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"I Felt like I Was Losing Every Day"
Women Educators' Lived Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

The covid-19 pandemic severely disrupted the education system in Canada from March 2020 throughout the 2020–21 school year. It also had disproportionate secondary effects on women in terms of unpaid care, economic loss, and poor mental health. This article explores the lived experience of women educators in the province of Alberta, drawing on interviews and focus groups with 39 educators. Findings indicate that the pandemic not only exacerbated the triple burden that women educators, in particular, bear but added additional layers of responsibility related to public health management, educating children at home, elder care responsibilities, and emotional labour. The essential role women educators fulfilled within the covid-19 response, at work and at home, cost them time, professional development opportunities, mental wellness, and the positive rewards that had drawn them to the educational field. Current concerns around educator burnout and retention may be mitigated by acting on the recommendations of women educators regarding the development of more equitable education systems and social policy.

RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

"I Felt like I Was Losing Every Day": Women Educators' Lived Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the education system in Canada from March 2020 throughout the 2020–21 school year. It also had disproportionate secondary effects on women in terms of unpaid care, economic loss, and poor mental health. This article explores the lived experience of women educators in the province of Alberta, drawing on interviews and focus groups with 39 educators. Findings indicate that the pandemic not only exacerbated the triple burden that women educators, in particular, bear but added additional layers of responsibility related to public health management, educating children at home, elder care responsibilities, and emotional labour. The essential role women educators fulfilled within the COVID-19 response, at work and at home, cost them time, professional development opportunities, mental wellness, and the positive rewards that had drawn them to the educational field. Current concerns around educator burnout and retention may be mitigated by acting on the recommendations of women educators regarding the development of more equitable education systems and social policy.

Keywords: gender, women, education, Canada, Alberta, COVID-19, health, feminist, care economy

Résumé : La pandémie de COVID-19 a gravement perturbé le système éducatif au Canada à partir de mars 2020 tout au long de l'année scolaire 2020-2021. Elle a également eu des effets secondaires disproportionnés sur les femmes au point de vue soins non rémunérés, perte économique et mauvaise santé mentale. Cet article explore l'expérience vécue des éducatrices dans la province de l'Alberta, en s'appuyant sur des entrevues et des groupes de discussion avec 39 éducatrices. Les résultats indiquent que la pandémie a non seulement exacerbé le triple fardeau que portent les éducatrices, en particulier, mais a ajouté des niveaux supplémentaires de responsabilité liés à la gestion de la santé publique, à l'éducation des enfants à la maison, aux responsabilités des soins aux personnes âgées et au travail émotionnel. Le rôle essentiel joué par les éducatrices dans le cadre de la réponse à la COVID-19, au travail et à la maison, leur a coûté du temps, des possibilités d'avancement professionnel, le bien-être mental

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et les récompenses positives qui les avaient attirées vers le domaine de l'éducation. Les préoccupations actuelles concernant l'épuisement et la rétention des éducatrices peuvent être atténuées en agissant sur les recommandations des éducatrices concernant le développement de systèmes éducatifs et de politiques sociales plus équitables.

Mots clefs : genre, femmes, éducation, Canada, Alberta, COVID-19, santé, féministe, économie des soins

On 15 March 2020, the Alberta government announced the closure of all schools and daycares, in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic. The shuttering of schools lasted for the remainder of the 2020 school year. Over the summer, as scientific understanding of COVID-19 increased and case numbers declined, the decision was made to reopen schools, with the option of online learning available to families. Most students and teachers returned to the classroom in September 2020 for a school year like no other. COVID-19 case numbers quickly began to rise again, leading to secondary school closures in November 2020 and all schools shifting to online learning for the first few weeks of 2021. While such measures led to a temporary reduction in cases, numbers began to climb once more in the spring, causing at first isolated and then province-wide school closures in May 2021.

While numerous studies have analyzed the impacts of COVID-19 on students' education, there is little research on the experiences of education workers.[1] Margaret MacDonald and Cher Hill's research in British Columbia explored teachers' early experiences of the pandemic and concerns regarding the 2020–21 school year.[2] Their findings indicated that teachers questioned how to keep children safe and worried about supporting both online and face-to-face learning. Laura Sokal, Lesly Trudel, and Jeff Babb surveyed Canadian teachers in April and June 2020, focusing on attitudes toward change, with results indicating increasing levels of burnout and cynicism.[3] In January 2022, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) released results from a study that found 97 per cent of participants had experienced increased physical, mental, and emotional workload during the 2020–21 school year.[4] These conclusions build on research by provincial teachers' unions, including the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), which found that over 70 per cent of teachers were

1. Andy Hargreaves, "What the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Taught Us about Teachers and Teaching," *FACETS* 6 (2021): 1835–1863.

2. Margaret MacDonald and Cher Hill, "The Educational Impact of the Covid-19 Rapid Response on Teachers, Students, and Families: Insights from British Columbia, Canada," *Prospects* 51 (2022): 627–641.

3. Laura Sokal, Lesly Eblie Trudel, and Jeff Babb, "Canadian Teachers' Attitudes toward Change, Efficacy, and Burnout during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 1 (2021): 100016.

4. Canadian Teachers' Federation, *"But at What Cost?" Teacher Mental Health during COVID* (Ottawa: Canadian Teachers' Federation 2022), https://www.ctf-fce.ca/ctf-fce-pan-canadian-research-report-on-teacher-mental-health/.

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exhausted, while 63 per cent reported feelings of isolation.[5] Globally, research has linked increased burnout to COVID-19-related anxiety and lack of administrative support and has documented the challenges of virtual education.[6]

Within the limited research on teachers' experiences of COVID-19, there has been a notable lack of gender analysis. Exceptions include a paper that discusses Italian teachers, focusing on the relatively higher risk of negative mental health impacts among women, and research from Ireland that documents the challenges facing teachers who are also mothers in terms of their unpaid care responsibilities but does not discuss their professional roles.[7] Natalie Spadafora and colleagues found that during the initial year of the pandemic, kindergarten teachers with child and elder care responsibilities were more likely to report moderate levels of depressive symptoms; however, the authors do not analyze the gendered nature of care work.[8] The lack of gender analysis of teacher experiences during COVID-19 is significant considering that substantive research indicates women have been disproportionately impacted by the secondary effects of the pandemic, including increased unpaid care burdens, greater risk of violence, economic loss, and heightened mental health threats.[9] The education field in Canada is distinctly feminized, with women making up 68 per cent of all workers and a clear majority of teachers.[10] These labour force demographics reflect a historical devaluing of the profession (in terms of both pay and status) and norms that consider work with children as

5. Alberta Teachers' Association, *Alberta Teachers Responding to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Pandemic Research Survey Study* (Edmonton: Alberta Teachers' Association, 2021), https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/COVID-19/2020-School-Re-entry/Pages/Covid-19-Survey.aspx.

