31; Chance et al., 2022). The second phase of research expanded both the survey instrument to look more in depth at topics ranging from mental health to tools for virtual collaboration as well as recruited across academia and around the globe utilizing our diverse identities as conduits.

## **Our Location as Academic Women**

As insider researchers and as authors of this co-constructed autoethnography, we recognize the importance of locating ourselves within academia as well as present the diversity and limitations of our research team as a foundation to our provided recommendations. As described, COVID GAP includes multidiscipline, multicultural, and multilingual globally located self-identified academic women at various stages of career and scholarly life as presented in Tables 1 and 2.

These demographics neither fully describe our multicultural identities, nor do they reflect how international we truly are. For example, of the nine women who identify as white, four were born outside of the U.S. with two currently living in the U.S. Of the 12 women who are geographically located in the U.S., four identify as born citizens of other countries.

Providing the same demographic information as collected from respondents in the first and second phases of our research, COVID GAP includes faculty and graduate students with a variety of (primary) academic identities at various stages of scholarly life. Academic demographics included in Table 2 were collected at the outset of our collaboration. In the two years (so far) of our collaboration, we have since celebrated some members' shifts from student to graduate status and changes in academic identity across rank and responsibilities. Though we came together around our shared identity as scholarly women, unique to COVID GAP, we are from 11 different disciplines as presented in Table 3.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of COVID GAP (n=16)*

Race/Ethnicity		
	Asian	2
	Black/African	3
	Caucasian/White	9
	Mexican	1
	Middle Eastern	1
Location		
	United States	12
	United Kingdom	1
	Poland	1
	United Arab Emirates	1
	Qatar	1
Relationship Status		
	Partnered	14
	Single	2
Children		
	Yes	12*
	No	4

*Note.* These demographics were collected at the outset of our collaboration and reflect our identities as of May 2020. Team members range in age from 28 to 60 with mean age of 40.4, median age of 39.5, and mode ages are 34, 35, 40, and 47; \*two have one child and ten have two children; one is caregiver to elderly parents.

**Table 2**

*Academic Demographics of COVID GAP (n=16)*

Highest Completed Degree		
	Master's Degree/ABD	5
	Doctoral Degree	11
Primary Academic Identity		
	Writing Dissertation	5
	Lecturer	1
	Instructor	1
	Assistant Professor	4
	Associate Professor	3
	Full Professor	1
	Other	1
Stage of Scholarly Life		
	Writing Dissertation	2
	Writing Dissertation & Contingent Faculty	3
	Writing Dissertation & Research Associate	1
	Postdoc	1
	Assistant Professor	3
	Assistant Professor & Administrator	1
	Associate Professor	2
	Associate Professor & Administrator	1
	Full Professor & Administrator	1
	Other	1
Discipline/Academic Specialty		
	Advertising & Public Relations	1
	Couple & Family Therapy	1
	Criminology & Criminal Justice	1
	Curriculum & Instruction, Women & Gender Studies	1
	Education	4
	Forest Science	1
	Management	1
	Communications	2
	Neuroscience	1
	Psychology	2
	Social Work	1

*Note.* These demographics reflect our identities at the start of our collaboration in May 2020.

## Analysis

This autoethnography allowed us to merge our stories as one intersecting voice with a specific focus on how COVID GAP provided us with “deeper and different ways of knowing, being and working” (Black et al., 2019, p. 3). Rather than present 16 separate accounts of our experiences, we united our voices. To accomplish this outcome and further deepen our understanding of group members’ experiences within the research cooperative, we requested reflections from all 16 COVID GAP researchers in response to the questions presented in Table 3. Analysis of these responses allowed us to confirm our shared and collective experiences through our described process. These questions were about the past (motivation to join), the present (how it is going), and the future (what we should change).

