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Challenges experienced by academic mothers in the health field after maternity leave

Desafios vivenciados por mães acadêmicas da área da saúde após a licença-maternidade

Abstract

Objective: To understand the challenges experienced by mothers who are professors in the health field when returning to work after maternity leave. **Methods:** Exploratory, descriptive study with a qualitative approach. Eight mothers who are nursing professors at a public university in southern Brazil participated. Data were collected between February and June 2024, using a semi-structured electronic form and analyzed using thematic content analysis, proposed by Bardin. **Results:** Two thematic categories emerged: overlapping formal work activities and unpaid care activities and their repercussions on teaching careers; and support network and difficulties in caring for children. Motherhood had an impact on the academic and scientific productivity of the participants. They faced overlapping activities, which impacted their scientific production, work overload and fatigue. Although academic mothers have rights guaranteed by law, they describe experiences of persecution, harassment and discrimination when they return to their work activities. The university was not recognized as a component of the support network by the volunteers. **Conclusion:** It is essential to rethink the work dynamics in academia, to provide a more welcoming, flexible environment that encompasses the perspective of healthy parenting, avoiding the victimization of workers for exercising motherhood.

Keywords: Faculty, Nursing; Parental Leave; Occupational Stress; Occupational Health.

Resumo

Objetivo: Conhecer os desafios vivenciados por mães acadêmicas da área da saúde no retorno ao trabalho após a licença-maternidade. **Métodos:** Estudo exploratório, descritivo de abordagem qualitativa. Participaram oito mães acadêmicas do curso de enfermagem, de uma universidade pública do Sul do Brasil. Os dados foram coletados entre fevereiro e junho de 2024, por meio de um formulário eletrônico semiestruturado e analisados à luz da análise temática de conteúdo, proposta por Bardin. **Resultados:** Emergiram duas categorias temáticas: sobreposição de atividades do trabalho formal e do cuidado não remunerado e repercussões na carreira docente, e rede de apoio e dificuldades de cuidados com os filhos. A maternidade repercutiu na produtividade acadêmica e científica das participantes. Elas enfrentaram a sobreposição de atividades, impactando na produção científica, sobrecarga de trabalho e cansaço. Apesar das mães acadêmicas possuírem direitos garantidos por lei, descrevem experiências de perseguição, assédio e discriminações ao retornarem às suas atividades laborais. A universidade não foi reconhecida como componente de rede de apoio pelas voluntárias. **Conclusão:** É fundamental repensar a dinâmica de trabalho no cenário acadêmico, para proporcionar um ambiente mais acolhedor, flexível e que englobe a perspectiva de parentalidade saudável, evitando a vitimização das trabalhadoras por exercer a maternagem.

Palavras-chave: Corpo Docente de Enfermagem; Licença Parental; Estresse Ocupacional; Saúde do Trabalhador.

Introduction

Middle-class women entered the labor market on a massive scale after the First World War, due to the need for manpower as a result of the high mortality of men during armed conflicts. For working class women, however, this entry has lasted for centuries, in the context of domestic work, care activities and other local activities¹.

Increasingly, women have started to conquer other spaces and have the chance to aim for and build professional careers. However, unpaid work and care activities continue to be centralized among women, with overlapping domestic, work and maternity-related activities¹.

For women, the presence of young children is a determining factor in entering the job market. In Brazil, in 2019, the level of employment was lower among women who lived with children up to three years old in the household (54.6%), compared to those without children (67.2%)². The occupation level of men was higher than that of women in both conditions. The analysis of this data is essential for the national labor market to be aware of and sensitive to the reality of the workforce made up of working mothers.

The Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) encompasses legislation that protects and supports pregnant women, postpartum women, breastfeeding women and their families, including: job stability for pregnant women, maternity and paternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and daycare reimbursement³. The CLT guarantees maternity leave of 120 days, which can be extended to 180 days if the company joins the Citizen Company Program. For federal civil servants under the Single Legal Regime (RJU)⁴, similar rights are guaranteed. Maternity leave is 120 days by default and can be extended for a further 60 days upon request up to one month after giving birth⁵.

The disparities in the labor market require that other strategies and public policies be developed and adopted to fully address this issue. The cultural construction of childcare, centered on women, often leads to a gap between professional career and motherhood^{6,7}.

In the academic environment, the impact of motherhood on women's careers also imposes major challenges and a reality marked by pressure, discrimination, and sometimes harassment⁸. These women are often excluded from various opportunities within the university, which results in physical and emotional exhaustion. The presence of an institutional support network is essential for the well-being of teaching mothers in the workplace⁹.

