WILEY

Academic mothers, professional identity and COVID-19: Feminist reflections on career cycles, progression and practice

Dorothea Bowyer[1] [ID] | Milissa Deitz[2] | Anne Jamison[2] |
Chloe E. Taylor[3] | Erika Gyengesi[4] | Jaime Ross[2] |
Hollie Hammond[5] | Anita Eseosa Ogbeide[3] | Tinashe Dune[3]

[1]School of Business, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia

[2]School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia

[3]School of Health Sciences, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia

[4]School of Medicine, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia

[5]School of Psychology, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales, Australia

Correspondence
Dorothea Bowyer, School of Business, Western Sydney University, Penrith, New South Wales 2751, Australia.
Email: d.bowyer@westernsydney.edu.au

Funding information
Western Sydney University's Vice Chancellor's Gender Equity Fund

Abstract

Based on a collection of auto-ethnographic narratives that reflect our experiences as academic mothers at an Australian university, this paper seeks to illustrate the impact of COVID-19 on our career cycles in order to explore alternative feminist models of progression and practice in Higher Education. Collectively, we span multiple disciplines, parenting profiles, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Our narratives (initiated in 2019) explicate four focal points in our careers as a foundation for analyzing self-definitions of professional identity: pre- and post-maternity career break; and pre- and post-COVID-19 career. We have modeled this research on a collective feminist research practice that is generative and empowering in terms of self-reflective models of collaborative research. Considering this practice and these narratives, we argue for a de-centering of masculinized career cycle patterns and progression pathways both now and beyond COVID-19. This represents both a challenge to neo-liberal norms of academic productivity, as well as a call to radically enhance institutional gender equality policies and practice.

KEYWORDS
academia, career progression, COVID-19, feminist theory, motherhood, professional identity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Substantial progress has been made in academic institutions across the globe with regard to enhancing gender equity for academic staff and reducing barriers to career progression, especially for women and mothers. However, the often pragmatic and policy-based approaches adopted by many universities to tackle gender inequity arguably belie the lived experiences of academic mothers and continue to privilege what Castenada and Isgro (2013) label the "Western, competitive masculine frameworks for learning, teaching, and research" that are the cornerstones of the neoliberal university (p. 9). Despite substantive progress, scholars continue to demonstrate that there remains a "systematic failure to recognize the ways that motherhood can alter a female academic's career in profound ways" (Castenada & Isgro, 2013, p. 9; Allison, 2007; Mason, 2011).

In view of this failure, this paper engenders a polyphonic feminist narrative that attempts to centralize the personal experiences of six academic mothers at an Australian university in order to critically disrupt institutional conversations around gender equity and academic motherhood. It further aligns with Hirsch and Kayam's (2020) definition of academic mothers, which ranges from "doctoral students to full tenured professors, researchers, and any mothers who self-identified as an academic, based on their level of education and current or past professional activities that necessarily included an academic institutional setting" (p. 27). Our methodological aim is to put into practice feminist scholarship that champions women's personal experience – or auto-ethnography more broadly – as a legitimate mode of intellectual inquiry, as well as one that can make new meaning and produce original knowledge (Collins, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As Gannon et al. (2015) note, the use of personal narratives in understanding the career pathways of feminist academics is ideal for exploring "the relational complexities of academic work" (p. 190).

Affirming the authority of these personal voices and better understanding these relational complexities takes on a new urgency as global leaders and international humanitarian bodies sound the alarm on COVID-19's pandemic's "devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls" (Guterres, 2020). What began in 2019 as a self-reflection on our professional identities pre- and post-motherhood has consequently extended into a consideration of the significant (and often negative) impact of the health crisis on our working lives and senses of professional self. The bonds of our collaboration have also taken on new meaning, not only providing a practical lifeline to continue with our research under the duress of the pandemic, but also manifesting alternative modes of analysis. Akin to the personal narrative, recent scholarship recognizes feminist collaborative writing as a method of inquiry in its own right (Brooks et al., 2017; Handforth & Taylor, 2016) and, similar to the shared intellectual practice of Breeze and Taylor (2020), we view our collaborative writing as articulating more than "a simple 'writing up' of our analysis and interpretation of the 'data'" (p. 419).

Through conversations, emails, and shared documents our resultant collaborative writing is palimpsestic in nature – never fully complete and always suspended in a process of becoming that defies a singular authority or voice – and it includes the female student researchers and mentees who share authorship of this paper. These younger voices add to the diversity of our already multivalent subject positions, which cross the boundaries of various disciplines, social classes, races, and parenting models, but also pay testament to our feminist praxis as academic mentors. The latter is recognized as a specific type of cross-collaboration (Handforth & Taylor, 2016), and feminist research leaders have been shown to view such partnerships as an integral feminist commitment (Acker & Wagner, 2017). Echoing Breeze and Taylor, our paper thus analyses the experiences of feminist academic mothers in and through our continuing experiences as feminist academic mothers in a bid to radically intervene in the institutional and public conversations around gender equity in higher education both during COVID-19 and beyond. This paper thus gives voice to our experiences and scrutinizes them in light of past and emerging discourses around gender equity in Higher Education and, as such, responds to recent calls to "continue recording and analyzing" the effects of the "pandemic-heightened gender inequalities" on women academics as a means of championing real change in the sector (Pereira, 2021).

1.1 | Literature review

Academic research emerging from a range of different disciplines has long demonstrated the substantial gender disparities experienced by female academics (especially mothers) that negatively affect their career progression and sense of professional identity. These disparities have been linked to an overtly masculinized neoliberal agenda and have been additionally seen to intensify during COVID-19. Few studies, however, pertain to an Australian setting, or bring all of these critical narrative threads together.

1.2 | Gendered academic work

The fact that female academics face a complex set of gendered challenges that have a negative impact on their careers is no secret: there are major gaps in the rate of advancement, wage, and workload, among other variables (Savigny, 2014). The gendered division of academic labor is one such challenge, and it has been well documented as a significant barrier to progression. Existing scholarship indicates that women take on the bulk of teaching, service, and administrative roles (Kjeldal et al., 2005) and, as a result, are left with very little time for research. The latter is a key marker of academic distinction and advancement that has arguably been hyper-inflated through what Monroe and Chiu (2015) define as a process of "gender devaluation." This phenomenon witnesses the devaluation of certain forms of academic labor when that labor is adopted, in the main, by women: "Work or positions once deemed powerful and high status become devalued as women take on these roles. Service tends to be thought of as a female job, and service within the university is undervalued, as is teaching. The status hierarchy rewards research" (Monroe & Chiu, 2015, p. 230). This hierarchy thus also demotes women, who often have lower rates of publication, and subsequently decreases their ability to achieve academic promotion (Acker & Armenti, 2004). This stunted trajectory goes some way in explaining the diminishing numbers of women promoted to the level of professor (Alon et al., 2020; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). It also partially explains what Ysseldyk terms the "leaky pipeline" of academia which sees institutions lose female academics at every stage of the academic career trajectory (Ysseldyk et al., 2019).

1.3 | Academic mothers: Work-life balance

Motherhood can engender some positive career effects, including logistical and practical benefits, as well as emotional and intellectual ones (Dickson, 2018). For instance, some mothers report that they have become more effective academics through the transfer of organizational skills, and greater efficiency and compassion. However, the various gender inequities at play in higher education have clearly had a negative impact on the career trajectories of many female academics and, while research suggests that motherhood is not the sole culprit for the lack of women in the professoriate (Ollilainen, 2020), these inequities are arguably exacerbated for academic mothers. It has been shown that academic mothers suffer far more difficulties in their bid to juggle family and parenting commitments with a broad range of academic work across teaching, research, and service compared to their male and non-parenting counterparts (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Woodward, 2007).

According to Guarino and Borden (2017) and Van Anders (2004), academic mothers are often overwhelmed in their teaching and service roles while carrying the additional responsibility of being the primary caregivers to their children, doubly hampering their efforts to maintain a research career. Craft and Maseberg-Tomlinson describe these extra duties as a "second shift" in the life of academic mothers, whereby the labor of childcare and housework becomes, in effect, a second – and equally demanding – job (p. 75). Increasingly, this "second shift" also overlaps with the demands of academic work whereby research and class preparation often occur outside typical working hours and become compounded by parenting responsibilities (Maranto & Griffin, 2011).

As such, many of the difficulties for academic women arise as they attempt to return to their pre-parent schedule of research work, which suddenly becomes much more difficult, if not impossible in light of their caring responsibilities (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). In their study of junior academic mothers with small children, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004) found that these women "admit[ed] working all the time" before having children (p. 253). Fothergill and Keltey (2003) note that this has become a working academic norm that engenders an unrealistic "ideal worker", one who assumes an "open-ended commitment of time, energy, and personal resources" (p. 16). Unsurprisingly, the subjects of Ward and Wolf-Wendel's study unanimously confirmed their inability to maintain their "pre-baby work habits," which created "feelings of stress" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004, p. 249). As Powell (2013) concludes of her own academic experiences and career trajectory, "being a mother ultimately imposes restrictions on women professionally because the demands of the work are not consistent with the time and effort it takes to be a good mother and maintain sanity" (p. 47). Other studies and professional Higher Education blog accounts concur with these findings and illustrate the ways in which academic mothers often succumb to mental exhaustion, stress, and anxiety in their efforts to balance their roles of mother and academic (Heggeness, 2020; Jacobsen, 2020).

1.4 | Professional identity and neoliberalism

Findings based on the experiences of academic mothers begins to expose the ways in which conventional academic career trajectories are gendered male and assume an unbroken linear progression without the inevitable interruptions that come with academic motherhood (Santiago et al., 2012). They further reveal the unrealistic nature of the default (male) academic professional, especially with regard to a healthy work-life balance. Recent scholarship has additionally made the connection between this ideal academic worker and the principles of the neoliberal university, including the impact on how academic workers perceive their professional identities (Nash, 2019; Tang, 2011).

Winter (2009) argues that the concept of the ideal academic worker is a direct result of the neo-liberalization of universities, which has "reshaped all aspects of academic work and identity around an idealized image of corporate efficiency, a strong managerial culture, entrepreneurialism, and profit-making ideals" (Winter, 2009). This model of professional identity, Winter explains, does not allow for the integration of one's personal identity, thus creating a "schism [which] is the notion of *professional identity* and the extent to which an academic seeks to separate *inner* professional self from an *outer* organizational self that privileges commercial principles and practices" (Winter, 2009, p. 122). As such, Dickson (2018) argues that academic mothers are expected and pressured through institutional culture to separate their identities, essentially leaving their "mother" identity at home with their children. Mirick and Wladkowski (2018) further point out the prevailing institutional attitude that "motherhood should come second to academia and [women] should not emphasize motherhood and family, talk about it, or let it interfere with their work" (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018, p. 264).

This falsely imposed binary arguably obstructs more fruitful modes of understanding and experiences of professional identity. Wiles (2013) explains that "professional identity can be regarded as a process in which each individual comes to have a sense of themselves" (p. 854) and "is more complicated than adopting certain traits or values, or even demonstrating competence" (p. 854). Mirick and Wladkowski (2018) describe women who become mothers while completing a doctorate as experiencing the "socialization to academia and motherhood simultaneously; a unique experience due to the intersection of their identities as doctoral student, woman, and parent" (p. 255). The socialization of the neoliberal academic professional identity, however, means that academics, particularly those who have only known systems of managerialism, tend to accept it as the only professional identity available to them. As Kolsaker illustrates, they "appear, on the whole, to accept managerialism not only as an external technology of control, but also as a facilitator of enhanced performance, professionalism, and status" (Kolsaker, 2008, p. 522).

Within this neoliberal model, the equation of academic professional identity with overachievement and overperformance is very quickly threatened by having children. Lust et al.'s study (2019) explores the way in which academic identity, when perceived to be under threat, can result in forms of resistance (Lust et al., 2019). They demonstrate how

the ideology of market-based rationality is so strong that, for many academics, any deviation from the norms of work that have been created is considered fanciful, steeped in a bygone age, or insular and ignorant of the competitive and financial realities facing universities today. This helps to explain the stress felt by academic mothers upon the realization that a return to pre-parent work habits is either not desirable, not realistic, or both.