**Table 3**

*Reflection Questions for the COVID GAP Research Team*

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1. Why did you join this project? What specifically motivated/interested you?
  2. What have you gained from participating in this project?
  3. Describe any past experiences of research/writing collaborations?
    - Please include how you came together, the make-up of the collaboration, how it went, what came out of it.
    - In what ways has this experience differed from previous experience(s)?
  4. What were our strengths and growth edges as a research team? Please describe both the larger full COVID GAP as well as your subgroup.
  5. What were the biggest challenges we faced as a research team? What worked well for us in overcoming these challenges?
    - Please describe both the larger full COVID GAP as well as your subgroup.
    - Please describe your role within each group.
  6. How did your experiences as a woman shape your involvement with the project?
  7. How does this project affect your professional identity as an academic scholar?
  8. What recommendations do you make to other academic women/womxn in general? And specifically, in terms of scholarship?
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Responses from all 16 members of COVID GAP used throughout this article provide a full reflection of our experiences. For this article, we engaged in informal reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) of questions 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8. Our experiences of how we collaborated (questions 3, 4, 5, and 8) are presented in a separate article (Brown et al., 2022). Analysis occurred in six phases. The research team repeatedly reviewed the responses to familiarize themselves with the data identifying codes and generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) – motivation to participate in collaboration and scholarship as academic currency. Within these themes, we organized and reflected on the responses looking for patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that would benefit our own continued collaboration in lessons learned and recommendations as intended in this article. The themes were consistent with the literature both before and after COVID-19 though the outcomes of our collaboration contraindicate our actual research – we were able to produce meaningful scholarship during the pandemic.

Further, our collaboration gave opportunity for professional and personal relationships (Brown et al., 2021) as well as camaraderie as academic women and all it entailed. We were emboldened as a team to give voice and speak truth about the gendered experiences of academia that were being highlighted by the pandemic. To this end, we utilized direct quotes *without*

attribution to a singular research team member in the presentation of our experience; we joined our voices to both amplify and protect individual reflections per the tenets of feminist research (Harvey et al., 2016) as doing this further enriches polyvocal storytelling of the co-constructed autoethnography intended (Arthur et al., 2017). Without dismissing any insights, we reflected on and investigated perspectives shared by all research team members as a co-constructed narrative (Hemmings, 2011). Here, we used an analytical feminist autoethnographic approach that involved both intentional and reflexive analyses of the retelling of our stories and the iterative phenomena of our collaborative efforts (Ellis et al., 2011). We connected these to our experience of academic inequities foundational in our diversity as academic women.

## Findings

### Our Diversity as Academic Women

In further reflection of our identities, we noted both missing demographics as well as gaps in our collective identity. Part of our process as feminist researchers is to name these and explore the ways in which they influenced the research process. This occurred through the qualitative process called epoché (Morley, 2010), which included individual memo-ing and journaling as well as overt conversations in our regular monthly Zoom meetings of both the larger group and smaller subgroups:

*I think it's important for academic scholars to engage in some self-reflection around the institutions we have created and how they impact our work. It's increasingly clear that there are systemic barriers for women, non-binary, and academics belonging to minority groups, so I think it's important to assess how this affects our work (during and beyond the pandemic).*

A cursory review, specifically of our group's demographics, revealed that over half our team members identify as white (57%), 75% are located in the United States, and most identify as partners (87.5%) and mothers (75%), suggesting a fairly homogeneous collective. Though we recognize the necessity for continued and improved representation reflective of academia within our research team, these statistics are somewhat misleading as they do not fully represent the differences between us as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2. Twelve members reflected that across multiple dimensions, especially in comparison to the variability experienced within academia, our actual diversity was one of our strengths:

Though our identities as multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multilingual academic women brought a richness to our experiences, we found ourselves replicating the disparities of representation within our research. For example, phase one participants (n=101) included 71.3% who resided in the U.S. Further, we recognize that our demographics perpetuated the voice of white privilege in academia.

Part of our feminist process is naming the ways that demographics of academic women around the globe are less diverse (Hemmings, 2011). Published reports summarizing faculty demographics confirm that women worldwide hold fewer senior academic appointments, less often serve in leadership roles, and are frequently paid less compared to their male colleagues (Weisshaar, 2017). Additionally, in the United States, less than 13% of faculty are women of color, specifically identifying as either Asian, Black, or Latina (NCES, 2018). Rollock (2019) reported

that these dismal statistics may actually represent a higher level of racial diversity among academic women faculty than observed in other parts of the world.

