Weaponizing Resilience: Women in the Trenches and Fringes of Pandemic Pedagogy

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Abstract: This study foregrounds the conflicting social pressures that women educators in the United States face in dealing with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in higher education. Narratives from three standpoints interweave to provide three perspectives on pandemic-informed practices that can build resilience as an inclusive rather than simply an individual process. The three points of view are: a mother in a non-tenure track teaching position who juggles caregiving duties; a male department head navigating how to energize allyship within a neoliberal educational system that suppresses acknowledgment and support of caretaking; and interactions among members of the Facebook group Pandemic Pedagogy, a global social media hub for educators adjusting to the pandemic's impact. Collectively, these standpoints constitute a critical autoethnographic multilogue to deconstruct and remediate the systemic gender inequities exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. The three perspectives converge on implementing feminist ethics of care as both a philosophical and practical foundation for constructively cultivating resilience at the personal, community, and institutional levels.

Keywords: COVID-19, Resilience, Compassion fatigue, Higher education, Critical autoethnography, Online communities

1. Introduction

The United States response to the COVID-19 pandemic from government, institutions, and individuals often has modelled "worst practices" rather than exemplars. Amidst COVID-19 politicization and misinformation, a fragmented patchwork of healthcare and public education, dysfunctional family care systems, and the chaos attendant to shifting educational and support services online, women face disproportionately large challenges throughout the pandemic and its subsequent reverberations. Shouldering the majority of family care responsibilities and already disadvantaged in a mostly male-dominated professional environment, women who work in higher education contend with personal and institutional pressures intensified by the pandemic.

Jo Augustus (2021) summarizes dozens of studies documenting how the COVID-19 pandemic increased childcare and household responsibilities for women, widening already problematic gender inequities in higher education. Similar impacts have been observed worldwide, raising concerns about long-term economic consequences to women and to nations (Abdelkafi, Ben Romdhane, & Mefteh, 2022). The pandemic exposes the precarity many women face amidst major social disruptions, and the research productivity of many women suffered in the face of mounting responsibilities outside the workplace (McMillen, 2021).

2. Method

This study foregrounds the conflicting social pressures that women educators and their students in the United States face in dealing with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in higher education. Narratives from three standpoints interweave to provide a multi-dimensional understanding of pandemic resilience. First, a mother in a non-tenure track teaching position discusses juggling caregiving duties. Next, a male department head navigates how to energize allyship within a neoliberal educational system that suppresses acknowledgment and support of caretaking. Finally, discourse in the Facebook group Pandemic Pedagogy, a global social media hub for educators adjusting to the pandemic, demonstrates how online communities can foster resilience. The three perspectives converge on offering feminist ethics of care as a philosophical and practical basis for constructively enacting resilience. We define resilience in performative terms as the behaviours that individuals, groups, or formally organized institutions engage in to cope with adversity or disruption and its consequences.

The conditions of the global pandemic amplify the need for collaborative autoethnographic research (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). The social isolation resulting from physically distant online work spaces, the reduced availability of sites for extended ethnographic observations in the field, and the attenuation of physical public spaces for collaborations push researchers toward alternative methods for reporting and analysing their professional environments. Combining autoethnographic perspectives can provide one way to circumvent these restrictions, offering transparency to professional and personal activities that have become less observable. Patrice Buzzanell (2021) affirms that "constituting resilience is an unending design project grounded in situated lives" (p. 470), hence the grounding of this project in descriptions and analysis of lived experience. Attention to specific cases that foreground resilience has the advantage of showing how resilience plays out in practice, presenting

"concrete demonstrations of principles that might otherwise remain abstract" in more quantitative studies (Hopkins, Lim, & Phillips, 2011, p. 57).

3. Crises of Care for a (Non-Tenure Track) Teaching Mother

At first, we both worked from home. Then, as the first wave in the United States started to wane, my spouse went back to work a few days a week. When the university opened for Fall 2020 classes, I taught hybrid versions of my courses, working from home Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and teaching face-to-face on Tuesday and Thursday.

3.1 Unravelling (in) the Pandemic

To say that I was "working from home" is a misnomer…or perhaps simply grossly inadequate. With two children in virtual school, I was homeroom teacher, math and reading specialist, and resource officer (the term applied to school police officers in the United States) all in one. I found myself pulled in more than the dual identities of public and private personae women wear so fluidly in modern Western society. My children needed me. My family needed me. My students needed me. My department needed me. And, as all of these entities are crucial to my notion of identity, I needed them. The world may have slowed down, but somehow, my life was careening out of control.