1.5 | The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered daily life across the globe. Hundreds of thousands have died, and millions have tested positive to COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020). Preliminary thinking and analyses in the public media suggest that the pandemic also continues to compound pre-existing gender disparities regarding women and work (Ross, 2020). These disparities existed on several levels before the pandemic, across populations and within groups – by gender, occupation, ethnicity, age, and geography (Blundell et al., 2020) – but studies show women have experienced the greatest COVID-10 – induced disruption (Rapid Research Information Forum, 2020).

The health crisis has resulted in women facing a disproportionate increase in care responsibilities and disruptions to work hours. Scholars are still scrambling to make full sense of this impact and its consequences, but embryonic data and emerging research published across different scholarly and more public academic media and research blog sites is certainly beginning to suggest that, as mothers are generally already more involved in parenting than fathers, the effect of this crisis on women is enormous (Andrew et al., 2020; Hermann, & Neale-McFall, 2020; Ross, 2020; Gouws & Moodley, 2020). During this time, it has been observed that academic mothers are striving to be active scholars and teachers while simultaneously attempting to keep their children occupied (Guy & Arthur, 2020). In the United States, COVID-19's influence on faculty members continues to unfold among female academics with caregiving responsibilities who are experiencing intensified challenges (Hermann, & Neale-McFall, 2020) as they juggle their family, professional and personal lives. As they handle these new duties, the already limited blocks of uninterrupted time for organizing classes and conducting research have been further reduced (Ross, 2020). Professional work has become an activity performed while mothering (Hand et al., 2020), which includes helping children deal with the stress caused by the profound changes in their lives. In addition, academic mothers struggle to cope with their own stress and the psychological pressure of discovering that they, along with their families and friends, are facing an invisible, extremely contagious, potentially lethal illness (Hermann, & Neale-McFall, 2020).

Gouws and Moodley (2020) propose in their *Conversation* report that navigating motherhood and academia has taken on a whole new meaning in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, as the increased strain magnifies the lack of gender parity in academic environments and exposes the effects on productivity (Gouws & Moodley, 2020). The pandemic has underlined the struggle of academic mothers to keep up with their male counterparts, as well as exacerbated that struggle (Guy & Arthur, 2020). Alon et al. (2020) note that the closure of schools and childcare centers during the pandemic is likely to have negatively impacted time for research, particularly for academic mothers. Kitchener's (2020) small-scale study further highlights the fewer journal submissions lodged by women in particular disciplines during the pandemic compared to its onset, while men's submission rates have risen. If this trend is confirmed more broadly, it will potentially harm women's efficacy in maintaining a viable research career, as well as their ability to compete for funding opportunities in years to come. Closer to home, Ross (2020) indicates that academic mothers in New Zealand missed deadlines and delayed manuscripts, sabbaticals, and fellowships during the pandemic. According to the Rapid Research Information Forum (2020), female academics in Australia and New Zealand shouldered a disproportionate share of the work involved in moving teaching programmes online, exacerbating "pre-existing gender inequalities" in research and teaching. They also assumed the lion's share of housework along with home-schooling children.

1.6 | The current study

Before COVID-19 became a daily reality, we pondered the issues, stressors, and challenges, as well as the opportunities, successes, and joys of being academic mothers after returning from maternity leave/s and its impact on our professional identity, work-life balance, and career trajectories. Founded on feminist theory and its valuation of diverse voices, perspectives, and qualitative exploration, we noted our reflections with the aim of collating our auto-ethnographic experiences into this paper – and then COVID-19 hit. So, we again reflected on our lives with the aim of understanding the intersections and impacts of COVID-19 on our already strained experiences of career, parenting, partnering, and identity. In this paper, we illustrate the impact of COVID-19 on our career cycles in order to explore alternative feminist models of progression and practice in Higher Education.

2 | METHODS

In this collaborative reflective narrative, we employed qualitative methodologies to generate personal and subjective accounts of the experiences of being academic mothers in an Australian university. Informed by a feminist methodology, we further considered the additional influences that affect our senses of professional identity.

2.1 | Theoretical framework

Feminist theory offers a rational framework for opposing numerous gender-based social oppressions by questioning cultural/historical meanings and gender-based biological assumptions (Nagoshi et al., 2012). A feminist approach helps to interpret our experiences as women, mothers, and academics and has allowed us to decentralize the exalted values and impositions of masculine norms (Hesse-Biber, 2011). Our auto-ethnographic narratives are informed by scholarly feminist approaches which emphasize the richness of data gathering through empathic interaction and co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hockey et al., 2007; McRobbie, 1982). In these ways, feminist theory helped us to produce rich and nuanced auto-ethnographic data focused on the meanings and interpretations that we attribute to being academic mothers across various time points, as well as how these identities influenced our experience/s of professional identity (Liamputtong, 2012).

2.2 | Collaborative auto-ethnography

In order to produce robust, self-reflective narratives we employed auto-ethnography, a qualitative, transformative research method. According to Lapadat (2017, p. 592), this method,

> …creates opportunities to enhance understanding of others, as well as openness and a willingness to engage that fosters trust and solidarity. As a relational social practice, auto-ethnography provides a forum to hear about people's everyday experiences and incorporate what matters to them into decisions and policy deliberations, thus contributing to a caring democracy.

Auto-ethnography therefore involves vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, respects subjectivity, and offers therapeutic benefits (Custer, 2014). It is a valuable qualitative research method used to analyze the lives of both people and researchers (Méndez, 2013) which allowed us to observe ourselves, to question what we think and believe, and to challenge our own assumptions, to ask over and over whether we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, doubts, and uncertainties as our narratives required (Custer, 2014; Rapp, 2018). Thus, for

many, auto-ethnography reflects the right to tell their truth as lived without waiting for others to convey what they really want to know and understand (Richards, 2008). This research method allowed us to explore what it means to be academic mothers before and after career breaks and during an ongoing global pandemic (Sell-Smith & Lax, 2013).

While bound to our individual identities, we are also bound to our communal realities (Dune, 2014). It was therefore important, informative, and cathartic to immerse ourselves in the narratives of the other authors, allowing each of our narratives to speak to and inform each other, thus the additional need to adopt a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach (Chang et al., 2013). Collaborative auto-ethnography emerges as a "pragmatic application of the auto-ethnographic approach to social research" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 21) and focuses on self-examination, but does so jointly within a team of researchers. Lapadat (2017, p. 597) uses the term collaborative autobiography to describe "autobiographical, auto-ethnographic, polyphonic approach[es] to writing, telling, interrogating, analyzing, and collaboratively performing and writing up research on personal life challenges and on negotiating personal and professional identities." This approach therefore encourages different viewpoints and perspectives in research and expands the data and knowledge source from a single researcher to multiple researchers; this leads to a more in-depth understanding and learning of self and others (Lapadat, 2017). By engaging all contributors as authors, collaborative auto-ethnography reduces opportunities for "exploitation or misinterpretation of others' voices, as the others are co-researchers with an equitable voice in the design, research process, and authorship. Collaborative auto-ethnography projects avoid appropriation of voice as all collaborators are acknowledged as co-authors and owners of their stories" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 599) and in doing so, creates a more inclusive and methodologically more rigorous approach to engaging with individual perspectives than solo auto-ethnography (Lapadat, 2017).

2.3 | Recruitment

This project utilized snowball sampling with the goal of engaging a diverse group of academic mothers from different disciplines, ethnic backgrounds, and experiences of parenting (Naderifar et al., 2017). The snowball method was preferred as it allowed the research team to ensure that project aims could be addressed from diverse viewpoints as a pilot study, with the goal of expanding to purposive sampling with a larger group of academic mothers in the future. The research team evolved over time through gender equity networks and other collegial links to result in the recruitment of six academic mothers from the same university across different campuses and disciplines.

2.4 | Data collection

To gather narratives in line with the project aims, a data collection document was created by authors Dorothea Bowyer (DB) and Anne Jamison (AJ) (see Appendix 1). Topics were generated from the pre-COVID concepts discussed in the Literature Review above. Prior to COVID-19, authors DB and AJ discussed the project and its aims with authors Chloe E. Taylor (CT), Milissa Deitz (MD), Tinashe Dune (TD), and Erika Gyengesi (EG) who were recruited into the project given the additional diversity they could contribute to the collaborative auto-ethnography. DB emailed the data collection document and study aims to authors CT, MD, TD, and EG in September 2019. In line with collaborative auto-ethnography methods used by Lapadat (2017), we then engaged in the following data collection steps. First, authors DB, AJ, CT, TD, MD, and EG each filled in the narrative data collection document independently. The pre-COVID-19 data collection document took between 60 and 90 min to complete over September and October 2019. After completing the document, we each emailed our narratives to all members of the team. We then read each other's narratives and met via videoconference to discuss a framework for analysis and interpretation of the data.

Following COVID-19, we decided to complete another data collection document to see how our experiences and perspectives had changed over time. To this end, author TD revised the original data collection document in July 2020 (see Appendix 2) and emailed authors DB, AJ, CT, MD, and EG. Similar to the steps noted above (Lapadat, 2017), the

COVID-19 narratives were completed by authors DB, AJ, CT, TD, and MD within 60 to 90 min in July and August 2020 and saved into a shared Dropbox folder so we could review each other's narratives. By this time, EG had begun a period of maternity leave and only her pre-COVID narrative could be included in this paper. The remainder of us then met to discuss the framework for analysis and interpretation of the narratives and we engaged support from the project research assistants (authors Jaime Ross [JR], Hollie Hammond [HH], and Anita Eseosa Ogbeide [AEO]) who contextualized the narratives by co-writing the literature review (JR and HH) as well as analyzing, writing up and drafting the discussion of this paper (AEO).

2.5 | Sample and positionality

In this paper, we decided to turn the research lens back on ourselves and engage in reflective practice which is central to feminist research (Bourke, 2014). Given our positionality and experiences, our choice of research topic, methodological framework, and theoretical foci for this research does not emerge from mere naive interest (Dune & Mapedzahama, 2017). Rather, this project draws on the strengths of our diversity and positionality which inform how we interpret our communal (and individual) experiences as academic mothers. As we reflected on our own narratives and those of the other contributors, we routinely explored our positionality in relation to one another and across time (Louis & Barton, 2002). We share similarities in our identities as mid-career academics and as mothers. We all have two or three children between the ages of 3 months to 17 years old, and we have all taken on significant administrative, governance, and/or student support roles. A summary of our demographic details is provided in Table 1 (below). To better understand and contextualize our narratives we provide the reader with our individual positionality statements in Appendix 3.

We have also experienced unique and shared challenges relating to our individual and intersectional identities, including the similarity of being female (in a masculine and male-favored workspace) while struggling for opportunities that bring about personal and professional growth and a sense of fulfillment. Additionally, we shared the impact of being academic mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given that the research assistants engaged with the literature and the narratives through the lens of their own identities and experiences, their positionality was also important to consider as it reflects their engagement in the project as simultaneous insiders and outsiders (Clift et al., 2018). JR and HH were insiders because they shared similarities as tertiary students, females, mothers, and they were of Anglo heritage. Their positionality helped them to understand the challenges faced by female parents in academic settings. They were able to identify the challenges of balancing academic and home life and this informed their ability to collate relevant/evidence-based data for the literature review in ways that provide a comprehensive foundation. However, the students were not privy to the gendered politics of academic workload determinations including teaching loads, research allocations, and administrative duties. AEO was simultaneously an outsider – she is not a mother – and also an insider – she is female, partnered, and a Black African migrant (international postgraduate student) from Nigeria. These intersectional identities helped her to understand the experiences of marginalization, visa challenges, and ethno-racial disparities experienced by migrant women of color in academic settings. Her analysis and reporting of the results empathically captures the story of people who experience diverse forms of marginalization and challenges, as well as innovation and successes that females from diverse backgrounds experience.