We also learned that systems of rank and promotion are not globally synonymous across higher education though narratively our experiences of women within those systems are parallel. Though we named and explored through overt conversations about our own limitations in terms of demographics, we find that COVID GAP has been a *beautiful collaboration of women of all races, ethnicities, and professional backgrounds. ... such diversity allowed us to better ourselves in more ways than just writing. It created friendships based on understanding, support, and guidance (both professional and personal).*

*Our strengths included our diversity - hands down. We have so many scholars from not only diverse locations and backgrounds but also disciplines. This allows us to think of contexts that may not have been options with a group of overly similar scholars (same content area, only English speakers, etc.).*

### **Motivation to Participate in COVID GAP**

The balancing of personal and professional roles and responsibilities have long been part of the identity of women in academia (Berggren, 2008). The dual responsibilities of academic women, often dismissed, has now been underscored within the context of the pandemic.

*I believe that being surrounded by women who in so many ways live a similar life allowed [me] to see myself for who I am - an educator whose parenting and passion for teaching and researching are a driving force.*

Though academic women as mothers have historically been emphasized in illustration of this dual role, child-free women have also expressed experiencing a greater double bind:

*I acknowledge that in some ways, this puts childless women academics in a position of privilege (not being seen as a mother by their male colleagues), but also doubly excluded in that they are often seen as 'other' to traditional women's roles.*

Motivations to participate within COVID GAP were directly connected to all of these varied identities – both personal (see Table 1) and professional (see Table 2) – and biases. Specifically, in response to the directed questions (see Table 3), motivations to participate in COVID GAP represented four themes: 1) intellectual curiosity, 2) validation and camaraderie, 3) professional opportunity, and 4) meaning.

#### ***Intellectual Curiosity***

We initially viewed informal reports across social and mainstream media suggesting that women's scholarly productivity had declined due to the pandemic. While most of these commentaries were not based on empirical studies, they reflected many of our own informal observations within academia:

*My scholarly life came to a pause.... I could see clearly in my department that there is a gender dimension to this experience. I could see male colleagues publishing left and right and many of them had been talking about all the free time we all had because we do not have to come to the university every day.*

This common experience inspired a need to further understand this perspective. Though we were previously familiar with the literature identifying gender differences within academia, we were curious to know how the context of pandemic may have exacerbated previously identified disparities:

*The original call asked for people interested in gender issues. I view the world through a feminist lens and this piqued my interest. ... I knew there were obvious gender differences in academia but was excited to explore the impact of the pandemic on those differences.*

A broad intellectual curiosity was also a motivator. The desire to simply know what was happening with academic women during COVID inspired many of us to join the team, while the general lack of research on female productivity coupled with a lack of research on pandemic-specific writing practices also influenced our curiosities.

### ***Validation and Camaraderie***

Quarantine and social distancing restrictions impacted all of us in our ability to be on-campus, to access colleagues, and/or to operate research labs. Outside of the professional environment, social distancing restrictions affected our ability to engage in socialization with friends and families. For many in the group, we identify not only as women and academic scholars, but also as partners and parents. This meant that some of us not only had to adjust to remote work/school, but we also faced on-going quarantine and isolation with and from our partners and families. We found ourselves carrying the majority of caretaking responsibilities including facilitating virtual school for our children. Isolated in our struggles as well as growing resentment in response to perceived (and real) inequities in our academic departments, *I wanted to bring light to this phenomenon and amplify the voice of women all over the world.* Given the immediate and somewhat unexpected impact the pandemic had on our professional and personal lives, we felt ill-prepared to make these extreme changes so rapidly. As we observed others in our departments and more broadly within our fields, we wondered how our experiences were similar to and different from those of our colleagues.

