

Review

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Academia, Gender, and Beyond: A Review

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Abstract: This article aims to engage critically with the scholarly narratives and the emerging literature on the gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in academia. It outlines the key contours and themes in these scholarly discourses and conceptions, acknowledging their richness, depth and strengths especially given the short timespan within which they have developed since 2020. The article then suggests broadening and historicising the critique advanced by the literature further. In doing so, the hierarchies and vulnerabilities exposed in the academic domain by the pandemic are positioned within a holistic understanding of crisis-ridden characteristics of social relations under capitalism.

Keywords: higher education; gender; inequality; pandemic; capitalism

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1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has yielded drastic transformative and restructuring effects on social relations, as well as the dynamics and governance of world economy and politics. Unsurprisingly, its multifaceted socio-economic and political impact has spurred scholarly research and analysis across multiple disciplines and from a variety of perspectives. One of the core areas of renewed scholarly interest has been the uneven and gendered character of academic labour(ing), knowledge production, and scholarly productivity. In the past two years, a rich and ever-expanding literature has emerged which has aspired to collect both quantitative and qualitative data and document the lived experiences of gender inequalities and vulnerabilities as they have unfolded with particular emphasis on the advancement of women's academic careers, work–life balance, and academic productivity.

While this literature has evolved towards nuanced and intersectional analyses of the inequalities over time, the article aims to provide a critical review of this very evolution. The central argument is that the inequalities, inclusive of those identified in the domain of academia, that are exposed by the pandemic require further contextualisation within a holistic understanding of crisis-riddenness endemic to capitalism and the intrinsic contradictions between the needs and logic of social reproduction and the logic of capital accumulation [1–5]. Such a systemic, macro-scale outlook would then enable us to position the latest crisis episode of the COVID-19 pandemic and its gender impact more organically to earlier episodes of crises and the pre-pandemic era. It would also explicitly acknowledge the operation of gender both within as well as beyond academia as part and parcel of the disciplining and exploitative character of global social relations that become localised and take specific forms of appearance in particular social and political settings.

I approach this review from the perspective of a woman university worker, with significant previous administrative, teaching, and pastoral care work experience on short-term contracts (until recently), and insecure employment in higher education as an

international staff member. This enables me to reflect on the structural, interconnected, yet often invisible character of inequalities and the anxiety and insecurity they perpetuate, which make even the potential future ‘stability’ extremely challenging to envisage in the face of persistent upheavals. Having directly experienced the impact of hiring freezes in the context of the UK higher education during the first year of the pandemic, I could, nevertheless, allocate time and energy, in the absence of extra-academic caring responsibilities in my experience, to extensively search for alternative employment. Acknowledging the presence as well as absence of specific experiences and elements of positionality is crucial to account for their impact in one’s perspective. As these experiences inform and influence my interest, perspective, and engagement in countering these structural inequalities and (dis)advantages broadly, they also potentially bring elements of subjectivity in the assessment of the literature on pandemic-related gender inequalities in academia. In turn, engagement with this emerging scholarship opens up the space and serves as a learning opportunity to make sense of and ground these particular experiences within their broader, global political and economic context.

On this basis, a narrative approach to reviewing the literature aims to identify and synthesize key themes interpretively as well as outline future directions. This approach has been adopted to allow for a more open-ended, exploratory account given the recency and ongoing evolution of this literature in motion, the diversity of perspectives and methodologies represented in it, and to derive further theoretical insights and linkages (on the literature review as a research methodology; different types and purposes of literature review, their strengths and weaknesses see Snyder [6] (p. 334–336); for a discussion of the value and strengths of narrative literature reviews see Rozas and Klein [7]; for a critique of systematic literature reviews see Hammersley [8]).

Against this background, the second section introduces the onset of the global pandemic and the initial research concerns and focus of the literature on the (post-) pandemic era gender inequalities in academia. For this purpose, the scholarly works are explored in terms of their approach towards academia as a distinctive site of research, the temporality of the pandemic, empirical research areas and methods, and alternatives. These dimensions have been chosen since they comprise the key elements and issues of concern in the emerging literature and help to deliver an integrative overview of it [9] (p. 112, 126). It is noted that the emerging literature in this field has developed a gradual appreciation to challenge its initial boundaries and understanding of gender dynamics to explore the co-existing, yet diverse inequalities and oppressions within the nexus of class, race, mobility, ability which accompany the gender dimension. While this is highlighted as a strength of the literature, embedding these insights within a cohesive critical conceptual framework would create space for both the particular assessments of these inequalities and their entanglements with gender dynamics as well as their shared grounding and common source in capitalist accumulation and exploitation dynamics conceived at global scale.