6. Tim Pressley, "Factors Contributing to Teacher Burnout during COVID-19," *Educational Researcher* 50 (June 2021): 326–327; Michael W. Marek, Chiou Sheng Chew, and Wen Chi Vivian Wu, "Teacher Experiences in Converting Classes to Distance Learning in the COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies* 19 (2021): 89–109.

7. Alessio Matiz, Franco Fabbro, Andrea Paschetto, Damiano Cantone, Anselmo Roberto Paolone, and Cristiano Crescentini, "Positive Impact of Mindfulness Meditation on Mental Health of Female Teachers during the COVID-19 Outbreak in Italy," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 (2020): 6450; Serena Clark, Amy McGrane, Neasa Boyle, Natasha Joksimovic, Lydia Burke, Nicole Rock, and Katriona O'Sullivan, "'You're a Teacher, You're a Mother, You're a Worker': Gender Inequality during COVID-19 in Ireland," *Gender, Work and Organization* 28 (July 2020): 1352–1362.

8. Natalie Spadafora, Caroline Reid-Westoby, Molly Pottruff, and Magdalena Janus, "Family Responsibilities and Mental Health of Kindergarten Educators during the First COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown in Ontario, Canada," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 115 (July 2022): 103735.

9. Julia Smith, Sara E. Davies, Huiyun Feng, Connie C. R. Gan, Karen A. Grépin, Sophie Harman, Asha Herten-Crabb, Rosemary Morgan, Nimisha Vandan, and Clare Wenham, "More Than a Public Health Crisis: A Feminist Political Economic Analysis of COVID-19," *Global Public Health* 16, 8–9 (2021): 1364–1380.

10. Statistics Canada, "Teachers and Professors," in *Back to School … by the Numbers*, last modified 6 January 2023, https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/dai/smr08/2014/smr08_190_2014.

feminine.[11] Thus, education is feminized in terms of both who does it and how it is valued.

Recognizing that it is unlikely that teachers are isolated from the disproportionate secondary effects of COVID-19 on women, this article explores the lived experiences of women teachers and school leaders (principals and vice-principals) in Alberta during the 2020–21 school year.[12] Findings indicate that the pandemic not only exacerbated the triple burden that women educators, in particular, bear but added additional layers of responsibility in terms of public health management, children's education at home, elder care responsibilities, and emotional labour. In analyzing these dynamics, this article seeks to highlight the contribution of women educators to the COVID-19 response, both at work and at home, and documents the costs of their contributions. It argues that women educators not only continued to fulfill an increased triple burden of paid work, unpaid care, and family/community management; they also contributed essential emotional labour and filled crucial public health roles. In so doing, they both were integral to the COVID-19 response in schools, homes, and the community and – in the absence of gender-transformative policies – bore the costs of the response individually.

Beyond the Triple Burden

In conceptualizing the role of women teachers during the COVID-19 response, I draw on the concept of the triple burden, which refers to the responsibilities placed on women in neoliberal economies to perform paid work, do unpaid care work, and manage family or community relationships.[13] In Canada, although gender roles have shifted over time, resulting in an increase in the proportion of women in the paid workforce – from 24 per cent in 1953 to 64.7 per cent in 2019 – men's participation in unpaid labour inside the home has not adapted to a corresponding degree, with women still doing two to three times the amount of unpaid care work done by men.[14] This "second shift" and related differences in time use have sustained related gender inequalities and power relationships, restricting women's opportunities for personal and

11. Regina Cortina and Sonsoles San Román, "Introduction: Women and Teaching – Global Perspectives on the Feminization of a Profession," in *Women and Teaching: Global Perspectives on the Feminization of a Profession* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), doi:10.1057/9781403984371.

12. The terms "woman" and "women" are used in this article to refer to all those who identify as women regardless of sex assigned at birth.

13. Helen Jaqueline McLaren, Karen Rosalind Wong, Kieu Nga Nguyen, and Komalee Nadeeka Damayanthi Mahamadachchi, "Covid-19 and Women's Triple Burden: Vignettes from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia," *Social Sciences* 9, 5 (2021): 87.

14. Melissa Moyser and Amanda Burlock, "Time Use: Total Work Burden, Unpaid Work, and Leisure," in *Women in Canada: A Gender-Based Statistical Report* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 30 July 2018), https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/54931-eng.htm.

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professional development, as well as community and political participation.[15] Men have, on average, more control over their time outside work than women do, as more claims are laid on women's time by family members.[16] The triple burden imposes multiple costs on women, including economic, opportunity, and well-being costs. While these costs are often viewed and responded to through individual or household gender strategies, policy responses, such as around child care and labour standards, structure possibilities for more equitable arrangements.[17]

COVID-19 exacerbated the tension between professional and unpaid care responsibilities for women across Canada. While men's share of unpaid care work increased in the context of the pandemic, women continued to do the majority of this work, which includes caring for children and other dependents, the elderly, and people living with disabilities or chronic illness.[18] Such work is shaped not only by gender dynamics but also by cultural norms and household composition. For example, women living in multigenerational households often bear additional unpaid care responsibilities.[19] Teachers, most of whom continued to fulfill their professional tasks in the context of increased unpaid care, had to balance multiple shifting responsibilities. MacDonald and Hill found that the most profound impact on teachers was the shift that took place in terms of work-home balance. They argue that "for teachers who had children, this was characterized as a juggling act, where the teacher was wearing many hats and responsible for both their own and other children's needs."[20] In other words, the previous act of managing both professional and unpaid care responsibilities became even more fraught.

The third burden, disproportionately placed on women, includes household and community management, which Sibyl Schwarzenbach describes as "all those rational activities (thinking about particular others and their needs, caring for them, cooking their meals, etc.) which go towards reproducing a

15. Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin, 2012); Valerie Bryson and Ruth Deery, "Public Policy, 'Men's Time,' and Power: The Work of Community Midwives in the British National Health Service," *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (March–April 2010): 91–98.

16. Andrea Hjálmsdóttir, Valgerður S Bjarnadóttir, and Minningasjóður Eðvarðs Sigurðssonar, "'I Have Turned into a Foreman Here at Home': Families and Work–Life Balance in Times of COVID-19 in a Gender Equality Paradise," *Gender, Work and Organization* 28 (January 2021): 268–283.

17. Hochschild and Machung, *Second Shift*.

18. Kevin Shafer, Casey Scheibling, and Melissa A. Milkie, "The Division of Domestic Labor before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada: Stagnation versus Shifts in Fathers' Contributions," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 57 (2020): 523–49.

19. Julie Ann McMullin, "Patterns of Paid and Unpaid Work: The Influence of Power, Social Context, and Family Background," *Canadian Journal on Aging* 24 (Fall 2005): 225–236.