2.6 | Data extraction and analysis

The data was thematically analyzed by identifying topics and substantive categories within participants' accounts in relation to the study's objectives, followed by a participant meeting where core themes were identified from each narrative. TD then created a data extraction table where each contributor could conduct a preliminary coding and

TABLE 1 Demographic details of contributing academic mothers

Author	Role	Age range	Marital status	Carer status	Number of children	Total time of child related leave	Ethnicity	Migration experience
DB	Lecturer in Business	40–44 years old	Married	Primary carer	3	54 months	European (German-Australian)	Poland – Middle East – Germany – Australia
MD	Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication	45–50 years old	De facto	Primary carer	2[a]	15 months	Anglo-Australian	N/A
AJ	Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies	40–44 years old	Married	Primary carer	3	27 months	Iraqi-Irish Muslim	England – Scotland – Northern Ireland – Australia
CT	Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science	30–34 years old	Married	Primary carer	2	12 months	English	England – Australia
EG	Senior Lecturer in Neuropharmacology	35–40 years old	Married	Primary carer	3	33 months	Hungarian	Hungary – USA – Australia
TD	Senior Lecturer in Interprofessional Health Sciences	35–40 years old	Married	Primary carer	3[b]	14 months	Zimbabwean	Zimbabwe – UK – USA – Canada – Australia

Abbreviations: AJ, Anne Jamison; CT, Chloe E. Taylor; DB, Dorothea Bowyer; EG, Erika Gyengesi; MD, Milissa Deitz; TD, Tinashe Dune.

[a]Both permanent foster children; one child deceased.

[b]One stepchild.

extract/insert excerpts of their own narratives in line with the identified themes. Another meeting was held where each contributor's extracted narratives were reviewed to ensure consistency in the preliminary coding. CT and MD then refined the preliminary coding and supported AEO in her analysis of the narratives. AEO finally conducted a complete analysis of the extracted narratives with a focus on topical responses and emergent substantive categories, coding particularly for word repetition, direct and emotional statements, and discourse markers including intensifiers, connectives, and evaluative clauses. After in-depth coding was completed by author AEO, the research team met to discuss her analysis, presentation of the findings, and their interpretation in the Discussion of this paper. AEO then drafted the results and discussion which was then reviewed, revised, and approved by authors.

3 | RESULTS

In this section, we discuss our experiences in our various roles as academics, mothers and across our careers pre- and post-maternity leave(s), as well as pre and during COVID-19. Our narratives highlight our understanding and experiences of professional identity considering the multiple intersectionalities we embody, while also managing masculine and inflexible academic settings and expectations. The following core themes are discussed below: Defining professional identity; Barriers and supports for regaining and maintaining professional identity; Finding balance; Gendered expectations of academia; Creating sustainable career paths.

3.1 | Defining professional identity

Our professional identity is linked to the way we see ourselves in our professional capacity in the academic workforce and is shaped by our moral and social principles, both of which are engendered by our beliefs, attitudes, values, and experiences. Therefore, professional identity is key in our sense of personal and professional belonging:

> Professional Identity is the way I perceive myself and my role within the university, my research field, and the wider community. It is what I feel my strengths and value are, combined with what others perceive my strengths and value to be. (CT)

For many of us, such definitions were shaped prior to our experiences of motherhood:

> My professional self-perception was built on determination… I felt privileged, and very lucky, to be have been accepted to work in my dream job. (MD)

3.1.1 | Pre-maternity career break

Before becoming parents, we saw our work and professional identity as a central part of our lives, where merits and achievements were the main foci, and there was pride in being productive. All of us shared a commitment to creativity in our work and thrived on a personal sense of control and drive. AJ directly stated that "*I was in control of that identity*" and DB admitted that "*it seems as if I had no life but I was in control.*" Further to this, TD said that "*before children my professional identity prevailed, and I was very content with that.*" Moreover, we recognized in different ways that our professional identity gave us a platform to champion feminism and advocate for social justice for other women from multiple disciplines and racial backgrounds (just like ourselves).

> My professional Identity allowed me to add a droplet to the social justice pool and make a small differ-
> ence to the ways that the world viewed and interacted with people like me and those far less privileged.
> (TD)

It was very quickly apparent through our narratives, however, that our sense of control over how we were perceived professionally, as well as our ability to maintain and control our career pathways were significantly challenged as we tried to navigate being mothers and academics upon returning to work.

3.1.2 | Post-maternity career break

For all of us, the return to our academic work environments was difficult and confronting. Becoming a mother often made us feel inadequate both at home and at work. Post-maternity, some of us felt distinctly average compared to our ambitions and achievements prior to having children, sometimes to the point of feeling like a "*failure and somewhat of a fraud*" (MD). We were also conscious of being perceived differently at work by colleagues and felt that our value and self-confidence had diminished; as TD explained, "*Before babies, I felt proud of my education, intelligence, creativity, and capacity*." These experiences led us to question our professional identity. AJ noted, "*After my son was born, I felt that I had somehow lost that sense of being able to determine my professional identity*." These internalized uncertainties were further compounded by the practical changes to our working lives as we attempted to strike a healthy balance between family and work.

> As it turned out I was only back at work for 5 months before again taking parental leave. My pre-leave
> schedule had changed over those months, of course. I no longer had time for coffee catch ups, let alone
> lunch or any sort of networking – I wanted to finish the work needed and go home…Well, this is the life
> of a working parent, I thought. (MD)

Efforts to recalibrate our professional identity were challenged by colleagues who prescribed to societal and institutional norms which constructed us as mothers first, academics second. Consequently, we were often given unsolicited advice from colleagues. AJ summarizes this experience, "*On having children, I suddenly had supervisors that seemed to want to give me family planning advice instead of academic supervision*." DB also felt hindered by the response of her colleagues who repeatedly questioned her commitment and capacity to work, "*I was asked on multiple occasions as to whether/why I don't consider going part-time*." The competitive nature of academic work and, in particular, the metric-based criteria against which research success is measured also produced in us our own sense of incapacity or insufficiency. CT states that, "*Academia* can *be such a competitive sector to work in. It is easy to compare yourself to others and sometimes to experience jealousy when they succeed*." TD also gave voice to the conflict of emotions that many of us experienced as we began to navigate our new role as mothers while also attempting to sustain and enjoy our careers;

> After my first child I went back to work with such great joy and excitement… I had settled into a new
> office and made new work friends. Work was fabulous! But I was confused and so drained… But work
> was so fulfilling… And then I would come home and it was as though I was floundering… Parenting – it
> was my job. Academia – it was my job. I felt like an imposter. (TD)

As a result of these internal and external changes to the ways we experienced our professional identities, as well as how others perceived us, we felt pressured to prove to others (and ourselves) that we were more than just mothers – our experiences of returning to work repeatedly indicated that being a mother was seen as a hindrance to professional success. DB and CT both describe how they made a conscious effort to enhance their visibility at work. DB states that, "*I took it upon myself to push more strongly for teaching the units that I wanted, have my boxes/office*

relocated (which took 8 months) to sit with other colleagues and take the initiative to become visible." Many of us agreed that this process of agentic re-engagement facilitated positive self-appraisal and a sense of self-worth. CT notes that by "*for me, rebuilding professional identity is about rebuilding my networks, defining my role, and feeling confident about my value and contribution.*"

Over time and multiple career breaks, we attempted to resist (consciously, or not) the established models of academic identity and re-establish a more holistic sense of professional identity by reflecting on who we used to be, who we were, and who we wanted to be.

> I had to prove myself again as it seems all my hard work and who I was before becoming a mother was forgotten… I also learned a lot about my own professional identity and have grown up in regards to who I am and want to become. (DB)

Combined with a personal sense of confidence via our experiences as mothers this reflective process bolstered our academic capacities and helped us to (re)gain respect from colleagues and students.

> [being a mother] has boosted my confidence as a teacher, course advisor and HDR supervisor. I feel more comfortable taking on roles of authority. (CT)

There was also a distinctive reorientation of the values tied up in our identities as academics. AJ notes that there was a distinctive "*shift away from a predominantly research-focused sense of self*" and a more balanced approach to teaching and research.

> I became more involved and interested in my teaching and, consequently, in my students and I derived a great sense of pleasure in mentoring others. (AJ)

CT experienced a similar change in perspective and approach, reflecting that her newfound parental status somehow "*reinforced the importance making a positive difference to the lives of others,*" as opposed to simply chasing individual research accolades.

However, the process of developing a new sense of our professional identity was a contentious process which required significant work and focus to validate and maintain, as well as the support of colleagues and the institution.

3.2 | Barriers and supports for regaining and maintaining professional identity

As we re-entered our academic professions, we felt that a considerable amount of self-development, external support, and reflection was needed in light of the barriers to full academic participation and progression that we were encountering as academic mothers. This process manifested through changes in our internal perceptions, engagement with our colleagues, and the role of the institution.

3.2.1 | The role of colleagues

Many of us experienced support from colleagues that helped us re-establish and maintain many elements of our previous professional identity while allowing us to revise our sense of self following our career breaks.

> The support of mentors and colleagues, especially those who work in or are passionate about gender equity, helped me on a personal level to rebuild my confidence in my academic abilities. (AJ)

Empathetic colleagues were a significant component to our ability to feel supported at work and to re-engage in our academic tasks.

> I returned to work after three months' bereavement leave. The support from my colleagues was truly incredible. (MD)

For those of us who had team leaders who actively supported our reintegration into the workplace, the process of re-establishing our careers and professional identity was expedited.

> [My supervisor] sat down with me upon my return to get me up to speed and I was invited to the next group meeting... This meant I was able to quickly re-establish my identity as a valued member of the team. (CT)

In contrast, some team leaders seemed to challenge our professional identity and our aims to re-establish career momentum.

> As I sat on the floor of this [team leader's] house... openly breastfeeding my first child...I told her I would like to apply for promotion... She replied, "You know you are not entitled to a promotion right?!"... I was shocked. (TD)

Such conversations were also confronting and often demeaning or patronizing, situating academic motherhood as a position of weakness and undermining the legitimacy of gender equity processes within the institution;

> I have been told not to bother applying for certain governance positions because they wouldn't fit in with the fact that I have kids; conversely, I've been told I should apply for certain grants or a promotion because I can "play the gender card" and get brownie points for all my career interruptions. (AJ)

Support from colleagues (or the lack of it) played an instrumental role in the success, or otherwise, of re-engaging with our academic careers and the role of the institution proved an equally (if not more than) vital element in either helping or hindering our sense of belonging and capacity for achievements across our diverse academic environments.

3.2.2 | Institutional policy and practices

Despite the challenges faced by some, we felt that support for academic mothers was generally reflected in institutional policies and practices that created a child-friendly workplace and practical support via a flexible work environment.

> I took advantage of the now increased phased return to work that allowed me to come back to work... (and get paid fulltime) while I could spend a day at home with the babies. (EG)

The Phased Return program allows individuals (of all genders) returning from long-term primary carer responsibilities to work at 80% of their normal hours for 40 weeks at 100% pay (pro-rata for part-time positions). These return-to-work provisions are part of a large suite of policies and practices at the University to support a balanced reintegration to work, including flexible work arrangements; child-friendly working areas; childcare services on most campuses (with reduced rates for staff and students); and breastfeeding rooms – to name a few.

> The fact that [the University] is a child-friendly workplace and that academic roles are quite flexible by nature, makes the marrying of a new maternal self with the professional self more possible. (AJ)

In addition, we all noted the University's Career Interruption Grant as a major facilitator of support that helped us regain and maintain our professional identity following career breaks. The grant is available to individuals (of all genders) who have experienced prolonged career interruption due to carer responsibilities. Each grant offers up to $10,000 for recipients to attend conferences, engage research assistant support, buy out teaching, or support research translation. This kind of support acknowledged our experiences and challenges in the workplace and was therefore important to how we reconnected to our prior sense of professional identity.

> I've used the Career Interruption Grants to support conference attendance and networking within the wider research community. This has been a conscious effort to adopt some of the same approaches that made me feel so connected in my first 3–4 years at this institution. These activities can open up further opportunities and provided a channel for meeting people from different parts of the University and wider community. (CT)

Some of us received this grant multiple times, which played a significant role in helping re-establish our professional identity, re-engage with opportunities to network with the broader academic community and, importantly, enabled us to meet other colleagues who are mothers. As DB states, important factors allowing her to "*regain professional identity*" included "*career interruption grants*" and "*having a network to share [the] challenges of raising kids and juggling work*." The University's facilitation of these opportunities allowed us to engage with the larger community of academic mothers in ways that motivated, inspired, and supported who we were, who we are and who we aspired to be.