Therefore, the third section draws more specifically on Marxist and feminist theorising and highlights the need to connect the literature’s critique of gender inequalities in the (post-) pandemic era to a more structural critique of social relations which perpetuate exploitation, alienation, and anxiety at global scale beyond the timeframe of the pandemic and the specific context of higher education. This has been the basis on which social reproduction theory (SRT) and Marxist approaches are grounded and conceived to provide further critical conceptual tools that could help build on, broaden and historicise this critique. The main objective on this front is to encourage even stronger linkages and interaction between this emerging literature and the critical scholarship on higher education and capitalism, (academic) precarity and casualisation in shaping future research questions and agendas in this field.

2. Taking Stock: Research Agendas amidst the Global Pandemic

The swift spread of the SARS/COVID-19 virus has transformed the organisation of both production and reproduction at global scale through the national lockdown measures and accompanying school/university closures, shift to online/remote teaching, unavailability of childcare and eldercare support services that gradually followed from early 2020 onwards. Underpinning the developments regarding, what might be called, the crisis of social reproduction was the entanglement of the private and the public domains under mass confinement and isolation conditions. The disappearance, or rather the temporary suspension, of the public/private 'divide' has ironically revealed the otherwise hidden inequalities in the private, household domain dramatically. The scholars have identified the abruptness, rapidity, and the global scale within which these changes have unfolded to be the key aspects of the unprecedented character of the pandemic crisis [10–12].

The COVID-19 pandemic has transposed the most vulnerable segments of the global workforce onto the 'frontlines' of capitalist economy, now dubbed as 'key' or 'essential' workers. Others have become confined to their homes and directly experienced the now-overlapping layers of contradictions and inequalities as well as the accompanying changes in the concept and perception of 'home' [13] (p. 7). Therefore, it is not surprising that this revelation spurred the rise of new research agendas and scholarship on the impact of the pandemic across diverse disciplines at a rapid pace [14,15]. Kalmus [15] (p. 256) observes this prioritisation of the pandemic in the public and scholarly domains given the unprecedented number of new calls and 'public and private funding targeted at finding solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts'. Academia and universities themselves have also emerged as more visible sites of these contradictions and inequalities which made them objects of scholarly inquiry. Indeed, one might argue that the emerging literature has approached academia as a distinctive site of research with its own dynamics in terms of metric-based research productivity measures, tenure/promotion practices, and gender relations (for a comprehensive critical review of the literature, see Pereira [5]).

Consequently, the initial framings and research trajectories have been shaped by the temporality of the pandemic which was largely conceived as the landmark event for the drastic changes, given its unprecedented character and recency. At the outset, several studies have acknowledged the long-standing pre-pandemic structural problems concerning the underrepresentation and 'ontological insecurity' of women, marginalised groups, and precarious faculty in academia [16–20] [21] (p. 753) [22] (p. 5). The literature has also identified inequalities specifically faced by women in terms of publication record, grant acquisition, and promotion [22] (p. 4). In this light, the pandemic has been hypothesised to be a major dynamic exacerbating these gender gaps and leading to a 'disproportionate productivity slowdown among female scholars' [23] (see also Amano-Patino et al. [24]; Lerchenmüller et al. [25]). The culprit behind these developments, which was predicted and later corroborated by multiple studies and survey-based research carried out within (and beyond¹) academia, has been the increased childcare burdens faced especially by women academics with (younger) children amid school and nursery closures [26–31] [23] (p. 2,8).

As noted earlier, the key empirical issues that captured the immediate interest of the scholars have been the decline of metric-based research productivity of women academics given the intensifying household workloads alongside academic work pressures in the context of the pandemic [32–34]. The scholarship has delved further into the significant marginalisation and disadvantages experienced by academic parents, especially academic mothers [35–40]. The researchers have explored the intersections between gender, parenting, and care responsibilities and documented the emergence of a potential 'parent productivity gap' which affects both genders beyond the prevalence of disparities solely affecting women vis à vis men [22] (p. 4) (see also Shalaby et al. [41] (p. 663)).

