

*(Invisible) Labors of Love? Women  
Faculty's Domestic and  
Institutional Labor*

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# Introduction

- “My husband thinks we share household tasks equally... What this means is that he cleans the kitchen in about 30 seconds... and then I follow behind and clean the kitchen correctly.”
- “I could always just put down the sponge and leave the kitchen a mess, you know... it’s my fault too, really.”
- This paper focuses on gender and race based-inequalities in the labor of women faculty both at home and in the workplace

# Background

- Institutions' stated intentions: diversity, equity, inclusion.
  - Women, especially women of color, do the heavy-lifting of mission integration – which often doesn't count toward tenure and promotion.
- Increasing emphasis on “Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI)” in higher ed, but systems of inequality preserve biased policies and practices.
  - Same actors will be called on for DEI work, also without recognition and reward, unless we make structural changes.
- Invisibility of women's work, institutional and domestic.
  - Even when visible, still poorly assessed and evaluated.

# Theoretical framework

- Black feminist theory and intersectionality as a lens.
- Ahmed (2012): Mechanisms of power are reproduced in higher education institutions. Happy talk: insistence on a happy-seeming community can lead to systematic exclusion of those who critique the institution.
- Sociological analyses of domestic labor
  - Daminger (2019): Cognitive load in caregiving -- anticipating household and family needs
  - Calarco (2021): Justify unequal care arrangements by pointing to gendered structural and cultural conditions

# Data: Iñigo University

- 2016-present
- Institution is Jesuit and mission-focused
- 77 in-depth interviews (56 women, 21 men)
- 2 focus groups
- Analyses of 40 faculty CVs
- 20 faculty promotion statements from successful tenure or promotion application files
- 27 faculty reflections on the impacts of COVID-19
- Participant observation

# Research Questions

1. How is labor gendered and raced in the context of mission-driven higher ed?
2. How are gendered and raced practices perceived to affect tenure and promotion practices?
3. How does division of labor in the (dual-income, heteronormative, male-female) household impact women's work experiences?

# Institutional Asks before the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Our first finding is a pattern whereby women faculty – and especially women of color – received unequal institutional asks for service (to the department, college, university, community).

# Findings: Institutional Asks Pre-Covid

**Alice** (associate professor/woman of color):

- “I think there's some of my male colleagues in particular who are able to... stay on the periphery so they're not really looked to for it. They are able to skate, skirt it a little.”
- “Women and faculty of color get over-asked. And are less popular if they say no... There's a lot of people here probably not very happy with me 'cause I say no a lot.”
- But saying no allowed her to do the work to be promoted.



# Findings: Institutional Asks Pre-Covid

**Alana** (associate professor/woman of color):

- “I don’t like whining or complaining, so I’m sure that part of this is me not sort of standing up [but my teaching load has been unsustainable]... They are classes where nobody wants to teach them... I think, in hindsight I shouldn’t have said ‘I’m a team player. I’m happy to teach them if you need to.’ I should have said what everyone else says: ‘I don’t want to teach it’... I do think like, maybe gender with the teaching thing... you know, ‘She got the right personality.’”
- Alana was perceived by female colleagues as vital to the functioning of the department. Yet, her male peers registered much higher rates of satisfaction with their work experiences, because they were allowed to set boundaries.

# Findings: Family Labor Pre-Covid

- Women faculty: **dual burden**.
- Men faculty: share domestic and childcare duties, but do not appear to often take primary responsibility, especially for cognitive load.
- **Cognitive load=invisible labor**.

