Competing Roles in Times of Crisis: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Lives of Graduate Student Mothers

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the lives of graduate student mothers at the University of Alberta changed during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease, COVID-19. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, I interviewed 19 graduate student mothers from various programs using a maximum variation strategy to recruit participants from a diverse set of backgrounds. A critical, reflexive thematic analysis revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a loss of control in graduate student mothers' lives due to a decrease in childcare and new ways of responding to common illness. Institutional decisions from the government and the university influenced the loss of control through negatively perceived government policy and the simultaneous restructuring of the University of Alberta, exacerbating relational inequality and reinforcing inequality regimes. Predictability and planning are needed to balance the competing role of mother and student, and the loss of control from the pandemic resulted in mothers having to readjust their academic goals and extend the amount of time needed to complete their degrees. The forced readjustment of mothers' goals was shaped through an organizational context which constrained the options available to them and increased their difficulty in accessing organizational resources. For some participants the shift to online learning was a benefit, allowing them to reduce their work-family-conflict. The findings of this thesis inform a definition of the "ideal graduate student", someone who can meet the requirements of graduate work in a neoliberalized university with dwindling resources. Finally, this thesis puts forward suggestions that would resist inequality regimes in the academy and assist graduate student mothers in achieving their academic goals. The findings are useful to policymakers and activists working towards gender equity in academia and other institutions that share similar organizational patterns.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Andrea DeKeseredy. The research project, of which this thesis is a part of, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Board, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Graduate Student Mothers” No. Pro00120409, July 21, 2023.

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Chapter One: Introduction

COVID-19 is a highly contagious respiratory disease that has killed millions of people worldwide (WHO, 2023). Throughout 2020 as the disease spread, we quickly learned that even a highly contagious pathogen treats people differently based on their social location. The virus is more likely to be deadly for the most vulnerable: older adults, people with disabilities, those living with HIV, pregnant people, and people with underlying health conditions such as diabetes and addiction issues (CDC, 2021). People who had the privilege of being able to isolate were able to protect themselves from the virus. Those with no choice but to work, often in low wage labour, were more likely to be exposed (Faghri et al., 2021; Sanchez et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the harms of social inequality and rabid individualism in its most rare form, dictating who lived and who died.

Spread by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-COV-2) which causes COVID-19, the disease attacks nearly every part of the body (CDC, 2021). This creates a diverse set of adverse complications including loss of taste and smell, cough, fever, and body aches (CDC, 2021). Serious cases of the disease result in damage to vital organs, with people having to be put on ventilators to breathe because of a severe impaired flow of oxygen to the lungs (Belluck, 2020). Every infection of the virus increases the risk of stroke, heart attack, and other cardiovascular issues (Abbasi, 2022 Belani et al., 2020). Many people who survive the disease continue to suffer from what is known as long covid where the body experiences COVID-related symptoms for months, if not years (CDC, 2022). COVID-19 is a dangerous disease that continues to spread throughout our community, killing and disabling its victims.

Mitigation strategies put in place to limit the spread of the disease affected people differently based on their roles and social locations. For women, there was fear that decades of

progress towards gender equity would be erased in a matter of months. The closures of daycares and schools to mitigate the spread of the disease disproportionately affected women as they were more likely to experience disruption in their jobs due to childcare obligations. Already concentrated in low-wage, service-related jobs, women were also more likely to lose their employment since their jobs were more precarious. In Canada, during the initial outbreak of the virus, women accounted for 2/3 of all job losses (Grekou & Lu, 2021).

The effects of the pandemic on women's employment were not surprising; as with other patterns of social inequality, the pandemic served as an exogenic shock to an already prevalent issue. Despite women making overall gains in the workforce, mothers continue to lag behind men and their childless peers (Crittenden, 2001). Mothers who are unable to access the same opportunities as men and those without care work responsibilities experience a gendered phenomenon often referred to as the "motherhood penalty" (Budig & England, 2001, p. 205). The ongoing oppression of mothers can be explained in part by workplace adoption of policies that favour the ideal worker, rewarding those who can dedicate the entirety of themselves to their job with few external responsibilities. In her pathbreaking book *Unbending Gender*, Joan Williams refers to this concept as the "unencumbered man" (2000, p. 64). someone who can commit themselves without interruption to their job because they have a partner at home to handle all other aspects of modern life. These workers are more likely to be able to put in overtime and work with little interruption, increasing their productivity at rates inaccessible to those raising children.

The ideal worker, or unencumbered man, is rewarded within most types of organizational "inequality regimes" (Acker, 2006, p.448). These are the ways in which all organizations, like workplaces and universities, are structured and maintain gendered and other forms of inequality

through their actions and their policies. One example of how inequality regimes manifest in organizations is through the accepted general requirements of work, which are often based around the unencumbered man. These are usually at least eight hours of predictable, consistent work a day, entirely free of interruption. With email, texting and communication, many times the general requirements of work require continuing to be connected even from home (Acker, 2006). To meet the requirements of work, you must have immense control over your time and your life to ensure predictability. The general requirements of work are difficult for women to meet due to the unpredictability of childcare, and often inequality regimes will categorize women into lower positions in the organizational hierarchy due to their perceived family obligations. While women are relegated to lower positions, the ideal worker continues to be able to meet the general requirements of work, is rewarded with a "good" job, and has success in laying claim to additional organizational resources.

There is perhaps no better example of an inequality regime than academia, an organization in which men are rewarded for their continuous productivity while women are concentrated in lower paying, more precarious positions. Academia incentives the unencumbered man through the lionization of publishing, rewarding them with jobs at the top of the organizational hierarchy and increased organizational resources. Women, unable to produce at the same rate due to the unpredictability of family obligations as well as categorization that leads to decreased departmental resources, are more likely to be concentrated in short-term, contract-based positions with little power and security (CAUT, 2011; Kaufman & Colyar, 2022; Wang & Doolittle, 2021).

One of the most vulnerable positions held within the academic institution is occupied by graduate students, who are often tasked with completing work at the level of faculty without the

added resources or benefits. The ongoing transformation of North American universities under conservative governments and neoliberal policies have left graduate students with even fewer resources to access while pursuing their academic goals. Pressure from the government to provide data demonstrating that public funding is being used efficiently (Coté and Pickard, 2022; Graney, 2019) adds to this stress, and students are under more pressure to finish their programs quickly and enter the workforce. Like the ideal worker, these organizational confines are defined around "the ideal graduate student," reinforcing inequality regimes and categorization within graduate programs.

In an intensifying neoliberal academic environment, the ideal graduate student is someone who can afford the exorbitant and ever-increasing tuition, making recruitment of students more likely to be from middle or upper class. Second, the ideal graduate student is someone who can complete their academic work with little supervision or resources. This is because resources and support cost money to provide, and their supervisor is busy with their own increased workload. Lastly, the ideal graduate student finishes their degree quickly, providing data to the university that they are doing their job efficiently with the public money they have been allotted. Like the ideal worker, the concept of the ideal student is raced, classed, and gendered. More privileged individuals are the most likely to be able to adhere to the confines of the ideal student due to their available resources and control over their time, while the most oppressed are not. This places graduate student mothers in a tough situation as they are unable to meet the general requirements of graduate work and make claim to dwindling organizational resources in a neoliberalized academic environment (Lynch, 2008; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009).

Informed by relational inequality theory (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019), inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) and intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), this study explored the experiences of graduate student mothers during the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how the outbreak of the virus and subsequent restrictions affected graduate student mothers as they worked towards achieving their academic goals while balancing their competing roles as mother and student. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and critical reflexive thematic analysis, the research questions that guided this project were: 1) *what has been the impact of the COVID-19 disease on graduate student mothers' academic goals? 2) what characteristics and supports influenced varying experiences of graduate student mothers during the pandemic? and 3) what factors increased and decreased the amount of control participants had over their lives during the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus?"*

Within the following chapters of this thesis, I give an overview of my research process and discuss how my findings relate to theoretical perspectives on why inequality persists within organizations and what policy that may resist it. First, the background chapter discusses the current literature and theoretical framework in relation to my study. Next, the methods chapter describes my methodology and data collection, including my sample requirements, recruitment procedure, participant characteristics and interview process. Within this chapter I also outline my analytic process. including my coding strategy and subsequent development of themes. The next chapter is my findings, where I describe and interpret the results of my study as they relate to my original research questions and theoretical framework. Finally, the last chapter consists of a discussion and concluding thoughts, where I review my key findings, connect them to my

research question and discuss potential theoretical contributions. Within the final chapter I also discuss limitations of the work and paths forward for future research.

Chapter Two: Background

In Canada, women generally earn 87 cents for every dollar earned by men, often referred to as "the wage gap" (Pelletier & Patterson, 2019). This gap varies amongst women, often changing based on social characteristics. For example, racialized Canadian women who make 88.2 cents for every dollar non-racialized women earn (Block & Galabuzi, 2011). Traditionally, we have thought of the wage gap as the difference between what men and women are paid for equal amounts of work. In reality, childless women have been quite adept at closing it (Crittenden, 2001; Kleven, Landais & Sogaard, 2019). A better way to understand the wage gap is to look at it from a caregiving perspective, as it is predominantly women with children who make less money than their male counterparts and childless women (Avellar & Smock, 2003; Crittenden, 2010; Kleven, Landais & Sogaard, 2019).

The discrepancy in pay between mothers and their childless counterparts is known as the "family gap" (Waldfogel, 1998, p. 209). On average, women lose around 3-10% of their income per child (Anderson, Binder & Krause, 2003; Budig & England, 2011). with some studies showing a loss of up to 9-18% per child (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009). This can be attributed to mothers being more likely to engage in part-time work, take on shorter hours, and be segregated into lower paying jobs (Cha & Bucca, 2016; Crittenden, 2001; Fuller, 2018; Waldfogel, 1997). Childcare responsibilities have the largest impact on women's decisions to engage in fewer hours and part-time work (Mennino & Brayfield, 2002; Moyer, 2017). Alternatively, fathers often experience what is known as the "fatherhood premium" or "fatherhood bonus" in which they are awarded an increase in pay after they have children because they are categorized as predictable and dedicated to providing for their family (Glauber, 2008; Killewald, 2012;).

The motherhood penalty is generated through the presence of inequality regimes in the workplace; the patterns, policies, and actions of organizations which maintain gendered forms of inequality (Acker, 2006). Inequality regimes put forward general requirements of work for full-time jobs which typically consist of working eight predictable hours a day. It may be difficult for mothers to adhere to the general requirements of work because they are still predominantly responsible for work outside the home, including domestic, emotional, and child-related labor (Crittenden, 2001; Collins, 2019; Hochschild, 1989). These responsibilities range from cooking and cleaning to lesser obvious tasks like scheduling appointments or taking primary responsibility for holidays like Christmas (Bella, 1992; Daminger, 2019). Those who can adhere to the general requirements often have a partner at home completing domestic tasks, which allows them to complete their work with complete focus, and more control over their time (Williams, 2001).

Relational inequality theory (RIT) can also be used as a framework to better understand how inequalities like the motherhood penalty are generated and maintained within organizations (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). RIT is comprised of two main pieces; the categorization of people and how these categories are used to structure organizations and inequality regimes (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). People categorize others to quickly make sense of the social world around them. For example, mothers are categorized in relation to others as being less committed to their jobs because of their family obligations (Benard, Correll & Paik, 2007). Regardless of whether this is true or not, categorization is a quick way for people and organizations to structure their policies and resource allocation. The categorization of "mother/worker," and the assumption that they are less committed to their jobs, leads them to be ranked lower in the organizational hierarchy. This ranking makes it difficult for

women to engage in the process of claims making; the way people obtain organizational resources (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019).

The categorization of people within organizations influences access to resources through the process of "relational claims making" (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019, p. 6). Relational claims making is an articulation or discursive argument from an actor as to why they should be given resources by an organization and the influential people who control it (Tamaskovic-Devey, 2014). Within an organization, claims take a myriad of forms. For example, successfully finishing a task may be a claim of productivity while never taking a sick day can be a claim of dedication. A claim could also be a request for accommodation, like being able to work remotely or receiving an extension on an assignment. Having a claim recognized by someone is easier for those in higher positions due to the legitimacy they receive through categorization, and they are more likely to be successful in garnering organizational resources. The unencumbered man is an excellent claims maker as his worthiness is shaped by culturally engrained beliefs about men, and his ability to easily meet the general requirements of work is a claim on its own. Mothers will struggle more due to the categorization of being less dedicated to their work as well as the barriers they experience in predictably meeting the general requirements of work.

The categorization of mothers within inequality regimes create and maintain the motherhood penalty within organizations. Women with caregiving responsibilities are first categorized as mothers who are less dedicated to their jobs because of family responsibilities. This also makes them less likely to access organizational resources through claims making due to their perceived illegitimacy. This triggers an endless cycle in which mothers are denied organizational resources that would assist them in meeting the general requirements of work.

Categorization, claims-making and ideal worker norms are made even more prevalent by the pressure for mothers to adhere to yet another role, the intensive mother.

The Competing Demands of Ideal Mother and Ideal Worker

Women experience conflict through pressure to adhere to the standards of two impossible practices: ideal worker and intensive mothering. The demand to engage in these practices are shaped by organizational patterns like inequality regimes, as well as cultural schemas, which are "socially shared representations deployable in automatic cognition." (Boutyline & Soter, 2021, p. 728). Cultural schemas are shared models that shape the way we see and understand our society as well as our opinions and behaviour (Blair-Loy, 2003; Collins, 2019). The ideal worker and intensive mother are two full-time commitments, and the inability to perform both simultaneously conflicts to create ongoing work-life conflict.