Regarding mothers who teach in the health sector, these challenges increase, since there is a need for extra care for pregnant and breastfeeding women in health services, as they are subject to occupational risks that can impact on the health of the pregnant woman and her baby⁵. Moreover, there are risks to maternal mental health due to the demands, requirements and overload of duties¹⁰.

In the field of nursing, exposure to all these occupational risks is present, given that it is a profession that works directly in caring for people with multiple health demands, posing a risk to the health of these teaching mothers in institutions such as hospitals and Basic Health Units (UBS)¹¹.

A large part of the negative feelings and consequences related to reconciling motherhood and professional life is directly related to the lack of actions that offer support and assistance to mothers, considering that this panorama is not restricted to the maternity leave period, but extends to the first years of the child's life¹².

The motivation to carry out this study comes from the authors' experiences of returning to work after maternity leave and from working with mothers in the academic environment of the health sector. There is suffering from returning to work, given the demands of productivity, especially in postgraduate studies, and the new routines of these mothers. The question therefore arises: "What is the perception of the challenges faced by academic mothers, in the context of the health area, when returning to work after maternity leave?"

The aim of this research was to find out about the challenges faced by academic mothers in the health sector at a public university when returning to work after maternity leave. It is believed that this research could problematize the challenges faced by these women and present possible strategies for promoting well-being in the workplace.

Methods

This is an exploratory, descriptive study with a qualitative approach, which followed the recommendations of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)¹³.

The study was conducted in the nursing school at a public university in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The group of participants was defined by convenience and intentionally¹⁴, including undergraduate professors who became mothers as of 2019 and who were not on leave from the institution. We chose to investigate the last five years due to the proximity of the maternity experience and the possible organizational policies that may have impacted on the return to work after maternity leave.

To select the sample, a survey of the teaching staff was carried out on the institutional website. Subsequently, academic mothers were invited by e-mail, with textual content explaining the interest in recognizing the possible participant's perspective on the research topic; and the Free and Informed Consent Form in accordance with Circular Letter No. 1 of the National Research Ethics Committee (CONEP)¹⁵.

All the professors who had their babies between 2019 and 2024 were invited to take part in the study and accepted. The research group was closed due to data saturation, when the repetition of findings in the interviewees' statements was identified¹⁶.

Data was collected between February and June 2024, using interviews guided by a semi-structured script, via *Google Forms*[®], which took an average of 20 minutes to complete. The instrument consisted of two parts: 1) data to characterize the participants; and 2) questions related to the object of the research. Remote collection was chosen to facilitate access to the interviewees. By answering individually and online, the participants were able to have more privacy and comfort to report what they wanted, while also respecting confidentiality.

The data was analyzed using the thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin¹⁷, in three stages: a) Pre-analysis - in which the units of meaning present in the content of the speeches were defined, considering the guiding question and research objective; b) Exploration of the material - the data was coded, the emerging units of meaning were grouped and the classification operation was carried out, which aimed to reach the core of understanding of the content, by differentiating and aggregating the constituent elements of a set by similarities, when the text is reduced to expressions and words that are significant to the research; c) Treatment and interpretation of the data - the raw results were analyzed, looking for trends and other characteristics of the analysis, highlighting the most relevant information obtained for the formation of themes, which provided the opportunity to obtain an interpretation based on the theoretical framework of this study.

This research complied with the ethical precepts of Resolution No. 510 of 2016 of the National Health Council (CNS)¹⁸ and Resolution No. 466 of 2012 of the CNS¹⁹. It was approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee, under CAAE registration: 75441623.4.0000.5347 on February 1, 2024.

The data collected was protected based on the General Personal Data Protection Law (LGPD)²⁰. The guidelines for research in a virtual environment were taken into account¹⁵. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, codes were used (C1 to C8).

Results and discussion

Eight academic mothers took part in the research. They ranged in age from 35 to 44, with an average age of 39. One teacher declared herself black and the others declared themselves white. All said they were in a marital relationship.

Regarding the year their children were born, three had their children in 2019, two in 2020, two in 2021, three in 2022, and one in 2023. Two teachers had more than one maternity experience between 2019 and 2024.

The participants were able to stay away from work for an average period of seven months, adding up maternity leave (four months), the extension period for breastfeeding (two months), and vacation (one month).

Overlapping formal work and unpaid care activities and repercussions on teaching careers

Among the challenges faced by academic mothers, the need to reconcile professional activities with unpaid care work was identified, amid the new roles that motherhood imposes on women.

The return to work was positive, but also challenging, given the excessive workload and domestic activities related to motherhood (C1).

Reconciling the demands of being a teacher and a mother was challenging (C2).