"Mom! He licked me again!"

I check my screen to make sure I'm muted. As a gender scholar, I have done my best to suppress outbursts of toxic masculinity between my two male offspring. The results are varied. Today, I have made it absolutely clear there will be no hitting, pushing, biting, or fighting in all its various forms, as I am, once again, facing a virtual gallery of squares. So, in the absence of traditional, overt aggression, the boys have resorted to licking each other. We are a year into remote learning and their school has announced we will not go back to face-to-face instruction for the next term.

"He licked me first!"

I bring my hand up to make it look like I'm rubbing my nose, which effectively covers my mouth. "Goddamn it! Knock it off!" I yell, taking full advantage of Zoom's mute function. "I told you I'm on a call!"

I get up from the computer. My alert for the next meeting has already announced I have ten minutes of "free time" to do some dishes. Suddenly, the world that I had been ignoring while in Zoom sessions, grading papers, or advising students, comes into full light. My kids aren't on their school calls. They also aren't doing their homework. They are, in fact, blaring YouTube videos while surrounded by empty bags of food and soda cans. None of which they are allowed to have, in general, but particularly not in the living room. My house and my kids have turned into a bad internet meme.

Structural gendered sexism and racism—the ideological systems that disproportionately assign responsibility for the care of children to women—were brutally exacerbated by COVID-19 (Laster Pirtle & Wright, 2021). When economies shut down, both men and women began to work from home; however, the responsibilities for unpaid childcare and learning largely fell to women (Dunatchik et al., 2021; Laster Pirtle & Wright, 2021). With the COVID-19 crisis, the inequities of gendered labour come into sharp focus. In the United States, women were forced to pay for childcare (if available) or find creative childcare options, while concomitantly working longer (and harder) hours without increased wages.

3.2 Reconfiguring Care

Feminist ethics of care prioritize human networks and interpersonal relationships as the highest level of moral development. Caring for self and for others is a primary component of feminist ethics of care, where relationship nurturing between the caregiver and the cared for lies at the core of ethical decision making. Lived experiences and concrete situations of caregiving and care-receiving guide ethical decision making from this perspective. Problematically, "crisis management tends to be conceptualized as a rational and linear process which follows discrete stages of signal detection, preparation/prevention, containment, recovery and learning" and is inherently masculine in nature (Branicki, 2020, p. 873). Purely calculative approaches to crisis management often follow business/profit models, and in so doing, marginalize already vulnerable populations (Branicki, 2020), such as mothers suddenly finding themselves shouldering the dual responsibilities of teaching and working while also maintaining a household and the overall health of the family.

A feminist ethic of care holds greater potential for leading societies through crises. Traditional crisis management is designed to maintain or return to the status quo. It is systematic and universal—what goes for one, goes for all—and stifles debate, resistance, and critique (Griffin, 2015). As the pandemic has demonstrated, the in-home needs of women and children differed greatly, and the answers to their plight were far from universal. A feminist ethic of care applied to crisis management can be "transformative, because it shifts the normative focus towards issues that are often marginalized, makes these issues visible and in so doing improves lives" (Branicki, 2020, p. 873). The transformative nature of feminist ethics has the ability to upend a global system of governance that makes decisions based on established (often inequitable) legal systems and a desire to control populations in an effort to reduce panic (Griffin, 2015). A "feminist crisis management" provides an "alternative perspective that is concerned with caring about, taking care, caregiving and care receiving" (Branicki, 2020, pp. 880-881), as opposed to a systematic set of rules that only extends care to those already cared for.

In terms of resilience, a feminist ethic of care allows for individuals to approach adversity brought about through crises from a standpoint of "we" rather than adopting an individualistic approach. Resilience is not simply a matter of "bouncing back," but also an opportunity for "bouncing forward" (Houston, 2015) through individual and community growth. Adopting feminist ethics of care allows communities to address crises through interpersonal networking and relationship building. Giving and receiving care becomes a more holistic process that takes the needs of those receiving care into account rather than a universal approach that provides a form of blanket comfort that serves the institution's interests more than it does the community of stakeholders who constitute the institution. Care can become restorative and transformative as those giving care recognize the needs of those receiving care and how those needs might be exacerbated by traditional systems of control.

