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FEMINIST FRONTIERS

'All the single ladies' as the ideal academic during times of COVID-19?

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Much of what has hitherto been written about women's lived experiences of the coronavirus pandemic takes their status as mothers and the spouses of men for granted. Skewed care demands on women researchers working from home may translate into individual career disadvantage and cumulative, large-scale gender inequalities in the future, which is undeniably a serious issue. However, the narrative that single, childfree women must currently, by contrast, be unconcernedly enjoying a surge of productivity needs to be nuanced. Therefore, with this article, I autoethnographically discuss how living alone in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic provides its own set of circumstances and is hardly problem-free, which affects how one can deal with issues of academic productivity and work–life balance. Also, I take issue with the premise that our productivity is the golden standard against which we and our worth should be measured while we are living through a global crisis.

KEYWORDS
autoethnography, coronavirus, productivity, singlehood, work–life balance

1 | OPENING

Okay, guilty as charged. When Denmark went into lockdown on 11 March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I thought 'Yes!' — what a great opportunity to get some writing done, work out and get to the bottom of that 'to do around the flat' list. The lockdown came only about a month after I had handed in my PhD dissertation. Although I avoided a gruelling, 24–7 finishing sprint, after six months of *intense* writing, I also saw the stay-at-home order as a welcome opportunity to slow down and recuperate. This was, however, not how the past two months turned out for me. Clearly, I had no clue about what existing in a global crisis feels like, nor its consequences at a

personal level. In this text, based on my experience and gender scholarship, I discuss the relationship between two issues — academic productivity and work–life balance — in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This may not seem particularly inventive as these topics have been extensively covered in the media (e.g., Ahmad, 2020a; Jenkins, 2020; Minello, 2020), which I have followed closely, as well as in other contributions to the *Gender, Work and Organization* Feminist Frontiers section (Boncori, 2020; De Coster, 2020). Still, I believe that I occupy a hitherto generally overlooked position from which to approach these issues, namely, that I am single and live alone. And why is this demographic information about me important? It is important because all of the previously mentioned, very valuable and insightful contributions to these discussions focus on working mothers (see also Chemaly, 2020; Featherstone, 2020; Flaherty, 2020). I, on the other hand, as an 'unburdened' academic (read: childfree, Flaherty, 2020), have supposedly been 'stockpiling papers' during these past two months and am now 'aiming for the stars' (Minello, 2020). Sounds good, right? Can't wait!

2 | WOMEN AND ACADEMIC CAREERS

Please do not get me wrong. The barriers that working mothers face in their careers are important — generally speaking — and they are important to me personally even though I do not count myself among them. My research focuses on how organizations attempt to remove such barriers with equality and diversity interventions and programmes, with universities as one of the empirical settings I study (Utoft, 2020a). While Denmark is often perceived as a gender-equality spearhead nation, the attrition of female researchers is just as bad here as in most other countries. In 2017, only 22 per cent of all Danish professors were women (Danish Ministry of Education and Science (DMES), 2019, p. 12). The narrative that usually pervades when this issue is addressed, politically as well as institutionally, is how young female scholars 'opt out' of academic careers (Nielsen, 2017). After the PhD, university careers are characterized by consecutive short-term contracts with no guarantee of tenure in the end (DMES, 2015; Gleerup, Nielsen, Olsen, & Warring, 2018), expectations of international mobility (Ackers, 2004; Uhly, Visser, & Zippel, 2017), as well as ever-increasing research productivity demands (Gill, 2009; Nielsen, 2017). Such factors are believed to in particular clash with the phase of women's lives in which they have children (Nielsen, 2017; Bassett, 2005; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005) and, thus, disproportionately deter women from pursuing academic careers. But other research also points to how sexist views are alive and well in the Danish academy (Skewes, Skewes, & Ryan, 2019) and how such views affect decision-makers in their assessment of female researchers' qualifications and commitment to their work (Nielsen, 2017). Thus, the agentic 'opt out' of women is far from clear-cut. At least, alongside the 'opt out' narrative exists a discourse of exclusion which entails that 'discriminatory structures, cultures and practices outside and within the workplace [serve] to suppress women and limit their opportunities for advancement' (Rennison, 2014, p. 47), this way in fact *pushing* women out. At universities, one aspect of such structures and cultures is academia's unfaltering championing of meritocracy (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001). Meritocracy obscures how notions of 'academic excellence' (Herschberg, Benschop, & van den Brink, 2015; Lund, 2015) are deeply gendered in favour of men by idealizing 'the rational and competitive pursuit of knowledge' (Knights & Richards, 2003, p. 214). Scholars have further convincingly argued that the 'ideal academic' — an extension of Joan Acker's (1990) disembodied 'ideal worker' — is constituted in masculine terms (e.g., Bleijenbergh, Engen, & Vinkenburg, 2012) by being absolutely unencumbered by commitments outside of work, especially care responsibilities, leaving *him* free to mass produce scientific papers for A-level journals (Lund, 2012).