The focus on the housework/academic work divide as the main axis of gender dynamics has been criticised by several scholars for its ‘embedded sexist oversights’ and prompted calls for equal attention to be paid, from a more expansive view, to both public as well as private patriarchy that disproportionately burden women faculty in the academic workplace [42] (p. 2162, 2169–2171) [5]. As a result, the literature has gradually moved towards incorporating more nuanced analyses concerning the gendered, racialised, precarious, and invisible character of academic work itself [41–47] especially in terms of the gendered division of labour in research, teaching, and service [13]. This has broadened the prior conceptualisation of parenting and mothering to now include and bring visibility to the ‘mother work’ [41] (p. 665), ‘secret service’ labours, and gendered ‘academic housekeeping’ (Hanasono et al., 2019 and Guarino and Borden, 2017 cited in Docka-Filipek and Stone [42] p. 2170) which are prevalent at departmental and university levels in the areas of teaching, administration, and pastoral care at the expense of research and publication activities.

In their interview- and survey-based mixed method research conducted with political science, international relations, and area studies faculty based at US and international institutions during June–July 2020, Shalaby et al. [41] (p. 665) found that it was the ‘female faculty without children’ who were ‘significantly more likely to report increased service- that is, 77.3% compared to 58.3% for respondents with young children and 55% of male faculty without young children’. Utoft [47] (p. 779) further problematises the categorisation of single academic women as the ‘unburdened’, ‘ideal academic’ understood in masculine terms in the existent literature and provides lived experience-based counter insights against these formulations. Identifying ‘service’ work in academia as a form of carework, drastically feminised and casualised under neoliberal capitalism, Docka-Filipek and Stone [42] (p. 2161) reposition the gender disparities in academe within ‘the gendering of precarity’ in more structural terms. The authors highlight the centrality of gender as an independent factor impacting the mental health of women faculty, even when other factors have been controlled for, such as caring responsibilities in the home, financial hardship, prevalence of higher academic workloads and insecure job contracts (p. 2169). Alongside Docka-Filipek and Stone [42], the dire mental-health impacts of pandemic-related inequalities as well as the neoliberal academic workplace more broadly have emerged as another line of inquiry explored by several studies (e.g., [48–51]); in addition to the findings of the literature that largely focused on research productivity and caring responsibilities [22] (p. 5) [23] (p. 9).

The data collection and analysis have concentrated on (auto)ethnographic, narrative- and interview-based qualitative methods [10,37,40,43,48,50–53] as well as larger scale quantitative and mixed-method research in single country as well as multi-country contexts [13,25,29,41,45]. This data-driven character of the scholarship is particularly noteworthy in the context of the recency and ongoing character of the global pandemic and the sense of urgency to assess its multi-dimensional effects. While the narrative and autoethnographic accounts have provided detailed, reflexive assessments of the pandemic’s impact on the lives and working conditions of individual academics, the panel data- and survey-based research facilitated more expansive and comparative insights into these impacts within and across disciplines as well as countries. The assessment and interpretation of this increasingly rich empirical data could benefit further from a theoretically informed critique that takes into account the pre- as well as post-pandemic global social relations.

Finally, we can make a number of observations with respect to the types of policy proposals and alternatives outlined in response to the gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education. Scholars, as part of the early interventions that were published in the wake of the pandemic from the mid-2020 onwards, proposed and embraced the immediate interventions in the form of extensions on research grants, project reporting, eligibility, and tenure clocks [12] (p. 392). The rationale behind these proposals rest-

ed on the need to allow academics to adjust to the pandemic reality and the home-based work circumstances without being additionally disadvantaged.

Several scholars, however, have problematised the potential worsening of gender gaps via such a ‘universal approach’ and invoked the feasibility of more targeted and flexible approaches [23] (p. 9); [21] (p. 753). Others have highlighted the need for longer term and more structural transformations of the organisation and distribution of academic work, and allocation of funding to address the entrenched structural gender dynamics [54]. Indeed, considering the prevalence of the structural inequalities and marginalisations in the pre-pandemic context and the persistence of pandemic inequalities in the years to come, the need for more systemic rethinking of and challenge against the commercialisation of higher education, and the gender dynamics of academic work and knowledge production remains crucial.

In the following section, I will draw on the interventions of scholars who highlight the need for a critical theoretical positioning of academia in relational terms to the systemic critique of broader classed, gendered, and racialised social relations in contemporary societies. In order to break out from the spatial demarcation of academia and the temporal restriction of the (post-) pandemic era, the article will call for historicising the analysis of inequalities in academia as well as closer engagement with the critical political economy scholarship on the marketisation, and neoliberal restructuring of higher education.