20. MacDonald and Hill, "Educational Impact," 12.

particular set of relationships between persons over time."[21] In heterosexual relationships, mothers are much more likely than fathers to be household managers.[22] Their work includes the mental burden that goes into planning, decision-making, and monitoring family and community members to ensure they have what they need. A key characteristic of such work is that it is challenging to delegate, as delegation requires management work by definition; for example, asking a co-parent to make an appointment for a child can be as much work as doing it oneself. Mental work often goes unnoticed by other family members, as do effects on mothers' well-being, such as stress and anxiety.[23] Literature from the field of education suggests that such managerial labour is also expected as unpaid contributions by teachers to the education system, and teachers' caring approach to their profession is often manipulated.[24] The elements of the triple burden imposed on women often overlap in such ways, as will be demonstrated below.

Such work includes emotional labour, which is identified as a key theme in the analysis that follows and includes those activities relevant to the emotional well-being of other family members and the provision of emotional support.[25] A key aspect of emotional labour is managing one's own emotions so as to be able to provide support to another.[26] Research has demonstrated how emotional labour is gendered because it is most often expected of women, and it then becomes part of women's routines. Emotional labour has traditionally been identified with women's work and the role of the mother in the family.[27] The portrayal of emotional labour as a "natural activity" for women has resulted in its devaluation in cultural and economic terms.[28] Such devaluations also result in a lack of recognition of emotional labour conducted in

21. Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach, "On Civic Friendship," *Ethics* 107 (October 1996): 102.

22. Lucia Ciciolla and Suniya S. Luthar, "Invisible Household Labor and Ramifications for Adjustment: Mothers as Captains of Households," *Sex Roles* 81 (October 2019): 467–486.

23. Liz Dean, Brendan Churchill, and Leah Ruppanner, "The Mental Load: Building a Deeper Theoretical Understanding of How Cognitive and Emotional Labor Overload Women and Mothers," *Community, Work and Family* 25, 1 (2022): 13–29.

24. Julia Ismael, Althea Eannace Lazzaro, and Brianna Ishihara, "It Takes Heart: The Experiences and Working Conditions of Caring Educators," *Radical Teacher* 119 (Spring 2021): 30–40; Stephen Chatelier and Sophie Rudolph, "Teacher Responsibility: Shifting Care from Student to (Professional) Self?," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39, 1 (2018): 1–15.

25. Melissa A. Curran, Brandon T. McDaniel, Amanda M. Pollitt, and Casey J. Totenhagen, "Gender, Emotion Work, and Relationship Quality: A Daily Diary Study," *Sex Roles* 73 (August 2015): 157–173.

26. Benjamin Gray, "The Emotional Labour of Nursing 1: Exploring the Concept," *Nursing Times*, 4 March 2009, 26–29.

27. Carol Vincent and Annette Braun, "Being 'Fun' at Work: Emotional Labour, Class, Gender and Childcare," *British Educational Research Journal* 39 (August 2013): 751–768.

28. Dean, Churchill, and Ruppanner, "Mental Load."

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professional settings. Previous studies have documented the prevalence of emotional labour within female-dominated professions, such as teaching, and how this work, along with other forms of care work, is rarely recognized and often undervalued.[29] Andy Hargreaves writes, "Teaching is an emotional practice, not just a cognitive and intellectual one. It arouses, inflects, and engages with the emotions of others and with teachers' own emotions too."[30]

Approach and Methods

In this research, I apply a lived experience perspective focused on everyday life occurrences and self-awareness. Feminist scholarship has a long history of drawing on lived experience as an approach that is committed to the creation of knowledge grounded in the experiences of people belonging to groups most affected by the subject of the research.[31] As Joan Sangster writes, "Asking why and how women explain, rationalize and make sense of their past [or in this case, their recent experiences] offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced."[32] Such feminist scholarship aims to make visible experiences that are often ignored, including those of gendered subjects, capturing both the "ordinary" and the "extraordinary," across a range of individuals who are comparably in a similar situation – such as an infectious disease outbreak.[33] While recognizing that individual experiences are unique, elements of commonality across lived experiences facilitate analysis of clusters of shared intersubjective experiences, illustrating recurring patterns and typical forms of behaviour and concerns.

While recognizing the power relationship inherent in the research process, feminist scholars apply interview and focus group methods as approaches that can enable respondents to shape the research agenda by articulating what is important to them.[34] Building on this tradition, I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with women educators from March to May 2021.[35]

29. Lynn Isenbarger and Michalinos Zembylas, "The Emotional Labour of Caring in Teaching," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22 (January 2006): 120–134.

30. Hargreaves, "COVID-19 Pandemic."

31. Elizabeth Yarrow and Victoria Pagan, "Reflections on Front-Line Medical Work during COVID-19 and the Embodiment of Risk," *Gender, Work and Organization* 28 (January 2021): 89–100.

32. Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, 1 (1994): 5–28.

33. Ian McIntosh and Sharon Wright, "Exploring What the Notion of 'Lived Experience' Offers for Social Policy Analysis," *Journal of Social Policy* 48 (July 2019): 449–467.

34. Sangster, "Telling Our Stories."

35. The term "educators" is used here to refer to teachers, principals, and vice-principals; "school leaders" refers to principals and vice-principals.

I recruited focus group participants voluntarily through advertisements on the ATA Women in Leadership Summit website. I held five focus groups with a total of 29 women educators, including teachers and school leaders (principals and vice-principals). Criteria for inclusion in focus groups included identifying as a woman and having worked as a teacher or school leader in Alberta between September 2020 and the time of data collection.

Three focus groups were held during the Women in Leadership Summit on 5 March 2021, and two were held the following week. In an effort to learn from a variety of experiences, I organized focus groups as follows: teachers from rural schools (six participants); teachers from Edmonton-area schools (seven participants); teachers from Calgary-area schools (six participants); school leaders (six participants); and teachers who identified as Indigenous or racialized women (four participants).[36] Across participants, years of experience ranged from three to over 30, and the number of dependents at home ranged from none to three, though the majority of educators (19 of the 29) had dependents.

To gain deeper understanding of key themes that emerged from the focus groups, I conducted ten individual semi-structured interviews with school leaders (n = 6) and superintendents (n = 4) in May 2021. All interview participants were women, except for one male superintendent.[37]

Applying reflexive thematic analysis, I first created a preliminary set of codes, which was refined into a thematic framework and then mapped according to the concepts of the triple burden, emotional labour, and public health contributions, including costs associated with each type of burden.[38]

While I aimed to include educators who represented a variety of identities and geographies (as noted above), more similarities emerged than differences; as a result, common experiences are the focus of analysis here. Coherence across the transcripts may partly reflect the virtual mode of data collection, which inhibited my ability to build relationships with participants and therefore gain the trust needed to discuss nuanced and sensitive aspects of their experiences. Further research is needed to fully understand the diversities of experiences among women educators during the pandemic – particularly

36. Other focus groups also included participants who identified as Indigenous or racialized. The purpose of this focus group was to provide a safe space specifically for Indigenous and racialized educators.