We found ourselves hoping for some confirmation that we were not the only ones struggling to navigate the pandemic: *I was thinking, 'Wow. I'm not alone'...and I just wanted to know what others are going through.* In addition to gaining insight into others' lives and having our own experiences normalized and validated, the opportunity to form camaraderie with other academic women scholars served as a motivator to join the research team, *I was intrigued by connecting with a new community (especially one that I knew I had some things in common – academic, female, etc.).* A more general desire for connection, after feeling isolated due to restrictions in place in response to the pandemic served as another motivating factor for some people to join the team, *I had been quarantined for a while and felt professionally disconnected” and “I was stressed out and needed a scholar community.*

### *Professional Opportunity*

We also viewed our partnership(s) as a professional opportunity. By joining COVID GAP, each of us had the opportunity to grow our academic networks across institutions and disciplines, to connect with international colleagues, to increase our research skills and experiences, as well as to remain productive and generate publications despite our own challenges particular to the pandemic: *Seeing that there are ladies both younger and older than me, on different stages of their careers, was very influential in seeing myself as a scholar.*

Members of our research team recognized that they had internalized the harmful “publish-or-perish” mentality common within academics. Even with the pandemic, this worldview dictates that we must remain “on track” with our scholarly productivity regardless of our status. This mentality had caused increased anxiety and discomfort during the pandemic in an already stressful time, especially considering our shared informal observations of (male or non-caregiver) colleagues’ apparent increase in scholarly productivity. For some of us, there was mounting pressure to achieve *not what I have been doing but even more* to keep up with our peers. Joining COVID GAP provided inspiration, accountability, and structure for those of us who felt pressured or were eager to continue engaging in scholarly activity but overwhelmed by this prospect as a lone endeavor.

### *Meaning*

The perceived value of the research – both on a personal level and for academia as a whole – was another motivator to join COVID GAP. We understood that the ongoing pandemic not only affects our current professional status but may continue to affect us for some time, especially in advancement of our careers. The members within our group vary in status. For those who identified primarily as students (n=7 at the outset of our collaboration), compromised productivity during this time could delay degree completion. For faculty (n=9), it may affect our ability to achieve tenure, advanced rank and positions, or other promotions. Each of these may affect our professional status and earning potential, which will be compounded over time. As a collective, we believed *the topic of how COVID-19 is impacting women in unique ways is an important issue to study with far-reaching implications for work, family, and relationships in general.* With that, formally studying gendered academic productivity within the context of the pandemic provided us a unique opportunity to advocate for our colleagues by *amplifying the voice of women academics and shedding light on their experiences.*

For all COVID GAP members, “lockdown” (stay-at-home) orders started on different dates in March 2020. These orders impacted our team members in multiple ways including balancing work and home demands which consequently decreased time to focus on scholarship. We saw that joining this collaborative opportunity would give us more than productivity in a limited reality, *[this] project really helped push and expand my professional identity...improve as a professional... push me to be a better academic scholar.* Even with the various restrictions the pandemic caused for academia and our research team, we gained more than we hoped:

*I think it has improved my confidence -- it offered me the opportunity to engage in relationships I otherwise would not have pursued, allowing me access to colleagues across disciplines and institutions. I might not be so afraid to pursue such partnerships in the future.*

These benefits echoed throughout all responses with the added opportunity of having collaborated with colleagues in other countries and investigated academic experiences around the globe. This was an opportunity for learning on multiple levels.

### **Scholarship as Academic Currency**

Though motivated to investigate and understand the experiences of our fellow academic women to provide insight and information to mediate the adverse impacts and propose recommendations for academia, our motivations were not purely altruistic. We understood the importance of publication— as academic currency — to each of our professional identities as graduate students and faculty. Herein lies the foundation of our response to reports of how the pandemic negatively impacts women across academia (Berggren, 2008). Scholarship serves as academic currency; publication provides opportunity for advancement and promotion. Though scholarship can be broadly defined to include other endeavors (e.g., presentations), the academic system has been created and reinforced so that publications serve as the highest and most valued level of currency. Preliminary reports suggesting that women’s scholarly production declined due to the pandemic (Andersen et al., 2020; Lambrechts et al., 2021; Muric et al., 2020) served to implicitly fuel many group members’ fears about professional trajectories, concerns about damaging their professional identities, and ultimately reducing their “value.”