Much of the literature centring women's work life experiences takes women's status as mothers and the romantic partners or spouses of men for granted, with the contradictory demands that this poses on women, including 'the second shift' (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). The notion of 'work–life balance' has therefore become central to understanding women's work lives, including at universities. This way, when work–life balance policies are discussed at workplaces, employers rarely make any reference to employees' (of any gender) ability

to pursue their hobbies, favourite pastimes or other important life aspects. Rather, what is typically at stake is women's access to flexible working arrangements in order to accommodate childcare needs (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019), revealing the genderedness of this concept (Armstrong, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018; Sørensen, 2017). Therefore, implicit in work–*life* balance more often than not lies work–*family* balance (Rottenberg, 2018).

3 | COVID-19 AND GENDER

As mentioned, much has already been written about how, even in dual-career families, care burdens and domestic work overwhelmingly fall on women during the lockdown (e.g., Chemaly, 2020; Featherstone, 2020; Ferguson, 2020), which, for academics, is *already* showing in journal submission and publication statistics for the month of April (Fazackerley, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Kitchener, 2020; Priore, 2020). Clearly, during the present situation, for scholars with kids — and especially women — concessions on their work-performance demands are pertinent.

At my own department, leadership has sent well-meaning words of comfort and encouragement each week during the lockdown, such as the following:

> *I am very impressed by everyone's — both TAPs' [administrative personnel] and VIPs' [scientific personnel] — hard work. I appreciate that those of you with children are facing extra challenges. It is not easy to figure out new [online] teaching methods or 'nerd' on articles while you're looking after children. I can only ask you to do your best, and I am convinced that you are. If you hit any roadblocks, please contact [X] or me.* (20 March 2020)

> *We have now been confined to our homes for two weeks. I continue to be impressed by how well the teaching is working, but I also realize that some of you — especially those of you with small children — are under pressure. Let me repeat what I wrote last Friday: Just do your best, which I am convinced you are already doing.* (27 March 2020)

While I acknowledge that these excerpts do not outright deny that staff without children may be struggling during the lockdown, they stress that the situation for parents is particularly complicated. I do not deny this either. However, I believe that there is a need to nuance discussions about the challenges of working from home in relation to the coronavirus by highlighting — as countless, legendary feminist scholars have done before me (e.g., Butler, 1990; hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 2003) — that the category 'women' is not a monolith. Stressing this point does not diminish the importance of attention to how care demands on researchers who are mothers may translate into individual disadvantage for career progress as well as cumulative, large-scale gender inequalities in the future due to reduced productivity. Rather, critiquing 'women' as a uniform category brings to the fore that motherhood and heterosexual relationships alone cannot capture *all* female researchers' experience of the coronavirus lockdown. It is this gap I wish to address by autoethnographically (Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2011) discussing what being single and living alone has meant for me during the past two months of involuntary confinement. Although this piece of writing also serves a therapeutic purpose, this issue is not only relevant to me personally since approximately 1.6 million Danish citizens are single, the majority of whom are women (Statistics Denmark, 2016). At least to some of these single ladies (scholars or not), my experience may resonate, and my theoretically anchored reflections will contribute with an important, generally overlooked perspective to the research being done around people's lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I base my discussion on the following two questions:

- When work–life balance often means work–*family* balance, can there be a 'life' for single, childfree women, or is work the only thing left?
- May single women, who live alone, in fact be considered the 'ideal academic' during the coronavirus lockdown?

4 | THE SINGLE WOMAN AS THE 'IDEAL ACADEMIC' IN TIMES OF COVID-19

Since the beginning of the lockdown, supposedly motivational and inspirational posts and tweets have circulated urging us to make the most of the situation now that we have the time — take up a new hobby, learn new skills or a new language, read books, get wiser. As I already confessed, I intuitively got on the bandwagon. Usually, apart from long workdays, my weeks are quite full of sports activities, seeing friends and whatever else might be up. With all of this cancelled, I eyed an opportunity. I made to-do lists and began working on that 'post-dissertation submission' paper I had been planning. I was off to a good start, it felt great, but it did not last. After approximately two weeks, my mood changed, my motivation plummeted and I felt like I had lost my ability to concentrate.

