

How has Covid-19 impacted on gender equality in HE?

Podcast transcript

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- + **EP:** Ellen Pugh
- + **SL:** Dr Sarah Liu

Transcript

EP: Hello, everybody, and welcome to this podcast. We're going to be focusing today on gender equality, intersectionality and the impact of Covid-19 in higher education. This podcast is part of a series of events that we're holding during February 2021 to focus on the impact that Covid-19 is having on gender equality in the higher education sector and looking at how we can continue to progress. I'm really delighted to have with me today, Sarah Liu. Sarah is from the University of Edinburgh, she is a lecturer in gender and politics and chair and co-founder of the University of Edinburgh's BAME staff network as well as co-founder of the Scottish Feminist Politics and International Relations Network. Sarah has been researching this area with a particular focus on intersectionality. We are really pleased to have her views today on how it's impacting on higher education. So, thank you so much, Sarah. And it's a pleasure to have you here.

SL: Thank you so much for having me.

EP: I'd really be grateful if you could just give people listening to this podcast an overview of the intersectional impact that Covid-19 has actually had on our society today that you're aware of.

SL: Sure. Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated the multiple underlying structural inequalities that cut across race, gender and class in our society. And race has stood out in many instances in particular. We hear a disproportionate rate of, a high rate of infection and death of black and minority ethnics from the virus and although these are health concerns, the pattern of race based difference is historically rooted in the structural racism from which racial minority communities suffer. Equally before the pandemic we know that racial minorities are already more likely to be working in lower paid, more precarious jobs so that leads them to higher chances of unemployment when facing a public health crisis and then expected economic downturn. So socioeconomic class also appears to account for the extent to which individuals can protect themselves from Covid-19. For example, holding jobs that allow them to work from home and accessing adequate healthcare when needed so the impacts of the pandemic also carry important implications that intersect with race and gender. It is estimated that more than two of the three million holding high exposure risk jobs in the UK are women. Migrant women are also at the front lines of delivering health and social care so while lauding the contributions of frontline workers, the UK Government has implemented policies that actually worsen the existing inequalities faced by marginalised communities occupying these roles. For example, apart from employment deemed essential

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outside the home state level decisions to close schools and ask vulnerable populations to shield also has created dramatic increases in concurrent child and elder care responsibilities for mostly women.

That really reinforces the gender roles, the gender norms in society and we see this from numerous studies. A study surveyed women and men in the United States and Europe found that women actually provided 15 more hours of unpaid domestic labour per week than their male counterparts during the pandemic.

EP: Unbelievable.

SL: I know and wait until you hear about this other study, another study also showed how women have been juggling since the pandemic started while men have been bored. So men have found themselves in a situation where they're just bored, they don't know what to do with their lives. This additional labour and having to juggle work with unpaid caring responsibilities in the domestic space really affects women's performance, capacities, in their unpaid employment. And these pandemic related impacts on work performance will also have a long term consequence on women's careers as well.

EP: Sarah, in terms of women's careers and the higher education sector, are you aware, or do you think the impact in our society as a whole has been mirrored through higher education and its role as a major employer in our society?

SL: Yes, so there's mounting evidence that demonstrates that gender inequalities have become more entrenched and now women's labour has been exploited and under recognised during this time. But less is actually known about how this current crisis we are all facing is being experienced by individuals with a multiple marginalised identity in the higher education system which is the research that my colleagues and I are working on. We find that many staff have to go to work in person, they have to deliver in person services such as teaching or working in the library so this puts...again, going back to what I said earlier about how racial minorities disproportionately are impacted by the health concerns of Covid-19 when staff have to go into campus and deliver these services in person, that really puts them in danger. And some of the staff have to come into work, they have to take a bus or take a train that, again, adds to the chances of exposure to the virus. And also many academic staff in the higher education sector are, perhaps, more lucky in the sense that we get to work from home while these teaching staff or professional service staff have to be on campus. But even if our work environment and hours may be more flexible than others on the frontline, we still see the severe division of domestic labour at home and this gendered division of labour is particularly challenging for those with caring responsibilities especially when nurseries and schools are closed and those with caring responsibilities are often women. Yeah, at the same time the universities are still pushing for their academic staff to be productive in their research outputs.