COVID GAP presented an opportunity to gain academic currency. For some, this was their first foray into scholarship outside of their dissertation, *being a PhD student ... this project is my first ever publication (in fact, first two)*. For others who identified as early career researchers, they knew it would “help develop my CV” and for the more senior academics, they stated it clearly as *the opportunity for publication*. Team members also saw the potential for professional development and experience as well as learning new skills: *I also thought involvement in this project would teach me new tools, perspectives, etc., and also keep me motivated with accountability amongst the women in the group*. For our multilingual members whose primary language is not English, they identified “language skills” as another important benefit of the collaboration.

Participation within COVID GAP and engaging in research with professionals from variable institutions, disciplines, cultures, languages, and geographical locations resulted in an array of favorable outcomes, suggesting that such collaboratives may be worth pursuing in other contexts (Brown et al., 2022). We each benefited from gaining academic currency through our professional presentations, peer-reviewed publications, book chapters, and ongoing research opportunities (Brown et al., 2022). We also gained mutual support and encouragement that was embedded in the relationships developed throughout our research endeavors (Bender et al., 2022b). This support became and remains essential for many of us to remain inspired and engaged in our work. It even helped facilitate several group members’ notable successes such as completing their doctoral degrees, securing advance positions, and earning promotions. This camaraderie served to somewhat counterbalance what we had lost during the pandemic.

Specifically, the loss of collegial support due to moving remote in our positions had a notable impact on many group members’ professional experiences. It highlighted our need for connection as a conduit for facilitating our well-being and productivity. Establishing new professional connections was a predominant benefit of COVID GAP; *I was stressed out and needed a scholar community*. We each reached out with unique needs feeling secure in coming together with fellow women who innately understood our individual experiences in academia on multiple levels.

## Discussion: Recommendations for Fellow Academic Women

Throughout our collaboration, we have each engaged in reflection on how being part of COVID GAP had impacted us. The consensus was that participation in the group had been meaningful, productive, and transformative: *I have benefited from working as a member of an international, interdisciplinary collaboration, working with more experienced researchers, and most importantly, working with other women, building a wider community of support.* Recognizing the significant impact our scholarly partnership had on our professional and personal well-being, a subset of our group felt compelled to document our experiences via this autoethnography to support and inspire fellow academic women. Our recommendations begin with a shift in the internal dialogue that has kept us paralyzed.

### Know Your Value

We suggest the necessity to be confident and speak up as a foundation from which to build; we encourage our fellow academic women to *believe in yourself and in what you bring to the table. Do not downplay your experience, expertise, and ideas. You are good enough!* Further, *do not feel intimidated by those who share different values and lifestyles. The only way to overcome this feeling is to allow yourself to grow without asking others for permission.* Specific to our experience as COVID GAP and the subsequent collective benefits, we recommend to *be brave and open yourself to the possibility of collaborative work in safe spaces with like-minded peers.* Important to this is to also *help each other out – most people want to collaborate, either as a mentor or mentee, and we all have plenty to learn from each other.*

Upon the formation of our group, we took the time to establish norms and build trust with one another (Bender et al., 2022b). An explicit discussion regarding our strengths, growth edges, and intentions for our time within the group allowed us to establish a sense of trust in one another that grew relatively organically over time and was grounded in our common experiences as academic women and our implicit understanding of the challenges associated with this status. This trust, coupled with our willingness to confront feelings of imposter syndrome and support one another, allowed us to shift our perspectives and engage in meaningful research that has resulted in a number of tangible (e.g., presentations and publications) and intangible (e.g., mentorship and friendships) outcomes.