Workplaces reward the ideal worker who can commit themselves to the general requirements of work. This is usually someone who works predictably fulltime, takes little time off, and prioritizes their work over caregiving responsibilities (Williams, 2001). The concept of the ideal worker was propagated in the 1990's through the societal adoption of neoliberalism – an ideology supported by capitalism that values individualism, competition, and productivity (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2019). Mary Blair-Loy refers to the ideal worker practices as the "work devotion schema" a deeply rooted cultural belief that a job requires undivided attention and intensive allegiance (Williams, Blair-Loy & Berdahl, 2013, p. 211). Those who can adhere to the standards of the ideal worker are rewarded with "good jobs" like executive positions and professions (Williams, 2001, p. 66). In academia, the "good jobs" would be the full-time tenured track positions or roles in senior administration.

Alongside ideal worker practices, working mothers are expected to adopt the cultural ideal of "intensive mothering." (Hays, 1996, p. 97) This is characterized by three themes: 1) the mother is the central caregiver to the child; 2) the role of mothering is more important than paid work; and 3) successful mothering requires a significant amount of time, energy, and material resources (Hays, 1996). In practice, intensive mothering requires the mother's life to completely revolve around their children in all areas. This requires the mother to spend all their free time with their children, always put their children's needs before their own, exclusively socialize with other mothers, and form all conversations around the topic of their children (Ennis, 2016). The relentless requirement of women to engage in intensive mothering came to be in the 1990's as another response to the emergence of individualized neoliberal ideology. Privatization, deregulation, and the emphasis on individual responsibility replaced services once provided by the government and community with mothers' labor (O'Reilly, 2016).

Another impact of neoliberalism on mothering has been women feeling overwhelmingly responsible for preparing their children to survive in a hyper-competitive individualized society. This childrearing strategy is also known as concerted cultivation, in which parents raise their children with the goal of fostering skills that will be beneficial to them in progressing through society and the market (Lareau, 2018). If their children should fail in this hyper-competitive world, it is the mother's fault for not preparing them well enough (O'Reilly, 2016).

Today's hyper-competitive society has created a world in which women feel pressured to perform the requirements of intensive mothering alongside the requirements of ideal worker in a hyper-individualized, competitive world. Attempting to do so results in work-family conflict, or what Blair-Loy refers to as "competing devotions" (2003, p. 18). While it is difficult for anyone to perform both roles simultaneously, some women can do so better than others. One of the

biggest factors in the ability of women to manage work-family conflict is flexibility and control over their life, specifically, their time (Clawson & Gerstel, 2014). Women with socioeconomic privilege are more likely to be able to use their resources to maintain control of their time, by working in jobs that allow them to take time off work when they are sick and give them the ability to form their own schedule (Clawson & Gerstel, 2014). These women will also have the resources necessary to outsource tasks like cleaning, and pay for quality childcare. Poor, working-class women are less likely to have the resources to balance these competing roles through outsourcing and are more likely to be concentrated in lower-paid part-time work with little flexibility (Clawson & Gerstel, 2014).

The conflict that arises between the competing roles of ideal worker and intensive mother all take place within the context of organizations. Organizations reward actors for adhering to ideal worker norms, and the pressure to perform intensive mothering make it difficult for women to mirror the image of the ideal worker norms and meet the general requirements of work. This leaves mothers relegated to lower positions in the organizational hierarchy, while those without caregiving responsibilities continue to be rewarded with additional organizational resources and higher positions.

Inequality Regimes and Universities

Inequality regimes, "interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (Acker, 2006, p. 443), are highly influential in academic organizations. Their influence is exemplified through a motherhood penalty within the academic world, with women in academia being underrepresented in academic positions that would be considered the "good jobs" due to their inability to meet the standard of the academic ideal worker. For example, women account for

only 33% of full professors in the United States (AAUP, 2020). Despite making up about 46% of all full-time faculty, women are concentrated in non-tenure-track positions at 53% (AAUP, 2020). On top of this, women in academic positions are subject to the classic "wage gap," being paid around 81% of their full-time male counterparts (AAUP, 2020). This trend is also prominent in Canadian universities with women continuing to be concentrated in lower paying jobs within the institution (CAUT, 2011; Kaufman & Colyar, 2022; Wang & Doolittle, 2021). Women at Canadian universities are less likely to hold tenure track jobs, (CAUT, 2008) and a majority of faculty below the ranking of assistant professor are women (Statistics Canada, 2019). This gap is wider for racialized women, who are awarded tenure at even lower rates than white women (CAUT, 2018). Throughout Ontario universities, women account for only 31% of full professors (Wang & Doolittle, 2021).

Women in academia also face high attrition rates throughout their academic journey, leaving the field before securing a full-time position (Goulden, Mason & Frasch, 2011). This has often been referred to as "the leaky pipeline," (Goulden, Mason and Frasch, 2011, p. 147) in which women are more likely to exit the academic world the longer they have been in it. The most common reason for this is a family obligation, such as marriage and childbirth (Goulden, Mason & Frasch, 2011). Mothers in academia feel uncomfortable balancing their role as ideal worker and devoted mother, worrying that these competing roles are negatively perceived by their colleagues (Armenti, 2004a, 2004b; Ollilainen, 2020). This feeling is so prevalent that women will sometimes engage in family planning around their responsibilities in the academy. The "post-tenure baby phenomenon" and occurs when women put off having a baby until they have achieved tenure status (Armenti, 2004b; Mason, Wolfinger & Goulden, 2013). In the past, women reported hiding their pregnancies from colleagues and scheduling their deliveries when

the academic year is at its most manageable (Armenti, 2004a, 2004b). These feelings of hostility amongst women in the academia who are pregnant and mothering persist today (Ollilainen, 2020).

Graduate Student Mothers

Graduate student mothers experience the same difficulties as do faculty, but on a larger scale and with even less support. Regardless of parental status, graduate students experience high rates of depression and anxiety (Chiricov et al., 2020; Garcia-Williams, Moffit & Kaslow, 2014;). Due to competing demands of intensive mothering in the home and the competitive academic world, graduate student mothers' often feel an immense sense of maternal guilt which clouds their graduate school experience (Hillier, 2020). The professionalization of graduate school has created an environment in which students are now expected to produce at a higher, more competitive rate, to compete for limited resources like funding and supervision (Cassuto, 1998). Graduate school, once a place that prioritized learning, is now shaped from the top down by neoliberal ideology, with a focus on training that will allow students to enter the workforce quickly (Coté & Pickard, 2022). However, graduate students have considerably fewer resources than do faculty and staff, including mentoring, funding, and access to childcare (Lynch, 2008; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009).

For graduate student mothers, accessing childcare is particularly difficult as they are unlikely to be able to afford it (Lynch, 2008; Springer, Parker & Leviten-Reid, 2009). At the U of A (University of Alberta) the waitlist for childcare is usually two years, with a cost of $600-$1500 a month (University of Alberta, 2023). The graduate assistantship monthly stipend for those working twelve hours a week is $2,303.31 for doctoral, and $2209.97 for master's students

(Graduate Student Association, 2023). This leaves graduate student parents having to use more than half of their salary to pay for childcare.

Neoliberalization of Academia

Adding to the struggles women in academia face has been the ongoing neoliberalization of academia, a transformation of university structure and policy guided by neoliberal ideology which values individualism, competition, and productivity (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2019). Throughout the beginning of the twenty-first century, Anglo-American universities have undergone an aggressive transformation through the process of marketization heavily influenced by right wing governments (Coté & Pickard, 2022). As defined by Coté and Pickard (2022), the marketization of universities consists of universities adopting "a system based on a rationalized, means-end logical increasingly dictated by governments adopting neoliberal ideology" (p. 2). In practice, this has resulted in universities applying rules from the market to the institution. Anglo-American universities now work to maximize "output" (or number of graduating students) while minimizing cost, with the goal of "delivering the cheapest product to the largest number of customers" (Coté & Pickard, 2022, p.2).

In an environment with little job opportunity, a masculinized "survival of the fittest" mindset guides success, and men are categorized as being more worthy of resources (Davies & Bansel, 2005). For academics, this has translated into the notion of "publish or perish," where each piece of your work is assigned a value and you are rewarded for your contribution. Productivity includes research, grant awards, and published research (Davies & Bansel, 2005), all things that can be easily quantified and measured. For women, this creates an environment hostile to mothers within their workplace as their caregiving roles conflict with the neoliberal academic environment (Armenti, 2004a, 2004b). It is difficult for women to compete with men,

who have fewer caregiving responsibilities in a hyper-competitive academic environment, for jobs. Men in academia are more likely to adhere to notions of the masculinized "ideal worker" and are rewarded in doing so with tenured, high-power positions (AAUP, 2020; Wang & Doolittle, 2021). The aggressive adoption of neoliberalism in the academic world has exacerbated inequality regimes in the field and shaped the confines of the "ideal graduate student."

An example of what the neoliberalization of Canadian universities looks like is the University of Alberta (U of A) – the recruitment site for this study. Spurred by the 2019 election of the United Conservative Party (UCP), a hard right conservative provincial government, the U of A experienced a funding slash of over 170 million dollars (Issawi, 2022; Flanagan, 2021). In response to the massive budget cuts, the university aggressively adopted a neoliberal ideology to recuperate from the loss of funding. This process became known by many names including "The University of Alberta for Tomorrow" (Flanagan, 2021), "Service Excellence Transformation" (University of Alberta, 2022) and "Academic Restructuring" (Flanagan, 2020). Through these proposals, the university decreased their administrative costs by 95 million dollars and grouped 13 different faculties into three colleges (Flanagan, 2021). To accomplish these cost saving measures, over one thousand people lost their jobs (Cook, 2020). In keeping with neoliberal marketisation and massification, despite the loss of funding and services, the university continued to aggressively increase enrolment (Flanagan, 2022).

The UCP also put together a six-member panel to review Alberta's higher education funding, which produced "The MacKinnon Report" (French, 2019; MacKinnon & Mike, 2019). Released in 2019, the report recommended that Alberta post-secondary institutions' funding should be tied to performance, not enrolment, arguing that many students enrolled in publicly

funded colleges never complete their degree programs (French, 2019; French & Graney, 2019; MacKinnon & Mike, 2019). After the report was released, the United Conservative Government promised to tie funding to performance by measuring "labour market outcomes of post-secondary programs to identify the correlation between provincial subsidies and economic returns" (Graney, 2019). This meant that to receive public funding, universities in the province needed to start providing data showing that they were graduating students efficiently.

Restructuring at the U of A harmed many in the university community (Archer & Chacon, 2023; Bendico, 2022; Teeling & Williams, 2022; Williams, 2022). With fewer staff and more students, those who managed to survive the mass layoffs were tasked with doing the job of multiple people (Teeling & Williams, 2022). Students reported difficulty in accessing services, communication, and guidance from the university (Teeling & Williams, 2022). To add further strife, in the fall of 2022 the power to issue contracts was removed from the departments due to the adoption of a centralized services model (Teeling & Williams, 2022). This resulted in graduate students, many of whom were also sessional instructors, being forced to work without contracts or employment protections (Bendico, 2022;Williams, 2022; Teeling & Williams, 2022). In the end, numerous graduate students did not get paid on time for their work (Teeling & Williams, 2022).

To further maximize profits while mitigating the damage from funding cuts, the university proposed multiple tuition increases (Archer & Chacon, 2023). In March of 2023, the university increased tuition for all students by 5-6.5% (Archer & Chacon, 2023). Meanwhile, the campus food bank saw the number of clients they service double and struggled to keep up with the increased demand (Chacon, 2022). Half of their clients listed increased tuition as the reason they needed to access the food bank (University of Alberta Campus Food Bank, 2022). Those

most likely to access the bank were international graduate students (University of Alberta Campus Food Bank, 2022), the same group who saw the largest increase in tuition (Archer & Chacon, 2023).

The Ideal Graduate Student

The neoliberalization and professionalization of graduate school have created an environment in which higher education more closely mirrors the market and favors what I call the "ideal graduate student." Several scholars have conceptualized what they argue is the ideal student. For example, Wong and Chiu (2021) put forward the idea that the ideal student is someone who has characteristics like a stereotypical "good" student based on perceptions from other members of the university community. This includes characteristics like diligence, organization, discipline, and supporting others. Marvell and Child (2022) take a more critical, feminist approach to the concept of the ideal student in their work, arguing that certain characteristics keep students from being seen as "ideal" and lead to inequality throughout the education experience. These characteristics include someone who has experienced trauma and financial precarity.