37. Focus groups and interviews were held virtually through Zoom, and audio recorded, with the recordings transcribed. Simon Fraser University provided ethical approval and participants provided verbal consent, with participant anonymity preserved throughout the analysis and presentation of findings. I used a semi-structured discussion format, with a mix of questions around key themes, as well as opportunities for participants to lead the discussion.

38. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "What Can 'Thematic Analysis' Offer Health and Wellbeing Researchers?" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 9, 1 (2014): 26152.

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the experiences of racialized educators and the differences between rural and urban communities.

"A Gong Show": Professional Responsibilities

Many of the changes in professional responsibilities caused by COVID-19 affected all educators, regardless of gender. However, these effects were structured by the feminization of the education sector, which is reflected in attitudes that devalue the profession, partly through the perception that it is easy or natural for women to care for (never mind educate) children, which in turn justifies lack of investment in and exploitation of labour.[39] For example, teachers in Alberta, particularly in rural and remote communities, entered the pandemic already overburdened owing to a substitute teacher shortage that meant schools were scrambling to meet human resource needs.[40] This shortage was then exacerbated by increased teacher absences due to the need to isolate and many substitute teachers deciding to serve a limited number of schools as a way of reducing their risk of infection.[41] When substitute teachers were not available, which was often the case, gaps had to be filled within the school. A principal explained, "The impact for staff is that whenever you don't have coverage for your building, you are then using internal coverage – who has a prep period, who has a piece of time, who has a lunch break, who has a recess break, who has time – which is intended over the course of that day to allow them to recharge, to make sure that they have the energy that they need." They went on to note, "I haven't met a teacher that hasn't rallied to help their colleagues and to provide internal coverage. Teachers have huge hearts and they are so giving. The issue becomes, certainly for a system like ours where we've had week after week after week, after week after week, of not having appropriate numbers of substitutes."[42]

In high schools, the response to the substitute shortage was often a shift to online teaching; if a teacher had to quarantine, they would instruct virtually from their home. One vice-principal in a rural school that had experienced a large COVID-19 outbreak recalled, "At one point we had fourteen teachers away, and so to bring fourteen subs in, we couldn't find fourteen subs, and so then we ended up changing the system. Then the poor kids, if their teacher was

39. Cortina and Román, "Introduction."

40. Jamie Labeuf, "Rural Communities Near Fort McMurray Struggling to Find, Retain Teachers," CBC News, 7 July 2019, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/teacher-turnover-rural-wood-buffalo-1.5202367.

41. Teri Fikowski, "Calgary Schools Face Staffing Challenge with Shortage of Substitute Teachers," CTV News, 2 May 2022, https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/it-s-very-frustrating-calgary-schools-dealing-with-staffing-substitute-teacher-shortages-1.5885155.

42. Principal, interview by the author, 7 May 2021, Gender and COVID-19 Project. Subsequent quoted excerpts from focus groups and interviews will be cited within the text by date.

quarantined, it's like, you guys, you're not quarantined, but your class is going to be online for the next two weeks, because we couldn't find subs" (interview, 9 May 2021). Virtual learning was recognized as a poor solution for both the students, who lost out on in-person learning and connecting with their peers, and the teachers, who had to work from home while dealing with the personal and family challenges of isolation and potential COVID-19 illness.

Shifts to and from online learning were described as "a gong show," with there being "no end to confusion," particularly when the shift was abrupt (focus group, 5 March 2021). Teachers felt they had little control or autonomy within this chaos. One teacher described online learning as follows:

> It's 20 or 30 children on the other end of the computer that need computer assistance, that can't find their login, that aren't really sure, that are having volume problems that need help. All of those problems need to be resolved. While a teacher has things going on at home that involve their rest of their world. And in addition, then trying to teach a lesson that they probably spent weeks getting organized, ready to teach in the classroom. And with no notice, now they need to turn that on into somehow doing it in an engaging way online. (Focus group, 5 March 2021)

While some teachers expressed pride in being able to adapt to online delivery, and found satisfaction in learning new methods, most found the transition chaotic and stressful.

Educators also became responsible for public health management. While the ATA provided guidance and advocated for access to personal protective equipment (PPE), public health responsibilities greatly increased teacher workload, with additional cleaning and monitoring for sickness added to teachers' responsibilities. One teacher reflected, "I think that a lot of teachers felt some concern with the PPE when we first started. Also, there was a lot of confusion about the return-to-school entry plans. We were basically required to create them on our own, kind of last minute" (focus group, 5 March 2021). A vice-principal described teachers in her school as "working their butts off sanitizing these desks a million times; they're watching for every little sniffle underneath the masks and they're just exhausted by the extra work other than teaching, and I think that's the biggest impact we've had" (interview, 12 May 2021).

The need to protect against and respond to an unfolding pandemic continued throughout the school year as new information emerged, guidelines changed, and waves of infections followed. A school leader noted the need to "be adaptive and flexible, and to problem solve and to be nimble, and to learn new skills while trying to provide instruction for everybody else who is learning new skills, [which] has been extraordinarily difficult" (focus group, 7 March 2021). For example, a principal in an inner-city school noted that, instead of emailing COVID-19-related information, she found she had to call parents: "The other challenge we have is that we have so many families who do not speak English at home. And so you send documents, and they may be translated, but some of our families don't read in their home language either. So it's much easier for us to phone, because there's usually a higher level of conversational English that

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we can get by on" (interview, 10 May 2021). Ensuring public health protocols were implemented and communicated greatly added to educator workload.

School leaders, in particular, bore the responsibility of public health decision-making and implementation. While they recognized that taking on additional responsibilities during crisis was part of their jobs, being responsible for public health safety, as opposed to educational standards, created new, high-stakes challenges. One principal noted that during the first few months of the school year, "every decision we were called out on" (interview, 12 May 2021). Many leaders expressed feelings of responsibility for COVID-19 outbreaks and the sense that cases in their school reflected on their performance. One principal shared that "to have that perception and the … perceived community pressure that you'll do everything you can to keep them safe means that if somebody ends up not safe, it must be your fault. And that's a heavy load to carry" (interview, 10 May 2021). Principals felt they were literally asking people to trust them with their own or their children's lives: for instance, "now I'm introducing myself to staff in August and saying, hi … please trust me with your life; come on into the building with 160 other people" (interview, 14 May 2021). Another principal described a recent conversation with her counsellor: "the first question she asked me in my therapy session was, 'What's the worst thing that could happen?' My answer was, 'Someone could die on my watch'" (interview, 15 May 2021). School leaders noted that while being in decision-making roles enabled them to develop appropriate policies for their schools, it was also "a great way of passing off responsibility, right?" (interview, 10 May 2021). School leaders expressed that because they did not have the experience or skills of public health professionals, decision-making power generated fear and anxiety, as opposed to rewards and recognition.

