Impact of COVID-19 on academic mothers

As daily life grinds to a halt worldwide in response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, professionals are adjusting to a new reality of remote working. For many researchers, the release from teaching and administrative activities means more time for independent work. In contrast, parents of young children for whom school has been cancelled are facing uniquely challenging responsibilities. Although academic fathers are not immune to the impacts of confinement, it is traditionally women who carry the heaviest load (1, 2).

These women risk suffering yet another motherhood penalty. Instead of writing papers, they are likely to devote time to homeschooling children and doing household chores. For those who have not yet leaked from the pipeline (3) and are struggling to keep their careers on track, these months of heavier duties may increase the distance between them and their male and childless peers.

Gender inequality in science is an urgent issue, and motherhood plays a major role in it (4). Recent years have witnessed the emergence of many initiatives that ignited changes toward addressing this problem [e.g., (5–8)]. We cannot allow this pandemic to reverse advances and further deepen the gender gap in science.

Policies and actions to mitigate the motherhood penalty can benefit all scientists. Deadlines for grant proposals, reports, and renewal requests must be postponed. Funding agencies should consider creating granting programs designed around the reality of academics with families. By instituting more flexible policies, we can make science fairer for everyone affected by the pandemic.

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Support early-career field researchers

Pandemic-induced restrictions on research are now ubiquitous. We urge administrators and policy-makers to recognize that field researchers—especially those early in their careers—face unique challenges, even if restrictions last only a month or two. Bans on travel, hiring, and facility use are forcing many researchers to abandon the entire field season, losing a full year of irreplaceable data and research-training opportunities.

The loss of data is most damaging for multi-year projects, which are common in the case of field research. For example, a lost year in a demographic study renders multiple years of data uninterpretable because data growth and survival between years are required for analysis. Similarly, in any system with lagging effects, the loss of a single season can have multi-year consequences on analyses. For long-term studies, the loss of a single year may seem less damaging, but increasing climate variance means that each season brings new insights.

The impact of lost research is most severe for scientists at early career stages. Institutions and agencies should focus on protecting graduate students and postdocs, as the loss of a year’s data can affect their ability to complete dissertations or acquire jobs. We call on policy-makers and institutions to provide funding opportunities for early-career researchers to recover from such disruptions; support for salary, stipends, and tuition will be most critical. Although scientists conducting field research may be most vulnerable, these funding opportunities would certainly benefit laboratory-based scientists as well.

No one institution or agency has the resources to prevent impacts of lost research on field science or science in general. However, modest targeted funding for the most vulnerable research projects and researchers would help to preserve the quality of research and the pipeline of
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