These conceptualizations have yet to take enough of a critical perspective specific to the environment of graduate students and the inequality regimes linked to educational organizations in the current neoliberal climate. In this environment, the ideal graduate student is, first, someone who can afford the ever-increasing tuition. Second, the ideal graduate student is someone who can complete their academic work with little supervision or resources because resources and support cost money to provide. Lastly, the ideal graduate student finishes their degree quickly, providing data to the university that they are doing their job efficiently with the public money they have been allotted. For graduate student mothers, adhering to the confines of the "ideal

graduate student" is difficult due to the demands of caregiving. While difficult on its base, during crises like the pandemic the struggle to balance the dueling role of mother and graduate student become much more difficult.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and various levels of governments' attempt to stop the spread of the disease led to large-scale societal upheaval. In Canada, governments implemented restrictions included the closing of businesses, schools, and daycare facilities (Calgary Herald, 2022; The Canadian Press; 2021). Those who tested positive for the COVID-19 disease were mandated to isolate for fourteen days, and limitations were put on how many people could gather to visit with friends and family (Calgary Herald, 2022; The Canadian Press; 2021). During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, three million Canadians experienced job loss (Statistics Canada, 2020) and about a quarter of Canadian families fell into poverty (Statistics Canada, 2020).

In Alberta, the provincial government and its Premier Jason Kenney were heavily criticized for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for often waiting until the hospitals were reaching capacity to impose mitigation strategies to slow the spread of the disease (Bennett, 2022). From March 2020 throughout the summer of 2022, the Alberta government's response to the ongoing health crisis was confusing because it kept lifting and imposing COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions arbitrarily and against the advice of healthcare experts (Assaly, 2021). According to polls from Angus Reid, only 19% of Albertans thought Kenney did a good job of handling the pandemic, with 48% responding that he had done a "very bad job" (Joannou, 2022). Across Canada, this was the worst approval rating of any premier in response to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Joannou, 2022). At one point, the Premier was absent for

four weeks, leaving the province with no leadership as it continued to struggle with the ongoing outbreak, further cementing the province's individualized "everyone for themselves" mentality in response to the pandemic (Rieger, 2022). The Alberta government's response to the outbreak of the disease was so poor, it would eventually play an integral role in the resignation of Jason Kenney in May of 2022 (Bennett, 2022).

Despite the ongoing circulation of illness and death from COVID-19, mask mandates and online options in schools were banned in Alberta in November of 2022 (French, 2022a). All pandemic related restrictions including mandatory masking and isolation were lifted on June 14th, 2022 (CBC News, 2022). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with no mitigation strategies or supports, continued to spread through Alberta during the fall of 2022 with an unprecedented circulation of illness among children (DeLaire, 2022). The ongoing spread of the flu, RSV and COVID-19 throughout the fall and winter of 2022 was dubbed "the tripledemic" (DeLaire, 2022). In Edmonton, three quarters of public schools hit an absenteeism rate over ten percent with over 20,000 students missing school due to illness (French, 2022b). Exacerbating the tripledemic was the low vaccination rate among children, as only 12% of Albertans between six months and four years received their flu shot (Lee, 2022). Canadian children's hospitals struggled to operate at 100% capacity (DeLaire, 2022), with the Alberta Children's Hospital opening a heated trailer to house the influx of sick children in need of care (Kanygin, 2022). There is currently a dearth of research on the impact of the tripledemic on caregivers, but it can be theorized that the lives of Albertan parents continued to be negatively affected by the increase of illness.

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected women (Calarco, Meanwell, Anderson & Knopf, 2021; Fuller & Qian, 2021). For many families struggling to survive under

the restrictions, mothers altered their work life because the father made more money, and it felt more natural for mom to stay home (Calarco et al., 2021). Linked to the motherhood penalty and occupational segregation, women were already concentrated in low-paying jobs in the service sector which was more likely to be impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. These combined factors created a world in which women were most impacted by job loss during the pandemic (Fuller & Qian, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2020). At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, women accounted for 62% of all employment loss (Grekou & Lu, 2021).

For mothers in academia, the pandemic had an overwhelmingly negative impact on their careers (Allam & Buttorf, 2021; Hayden & O'Brien-Hallstein, 2021; Kasymova et al., 2021; Martinez & Ortiz, 202; Shalaby et al., 2021). During the outbreak, academic mothers significantly increased the amount of childcare and domestic labor they did within the home (Kasymova et al., 2021; Martinez & Ortiz, 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021). In turn, they experienced decreased productivity, research, and publishing (Kasymova et al., 2021; Martinez & Ortiz, 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021). Mothers canceled their fieldwork and were less likely to commit to any new projects due to the uncertainty of the virus and childcare (Shalaby et al., 2021). They reported increased mental health problems like depression and anxiety while feeling unsupported by their departments (Martinez & Ortiz, 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021). Many are deeply concerned about long-term, permanent damage to their careers (Fulweiler et al., 2021; Shalaby et al., 2021).

Most of this research, however, has focused on faculty, ignoring mothers in other positions in academia (like graduate students and sessional lecturers), even though many of these positions hold similar responsibility with more precarity. There is currently a dearth of research pertaining to the unique experiences of graduate student mothers during this time, with some research showing that it led to increased stress and financial strain alongside some positive

changes, including more time with family (Savage, 2021). Research has also shown that graduate students experienced increased mental health problems during the pandemic and graduate student caregivers experienced even higher rates of major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety (Chirikov et al., 2020). Mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and burnout, have a negative impact on graduate student's academic work engagement (Levecque et al., 2017). Since graduate caregivers experienced higher rates of mental health issues during the pandemic, they may have also experienced the largest impact on their academic goals.

The pandemic served as an exogenous shock to an already fraught system where graduate student mothers struggled to meet the demands of mother and student in a hierarchal organization with decreasing resources. This shock to the organizational system had the potential to create change in a myriad of different ways-positive or negative. Decisions as to whether to make things easier or harder for people is dependent on organizational response. For some, the sudden shift to online learning was a welcome reprieve from ongoing work-family conflict. For others, the outbreak of the virus led to even more challenges for those already struggling to balance their competing demands.

Research Question and Purpose

The purpose of my research project is to understand how the pandemic has affected the lives of graduate student mothers at the University of Alberta. This research will inform future academic policy on how to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on graduate student mothers and create a more equitable environment for mothers in academia. Furthermore, the experiences of graduate student mothers can be applied to other mothers in similarly organized institutions. The original research questions for this project were 1) *what has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate student mothers' academic goals? and 2) what*

characteristics and supports influenced varying experiences of graduate student mothers during the pandemic?

Throughout the research process it became clear that the lives of my participants were influenced by the institutional and organizational responses. These either exacerbated the struggles the mothers were facing or in some ways assisted them in addressing these struggles. To further explore this, I added the research question: "*what factors increased and decreased control participants had over their lives during the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus?*"

Chapter Three: Methods

I used a qualitative descriptive research design to answer my research questions and identify findings designed to influence public policy (Sandelowski, 2000). A qualitative descriptive approach allowed me to collaboratively engage with my research participants to provide an accurate description of the research topic that both the participants and I agree is accurate (Sandelowski, 2000). This method of design also complimented my epistemological approach as a researcher, as I believe the creation of knowledge is transactional. Throughout my work, my participants and I influenced inquiry through shared values and transactional knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The responses I received from my participants shaped the evolution of this project, steering my focus in different directions based on what my participants told me was most important and influential to their experiences.

In addition to being an established and reliable method of inquiry, a qualitative descriptive approach allowed me to summarize participants' experiences in everyday language, supporting the dissemination of my research to a broader audience in ways other methods, such as phenomenology, would not (Sandelowski, 2000). This is in line with my engagement in public sociology, a strategy in which the researcher uses their research to engage with multiple publics in multiple ways (Burawoy, 2005).

Participant Sample and Recruitment

I framed the eligibility requirements for the study around what would best yield answers to my research questions. The inclusion requirement for the project required each participant to self-identify as a mother who was enrolled in a graduate program at the U of A. Narrowing down the sample to U of A students allowed me to explore how the university and provincial government's response to the pandemic influenced the experiences of my research participants.

To better understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives as both parents and students, I ensured each participant was enrolled in graduate school before and after the outbreak of the virus (i.e., before data – March 2020). This allowed my participants to describe what changes the virus prompted to their lives as they balanced care and coursework.

The research conducted in the study followed guidelines put forward by the Canadian Institute of Health Research Tri-Council Policy (Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2018). My research proposal, consent form, and recruitment materials were approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (Pro00120409) before the recruitment process began.

Various strategies were used to recruit participants, some more fruitful than others. I had a graphic designer create recruitment material with the details of the study in two different forms, one for postering the U of A campus (Appendix A) and one for online distribution through Twitter (Appendix B). I also sent out the details of my study through the graduate student listserv, a strategy that yielded most of my research participants. Finally, I utilized a snowball sampling strategy and asked each research participant to reach out to other graduate student mothers who may be interested in participating in the study. In the end, all participants were recruited through online means.

Throughout the recruitment process I applied a maximum variation strategy (Sandelowski, 2000) in which I sought out research participants of different demographics and backgrounds. Using a maximum variation strategy allowed me account for variance across participants and better answer my research question about the factors shaping differing experiences among the mothers interviewed. As shown in the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1, the participants for the study ranged in age from 33-59 and identified from eight different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Students from each of the three different colleges at the U of

A were represented in the sample: College of Health Sciences, College of Natural and Applied Sciences and the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (see table 1). Most participants were married and had more than one child. Saturation of the data, where new themes stopped emerging, occurred at nineteen participants.

Table 1 Descriptive Information for Participants (N=19)

	N	%
Gender		
Women	19	100
Race		
White	9	47
Black	1	5
East Asian	3	16
Mixed race: White/Métis	1	5
Mixed race: Arabic/White	1	5
Mixed race: White/Black	1	5
Arab	2	11
South Asian	1	5
Age		
31-35	7	37%
36-40	3	16%
41-45	3	16%
46-55	5	26%
56-60	1	5%
Marital Status		
Married	18	95%
Single	1	5%
Partnered (not married)	0	0%
Employed outside of TA-ing		
Yes	13	68%
No	6	32%
Number of Children		
One	3	16%
Two	11	58%
Three	2	11%
Four	3	16%
Children's Ages		
Zero-two	6	32%
Three-five	6	32%
Six-nine	2	11%
Ten-twelve	5	26%
Thirteen-fifteen	4	21%
Sixteen-eighteen	4	21%
Nineteen and above	4	21%
Program Status		
PhD	14	74%
MA	5	26%
Full-time	16	84%
Part-time	3	16%
Department		
Health Sciences	4	21%
Natural and Applied Sciences	1	5%
Social Sciences & Humanities	14	74%
Formal Childcare		
Yes	18	95%
No	1	5%

Data Collection

In keeping with a qualitative descriptive approach, and to gain rich data on the range of participant experiences, semi-structured interviews were chosen for the method of data. This entailed entering the interview with a set of pre-determined questions based on my theoretical framework while also allowing for the possibility of new questions based on my participants responses. Before each interview, the research participants were given an informed consent sheet (Appendix C) and encouraged to ask questions before giving verbal consent to participate. I originally designed my interview protocol around my research questions, and although I followed my original plan, as my project evolved, as did my interview questions. By the end of the interview process, I found myself asking broader, open-ended questions at start of the interview because it created space for the participant to tell me what was most important to them. This allowed for richer data and opened new lines of inquiry for future interviews. For instance, once I noticed patterns regarding the restructuring at the university and the provincial government's response to the pandemic, I then added questions surrounding those topics to my interview protocol in subsequent interviews.

I offered each participant the option of conducting the interview either in-person or over Zoom. Zoom was the preferred option for participants as it allowed for more flexibility. Respondents were able to participate in the study from home at any time during the day, not having to worry about transportation or childcare. Multiple participants conducted their interviews with children in their laps. Having a child of my own, conducting interviews in-person throughout the fall and winter of 2022 would have been difficult due to the circulation of illness among children, what the media has dubbed "the tripledemic." Many interviews were conducted with my own pre-schooler home sick next to me, and throughout the interviews I

often had to pause to attend to a sick child, as illustrated in some quotes taken from interviews. Although for some forms of inquiry this interruption could be seen at detrimental to the flow of the interview, I found it allowed for self-disclosure and rapport building with my participants as it opened the conversation around the changing ways in which mothers respond to illness. While I did run into various technical issues throughout the interviews, these were ultimately resolved quickly. Where I found the most difficulty was in conducting interviews with either myself or my participant sick, coughing or with little voice due to the ongoing circulation of illness in the province amongst children and their parents.

Data Analysis

In keeping with a qualitative descriptive approach, I utilized an inductive process of inquiry (Sandelowski, 2000). To begin identifying patterns in the data, I conducted my analysis without a pre-existing set of codes. After familiarising myself with the data by reading the interviews multiple times, I engaged in a form of initial coding (Charmaz, 2014). Informed by Charmaz (2014), I remained open to all possible directions the data could take. These codes were primarily descriptive and throughout the initial process. After initial coding was complete, I engaged in analytic memoing where I wrote initial thoughts down regarding each of my interviews (Saldana, 202). I found that analytic memoing allowed me to better understand variance amongst my participants' experiences. During this process, I also assigned each participant a pseudonym.

For my second cycle coding method I built upon my first-round analysis by engaging in a form of theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2021b). A theoretical code aims to identify the relationship between various codes and categories, moving the analysis in a more theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2014). During my analysis, the theoretical coding served as an umbrella,

housing the codes and categories I formulated during my first-round coding cycle (Saldaña, 2021b). Throughout the second cycle coding process I began refining codes and categories within the data which allowed me to formulate a codebook. I then used this codebook to assist me in coding later interviews.