While education as a sector is feminized, school leadership remains masculinized as a profession in terms of both who fulfills roles (slightly over half of principals and vice-principals are men) and the higher-status, managerial nature of the work.[43] As such, principals and vice-principals are expected to work extended and flexible hours when needed and to prioritize professional responsibilities over personal ones. These demands increased exponentially in the context of COVID-19. For example, while teachers worked from home during school closures, principals were still required to be in the school building. One principal, a single parent, described having to bring her two young children to the school with her, giving them colouring books and "throwing snacks" at them while she worked. Another noted that "having someone in an empty [school] building was more important [to the district and ministry] than my kids having Mom at home" (interview, 14 May 2021). Such priorities reflect an assumption that school leaders can depend on another parent (i.e. a

43. Cherry McGee Banks, "Gender and Race as Factors in Educational Leadership and Administration," in Margert Grogan, ed., *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership* (New York: Wiley, 2013), 299–338.

wife) at home to provide care to dependents – an assumption that disadvantages women leaders and those not in partnered parental relationships.

Even, or especially, when schools were open, the demands placed on school leaders' time increased dramatically. Most school leaders were responsible for calling potential contacts and relaying information regarding isolation and testing. One principal spoke about how this affected her day:

> For example, today I had five bus kids [exposed to COVID-19] – well, that just threw my whole morning, so I couldn't deal with anything on my desk this morning because I had five bus kids who are close contacts sitting in classrooms and they just got identified. So I'm isolating kids, I'm putting them in spots, calling parents, settling those kids' nerves because when they hear they're a close contact they automatically think they're getting something shoved up their nose, and they're crying and they're scared, right. That was the whole morning this morning, so all the things I had planned this morning are going to get done this evening or tomorrow. (Interview, 10 May 2021)

School leaders were asked to do contact tracing at all hours of the day and over weekends; for women leaders, this conflicted with other care responsibilities they had to bear (as described below). Another principal noted, "I got the call personally yesterday at 11, I had to be at the school at noon, didn't leave till 3 p.m., so that was my Sunday. This is typical of every school administrator right now, having to go to their school – that principal was just on the phone right now. They got a call last night at 10:15 p.m., had to be at the school by 10:30, done calls at one o'clock in the morning" (interview, 7 May 2021). Such responsibilities extended to the holidays: "We were on Christmas holiday. So, my assistant principal and I were called back into the school to do the contact tracing, to phone the families and say the last day of school, before the Christmas break, was the contact date. To which families said, you've just ruined Christmas for us. And, you know, like, it wasn't great" (interview, 12 May 2021). Another principal explained that they invested substantial time in communicating with and reassuring parents: "So not only have we had to do these contact tracing calls; you're getting calls all the time when numbers start to go up, where parents just need reassurance. And they're asking for you to tell them what to do and we can't tell them what to do, so that's taxing too because those conversations are taking ten, twelve, thirteen minutes a call" (interview, 14 May 2021).

In addition to the time costs noted above, public health responsibilities required substantial emotional expenditure. It took a great deal of sensitivity and compassion to communicate bad news to others and support them in responding: "You're having conversations with staff that they need to quarantine, and a hundred parents that they need to quarantine again and go get a COVID test done. They're conversations you need to be emotionally invested in too, and you need to be caring for them and be sensitive and compassionate" (interview, 10 May 2021). The possibility of getting a call about an outbreak at any time impacted school leaders' ability to relax when not working. They described the anxiety of "waiting every minute on a weekend for the phone

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call to say you have a case of COVID in your school" (interview, 12 May 2021). Another noted that she "can't separate home and work anymore. And maybe that's too much. I have to be on-call all the time" (interview, 14 May 2021). Similarly, a principal explained, "You know, at night I'll go to bed and I'll be thinking, okay, if this staff member is positive then I'm contact tracing in my head before I even go to sleep at night" (interview, 10 May 2021). Many respondents noted that high levels of stress contributed to poor sleep. One educator noted,

> I don't think I've slept really well since last March 16th. Because every single day I drive in to work and I wonder is this the day we're going to get another AHS [Alberta Health Services] call? Is this a day that we're going to get the call and that's going to be another six hours of our team having to deal with that? . . . it's sort of that humming constant stress of what is about to happen that is – and that's why I said overwhelming and exhausting. (Focus group, 5 March 2021)

This anxiety was layered on top of the increased professional burdens resulting from a lack of substitute teachers and shifts to virtual learning, described above. A principal explained how awareness of staffing shortages caused teachers to work even when sick: "People are just getting run down and they don't want to call in sick because they know they should but they don't want to because they know there's no subs because of the shortage. So it's kind of a double-edged sword as then you're only going to get yourself sicker" (interview, 14 May 2021). The added worry of monitoring for COVID-19 symptoms complicated calculations about the costs of missing work for themselves and colleagues, compounding anxiety and stress around meeting professional obligations.

Lack of time and recognition of the limits of online learning contributed to feelings of moral distress among educators. Moral distress, a concept that originally developed in nursing studies, can be defined as a phenomenon that occurs when someone knows the right thing to do but cannot pursue that action because of organizational or institutional constraints.[44] Research on moral distress among healthcare workers has found it to be more common among women than men.[45] Much like nurses when they have to care for patients without adequate supplies, teachers expressed a sense of helplessness when they could not ensure their students' educational goals and well-being. A teacher who worked with children with special needs noted,

> One of the hardest things that I had to face was, I worried about my kids. I worried, like, many of my kids are autoimmune compromised and so I worried, like, would they be okay. And then it was one of those, like, they don't socialize as it is, you know, before COVID. And now, having them being stuck in their homes, how are they going to be okay, you know, were they going to be okay? How could I make that, you know, their life be normal, and trying

44. Curran et al., "Gender, Emotion Work."

45. Christopher B. O'Connell, "Gender and the Experience of Moral Distress in Critical Care Nurses," *Nursing Ethics* 22 (February 2015): 32–42.

to achieve that? How was I supposed to support their families when I couldn't see them? (Focus group, 9 March 2021)

