

Lessons from COVID-19

# WHITE PAPER

on mitigating the negative effects of the Covid-19  
crisis on caregivers at Maastricht University





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Staff members with care responsibilities have been severely negatively impacted by the measures against the pandemic due to the lack of care facilities in combination with the continuation of activities within UM.

According to extensive statistical evidence and data, female researchers within this group are even more so disadvantaged. With this white paper, FEM urges the UM to take an array of concrete post-COVID measures to counterbalance the negative impact on the output of its employees (irrespective of gender or position) with care responsibilities (irrespective of the type of responsibility).

**Our recommendations are concrete and are addressed to all faculties no matter the discipline.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### University management and faculties

- Conduct a rigorous COVID-impact assessment on the careers of staff.
- Develop and establish a post-COVID relief policy (e.g. allocate flexible funds to employees with caregiving responsibilities).
- Include a “COVID-19 disruption statement” in all promotion decisions (incl. tenure) where employees can explain the level of affect to their careers.
- Explicitly take the COVID-19 disruption statement into account in promotion decisions either by considering lockdown periods as care-leave similar to parental leave or assess the candidate using previous years of performance or adjust criteria. We advise against extensions for being eligible for promotion!

### Direct line managers & supervisors

- Enquire into how COVID-19 has impacted career plans for each employee.
- Create a bespoke plan to boost the activities necessary for career advancement.
- Take steps for managing workload to prioritise activities vital for career advancement, especially when such activities were compromised during the pandemic, (e.g. take part in trainings, reduce teaching hours to make space for research).
- Adjust productivity goals and develop flexible timelines for short term and long-term professional goals taking into account the pandemic drawback.

## BACKGROUND

Female Empowerment Maastricht University (FEM) is committed to improving inclusion and diversity at Maastricht University. More specifically, we aim at counteracting the long-existing systemic biases against women (both academic as well as administrative staff).

In this position paper, we would like to raise awareness and propose measures to tackle the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis on UM employees. We fully acknowledge that this pandemic has negative, potentially severe, consequences for all UM community members irrespective of their family circumstances (e.g., single or partnered, with or without children, with or without other care commitments, academic or administrative staff, men or women). The lack of social contact, the disturbance of normal activities at UM, the fast introduction of e-learning and e-work more generally, and to put simply, the impact of such a globally disheartening event on life and future has taken enormous energy and time. We have been called to adapt and develop new skills (e.g. digital literacy, help students and colleagues with mental difficulties) while continuing as normally as possible our activities.

While acknowledging that all persons have suffered, in this white paper, we would like to focus mainly to employees with care responsibilities (e.g. children, older parents, sick partners) whether administrative or academic staff. This group of people, on top of the aforementioned challenges, faced also the lack of childcare or other care facilities during the pandemic (we note that emergency care was not available for all employees and even when available in theory, it was often not feasible in practice due to limited spaces). Even nowadays, due to continuing measures, the frequent closure of schooling and childcare due to potential infections creates an unstable and uncertain work reality for many of us. And while having to attend to care responsibilities, work at UM continued. An official COVID-19 leave for caregivers has been instituted in other countries, but in the Netherlands this has not been the case. Additionally, no significant and official reduction of workload at a central level of the UM (e.g. reducing work to only essential activities) has been put in place. Thus, caregiver employees had to maintain their productivity with only small adaptations while basic institutional structures e.g. care facilities, were gone. This had for many employees' tremendous negative impact on careers, but also on the mental and emotional health.

We would like furthermore to draw the attention to a specific subgroup of employees: women researchers with young children. The nature of research being self-driven in combination with the prioritization of teaching during the pandemic led to a severe documented reduction in productivity. A number of recent studies have repeatedly highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted the career prospects of women researchers. Evidence show that it brought a standstill to publication rate and research activities of women who are also parents and caregivers [1].

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1. Minello, Alessandra & Martucci, Sara & Manzo, Lidia K.C.. (2020). The pandemic and the academic mothers: present hardships and future perspectives. *European Societies*. 23. 1-13. 10.1080/14616696.2020.1809690.

For example, it is possible to observe a 10-20% drop in preprint submissions and submissions by women, whereas an increase in submission rates for men (6-30%) has been documented [2]. Moreover, women are less likely to work on COVID-related research (19% less authorships on COVID-19-related works) [3]. This severe decline in productivity will create long-term impact due to the well-known Matthew effect, which postulates that scientists who have previously been successful are more likely to succeed again [4].

Inclusion and diversity are about creating equal opportunities. The UM has been investing in diversity, inclusivity and creating a fair environment for all. Achieving this, in our view, urgently calls for addressing the negative impact of COVID-19 measures on caretakers, and particularly women. The vast evidence-based research we cite throughout this paper makes a compelling case for it. This literature is also sustained by a broad support across disciplines, which urges, through the voices of a multitude of researchers, for measures to be taken at the institutional level [5].