After coding was complete, I used critical reflexive thematic analysis to produce my overall themes and findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). Reflexive thematic analysis generates themes from the data while using critical reflexivity, the practice of consistent reflection upon your role as researcher in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). I decided to use this method as it is in alignment with my epistemological approach, one that believes the researcher is a key part of the research process and influences inquiry through a transactional approach with their participants.

I once again familiarised myself with the data by reading over the coded interviews and then engaged in thematic mapping of the data to identify candidate themes, potentially connected codes to explore further (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Creating thematic maps allowed me to explore how candidate themes related to each other as well as illuminate my overall potential argument resulting from the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). I continued the process of developing and reviewing themes, returning to my transcripts, coded data, and thematic mapping to ensure that I had a set of themes which captured the key meanings from my data.

Themes

Transcribed data was coded into three overarching themes alongside subthemes to better illustrate the complexity of my findings. The first overarching theme was "*loss of control"* and included the subthemes:

- Decreased childcare

- Changes in response to illness
- Goal readjustment

The second overarching theme was *"institutional and organizational influences."* This section discusses which factors influenced the varying amounts of control participants had over their lives during the outbreak of the virus. This includes the three subthemes:

- Government communication and poor policy
- University restructuring
- Academic flexibility

A third theme of *"proposed changes"* was present in the data. Each of the nineteen participants explicitly shared measures the university could take to create a more welcoming and equitable environment for mothers in graduate school. Some of these proposed changes were inspired by the participants' experiences during the pandemic.

These themes represent both the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic on the lives of research participants as they maneuvered their dueling roles as student and mother during the COVID-19 crisis. Although they are grouped separately, the positive and negative aspects of the pandemic were often connected and experienced simultaneously by the mothers. Differing participant characteristics influenced variance among their experiences, affecting the extent to which the pandemic impacted their academic goals. These aspects are discussed throughout the findings and include both individual and structural characteristics.

In line with my epistemological approach of creating transactional knowledge, I have used illustrative quotes to disseminate my findings as this research process was heavily shaped by both researcher and participant. In keeping with a qualitative descriptive approach to this project, I also present the findings in language accessible to a broader audience by using

everyday language (Sandelowski, 2000). Throughout the interview process, many of my research participants expressed that they felt invisible to the academic world and broader community. To resist the erasure of mothers from conversations on inequality in the academy, I have brought their voices to the foreground of my project.

Positionality

A crucial part of the reflexive thematic analysis process is engaging in critical reflexivity. I often did this by reflecting on my own positionality as it related to my research project. Going into the project, I was acutely aware that my own experiences as a graduate student mother informed my inquiry. Being a student mother both before and during the outbreak of COVID-19, I had experienced many of the barriers mothers face when trying to achieve their academic goals. The shared experiences I had with my participants allowed me to better understand their struggles, shaped my preliminary interview protocol, and led me to build strong rapport with those in my study.

While my positionality yielded many strengths, engagement in critical reflexivity also allowed me to mitigate blind spots I discovered during the project. Having socioeconomic privilege, I can afford full-time quality childcare and supplemental support on the weekends. With both my parents working academia, I also have mentorship and connections that few graduate student mothers can access. Furthermore, I had assumed most of my participants would be in the same style of program as me, full-time thesis-based with a goal of working in academia. As I progressed throughout the project, I learned quickly that this is not the case, and had to ameliorate this blind spot by recognizing that my experiences and goals are not universal. Being able to attend graduate school full-time is a privilege awarded to the few, and many of my participants had no interest in working in academia.

The biggest challenge in navigating the reflexive process was the extent to which my own life was being impacted by the same institutions as those I was interviewing. Much of the added strife and uncertainty felt by my research participants was due to the provincial government, their response to the pandemic, and the ongoing cuts to education and healthcare. In the middle of this project, my family and I moved to Omaha, Nebraska because my husband was unable to secure employment as a surgeon under Alberta Health Services. Additionally, the restructuring at the U of A, spurred by the slashes to education under the United Conservative Party impacted many of my participants. I had also been affected by the restructuring at the university, and in the fall of 2022 many of my graduate student colleagues were forced to work without their contracts due to the university's shift to a shared services model. In the spring, my peers and I organized a campus-wide protest against another round of tuition hikes. Between my own experiences under the provincial government and those of my participants, utilizing critical reflexivity not only allowed for me to recognize bias in my work, but pushed me to explore the larger forces influencing the lives of student mothers in Alberta.

Strategies to Enhance Rigor

To enhance the rigor of the study, I utilized Finlay's (2006) "Five C's". This included clarity, credibility, contribution, communicative resonance, and caring.

Clarity refers to the research making sense; that is, being coherent and clearly described. To enhance this, I maintained clear and easy-to-read descriptions throughout each aspect of the research process. This was exemplified throughout my recruitment materials, consent form, and concise writing in my final thesis project.

Credibility refers to the extent that the research is plausible, justified, and matches the evidence put forward by the researcher. To enhance credibility, I utilized reflexive thematic

analysis throughout my methodology. To further engage in critical reflexivity, I wrote journals relating to my own life and my research project, being careful to recognize how each was influencing the another. Ongoing conversations with my supervisor on data, coding, and emerging themes were maintained throughout the project.

Contribution refers to the extent that the research will add to the knowledge about our society. To enhance contribution, I dedicated a large portion of my discussion section to the policy recommendations which I felt would best assist graduate student mothers based on the findings of my research project. I presented the preliminary findings of my work at multiple conferences, including the 2023 Canadian Sociological Association meeting. Finally, I used the findings of the research project to inform my engagement in student activism, for instance by appearing on Global News and in the student newspaper.

Communicative resonance refers to whether the research will affect those who engage with it, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the findings. To enhance this, I engaged in open communication and discussion of my findings with my colleagues, student organizations, and stakeholders at the U of A. I also disseminated the findings of my research on social media platforms, taking care to connect with other sociologists in the field of mothering and care work.

Caring refers to the extent to which the researcher has shown respect and sensitivity to those participating in the process. To strengthen this, I ensured each of my participants had read my informed consent sheet and gave them ample opportunity to ask questions about the study before recording began. During the interview, I emphasized that we could stop at any point and any of the questions could be skipped. Throughout our conversations, I let the participants know

of resources that were available to them on campus. This included the mother's space at the Graduate Student Association (GSA) office as well as the GSA childcare grants.

Chapter Four: A Loss of Control

Each mother expressed that the pandemic had brought with it an increased sense of uncertainty and *loss of control*. For participants, the virus took away their ability to plan their lives and time, something graduate student mothers need to effectively balance the labour required of dueling roles as student and mother. The overarching loss of control in participants' lives manifested in three different ways: 1) a decrease in childcare due to the government closing schools and daycares, 2) changes in response to illness and 3) a readjustment of academic expectations.

Decreased Childcare

Living in Canada during the initial outbreak of the virus meant that the participants' lives changed abruptly with the government's closing of schools and daycares. Alongside the initial fear of contracting the virus, routines that had been solidified to ensure each member of the family was able to complete their responsibilities were completely upended. Olivia, a PhD student with four children described the beginning of the pandemic by saying:*"the outbreak was really terrifying, schools closed, and my kids were home schooling."* Charlotte, a PhD student with two young children told me of the initial closings: *"We had no childcare. Everything was at home* […] *I think it was Sunday? It was Sunday at 5:00pm or something ridiculous that they announced that schools and daycares were shut down."*

Depending on the age of their children, participants experienced different challenges and responsibilities because of the closings. Parents of children in daycare and pre-school took on full-time childcare for little ones who required high amounts of basic care and attention. With everything closed, it was difficult to find ways to fill the day. Joanne, a master's student with two young children, described this period: *"It was actually really boring. There was nothing else to*

do. I had this idea of taking him to the museum and mom's groups and libraries and all that stuff and none of this happened." Similarly, Jennifer, a PhD student with two young children, also told me that, when her youngest child's pre-school shut down, "*There was nothing for her to do."*

Ideally, those who had older children had the benefit of more independent children that would require less care. However, having older children brought with it distinct challenges and labour. The sudden shift to homeschooling and online classes was difficult, with the mothers taking on the role of ensuring their children were completing their online classes. Anna, completing her PhD at the time, told me that, after her son's elementary school shut down, *"They switched the learning online, so I worked on nothing* […] *so I can stay home with him just to, you know, watch him do online learning and sometimes fix the technical problems."* Samantha, a PhD student with three children of varying ages in school told me of this time: *"I had three kids at home during online schooling, and a kindergartener doing online schooling is not something you can leave to their own devices."*

The sudden shift to online learning seemed to be rooted in the assumption that everyone had access to technology that would allow them to seamlessly transition to online school. This was not the case, and those who didn't have the required resources to participate in online learning faced added challenges. Rachel, a PhD student with two children in elementary school said:

> *But then kids stopped going to school. And that was huge. Because I'm like, well, we don't have computers. They are talking about online, initially it was this big thing of how we are going to support the kids online. Most children in my kid's class are close to the University which means their parents are professors,*

> *lawyers, teachers, doctors and I was a nobody. And a single parent. So, most of them had computers for their kids and tablets. We had nothing.*

Rachel's situation highlights some of the additional struggles faced by single mothers and those with fewer resources.

For mothers of multiple children in online school, the added labour of organizing how to get everyone's schoolwork done increased their mental load. Rebecca, a PhD student with two teenage sons told me about the triage process during this time: *"If he* [eldest son] *didn't have a class or an assignment, then the second son got access to it* [the computer]. *When they were both finished with the computer, which is usually very late at night and in bed, is when I will access the computer."* Luna, who was completing her master's at the time with four kids, faced similar challenges, telling me: *"We have 1,2,3,4 computers of some sort but only a few have camera access. So, we have to use my computer sometimes because the teachers want to see their kids."* Ashley, a PhD student who also had four kids doing online school, told me that having multiple children all using their laptops at the same time meant she was often worried about managing bandwidth capacity so everyone could continue completing their work.

The pandemic led to a decrease in childcare access for the mothers of older and younger children as both daycares and schools closed to limit the spread of the virus. These closures dismantled the carefully crafted routines that had been put in place by the mothers to lessen their work-life conflict and balance their dueling responsibilities as mother and student. Experiences, however, varied with the ages of the children, the number of children, and whether mothers had access to important technology. The mothers of younger children were challenged with an influx of care work from children with high needs and little resources or activities to fill the day. Mothers of older children were challenged by taking on the responsibility of teacher with no

preparation, and those with multiple children or limited technological resources had more difficulty completing homeschooling.

Changes in Response to Illness

As daycares and schools opened back up, mothers reported that how they experienced and responded to illness since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus drastically changed. For most participants, this greatly affected their ability to complete their academic work because they were now missing more workdays and were unable to predict when they could not work. Jennifer explained the futility of trying to plan during the initial stages of the pandemic, telling me:

> *I miss the ability to plan. You know, like, last year. Well, yeah. Starting September 2020 when my schedule got a little bit more flexible and doing my coursework and stuff. It's like, okay, well, going to get one kid at school. Then kids outsourced to grandparents for care, whatever. But then somebody has the tiniest little cold and your entire day is derailed. So, like you just, you lose that ability. Like plans mean nothing, you can plan out the ying yang and you just get derailed over and over and over again.*

Before the outbreak of the virus, symptoms like a cough or cold would not amount to anything other than minor inconvenience, and their children would still attend daycare or school with mild symptoms. Now, mothers were far more likely to keep their children home when sick, as they felt sending them to childcare with any kind of symptoms was no longer an option due to a cultural shift in how the community responds to illness. Charlotte explains: *"Before, we had a two-year-old, so he was teething and he was getting sick. But we would Tylenol him up and send him. And now we can't really do that, but he needs to go to school."* Anna told me of this

change: *"Before COVID […] he is asking for leave because he's a lazy student, it was an excuse not to go to school. But nowadays? Please stay home. Don't go to school."*

Some mothers made the decision to keep their children home because they felt a personal responsibility to limit the spread of illness. Numerous participants referenced having fears that sending their sick child to school or daycare would directly lead to the death of someone else. As Katrina stated: *"there was an idea that like, I get somebody else sick, like, I could kill someone else"* This feeling of personal responsibility also meant that they would not access familial help, like grandparents, when their children were sick, leaving them solely responsible for looking after their kids each time they had any symptoms regardless of their scheduled day. For those with younger children who required more attention, entire workdays were missed as the mothers could not complete academic work while also caring for young children.