Moral distress is often the result of disempowerment owing to a lack of control over working conditions, access to resources, and outcomes, and it is more common in feminized professions, including teaching.[46] In the case of COVID-19, educators felt compelled to continue to provide high-quality education and support to students, even when physical distancing requirements and human resource limitations made it impossible. A principal reflected, "I think that teachers always feel – or often, I would say – they feel the moral obligation to ensure that their students are educated and educated well. And during COVID, because of the way that things had been handled, I think that there's a feeling of not being able to do their best work, or perhaps failure in some way" (interview, 15 May 2021). Many educators spoke about feeling guilty that students would have learning gaps and suffer long-term effects from schooling interruptions. One teacher described the most profound impact of the pandemic as "always feeling like you're failing" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Another noted, "I felt really defeated. I felt like I wasn't doing a good enough job, I felt like, I felt like a loser. I was at a loss – how was I supposed to help my kids? – and I felt like I was losing every day" (focus group, 5 March 2021). As moral distress is a determinant of poor mental health and burnout, such experiences have potentially long-term effects on teachers' careers and well-being. Indeed, superintendents worried about burnout within their divisions: "We're at a terrible risk for burnout of educators. We have people requesting leaves for next year, we have an increase in medical leaves that are occurring. We have individuals that we anticipated taking a leave next year asking for early leave. As a superintendent, that is probably one of my greatest worries is the health and well-being of our system. And will we have adequate staff going forward? Adequate numbers of staff, we have spectacular staff" (interview, 21 May 2021). Such concerns were supported by research by the ATA and CTF, both of which found increased risk of burnout related to increased work burdens that resulted from COVID-19.[47]

"The Go-To Person": Unpaid Care

While the challenges of working short staffed and switching to online learning were experienced by all teachers, women educators were more likely to also experience an increase in unpaid care labour at home. One teacher noted a difference in how her children treated her and her husband: "when

46. O'Connell, "Gender and the Experience."

47. Alberta Teachers' Association, *Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout: Research Study* (Edmonton: ATA, 28 March 2021), https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/COOR-101-30-2%20Compassion%20Fatigue-P2-Draft%20Report%20-%202021%2004%2007.pdf.

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my husband, who is a teacher, shuts the door, they won't bug him. But they'll come – someone might come through that door at any moment and come ask me for something, right. … because as the mom you're the go-to person" (focus group, 7 March 2021). A superintendent similarly identified a trend where women teachers, in particular, had to balance both child care and professional responsibilities:

> And one of the things that I'm seeing in my system is that they are also the caregiver in their home. And so when their children are at home or there is a requirement, it is often the woman, the educator that is taking leave and going home. Where their partner is perhaps remaining in their job. It is the teacher that's going home and trying to teach online and care for the kids in the home. I think that there is a disproportionate responsibility to manage the global pandemic placed on women educators. (Interview, 17 May 2021)

These conflicting responsibilities were particularly pronounced when educators' own children had to isolate or experienced school/childcare closures – which was not an unusual or one-off experience, with many educators noting that they or their children had isolated multiple times. One vice-principal noted that she "had some staff members that had to quarantine up to three times for upwards of ten to fourteen days. So again, if you're living with a family, you're basically stuck in their bedroom trying to manage your teaching assignments, stay away from your family, isolating, manage the day-to-day domestic responsibilities of being a parent or having food on the table or whatever else it is that you're responsible for" (interview, 12 May 2021). Another principal challenged, "imagine if you are a mother with small children at home and you're trying to teach from home. At the same time, you have your children with you, because there's really no other place for them to go" (interview, 7 May 2021).

Some mothers had opted out of paid child care as a risk-reduction strategy, which increased their own responsibilities:

> So we took our kids out of child care to have them in one less cohort. So that's like, again, also kind of a privilege and a financial benefit, but it comes at a cost. And that cost has been my mornings, my afterschool – I've got to run home because my kids are unsupervised … So, yeah, I'm grateful they're not in child care, but that child care provided a service to me that allowed me to do my work. And I think, for women, that's been such a challenge. (Focus group, 5 March 2021)

Educators noted that COVID-19 prevented women from reaching out to their networks for help in coping with added childcare responsibilities. One educator noted, "Our family childcare model had been based on grandparents. So that was a real luxury to have in a non-COVID times, but it wasn't sustainable in COVID times" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Educators with young children were particularly affected, with one noting, "I can't even put into words how not having a babysitter for a four-year-old in over a year has changed the landscape of life at home" (focus group, 5 March 2021). The inability to rely on family and social networks further impacted unpartnered mothers: "It is different from, like, having a two-parent or a two-caregiver family. Because at

least you can trade off, you can say, you know what, I'm reading a book, I'm having a, I'm going to go for a walk, I'm doing this or that … There is no break, there's no break, there's been no break since the pandemic started" (focus group, 5 March 2021).

In addition, many mothers noted that because they were teachers and primary caregivers, they were often the parent designated to coordinate their children's online schooling: "When I had my little people at home, I would work until five, go home, make dinner and then I would teach from seven until ten. I would be prepping every day at school to go home and teach them every night. Which was exhausting" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Another noted, "I was the one that was doing, like, everything with her schooling, making sure, okay, I've got this printed for her, you know. … My husband, I would say my husband was useless at the time just because it was like it's just, you know, up to the mother to make sure the schooling's done and doing all that part of it" (focus group, 5 March 2021).

Older educators, while having fewer childcare responsibilities, often had elder care responsibilities. One teacher explained how COVID-19 had impacted her family responsibilities:

> Since my father passed away several years ago, I have tried to make Saturday a committed day to go see my mother. And because of this year, and how things are, and concerns over her health and well-being, it's not only a matter now of, when do I see my mother, but it's also a matter of, if she needs groceries. I'm the person that is doing that for her reliably … So there are greater home demands, there are greater professional demands. (Focus group, 7 March 2021)

Other educators spoke of spending their weekends driving to other towns to check in on elderly parents and cleaning the parents' houses as well as their own (as cleaning services were cancelled due to risk of COVID).