Returning was difficult. In the sense that I wanted to go back to work, but at the same time I wanted to stay at home to breastfeed, put the baby to sleep, and nurse them. Reconciling the demands of being a teacher and a mother was challenging (C3).

It was chaotic! It took me a long time to manage my activities. The hard part was being productive... Looking after the house, the baby (...), and still having to manage my work was very difficult (C4).

It's always a challenge to reconcile the high workload at university with caring work (C8).

Motherhood and an academic career impose great demands, leading women to face the difficult choice between looking after their children and domestic responsibilities or maintaining their academic performance. This context naturalizes the overload of working mothers and their multiple responsibilities, with overlapping tasks and the need to prioritize certain activities over others²¹.

Motherhood can be an experience marked by various feelings. Some women may feel the desire to reduce their working hours to care for their children, while others may wish to maintain the same activities they carried out before the arrival of their children. The social construction of motherhood and the theme of “maternal instinct” have been questioned and deconstructed. This is a plural, multifactorial and diverse experience, since motherhood and maternal love are constructed in different ways in which there is no right or wrong. The literature describes the different ways of constructing maternal love, which can involve subjective and cultural aspects, which permeate each woman's expectations of motherhood and the construction of their careers²².

In this study, all the participants expressed a desire to adjust their working hours to have more time to care for their children. They also verbalized various difficulties and confrontations in fulfilling their teaching activities and motherhood.

When I return to my practical activities in the field, which start at 7am, I must leave home very early. Having to say several times 'I can't' to a lot of (work) activities that I think are great, but at this point in my life I can't handle (C3).

My husband and I took turns working and looking after my son. Not to mention that the early mornings were still long, which made it difficult to focus and concentrate on work (C4).

Scheduling meetings in the late afternoon, almost at night, was impossible for someone with a small baby. Life has changed for us women, but the world continues to be as 'tough' and demanding as before (C6).

Academic demands don't include a woman who has a maternal bond with a baby (C7).

Teaching activities in universities include not only teaching, but also research, extension, and management. The responsibilities of a teacher-scientist include: teaching classes, monitoring and supervising practical and internship courses, participating in or coordinating extension projects and/or programs, supervising undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students, participating in dissertation and thesis defense committees, writing and reviewing scientific articles, among other administrative activities within the university^{1,21}.

With the arrival of a child, the academic mother faces a new reality that requires adaptation, at the same time as the academic environment becomes competitive and demands more and more dedication and flexibility to meet the demands of academic-scientific work, which often exceeds regular hours^{1,21}. This reality has an impact on family relationships and on healthy parenting. The relationship between motherhood and academic career often results in negative feelings such as guilt, anguish, worry, anxiety, and insecurity, as well as negative impacts on the development of their careers⁸.

Reconciling all these changes with the return to work can be stressful, exhausting and can generate negative feelings such as anxiety, worry, guilt at not successfully meeting all the demands, and consequently, the feeling of never doing enough⁸.

In addition to the physical recovery and psychological adaptations required in the postpartum period, there are also repercussions arising from the difficulty in adjusting to the new routine, since this mother-teacher is subject to sleep deprivation, breastfeeding challenges, and hormonal changes that can result in mental health issues, such as postpartum depression. Women also face loneliness, as the birth of a baby changes the dynamics of their marital, family and social relationships.

Difficulties are the night classes and the times when my son was ill, and I couldn't take time off work (C1).

Returning for the second year was more difficult. It also coincided with the first child going to school, then the second. Lots of viruses, illnesses, visits to doctors, and a few hospitalizations. I say that my career is my first child and that's why I always think I'm in debt, when in fact I'm not. And I don't think they should let us think that either. But it's much harder to cope with life (...) We try to handle everything in our professional and personal lives, and we end up sleeping little, tired, and overloaded. I think that's the main issue. I always wanted to do more, but I started to realize that we work a lot and that we need to have qualified time for our children, husband, family, friends, and work (C2).

It triggered a feeling of always being in debt, in debt at work, in debt for childcare, in debt in my relationship with my partner, in debt for self-care (...) A feeling of frustration at not being able to cope with so many demands (C5).

With my first child, the adaptations when I returned to work were more intense, I had a limited support network to help me with my child's illness. (...) My children's illness is something that mobilizes me a lot and leads me to exhaustion (C5).

It was difficult, especially with my first child, but I suffered with the return of all my children. A lot of insecurity, fear of the unknown, fear of the care that was being offered, and of my absence (C6).

It was very difficult, I didn't have a support network, and the baby became very ill when he started school (C7).