For other mothers, decisions were based on new policies at daycares and schools that would not allow sick children to attend. Rachel described how she would tell her seven-year-old children to hide their symptoms by going to the bathroom when they had to blow their nose. She shared that she would time school drop off with the number of hours medication would mask her children's symptoms, *"I don't know how many times I had to hide their symptoms. I knew Advil takes eight hours. Okay, go to school."* Olivia told me that since the outbreak of the virus, if you sent your kids to school sick, they would call you and make you come pick them up, *"We used to send them even if they have a cold but nowadays if you send your kids sick, you send him to school, they will just call you and ask you to take your kid back,."* Luna had a similar experience, telling me: "*So basically before, kid who go to school sniffling, it's fine. But then, even allergies? No. It didn't matter. The kids would be sent home. And then God knows they are judging you. Oh you're a bad parenting and you're infecting us."*

The mothers repeatedly expressed that the hardest part of dealing with illness was its randomness and unpredictability. Multiple participants made references to daily life becoming a game of chance, or gambling, as they had no way of predicting when their children would be sick. Katrina explained: *"For a long time it was like, stuffy nose? No. Go home. So it was like, yes they are in daycare. Just kidding! They are in daycare 70% of the time and you don't know which days will be the days that they are not."* The ongoing unpredictability led to an increase in anxiety among several research participants, Camille decided to take a leave of absence from school because she could no longer handle the stress of working in sporadic bursts:

> *By three weeks in I was having a full mental meltdown. I had to go on sick leave for myself. And I ended up still being on sick leave and eventually long-term disability for eight months because of the built-up anxiety and stress over not knowing on any given day whether you're going to have childcare. It meant that I, literally, just didn't know if I would be able to fulfill my schoolwork.*

As the pandemic progressed, daycares and schools relaxed their sickness policies. For some mothers, the constant illness alongside the disruption of their lives became unsustainable, and they eventually decided to start sending their children to school with mild illness. Vivian explained: *"So, the first couple of times I did keep her home. Because I was like, she has one or two symptoms. And then after that, I was like, I can't do this. I'm losing time at work if I keep her home every week, and then I was like, okay I need to call them up and ask."* Camille, who had such a difficult time with the unpredictability of illness echoed this, telling me: *"As time went on, we realized our kid would just always have a runny nose. And you come to realize, what does sickness look like in my child? What does toddler illness look like? It looks like COVID."* Jennifer told me that the relaxing of the policies influenced her decisions around sickness: "*I*

think that's a result of loosened restrictions because now I don't feel as guilty […] *if my kids were sniffly last year, I would have kept them home. I don't feel like I have to do that this year."* The outbreak of the pandemic brought with it new ways of responding to illness and lessened the control participants had over their time. Before COVID-19, the mothers would often continue with their normal routine despite their children displaying symptoms of the common cold. After the outbreak of the virus, the mothers felt the culture had shifted, and it was no longer acceptable or allowed to send their children to school or daycare with even mild illness. The randomness of illness made their lives unpredictable and difficult to control, resulting in anxiety around when their academic work could be completed. Veronica illustrated this feeling when she told me: "*I lost that trust in my ability to keep going, basically, to keep working, and be able to see the end because I can't structure my life and my brain*." Due to the confines of their programs, and the pressure to meet the requirements of work, for many it eventually became untenable to continue missing workdays. Many began to send their children to daycare or school with mild illness.

Goal Readjustment

Due to the increased responsibility of childcare and homeschooling along with the changes in response to illness, many participants stopped completing their academic work because they no longer had the time to do it. Charlotte recounted of this time: *"My grad school life just evaporated* […] *I was no longer a grad student, I was taking care of a child all day long."* When asked if any graduate work was being done during the initial outbreak of the virus Rachel told me: *"I basically stopped for months."* Joanne told me that she took an entire semester off. When I asked her to expand on her reasoning, she told me: *"Being full-time parents and having to take care of them in a pandemic, and we have no childcare, and having to go to school? I don't think it's possible for us to do that."*

Although many participants stopped doing their graduate work due to the increase in childcare, many also had to readjust their research due other changes brought on by the outbreak of the virus. Anna, who had planned to do research in schools, told me that she was forced to change the entire structure of her research project because of the pandemic:

> *Because I was in education, my study, we were supposed to go into a school. I completed all the complex ethics requirements of the public schools. And it took me a lot of time to do that. And the school board just went, nope, sorry. We can't have any visitors to school right now* […] *my study had to completely stop.*

Anna would go on to tell me of this project: **"***we wanted to do good research. Now we just want to do research that I can finish*." Veronica told me that because her work was paused so many times throughout the pandemic, her research would become out-of-date and she would have to redo it. She said: *"It's the compounded effect at some point. What I had done is not relevant anymore. It's like, I had something ready in 2018. Now we're 2022. I have to redo it."* Haley, a PhD student with three children, had originally planned to travel to a different country in order to interview her participants, the sudden shift to online made it so she had to change her project and had more difficulty recruiting participants, *"I had a plan to go in those countries and interview my participants which was completely changed online* […] *they were busy so getting participants was a challenge that also increased my stress and anxiety."* Vivian, a PhD student in engineering with one child had her entire research project shut down,

> *Suddenly, the university sent an email saying try to shut down all your experiments in a week or two* […] *so I mean, I had to basically shut down my experiment* […] *with the kind of work I do, with cells and animals and stuff like*

> *that, to shut everything down and start up again? You're just adding on time to the shutdown.*

All of this put together meant the length required for nearly every participant to finish their degree was extended by years. As Charlotte told me: *"It added a lot of time. I am at least two years behind. I'm going to be two years behind."* Similarly, Rebecca said: *"It definitely extended it* […] *I've had to write for a program extension for two years."*

Before the outbreak of the virus, each mother had carefully organized routines that allowed them to balance their dueling role as mother and student within the confines of academia. These routines were crafted around the requirements of productivity in inequality regimes, giving the mothers predictable periods of time to complete their work on required schedule. After the outbreak of the virus, the mothers were unable to balance these dueling roles as they were no longer in control their time. This drastically altered the trajectory of their academic goals, changing the quality of their research and extending the period of time it will take them to finish their degree.

Chapter Five: Institutional and Organizational Responses

Throughout the initial stages of the pandemic, institutional and organizational decisions influenced the amount of control participants had over their lives. First, the participants were overwhelmingly unhappy with government response to the pandemic and felt it added to the uncertainty of their lives through poorly crafted policy and communication. Second, the university they attended underwent a massive restructuring process at the same time as the outbreak of the virus, leaving the participants to try and maneuver significant changes to their programs and departments with fewer resources. Finally, in a few cases the shift to online learning increased the amount of control the mother's had on their lives and positively affected their ability to complete their course work through increased flexibility.

Government Communication and Poorly Crafted Policy

As most participants lived in Alberta, many spoke about the unhappiness and frustration they felt regarding the government response to the pandemic. For many participants, the government was not a source of protection or resources. Instead, a sub-par response only added to the stress and uncertainty in their lives. Emma, a PhD student with two young children, expressed this succinctly by saying: *"Angry with the government? 100%. Absolutely."* Samantha furthered this sentiment by saying: *"I thought the provincial government response was atrocious and I think our numbers at the time showed that."*

Participants often felt the government did not communicate in an effective way, leaving them confused and having to do their own research on pandemic related issues and current restrictions. Katrina explained: *"They didn't even like, share information, you know? It was like you'd have to go digging to find out things like, oh Moderna is submitted for trial. The government didn't care about communicating."* Anna spoke of the confusion and inconsistency

by saying: *"Continuing changing of the policy just brought more chaos to the situation. It's just, open, close, and then reopen and close. It's just like a roller coaster."* Participants also felt left behind by the government because their children were not considered in the crafting of policy, Emily told me: *"I felt like kids were not even considered a part of the conversation."* Lifting pandemic related restrictions before children had access to the vaccine was another crucial point in which the mothers felt abandoned by the government. As Jennifer stated: *"It was like, as soon as adults were vaccinated, then things started loosening. It was like, wait, did we forget? Did we forget about our kids?"*

Many participants felt that decisions government made were driven by politics, not data or evidence. A few times, the Calgary Stampede was specifically noted as a point in which the government had abandoned its people. Emily told me: *"I think it felt stupid and arbitrary, a lot of the decisions that were made. Especially because, kids are dying! And you're deciding because you want to go to stampede?"* Quinn, a PhD student with four adult sons, said to me: *"the reason he* [the Premier] *opened up the Calgary Stampede was because the owner of the Calgary Stampede is a big conservative funder for the elections."* Charlotte felt similarly about the policies becoming rooted in politic, saying to me: *"They became very quickly political and very quickly pandering to anti-vaxxers."* Samantha echoed this saying: *"There's a very set political group within Alberta, which they must cater to because it's their core supporters. And it wasn't doing the rest of us any favours."*

Government organizations increased the lack of control the mothers had over their lives and many were angry with how government organizations responded to the pandemic. A lack of communication from the government added anxiety and further uncertainty to their lives with many feeling the constant opening and closing of facilities was confusing and difficult to keep up

with. The mother's felt the government did not consider children in their response, moving to open the province back up despite children being unable to be vaccinated. Finally, many mothers felt the government made their policy decisions based on what their base voters wanted as opposed to what was best for the people in the province.

University Restructuring

Another level of organization that structured the participants' lives was the university they attended. Throughout the initial stages of the pandemic, their university underwent a massive restructuring process due to provincial funding cuts. For many, at a time when they needed extra resources and support, the confusion spurred by the restructuring exacerbated the uncertainty in their lives. This was most keenly felt by students in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities who were impacted the most by the university restructuring. Changes to departments occurred with little communication. Charlotte told me of this time: *"So who knows what's happening, we are still getting no communication […] our department got split in half […] we are getting half piece of information from different people and most of it is coming through rumours so we don't get information."* Quinn also felt this was a time rooted in conflict telling me: *"there were a lot of conflicts that were going on between…they were like this is mine, no this is mine. They've completely eliminated departments in our faculty."* Luna, considering applying to other PhD programs at the university, told me story about asking for help from a contact at the university: *"I said, hey, can you help me out? And they actually advised not to bother applying until the restructuring has been figured out. Many, many changes are afoot."*

Another experience relayed to me was simply not knowing who to contact for help, something especially stressful when major shifts to academic work were occurring. Rebecca shared with me that the person in her office she could always reach out to when she had

questions disappeared: *"Their position was eventually taken away as well* […] *it also meant that when you had questions, now you're wondering, so who do I ask?* […] *You're wondering, I don't know who I am supposed to talk to, I don't know."* Veronica had a similar experience, stating: *"There are no people. You don't get answers to emails […] I wrote two emails, I never got anything back. And I phoned, obviously, no one's in the office. So I'm like, okay, well, until next term."*

Participants also lost their working spaces on campus due to the restructuring. Samantha told me: *"We don't have designated office spaces anymore, so we are effectively floating and kind of homeless within the university."* Charlotte had a similar story telling me: *"we lost all our office space as part of the cost savings and stuff […] I don't know if I am going to go back to work on campus because I don't have a space."* Rebecca told me she received an email one day that she had two weeks to empty her office, or all of her belongings would be thrown out. She commented: *"So what the office did is that it gave me a space and said that I belong too. So when you take that space away, and you tell me you have two weeks to vacate it, you send a very powerful message about not belonging."*

As graduate students, the mothers were also likely to hold jobs at the university. These were often as teaching assistants but also lecturers and counsellors. Rachel noted that she had lost one of her jobs during the pandemic because the office within the school where she worked had been dissolved. Emma, who also worked at the university, shared that the restructuring left her feeling with a lot of "survivors' guilt" as many of her colleagues were fired without notice:

> *There were people that I was so close with. I would see them for the first ten minutes of the day and then they would be gone. I was like, what happened?* […] *Some of them worked at the university for fifteen, twenty years of their lives and*

> *you can't spend two second with them providing them with any empathy? It was those little bits that it was like, why am I here? Like, why did I get to stay and not them? And then there was a lot of feeling like, in the middle of the pandemic I am going to get cut. I'm not going to be able to take care of my family because I am going to get fired.* […] *There were people getting cut left and right. And there was no explanation. There was no communication about what was going on."*

Emma's story exemplifies the feelings of panic and uncertainty many working at the university felt during this time. During a major reorganizing process at the university, little communication was provided to those working in the offices most affected.

Participants often referenced the office that oversees graduate education at the university, The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR), as being a source of added stress to their lives as opposed to a resource that could assist them. Much needed extensions, an important form of claims making, were an arduous process that became more difficult to obtain as the pandemic wore on. Charlotte recounted a group of students advocating for FGSR to give a blanket extension to all students. The office declined, instead deciding to process applications one at a time and creating more labour for students. She reported: *"What is happening now is they are getting a shit ton of applications and they cut all their staff* […] *they could have avoided it all by giving everyone an extra year and they didn't* […] *that would have been nice because it just takes away the trauma that they make you go through when you are write those extension requests, they're traumatic. You have to relive everything; it's just disgusting in itself."* Quinn also expressed to me frustration in having to sign extension forms alongside the ongoing pressure to finish despite the pandemic: *"They're hounding me to finish you know, to fill out this form to*

get an extension. I already did that, but the stupid form, you have to get it signed. You know, and I did get COVID."

Samantha recounted a frustrating experience with FGSR and extensions, saying *"they actually told me when I applied that they were no longer granting COVID related extensions. It was absurd. They have been very…I have nothing good to say about* [the graduate office] *response."* Eventually, Samantha was granted an extension by the office, but it was for another official reason as COVID was deemed insufficient. Veronica also experienced this with the graduate office telling me that at first FGSR was fine, but there had been a shift as the pandemic wore on, *"So now FGSR is suddenly saying, you need an extension, you haven't defended your proposal* […] *they were fine during the pandemic but I don't know why they think it is suddenly over or that the effects have suddenly disappeared. I don't understand this sudden shift."* Veronica had put in a request to cancel months of her registration during the pandemic, but the office refused. She told me that because of this, she can no longer apply for certain scholarships and grants.