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2. [No Tickets for Women in the COVID-19 Race? A Study on Manuscript Submissions and Reviews in 2347 Elsevier Journals during the Pandemic](#) Squazzoni et al., 19th October 2020, SSRN; [The decline of women's research production during the coronavirus pandemic](#) Vincent-Lamarre et al., 19th May 2020, Nature; [Are women publishing less during the pandemic? Here's what the data say](#) Viglione, 20th May 2020, Nature; [COVID-19's gendered impact on academic productivity](#) Frederickson, 11st May 2020, GitHub; [Unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientists](#) Kyle R. Myers, Nature; [Living, working and COVID-19 - Eurofond](#) Ahrendt et al., 28th September 2020, Eurofound; [Unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientists](#) Myers et al., 15 July 2020, Nature Human Behaviour; [Gender, race and parenthood impact academic productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic: from survey to action](#) Staniscuaski et al., 4th July 2020, bioRxiv; [The impact of COVID-19 on women scientists from developing countries: Results from an OWSD member survey](#) Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World, 29th June 2020; [COVID-19 Survey Shows One-Third of Researchers Could Leave Neuroscience](#) British Neuroscience Association (BNA), 18th June 2020; [The impact of COVID-19 on women in the STEM workforce](#) Johnston et al., 17th May 2020, Australian Academy of Science.
  3. [COVID-19 medical papers have fewer women first authors than expected](#) Andersen et al., 15th June 2020, eLIFE.
  4. <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/19/4887#:~:text=A%20classic%20thesis%20is%20that,succeed%20again%2C%20producing%20increasing%20distinction>.
  5. Reese TA, Harris-Tryon TA, Gill JG, Banaszynski LA. Supporting women in academia during and after a global pandemic. *Sci Adv.* 2021 Feb 24;7(9):eabg9310. doi: 10.1126/sciadv.abg9310. PMID: 33627436; PMCID: PMC7904251.

### Scope of the white paper

The main goal of this position paper is to propose specific policy measures to be taken at UM to tackle the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, based on the extensive literature available on this topic [6], to help **all UM employees with caring responsibilities** (men or women, academic or administrative staff). Whereas our recommendations concern employees with care responsibilities, we emphasize that amongst this group, **women researchers have been particularly disadvantaged**. Women researchers **with small children** should receive special attention.

We would like furthermore to highlight that, although the recommendations were initially inspired by the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on caregivers, some recommendations **may help all staff juggling work-life balance** on the long-term.

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6. See <https://www.mothersinscience.com/support-covid19>: (1) Family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19 UNICEF provides general recommendations that aim to help employers strengthen support for workers and their families. These policies should be adapted locally and according to the rapidly changing circumstances; (2) **Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19**: This policy brief published by the United Nations presents the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in an already precarious world of work and provides policies and practical options for a strong recovery from this crisis.; (3) **COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses**: This note offers a preliminary assessment of the possible impacts of COVID-19 on the world of work and proposes a range of policy options to mitigate these impacts and facilitate strong and fast recovery; (4) **COVID-19 and gender equality**: This resource aims to raise awareness of some of the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on society. The information draws on EIGE's existing research and gender statistics to highlight the different realities that women and men could be facing during and after the pandemic; (5) **COVID-19: Policy responses across Europe**: This report provides an overview of the content of a database of around 500 policy initiatives implemented by European governments during the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the economy in the context of the evolving labour market situation.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY ACTION AT MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

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In the following paragraphs we will structure the recommendations according to sphere of influence and timeline in top-down fashion [7]. It is imperative that none of the recommendations in this paper be implemented as a way to force a career path on employees and we strongly suggest that the use of individual measures proposed below should be discussed first with the employee.

## University management and faculties

We would like to acknowledge that at the break of the pandemic, the UM and the individual faculties did mobilize immediately several funds to take emergency measures and worked very hard to secure the continuation of activities, e.g. to extent PhD and post-doctoral contracts or to secure infrastructure. In this white paper we make a plea for a more **organised, centralised and clear policy** designed to battle the **long-term effects of the pandemic** to a large part of UM community severely affected by the pandemic.

Although the gendered effects of the pandemic have been studied widely, the effects within the UM community are not yet fully documented. As having a detailed picture is the first step to implement informed action, we strongly encourage the Executive Board and the Faculty Boards to perform a (1) **rigorous COVID-19 impact assessment** and to conduct (regular) anonymous surveys to seek for employees' feedback. This continuous monitoring is essential to evaluate which policy-measures work well and which measures should be re-evaluated. FEM is very willing to offer assistance to the Executive and Faculty Boards in conducting COVID-19 impact assessment surveys.