4. Cultivating Resilience: A Department Head's Perspective

My colleague's narrative in the preceding section illustrates compassion fatigue, understood as the "cost of caring" for others, sometimes more clinically referred to as secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 2002, p. 2). Confronted with increased needs from families, partners, and students throughout the pandemic, many women face escalating expectations of administering care on every front. If left unaddressed, compassion fatigue contributes to a more systemic shutdown: burnout that can interrupt or end academic careers. Studies report "a disproportionate increase in burnout in academic researchers" across many nations, especially in marginalized groups such as women and LGBTQ+ populations (Gewin, 2021, p. 491).

Implementing a feminist ethic of care confronts the reality that the individual's reservoir of care is finite. On the demand side, policies and practices can re-examine the expenditure of care by structuring expectations of students and the university regarding the nature and type of care women should provide. On the supply side, creating or expanding networks of care can replenish the dwindling ability of women to exercise care for themselves and others.

I have an obligation to use my own power and privilege as a white, male, tenured full professor and department head to address inequities that the untenured women faculty who comprise 50 percent of my department constantly face. The *Pandemic Effects on Legal Academia* study (Deo, 2022) notes the "lack of structural support" (p. 128) for women faculty—particularly women of colour—who are more concentrated in non-tenure track positions that require working with the most students. Allies in the academy who do have greater job security or who wield some power to implement policies can help to counteract regressive or repressive policies and practices.

4.1 Institutional Pressures on Women

Faced with declining enrolments (our university has lost an average of 1,000 students per year since 2020), institutions already enamoured with commodification of education (Schwartzman, 2017) increased their emphasis on "customer satisfaction" to maximize student retention. In most institutions, the student evaluation of teaching (SET) provides a primary indicator of student satisfaction. A growing body of research confirms that SETs demonstrate gender biases against women, especially insofar as they "reinforce gender-stereotypical behaviour in teaching" (Gelber et al., 2022, p. 204; cf. Adams et al., 2022; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022). For non-tenure track women faculty, SETs generally constitute the core data in their major—often sole—category of evaluation: teaching. Thus, with institutions desperate to retain students, the key evaluative tool becomes a more powerful means of enforcing traditional gender norms for women and punishing variance from expected "feminine" behaviours.

Many universities, including ours, offered extensions of the tenure and promotion timeline for tenure-track faculty. At our university, tenure-track faculty could opt in to extend their probationary period an additional year. No equivalent measures were offered to faculty on year-to-year contracts or to adjuncts. This extension was especially helpful to a woman faculty member in my department who specializes in community-engaged research. During the pandemic, she also had her first child, so her caregiving strains would intensify while the restricted contact with community members would slow her research.

The extension of the tenure time clock has merit; however, merely extending the timeline neglects the opportunity to expand and improve the modes and metrics of performance evaluation. The timeline extensions pause assessment without reflecting on the nature of assessment itself. One option would be for institutions to expand the scope of what counts as suitable research and creative activity. For example, inclusivity and accessibility of publication venues could be prioritized, reducing continued reliance solely on journals whose prestige rests on the same homogeneous cadres of editors and reviewers as gatekeepers. Furthermore, public intellectual work could receive more credit, especially since it often reaches and can affect a wider audience than abstruse esoterica ensconced within a journal's paywalls. These kinds of changes challenge the type of institutional resilience that materializes as recalcitrance, a re-entrenchment of conventional performance metrics and evaluative methods.

4.2 Resisting Regressive Institutional Resilience

Institutional resilience operates along a continuum between two orientations toward disruption: organizational transformation through embracing change, or reversion through treating change as a threat and returning to the previous status quo. During the worst of the pandemic, our university appeared to embrace transformation. Teaching modalities and schedules were fully negotiable between faculty and their department heads. Sick leave allowances were extended. Central procurement of protective and cleaning supplies gave departments full ability to practice pandemic protocols at no cost to them. All of that changed after approximately one year.