Ahmad (2020b) reminds us that adapting to a crisis situation is not linear, which may be especially discouraging if you start off well followed by feeling like you are being hit by a 'series of train wrecks'. My belated reaction was principally related to two things. One, the Danish lockdown was planned for two weeks from the outset, and while, probably, I rationally knew that two weeks would not suffice in halting the spread of the virus (seeing what was happening in other countries), it may only have been at the announcement of the extension of the lockdown that I actually comprehended that the isolation and working from home would be a long-term thing. Two, around this time, I received the assessment of my PhD dissertation, and while it was accepted for defence, the assessment committee recommended certain revisions before it would be printed. Officially, these revisions had to be sufficiently minor to complete before the already set defence date. However, they were hardly easy, and the deadline was relatively short. We are probably all familiar with the mixed emotions associated with receiving a 'revise and resubmit', and this experience was no different. I quickly had to 'move from a place of indignance [from — what felt like — having my work eviscerated by the assessment panel] to one of perseverance and willingness to' get over my wounded ego and make my already good enough dissertation even better (MacIntosh, 2018). However, especially my reduced ability to concentrate posed a challenge to completing this work as well as my isolation from my close colleagues, PhD supervisor and line manager, to whom I would normally turn when struggling with a task or when motivation is low. Furthermore, since I am the expert on my own research, I felt that making the improvements that the committee requested and finishing my 'baby' lay solely with me.

What happened was, however, that the pressure of completing this important task consumed me. Since the revisions required so much effort, I was gradually working more and more. Also, given how my home had been 'requisitioned' by my employer to now constitute as much my office (Jenkins, 2020), the boundaries between work and off work completely vanished. As Jenkins argues, flexible working arrangements (as a personnel benefit offered by employers), in normal circumstances, imply the option of increased movement between work and home to accommodate different sets of demands. However, with the lockdown, there is no movement; there is only home, which, for me, turned into only work.

I was keenly aware of the privileged situation I was in, namely, that I was in no risk of losing my job and my income. In Denmark, the stay-at-home order never meant 'you cannot leave your house at all', so I was outdoors walking and running every day, and most importantly, I (and my loved ones) remained healthy. These factors only added to my guilt of struggling when, in principle, I had the perfect conditions for 'grinding'; that is, I had no other claims on my time than to do my work. In this sense, yes, I represented the wholly dedicated, unencumbered 'ideal academic' (Acker, 1990; Bleijenbergh et al., 2012) who has no work versus family needs to balance, but I was certainly not 'unburdened' (Flaherty, 2020). The idea that I could be seems preposterous to me — even without the work pressure. I will get back to that.

Nevertheless, I am of course as much a product of my (neoliberal capitalist) time as anyone, in which an idle moment is a moment ill spent, and I guess very few of us are completely immune to 'hustle culture' (Griffith, 2019) and 'toxic productivity' discourses (Grigg, 2020). Moreover, higher education scholarship recognizes the 'neoliberalization' of universities (Gill, 2017; Lund & Tienari, 2019; Taylor & Lahad, 2018), which subjects scholars to gruelling publication pressures as part of the 'metrification' of research performance (Lorenz, 2014). I am also wondering if the nature of academic work itself may be a contributing factor, firstly, because it generally requires 'deep work' (Newport, 2016) and, secondly, since scholars are often very passionate about their research topics. This may be even more so for feminist scholars for whom research is also part of their politics and activism (Taylor & Lahad, 2018), which applies to my own case. However, I was feeling incapable of performing and concentrating to my normal standards, while faced with an inescapable and demanding deadline, in the context of living through apocalyptic-feeling, pandemic times. Luckily, alongside supposedly 'motivational' online content on 'maximizing self-optimization' (Grigg, 2020) during the lockdown, content taking issue with this premise also emerged. Several writers do not mince their words as they slam such reasoning, for example:

> We are going through a collective trauma, that is bringing up profound grief, loss, panic over livelihoods, panic over loss of lives of loved ones.... Yet, someone has the nerve to accuse someone of lack of discipline for not learning a new skill. (Dr Alaa Hijazi, trauma psychologist, quoted by Reneau, 2020)

