Editorial

Online Academics and Burnout in Working Mothers: An Overlooked Crisis

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EDITORIAL

The rapid expansion of online education has transformed access to learning, particularly for working adults seeking to balance professional growth with personal responsibilities. Among these learners, working mothers represent a uniquely burdened group. While online academics promise flexibility, they often mask a deeper issue: the intensification of burnout due to the convergence of work, caregiving, and academic demands within the same space and time [1].

Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, the three dimensions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Human Services Survey), has been widely studied in occupational contexts [2]. However, its intersection with online learning, especially among working mothers, remains underexplored. The assumption that digital education alleviates stress by offering convenience fails to account for the invisible labor that mothers perform daily. Rather than reducing strain, online academics frequently extend the "second shift" [3] into a "third shift," compounding cognitive and emotional overload.

Working mothers engaged in online education often navigate fragmented schedules, studying late at night or during limited breaks. This irregular pattern disrupts sleep cycles and contributes to chronic fatigue. Research indicates that sleep deprivation strongly impairs human functioning, with mood being particularly affected, more so than cognitive or motor performance, and that partial sleep deprivation may have an even more profound impact than short-term or long-term total sleep loss [4]. Furthermore, the financial and psychological pressures associated with combining employment, caregiving, and study contribute independently to stress and exhaustion [5].

The absence of physical separation between home, work, and study environments further blurs role boundaries, making it difficult for working mothers to disengage from competing responsibilities. This continuous role overlap is a significant predictor of burnout [2].

Another critical factor is the lack of institutional recognition of caregiving roles. Many online academic programs are designed with the "ideal student" in mind, one who has uninterrupted time, stable resources, and minimal external obligations. This model inherently disadvantages working mothers, who must constantly negotiate competing priorities. The rigidity of deadlines, synchronous sessions, and assessment structures often fails to accommodate caregiving emergencies or fluctuating domestic demands [6].

Social isolation further exacerbates burnout. Traditional academic environments provide peer interaction, mentorship, and informal support systems that can buffer stress. In contrast, online platforms may limit meaningful engagement, leaving working mothers feeling disconnected and unsupported. Research has shown that social support plays a protective role against the health consequences of life stress [7], and more recent evidence suggests that perceived connectedness and teacher presence are especially critical for retaining and supporting non-traditional online learners with family and work responsibilities [6].

Financial pressures also cannot be ignored. Many working mothers pursue online education to enhance career prospects, yet they often do so without reducing their existing workload. The dual pressure of financial responsibility and academic investment creates a high-stakes environment in which failure is not perceived as an option, intensifying anxiety and contributing to emotional exhaustion [8].

Addressing this issue requires systemic change rather than individual coping strategies alone. Educational institutions must adopt more inclusive frameworks that recognize the realities of working mothers. Flexible deadlines, asynchronous learning options, and compassionate academic policies are essential. Additionally, integrating mental health resources and fostering online communities can help alleviate feelings of isolation. Employers also have a role to play, supporting employees who are pursuing further education through flexible work arrangements or reduced workloads can significantly reduce burnout risk. Public policy interventions, such as subsidized childcare and educational grants, would further ease the burden.

In conclusion, while online academics have democratized access to education, they have also inadvertently intensified burnout among working mothers. Recognizing and addressing this hidden crisis is essential for creating equitable and sustainable learning environments. Without meaningful reform, the promise of online education will remain out of reach for those who need it most.

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