Recognizing their increased risk of COVID-19 as educators added an additional layer of difficulty to meeting these unpaid care responsibilities. One educator explained that as the primary care provider for her elderly mother, she has constantly worried about risk of COVID infection: "I don't want to get my mom sick. So definitely, this has been an exhausting year and for that" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Managing both increased care burdens and COVID-19-related risks added to the mental load and consequent anxiety of women educators. An Indigenous teacher explained, "my parents are elderly, my dad is 70 years old and my mom is 66, and I know Indigenous people we're a little bit more susceptible, so I'm really scared" (focus group, 9 March 2021). Both care burdens and risk calculations were determined by teachers' positionality not only as women but based on age (which affected whether they had children at home and/or elderly parents), location (those in rural areas often had to travel farther to provide care to dependents outside their homes), and race (COVID-19, like previous infectious disease outbreaks, disproportionately

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impacted Indigenous and other racialized peoples, who are also more likely to reside in intergenerational households).[48]

Increased and complicated unpaid care responsibilities incurred professional development costs, particularly for mothers. Female educators cited increased care work outside of school as discouraging them from pursuing or continuing career development. One principal predicted that COVID-19 "might make women take a step away from seeking leadership because this has been a lot for them. And it kind of reinforces them back into a recognition that they need to be the primary childcare provider in some way even as a working woman and that stepping into leadership makes it more difficult for them" (interview, 15 May 2021). Accounts from participants support this assessment. A superintendent shared the experience of a teacher:

> I know, for example, one young woman whom I hired as a teacher – and I still keep in contact with her, and I have been encouraging her to go into administration, or to start her master's or something. And she's, like, oh, I've got way too much on the go right now, I can't do it. But you know, she's got younger children, she's teaching, plus everything … So she's just overwhelmed with the pace of it. And then just the constant reaction to things that are changing all the time. (Interview, 18 May 2021)

A mother who had recently become a vice-principal noted,

> This is my second year as a vice-principal and it really took the wind out of my sails. I was so excited when I got this job and it was the year after I had a baby. So I was, like, I had a new baby and I found a daycare and I was going to be a school leader, and I was super excited. And then we went through, you know, 2019–20 in all of the not-so-greatness of it, but then I got here this year and I was ready to go and then it's just like, it hits you. (Interview, 12 May 2021)

Educators felt that there would be career penalties if they requested accommodations to enable them to better manage unpaid care responsibilities, such as permission to work from home. A superintendent noted, "We have a few principals who have young children, who are women and they can't be in their school. If their children are isolated, they have to be at home. And they feel like the perception among the rest of their colleagues and even within their school community is that they're not doing their job" (interview, 11 May 2021). This perception was evidenced by another superintendent, who recounted,

> I was speaking to, you know, a colleague of mine … We were talking about somebody and sort of their career trajectory, and he said, well, I don't think they'd be considered for that position because they're mostly working from home right now. And I said do you realize she has two little ones? Like, that's her reality. And so, you know, I was glad to set him straight, but I don't think it occurred to him that that fell on her shoulders as a burden and that really that was the only way for their family to cope. (Interview, 21 May 2021)

48. Josephine Etowa and Ilene Hyman, "Unpacking the Health and Social Consequences of COVID-19 through a Race, Migration and Gender Lens," *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 112 (February 2021): 8–11.

While such biases were prevalent before COVID-19, increased unpaid care responsibilities combined with the added responsibilities layered on to educators (as described above) made women more vulnerable to such discrimination.

"Carrying the Weight of the Day": Mental and Emotional Labour

COMPETING PRIORITIES AT SCHOOL and at home, along with new management tasks related to the pandemic, exacerbated the mental load borne by women. One teacher explained, "my primary concern will still be the school, but I am also primarily responsible for the logistics of my family, and then I'm trying to do both of those" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Another described her many responsibilities: "Taking care of this family, booking vaccinations, taking time off work for COVID testing, me the one who gets called when my kid is sick. Longer days at work because of more time spent on just dealing with kids at school is impacting my family significantly" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Respondents spoke of booking vaccinations on weekends so they would not have to miss work if they experienced side effects. They described additional management tasks, including arranging Zoom gatherings with grandparents who were upset they could not see their grandchildren and finding creative ways to keep children busy in the absence of extracurricular activities.

Participants noted that the lack of certainty regarding school and childcare closures, as well as COVID-19 protocols, greatly increased and complicated family and community management. One teacher explained,

> For us women who have been working in a school setting, or else have had our children in a school setting, I think the huge pressure we've had with uncertainty for whether our children will be in school or not. That's been a real challenge. Even me, I have two kids, but they're older, like they don't require child care, but the added stressor of not knowing whether or not they're going to be in school or at home on a week-to-week basis is really difficult. (Focus group, 7 March 2021)

Respondents described constantly having to adapt childcare arrangements and work schedules. They also took on responsibility for keeping up to date on public health guidance and communicating changes to family and colleagues.

In addition, educators described spending a great deal of time and energy engaging in "emotional heavy lifting with colleagues" and "smoothing over other peoples' anxiety" (focus group, 5 March 2021). While such roles extended to all educators, women are often expected to take on greater emotional labour. One participant explained:

> So I feel such – as a principal, I feel such pressure to try to respond to other people's crises or emotions because I want to take care of them. I want to make sure they're okay to be in front of kids, you know. And that they're not carrying the weight of the situation into their day. Because we're with littles and they can pick up on that for sure. I mean the older kids can too. But that emotional piece of just regulating that emotional environment for folks. (Interview, 7 May 2021)

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Teachers frequently mentioned the effort that went into trying to maintain a sense of calm or normalcy within the pandemic classroom. One teacher explained, "we're trying to create as much normalcy as we can for our students and families," and another described "the expectation that we're bringing the calm and not amplifying the chaos" (focus group, 5 March 2021). This took substantial effort; as one teacher joked, "I was just thinking, we've become masters of disguise. We present to our community and our students as though we've done this a million times" (focus group, 9 March 2021). Such labour added to educator workloads: "I believe that just the emotional load that it takes to navigate all those pieces is just very difficult, and it's not your regular administrative duties or teaching duties" (focus group, 7 March 2021).

Women's emotional labour was recognized as beneficial and essential by school leaders and superintendents: "One thing that I have seen that's been really positive this year is the increased desire in staff to build relationships with students. And so because they are so concerned about them, they're really working hard to keep them engaged with school, regardless of whether it's from the point of view of just the teacher or, I guess, more in a caring, concerned kind of way" (interview, 21 May 2021). Another superintendent observed, "What I'm seeing in our women leaders is a real strong effort to try and support the emotional and mental health of the staff and the students and the families. That has been a dominant theme in our conversations, about what are they doing? How are they doing? How are they outreaching? What are they dropping off or texting or messaging or phoning? There's this heightened support network as a result from the women leading in our system" (interview, 18 May 2021). Others noted a new appreciation for those abilities often recognized as feminine: "those soft skills, the more caregiver type of mentality, I suppose, is very much being relied on right now, as people are recognizing the stress levels. And it is that kind of caregiving that's getting a lot of people through" (focus group, 7 March 2021).

However, there was a cost to the emotional energy that women educators invested in others. In particular, the severity of emotional needs expressed from students – and the consequences of not meeting them – weighed on educators. One recounted how a student had interrupted an online class to express suicidal thoughts. Those working in rural and inner-city schools alike expressed concerns about increased rates of violence within homes, economic hardship, and substance use related to COVID-19, which "put a huge, huge pressure and stress on the schools, on the teachers and administrators" (focus group, 9 March 2021). Due to emotional exhaustion, many educators noted that they had lost their passion for teaching. One educator described her overwhelming feeling as "discouraged" because COVID-19 had "removed the reason [joy of teaching] why I do the work that I do" (focus group, 5 March 2021). Another respondent reflected, "People are feeling very … people are languishing. They just don't have any energy left to experience hopefulness or joy;

they're not really depressed, but they're not really happy. So they're in a state of trying to just continue and get through things" (vice-principal, interview, 9 March 2021).