We found that these internal shifts translated into academic success by being “goal driven” and we urge *following your bliss - do work that is deeply meaningful to you.* This is especially true in cooperation and accountability as we realized that *it helps to create writing partnerships that ... propel us forward in our academic journeys.* When we wrote about topics that were essential to our own identities, internal motivation as well as an obligation to represent the voices of participants inspired us. In collaboration, we encouraged each other to *write often; write every day, do not drag out what you can do today until tomorrow, and make sure to pull your weight on the tasks.* Though these shared lessons learned may be simplistic or already known to readers, we hope to role model to our fellow academic women *not to limit yourself because of fear - fear of not being good enough, not being young enough, not being smart enough.*

### **Learn from Past Collaborations**

Based on our experiences, we offer the following specific recommendations to colleagues who wish to create their own research teams; to “identify a team coordinator to organize efforts,” to “create a safe and equitable space for all involved,” and to “build a network for collaboration” (Brown et al., 2022, pp. 11-12). For COVID GAP, the first author served as team coordinator for the full group, but for each project and subgroup, there were different coordinators that are not always first or corresponding authors. While each research collaborative negotiated a structure that best meets its own needs, we recommend that researchers proactively and directly establish boundaries and expectations as well as establish anticipated authorship when collaborating with others. Within COVID GAP, we began this process by asking members to consider their own strengths and limitations as well as their capacity to contribute to a group project to establish initial roles to propel us forward. Ongoing assessment of these roles allowed each of the subgroups to make accommodations in designated responsibilities, as needed, to keep projects progressing. We also encouraged and grew relationships and networks within and beyond COVID GAP. For example, members of our original team have created opportunities to look at gendered academic productivity during the pandemic in specific countries (Poland, Mexico, and Qatar) and have invited scholars within those countries and expertise to join them on these projects (Brown et al., 2022).

While COVID GAP has collectively experienced numerous positive outcomes, our collaboration has not been without challenges. Retroactive reflection of our process reveals that each of the subgroups had variable experiences while engaging in the project. One of the subgroups, for example, has two articles published in peer-reviewed journals thus far and another book chapter in review. Another subgroup had a team member stop contributing after the first few meetings and another team member who always offered to do work, but did not complete the work, leading to a delay in their progress towards completing their manuscript. While disappointing, the second experience described above is not atypical and is actually in line with past experiences that some members of our team had with previous co-authored research (Brown et al., 2022). However, what is notable about this experience as it occurred in COVID GAP and differentiates from other collaborative efforts in that instead of being derailed, the other team members picked up and continued on with the work. Relying on the relationships we initially established, we encouraged each other to be transparent about personal limitations and obstacles as well as availability and commitment to both build trust and partnership as well as move COVID GAP forward. In this process, we recognized and honored that we too, after all, were women scholars affected by the ongoing pandemic.

### **Provide and Receive Help**

Collectively, members of our group have been committed to creating a safe and equitable environment throughout our work together. Through this process and subsequent reflections, we have found that our gender and how we have been socialized to be polite and nice – often referred somewhat stereotypically by the broader term “ladylike” – has been both a strength and a growth edge within COVID GAP. For us, collegiality included grace and understanding as well as consultation and cheerleading when needed. As insider researchers studying the impact of the ongoing pandemic, we’ve had to sometimes overtly acknowledge our own limitations due to extenuating circumstances related to COVID-19 that affect our ability to engage in scholarship. Given our collective understanding of the often-conflicting pressures of being a woman (sometimes

to include the roles of mother, partner and/or caretaker) and an academic as well as our commitment to being respectful of one another, we have been able to provide some leeway to one another as well as the research process. Providing such accommodations has allowed us, as a group, to keep all members engaged and feeling valued. While we are not able to confirm the same empirically, we hypothesize that our group's successes, as reflected by both tangible and intangible outcomes, have been perpetuated, in part, by prioritizing each member's well-being. We cannot help but wonder if our group did not consist of like-minded individuals with overlapping elements of our identities, if such flexibility would be extended and how subsequent outcomes might be impacted.

Our socialization as women to be both polite and nice also required us to be a bit more overt in our communications as well. *I always check my emails for "please" and "thank you" before I send it out.* We recognize that such discrete efforts may not be necessary in groups of researchers with identities quite different from our own. Due to our sense of obligation to always be considerate of and polite to others, we determined that it was imperative to establish hard deadlines and clear boundaries on authorship to keep us all accountable. At the outset of any given project, overt conversations and decisions were made about contribution. Important to this process was follow-up and accountability in terms of actual writing and work done. For example, one subgroup uses co-writing in different font colors to track and determine authorship as well as discussion prior to submission about order of contribution.