> [The Grant] had an important bearing on my sense of self; it validated my career interruption and recognized that extra support was required and it gave me back much-needed confidence in my abilities. (AJ)

Opportunities to overcome the barriers we experienced when returning to work helped us to make conceptual and practical room to consider how we could balance our academic and maternal identities.

3.3 | Finding balance between motherhood and academia

For all of us, becoming a mother meant that our focus on work and other personal pursuits shifted in a number of ways. Returning to work not only brought with it great benefits, but also challenges to our work-life and financial balance.

3.3.1 | Work-life balance

While trying to manage re-engaging with our academic work and simultaneously bringing up our children, it often felt like our identity in the workplace had slipped from female academic to academic mother. In the process, we grappled with how to balance who we once were with who we were becoming and with what was expected of us – from others as well as ourselves at home and at work.

> I want to have a reputation for being highly skilled and competent, but I also feel I am stretched very thinly at times. It is so frustrating to work so hard both at home and at work and still feel as though I could or should be doing better at both! (CT)

Being at work made sense for some of us and we were clear about who we were and what we needed to accomplish.

> …I felt like work was tangible with clear outputs and impacts. Being a mother and a wife was messy. (TD)

Simultaneously, the demand of both roles meant little time for self-care or rest.

> What this means is basically little or no time to do anything else, other than these two jobs: no down-time, no time for exercise, to socialize, let alone to go out. (EG)

In an effort to find balance between work and home, we had to reflect on and reset our priorities. This required us to manage our time more strictly. Instead of trying to balance our multiple identities and roles, some of us found consolidating them was a more helpful strategy.

> My role hasn't changed, my workload hasn't changed, my daily routine at work hasn't changed, but everything else outside of work has and it has a huge impact on how I do or do not do things. I have to now somehow merge my two identities, one as an academic professional, and the other as a mother of two small kids, and somehow balance life in a way that neither of these roles suffer and happily coexist without too much of an interference. (EG)

Balance was also facilitated by adopting different strategies to support the co-existence of our work and life identities. DB noted, "*My family life was well-organized (we had an au-pair who joined us for a year to look after the kids so that I [could] have a smooth return and focus on my career) and I was ready to work hard again, re-position myself and resume where I left off.*" AJ explained, "*…my husband had his own business when my son was born and a high level of flexibility, so we largely juggled childcare between us and we did not access private childcare [until my second child was born],*" and MD said, "*…when I returned to work 4 days a week, [my parents] looked after [my son] one day and he was in day-care for 3 days.*" While support encouraged work-life balance, finding support was not always easy. TD reflected,

> And then I would come home and it was as though I was floundering. My second shift would begin, and there was no one to share the burdens of parenting. I resented not having help from anyone. This is not who I was. I was a successful person who made things happen. And I felt stuck in a quagmire of shattered expectations, disappointment, and exhaustion.

While many academic mothers take extended leave to care for their children, for many of us this was not an option given our financial responsibilities and existing support networks.

3.3.2 | Financial balance

More time away from work was not always possible because our financial resources were limited. For several of us, there was also a need to balance being a mother, an academic and a primary breadwinner and caregiver. MD described the impact of this pressure,

> I returned to work after three months' bereavement leave…My partner resigned from his job, unable to work, and we decided to wait until the end of year, about eight months away, to think about what he might do next. As there was now financial pressure, I applied for a governance position that would enable me to be paid at a higher rate. (MD)

For many of us, the University leave allowances (20 weeks at fulltime pay, or pro-rata plus any annual leave available) were significant, however, our financial circumstances meant that we still needed to return to work sooner rather than later.

> It was largely for financial reasons that I took a shorter term of leave with my youngest child than with my other children. (AJ)

Making money was also important to our sense of self and facilitated a re-establishment of our professional identity.

> … my main motivation to return to work was to resume where I left off. Earning money, being career focused (wanting to publish) and to keep on socializing with colleagues at work was also what I needed as this was "home away from home." (DB)

The multiple roles that we had to integrate into our identities often felt uneven and gendered such that we felt (as women) that we had to do more than our male counterparts.

3.4 | Gendered expectations of academia and childrearing

The literature on motherhood and professional identity discussed in the Literature Review highlights the gendered nature of motherhood, the conflicting expectations of academia and the roles that women are expected to fulfill in their academic lives. We found much of this to be true in our own experiences, especially in relation to constructions of (academic) fathers and the pressure to do everything, all the time.

3.4.1 | Constructions of (academic) fathers

In our narratives, we all spoke of the different expectations of men who work (in academia) and the praise afforded to those fathers who participate in their children's upbringing.

> When an academic male has children and demonstrates his involvement in their upbringing, we might think of him even more highly, assuming that he is responsible/capable/a family man. (CT)

However, no such praise or wonder is afforded to academic mothers. As DB describes, having children can mean that we are perceived as less "*efficient or effective as [our] fellow colleagues who have none or older kids…It seemed after the 19 months I was forgotten and so were all my accomplishments prior to that.*"

While many of us were supported by colleagues and the University in our return to work (as discussed above), we also experienced assumptions that our academic capability and importance were limited upon returning to work. AJ recounts what she called a "*formative experience*" about how academic mothers were perceived.

> I was working [as an assistant] on a major funded research project… The project was led by two male senior professors and… one of the female [members of the team] was pregnant and went into early

labor at a crucial time [in the project]… At [a project] meeting, where this scenario and its implications were being discussed (I was the only woman in the room with four men), the conversation veered toward both a disbelief in [her] condition, as well as a general smirking and disdain for a woman who seemed to have had the temerity of wanting and having a fourth child. The men in the room all seemed to think that [her] early labor story was a ruse – they all claimed unfounded expertize on [her] condition, refuting the possibility that her waters could have broken without the child yet being delivered. She simply "couldn't handle" the final stages of the work… and, in any case, it was common knowledge that the only reason she was an academic in the first place, was so that she could abuse the flexibility that comes with the role and be at home with her ever-growing brood of children.

The discussion AJ witnessed felt akin to the different kinds of experiences we had all been privy to at some point in our careers, moments where the ways in which a woman's previous academic identity, scholarly achievements and disciplinary knowledge – in this case, the reasons why someone is invited to originally be part of a prestigious research project – are no longer valid or valued, or at least deeply obscured, once viewed through the lens of motherhood, especially multiple motherhoods. AJ's own experiences would later corroborate this moment when the prospect of having a third child was deemed by senior colleagues as "*career over.*"

3.4.2 | Doing it all – all the time

The combination of our personal experiences and the external gendered constructions of parenthood arguably leave academic mothers under pressure to excel in all areas, all of the time. We felt expected to ensure the smooth running of our households while trying to double our efforts to prove our worth at work.

> I am still the primary parent, domestic carer, family administrator, and my husband's personal assistant as well as being the primary breadwinner, working fulltime, and studying to complete my [professional] accreditation. (TD)

Even where male partners were not academics, the expectations on them seemed far less. CT explains this burden and its implications in detail.

> Although my husband works part-time and plays a significant role in the upbringing of our children (importantly, he sees the value in it), I am conscious that the family admin and similar duties still fall under my responsibility as the mother. There's often no discussion or divvying up of jobs – it just happens that way, like it's a social expectation or an unwritten rule. My experience is that these jobs carry with them a significant mental burden, not to mention guilt if something is done incorrectly or worse, forgotten.

We all internalized these expectations to the point of guilt and frustration about taking time to go on work trips while leaving our children and partners behind. EG explained her first international conference experience,

> …I am giving an oral presentation at probably the most prestigious neuroscience conference in the world. Pre-babies, I would have been so excited about the trip, and eager to attend, and looking forward to it, while now I am almost considering canceling the trip and not looking forward to it as much, simply because I have never left my kids, not even for a day… Obviously, this is causing a level of anxiety, and stress and I'm constantly questioning myself if I'm a good enough mother, because I'm going to leave them for a week or so. In general, everything I do, …my entire professional life revolves around my

family and my children… Not to mention the load…that is now on the shoulder of the rest of the family (mostly my husband) who will most likely have a stressful week too.

The pressure to constantly consider and prioritize the needs of so many people and tasks above our own well-being was daunting and intense; it also had physical and emotional ramifications. MD admits that she twice contracted pneumonia (both before and after becoming a mother) in her efforts to "prove myself." When we were not berating ourselves for not being "good enough" mothers, we were often feeling like failed academics. However, MD makes an important reflection about the benchmarks against which we seemed (with hindsight) to be measuring ourselves;

> I no longer considered myself well-read. I felt like I no longer deserved my job because I couldn't keep up. I was too tired to work at night… I had a flexible workplace, a supportive partner, and family support. The problem could only have been me. Looking back, my problem was that I was only working a normal, 40-hour week. (MD)

For many of us, it was just as we were beginning to find a new stability and recalibrate our professional identities that COVID-19 happened.

3.5 | Impact of COVID-19 on professional identity and experiences of academic motherhood

As TD sums up, the onset of the global pandemic was a shock to the system which left us feeling "as if nothing had changed – but everything had" (TD). As academic mothers, we felt as though our hard fought (but still fragile and tenuous) balance across multiple senses of self and responsibilities – academic and mother – very quickly began to disintegrate when COVID-19 began to significantly disrupt both our personal lives and the academic system. As the priorities of home-schooling and mothering took over, AJ said,

> Given that so much of my professional identity is tied to my participation in teaching, research and professional communities of practice, I admit that I felt somewhat bereft.

The additional personal responsibilities that academic mothers found themselves needing (and wanting) to attend to were combined with an intense pressure from the institution to maintain teaching via a rapid transition of all teaching and other academic activities into online mode. TD explained,

> …the message has been clear that it is students first and that staff simply need to rise to the occasion. The problem is that there are so many "occasions." This is made more difficult with being a mother, wife, sister, friend, support person.

It seemed we were expected to shoulder these burdens with little or no help from partners, society, or the academic system. TD described this experience as, "Being like a machine, a robot from whom more is expected in these trying times." AJ reflected on the impact of these changes on her sense of professional progression and the regression it engendered in comparison to her career and research achievements prior to the pandemic,

> …a gnawing frustration (and, admittedly, bitterness) in knowing how hard it has been, and how many (unfair) hurdles in my career that I have had to overcome, to get to the position I felt I was in at the start of the year.

This frustration was felt by us all. Being an academic mother was demanding during the pandemic and most of us found that we were expected to carry the additional personal responsibilities created, in particular, by the closure of schools.

> During the first phase of the lockdown, I was solely responsible for home schooling the children... I was also coordinating a [first year] compulsory unit... and a team of 5 tutorial staff across 16 tutorials. (AJ)

While workloads for all academic staff skyrocketed and coping with student needs was exhausting, AJ continued to reflect that,

> There was also an unnerving sense of "cashing in" by [University executives] whereby the perceived successes of the [University] in managing the crisis became an institutional accolade for individual senior managers or executives. The reality on the ground, however, was much more complicated and (sometimes) much uglier.

In recognition of the limitations within the system and the realities for staff and students, confronting and exposing these issues head-on was helpful. MD explains her approach to managing her own sense of helplessness and that of her students,

> I felt helpless and judged because I was adamant I could not carry on as normal. This was not a normal situation and was unprecedented. All I could do at first was be honest with my students. I told them that I was finding our "new normal" very tough, and that I understood that they might be too. That I wasn't going to assume that because, say, their commute time was no longer something they had to fit into their schedules that their "flexible" lives were a little easier in some way.

Reflecting on how the pandemic has changed what is expected and what can be done helped us to take on a big picture view of the situation. As a result, CT mentioned experiencing several positive effects of the pandemic.

> ...family and parenting have become more visible...the greater appreciation for challenges experienced by academic parents,... feeling more connected to colleagues who are fellow parents, and in some instances a more compassionate work environment. Perhaps it even helps to address the unrealistic expectation that academic parents should develop their careers as if they don't have children, and bring up their children as though they don't have a job.