A study on women's experiences and decisions in balancing multiple roles, carried out with around a thousand women, found that 56% perceived their careers to be more difficult with children²³. This scenario gives rise to a feeling of inadequacy at not being able to meet academic demands as before motherhood and results in tiredness, stress and negative impacts on physical and mental health^{1,21}.

The overlapping of activities results in a reduction in the time available to devote to the demands of the university, which consequently has an impact on productivity and a reduction in the number of scientific publications, as shown in the following reports:

With the first child, I was left with a very low workload and quite fearful about whether I would get the promotion to associate professor. A very important issue that impacts on the workload is that with breastfeeding we have the right not to be in practice, but we have a low workload, and this is an important issue. There is an adjustment in the progressions/promotions for leave, but it was complicated (...) Many adjustments were necessary, and the first two years ended up having an impact on productivity, especially in the production of articles (C2).

Not being able to cope with ongoing research. I had to use my vacations to catch up on research (C3).

I was left with an “empty space” in my lattes during these periods of leave and another six months when returning, with difficulty in writing/publishing with two babies at home (C6).

Research conducted by the group Parent in Science revealed that, after the birth of a child, there was an immediate reduction in the scientific productivity of mothers, reflected in a decrease in the number of publications²⁴. Of the 2,136 scientists interviewed, 78% of the women were mothers. The vast majority of those interviewed (81%) reported that motherhood had had a negative impact on their scientific careers²⁴. The literature describes how gender issues permeate the demand for productivity from academic mothers, and existing public policies are not sufficient to support the needs of these women¹².

The impact of maternity on teaching careers is not limited to the period of leave; it can persist into the first years of the child's life and extend for at least four years after the birth of the first child, hindering the development of their careers²¹.

It is essential to question the reality of the academic environment, which often imposes the need for exclusive dedication, high scientific productivity, and long working hours, ignoring socially imposed gender disparities. In the academic environment, when they return from maternity leave, professors face pressure to maintain productivity and suffer prejudice and discrimination, being seen as less committed or available for their professional duties. They can also be excluded from opportunities such as extension grants, scientific initiation grants, supervision of students in internship camps, and competitions for research funding.

Some colleagues don't understand that we're not going back to the same professional we used to be (C5).

Colleagues never understood that I had other demands with my baby at home, but they continued to demand as before, but life already had another meaning and another routine (...) Lack of understanding and empathy about this return to work on the part of colleagues (C6).

Hostility from some peers due to the fact that the breastfeeding employee was exercising her right to be away from unhealthy activities or because she had been on maternity leave for 6 months, guaranteed by Federal Law (...) Pressure from some peers to take on roles or carry out activities other than those already carried out, at a time of adaptation, without considering the particularities of the breastfeeding employee (C8).

These statements elucidate situations that can be described as forms of institutional harassment, because they feel discriminated against and neglected. There is a need for equity and inclusion policies to ensure that these mothers can carry out their activities after returning from maternity leave²⁵.

Women should not be penalized because of motherhood, especially in an environment where knowledge and science are produced. The challenges identified in the participants' speeches cause concern, especially in undergraduate nursing courses, which are predominantly taught by women and whose main focus is care.

To mitigate the consequences of this penalization, academic mothers work hard to meet all the demands of the university, using their vacations or staying up all night to work. The constant pressure to meet all the expectations imposed results in physical and emotional exhaustion, directly affecting the mothers' mental health.

The institutional environment, especially at university, often fails to recognize and accommodate the specific needs of women who are mothers. The demands of the job market and/or the academic field often contribute to perpetuating inequalities and neglecting the individual context of women, as the criteria for academic excellence are often based on the routine of a childless academic^{12,26}.

Support network and childcare difficulties

Returning from maternity leave brings with it a new reality surrounded by fears and challenges that come from having to go out to work and leave the baby at home, making it essential to have a solid support network so that lecturers can return to university safely.

I don't think we have a support network, maternity has no space at the university (C7).

Federal legislation is our only anchor. Maternity needs to be reframed within the university (C8).

Support network at university? That doesn't exist, unfortunately (C4).

Family support network, but not at university! (C6).

The support network, in turn, plays a crucial role in enabling mothers to return to their daily activities. Having effective support to divide up the housework and childcare allows scientist-mothers to meet the demands of their work and continue with their academic responsibilities²⁶.

The structure that academic mothers identify as a support network is the family. The university was not mentioned by any of them as a support, so it does not seem to be seen as a structure that supports teaching mothers. The participants identify support and welcome in their families, nurseries and schools, and in a few professional colleagues, who understand the new reality and the need to readapt to the academic environment.