So we need to remember that we're all in the middle of a pandemic still, we are juggling childcare, we are juggling elderly care and all sorts of other caring responsibilities while teaching, while providing services and leadership and while meeting the expectations of

research. This is particularly challenging when universities don't provide other ways to alleviate caring responsibilities or loosen up their expectations and use meritocracy as a way to evaluate individuals' performances and contributions.

So in the long term it is really those with caring responsibilities or health concerns, again, who are mostly women and people of colour who are hurt the most. But, of course, the impact of the pandemic on those working in the higher ed is not just gendered, it is intersectional as racism and sexism have been historically rooted in the higher education. So, for example, people of colour are heavily underrepresented in both the student body and the staff body in most universities across the UK. And currently we have fewer than 30 black women who have made it to full professors, full professorship, in the entire country.

EP: Which is an incredibly alarming figure.

SL: Yes, and can you believe that, we live in 2021 and still we have fewer than 30 black women full professors in the entire country. And other racial minorities tend to hold on fixed term contracts and positions at the lower pay scale. Their positions are critically precarious in comparison to the positions of their white counterparts. So when universities respond to the pandemic by having all sorts of cuts such as redundancy, pay increase freeze, promotion freeze or recruitment freeze it is really those racial minorities especially women, again, who are suffered... they are usually the first ones to let go when they experience the pay increase, or a pay increase freeze or promotion freeze. It also means that it will take them much longer to catch up on the gender and racial pay gaps that they currently face.

So, just to give you an example during Covid I'm aware that some university terminated existing fixed term contracts and froze associate lecture contracts for the 2020 to 2021 academic year. This policy seems to apply to almost the whole such positions, it doesn't seem racist or sexist, however we also know that a significant portion of those on temporary contracts are women or BAME academics. So, for example, at this particular university almost half of all female Asian academics are casualised workers whereas only 28% are white men. Therefore universities, one policy for all, that seems to be fair, is in fact highly inequitable in its impact and enables inequalities to accelerate more during Covid-19 than they otherwise would. So we can certainly say that everyone struggles with the pandemic but the extent to which one struggles varies depending on their different axes of identities.

EP: Thank you so much, Sarah. You highlighted a range of issues there that higher education institutions might want to be aware of. Is there anything else in particular that they should be aware of beyond the issues you've raised in terms of the vulnerability of frontline staff, staff on less formal contracts?

SL: We know that the impact of Covid is intersectional, and we know that Covid has only exacerbated existing inequalities. Institutions need to be aware of the different challenges that their staff face. First this may be a good time to re-evaluate why we are using meritocracy or mostly research outputs to determine one's worth and contribution to the university. We know that academic staff contribute more to the university beyond research through their teaching, through their services and leadership, their mentoring and their

involvement in all kinds of activities yet research output is the one that's used the most in evaluating one's credentials for promotion, for example.

So such evaluations based on meritocracy hurts women and people of colour the most while their white male counterparts benefit from that. And, secondly, universities have made many decisions very early on in response to the Covid-19 because they were worried about the financial constraints made by the pandemic. Universities made decisions to cut staff, freeze pay, increase and promotion and so on however we also know that some of the worries at university administrations had earlier on actually didn't happen. For example, the statistics show that the international student enrolment in the UK has actually increased in the last year. So universities need to reverse their decisions because their decisions have a long lasting detrimental impact, again, mostly on women and people of colour. And to give you an example, we know that racial and gender pay gaps exist in the higher ed and promotion is one of the only ways in which women of colour could catch up on their academic status as well as their pay. So putting a freeze on promotion really creates a barrier for women and people of colour academics especially those in early career in the long run. However, I don't see any university, really, trying their best to help these early career scholars who are mostly racial minorities and women despite their... I'm using my air quotes here, commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. Universities are not exploring other options such as freezing promotion and pay increase of those who are already above a certain threshold in terms of salary or title and university have called also for voluntary pay cuts and implement it even if it's just temporary a six:one pay ratio.

Most importantly universities haven't made any financial justification or provided any financial evidence for these cuts. So you asked me earlier if there are things that institutions need to be aware of, I think they are all very aware of the very things I just mentioned, the unequal impact of COVID and university decisions on staff, yeah, universities really need to think about how they can recognise these issues and address them in a systematic way.