Taking on a positive and reflective perspective helped us to cope with the new challenges we faced. DB noted a sense of, "*embracing change, being open minded and trying to manage it with the best intentions for everyone.*" TD reflected on the positives, especially with regards to working from home.

> ...I am better able to decide when to engage with others and when not to...I found it frustrating and distracting when students and staff were entering my office without an appointment. This meant that I did not get done what I would have hoped for in that time period... Working from home also means... that I can decide with more autonomy with whom I work and spend time with during office hours... While that aspect has improved there are no longer any boundaries across the various areas of my life such that my professional identity is no longer a discrete entity.

As the pandemic escalated, the collegial connectedness that we had regained after returning to work was no longer available as national and international lockdowns were initiated to prevent the spread of the virus. CT said, "*I really do miss the opportunity to interact with colleagues face to face.*" Losing opportunities to connect face to face with our

colleagues and especially other academic mothers was difficult as it interfered with strategies we had implemented for self-care and balance at work.

> I also missed the face-to-face bonds and ongoing conversations… with my longstanding female colleagues. These friendships at work shore up my sense of self as an academic;… [and] are a safe space for talking about work, parenting and gender equity issues. (AJ)

Despite our experiences of disconnection, there were a number of factors that helped to uplift us during the pandemic. DB explained the new support networks she valued during the pandemic.

> The Parent Network and this professional identity project group. Talking, chatting, and laughing in online meetings. Having someone to vent to and sharing similar views on the complexities of home schooling and seeking advice on other matters.

As our work environments changed, we again had to adapt our professional identity and domestic identity in line with our new circumstances amidst growing uncertainties.

> Everyone around me…keeps on talking about recession… and how unemployment figures will rise and no one knows when this pandemic will come to an end. So, my motivation has shifted to "survival mode" at present and focusing on the tasks at hand. (DB)

Moving into survival mode was a means of coping in the short term, but we all recognized that it is not sustainable and potentially jeopardizes career progression.

3.6 | Creating sustainability

If the COVID-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing professional challenges for academic mothers, it also served to expose the fragility of the gender equity gains made over the last decade and more in higher education settings via revised policies and practices. The quick regression back into conventional gendered roles and responsibilities as the pandemic's effects took hold are a reminder that sustaining gender equity into the future requires a closer critical look at the neoliberal and masculinized foundations upon which universities continue to operate. Our experiences suggest that while pragmatic policies (maternity leave provisions and career interruption grants) are a vital compensatory step in supporting academic mothers, key conceptual and attitudinal changes are needed across multiple professional sectors to ensure that (academic) mothers feel supported in their careers and are given equal opportunities to achieve success.

> This flexibility and sharing of parental responsibilities, if adopted across all sectors, may encourage a more balanced home and environment and, in doing so, provide a more equal playing field at work for academic mothers and fathers. (CT)

There is therefore a need to address the gender role biases at the societal and institutional level to balance home and work responsibilities across genders.

> We all know that career advancement in academia can be incompatible with having a family…so it's good to see a slightly wider recognition that care-work, which is mostly performed by women, supports

the whole of society and is fundamental to the economy. And there needs to be reorganisation of care
and work time along equal gender lines. (MD)

To support reintegration following long periods of leave, there is also a need for collegial support to help mothers retain their track records and/or relevance across various fields. Having advocates or mentors who speak for us when we are on maternity leave helps to mediate the difficult process of trying to settle back in and helps us pick up where we left off. The latter was central to our confidence when returning to work and, therefore, to our engagement and productivity.

Women who go on leave/career breaks need ADVOCATES! Their names have to be mentioned when
they are absent, their names have to appear on projects, on papers, in group reports. (DB)

However, the ability to advocate for others can be challenged by the current work environments in which we find ourselves. AJ provided an example of how institutional cultures seemed to regress during the pandemic.

The "new norm" seems to be that we simply accept that working at 150% is okay and is now near-ex-
pected. In effect, it's neoliberalism on steroids, and there are already huge gender inequity implica-
tions of the neoliberal university model…these dynamics left me feeling a bit deflated in a professional
sense…I often feel that I have to define myself outside of (or against) institutional norms in order to be
and feel effective and while there is a sense of the "slow build" in terms of gender equality and real-time
change, the pandemic brought home how quickly and how easily gender equality gains can be pushed
backwards.

In line with AJ's sense that the (academic) system was compromising our hard-won efforts to find some balance and movement in our careers, there was also a sense of frustration about how this "new norm" could be sustained and what it meant for professional identity.

I am tired of my professional identity at the moment and sometimes wish I had a job that had clearer
parameters. This, right now, is unsustainable and yet with no end in sight. (TD)

Despite our frustrations, creating sustainability implored us to become advocates for ourselves and others and to articulate what we needed. MD explained how academic mothers could fulfill this task.

Being forced into an unprecedented "new world" meant people slowly began to be more vocal about
needing help and more prescriptive about what that help might look like, which was positive. But obvi-
ously there's a long way to go. (MD)

Through this feminist endeavor we found that creating sustainability in light of the changed reality brought on by COVID-19 required a range of psychosocial adaptations and the strength to acknowledge, accept and, in some cases, embrace this unexpected change. MD's experience of profound loss and grief helped her to put these changes into perspective and generate a sustainable platform for both riding out the storm of COVID-19 and progressing her career beyond it.

It took me a long time to accept that I was never going to see my little girl again. I think I refused to
believe it, or didn't want to believe it. We need to accept that we are all dealing with some type or level
of grief or trauma, and that our reactions won't be in any way linear. Everybody is making it up as we
go along. Challenge assumptions, ask uncomfortable questions, fight the corporatization of universi-

ties. Act the way you want women to act, whether or not other women agree. And let yourself laugh long and hard, as I did, when a Zoom meeting was interrupted by my child yelling out, "MUM! Diarrhea alert!." Such interruptions should be acceptable when one is in the middle of, let's say it again, **a global pandemic** [original emphasis], and I for one am glad these messy interruptions have become more visible.

4 | DISCUSSION

This paper presented the narratives of six academic mothers at an Australian university through collaborative auto-ethnography. Using a feminist framework, we reflected on our perspectives and experiences of how our sense of professional identity before and after motherhood, as well as before and during the COVID-19 global pandemic, had changed. It has been suggested that one of the key strengths of collaborative auto-ethnography derives from its focus on relationship building through the sharing of vulnerability, the flattening of hierarchies, and the resultant establishment of trust amongst group members (Lapadat, 2017). Collaborators who trust each other begin to see themselves as members of a democratic community and make the shift from individual to collective agency (Lapadat, 2017). Through this collective agency and collaborative auto-ethnographic lens, we found that our experiences as academic mothers not only mirrored those indicated in the literature in relation to Western constructions of women and women's professional identity, but also generated new insights into feminist models of research practice. The latter raises vital questions over how such practices might offer useful disruptions to the conventional ways in which institutions have approached not only gender equity within our own localized academic community but also, potentially, more broadly across the national and global higher education landscape.

Our project, firstly, exposed how professional identity is challenged by often preconceived and gender-biased assumptions about motherhood, career breaks, and female academics more generally. Reintegrating into our work environments after the birth of our children made us question our roles as academics and exposed a lack of collegial and institutional support in securing a sense of belonging in our new roles as academic mothers. While many of us were grateful for and thrived on individual instances of internal compensatory resource support (e.g., career interruption research grants, women's research fellowships, phased return to work schemes), there was also a collective sense that these gains were being continually eroded by negative attitudes toward academic mothers, as well as by performance benchmarks that seemed to operate in opposition to the underlying principles of the institutional gender equity measures designed to support us. This echoes Morris's findings in the UK (2014), which indicate that 33% of academic mothers in Morris' study felt that the attitude of their employers and colleagues negatively impacted their return to work.

Our narratives collectively suggest that these sometimes intangible but deeply systemic impediments play a major role in how effectively we were able to both successfully transition back to work and rebuild a viable sense of professional identity. As demonstrated in other studies, our overriding sense was that the emphasis in "academic mother" was solidly on our parenting status – mother – and that this modified or, more accurately, reduced our professional status – academic. Ruiz and Nicolás (2018) argue that the social structures within which we operate as both mothers and academics have been programmed in such a way that a working woman's identity is predominantly viewed as primary carer first, professional worker second. As a result, many global and Western societies facilitate biases that construct women as less capable than men across varying professional capacities (García-González et al., 2019) and, in Australia, while women are afforded the right and agency to choose to work, this work is constructed as a privilege. Within this construct, women are (supposedly) given the opportunity to function at the same capacity as men but are not expected to continue to have professional aspirations after becoming mothers or taking extended periods of leave (Amato, 2018). Our findings corroborate this research and make explicit the biases and assumptions that construct these expectations, consolidating and extending other studies that illustrate how women working in educational organizations often have to struggle against socialized gender roles that further promote patriarchal working environments (Günçavdi, et al., 2017). As Poduval and Poduval (2009) conclude, female academics begin their careers

with a distinctive disadvantage by virtue of their gender; for those who go on to become academic mothers, this disadvantage is then doubled.

While systemic gender biases and assumptions clearly have a significant bearing on our capacity to successfully re-enter our academic lives, like Poduval and Poduval (2009), our findings also repeatedly return to the more pragmatic barriers which clearly hinder our ability to progress our careers, especially our research careers. This is in line with the findings of several scholars, including Huang et al. (2020) and Prozesky (2008), who highlight significant disparities in experience and career progression between academic mothers and their nonparenting counterparts. These disparities are often shown to relate to family and child career interruptions, resource allocations (Fritsch, 2016; Long, 1992), and access to collaborative networks (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014; Rotchford et al., 1990).

Time, or rather the lack of it, also surfaces again and again in our narratives – there is never enough of it and the struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance is under constant pressure. Socialized gender roles arguably play a part in this dynamic too. Research suggests that women are expected to be far more economically involved with the raising of their families than in past generations, but that care continues to be associated as a feminine practice (Lewis, 2001; McKie et al., 2002; Rake, 2001). More than that, Conley and Carey (2013) demonstrate that academic mothers are expected to attain personal and professional heights of perfection as they juggle their home and academic lives, leading to high workload demands both at home and at work (Hampson, 2018). According to Quirke (2006) and Warner (2012), as more women take on increasingly challenging academic careers, they are simultaneously expected to expend unprecedented amounts of time, money, and emotional energy on raising a family (Evans et al., 2008; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). This creates a negative spiral, whereby it is often assumed that women will prioritize their time around family responsibilities and are thus denied career opportunities (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Conversely, in order for some academic mothers to meet these expectations, they choose to lower their career aspirations (Baker, 2012).

While our research focuses on the past and immediate experiences of mid-career academic mothers, rather than those at the higher end of the academic scale, it also potentially adds context and explication to studies that have identified the diminishing proportion of women moving up the educational and professional hierarchy (European Commission, 2012). This "leaking pipeline," as it has been termed, appears to have global resonance, emerging across the boundaries of geographical place, as well as social and cultural background (Thanacoody et al., 2006). Despite a global rise in anti-discrimination policies and advocacy for gender equality since the 1980s (Ozdowski, 2003), the ascension of women to the upper ranks of academia is a slow movement (Samble, 2008). Female academics still have less advancement opportunities than their male counterparts, as well as lower wages and increased teaching and service loads (Kjeldal, et al., 2005).

Preliminary analyses of the impact of COVID-19 on gender equity in higher education reveal that many of the pre-pandemic pressure points and challenges for academic mothers were significantly amplified, especially during the initial height of the crisis, and that academic women more generally "will likely bear a greater burden of this pandemic" (Malisch et al., 2020). The rapid transition to online learning, coupled with school shutdowns, created a double shift for many women whereby academic, and family responsibilities increased and had to be met simultaneously. As teaching and service loads increased exponentially alongside our caring roles, it was very much the research elements of our careers that suffered. As illustrated by Pereira (2021), this has also been the core focus of analyses so far on the impacts of the crisis on women academics. Our narratives bolster these collective findings but when we look across and through the longitudinal results, they also expose the ways in which our pre-COVID lives had been built on unsustainable platforms to begin with.