Some colleagues were supportive, they talked to each other to exchange experiences - this support was fundamental (C7).

I need to point out, first of all, that I have a good personal network, the nanny, my in-laws and the school. They are essential for me to be able to work more calmly and to deal with everything. Colleagues in my area are very supportive, we also have a parenting group that needs to be encouraged more at school, and we have colleagues and friends who are very supportive. I'm happy to say that among my colleagues I have friends. It's a joy and an important support network at various times (C2).

As a support network, I think of my colleagues who are mothers and share the same demands, who share the workload equally, who provide a pleasant working atmosphere (C3).

Some colleagues who are more collaborative and understand the moment (C5).

Co-workers who are mothers seem to show greater empathy and understanding of the participants' new life moment, representing social support within the university.

The pandemic period marked a new work culture, with remote meetings and activities extending beyond office hours. This reality accentuated social and gender inequalities, demonstrating the impact of motherhood on the careers of teaching mothers^{26,27}, especially when nurseries, childcare services and schools faced long periods of closure^{12,26,27}.

According to data from a survey involving around seven thousand women, approximately 40.5% of the participants identified the difficulty of reconciling the demands of remote work with domestic responsibilities and childcare as one of the main issues during the period of social isolation. A study that investigated the experiences and reflections of scientist-mothers, with 89 teachers interviewed, approximately 80% mentioned that social isolation impacted their professional activities in various ways, including concentration problems²⁶.

Discussions about motherhood and careers have gained prominence in Brazil, mainly through the actions of the Parent in Science group, started in 2015 and coordinated by a researcher from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul together with other scientists. This group aims to bring about changes in the academic and scientific environment to reduce inequalities and make it more receptive to women who are or wish to become mothers²⁴. This group proposes the adoption of criteria that take maternity into account in all curriculum evaluation processes, such as selection processes, accreditation in postgraduate programs, functional progression, funding and scholarships. In addition, it advocates guaranteeing opportunities for mothers to progress in their careers and encouraging their inclusion in decision-making committees and academic leadership²⁸.

In 2021, the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) implemented a field in the Lattes curriculum to inform the period of maternity leave. This measure is important because the Lattes CV is the space in which scientists publicize their academic production and is essential for participating in funding calls and public tenders. Previously, it had not been possible to identify a gap in CVs due to maternity.

Other proposed actions that are in line with the participants' statements are the promotion of a more flexible and inclusive work culture, which values the balance between professional and personal life, such as recognizing maternity leave as working time, to avoid negative impacts on careers and promoting discussions about the difficulties they face²⁸.

It is essential to build an inclusive and welcoming environment for mothers in academia, since the lack of a private space for breastfeeding and/or expressing breast milk continues to be a major barrier to continued breastfeeding for teaching mothers^{28,29}. The setting in which this research was carried out, for example, has a large number of female civil servants and students and, even so, does not have a space for breastfeeding, expressing human milk or a suitable place to change babies or children. In addition to work dynamics, we need to think about infrastructure that serves and respects academic mothers.

Implementing breastfeeding support rooms, making time available for breast milk extraction and offering flexible working hours are crucial measures to make it easier to reconcile professional responsibilities with demands on children and provide the necessary support for teachers^{28,29}.

Conclusion

This study aimed to find out about the challenges faced by academic mothers in the health sector when returning to work after maternity leave. Two thematic categories were identified: 1) Overlapping formal work and unpaid care activities and repercussions on teaching careers; and 2) Support network and childcare difficulties. The overlap between formal work and unpaid care work appears to be the main challenge for academic mothers, with negative repercussions for their careers.

The social support network appears to be an important pillar of support for academic mothers. They found this help in the family environment, in schools, nurseries and, subtly, in some work colleagues who are also mothers and shared the same demands and experiences. On the other hand, there were reports of peer pressure, showing that this support is not universal.

It is crucial to incorporate measures to reduce gender disparities in the academic context. This includes research on the subject to address issues such as overlapping roles, maternal overload, harassment and the impact on the well-being of academic mothers.

A limiting factor in this study was the absence of face-to-face interviews with the participants, which may have made it difficult to clarify some answers and prevented certain issues from being explored in greater depth, since face-to-face interviews allow volunteers to express themselves more naturally, providing a greater amount of information on the subject in question.

This study contributes to the debate on motherhood and the return to work of academic mothers within public universities. By identifying the difficulties and weaknesses faced in the daily lives of these teachers, it can encourage discussion in the academic environment and in the study setting, and collaborate in the development of actions that offer support to academic mothers, who as well as being producers of science at university, also contribute to social progress through their formal work and unpaid care.

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