Prevailing messages to employees, students, and the public touted a "return to normal," in effect declaring "mission accomplished." Throughout the pandemic, official administrative messages to all stakeholders still stress continuity: "Keep teaching." "Keep working." "Keep learning." Official messages from our university's human resources office and from upper administration consistently celebrate resumption of past practices rather than framing the pandemic as an opportunity for creative institutional change (Schwartzman, 2020). After vaccinations became more widespread, the university quietly abandoned all COVID protocols. Now, the only acceptable rationale for a full-time instructor to teach fully online is through a medically certified disability filed through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This new, narrower policy applies only to medical conditions of employees themselves. Caregiving to others does not qualify for long-term accommodations.

When manifested as reversion, institutional resilience becomes problematic, as it avoids confronting the potential for constructive change (Schwartzman, 2022). Years before the current pandemic, Evans and Reid (2014) critically examined institutional calls for personal resilience as a way to increase tolerance for inequitable or oppressive institutional practices and thereby bolster an organization's resistance to change. "Business as usual" restores the status quo, treating the pandemic as a momentary blip in an educational system that self-corrects just as the (so-called) "free market" does. Within this model, symptomatic of the neoliberal university, tweaks replace critiques. Default modes of educational and labour practices remain exempt from structural reform. Maximizing flexibility in when, how, and where academic work is performed can mitigate some of the disproportionate impact the pandemic continues to have on women (Augustus, 2021).

4.3 Practices of Empowerment and Support

Research on managing compassion fatigue in the helping professions (Figley, 2002), heavily populated by women (Lepore, 2021), reveals several measures that academic departments can implement locally even when institutional resilience works against women. For example, I try to encourage and enforce boundaries that reasonably limit expectations of caregiving to students. Several of my colleagues have included their email response time (e.g., reply within 48 hours) in their email signature block and on their course syllabi. Many colleagues also state a time frame for their daily availability (e.g., no replies to messages before 8:00AM or after 9:00PM). Women in my department who shoulder familial care responsibilities especially include this information and the reasons for it when orienting students to their courses.

I also try to serve as gatekeeper for the flood of information that flows to department heads for distribution to faculty. The information and tasks continue with no respect for any work/life boundaries. "Keep working. Carry on." As department head, I have complex, high-stakes budget reduction planning documents due over winter

break after the semester has ended and while the university is officially closed. Add a two-day leadership workshop scheduled during winter break, announced during break and less than two weeks in advance. Final course schedule changes are often due on weekends or holidays, even when the university is not in session. In my gatekeeping role, I recognize that the vaunted value of transparency has limits. The constant supply of grim budgetary details gets discussed promptly but within officially designated meeting times during normal work hours.

Selective humour can relieve tension and boost morale. Humour comprises a regular part of my communication with faculty colleagues, who in my performance evaluations express their appreciation of it. Humour can moderate compassion fatigue by reducing stress, reframing unpleasant circumstances, and creating some distance from problems (Moran, 2002). More specifically, humour can buffer the stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartzik, Aust, & Peifer, 2021). Humour must be used judiciously, steering clear of insults or pessimism and avoiding trivialization of genuine concerns. To build camaraderie, my humour focuses on making light of our shared challenges and using self-deprecation to expose the plights that department heads face. Humour also can operate strategically to demonstrate the inconsistency or counterproductivity of policies that systematically disadvantage women.

5. Cultivating Resilience via Online Communities

The semester after I became department head and the day our university announced the shift to fully online instruction in March 2020, I established the Facebook group Pandemic Pedagogy. Dedicated to discussions of education throughout the pandemic, the group quickly grew to more than 30,000 members and remains listed on sites worldwide as a key resource on pandemic-era education. The group's membership has always been predominantly female (self-reported at 73%), which could reflect a greater desire or need than males to seek a supportive professional community online.

Pandemic Pedagogy continually demonstrates how an online community collectively cultivates resilience. Members exhibit mutual care in three primary ways:

- Empathy: Acknowledging and validating one another's experiences, attitudes, and feelings.
- Encouragement: Providing positive communication to reassure others that they are valued, capable of taking action, or can cope with challenges.
- Empowerment: Offering suggestions or resources for actions to address specific challenges.