Privileged as we are at an institution with a global reputation for advances in gender equity – both at the level of research, and policy and practice – our post-maternity narratives arguably tell a much less advantaged story, one that is colored by cultural and attitudinal behaviors engendered by the neoliberal fabric of academia. Our focus on changing senses of identity seemed to highlight our resistance to these behaviors and our ability to imagine and forge alternative academic selves that, ultimately, attempted to move away from narrow definitions of the ideal academic worker (ones we had admittedly complied with earlier in our pre-motherhood careers) and toward a more holistic conception of ourselves as academic mothers. At the same time, this resistance appeared to be continually undercut both by external factors and an internalized value system that repeatedly sets unrealizable benchmarks of achievement

and posits our maternal (re)productivity as the sole barrier to our academic productivity. Similar to other recent studies, our temporally intertwined and collectively interspersed narratives suggest that both during the pandemic and before it, it was possibly less our housework and our children that hindered our career progression, and more (or at least equally) what Pereira (2021) terms the "normalization of intense and constant work" within academia. This begs the question of how far existing – and what Malisch et al. call "box-checking" – compensatory gender equity actions and strategies are geared toward supporting us as academic mothers, or simply restoring us to the preferred neoliberal model of the ideal academic worker. Certainly, our narratives suggest that during COVID-19, it was the latter that was relied upon to get institutions through the heights of the crisis, but our paper questions the cost of this reliance to the physical, emotional and intellectual well-being of those workers, as well as to gender equity.

5 | CONCLUSION

Malisch et al. (2020) and Pereira (2021) suggest that if COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated gender inequity within higher education, then it has also provided an opening for deep and systemic change in "how the academy thinks about gender equity" (Malisch et al., 2020), as well as how we might move beyond the neoliberal "pre-pandemic status quo" (Pereira, 2021). Our paper has attempted to give voice to our experiences as a mode of knowledge making that might assist in thinking differently post-pandemic. It has attempted to perform alternative models of academic productivity that shift us away from individualized and marketized norms of working to instead encourage, practices of collegiality and solidarity based on a feminist ethics of care and collaboration. This paper thus finally asks how such practices might serve as a broader model both for rethinking what it means to be productive as an academic, as well as building a more sustainable and resilient foundation upon which to forge our future gender equity strategies.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data are not publicly available due the sensitive nature of the complete original narratives which restricts public access.

ORCID
Dorothea Bowyer https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3613-7351

REFERENCES
Acker, S., & Armenti, C. (2004). Sleepless in academia. *Gender and Education, 16*(1), 3–24.
Acker, S., & Wagner, A. (2017). Feminist scholars working around the Neoliberal University. *Gender and Education, 31*(1), 62–81.
Allison, J. (2007). Composing a Life in 21C academe: Reflections on a mother's challenge. *NWSA Journal, 19*(3), 23–46.
Alon, T. M., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., & Tertilt, M. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality (No. w26947).* National Bureau of Economic Research.
Amato, V. (2018). The social construction of a possible male gender bias is negatively impacting fathers in child welfare services: Hammering a square peg into a round hole. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 28*(4), 466–474.
Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Dias, M. C., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., & Sevilla, A. (2020). *How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?* Institute for Fiscal Studies.
Baker, M. (2012). Gendered families, academic work and the "motherhood penalty". *Women's Studies Journal, 26*(1).
Blundell, R., Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R., & Xu, X. (2020). COVID-19 and inequalities. *Fiscal Studies, 41*, 291–319. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5890.12232

Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: Reflecting on the research process. *Qualitative Report*, *19*(33), 1–9.

Breeze, M., & Taylor, Y. (2020). Feminist collaboration in higher education: Stretched across career stages. *Gender and Education*, *32*(3), 412–428.

Brooks, S. D., Dean, A. S., Franklin-Phipps, A., Mathis, E., Rath, C. L., Raza, N., Smithers, L. E., & Sundstrom, K. (2017). Becoming-academic in the neoliberal academy: A collective biography. *Gender and Education*, *32*(3), 281–300.

Castenada, M., & Isgro, K. (2013). *Mothers in academia*. Columbia UP.

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K. C. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Left Coast Press.

Clift, B., Hatchard, J., & Gore, J. (2018, July). How do we belong? Researcher positionality within qualitative inquiry: Proceedings of 4th annual qualitative research symposium. In *South west qualitative research symposium: Fourth annual event*. University of Bath, Bath, England.

Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought. Knowledge, thought, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Conley, C. S., & Carey, D. C. (2013). Academic mothers on leave (but on the clock), on the line (and off the record): Toward improving parental-leave policies and practices. In K. L. Isgro & M. Castaneda (Eds.), *Mothers in academia* (pp. 141–148). Columbia University Press.

Custer, D. (2014). Auto/ethnography as a transformative research method. *Qualitative Report*, *19*(21), 1–13. http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/custer21.pdf

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 1–25). Sage.

Dickson, M. (2018, November). The joys and challenges of academic motherhood, *Women's Studies International Forum*, *71*, 76–84.

Dune, T., & Mapedzahama, V. (2017). Culture clash: Shona (Zimbabwean) migrant women's experiences with communicating about sexual health and wellbeing across cultures and generations. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, *21*(1), 18–29.

Dune, T. M. (2014). Conceptualizing sex with cerebral palsy: A phenomenological exploration of private constructions of sexuality using sexual script theory. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies*, *2*, 20.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 733–768). Sage.

European Commission. (2012). *Meta-analysis of gender and science research: Synthesis report*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Evans, E., Grant, C., & Peskowitz, M. (2008). *Mama, PhD: Women write about motherhood and academic life*. Rutgers University Press.

Fisher, V., & Kinsey, S. (2014). Behind closed doors! Homosocial desire and the academic boys club. *Gender in Management*, *29*(1), 44–64. https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-10-2012-0080

Fothergill, A., & Keltey, K. (2003). "I've worked very hard and slept very little": Mothers on the tenure track in academia. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, *5*(2), 7–19.

Fritsch, N. S. (2016). Patterns of career development and their role in the advancement of female faculty at Austrian Universities: New roads to success? *Higher Education*, *72*(5), 619–635.

Gannon, S., Kligyte, G., McLean, J., Perrier, M., Swan, E., Vanni, I., & van Rijswijk, H. (2015). Uneven relationalities, collective biography, and sisterly affect in neoliberal universities. *Feminist Formations*, *27*(3), 189–216.

García-González, J., Forcén, P., & Jimenez-Sanchez, M. (2019). Men and women differ in their perception of gender bias in research institutions. *PloS One*, *14*(12), e0225763.

Gouws, A., & Moodley, K. (2020, August 7). How women in academia are feeling the brunt of COVID-19. https://theconversation.com/how-women-in-academia-are-feeling-the-brunt-of-covid-19-144087

Guarino, C. M., & Borden, V. M. (2017). Faculty service loads and gender: Are women taking care of the academic family? *Research in Higher Education*, *58*(6), 672–694.

Günçavdi, G., Göktürk, S., & Bozoglu, O. (2017). An insight into the challenges faced by academic women with pre-school age children in academic life. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *5*(6), 953–959.

Guterres, A. (2020, April 2). The Impact of Covid-19 on women. Video statement released by UN General-Secretary, Antonio Guterres: https://unwomen.org.au/put-women-and-girls-at-the-centre-of-efforts-to-recover-from-covid-19-statement-by-the-un-secretary-general-antonio-guterres/

Guy, B., & Arthur, B. (2020). Academic motherhood during COVID-19: Navigating our dual roles as educators and mothers. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *27*(5), 887–899.

Hampson, S. C. (2018). Mothers do not make good workers: The role of work/life balance policies in reinforcing gendered stereotypes. *Global Discourse*, *8*(3), 510–531.

Hand, K., Baxter, J., Carroll, M., & Budinski, M. (2020). *Families in Australia survey: Life during COVID-19*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Handforth, R., & Taylor, C. A. (2016). Doing academic writing differently: A feminist bricolage. *Gender and Education*, *28*(5), 627–643.

Heggeness, M. (2020). *Why is mommy so stressed? Estimating the immediate impact of the COVID-19 shock on parental attachment to the labor market and the double bind of mothers*. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis Institute working paper no. 33. https://www.minneapolisfed.org/institute/working-papers-institute/iwp33.pdf

Heilman, M. E., & Okimoto, T. G. (2008). Motherhood: A potential source of bias in employment decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *93*(1), 189–198.

Hermann, A. M., & Neale-McFall, C. (2020). COVID-19, academic mothers, and opportunities for the academy: The pandemic's toll on women faculty caregivers. https://www.aaup.org/article/covid-19-academic-mothers-and-opportunities-academy?link_id=15&can_id=bd7618762993cd3381e3f5424dddd52d&source=email-the-covid-19-crisis-2&email_referrer=email_967969&email_subject=the-covid-19-crisis#.YUSUrofivIW

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.). (2011). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis*. SAGE publications.

Hirsch, T., & Kayam, O. (2020). Academic mothers' definitions of bilingualism, bilinguality, and family language policies. *Psychology of Language and Communication*, *24*(1), 22–43.

Hockey, J., Meah, A., & Robinson, V. (2007). Mundane heterosexualities. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Huang, J., Gates, A. J., Sinatra, R., & Barabási, A. L. (2020). Historical comparison of gender inequality in scientific careers across countries and disciplines. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(9), 4609–4616.

Jacobsen, M. (2020). *Thriving in academia and maintaining a work-life balance: Being a mom on the tenure track*. Retrieved September 2020 from https://csse-scee.ca/blog/thriving-in-academia-and-maintaining-a-work-life-balance-being-a-mom-on-the-tenure-track/

Kitchener, C. (2020). *Women academics seem to be submitting fewer papers during coronavirus. "Never seen anything like it," says one editor*. The Lily.

Kjeldal, S. E., Rindfleish, J., & Sheridan, A. (2005). Deal-making and rule-breaking: Behind the façade of equity in academia. *Gender and Education*, *17*(4), 431–447.

Kolsaker, A. (2008). Academic professionalism in the managerialist era: A study of English universities. *Studies in Higher Education*, *33*(5), 513–525.

Ladge, J. J., & Greenberg, D. N. (2015). Becoming a working mother: Managing identity and efficacy uncertainties during resocialization. *Human Resource Management*, *54*(6), 977–998.

Lapadat, J. C. (2017). Ethics in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry, 23*(8), 589–603.

Lewis, J. (2001). The decline of the male breadwinner model: Implications for work and care. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *8*(2), 152–169.

Liamputtong, P. (2012). Researching vulnerable groups. In S. Becker, A. Bryman, & H. Ferguson (Eds.), *Understanding research for social policy and social work: Themes, methods and approaches* (pp. 73–79). Policy Press.

Long, J. S. (1992). Measures of sex differences in scientific productivity. *Social Forces*, *70*(5), 159–178.

Louis, K. S., & Barton, A. C. (2002). Tales from the science education crypt: A critical reflection of positionality, subjectivity, and reflexivity in research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *3*(3).

Lust, M., Huber, C., & Junne, J. (2019). Academic identity as a discursive resource for resistance: The case of quality management in German higher education institutions. *Higher Education Policy*, *32*(1), 49–69.

Malisch, J. L., Harris, B. N., Sherrer, S. M., Lewis, K. A., Shepherd, S. L., McCarthy, P. C., Spott, J. L., Karam, E. P., Moustaid-Moussa, N., Calarco, J. M., Ramalingam, L., Talley, A. E., Cañas-Carrell, J. E., Ardon-Dryer, K., Weiser, D. A., Bernal, X. E., & Deitloff, J. (2020). Opinion: In the wake of COVID-19, academia needs new solutions to ensure gender equity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(27), 15378–15381.

Maranto, C. L., & Griffin, A. E. (2011). The antecedents of a "chilly climate" for women faculty in higher education. *Human Relations*, *64*(2), 139–159.