The university implemented decisions that made life harder and led to an increase in inequality for graduate student mothers. During a time when mothers on campus needed extra support and guidance, a restructuring process in response to mass budget cuts left them to navigate their confusion with little support, guidance, or communication. Students in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities experienced the most change, with many having their departments reorganized and offices removed during an already chaotic time. With a loss of staff and resources within their own departments, many of the mothers were left to reach out to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for help and support. Receiving much needed extensions from FGSR was a difficult and complicated process, and in the end many mothers

were refused extensions. The hesitancy of the graduate office to provide extensions serves as an example of the difficulties students with caregiving responsibilities face when engaging in organizational claims making. The university had a choice as to whether to make things easier or harder for students who do not fit the mold of the ideal graduate student and, in many instances, they decided not to provide the most crucial resource to those who needed it: time. Others sought opportunity during the short-term changes brought on by the pandemic, specifically the move to remote learning.

Academic Flexibility

Many of the mothers expressed that some of the changes spurred by the pandemic were beneficial to their studies, reducing the role strain they felt in their competing roles as student and mother while giving them more control over their lives. Moving everything online allowed more flexibility for the participants, who could take classes any time, without having to worry about childcare. Maggie, a master's student with two children, told me that moving online was a huge advantage to her. "*Because of COVID, I got a full year online. So I could take way more* [classes] *than I probably could have in the last year".* Emma told me that because of the pandemic, she decided not to take maternity leave with her second baby as she had access to courses she could do from home. *"The pandemic was the big difference, I found that prior to the pandemic, my program didn't offer a lot of online options for classes. So when I had my daughter in 2020, by the fall I was able to take an online course."* Jennifer expressed similar sentiments regarding how much more accessible school became once it moved online: "*it totally changed the way I did my program, because suddenly the logistics were so easy, because I didn't need childcare, because I was going to be home on the computer. I mean, it was better if I wasn't also minding children while in class, but if it had to happen it was okay."* In fact, like Maggie,

Jennifer used COVID as an opportunity to take more classes while they were online, *"I think I took eleven classes in that year. Because I was like, it's never going to be easier than it is now. And so I packed it in."*

The normalizing of online meetings was something many of the mothers expressed was a positive aspect to come out of the pandemic. Participants indicated that it had become a lot more acceptable to just move a meeting to Zoom as opposed to cancelling it entirely in case one of their children was sick. Emma felt quite strongly about the newfound increase in flexibility, saying:

> *I think that if a pandemic needed to happen for more graduate programs to embrace a more flexible program, so be it. Even before I had kids I was complaining about the graduate program I worked in and how inflexible it was for the demographic of women that we were trying to recruit to our program. I think that a silver lining is programs have been forced to become more flexible.*

Despite the clear challenges of balancing the role of mother and graduate student, many participants were thankful for being a graduate student during the pandemic as opposed to working in a different profession. As Ashley explained, *"So, because I was a PhD student, I had the flexibility of just being able to roll with it as best I could and try to support my other family members who were doing the best job that they could in terms of getting through."* Charlotte felt similarly: *"I'm glad I was in graduate school during that time because it helped. It was easier than working. I was paying the university lot of money but I didn't have to do anything."* The participants felt that graduate school served as a kind of refuge from other forms of employment that were less forgiving to mothers during the pandemic.

The successful implementation of online classes shows that organizations have the capacity to engage in policies that challenge inequality. For many graduate student mothers, online classes were an important resource that allowed them to better control their time and meet the general requirements of graduate school. Many participants knew this opportunity would be fleeting, and tried to engage in as many online classes as possible while they had the chance. Moving forward, universities will be faced with decisions as to whether to continue to provide remote options to students who need increased flexibility. Refusing to do so will continue to exclude those who cannot attend full-time, in-person programs.

Chapter Six: Proposed Changes

Each mother felt that there were things the university could change to reduce the tension between their dueling roles of student and mother. For the participants in this study, it wasn't the amount of work graduate school requires that made things so difficult. Other factors made it difficult for them to organize the labour. Maggie summed this up nicely when she said: *"The schoolwork doesn't seem too hard. I just find life around it the worst."* In fact, none of the mothers reported that they thought their programs should require less work. What the mothers wanted was more time, flexibility, and accessibility so they *could do* the required work.

The first proposed change was to continue offering courses online to make it easier for mothers to be able to attend the class. Joanne told me: *"I wish we could have just had the option of having a hybrid course or option for people who want to attend in person* […]. *I get it, in undergrad you want to be there in person 100%. But there is literally no childcare, and you expect me to be in class for some of the courses."* Luna based the entirety of her PhD applications on programs she could do online because of her responsibility to her children but there were so few out there**.** *"I looked and I look abroad as well for an online PhD because teaching and learning with the scheduling, commuting, gas prices* […] *my plan is to start the ED doc online, then switch to a PhD, so that I can have one year online for the sake of my children."* She stressed that universities need to be open to online PhD programs in the future to increase accessibility.

Another proposed change was an increase in program flexibility and timelines. For Rachel, this meant allowing for a part-time PhD program. **"***It's like, I keep telling them as a parent, you want me to be fulltime. Why can't we have a PhD that is part time? There is no PhD that is part time. And I would have liked that because I am not a full-time student. They require*

me to work full-time, and I just can't. I don't have the hours." Samantha, someone who has struggled with getting extensions from the graduate office, told me: *"The number one thing that would be beneficial would be more flexibility on our timelines."* Charlotte also told me that the pandemic would have been a good time to *"start practicing and experimenting with flexible deadlines."*

Several mothers said that one of the biggest things that would help is an increased sense of community on campus. Many of the participants suggested creating some form of mom's group. Emma told me, *"I think having a network […] like, hey we're mom's on campus, here's our network, be part of our email chain. We go for coffee or whatever on Thursday's"*. Joanna expressed a similar idea: *"what if the university had a group? Like a support group? […] like a scheduled time to meet on Zoom or whatever and have a chat group?*

Participants felt part of the difficulty in establishing community was a lack of visibility. Jennifer told me she felt that academia was hesitant to acknowledge parents at all. *"I think in general, the academy doesn't acknowledge the difficulty of parenting, even tenured professors, the academy in general does not acknowledge the difficulty of parenting."*

Finally, participants mentioned university daycare, something well known across campus to be nearly impossible to access. Multiple participants told me that they had their children on lists for years to get one of the coveted spots. Katrina explained to me: *"I'm still on the waitlist for the U daycare for my oldest kid, I've been since a year before he was born."*

Many of the proposed changes put forward by the mothers were resources that would allow them to balance their dueling role of student and mother by gaining more control over their lives. Online classes would allow the mothers to complete their schoolwork and attend classes regardless of unexpected interruptions to childcare due to illness. Extensions being granted easily

and to a larger number of people would make it easier for the mothers to complete their work as well as engage in relational claims making, being granted the coveted resource of time from the university organization. Finally, the creation of a community would help the mothers feel less alone as well as aid in resisting inequality regimes at the university. More visibility would bring the inequality to light, making it more difficult for universities to ignore, increasing the likelihood of successful claims to university resources.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

The COVID-19 disease impacted people differently based on their social location, widening instances of gendered inequality in our society. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, women accounted for 62% of all employment loss, reinforcing the motherhood penalty in our society (Grekou & Lu, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding as to *how* the COVID-19 crisis effected women balancing dueling responsibilities within organizations that reproduce inequality. I found that most graduate student mothers were negatively affected, experiencing a loss of control over their lives which upended the careful planning needed to manage the competing responsibilities of intensive mothering and graduate school. For most of my research participants, the pandemic set them back years from being able to finish their degrees and research projects, widening the academic "family gap" (Waldfogel, 1997, p. 200). Those without caregiving responsibilities were able to keep working while mothers had no choice but to pause their work, putting them even farther behind their childless colleagues. The adoption of neoliberal ideology at their university added more strife, leaving the with less resources, support, and increased competition over what little jobs are left.

The pandemic served as an exogenous shock to an already fraught system where mothers in academia are at a disadvantage. Graduate student mothers are asked to take on two competing roles. Firstly, they must adhere to the organizational standards of the ideal worker, (Williams, 2001) someone who can commit themselves entirely to the general requirements of graduate school, taking little time off and working reliably. Secondly, shaped by our ingrained cultural schemas (Boutyline & Soter, 2021) mothers are pressured to engage in the practice of "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996, p. 97). Intensive mothering requires the mother to be the primary caregiver to the child, dedicating significant time, energy, and material resources to prepare them

for a competitive neoliberal society (O'Reilly, 2016). For my research participants, the only way they were able to tentatively balance these competing roles before the outbreak of COVID-19 was careful management of their time. The pandemic took away their ability to control their time, leaving them unable to access the resources that allowed them to fulfill both roles.

The biggest contribution to the loss of control over their time was the decrease in childcare due to closures and restrictions of schools and daycare facilities. While all of the mothers were challenged by the decrease in childcare, they had varied experiences based on the ages of their children. Mothers of younger children had dependants that required more assistance in meeting basic needs, and they had difficulty filling the day as most activities and social events were inaccessible due to restrictions. The mothers of older children faced different challenges, having to quickly pivot to online home schooling which was a time consuming and confusing process. The sudden shift in routine made it difficult for all the mothers to adhere to the standards of intensive mothering (Hays,1996) something that requires large amounts of resources and planning.

The challenge to complete their dueling roles all took place within a specific organizational environment shaped by the government and university. While the ongoing crisis unfolded, institutional and organizational decisions influenced the amount of control the mothers had over their lives and their ability to fulfill their duelling roles. Institutions meant to be a source of support for the mothers only increased the loss of control, adding stress and uncertainty to an uncertain time. My participants felt the provincial government did a poor job responding to the virus. Poor communication left the mothers having to conduct their own research to protect themselves and their children as well as stay updated on the continuous changing restriction. Many had children who could not be vaccinated at the same time as themselves, and the

government lifting restrictions before their children had access to protection left the mothers feeling abandoned. This furthered the message that protecting themselves and their family was an act of individual responsibility, a main component of neoliberal government policy.

Simultaneously, budget cuts to their university from the same government spurred a massive restructuring process, increasing the loss of control in their lives and solidifying inequality regimes within the organization (Acker, 2006). Resources and staff the mothers had once relied on were removed with little notice during a time when they needed increased support. The restructuring process and subsequent firings left massive voids in communication, and participants could not gain access to support and guidance in relation to the pandemic and their program. The lack of assistance made it more difficult for the mothers to participate in relational claims making (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019), specifically extension requests. Many participants needed extensions on their programs due to the demands of pandemic parenting. FGSR was of little support, shifting to a policy where they no longer granted COVID related extensions despite so many mothers continuing to be affected by the virus. The government and university mirrored each other organizationally, both implementing policies that maintained inequality regimes by refusing to provide assistance to those who needed it during the crisis.

Alternatively, for some of the mothers in my study the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic allowed them to better balance their competing roles, lessening the strain between their "competing devotions" (Blair-Loy, 2003, p. 18). For these mothers, the shift to online learning allowed for greater access to coursework as they were able to control when they could complete their academic work and attend class regardless of interruptions in childcare. Instead of having to be on campus on a certain day, they were able to choose whichever time worked best for them in relation to their mothering role. For these participants, the COVID-19

pandemic gave them *more* control over their lives, increasing the factors needed to decrease work-family conflict, flexibility and time (Clawson & Gerstel, 2014).

Conceptualizing the "Ideal Student" in Post-COVID, Neoliberal Academia

In a post-COVID-19 world, universities are increasingly transforming from places of learning into vocationalized organizations (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Coté & Pickard, 2022) Under increased scrutiny from the public, universities have become inundated with demands for efficiency and accountability (French, 2019; French & Graney, 2019; MacKinnon & Percy, 2019). This means they must prove that they are graduating students who are entering the workforce. In Alberta, this is best exemplified by the "MacKinnon Report," a document that argued for public funding to be tied to university graduate rates. Extensions are now less likely to be granted because it harms the university's performance data, which is tied to funding. For mothers who experience increased disruptions in their work, this has created a hostile environment as they need extensions that are no longer being granted. In this study, the university made the process for requesting extensions arduous, and eventually ceased granting extensions due to COVID-19 related issues. A focus on graduation and entering the workforce is also why participants from the Arts and Humanities were impacted the most by university restructuring. They were deemed less valuable to the economy in the eyes of a conservative government monitoring which graduates are entering the workforce.

Graduate school is increasingly becoming a place reserved for a select few, defined by the "ideal graduate student" norm. In an academic inequality regime, the ideal graduate student is someone who succeeds because the requirements of academic success are organized around their image. This benefits an organization restructured under austerity. In this environment, the ideal graduate student is someone who, firstly, can afford the exorbitant and ever-increasing tuition,

likely white and of middle to upper class. Secondly, the ideal graduate student is someone who can complete their academic work with little supervision or resources. This is because resources and support cost money to provide, and their supervisor is busy with their own increased workload. Lastly, the ideal graduate student finishes their degree quickly, providing data to the university that they are doing their job efficiently with the public money they have been allotted.

My findings demonstrate how the neoliberal transformation of academia has been operationalized, and how being unable to adhere to the standards of the ideal graduate student affects those in higher education. Graduate student mothers are less likely to be able to conform to the standards of the ideal student for similar reasons mothers cannot adhere to the standards of the ideal worker. Joan Williams (2000, p. 64) theorizes that in the professional world, this is because of the "executive schedule" where the ideal worker is rewarded for working longer, predictable hours. In the academic world, there is now an "academic schedule" which requires students to finish their degrees before their funding runs out and without extensions. For graduate student mothers who are now living in a world where we respond to illness with more seriousness, their academic work is constantly being interrupted due to increases in childcare responsibilities. Graduate school is becoming less accessible for mothers.