3. Broadening and Historicising the Critique beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

The previous section has put forward some of the key issues of concern and dispute with respect to the unfolding trajectory of the scholarship at the nexus of the COVID-19 pandemic, academia, and gender disparities. Indeed, as part of a living and continuously evolving body of research, scholars have been responsive to address these shortcomings and silences by adjusting their research agendas and questions over the course of the past two years. This section will bring these insights together and argue for further broadening and historicising of the critique of the gendered characteristics of academic work and knowledge production beyond the temporality of the global pandemic and the demarcated spatiality of academia. To achieve the latter, the value of a firmer grounding of pandemic-era gender equalities within a broader critique drawing on social reproduction theory and non-reductionist Marxian perspectives will be emphasised given the strengths of their alternative rethinking of ‘care’, ‘productivity’, ‘work’, and ‘solidarity’ in non-/anti-capitalist ways.

As noted earlier, scholars have posed a number of criticisms to the literature on pandemic-related gender inequalities in higher education. It is possible to position these critical insights with respect to their assessment of academia as a research site, reflections on periodisation along the pre-/post-pandemic axis and rapidity/reliability of knowledge production on the effects of the pandemic, conceptualisation of issues of primary research interest in the literature such as ‘research productivity’, and the horizon of alternatives.

Reflecting on the scale, pace, and reliability of knowledge production about and amidst the unfolding pandemic and acknowledging the deepening of inequalities due to the pandemic, Bell and Green [14] (p. 380) call ‘for caution in rushing to judgement around the impacts of the coronavirus on scholarly publishing itself’. The tendency towards periodisations along the pre-/post-pandemic axis has been further problematised by scholars who point towards the risks of attributing exceptional status to the COVID-19 pandemic vis à vis prior crises and disasters and persistent structural inequalities². Other scholars have problematised the rapid redirection of funding towards pandemic-related research agendas and projects leading to a “Covid-isation” of research systems’ which ‘reinforces the processes of instrumentalization and projectification of science’ yielding intra-institutional hierarchies, exacerbating competition as well as academic precarity and insecurity [15] (p. 260).

Pereira [5] (p. 505), in her comprehensive review of the literature, takes issue with the ways in which the ‘productivity’ of academic work and gender (inequalities) are conceptualised in the early scholarship due to the risks involved in normalising the pre-pandemic neoliberal status-quo and overwork culture in higher education. She goes further to suggest that ‘academic work is implicitly or explicitly equated with the publishing of research’ in many scholarly works investigating the impact of COVID-19 on academia (p. 502).

Relatedly, this leads to an exclusion of the ‘carework’ dimension of academic work (i.e., teaching, supervision, pastoral care, administration, trade union activism, public and community engagement) as ‘acceptable’, ‘valued’ work which, in turn, reproduces gendered hierarchies internal to academia. Besides the research vs. teaching/service binary, scholars have identified another crucial factor exacerbating these hierarchies and exclusions: the binary conceptions of gender identities when it comes to caring responsibilities external to academia (carer heterosexual women/mother academics vs. high-achieving men academics without caring duties) that do not enable us to capture and respect the full diversity of experiences on this front [5] (pp. 503, 504) (see also Docka-Filipek and Stone [42] (pp. 2160–2163) .

In a similar vein, Rosa [55] (p. 67) points towards the need to problematise the taken-for-granted definitions of work–life balance in neoliberalised academia and ‘expose the gendered conditions under which this ‘balance’ is defined and pursued at both individual and institutional levels’. Such a task, indeed, requires moving beyond the temporality of the pandemic as well as the spatial demarcation of academia in the critique of the long-entrenched pre-pandemic economic and political paradigm. When the critique is broadened and historicised in this fashion, the possibilities to assess the specific entanglements of gender and (academic) work open up especially with respect to the gendered character of casualisation, insecure and precarious work, as well as devaluation of carework under capitalism (more to follow on this point in the next section).