> Working effectively has never been so difficult as we have to adapt to studying at home, remotely and with a constant stream of bad news and feelings of uncertainty about the future. Yet, simultaneously, we are hit even harder by the commercialized 'self-help' machine as more and more of our lives are moved online. (Grigg, 2020)

These writers (as well as others, including Ahmad, 2020a; Edwards, 2020) question our priorities in this moment and state that our mental and physical health is much more urgent in these stressful times than our productivity and that we should be 'investing' — to stay within the neoliberal, capitalist vocabulary — time and whatever surplus energy we might have in ensuring the wellbeing of our loved ones and aiding the vulnerable and additionally challenged people within our sphere of reach. Ahmad (2020a) even goes as far as to state that the COVID-19 pandemic will change the world to such an extent that worrying about scholarly productivity in this moment constitutes outright denial and delusion, which only serves to 'delay the essential process of acceptance [of permanent change], which will allow us to reimagine ourselves in this new reality'.

Notions of self-work and self-improvement are part of central neoliberal logics, which obscure systemic challenges and problems and turn them into trivial, individual obstacles (Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018). Such obstacles are assumed possible to overcome by changing one's affective state, such as to 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013) and cultivate confidence, resilience and — especially — a positive mindset (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2017). I tried to focus on the revisions of my dissertation as a wonderful opportunity to improve my work before it was to be published (which of course it was), but I had internalized the idea that completing this work fell exclusively on me — all I had to do was *work harder*. I was working constantly, but not particularly efficiently, and felt increasingly panicked that I would not be able to do what the assessment committee asked. Eventually, I was completely stuck between self-doubt and self-pity.

5 | COPING WITH WORK AND GLOBAL CRISIS WHILE LIVING ALONE

Agreed, I should have asked for help sooner. Although I did not see my supervisors or my boss on a daily basis, they were all available. And although, yes, I live alone and, during the pandemic, I have spent the vast majority of my time on my own, my family has called nearly every day to check in and friends (some of whom are academics)

have listened to my frustrations and cheered me on because they knew how important it was for me to do the revisions well. Nevertheless, while my supervisors and my academic friends and colleagues could offer much appreciated substantial advice to the revisions, I found most solace and motivation in reading those online blogs and Op-eds that, without a shred of shame, discussed anxiety, depression, and especially feelings of guilt and insufficiency in relation to working from home during the coronavirus. Clearly, I was not alone in feeling the way I did, but I did not have caring responsibilities to 'blame' like many of these writers. So, I am wondering if my 'excuse' for struggling is good enough?

Under normal circumstances, living alone is key to my mental health, which I even wrote about elsewhere (Utoft, 2020b). It provides a calm space where I can recuperate my strength while leading an often hectic, but certainly full and exciting life. I am an active and adventurous person, who needs social input to thrive. Therefore, the combination of work demands and coronavirus confinement (although the 'luxury' version of it that we have had the privilege of here in Denmark) produced feelings of loneliness, which is pretty terrifying to admit since loneliness is so heavily tabooed. Murthy (2020) argues that loneliness is linked with low self-esteem and self-worth.1 As such, I may, in theory, have had the perfect conditions (as an 'ideal', unburdened academic — being alone and undisturbed in my home) to perform to my maximum. However, these conditions rather became a barrier and a self-perpetuating loop through which my frustrations and insecurities concerning the revisions exacerbated feelings of loneliness, and feeling lonely increased my frustrations and insecurities concerning the revisions.

And then there is the other minor thing: the coronavirus pandemic. Maybe some of you recognize the feeling of questioning the significance of your work all together given the sheer scope and scale of current global disasters, including COVID-19 and the climate crisis. Does my silly little dissertation even matter anymore? But of course it does, and holding on to that conviction is also a way of ensuring some degree of meaningfulness in our lives right now, when hopelessness and existential dread are lurking. As Cynthia Pong (quoted by Edwards, 2020) argues:

> We have crafted a lot of our feelings of self-worth on achievement, accomplishment and being prolific in stuff that we do. If you take that away, there's a void. And voids are so hard to deal with.

The point is that, in this context, work performance and productivity ought not to be the *only* source of meaningfulness when perfection, high achievement and 'excellence' are (for most scholars, with or without children) out of the question at the moment (Ahmad, 2020b). Aiming for these kinds of standards means setting ourselves up to fail. As such, the last thing we need right now are little 'uplifting' quotes glorifying productivity (Edwards, 2020), and those (misogynistic) writers who shame (female) scholars who teach or join meetings on zoom with greasy, unwashed hair can 'fuck right off' (Isis the scientist, 2020; in response to Kiser, 2020). We should be glorifying surviving and staying sane (Edwards, 2020) while simply getting our work done — nothing more.