### **Negotiate Teamwork**

Similarly, some of us also noticed that we were sometimes hesitant to offer our opinions regarding study design or data analysis at the risk of being perceived as disrespectful to others within the group. Likewise, some of us felt uncomfortable critiquing or editing each other's work out of fear of hurting our colleagues' feelings. Again, we suspect that such hesitations are rooted in our socialization as (academic) women and perhaps not typical of research groups with other primary identities. To overcome these concerns, we engaged in regular Zoom meetings and explicitly acknowledged and discussed such matters via open dialogue, reestablishing group norms and expectations throughout the research process, as warranted. Again, our collective commitment to respecting each other facilitated an environment that allowed us to explicitly acknowledge the beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors incumbent to being academic women as well as formulate methods of navigating behaviors rooted in the expectations implicit in that identity within the collaborative research process.

In addition to our recommendations, we also shared our lessons learned about "transparency in roles and responsibilities" and that "organization and communication are essential" (Brown et al., 2022, pp. 5-6). We each brought our past experiences to this collaboration and utilized both the good and bad from previous research teams in forming COVID GAP. We overtly talked about our roles both in our large and small groups in an effort to keep projects moving and used different modes of communication depending on the subgroup for ultimate benefit. For example, one subgroup of four authors all located in the U.S. across time zones would both email and text depending on the urgency of the communication while another subgroup utilized Slack to stay connected throughout their project.

We further understood that "collaboration is a negotiated, evolving, recursive, and transformative process" that requires "time and effort" (Brown et al., 2022, pp. 10-11). We have operated as a collaboration since spring 2020 and from our inception at 16 members, we now have 12 members continuing on with various projects in intersecting smaller groups that also include additional scholars. For those who have moved on, they have cited various reasons including that

the collaboration has met their needs, they are choosing to focus on their own scholarly agendas, or their academic positions have changed creating new demands on their time and resources. As we have strived to create a healthy system, movement in (and out) is essential for continued growth and strength of all members and the collaboration as a whole.

### ***Embrace and Balance the Benefits***

Our collective reflection upon our experiences of COVID GAP highlighted that it is essential that women academics fully explore their own individual academic identity and priorities in order to develop a thoughtful plan for career trajectory. By doing this, scholarly agendas are developed that meet unique professional and intellectual needs as well as open opportunities for optimal collaboration. We recognize such needs are affected by personal and professional factors. For example, one more advanced researcher clarified that COVID GAP served as a forum through which she could address more long-term professional objectives, as contributing to the group *does meet my own professional goals where I am opening up more time for scholarship and research while focusing on my commitment to gender and social justice in ways that contribute to my own expanding scholarly agenda*. Though a majority of our members identified as emerging scholars, and for some participation in COVID GAP did not directly align to previously established professional objectives, it provided an opportunity for learning, mentorship, and camaraderie. As we all sought to earn academic currency and stay “on-track” within academia’s expectations, we gained relationships during a time of isolation and an understanding of our own context as academic women.

Regardless of our initial motivation for joining COVID GAP, our research elucidated for all of us how ongoing gendered expectations impact our abilities to gain satisfaction from our professional endeavors, including scholarly production. This was especially true as we navigated our caretaking responsibilities to children and family members as well as attendance of personal relationships, including those with our partners. From these reflections, we recommend that academic women pursue meaningful work. We caution our counterparts to *be careful not to lose yourself in teaching or service if you are building a research and writing career*, especially as teaching assignments and advising responsibilities appear to fall heavier on women’s academic loads (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020). We believe it imperative that academic women explicitly and unapologetically pursue work that is meaningful to them which can often feel untenable while meeting the requirements for rank and promotion. Though some shared a motivation to join COVID GAP beyond this, the learning and experience ultimately benefited all of us in developing this mindset: *Beyond the benefits of research experience and publication, I gained knowledge that will promote my individual scholarly agenda as well as the relational rewards of COVID GAP across my identities*. Through participating in COVID GAP, each of us gained confirmation that the pursuit of meaningful work and a willingness to advocate for ourselves is imperative to ensuring our long-term professional and personal contentment.