Mason, M. A. (2011). The pyramid problem. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. http://chronicle.com/article/The-Pyramid-Problem/126614

McKie, L., Gregory, S., & Bowlby, S. (2002). Shadow times: The temporal and spatial frameworks and experiences of caring and working. *Sociology*, *36*(4), 897–924.

McRobbie, A. (1982). The politics of feminist research: Between talk, text and action. *Feminist Review*, *12*, 46–57.

Méndez, M. (2013). Autoethnography as a research method: Advantages, limitations and criticisms. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, *15*(2), 279–287.

Mirick, R. G., & Wladkowski, S. P. (2018). Pregnancy, motherhood, and academic career goals: Doctoral students' perspectives. *Affilia*, *33*(2), 253–269.

Monroe, K. R., & Chiu, W. (2015). Gender equality and the pipeline problem in academia. In *Science, ethics, and politics: Conversations and investigations* (pp. 232–252). Routledge.

Morris, L. (2014). *The experiences of women returning to work after maternity leave in the UK: A summary of survey results*.

Naderifar, M., Goli, H., & Ghaljaie, F. (2017). Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education*, *14*(3), 1–6.

Nagoshi, J. L., Brzuzy, S. I., & Terrell, H. K. (2012). Deconstructing the complex perceptions of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation among transgender individuals. *Feminism & Psychology*, *22*(4), 405–422.

Nash, K. (2019). Neo-liberalisation, universities and the values of bureaucracy. *The Sociological Review*, *67*(1), 178–193.

Ollilainen, M. (2020). Ideal bodies at work: Faculty mothers and pregnancy in academia. *Gender and Education*, *32*(7), 961–976.

Ozdowski, S. (2003). Don't judge what I can do by what you think I can't: Ten years of achievements using Australia's Disability Discrimination Act. *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission*.

Pereira, M. (2021). Researching Gender inequalities in academic labour during the COVID-19 pandemic: Avoiding common problems and asking different questions. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *28*(S2), 498–509. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.uws.edu.au/10.1111/gwao.12618

Poduval, J., & Poduval, M. (2009). Working mothers: How much working, how much mothers, and where is the womanhood? *Mens Sana Monographs*, *7*(1), 63.

Powell, K. (2013). Breaking the glass ceiling while being a mother: Parenting, teaching, research, and administration. In K. Isgro & M. Castenada (Eds.), *Mothers in academia* (pp. 46–56). Columbia UP.

Prozesky, H. (2008). A career-history analysis of gender differences in publication productivity among South African academics. *Science and Technology Studies*, *21*, 47–67.

Quirke, L. (2006). "Keeping young minds sharp": Children's cognitive stimulation and the rise of parenting magazines, 1959–2003. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, *43*(4), 387–406.

Rake, K. (2001). Gender and new labour's social policies. *Journal of Social Policy*, *30*(2), 209–231.

Rapid Research Information Forum. (2020). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the STEM workforce*.

Rapp, A. (2018). Autoethnography in human-computer interaction: Theory and practice. In *New directions in third wave human-computer interaction: Volume 2-methodologies* (pp. 25–42). Springer.

Richards, R. (2008). Writing the othered self: Autoethnography and the problem of objectification in writing about illness and disability. *Qualitative Health Research*, *18*(12), 1717–1728.

Ross, J. (2020, May 1). Pandemic "risks reversing" Australia's research gender equity gains. Retrieved from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/pandemic-risks-reversing-australias-research-gender-equity-gains

Rotchford, A. M., McNamee, S. J., & Willis, C. L. (1990). Gender differences in patterns of publication in leading sociology journals, 1960–1985. *The American Sociologist*, *21*(2), 99–115.

Ruiz, I. J., & Nicolás, M. M. (2018). The family caregiver: The naturalized sense of obligation in women to be caregivers. *Enfermería Global*, *17*(49), 434–447.

Samble, J. N. (2008). Female faculty: Challenges and choices in the United States and beyond. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2008*(143), 55–62.

Santiago, R., Carvalho, T., & Vabø, A. (2012). Personal characteristics, career trajectories and sense of identity among male and female academics in Norway and Portugal. In *Effects of higher education reforms: Change dynamics* (pp. 279–303). Brill Sense.

Santos, G. G., & Cabral-Cardoso, C. (2008). Work–family culture in academia: A gendered view of work–family conflict and coping strategies. *Gender in Management: International Journal*, *23*(6), 442–457.

Savigny, H. (2014). Women, know your limits: Cultural sexism in academia. *Gender and Education*, *26*(7), 794–809.

Sell-Smith, J. A., & Lax, W. (2013). A journey of pregnancy loss: From positivism to autoethnography. *Qualitative Report*, *18*(92), 1–17.

Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group. (2017). The burden of invisible work in academia: Social inequalities and time use in five university departments. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, *39*, 228–245.

Tang, S. Y. F. (2011). Teachers' professional identity, educational change and neo-liberal pressures on education in Hong Kong. *Teacher Development: An International Journal of Teachers' Professional Development*, *15*(3), 363–380.

Thanacoody, P. R., Bartram, T., Barker, M., & Jacobs, K. (2006). Career progression among female academics. *Women in Management Review*, *21*(7).

Toffoletti, K., & Starr, K. (2016). Women academics and work–life balance: Gendered discourses of work and care. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *23*(5), 489–504.

Van Anders, S. M. (2004). Why the academic pipeline leaks: Fewer men than women perceive barriers to becoming professors. *Sex Roles*, *51*(9–10), 511–521.

Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2004). Academic motherhood: Managing complex roles in research universities. *The Review of Higher Education*, *27*(2), 233–257.

Warner, J. (2012). Is too much mothering bad for you? *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *88*(4), 48.

Wiles, F. (2013). "Not easily put into a box": Constructing professional identity. *Social Work Education*, *32*(7), 854–866.

Winter, R. (2009). Academic manager or managed academic? Academic identity schisms in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *31*(2), 121–131.

Woodward, I. (2007). *Understanding material culture*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

World Health Organization. (2020). *Report of the WHO-China joint mission on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)*.

Ysseldyk, R., Greenaway, K. H., Hassinger, E., Zutrauen, S., Lintz, J., Bhatia, M. P., Fyre, M., Starkenburg, E., & Tai, V. (2019). A leak in the academic pipeline: Identity and health among postdoctoral women. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, 1297.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dorothea Bowyer is a lecturer at Western Sydney University (WSU) School of Business, since 2004 and is passionate about integrating teaching and research in a "modern" classroom. Her research is threefold and focuses on (a) gender equity in higher education, (b) public sector infrastructure management, stakeholder accountability & economic growth, and (c) graduate employability. Dorothea is the WSU Engaged Parent Network chair and a member of her School's Equity and Diversity Working Party. She was a recipient and involved in multiple Gender Equity Funded projects: "Returning to Work after Parental Leave: An Appreciative Inquiry" and "The Impact of Parenting on Careers." The latter project involves exploring and reviewing gender equality policies across the tertiary and corporate sector. She has extended her work to focus on investigating gender equity policies for student-parents in Australia and the availability and delivery of innovative flexible childcare minding options in the higher education sector to reflect the needs of working parents in a post-Covid environment.

Anne Jamison is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at Western Sydney University, and Deputy Director of the Writing and Society Research Center. Anne's core research focus is on nineteenth-century Irish literature, and she is currently working on a project to explore the gendered politics of Irish women's writing for children. Her interests in gender equity stem from both her critical work and pro-active participation in Western's formal initiatives to advance gender equity at the University.

Milissa Deitz is a Senior Lecturer in digital media and creative writing at Western Sydney University. She is a novelist and former journalist. Milissa's book *Watch This Space: The Future of Australian Journalism* (2010) was published by Cambridge University Press. Her novel *Bloodlust* and non-fiction title *My Life As A Side Effect* are both published by Random House. Her scholarly interests include grief, identity, and family; voice and the marginalized within digital storytelling; and young people, well-being and technology (www.invisiblecity.org.au). Milissa's current research is focused on Australian children and young people in foster-care: she is working on an app to support belonging and identity.

Chloe E Taylor is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Science and Health at Western Sydney University, and the Director of Academic Program for Sport and Exercise Science. Her primary research focus is the autonomic nervous system, and she is currently working on projects exploring sex differences in the autonomic control of blood pressure. Her interests in gender equity include career development for women, the experiences of academic mothers, and women in leadership. She contributes to gender equity and diversity initiatives and strategies through her role as Deputy Academic Lead for SAGE at Western Sydney University.

Tinashe Dune is a multi-award-winning academic in the areas of health sociology and public health. Her research, teaching and practice (clinical psychology) focus on the experiences of marginalized populations. This includes the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse people, those living with disability, aging populations, LG-BTIQ-identifying people, and Indigenous populations. Dr Dune is an expert in qualitative research methods and sexual and reproductive health. She also utilizes innovative mixed-methods approaches and interdisciplinary perspectives to support multidimensional understandings of the lived experience, health outcomes and ways to improve wellbeing.

Erika Gyengesi is a Senior Lecturer in Neuropharmacology at the School of Medicine at Western Sydney University. While Erika is a neuroscientist and her research focus is on the effects of chronic neuroinflammation leading to dementia during aging and neurodegenerative diseases, she is also a mother of three children under the age of

6. Being an academic mother sparked her interest in joining the University's initiatives to advance gender equity and to contribute by sharing her experience of balancing motherhood and her academic career.

Anita Ogbeide is an emerging public health scholar with interest and expertize in research with marginalized and racially/ethnically diverse populations. Her most recent publication is "Aging Indigenous Australians" in Aging Across Cultures: Growing Old in Non-Western Cultures to be published by Springer nature in November 2021.

Jaime Ross is a final year Bachelor of Arts student at Western Sydney University. She is mother to two young children and co-founded the WSU Student Parent Union. She began work on this project as a summer scholarship student, sparking a passion for the pursuit of improving gender equity within the university. As a result, she spearheaded the effort to introduce a Gender Studies submajor at WSU and is a student representative on the WSU Vice Chancellor's Gender Equity Committee.

Hollie Hammond is an Honors student currently completing her thesis on the experiences of precariously employed mothers in higher education. Hollie has been involved in interdisciplinary research exploring gender equity within institutions, focusing mainly on academic and student mothers, and she hopes to continue along this vein throughout a PhD. More recently, she has begun work on a project exploring menstrual equity through an evaluation of policy and practice in both public and private sectors. Hollie is a co-founder and President of the Student Parent Union, as well as a member of the Vice Chancellor's Gender Equity Committee, and an active participant in a range of equity and diversity initiatives.

APPENDIX 1: PRE- AND POST-CAREER BREAK DATA COLLECTION DOCUMENT

Professional identity paper

For our DATA COLLECTION, we will have to do the following:

STEP 1: Present the evidence in a tabulated manner. Reflect and write in a non-academic manner about "what it is and what it takes to rebuild Professional Identity" post career break.

STEP 2: Create one narrative per person (written in a descriptive – or if you prefer emotive – format, rather than an academic format) that answers.

(1)   What do we see as professional identity? Post career break what motivated us to go back to work, and

(2)   What ENVIRONMENTAL (these could be institutional, professional, or any other type of environmental influence) factors supported AND hindered our come back to work, and

(3)   What PERSONAL (these could be personal beliefs, abilities, or any other intrinsic factor) factors supported AND hindered the rebuild of professional identity.

Whilst there is no specific amount that each of us should write, the descriptions MUST be sufficiently detailed that we are able to conduct a data analysis that looks for similarities and differences in our stories. The intention here is to set-up a background story that grounds our activities and views on professional identity in the wider higher education environment with Q1, and then to evaluate what personal as well as environmental factors that support or hindered our success in rebuilding our professional identity (Q2 and Q3).

Guiding question 1

(1) What do you see as professional identity at work

    (a). pre and post career break
    (b). Has it changed
    (c). If so why? Triggers?
    (d). What motivated us to go back to work post career break

What is professional identity (please provide a 1–2 sentences definition)

Perception of your own professional identity BEFORE career break	Perception of your professional identity POST career break

Guiding questions 2 and 3

(2) What are the "elements/key success factors" (both personal and environmental) that are important to help REBUILD professional identity post career break (provide examples)

Environmental factors (such as institutional, professional, or any other type of environmental influence) that supported AND hindered our come back to work	**Personal factors** (beliefs, abilities, or any other intrinsic factors) that supported AND hindered the rebuild of professional identity post career break

---

APPENDIX 2: PRE- AND POST-COVID DATA COLLECTION DOCUMENT

Professional identity paper

For our DATA COLLECTION, we will have to do the following:

  STEP 1: Present the evidence in a tabulated manner. Reflect and write in a non-academic manner about 'what it is and what it takes to rebuild Professional Identity' post career break.