Close examination of one member's narrative illustrates how the online community enacts resilience. The member, a white woman teaching at a university in the southern United States, disclosed:

> *For the first time in 20 years, I dread class time. My hybrid classes (divided into 3 sections) quickly disintegrated to not one person showing up in class because the administration will not allow us to require attendance. It also will not allow us to default to synchronous online teaching from our office or home, so I stand masked in an empty classroom and lecture to students on Zoom, who have given up on participating in discussion. Except for the trolls, and I have had to deal with class trolls and online…trolls more in the past month than I have had to my entire career. I have been called "cruel" and been accused of "indoctrinating students with my communist/Marxist/Satanic ideologies on critical race theory, feminism, LGBTQ rights, multiculturalism, etc...." which only makes things worse…. To me, the crude behaviours of some of my students feel very gendered. I cannot imagine them attacking my male colleagues as blatantly as they attack me.*

The post generated 57 comments and 327 reactions. Member responses reflect how empathy, encouragement, and empowerment demonstrate care and bolster resilience.

Many women in the group offered empathetic comments, reassuring the original poster that she was not alone and was heard by colleagues if not by her institution's administrators. Acknowledging the absurdity of teaching online from an empty classroom, a member responded: "I am so sorry. I, too, lecture in empty classrooms to black boxes on a screen. It's incredibly draining (and kills the 'fire' in me)." Noting the market-modelled mindset of many American universities, another member commiserated: "That's awful. Our university also has no regard or care for faculty. They only care about students' satisfaction."

Encouragement also emerged in member comments, especially after the original poster added, "I did send a detailed letter to administrators about the soul sucking behaviours that we have little guidance (or worse, orders not to) address…." A member enthusiastically replied: "Good job! It's hard to make a move like that, I hope on

some level you feel good that you did it." Several women offered encouragement with comments such as: "I wish I could take your class."

Other members fuelled empowerment, identifying specific means of responding to the students' behaviours. A South Asian graduate student who teaches gender studies recommended consulting with the student judiciary office. Another woman faculty member suggested activating whatever alert systems the institution might use to report behavioural issues to the student services office or the dean of students. Other members suggested technical remedies such as muting, blocking, or placing the offending students in a Zoom waiting room. Additional recommendations included contacting the students' advisors, recording class sessions to document the behaviours, and designating other students as monitors to help maintain order.

Social media offers means of building resilience beyond the physical workplace. Kendra Haines (2022) specifically identifies the Pandemic Pedagogy group as an online community of practice (oCoP) that provides a vital support system for educators centring on sharing personal or professional concerns as well as pedagogical practices. When face-to-face interactions attenuated, social media forums such as Pandemic Pedagogy expanded the ability to compare institutional practices related to gender. Even beyond pandemic-imposed isolation, oCoPs enrich social support networks, a key to coping with crises. Such online networks address resilience as a community, in contrast to institutional emphases on self-reliance as COVID-era flexibility toward women and caregivers rigidifies (Ahn et al., 2021). Expanding social support also can reduce stress associated with compassion fatigue (Cordaro, 2020). Using the relatively new Facebook group feature that allows anonymous posts, members can report inequities and air complaints more freely. As Sara Ahmed (2021) notes, a key to systemic change would be to create an institutional culture that listens with "a feminist ear" (p. 3), valuing complaints as opportunities to address embedded gender biases rather than dismissing them as rumblings of malcontents.

6. Conclusion

Two caveats accompany this study. First, both authors operate from positions of relative privilege as white, cisgender, full-time workers, and middle class economically. Additional research should foreground the impact of intersectional identities on resilience in academic environments, especially highlighting non-binary, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, immigrants, and other marginalized groups (Rahman et al., 2022). Second, this research was conducted in the United States, with its mostly decentralized, privatized, and profit-oriented social support systems. Further studies could complement this work by noting how availability of more robust social support services or more systematic policies that confront gender inequities in other nations constructively build resilience.

Levine and Van Pelt (2021) astutely observe that most universities "misunderstood the nature of the pandemic," treating it "as an interruption in doing business as usual rather than an accelerator of the changes to come" (p. 260). The challenges facing women in higher education neither originated nor will end with COVID-19. Rather, the pandemic exposed many heretofore latent or suppressed ways that higher education structures and practices systematically disadvantage women, particularly those who hold already precarious positions without the protection of tenure. More optimistically, the pandemic has revealed creative ways to cultivate personal and community resilience through collaborative support and collective action. When energized through social media communities, colleagues worldwide can share their experiences, expertise, and solidarity regarding ways not only to cope, but to re-form higher education with insights gleaned from a more feminist ear.

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