The scholarship has evolved towards that very direction as noted in the previous section, but additional in-depth analyses of the pandemic-era academic inequalities, gender, and precarity drawing on the lived experiences of non-tenured, precariously employed faculty especially in large scale, survey-based research would be insightful (for similar research drawing on interview-based and auto-ethnographic qualitative data, see Kinikoglu and Can [44], Whelan [56], Bloch [57], Buckle [58]). Approaching precarity in academia as a ‘heterogeneous phenomenon’ and exploring its degree of negotiability by early career academics, Kinikoglu and Can [44] (pp. S820, S823, S824) find that ‘precarity during the pandemic could only be instrumentalised by those in the better-off research positions with favourable living conditions, i.e., in higher levels of “hierarchies of precariousness” (Bone, 2019: 1219)’.

The need for stronger focus on academic precarity also manifests in the limited public and scholarly attention paid to the de-facto dismissals and expulsion of university workers on precarious, fixed-term contracts through hiring freezes and non-renewal of contracts as observed in the UK context [59]. It is telling that those affected by these measures have emphasised that attention was paid only when permanent faculty across universities started being targeted by these measures [60]. In the period ahead, closer and deeper engagement with the literature and data on (academic) precarity and capitalism [61–63] would enrich the pandemic-driven academic gender inequalities scholarship further.

Finally, with respect to the horizon of alternatives, scholars have started calling for an ethics of care alongside a rethinking of the value of ‘service’ work in academia and the ‘privileged’ output-focused productivity in radical, anti-/non-capitalist ways (e.g., [1,48,49,57,64,65]). Here, the reasoning behind the broadening of horizons on alternatives and calls for a ‘renewed academic practice’ [49] (p. 6) rests on the limits of amelioratory policy interventions that remain within the contours of neoliberal capitalist enclosures of academia and leave the structural inequalities and marginalisations it produces funda-

mentally intact. In redefining the ‘value’ of ‘care’ away from the individualistic, profit-centred and monetised paradigm which perpetually degrades and sidelines it in the margins of academia, the space and possibilities of collective care, self-care, and solidarity for and by the university communities open up [1] (pp. 256–259, 270–272), [48] (pp. 662–663) [66]. Such an endeavour ultimately requires a stepping away from conceiving academia as an autonomous, demarcated site of inequalities and struggles towards recognising its organic connections to broader society and its contradictions [2]. In this light, the next part highlights the value and relevance of such an approach in exploring pandemic inequalities in academia with reference to social reproduction theory and non-reductionist Marxist approaches.

4. Marxist and Social Reproduction Perspectives on Pandemic-Related Inequalities

This section, building from Pereira [5], highlights the merits of embedding the analysis of pandemic-era gender inequalities in academia within a more holistic and non-reductionist thinking about the capitalism-(higher) education relationship drawing on social reproduction theory (SRT) as well as Marxist perspectives. The distinctiveness of SRT in a Marxist-feminist political economy perspective is its move away from the binary thinking around production and reproduction, and exploitation and oppression (for a recent brief review of the SRT literature see Mezzadri et al. [67] (pp. 4–7)). Building from the Marxian method, SRT approaches these seemingly dualistic couplets as integral elements of the ‘relationship between the oppression and the source of oppressions: capitalism’ and the latter’s ‘particular historical forms of appearance’ (Arruzza, 2013, Mojab, 2015, Holmstrom, 2002 cited in Bhattacharya [68] (p. 5) [69]).

The central question(s) in SRT’s research agenda is/are the following:

What kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day so that she can produce the wealth of society? What role did breakfast play in her work-readiness? What about a good night’s sleep? We get into even murkier waters if we extend the questions to include processes lying outside this worker’s household. Does the education she received at school also not “produce” her, in that it makes her employable? [68] (pp. 1, 2)

Bakker [70] (p. 541) draws on three definitions of social reproduction. The definition referring to the ‘reproduction of the labour force which involves subsistence, education and training’ is relevant to establish an account of the role of higher education from an SRT perspective in its connection to the broader dynamics of production and reproduction in capitalist societies (see also Fine and Saad-Filho, 2017: 60 quoted in Bhattacharya [68] p. 8)³. Bhattacharya [69] further highlights the ‘dual task’ of homes, schools and community spaces to make human beings ‘market ready as well as giving them tools to dispute the market’s regulatory norms.’ While we can clearly infer the reproductive and care dimension intrinsic to (higher) education from the above, this dimension of academic work in universities has intensified given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [50] (p. 1616). Consequently, this impact has prompted scholars to explore the different dimensions of social reproduction, such as the devaluation of unpaid work within and outside higher education, academic work/housework divide, alienation and anxiety in the context of (post-)pandemic gender inequalities in academia.