For us, such a mindset has positively correlated with improved job satisfaction, productivity, and personal well-being, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. Parallel to this recommendation, we expressly encourage women academics to “realize that while your academic status may be an important part of your identity, it is only one element.” This is an especially important suggestion as many women identify through their intersections, not solely as an academic, yet may feel pressured to prioritize one aspect of their being at the expense of others. This was confirmed in our first phase findings of academic women with partners (Brown et al., 2021) and children (Bender et al., 2022a). Women are not wholly defined by their professional

status. As such, it is imperative to be intentional with one's time and navigation through academia to ensure that professional goals are met in tandem with attending to one's personal needs.

Most important and consistent with the focus of this autoethnography is to be both mindful of the realities of the structures in academia and advocate for equity while welcoming flexibility in approaches:

*Academia is not women- friendly and straightforward patriarchal. The whole system is designed on competition, publish or perish. And along the way women were left behind because of the societal norms and expectations that place the burden of caretaking responsibilities on women's shoulders. Academia is not family friendly and so there's a lot of gendered norms that are biased against women and other minorities. As a woman, I recommend and I urge all fellow women academics and researchers to be graceful with each other and be mindful not to reproduce the norms that are set to put women down and harm them. I also remind myself and each other [to] let go of the competitive mindset that characterizes academia ... to be graceful and understand[ing] of the competing demands that are placed on women and to look after each other and to encourage each other and to understand that we cannot fragment ourselves and separate our different roles or put them in different compartments as we do research and collaborate with each other. We bring our whole and we expect others to do the same.*

The pandemic's ongoing negative impact, especially for women, highlighted that the academic system is designed for stacking one's academic currency, that is the foundation of the mindset of "publish or perish" for professional advancement (Clancy, 2020; Staniscuaski et al., 2021; Utoft, 2020). Along the way, and despite efforts to correct the same, women remain left behind within academia due to the well-established and ongoing societal norms that pervade its ranks. The pandemic only exacerbated this imbalance. The associated expectations that place the burden of caretaking responsibilities on women's shoulders were not only increased with the consequences of quarantine and social distancing (Bender et al., 2022a; Brown et al., 2021), but the long-standing experiences of these inequities in academia are being emphasized by the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

As women academics and researchers, we must encourage each other and be mindful not to replicate or perpetuate the norms that have historically hindered women's professional success. *We can sometimes be our own (and each other's) worst enemies. This is the time to support success because when one does well, we all do.* To sustain relationships similar to those we have developed through COVID GAP, we recommend transparency, clarity in ability and availability, and support to and from colleagues. For each of us, we engaged in a willingness to collaborate on various professional projects while simultaneously prioritizing our own self-care as a shared goal and as part of our relationships with each other. This especially included a willingness to ask for help when needed in balancing the multiple demands that women face: *Do not apologize for the elements of your life and do not sacrifice them for your academic status.*

Even during the pandemic, the particular nature of our collaborative work and experiences in COVID GAP has fundamentally made a favorable impact on our own identities as scholars. The reflexive nature of our work and the opportunity to engage in qualitative inquiry as insider researchers to understand the unique impacts on academic women has provided opportunity for not only our collective successes, but to also share our experiences in the form of these included recommendations. For some, the experience was even more personal with changes in individual identity and a deeper, more realistic comprehension of academia:

*I am now more consciously thinking about myself as a “woman scholar,” and not just a “scholar.” I understand better that my experiences are affected by my roles and responsibilities as a woman within and outside of academia, and I understand better the structural issues affecting my career and my success as a researcher.*

We wish this same invaluable experience for our fellow academic women, especially the opportunity to learn from colleagues in other disciplines and from other cultures around the globe. From our exploration of gendered academic productivity during the pandemic, we found the answer to our question of how our collaboration was successful. COVID GAP provided the opportunity for each of us to be *who you want to be and pursue projects that set your soul on fire.*

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