The commonality of contending with multiple burdens reduced women's ability to support one another. One principal in a small rural community explained,

> Women with community are good at helping other women. In a good year I'm dropping off muffins on your doorstep, and I've got someone who drops off cookies on my doorstep, or I will take your kids on Saturday afternoon, so you can go shopping on your own. The problem is, we're all in the same boat. So the ways in which women have supported each other off since the beginning of time isn't doable right now, because I know you're drowning too, and I can't help you, because I'm drowning too. Women have covered for each other in the workload for a long time. I haven't thought about it that way before, but there's nobody in my neighbourhood that's sitting about, painting their nails, but still on standby to help out, you know. (Interview, 14 May 2021)

In a context of impossible demands placed on women educators, previous reserves of time and energy fostered through peer support were depleted, in turn reducing women's ability to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

EDUCATORS PLAYED A KEY ROLE in the COVID-19 response. They ensured that students were able to continue their education during a period of constant change and uncertainty, often doing extra work to fill staffing shortages. They developed and implemented public health guidelines in schools, with school leaders conducting contact tracing, in order to keep students as safe as possible. At home, women educators, in particular, not only filled care deficits when child care, schools, and services for elders were interrupted; they also taught their own children. As family managers, they had to constantly adapt to changing routines and new information, while taking on additional tasks related to vaccination appointments and managing relationships from a distance. This work included substantial emotional labour, including reassuring family, students and their parents, and colleagues throughout the crisis.

Previous research has demonstrated how the triple burden continues to disempower women; this article demonstrates how such restrictions on women's agency were heightened for women educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Added unpaid care work discouraged women from seeking leadership opportunities, and it compounded discrimination when they were perceived as unable to manage both professional and care responsibilities. Experiences of moral distress drained educators of the passion that had motivated them in their careers. Increased emotional labour, embedded in their feminized professions, increased educators' risk of burnout and anxiety. The widespread experience of being overburdened not only impacted individual well-being but also reduced capacity for peer support.

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While the pandemic created a context of unpredictability, these costs were not inevitable or even surprising. Burdens placed on women educators were structured by inadequate responses to substitute teacher shortages that predated the pandemic and derisory investments in care infrastructure. Consequently, during the pandemic, the cost of the response was further downloaded onto women educators – through assumptions that they would fulfill education and care gaps while taking on public health roles, such as contact tracing; via gender norms that place responsibility for unpaid care more often on women than on men; and owing to gender biases that judge women for being unable to manage such burdens. The negative effects experienced by women educators could have been mitigated by supportive policy responses and meaningful recognition of their contributions, but they were not.

Educators' unions have a key role to play in ensuring that the health and rights of women educators are prioritized during crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The ATA and CTF both worked closely with public health actors throughout the pandemic. The ATA compiled mental health resources and provided information on refusing unsafe work. Throughout the pandemic, the association held town halls with parents and educators to hear their concerns and provide public health information. It commissioned research on teachers' experiences of the pandemic (including the research that informs this article), importantly disaggregating findings by gender.[49] General recommendations from the ATA around rapid testing, masking in schools, and the need for regular meetings among education stakeholders were adopted by the provincial government. However, a general lack of engagement by the provincial government restricted the ATA's ability to influence decisions that particularly impact women, such as around staffing and working from home. In the fall of 2021, the ATA noted that it had not been consulted on the provincial plan for the 2021–22 school year.[50]

In the absence of gender-transformative policies, there is real concern about educator burnout and resulting labour shortages. Research has demonstrated that both women and those working in essential roles in proximity to others – categories that apply to the majority of teachers – report significantly poorer mental health as a result of COVID-19 than do other categories of workers.[51] A

49. "2020/21 Pandemic Research and Reports," ATA, n.d., accessed 12 August 2021, https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/COVID-19/2020-School-Re-entry/Pages/index.aspx.

50. "Priority Expectations of Alberta Teachers for the Return to School during the COVID-19 Pandemic," ATA, 12 August 2021, https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/COVID-19/Pages/Priority-Expectations-of-Alberta-Teachers-for-the-Return-to-School-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Fall-2021.aspx.

51. Louis-Philippe Beland, Abel Brodeur, Derek Mikola, and Taylor Wright, "The Short-Term Economic Consequences of COVID-19: Occupation Tasks and Mental Health in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Economics* 55 (February 2022): 214–247.

survey conducted by the ATA in early 2022 found 37 per cent of teachers were considering leaving the profession, while schools continue to face staffing and substitute teacher shortages.[52] This is a problem for two main reasons: first, because women educators deserve a fulfilling career that bolsters, as opposed to threatens, their well-being; and second, because of the potential impact on children and the education system as a whole. Previous research highlights the importance of in-person schools and teachers for student well-being and educational progress and demonstrates that the most significant in-school factor affecting student achievement is the quality of the teacher.[53] As Hargreaves writes, "we cannot serve our students by sacrificing our teachers."[54]

Supporting educators requires, first, recognizing and then responding to the secondary mental and physical health impacts of the pandemic and, second, addressing the structural constraints – including the substitute teacher shortage and lack of child care – that compounded such effects during the crisis. In particular, as more women become school leaders, those positions will need to adapt to recognize the unpaid care responsibilities that women are likely to also bear. In terms of improved pandemic preparedness and response in the education sector, this study's research participants recommended developing robust, in-school mental health support for staff and students that can be scaled up during a crisis, alongside a holistic approach to supporting teacher well-being that includes paid care leave days, access to counselling, and other supports. Educators further noted the potential benefit of professional development days dedicated to COVID-19 recovery activities and self-care, as well as the need for greater resources to support women educators in pursuing career development, including support for care responsibilities that might restrict their opportunities. In order to challenge dominant power structures, they called for intentional policies to ensure diverse voices in decision-making and to guard against discrimination based on gender, care responsibilities, or leave taken because of COVID-19. In the case of ongoing or future health crises, they suggested that contact tracing or other public health measures should be carried out by the public health system, not the education system, and that additional emergency paid care leave should be provided alongside proactive childcare arrangements such as on-site care. By listening to and acting on the recommendations of women educators, more resilient education systems and pandemic preparedness can be fostered.

52. Alberta Teachers' Association, *Sixth Pandemic Pulse Survey* (Edmonton: ATA, 2022).

53. Hargreaves, "COVID-19 Pandemic."

54. Hargreaves, "COVID-19 Pandemic," 1852.

https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2023v92.0010