The integral approach towards production and reproduction in SRT finds its reflection in the formulation of labour’s mode of existence ‘in, against, and beyond’ capital in non-reductionist/autonomist Marxist perspectives [71] (p. 8), [72,73]. Scholars have drawn on Marx’s account of the formal/real subsumption of labour as well as alienation for the analysis of the capitalist organisation of higher education and the contemporary conditions of academic labour [74–77] (see also Moraitis and Copley [78]).

In this view, labour-power is considered ‘capital’s weakest link, for the single, living commodity that the whole capitalist system depends upon for its existence is within

us' [71] (p. 9). This brings further significance to its inherent resistance potential given its unique features:

Labour-power, which takes the form of human capital, is at odds with the person (de facto with itself) as not-labour-power; the person with interests, desires, motives (with dreams even) that run counter to the subsumption of the self as labour-power. The antagonistic labour-capital relation is a relation within personhood too in capitalist society. Our existence as labour against capital (as opposed to labour within and as capital) places a limit on the capitalisation of our souls, the capitalisation of humanity through the phenomenon of labour-power [71] (p. 15–16).

With reference to childhood, schooling, and capitalism, Ferguson [79] (p. 129) similarly points towards the potential for an 'alternative way of being' that escapes capitalisation and disciplining due to the very fact that 'the social reproduction of labour does not take place under the direct control of capital'. For Rikowski [71] (p. 18–19), this is the grounds on which teachers become 'dangerous workers' and the control of their labour through 'regulation, assessment, targeting, standards and inspection regimes within all sectors of education' becomes an 'iron necessity'.

Such a perspective brings centrality to and frames the analysis of academic labour and gender inequalities as part of broader anti-capitalist struggles. The adoption of insights from SRT and non-reductionist Marxist perspectives enables us to approach the classed, gendered, and bordered dimensions of education policies as well as resistance waged against them in a comprehensive fashion [80] (pp. 21–22). Therefore, there is value in this act of broadening and historicising the critique to be able to assess the continuities between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic structural inequalities which are prevalent both within and beyond academia.

The work of Hall [48] (p. 658) questions the calls for business-as-usual raised by university managements in the context of the unfolding pandemic. Here, a reference is made to entrenched 'commodity fetishism', which perpetuates 'alienation' and 'anxiety' in higher education through 'overwork and ill-being'. Hall also puts forward the organic linkages between capitalism and (higher) education in the following:

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us into an appreciation of how relationships have been subsumed and re-engineered under discourses of employability, entrepreneurship, excellence, impact, satisfaction, and value-for-money... The virus highlights the claustrophobic nature of our work, and how our lives *as-they-were* forced us to centre our labour rather than ourselves. Any demands that we deny our griefs and carry on simply scrubs away at the fabric of our souls [48] (p. 658).

This perspective grounds the horizon of alternatives within the abolishment of the 'capitalist University-as-is' [48] (p. 662). This agenda is further fuelled by the integral approach towards production and reproduction found in SRT and the 'dual task' of spaces of reproduction in subverting the logic of market as highlighted by Bhattacharya [69]. Connecting these insights more firmly to the scholarship under discussion situates the pandemic-related gender dynamics within a systemic critique of capitalism which perpetuates societal as well as academic hierarchies, oppressions, and alienation. It allows us to ask broader questions as to whether the pandemic constitutes a moment of rupture or continuity within the (re-)production of global capitalism and capitalist university in order to further assess the constraints and opportunities facing non-/anti-capitalist alternatives.

5. Concluding Remarks

This article highlights the importance of and engages critically with the emerging scholarship on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and gender inequalities in academia. Key themes from specific research pertaining to pandemic-related inequalities in academia have been reviewed, all of which have evolved rapidly since 2020. Much of the literature emphasises the pandemic as a landmark event in the trajectory of worsening gendered inequalities in academia. In this vein, researchers have drawn attention to unequal patterns and dynamics involving academic productivity, work–life balance, academic work/housework divide, and counter-proposals to tackle these ‘gendered and gendering’ effects [5] (p. 499). Again, given the richness and depth of this literature, the multi-faceted and long-standing, yet often invisible character of gender inequalities in academia seem to have been renewed against the revelatory backdrop of the global pandemic.