Proposed "Solutions" and the Preservation of Academic Inequality Regimes

The pandemic brought with it added challenges for many graduate student mothers, but for some it a way of increasing control in their lives through added flexibility. New ways of accessing education online made the mother's lives easier, being able to take more classes and complete their work regardless of interruptions in childcare. Online access to education reduced the strain between their "competing devotions" (Blair-Loy, 2003, p.18). However, it is important to question whether these changes made graduate school more accessible to mothers or simply

made it easier for them to perform both of their roles at once, furthering their marginalization in the academic world. Organizing the university in a way that increases online classes is likely to only apply to certain programs, leaving the ones with the most prestige and earning potential inaccessible to mothers.

Another recommendation put forward by participants was the addition of part-time programs, specifically a part time PhD. This may also improve access to higher education, but concentrate mothers into less prestigious, part-time programs similar to what has happened in the professional world through the "marginalization of part time work" (Williams, 2000, p. 64). The marginalization of part-time work creates an environment in which those who partake in it are treated differently with "restricted prospects for advancement." (p. 72). Part-timers are viewed as less deserving of attention and respect, categorized by within a "mommy track" with little prestige or attention. An increase in part-time programs within an inequality regime may yield the same results, with mothers having little access to opportunities and funding reserved for full-time students. However, increasing online and part-time options should not be discounted if they are the only way for many women to access higher education.

One thing universities can do to improve equity issues in relation to student mothers is assist in increasing their visibility. As Acker (2006) notes, the visibility of inequality influences on how inequality regimes are shaped and maintained. If inequality is invisible, it makes it easier for those in positions of power to maintain the status quo. While the participants in this study put forward technical suggestions for how to make higher education more equitable for mothers, many expressed to me that simply being recognized would make things better. Participants expressed that the implementation of a community group to increase visibility on campus as well as offer resources and support to other student parents struggling could be an answer. The

problem is that the same people who have the most interest in creating spaces for parents on campus have kids and are too busy to take on any more labour. If universities are serious about creating a more equitable spaces for mothers on campus, they can work towards building more communities on campus that can be accessed despite their dueling roles.

Lastly, my participants told me that resources that were available to student mothers were not well known, and they felt the university could do a better job disseminating what is available to the campus community. Having knowledge of what is available would make it easier for the mothers to engage in "relational claims making" (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019, p. 6) and access resources that could assist them. The lack of awareness of resources for student parents, specifically the mother's room available on campus, almost seems as if it done on purpose. If no one uses the resource, it gives the organization reason to take it away.

Based on the findings of this study, the most vital policy implementation for graduate student mothers would be to allow for added flexibility and timelines in their programs. The pandemic increased the required time necessary for participants to finish their degrees, and many will require extensions to be able to finish their program "in time." As we move forward in a post COVID-19 world, the way that we respond to illness has changed, leading to more interruptions in the work schedules of student mothers. Universities as well as professors must understand that many student mothers will need added flexibility to balance their competing roles. This may be challenging as most full-time professors are men who have not experienced the dueling roles of mother and graduate student (AAUP, 2020; CAUT, 2011). Another challenge may be implementing policies that will assist mothers are universities due to the continued funding cuts to higher education. Under pressure from the government to produce data

that shows they are graduating students at an efficient rate, graduate offices may continue to be reluctant to grant extensions for fear of added budget cuts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, it is important to recognize my closeness to the topic as a researcher as this influenced the creation of this study. I controlled for this by engaging in critical reflexivity throughout the project, journaling and having consistent discussions of my findings with my supervisor. The methods for recruiting participants, through the university listserv, social media, and postering on campus, resulted in only speaking to graduate student mothers who were still enrolled in university. Future research should broaden participant recruitment strategies to reach those who left university during the initial outbreak of the virus or those who have graduated. While I made a point of speaking to participants from a variety of races, this study would benefit from the inclusion of more racialized graduate student mothers to explicitly explore the impact of race and categorization within inequality regimes. This study also only focused on one university in North America, and graduate students in other countries with different support systems may have had different experiences.

This study only focused on the perspective of mothers and does not include the perspectives of other caregivers attending university. Future research should open the scope to include different forms of caregivers. Specifically, the work should investigate the experiences of graduate student fathers to see how gendered patterns of inequality influenced their experiences during the pandemic. In many instances, decisions around childcare and work during the pandemic centred around who made more money, and usually this was men. As graduate students are notoriously paid little, it would be interesting to see how caregiving decisions were made within the families of graduate student fathers.

This study was cross-sectional and only gathered data during a single point in time, while the effects of the pandemic and the way we think about it are always evolving. As our organizations continue to change due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, participants may feel differently in the future about the effects it had on their lives. The pandemic is also likely to impact the future employment and earnings of graduate student mothers. Future research may include a longitudinal study to see the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mothers who were in university during the initial outbreak and what consequences it had on their lives.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This study sought to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of mothers balancing their competing demands of mother and worker within inequality regimes. To explore this, I interviewed graduate student mothers, guided by the original research question "*what has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate student mothers' academic goals?"* In this study, I found that many graduate student mothers experienced a loss of control over their lives and the ability to balance family and school demands. This forced them to readjust their academic goals, widening the family gap within graduate education. The largest contribution to this was a decrease in childcare. The closures of schools and daycares shifted participants' childcare responsibilities to full-time, making it impossible for them to complete their dueling responsibilities. For some participants, the shift to online learning spurred by the pandemic increased the control they had over their lives, lessening the tension between their dueling role of mother and student. The shift to online learning allowed participants to complete their courses and other work when it worked best for them, regardless of unplanned interruptions in childcare.

The second research question that guided this project was "*what characteristics and supports influenced varying experiences of graduate student mothers during the pandemic?"* While most of the mothers were challenged by the decrease in childcare, those with younger and older children had varied experiences. Mothers of younger children had dependants that required more assistance in meeting basic needs and had difficulty filling the day with activities closed and little access to social events. The mothers of older children had to quickly pivot and assist their kids through online schooling, a time consuming and confusing process. The mothers who did not have access to the technology needed to complete online schooling, or enough devices

and space for multiple children, had increased difficulty shifting to home schooling. As was the case with many people during the pandemic, those with more resources fared better in the crisis.

After childcare facilities and schools opened up, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect the ability of participants to complete their academic goals because it altered how participants responded to illness. Before the outbreak of the virus, the mothers reported that if their children had mild cold symptoms, they would still attend school or daycare. Now, sickness is taken much more seriously, and it is less acceptable to send your children to school or daycare with cold-like symptoms. Due to the "tripledemic" and the increased circulation of illness in the province, the constant barrage of unpredictable sickness made it impossible for the mothers to be able to plan when they were going to be able to do their academic work. Many referred to it as a gamble or a game of chance, one that caused increased stress and anxiety. As the pandemic progressed, some of the mothers gave up keeping their children home when they had symptoms, opting to send their kids to school or daycare even if they were sick. Continuing to keep them home at random intervals was no longer an option, especially with the university increasingly becoming unforgiving with deadline extensions. Messaging from the government that everyone was on their own had won out.

The combination of the initial school and childcare closures coupled with the changes in response to illness made it impossible for participants to organize their lives and they ultimately had to engage in a readjustment of academic expectations, widening the family gap in graduate education. For most participants, the pandemic interrupted their graduate studies by extending the time needed to finish their degrees by years. Without access to consistent childcare, the mothers simply no longer had the time to also work on their graduate studies. Another factor that influenced the timeline extension was alterations to their research plans. Many participants had

to drastically alter these plans due to restrictions put in place to mitigate the spread of the virus. Mothers who had planned to conduct in-person research had to change the entire structure of their study, while others who worked in the lab had their experiments entirely shut down.

These changes and choices all took place within a specific organizational environment shaped by the government and university. While the ongoing crisis unfolded, institutional and organizational decisions influenced the amount of control the mothers had over their lives. This led to the addition of my third research question, "*what factors increased and decreased control participants had over their lives during the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus?*" Often institutions meant to be a source of support for the mothers only increased the loss of control, adding stress and uncertainty to an uncertain time. Participants living in Alberta felt the provincial government did a poor job responding to the virus. This was due to poor communication which left the mothers having to conduct their own research to protect themselves and stay updated on the continuous changing restrictions and mitigation policies. Many mothers felt the policies put in place by the government were poorly done and decided on based on what would be best for the party in power. With many having children who could not be vaccinated at the same time as adults, the government lifting restrictions before their children had access to protection left the mothers feeling abandoned, furthering the message that protecting themselves and their family was an act of individual responsibility.

At the same time, budget cuts to higher education from the same government spurred a massive restructuring process at the university participants attended, increasing the loss of control in their lives and solidifying inequality regimes in the academy. Resources they had once relied on were removed and participants could not gain access to guidance and support. For the participants who also held jobs at the university, the mass firings left them with feelings of fear

and uncertainty during an already chaotic time. Many participants needed extensions due to the demands of pandemic parenting and the graduate office was of little support. Instead, they stopped granting COVID related extensions. The refusal to grant extensions is likely due to suggestions outlined in the UCP's "MacKinnon Report" which argued that public funding should be tied to graduation rates and that not enough students were finishing. The government and university mirrored each other organizationally, both implementing policies that hurt mothers.

Some changes undertaken by the university due to the outbreak of the virus had a positive impact on participants and increased the amount of control they had over their lives, challenging inequality regimes and reducing work-family-conflict. The shift to online learning and other meetings created more accessibility for several the participants, allowing them to take more classes from home. Many felt the pandemic created positive changes for student mothers because there were more options for them to complete their studies at home without having to worry about childcare or random bouts of sickness.

Participants felt that there were several changes the university could take that would make it easier for graduate student mothers to achieve their academic goals, resisting inequality regimes within the university. Spurred by the positive experiences of online learning during the pandemic, many recommended that the university increase the number of online options available for students. This would allow mothers more control over when they could complete their academic work, not having to worry about interruptions in childcare. Second, with the participants having to increase the amount of time it will take for them to finish their degree, they felt that the university being more open to granting extensions would create a more equitable environment. As the participants continue to face interruptions in childcare due to the ongoing circulation of illness, they are unable to complete their work as efficiently as students without

children. Refusing to grant extensions can have catastrophic consequences, removing student mothers from funding eligibility.

Many participants also felt that there was a lack of community and visibility on campus for student mothers. Another proposed change was the implementation of a community group to increase visibility on campus as well as offer resources and support to other student parents struggling. Resources that were available to student mothers were not well known, and they felt the university could do a better job disseminating what is available to the campus community. Finally, many of the participants expressed that an increase in childcare facilities on campus would help graduate student mothers. Currently, the waitlist for university daycares is years long and the students are often competing with faculty and staff for the limited spots.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 disease served as an exogenous shock to graduate student mothers already struggling to balance their competing roles of mother and student. Based on my findings, many changes can be made to assist graduate student mothers in achieving their goals. The implementation of online learning and part-time programs will give more opportunity and access to mothers. However, we need to be cautious that this does not simply maintain the academic inequality regime and lead to a concentration of mothers in part-time, less prestigious online programs. Based on the findings of this study, the most vital policy that universities can implement to help mothers is to grant extensions easily and quickly. The most important resources for graduate student mothers are time and flexibility. These are things the university can easily grant to those they deem worthy.

As universities continue to transform under neoliberal policies, they are increasingly favouring the “ideal graduate student.” This is a student who can afford the ever-increasing tuition, complete their academic work with little supervision or resources, and finish their degree

quickly in a timely and efficient manner. As it the case with the ideal worker, mothers are unlikely to be able to fit into the mold of the ideal graduate student due to the duelling roles of mother and graduate student. To make the academic world a more equitable place for mothers, members of the university community must continue to resist the aggressive shift from schools being a place of learning to one with the sole focus of job training. If we do not continue to resist the ongoing restructuring of academic institutions, graduate student mothers will continue to be disadvantaged, being pushed further out of graduate education and the academic world.