EP: And certainly the impact that the pandemic's had on early career research is base... commissioned Vitae to undertake research in the area and it's found that there's been quite a significant impact on early career researchers who responded and it's a significant sample that they had within the sector so people might want to look at that. Thank you, Sarah.

In terms of staff support, is one of the things that we always advocate within advanced HE is at times like this, how are staff being supported, there's a lot of focus at the moment on student support, student mental health, how are staff being supported?

SL: It's definitely a challenging time for everyone including university administrations. But I think we also need to remember that the pandemic has been ongoing for a year now so the universities should have been ready and be more prepared to support both their student body and their staff body. However, I see very limited support from the university so, for example, like I said earlier many people still have to go on campus to deliver in person teaching and yet we don't really see much support how staff could travel or commute to work in a safe way. And, like I said, everyone really struggles with the pandemic and yet we

don't really see much support either on mental health of the staff. And some universities are very kind in terms of how they support their staff from taking a break from everything, I know some universities allow their staff to take, for example, Fridays off. That's really good, I think that's a really good first step but what is not considered is the fact that work is always going to be there, the workload is not going to disappear only because you all of a sudden start working four days a week instead of five. So, I think that kind of flexibility given by the university should be applauded but at the same time we also need to think about... the flexibility doesn't really make the work disappear so someone has to do it. So it's just really much longer hours of four days of the week rather than five. And let alone some universities don't even provide that option, some universities ask their staff to just take annual leave if they feel like they are burnt out.

And it won't be fair for me to say that university doesn't provide any support at all because I think some universities do provide support for the university. But at the same time a lot of the support given by the university centres on research so the universities still have this mentality or the expectation of their academic staff to be productive, to produce research outputs, to meet the next REF cycle, we've already started to think about that. So a lot of the support given is based on that which is really good but at the same time it's ignoring the fact that the pandemic has an intersectional impact on staff. Like I said earlier, for example, university could have extra funding opportunities to allow their staff to carry out research during this time but if you are a woman with caring responsibilities it doesn't matter if the university gives you some pot of money, you just don't have the time or the ability to really focus on work. So I think there's a lot of implications for support for staff and I think there are ways in which such support could be more comprehensive and could be more considerate of people, again, with intersectional identities.

EP: Certainly even where staff are considered critical workers during this lockdown and able to send their children to school, or if they've got younger children and nurseries are open, there's still a lack of wraparound care in terms of after school clubs and facilities and things. It's that the day is still shortened in terms of those facilities not being available in the same way. Thank you. And in terms of policy making, what do you think could be done to ensure continued staff progression and to reduce these inequalities that we're seeing emerging, or more pronounced in the sector due to Covid?

SL: These are definitely trying times, we are definitely facing a lot of challenges brought by the pandemic but I also think there are opportunities for us as well. I think this is a really good time to revisit the higher education system so we need to think about how the universities neoliberal practices particularly for woman of colour, especially those who are at the early stages of their career, like I discussed earlier. So in terms of policy making I think we should perhaps think beyond... think about why higher education is not provided for free. It is here in Scotland, for Scotland students, why is it not for free everywhere else? So if students are paying so much for their tuition we need to ask, well, where does that money go? We know that it certainly doesn't go towards academic and service staff as we see that, we suffer from that working conditions, pay gaps and so on. At the same time we know that

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some university VCs make 13 times more than their staff. So these are issues that policy makers need to pay attention to and to find a way to help the members of the universities foster a safe and equal environment where divisions are not autocratically or centrally made and where divisions are not made to pursue the internationalisation or neoliberalisation of education.

EP: That's an interesting one, thank you. That's great. And in terms of... we've seen a lot of media coverage on students in terms of how they fared during the pandemic, testing, being within halls of residence and a lot of focus has been on their food supplies. I am interested, though, in terms of the actual gendered and intersectional impact on students because that isn't something that we've heard a lot about in the media and I've seen wonderful sort of praise on Twitter for students who are juggling childcare.

SL: Yeah, right, we absolutely don't pay enough attention to that. So many students experience the same things that many people inside and outside the academia experience, they juggle work and caring responsibilities. However, I think for many students, especially they don't come from privileged backgrounds, may find it particularly difficult as many of them may become essential workers during this time, for example working in industries that require them to provide in person services such as working in supermarkets to basically really just make ends meet. We know that education is not free and it's not cheap so the pandemic really put a strain on students. I've heard stories about how some students are now forced to work multiple part time jobs to pay for their tuition fees because their parents lost their jobs during the pandemic so they couldn't help them out any more financially. So imagine having to juggle schoolwork, possibly caring possibilities and on top of them work multiple jobs just to survive.

