

Time Dilemmas and Coping Strategies for Academic Mothers: A Systematic Review

Yang Qian^{1,2,a,*}, Ye Pengfei^{1,b,*}

¹Graduate School, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

²Institute of Education, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

^ayangqian@nju.edu.cn, ^bpfye@nju.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This review systematically examines time-related challenges faced by academic mothers across career stages (doctoral students, early-career faculty, professors) and identifies individual and institutional coping strategies to foster more inclusive academic environments. A systematic search in Web of Science using keywords ("academic mothers," "career," "time constraints," etc.) yielded 339 articles. After screening (removing duplicates, irrelevant studies), 75 articles were analyzed thematically. Academic mothers face institutional pressures (tight deadlines, unequal workloads), societal role conflicts, and personal exhaustion. Coping strategies include time management, social support (individual), and family-friendly policies, flexible work arrangements (institutional). Addressing time dilemmas requires institutional reforms (equitable policies) alongside individual adaptations. This review offers insights for fostering supportive academic environments for mothers.

Keywords: Academic Mothers; Intensive Mothering; Time Scarcity; Career

1. Introduction

Academic mothers occupy a unique and challenging position within the increasingly demanding landscape of higher education. As they strive to excel in research, teaching, and service, they must simultaneously navigate the intensive responsibilities of motherhood.^[1] The intersection of these roles often leads to severe time conflicts, profoundly affecting their career progression, job satisfaction, and overall well-being.^[2] Despite the growing presence of women in academia, the specific challenges faced by academic mothers particularly in managing time under competing pressures—remain under explored. This review seeks to address this gap by synthesizing existing research on their time-related struggles and coping strategies, while also examining the broader institutional and cultural forces that shape their experiences.^{[3][4]}

Performance-based evaluation systems prioritize measurable outputs, such as high-impact publications and grant funding, pushing academics toward relentless productivity.^[5] For academic mothers, who must balance these demands with care-giving responsibilities, the pressure to meet rigid benchmarks within constrained time frames can be overwhelming. Compounding this issue is the pervasive ideology of intensive mothering, which dictates that mothers should devote substantial time, emotional labor, and hands-on involvement in child-rearing. This cultural expectation directly conflicts with the time-consuming nature of academic work, forcing many to grapple with guilt, exhaustion, and career sacrifices.^[6]

Furthermore, institutional practices often reinforce gender disparities. Academic mothers frequently shoulder disproportionate service burdens -such as committee work and student advising -which, while essential, are undervalued in promotion and tenure decisions. Even when family-friendly policies exist, they are frequently inadequately implemented or fail to address structural inequities. Together, neoliberalism's productivity demands, intensive mothering norms, and gender-biased institutional structures create a perfect storm of time scarcity for academic mothers.^[7] This review critically examines these intersecting pressures while highlighting potential pathways for institutional support and policy reform.

2. Objective

The primary objective of this review is to: 1) Provide a comprehensive understanding of the time-related challenges faced by academic mothers at different career stages. 2) Identify and analyze the individual and institutional strategies that have been employed to cope with these challenges. 3) Offer recommendations for academic institutions to create more inclusive and supportive environments for academic mothers.

3. Methods

3.1 Search Strategy

The search was conducted in the Web of Science database. The search terms were a combination of "academic mothers", "career stage", "time scarcity", "work-family conflict", etc. The search was limited to the period from 2015 to 2025. The selected categories were education research and social research to ensure the relevance and comprehensiveness of the retrieved literature.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they: 1) Focused on academic mothers, defined as women in academic positions (doctoral students, post-docs, faculty members) with children. 2) Addressed time-related issues, such as time constraints, work-family balance, or time management strategies. 3) Were empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) or literature reviews.

Studies were excluded if they: 1) Did not directly relate to academic mothers' time-related experiences. 2) Were opinion pieces, editorials, or non-peer-reviewed articles. 3) Were written in languages other than English.

3.3 Screening and Selection

The screening process comprised two phases. Initially, titles and abstracts of the 339 identified articles were evaluated against the eligibility criteria, excluding clearly non-conforming studies. Subsequently, full texts of remaining articles underwent rigorous evaluation, assessing methodological quality, alignment with review objectives, and analytical rigor. This process yielded 75 articles for final inclusion.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data from the 75 selected studies were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. First, the articles were read thoroughly to identify initial themes related to the time-related challenges faced by academic mothers and their coping strategies. These initial themes were then refined and grouped into broader categories. The frequency of each theme across the studies was also noted to determine the prevalence and significance of different issues and strategies.