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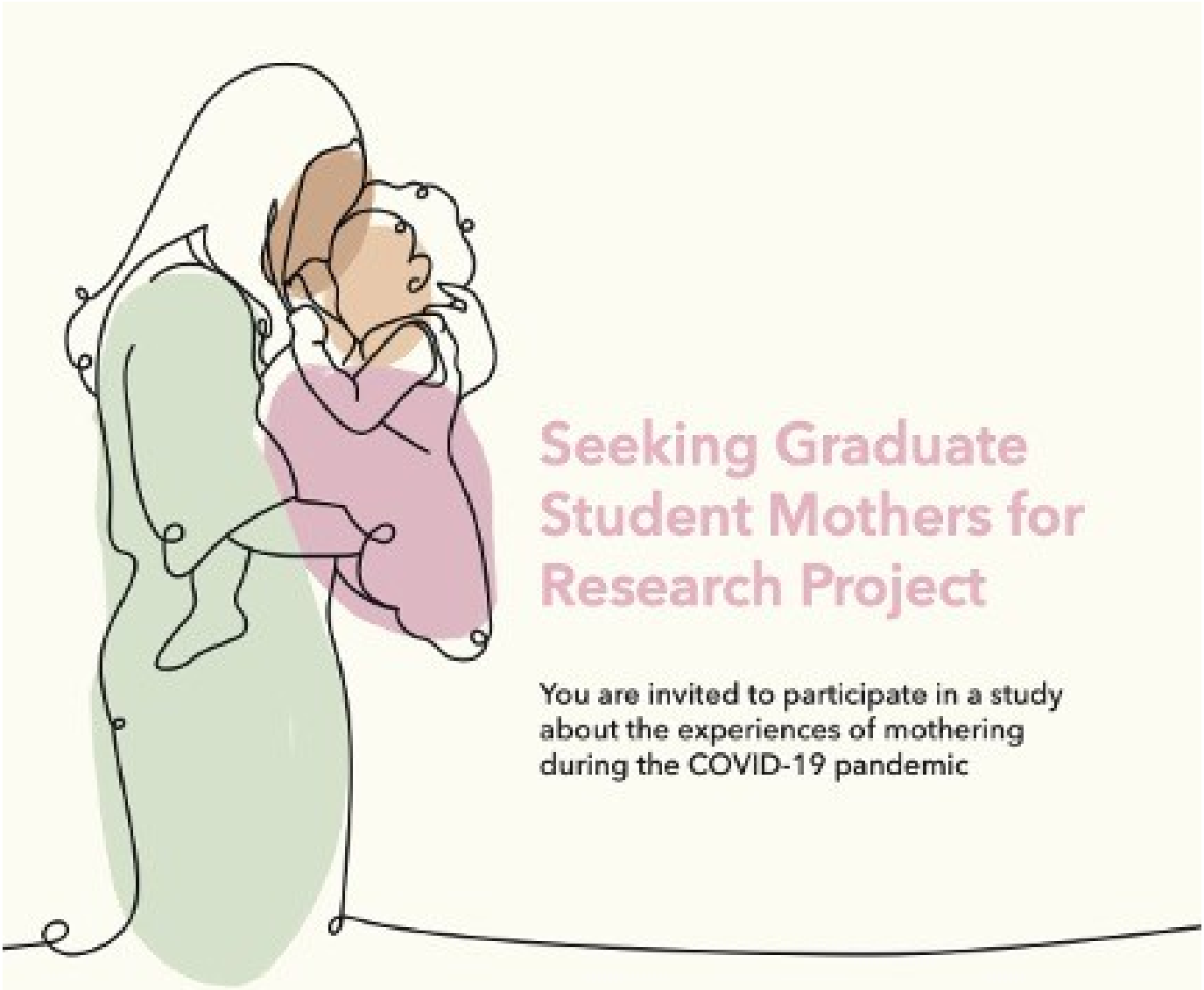
Appendix A



Seeking Graduate Student Mothers for Research Project

You are invited to participate in a study about the experiences of mothering during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Study: One interview lasting about an hour. Participants receive a $20 Starbucks eGift Card. Interviews will take place in-person or over Zoom. It's anonymous and confidential. Your name an identity will not be shared with anyone.

To sign up or learn more contact Andrea: dekesere@ualberta.ca

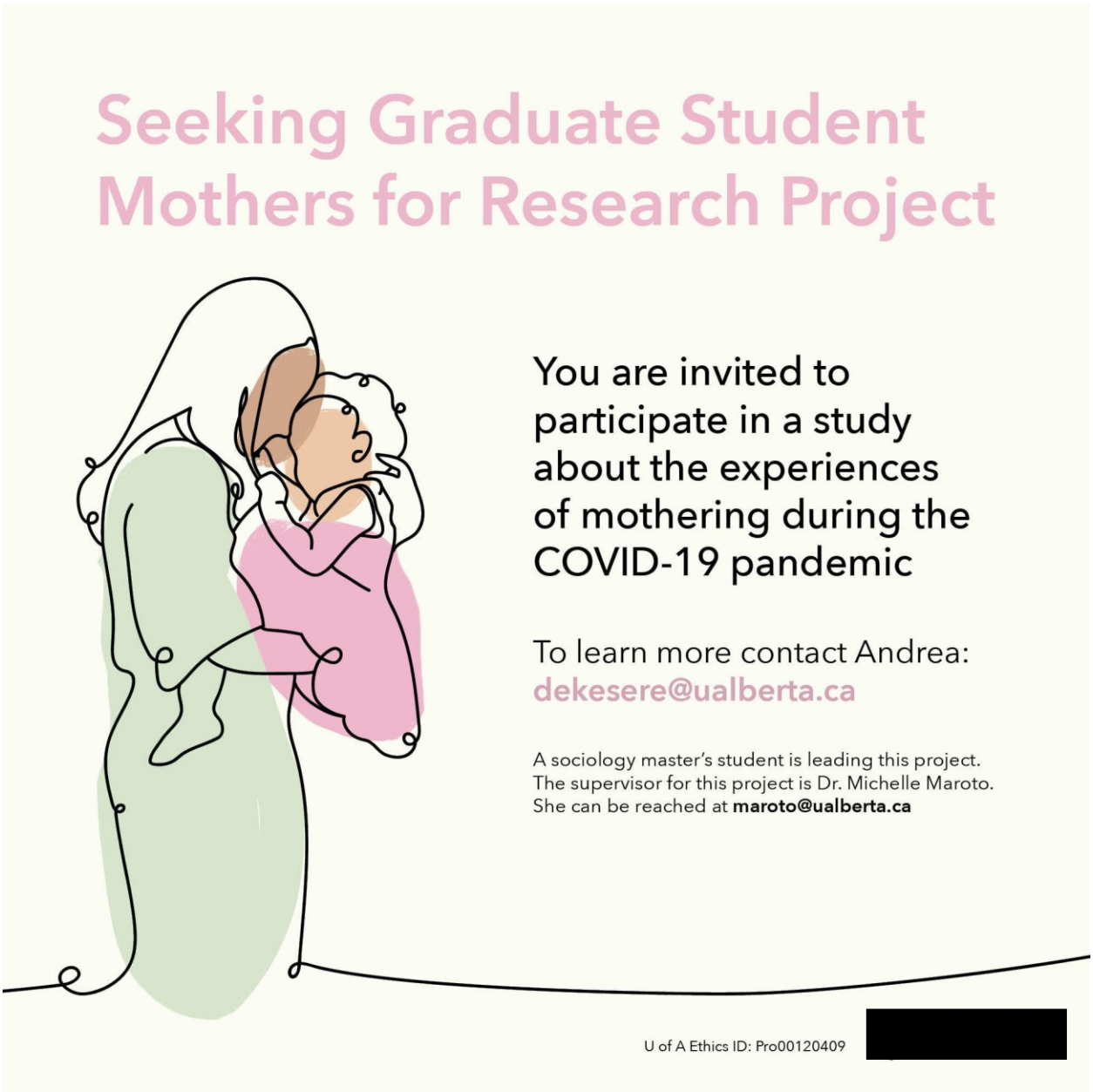
Andrea DeKeseredy, a sociology master's student, is leading this project. The supervisor for this project is Dr. Michelle Maroto. She can be reached at **maroto@ualberta.ca**

[redacted]

U of A Ethics ID: Pro00120409

Appendix B

Twitter text: One interview lasting about an hour. Participants receive a $20 Starbucks eGift card.Interviews will be audio recorded and take place in-person or over Zoom. It's anonymized and confidential. Your name and identity will not be shared with anyone.



Appendix C

[redacted]

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
FACULTY OF ARTS

5-21 HM Tory Building
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2H4
Tel: 780.492.5234
http://www.sociology.ualberta.ca/

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Graduate Student Mothers

Research Investigator:	Supervisor:
Andrea DeKeseredy	Dr. Michelle Maroto
4-08 Tory (H.M) Building	6-23 Tory (H.M) Building
11211 Saskatchewan Dr. NW	11211 Saskatchewan Dr. NW
Edmonton, Alberta T6G-2H4	Edmonton, Alberta T6G-2H4
dekesere@ualberta.ca	maroto@ualberta.ca
	780-492-0478

Background

- You are being asked to be in this study because you self-identify as a mother who was in graduate school at the University of Alberta during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020).
- You have been contacted through email.
- Before you make a decision, the researcher will go over this form with you. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.
- This project is being completed by a MA sociology student (Andrea DeKeseredy) for her thesis project.

Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of graduate student mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study Procedures

- This study will consist of one interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. You will be asked to describe your experiences of mothering and graduate school after the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.
- Interviews will be conducted over Zoom or in-person depending on your preference.
- With your permission, we will be recording and transcribing each interview. You may choose whether you prefer to have your interview recorded with or without video.

Benefits

- Participation in this research does not have any direct benefits to respondents but may lead to broader social benefits and policy changes. Responses will be used to provide a broader understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions affected graduate student mothers.

Risk

- There are no obvious risk to participating in this study but participants may experience an emotional response to questions asked.
- There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If I learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, we will tell you right away.

[redacted]

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Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary
- There is no direct personal cost to participation
- You are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.
- Even if you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. In the event of opting out, the data will be destroyed.
- Participants can withdraw from the study at any time up until two weeks after transcription takes place.

Incentive

- You will receive a $20 dollar Starbucks eGift card for participation
- You will still receive the gift card even if you withdraw from the study after the interview

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- All identifying information will be removed from the data and will be kept confidential.
- This research may be presented at conferences and published in academic journals.
- Only the researchers will have access to the data, and it will be stored in a secure location.
- The only exception to this promise of confidentiality is that we are legally obligated to report evidence of child abuse or neglect.
- Audio recordings and transcripts will be kept for a minimum of 5 years after completion of the project, but any identifying information will be removed.

Contact Information

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:
  Andrea DeKeseredy: dekesere@ualberta.ca
  Dr. Michelle Maroto: maroto@ualberta.ca
- The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can email reoffice@ualberta.ca This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above. I understand that completion of the interview means I consent to participate.

Appendix D

The Experiences of Graduate Student Mothers During the COVID-19 Pandemic Interview Protocol

Andrea DeKeseredy

Obtain Verbal Consent

You are being asked to participate in a study regarding the experiences of graduate student mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is being conducted by Andrea DeKeseredy, a sociology master's student.

For this project, I am interviewing participants who identify as mothers and were enrolled in graduate school during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. My goal is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of graduate student mothers and explore what impact the pandemic and pandemic related restrictions had on their lives.

The interview will include questions regarding your background, your academic goals, and how the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus impacted your life as both a student and a mother. Interviews are expected to be 60-90 minutes long. They will be audio recorded and transcribed. Any data will be kept confidential and stored on password protected drives. Transcripts will be kept for the duration of the project, but any identifying information will be removed.

Participation in this research does not have any direct benefits to respondents, but it may lead to broader social benefits and policy implications. There is no foreseeable risk to your participation in this study.

Please note that your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer questions. You have the right to request that the recording be stopped at any time. Your privacy will be protected in all published and written data resulting from this study. You can receive a summary of the research results upon request.

If you have any questions or comments, you may contact Andrea DeKeseredy at dekesere@ualberta.ca or 780-405-7054. You may also content the supervisor for this project, Dr. Michelle Maroto at maroto@ualberta.ca or 780-492-0478.

Do you have any questions about any of this? Do you agree to participate in this study and to have this interview audio recorded for the purposes of this study?

Do I have your consent to begin this interview? [OBTAIN VERBAL CONSENT FROM PARTICIPANT]

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I would like to start by getting some background information from you. Can I get your:

- Age
- Race
- Current Status as a student
    - Year, department?
- Are you employed?
- How many children do you have?
    - What are their ages?
- Do you have a partner?
    - Are you married? Living together?
    - What do they do for a living?
- Why did you decide to pursue graduate school?

BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19

Now I would like to establish what your life as a mother and graduate student looked like before the outbreak of the virus.

- What was your status as a student before the outbreak of COVID-19? For the purposes of this study, I usually pinpoint that at about **March 2020**
- How old were your kids during this time?
- Can you tell me a little bit about what your daily life looked like?
    - When did you get your coursework done?
- What did you use for childcare?
- Outside of formal childcare, what other support did you have?
- How did you and your partner *(if they have one)* divide household work?

AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19

Now I would like to gain an understanding of how the virus and restrictions impacted your life.

Childcare and Support

- How did your life change after the outbreak of the virus and initial lockdowns?
- What kind of restrictions and shutdowns impacted you the most?
- What did you use for childcare during this time?
- How was your partner's life impacted? *(if they have a partner)*
- How were other members of your family impacted?

- Did the way you divide household work change?

Graduate School *(if they started graduate school during the pandemic, ask why)*

- How did the outbreak of the virus impact your graduate work?
- Did the way you work on your research and coursework change?
- Were any of your academic goals impacted?
    - Courses dropped? Grant applications? Conferences?
- Was any university or departmental support offered?
- Are you concerned about any impacts to your career?

Misc. Questions

- Did academic restructuring impact your experiences at all?
- How did you feel about the government's handling of the virus?
    - Did you ever break the rules?
- Is the way you handle your kids sickness different now?

IMPROVEMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

- I would like to know what you think could have assisted you as a graduate student mother during the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, is there anything you can think of that would have helped you through this time?
- Do you have any suggestions or thoughts as to what could help you moving forward?

CONCLUSION

- Is there anything we haven't talked about today that you would like to add?

Those are all the questions I have for you today. I would like to thank you once again for participating in this study. It is my hope that your experiences will allow for better understanding of how the pandemic impacted graduate student mothers. If you have any other questions for me, please reach out to me through email.