And in addition to class, the impact of class, I think one thing that we don't often talk about is also disability in this situation. Some students may be immobile, they can't leave their house for whatever reason, that would really put a strain on their mental health as well. So I think those are issues that we need to think about when university, especially when universities think about providing support for their students. We shouldn't treat students as a homogenous group against students like academic staff and professional services, students have intersectional identities that put them in a situation where they experience a pandemic in a different way. So it's really dangerous for the university to treat them as a homogenous group without recognising their individual needs based on their individual identities.

EP: Thank you, that's good thinking. As I mentioned at the outset this month is about reflecting on the current circumstances and what's happening, the inequalities that have been very evident but also how we can move forward and part of that is looking at any positives that there have been coming out of the pandemic. We are finding some, we're actually going to be publishing research shortly on remote working and the impact that that has had on people and their ability to work productively. I just wanted to know if you had any thoughts in terms of are there any positives that we could build on that have arisen from the pandemic?

SL: I'm very happy to hear about all the things that you said are going to be happening 'cause I apologise in advance if I sound a little bit more pessimistic than optimistic. So I try really hard to think about the positives that we can build upon that have arisen from the pandemic. I think it's a good thing that people have realised that the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, we see that from a lot of research that has been produced and we see that from a lot of teaching that is also being generated. So I think it's really good our focusing on that. However, I think what we do with that information or evidence is what I hope we'll all take into consideration when making decisions. So there's mounting evidence of inequalities arisen by the pandemic so what do universities do and how can students hold their universities accountable. I think this is definitely the time to start thinking about that, to start thinking, asking those questions and to start making or holding the institutions accountable. And, lastly, like I said earlier, I think this is a really good time to revisit the higher education sector. Why is it working the way it is, why is it functioning the way it is, why has it become neoliberal, why is education not free anymore? So those are the questions that we need to continue pushing and, like I said, I think the pandemic, in a way, is a mirror, it really has mirrored or reflected or given us a chance to reflect upon some of the sufferings and oppressions based on intersectional identities in the past. They're all sort of out in the open or at least more out in the open than before now so this is a really great time to ask those questions.

EP: Thank you, Sarah, that's really, really helpful and I have the same thoughts, it's anyone, I hope, who sort of engages just in the mainstream news, reading newspapers, will really have some of the inequalities in our society laid before them on a very regular basis, often daily at the moment. If it does mean more people are aware and you don't have to convince them as much of some of the stark inequalities in our society.

It's nearly time to wrap up now but before we do, I'd just like to ask if you've got any further thoughts, any issues you'd like to raise at all?

SL: Yeah, I just want to emphasise again that 2020 and up until now has not been easy. In the middle of the pandemic there was also Black Lives Matter as a backdrop and many universities published open letters stating support for Black Lives Matter. However, universities continue to fail to address the systematic nature of racism entrenched within their institutions by making the urgent required changes to practices and operations. So I think if universities are serious about equality, diversity and inclusion as they claim they are in these open letters regarding Black Lives Matter then the most straightforward way again for them to fix these sexist and racist problems would be to revisit their decisions on cuts like I discussed earlier. So we cannot really separate out the pandemic from the Black Lives Matter or all these other movements around the world now because they're all interconnected. So I'm really hoping that institutions will pay attention to how they have exacerbated existing inequalities and their responses to Covid-19 and I really hope that members of the higher ed community will work together to hold institutions accountable. And students should also remember that they have, in a way, so much more power than staff so students should learn about these issues that not only they themselves or their peers are

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facing with the only representation or under recruitment and so on. And work with academic staff to create a better and more inclusive learning and teaching environment for everyone.

EP: Thank you very much indeed, Sarah, you've provided lots of food for thought, for us as advance HE, for universities who are members, in terms of the impacts that Covid-19 and the Government's responses are having on our society and in turn our universities and there's certainly some issue that we'll no doubt be picking up on more as this month continues. I'd like to wrap up now and thank you very much indeed.

SL: Thank you, Helen, it was definitely a privilege and a pleasure to be here with you.



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