4. Results

Analysis of the 75 included studies identified two core themes: the multidimensional time dilemmas faced by academic mothers and the coping strategies they and institutions employ.

4.1 Time-Related Challenges

4.1.1 Institutional Challenges

Institutional barriers were most commonly reported across two interconnected dimensions.

Time Pressures related to research work: Academic mothers often faced tight deadlines for research projects, grant applications, and paper submissions. For example, many doctoral students reported struggling to complete their dissertations within the standard time frame while also taking care of young children. Early-career faculty had to quickly establish their research profiles to secure tenure, which was difficult when time was divided between research and family responsibilities.^[8]

Service Overload: Female academics, especially those with children, were more likely to be assigned service tasks such as committee work, student mentoring, and administrative duties. These tasks not only took up a significant amount of time but also often went unrecognized in the tenure and promotion process.^[9]

4.1.2 Social Challenges

Societal Expectations: There was a strong societal expectation that mothers should be the primary caregivers, which put pressure on academic mothers. They often faced criticism from family, friends, and colleagues when they prioritized their academic work over family time.^[10]

Lack of Social Support: Some academic mothers reported a lack of social support networks, especially in the context of academic communities that were not always understanding of their family-related constraints.^[11]

4.1.3 Individual Challenges

Physical and Mental Exhaustion: The constant juggling of academic and motherhood roles led to physical and mental exhaustion for many academic mothers. They reported sleep deprivation, stress-related health issues, and burnout.^[12]

Role Conflict: Academic mothers often experienced role conflict, feeling torn between their identities as scholars and mothers. This internal conflict made it difficult to allocate time effectively between the two roles.^[13]

4.2 Coping Strategies

4.2.1 Individual Strategies

Time Management: Many academic mothers used time-management techniques such as creating detailed schedules, setting priorities, and using time-blocking methods to allocate specific time slots for academic work, family time, and self-care.^[14]

Seeking Social Support: Some academic mothers sought support from family members, friends, or other academic mothers in similar situations. They formed support groups, both online and offline, to share experiences and advice.^[15]

Role Redefinition: Some academic mothers redefined their roles, viewing motherhood as an experience that could enrich their academic work. For example, they used their experiences of parenting to inform their research in fields such as education, psychology, or sociology.^[16]

4.2.2 Institutional Strategies

Family-Friendly Policies: Institutions that implemented family-friendly policies, such as extended maternity/paternity leave, flexible work arrangements (e.g., part-time work, remote work options), and childcare support, were more likely to retain academic mothers.^[3]

Mentoring and Support Programs: Mentoring programs that paired academic mothers with experienced colleagues, as well as support programs that provided training on time management and work-family balance, were found to be beneficial.^[5]

5. Discussion

The findings underscore that academic mothers' time struggles are not individual failings but systemic issues rooted in institutional structures, cultural norms, and uneven resource distribution. The multidimensional nature of time scarcity underscores that these challenges cannot be reduced to "poor time management" or individual failure. Rigid timelines and performance demands clash with the unpredictable, care-centered rhythms of motherhood.

5.1 Implications for Academic Institutions

The findings of this review have important implications for academic institutions. To retain and support academic mothers, institutions need to implement more comprehensive family-friendly policies. This includes not only providing adequate leave and flexible work options but also ensuring that these policies are effectively communicated and implemented. Institutions should also recognize and value

the contributions of academic mothers in all aspects of academic work, including service tasks, and provide appropriate rewards and career advancement opportunities.

5.2 Future Research Directions

Future research could focus on the long-term impact of time-related challenges on the career trajectories of academic mothers. Additionally, more research is needed on the effectiveness of different coping strategies, especially in different cultural and institutional contexts. There is also a need for research on the experiences of academic mothers from diverse backgrounds, including those from underrepresented minorities.

6. Limitations

The review has several limitations. First, the search was limited to the Web of Science database and English-language articles, which may have excluded relevant studies from other databases or in other languages. Second, the review relied on the self-reported experiences of academic mothers in the selected studies, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias.