  STEP 2: Create one narrative per person (written in a descriptive – or if you prefer emotive – format, rather than an academic format) that answers.

(1) What do we see as professional identity? Post career break what motivated us to go back to work, and

(2) What ENVIRONMENTAL (these could be institutional, professional, or any other type of environmental influence) factors supported AND hindered our come back to work, and

(3) What PERSONAL (these could be personal beliefs, abilities, or any other intrinsic factor) factors supported AND hindered the rebuild of professional identity.

Whilst there is no specific amount that each of us should write, the descriptions MUST be sufficiently detailed that we are able to conduct a data analysis that looks for similarities and differences in our stories. The intention here is to set-up a background story that grounds our activities and views on professional identity in the wider higher education environment with Q1, and then to evaluate what personal as well as environmental factors that support or hindered our success in rebuilding our professional identity (Q2 and Q3).

Guiding question 1

(1) What do you see as professional identity at work?

  (a). Before and after COVID-19 restrictions
  (b). How has it changed?
  (c). What were the key triggers?
  (d). What motivates us to continue working under the conditions we are currently doing so?

What is professional identity (please provide a 1–2 sentences definition)

Perception of your own professional identity immediately BEFORE COVID-19	Perception of your professional identity DURING COVID-19

Guiding questions 2 and 3

(2) What are the "elements/key success factors" (both personal and environmental) that are important to help RE/DEFINE your professional identity DURING COVID-19 (provide examples)

Environmental factors (such as institutional, professional, or any other type of environmental influence) that supported your ability to continue to work	**Personal factors** (beliefs, abilities, or any other intrinsic factors) that supported AND hindered the redefinition of professional identity during COVID-19

APPENDIX 3: POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS FOR CONTRIBUTING ACADEMIC MOTHERS

Author	Positionality statement
AJ	I am a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at Western in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts; I am also the Deputy Director of the Writing and Society Research Center. I completed my PhD in 2004 in Ireland and held several postdoctoral research fellowships before securing an ongoing position as Lecturer in Irish Literature in 2007. My son (Rubin, 12 years) was born in 2008, and I took 9 months maternity leave. By 2009, I had taken on a significant research governance role – Research Director for the English Literature Group – and my middle daughter (Maggie-Rose, 10 years) came along in 2010. I had planned on taking 9 months maternity leave, but I extended this to 12 months after she was born. She was born with a major heart condition – ventricular septal defect – and I extended my leave to help our family cope with the intensive hospital visits we had to make in order to monitor her condition, as well as the general emotional fallout we all suffered when she was diagnosed. Fortunately, she has not suffered any major repercussions from her condition and no longer requires any specialized medical care. We relocated to Australia in 2013, and I was initially appointed at Western as Lecturer in Literary Studies. Our youngest daughter (Reem, 5 years) was born in Australia in 2015, and I took 6 months maternity leave. In 2018, I took up the Deputy Director role, which is a fairly major research governance position with a 20% workload allocation.
	With regard to my personal and cultural circumstances, I am a 42-year-old, married heterosexual woman. I am an Iraqi-Irish Muslim born in the UK; my mother tongue is English, and I know a handful of Arabic words and phrases. Neither of my parents studied at university and my mother did not finish high school; both my parents were either first (my father) or second (my mother) generation migrants. While my father came from a professional and educated family in Iraq, my mother's family came from the laboring rural classes in Ireland. Both of them worked in the manual labor sector, and I grew up in largely white working-class social housing communities in the South East of England. I have lived, worked, and/or studied in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and, now, Australia.
MD	I am a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Western Sydney University in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts. After working as a journalist for 15 years, I completed my PhD at the University of Sydney in 2006 and started at WSU in 2009.
	I am a 49-year-old heterosexual woman and have been with my partner for nearly 20 years. I was born in Australian to Australian parents. After some years of unsuccessful IVF, my partner and I became permanent foster carers to a 6-month-old baby boy in 2012. Permanent foster-care is similar to adoption insofar as we are considered his parents and guardians, but there are also four court-ordered visits with birth family each year. I took 10 months' parental leave with my son. In 2013, when he was 21 months old, we were joined by his biological sister who also arrived as a 6-month-old. This meant I had only been back at work for 5 months when I went on parental leave again, this time taking 5 months.

(Continues)

Author	Positionality statement
	When our daughter was 14 months old, she died suddenly and very unexpectedly in an accident at her childcare. I took 3 months' bereavement leave, and upon my return took on a significant governance position with a 20% workload allocation for financial and mental health reasons. I did not feel capable of taking on the level of research work I had been doing before I had children. I continued in that role for 3 years while again slowly building up my research presence.
TD	I am a Black African woman, born in Zimbabwe, raised in Canada and also an Australian citizen. I am a Senior Lecturer in Interprofessional Health Sciences at Western Sydney University and have been an academic since 2012. I began as a Lecturer at WSU in 2013 and was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2017. I have taken 14 months of maternity and other child-related leave. I am 36 years old, and I have lived and traveled around the world and would likely be in an upper middle class socioeconomic range. However, the racialized color of my skin automatically reduces my social capital especially in environments governed and structured by Whiteness – like academia. This reality imbues all element of my existence in Western (and global) contexts. One such environment is the University environment where particular characteristics of Whiteness are valued and perpetuated. These include masculinity, individuality, competition, and supremacy. I am a Black Afro-Canadian-Australian woman who is married to an Aboriginal Australian and with two children (6 & 2 years old) and a stepson (17 years old). These intersectionalities mean my experience of working within frameworks of Whiteness is challenging as I am a mother and wife at home but also primary breadwinner.
	I am the middle child of my parents – three children. All members of my immediate family and the majority of my extended family have at least one tertiary degree. My siblings and I have four tertiary degrees each and regularly engage in professional development and continuing education. This was a core element of my upbringing as education was perceived to be the greatest equalizer for my parents and their families. As such, I have two PhDs, a masters degree and a bachelors degree with honors. Education and academic achievement are core to my identity and my sense of value in my family and community. I am also a clinical psychology registrar and own my own psychology practice which I started in August 2020. My practice is focused on providing mental health services to minority identifying people and providing cultural competence and safety training to health professionals in Australia and internationally.
	My life's work therefore focuses on confronting, deconstructing, and reducing the impact of Whiteness on all people (especially those minority background) intertwine my experience and perceptions of professional identity and work. Unlike the aforementioned characteristics of Whiteness my work is feminist, communal, participatory, and collaborative. My academic and clinical work is the result of a purposeful and conscious effort to present the existential and phenomenological realities and diversity of life. My deliberate focus on marginalized identities and their health and well-being ensures that I, my family, my children and those who are not like the "others" are given a voice and prioritized across all areas of life.
EG	I am a Senior Lecturer in Neuropharmacology at the School of Medicine at Western. I completed my PhD in 2007 in Hungary and followed by two postdoctoral research positions, one at Yale University (New Haven, CT, USA) for 2 years, then another at NeuRA, in Sydney for an additional 2 years before securing an ongoing position as an Associate Lecturer in 2012 with the group of Pharmacology. After I got promoted to Lecturer in 2015, my son (Mirko, 4.5 years) was born in 2016, and I took 12 months maternity leave. When I went back to work from this maternity leave, I was already pregnant with my daughter (Liliana, 3 years), and I only worked 6 months while using the Phased Return to Work option. After Lili was born in October 2017, I took another 12 months of maternity leave and returned on Phased Return in October 2018. I got promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2020 January. I have just started my third maternity leave last week, and I am taking only 9 months off this time.
	During my first two maternity leaves, I was lucky enough that my School was able to provide a replacement fulltime, who helped me with my graduate student supervision, teaching, and kept my research going. Because my leaves were so close to each other, and I had some grant money for salary available (provided by Western Research Development grants), I was able to keep that person on a part time contract for 6 months, while I was also back to work and he took over as a replacement for my position for the second maternity leave. Due to COVID-19 financial restrictions in 2020, I am not getting a replacement during this current maternity leave, hence I had to drop my primary supervision of my three full time PhD students and nominate someone else from their panel to take over for the next 9 months of their candidacy.

Author	Positionality statement
	With regard to my personal and cultural circumstances, I am a 40-year-old, married heterosexual woman. I am Hungarian, born in Hungary; my mother tongue is Hungarian. My husband is Croatian Australian, so we speak a mix of language at home. Neither of my parents studied at university, and my mother did not finish high school when she got pregnant with me. I am the first person in our family to receive a PhD degree and work in academia. My family still lives in Hungary, my husband's family is living close by, but due to his parents age, we cannot rely on them for help with our kids. My parents visited us many times and helped with the kids, however, again due to COVID-19, we are not sure when we are going to see them again.
CT	I am a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science in the School of Health Sciences at Western Sydney University. At the start of 2020, I also took on the role of Director of Academic Program for Sport and Exercise Science, giving up my role of Academic Course Advisor. I am generally used to working in male-dominated environments: our exercise science team at Western Sydney consists of eight academics (six males and two females).
	I am a 33-year old heterosexual Caucasian woman and was born and grew up in the UK. My father studied art at University, and my mother trained and worked as an Occupational Therapist. I feel I had good role models and was always supported and encouraged to work hard and pursue my own interests. I am the oldest of two daughters: my sister works in the fashion industry. I studied Sport Science at Liverpool John Moores University (UK), where I also did my PhD, completing in 2011. Whilst writing my thesis, I became aware of the UWS recruitment drive and applied for a position in exercise science, starting in July 2011. I had also met a professor who worked at UWS and was keen to join his lab, so it was the pursuit of a research-active career that encouraged me to make the move to Australia. I did so when my then boyfriend, now husband of 5 years.
	I was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 2014, had my daughter in 2016, and my son in 2018. Both times I took 5–6 months maternity leave. I am the primary income earner in our household. Since our daughter was born, my husband, who works in a supermarket, went part time. Although my husband is part time, I would gauge our parenting input as roughly equal, despite my full time position. We do not have family in this country, but our children attend the campus childcare facility 2 days a week.
DB	I am a Lecturer in the Accounting discipline in the School of Business at Western Sydney University. I completed my PhD in 2009 and have been an academic since 2004. I am the chair of the WSU Engaged Parent Network and a member of the School of Business Equity and Diversity Working Party. My passion for research and being in academia is threefold and focuses on (a) gender equity in higher education, (b) infrastructure management, stakeholder accountability & economic growth, and (c) graduate employability. I became a mother toward the end of my PhD completion and have embraced the real life juggle of having three children and a career ever since. I have taken three extended maternity leaves of 11, 18, and 22 months. I have family overseas (Europe), and the extended maternity leave enabled us to spend quality time overseas. Memorable moments that we like to reflect on in particular as due to COVID-19 we are not sure when we can visit again. During my maternity leave, I was still involved in PhD supervision and other academic projects as I never perceived myself as a stay-home mom, rather saw myself as a better parent when keeping in loop with a professional environment.
	With regard to my personal and cultural background, I am a 40-year-old, married heterosexual women. I am German/Australian, born in Poland. I had an international upbringing living in various countries (France, Iraq, the Middle East, Poland, the USA, Australia, and Germany). I speak German, Polish, English, and French fluently. My husband is Australian and as he does not speak any other languages besides English we speak English at home. My immediate family (parents and sister) all went to university (postgraduate qualification), and I am the first in the family having been awarded a PhD. My husband works also full-time and with majority of our family overseas we have to rely on each other to balance work-life-parenthood.

Abbreviations: AJ, Anne Jamison; CT, Chloe E. Taylor; DB, Dorothea Bowyer; EG, Erika Gyengesi; MD, Milissa Deitz; TD, Tinashe Dune.