

# Early, mid-career women experienced higher stress than other academics during pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women who are early and mid-career academic faculty members, according to a recent study by University of Illinois Chicago researchers.

The study aimed to identify personal and professional characteristics to

understand the pandemic's impact on [faculty](#) and, consequently, on policy implications. "Work-Life Balance and Productivity Among Academic Faculty during the COVID-19 Pandemic—A Latent Class Analysis," was recently published in the *Journal of Women's Health*. "The goal of the research was to explore patterns—personal and work characteristics that highlight how the pandemic affected scholarly activity for faculty at different life stages and professional rank," said Dr. Pavitra Kotini-Shah, assistant professor in the UIC College of Medicine and research co-author. "We hoped it would provide some insight for administrators as they are trying to modify policies post-pandemic."

Researchers invited UIC faculty members to participate in the survey, and the results from 497 respondents were calculated for the qualitative analysis. Respondents answered 93 questions about work and home stress, as well as demographic information.

For the work-stress category, respondents were asked to rate their [stress levels](#) for tasks including attending meetings and functions, managing grants, teaching responsibilities, advising, and committee and clinical responsibilities. For the home-stress category, question topics included household responsibilities, [personal care](#) and financial obligations. Demographic questions included age, partner status, children and their ages, professional rank and tenure status, degrees held and their college appointment.

Those surveyed fell into four different analysis classes:

- Class 1: High work and home stress—most likely to be women who are assistant professors without tenure and in their early career; mothers of younger children. This group accounted for 35% of respondents.
- Class 2: High work and home stress—most likely to be women

who are associate professors with tenure; mothers of children under 12. This group accounted for 22% of respondents.

- Class 3: Moderate work stress and low home stress—most likely to be men who are professors with tenure; less likely to have young children. This group accounted for 24% of respondents.
- Class 4: Low work and home stress—most likely men without tenure, visiting or adjunct instructors; less likely to have young children. This group accounted for 19% of the respondents.

The first two categories of faculty who had highest home and work stress also had the most significant change in [work-life balance](#) due to COVID-19.

"The pandemic has not affected faculty equally. Early and mid-career individuals were impacted negatively from increased workloads, stress and decreased self-care," the study states.

"The stress for most faculty comes from conflicting commitments and expectations. It's the work-work stress—shifting between competing priorities of teaching, service, research and clinical work," said Dr. Bernice Man, UIC associate professor of clinical medicine in the College of Medicine and one of the study's leaders.

Respondents in the most stressed groups indicated their scholarly output suffered the most when it came to cutting back in order to manage stress. This reflected what the researchers hypothesized going into the research. Additionally, other research was alluding to a widening gender gap within months of the pandemic's beginning, with a drop in women submitting research papers to scholarly journals, Kotini-Shah said.

The project came about through work the team was doing as part of the Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health, an Institutional K-award funded by the National Institutes of Health to

conduct research on sex and gender in the clinical and other research areas.

"When the pandemic hit, we continued to meet and talk about our personal struggles on the home front and at work, adjusting to schedules and clinical care. The juggling at home and work contributed to [stress](#), but in the end it was the research and writing productivity, which had the least immediate external accountability, that suffered the most," Kotini-Shah said. "That compounded with uncertainty and unprecedented personal risk...those were the factors that led to the creation of this survey hoping to hear what others also experienced."

In their conclusion, the researchers call upon academic leaders to consider the paper's findings and "acknowledge the variable impact of the pandemic on faculty, take these differences into account, and be inclusive of faculty with different experiences when adjusting workplace and promotion policies."

**More information:** Pavitra Kotini-Shah et al, Work–Life Balance and Productivity Among Academic Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Latent Class Analysis, *Journal of Women's Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1089/jwh.2021.0277](https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2021.0277)

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