6 | 'A PANDEMIC ISN'T A WRITING RETREAT LOL'2

During the lockdown, scholars who are mothers struggle to get any work done and feel guilty towards their kids when they finally sit down to work (Ahmad, 2020a; De Coster, 2020). The question thus becomes: will you accept my struggle as legitimate when it strays from this normative perception of what the struggles of 'women' in their work lives presumably concern? The challenges I faced in relation to work–life balance were seemingly reversed so that my work became all-consuming and absorbed my home (my desk, my couch, my dinner table, my bed), turning everything into my office. I am by no means saying that either struggle is worse than the other, only that they are problematic in each of their different ways and that both deserve mentioning — especially considering how understanding and reduced performance expectations are generally only extended to academics with 'toddlers crawling

around at their feet'.3 Such discursive practices further perpetuate the unencumbered dimension of the archetype of the 'ideal academic' without problematizing how it overlooks that there may be more to life than work and family. Finally, neoliberal feminist logics champion the idea that women should postpone motherhood and establish and safeguard their careers while they are young (now is the time to grind!) by which they will (somehow, supposedly) be better poised to achieve balance down the line (Rottenberg, 2018). But what about women who do not *want* to have kids? When does the grinding end for them? In the words of *Sex and the City*'s Carrie Bradshaw, I cannot help but wonder; when work–life balance often (for women) means work–*family* balance, are single, childfree women entitled to balance at all?

In Denmark, we are now entering our third month of lockdown, although the restrictions are being lifted. Society is gradually reopening, but so far, universities are not. This means, as I am sure applies to most countries in the world right now, that we are in this for the long haul, and we therefore need to find work routines at home that are sustainable. For the Danish mothers working from home, the relaxation of the lockdown means that their children can go back to day care and schools. Kids and parents might be equally happy with that. Personally, I see these past two months as a phasing-in process. Ahmad (2020a) writes the following:

> On the other side of this journey of acceptance are hope and resilience. We will know that we can do this, even if our struggles continue for years. We will be creative and responsive, and will find light in all the nooks and crannies. We will learn new recipes and make unusual friends. We will have projects we cannot imagine today, and will inspire students we have not yet met. And we will help each other. No matter what happens next, together, we will be blessed and ready to serve.

Although the idea of being 'blessed' is perhaps a bit beyond my sphere of reference, much of this quote resonates. I have certainly learnt important lessons. Firstly, I overcame a task that, at times, seemed insurmountable. Secondly, having far exceeded it, I certainly know where my limit lies as to how much I can and should work under the present conditions. But most importantly, in a context of physical distancing, it seems all but too easy to default to hegemonic solutions, namely individualization as predicated by neoliberalism, when, in fact, collectivity and social support may be more pressing than ever. I have felt great solidarity and encouragement in online communities and writing groups with people whom, mostly, I have never met. And joining that daily, virtual 11-o'clock coffee break with my colleagues may seem inconvenient if I am in a good work flow but is imperative in terms of maintaining contact with them and to avoid feelings of isolation. Finally, as Grigg (2020) writes, having so much of our lives moved online makes it harder to escape 'inspirational' content and the 'self-help machine'. However, the Internet fortunately also offers an important counterpart hereto. To me at least, it is the radically honest,4 unapologetic writers who tell unpolished stories of struggles and overcoming that inspire me. They are inspirational because they are simply more credible and because they are part of subversive efforts that challenge those belief systems that make so many of us feel chronically insufficient by implying that, individually, we are both to blame for and the solution to why we are not doing more, nor doing better.

Therefore, in conclusion, and in response to you, Colleen Flaherty (2020) and Alessandra Minello (2020): you can calm down. I can of course only speak for myself, but even without caring responsibilities, I was neither unburdened, nor have I stockpiled papers. But I am still here, and that is enough.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Whom I heard interviewed on this point by Jameela Jamil on her fabulous, shame-shattering podcast iWeigh.

[2]Tweeted by @robin__craig on 28 March 2020.

[3]Also excerpted from one of the weekly emails from our department leadership, 8 May 2020.

[4]A term I humbly borrow from Jameela Jamil (also) from her podcast iWeigh.

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