7. Conclusion

This review synthesizes 75 studies across education and social research studies to map the time dilemmas faced by academic mothers and the strategies to address them. The findings converge on a critical reality: time scarcity for academic mothers is not a personal failing but a symptom of systemic tensions between neoliberal academic structures, gendered care expectations, and the embodied demands of balancing scholarship and motherhood. Academic mothers face significant time-related challenges that are a result of institutional, social, and individual factors. While they have developed a range of individual coping strategies, institutional support is crucial for creating a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. The implications are unambiguous: transforming academic life for mothers requires structural, not just individual, change. Institutions must reject the myth of “balance” as a personal responsibility and instead reimagine academic temporality around care. This means redefining productivity to value slow, care-informed scholarship; redistributing service work to end the “care penalty”; and investing in material supports that reduce temporal burdens. Equally vital is challenging cultural norms that frame motherhood as a “distraction” rather than a source of intellectual insight. The solution is not more time-management tools, but universities that honor the full humanity of their members—recognizing that good scholarship and good mothering are not opposing forces, but can thrive together in a system designed to value both.

Acknowledgement

This work is funded by the General Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities of Jiangsu Province: “An Empirical Study on Academic Achievement and Its Influencing Factors of Professional Degree Master's Degree Students in Universities in Jiangsu Province (No. 2024SJYB0004)”, Research Project on Interdisciplinary Mechanisms and Systems Development at Nanjing University: “A Study on the Impact of Interdisciplinary Training Mechanisms on Doctoral Candidates' Academic Achievement (No. XKJC202413)” and Research Project of Nanjing University Trade Union: “A Study on Trade Union Support for the Career Development of Young Female University Teachers from the Perspective of Social Time (No. NJUGYB202406)”

References

- [1] Bao L. *Women Academics Forgo Childbirth for Career Progression? Performances of Their Body Boundaries*[J]. *European Journal of Education*, 2024, 59(4).
- [2] Minello A, Martucci S, Manzo L K C. *The pandemic and the academic mothers: present hardships and future perspectives*[J]. *European Societies*, 2020(1):1-13.
- [3] Hamilton L, Roksa J, Nielsen K. *Providing a "Leg Up": Parental Involvement and Opportunity Hoarding in College*[J]. *Sociology of Education*, 2018, 91(2).
- [4] Gallardo M. *Does maternity affect women's careers? Perceptions of working mothers in academia*[J]. *Educación XX1*, 2020, 24(1):405-428.

- [5] Harris C , Myers B , Ravenswood K .*Academic careers and parenting: identity, performance and surveillance*[J].*Studies in Higher Education*, 2019, 44:708 - 718.
- [6] Marta Vohlídalová.*Academic couples, parenthood and women's research careers*[J].*European Educational Research Journal*, 2017, 16:166-182.
- [7] Moors A , Stewart A , Malley J .*Managing the career effects of discrimination and motherhood: The role of collegial support for a caregiving policy at a research-intensive U.S. university*[J]. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 2022, 44(4),377-392.
- [8] Hardy A , McDonald J , Guijt R ,et al.*Academic parenting: work-family conflict and strategies across child age, disciplines and career level*[J].*Studies in Higher Education*, 2016:1-19.
- [9] Zakaras J M , Sarkar U , Bibbins-Domingo K ,et al.*Not Just Surviving, But Thriving: Overcoming Barriers to Career Advancement for Women Junior Faculty Clinician-Researchers*[J].*Academic Psychiatry*, 2020, 45(11).
- [10] Habicht I M .*Do mothers get lost at the postdoc stage? Event history analysis of psychologists at German universities (1980–2019)*[J].*Higher Education*, 2022,44:377-392.
- [11] Etheridge, M. *Agency and cruel optimism in the care obfuscations of UK-based academic mothers*[J]. *Higher Education*.2025,02:1-16.
- [12] Bao L .*Women Academics Forgo Childbirth for Career Progression? Performances of Their Body Boundaries*[J]. *European Journal of Education*, 2024, 59(4).
- [13] Eldridge S V .*Mothers' Labor: Organizing and Parenting in Neoliberal Academia*[J].*Feminist German Studies*, 2024, 40(1).
- [14] Ocampo-Peuela N .*The balancing act of being an academic and a mother*[J].*Nature Human Behaviour*. 2025,9:425.
- [15] O'Laughlin E M , Bischoff L G .*Balancing Parenthood and Academia Work/Family Stress as Influenced by Gender and Tenure Status*[J].*Journal of Family Issues*, 2005, 26(1):79-106.
- [16] James-Mccarthy K , Brooks-Mccarthy A , Walker D M .*Stemming the 'Leaky Pipeline': an investigation of the relationship between work-family conflict and women's career progression in academic medicine*[J].*BMJ leader*, 2022, 6(2):110-117.