# Findings: Bending at Home and at Work

**Ava** (associate professor/woman of color):

- **Work:** “Teaching, service and research, none of them ever end... I’m frustrated with myself because I’m not really good at saying no and the reason... is sometimes I feel like ‘This is important. This is more important than me right now. This is the future of the department...’ I’m frustrated with the policies. I’m frustrated with the one size fits all promotion guidelines and requirements.”
- **Home:** “I feel like I just bent a lot. I did most of the childcare. In the past year, I have been a little bit more rigid. Some of it is because I have a lot more [service] work and it’s not all my schedule anymore ... If I ask for help and he can, he will help. If I ask for help and he needs to move things around, he will push back. Then I push back and then we figure out where we fall, who can compromise. If I don’t ask for help, I’ll do it. He doesn’t volunteer help. Does that make sense? And he doesn’t cook.”

# Findings: Gendered Self-Blame

- Larger culture emphasizes individual responsibility, not collective responsibility, and personal change, not structural change. “Fix the women,” in other words.
- Institutions reinforce notions of organizational loyalty and make it difficult (in inequitable, gendered, raced ways) to maintain personal-professional boundaries.
- Strong cultural emphasis on women being selfless in the context of their households and families.
- Result: cues to be selfless clash with cues to be responsible for establishing professional boundaries.
- Result: individualized self-blame without substantial structural change.

# **Findings: The COVID-19 Pandemic has triggered the collapse of personal and professional into each other.**

These findings mirror reported national trends among faculty in U.S. institutions.

The finding that this is inequitably affecting women is also mirrored by national trends, which moreover show that the affect is felt across all types of employment, not just in higher education.

# Findings: Pandemic-Fueled Personal-Professional Collapse

- All but one faculty member noted that their time for research and scholarly writing was severely impacted.
- Some faculty of color grappled with equity issues in the communities with whom they were engaged, which consumed their time, energy, and passion.
- Challenges with meeting family responsibilities and work obligations.
  - Mostly referenced by women with children under age 18, but also by men with younger children.
  - Women: caregiving demands + pandemic-related crises = reactive, rather than expert teaching.
  - Men: referenced “reactive teaching” but expressed far less anxiety about being evaluated.

# Findings: Bending (and breaking) at Home and at Work

## **Exemplar COVID Reflection from a woman faculty:**

“My husband and I are both working from home and I am home schooling [two children] ... As a result, childcare is a full-time job for at least one parent. Currently, my husband is taking one sick day each week and I am the primary caretaker the other four days. However, even my once-weekly dedicated work days are fragmented. It is hard to maintain physical space in our house... As a result, I am operating with about 10-15% of my normal productive time. **So, to answer the question, I am struggling to get anything done professionally.**”

# Findings: Bending (and breaking) at Home and at Work

## **Participant Observation Data:**

- In conversation with a group of women faculty after a Zoom meeting wrapped up, one attendee mentioned that “All the women I know are doing three quarters of the childcare labor now,” and pointed out that it’s just not possible to caregive well and work productively when the two are occurring simultaneously.
- In another faculty Zoom meeting, a different woman faculty self-described as the “command central” at her house, coordinating everything that needed to get done.



# Discussion

- Most institutions of higher education are mission-driven (even if not religious) but do not evaluate mission resonant work performed by faculty.
- Most institutions of higher education value DEI work unevenly.
- Professional labor: women (especially those of color) report being asked to do more service, more DEI work, and being viewed negatively by administrators, colleagues, students when they say no.
- Domestic labor: women appear to be doing more domestic labor, both pre- and post-Covid.
- Dual burden on women: professionally reactive during the pandemic, less able to produce research; managing cognitive and emotional burdens.

# Discussion Continued

- Women's tendency to self-blame.
  - Is this related to the cognitive burden they are expected to assume?
  - Individual level solutions posed to systemic problems.
- Comparisons between professional and domestic labor.
  - Women "don't want to complain," and want to "be a team-player," both in marriage and in their universities.
  - Ahmed's happy talk.
- Task is "more important than me right now, this is the future of the department."
  - Women of color in particular, but also women faculty generally may be judged harshly if they don't take up invisible labor (gendered expectations).
  - Do women also assume cognitive load and emotional burden for their universities?

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