In the second section, the article emphasises the need to broaden and historicize this pandemic-related literature, by including additional criticisms raised by several scholars. Here, I expand upon what has mostly been a temporal focus on the pandemic by highlighting an alternative view of the marketised, neoliberal logic of contemporary academia. This leads to the final part, where the contributions of social-reproduction theory (SRT) and non-reductionist Marxist approaches to (higher) education, are unpacked to further link the current literature on pandemic-related inequalities to a broader critique of social relations. Some of the studies reviewed in the article already build on the specific strands of SRT and Marxist perspectives theoretically (e.g., [48]); therefore, connections have been present to some extent. However, this specific part details the conceptual starting points and strengths of these perspectives further and emphasises the importance of the analysis of capitalism and the interconnected dynamics of production and reproduction that they put forward for the literature on pandemic-related gender inequalities in academia.

Marx’s social theory is valuable as it places the exploitative and alienating character of the capital–labour relation, which is built on the production and extraction of surplus value, at the heart of its analysis of societal power relations and inequalities. Through this lens, we could grasp the manifestations of pandemic-related inequalities in academia not simply as a consequence of the pandemic or due to any ‘peculiar’ dynamics of higher education but as part of a structural, enduring, societal condition. SRT, in turn, builds on these insights to provide an analysis of gender dynamics as part and parcel of capitalist social relations at the intersection of production and social reproduction. Together, they invite us to observe that the analysis of gender inequalities in the context of academia during and after the pandemic should not limit its horizon to academia as a demarcated domain from society so that it can acknowledge the scope, reach, and diverse impact of intersectional societal inequalities and place academia within it. These approaches also bring forth insights for the horizon of alternatives as highlighted earlier. They remind us that policy proposals and alternatives tackling the specific gender inequalities under scrutiny in the article must account for their structural and long-standing character and investigate the horizons of more systemic, anti-capitalist transformations to counter exploitative, alienating, and anxiety-producing power relations in contemporary societies.

Note that the recency of the pandemic and the short timeframe within which the scholarship has developed presents a limitation since it makes it challenging to reach definitive assertions regarding the literature. Therefore, as this body of pandemic-related scholarship expands and consolidates itself in the period ahead, systematic literature reviews, which also include experiences and studies beyond the Global North, will be valuable as part of a future research agenda to enrich and address the limitations of this review⁴.

To conclude, as the effects of the global pandemic further enforce and entangle with the structural inequalities and marginalisations fostered by global capitalism, explicit

acknowledgment of this interconnectedness in scholarly investigations and progressive political action remain on the agenda for those striving to create more humane and equal academia and society.

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Notes

1. Drawing on the UK Labour Force survey data with occupational classifications, Hupkau and Petrongolo [81] demonstrate that the labour market prospects of women have been harmed more significantly in the current COVID-19 crisis compared to men and compared to the previous crisis episodes given the fact that the impact of the lockdowns and social distancing was felt more drastically in service sector jobs where women were overrepresented (see also Dang and Nguyen [82]). Adams-Prassl et al. [83] (p. 2) note that in the USA and UK, women are significantly more likely to have lost their jobs compared to men. Based on findings in a six-country survey (including data from China, Italy, Japan, South Korea, UK, and USA), Dang and Nguyen [82] (p. 2) further support this point by adding that women are found to be '24 percent more likely to permanently lose their job compared to men.'
2. Exploring the impact of prior disasters, inclusive of the 2008 Great Recession and Hurricane Katrina alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, on patterns of social inequality in the American heartland and emphasising the importance in documenting similarities across disasters, Perry et al. [84] (p. 3) conclude that 'the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath are a result of common, pervasive, and well-recognised human action and inaction.' Similarly, Wrigley-Field [85] (p. 21855) explores the persistence and deadliness of racial inequality in the USA context vis à vis COVID-19 to conclude that 'a century after the 1918 flu, the basic fact endures that Black disadvantage is on the scale of the worst pandemics in modern USA history'. These conclusions also suggest that policy interventions must be more structural and long term rather than solely on short-term basis [84] (pp. 3–4) [85] (p. 21856).
3. The other two definitions that Bakker identifies among the diverse perspectives of social reproduction found in the literature refer to the 'biological reproduction of the species, and the conditions and social constructions of motherhood' and 'the reproduction and provisioning of caring needs that may be wholly privatised within families and kinship networks or socialised to some degree through state supports' [70] (p. 541).
4. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

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