

The pandemic's disproportionate effect on women in the workforce is impacting academic medicine

March 7 2022, by Ellen Goldbaum



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Like women in every other sector of the economy, those working in academic medicine have been negatively impacted by the exceptional

demands put on them by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a commentary called "Pandemic-related barriers to the success of women in research: A framework for action." It was published last month in *Nature Medicine*.

"During the first year of the pandemic, when schools shut down and went to 100% remote learning, we saw that it affected women disproportionately, having to stay home and teach their children while their research languished," said co-author Anne B. Curtis, MD, Charles and Mary Bauer Professor and Chair of Medicine in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at the University at Buffalo. Pamela B. Davis, MD, dean emerita of the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University, is first author.

The commentary was written by Davis, Curtis and their co-authors, all of whom are members of the Clinical Research Forum's (CRF) Academic Achievement Committee, which was established by the CRF during the pandemic in response to awareness that women in [academic medicine](#) were being more negatively impacted than their male counterparts. The mission of the CRF is to provide leadership to the national clinical and translational research enterprise; it was formed in 1996 to address the "unique and complex challenges to clinical research in academic health centers."

Even prior to the pandemic, the authors note, women in [academic medicine](#) were paid less than men in comparable positions, received lower startup funds for laboratory research and took longer to be promoted.

Gender disparities in research

In addition, they write, women have fewer "conventional markers of achievement" in academia than do men, such as principal investigator

positions on [research grants](#). Women write fewer grant applications than men; they have fewer grant renewals; they get lower funding amounts for initial grants; and are first or last author on fewer papers.

The reasons for these disparities have long been known, said Curtis. The pandemic sharply exacerbated them.

"Society expects women to assume the major portion of the burden for child rearing, and women themselves feel an obligation to put family above their own needs, to the detriment of their own career development," she said. "There still isn't the sharing of responsibilities in two-career families to mitigate these problems."

The paper includes a detailed ["menu" of proposed solutions](#). These include providing [financial support](#) to hire technicians who can continue lab-based research for two to three years while women researchers deal with their child care responsibilities at home, or supporting child care at home so women can continue their lab-based research. Curtis said the Doris Duke Foundation was an early proponent of these solutions, and has provided such grant support to women.

Slowing the tenure clock

The paper also proposes slowing down tenure clocks, delaying the tenure decision by two to three years to make up for lost time while women give birth and care for young children.

In addition to such programs, the list includes a category of solutions termed "cultural," described as creating the cultural expectation that gender equity is a shared responsibility and incorporating those expectations into bonuses and merit raises of institutional leaders. Also included is the need to engage university and hospital boards of trustees to support gender equity.

The goal of the paper, said Curtis, is to highlight the fact that these gender differences persist and that global phenomena like the pandemic only make them worse.

"As much as we would like to think that [gender differences](#) in career development no longer exist, they do, and they adversely affect women more than men," she said. "Understanding these issues and implementing solutions are the best ways to minimize potentially adverse effects on [women's](#) careers."

With the easing of the pandemic and related restrictions, Curtis said, "The situation is improving now that schools are open, but the next [pandemic](#) may only be a mutation away."

More information: Pamela B. Davis et al, Pandemic-related barriers to the success of women in research: a framework for action, *Nature Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41591-022-01692-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-022-01692-8)

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: The pandemic's disproportionate effect on women in the workforce is impacting academic medicine (2022, March 7) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-pandemic-disproportionate-effect-women-workforce.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