Based on these surveys, we recommend university and faculty management, to establish (2) **an evidence based COVID-19 relief-policy** for the careers of those with care responsibilities. Such a policy would consist of measures at the UM or Faculty level. This position paper offers some recommendations of such measures of a COVID-19 relief policy:

- In order to mitigate the detrimental effects on careers due to forcedly reduced productivity, we recommend university management to **allocate flexible funds to employees with caregiving responsibilities**: e.g. boosting research grants, funds to extend contracts, funding to buy-out of teaching and/or hire assistants or to follow a training.
- We advise to incorporate a "COVID-19 disruption statement" in all promotion dossiers, even those of faculties who have not been heavily impacted by the pandemic. Templates should be provided with clear instructions for review committee members and objective criteria to minimize biases that can arise during the evaluation [8]. All employees should

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7. Fulweiler, Wally & Davies, Sarah & Biddle, Jennifer & Burgin, Amy & Cooperdock, Emily & Hanley, Torrance & Kenkel, Carly & Marcarelli, Amy & Matassa, Catherine & Mayo, Talea & Santiago-Vazquez, Lory & Traylor-Knowles, Nikki & Ziegler, Maren. (2021). Rebuild the Academy: Supporting academic mothers during COVID-19 and beyond. PLOS Biology. 19. e3001100. 10.1371/journal.pbio.3001100.

8. Manchester CF, Leslie LM, Kramer A. Is the clock still ticking? an evaluation of the consequences of stopping the tenure clock. Ind Labor Relat Rev. 2013.

be offered the chance to describe the special circumstances and challenges faced while performing their work (i.e. teaching, research, administration, service) during the pandemic in their **annual review and/or evaluation statements**. FEM has put together a draft of a template that the Faculties could take as example for a COVID-9 disruption statement.

- Decreased productivity or other impact of the pandemic should be taken into account explicitly during evaluations on promotion. One idea for the faculties is to consider lockdown periods as **care leave similar to parental leave** when assessing promotion so that decreased productivity does not have a negative impact. Another idea can be to select, in accordance with the employee, **non-pandemic years as a sample of performance** for the evaluation dossiers [9], or alternatively, to **adjust expectations and requirements for promotion**.

**We advise against extensions of timelines for promotion.** Research has shown that extension of tenure is viewed negatively during evaluation [10], and often put additional pressure on individuals who already come from an extremely stressful period [11]. We strongly support a more holistic qualitative evaluation of performances that draws attention to the achievement of personal goals and not quantitative dry criteria; please see for more the Recognition & Rewards policy.

### **For the longer term we believe the following two recommendation could establish a better work-life balance beyond the pandemic:**

We would like to draw attention to the importance of university managers helping normalizing caregiving through the development of flexible, family-friendly HR policies, aligned with the ongoing UMCares project. We deem essential for the well-being of employees to create a culture where there are clear boundaries between personal time and work time and time off is encouraged. In addition, any policies to support caregivers should be openly promoted. HR departments should aim at communicating in moments of need the existing options to employees – e.g. to use the short-term care leave which many employees were sadly unaware of.

We would like to express our disappointment that during the two lockdowns the information coming from UM News and the Updates of Executive Board regarding Covid-19 mainly addressed the ergonomic work environment at home or taking breaks or health, but the obvious problem of working while attending to children was

9. Htun M. Tenure and promotion after the pandemic. Science. 2020. pmid:32499434

10. Manchester CF, Leslie LM, Kramer A. Is the clock still ticking? an evaluation of the consequences of stopping the tenure clock. Ind Labor Relat Rev. 2013.

11. Antecol H, Bedard K, Stearns J. Equal but inequitable: Who benefits from gender-neutral tenure clock stopping policies? Am Econ Rev. 2018.

not really acknowledged to a similar degree: neither under the sections “tips from working from home”, “basic principles for working from home”, or in the regular Updates is the problem of working without childcare addressed even if this was experienced as the major obstacle for the productivity of a large number of UM employees. Only in “working from home guide” there was one sentence about balancing childcare and work.

Finally, we encourage the university management to **create awareness** on the gendered influence of the pandemic and to educate employees about the gender inequalities in academia and at Maastricht University in general. Please consult the FEM website for more ideas on how to achieve this.

### Direct line managers & supervisors

Line managers (PhD and other supervisors, departmental heads, leaders of teams) are first in line and the closest to employees. To mitigate some of the negative effects of the pandemic, we recommend that line managers enquire (1) how COVID-19 has impacted the career plans of employees with care responsibilities: e.g. missed trainings, reduced publications, missed opportunities for skills, networks or projects. They should develop together a (2) bespoke plan on how to regain some of the lost time or lost opportunities. Such a bespoke plan should lay down concrete steps to counterbalance the negative impact on careers. We believe that the proposed discussions above under (1) and (2) between line managers and employees will have also benefits for the overall wellbeing of employees (mental as well) and it will improve the relationship and trust of line managers and employees.

Here we have collected a few ideas of aspects of **the bespoke plan** to be discussed between the line manager and the employee:

- Develop **flexible timelines** for short and long-term professional goals and adjust productivity goals when necessary, in line with current R&R policy. We highly recommend that the pandemic and its effects are a topic to be discussed during the **annual assessment even if this is not yet officially included in assessment documents** – as we recommend with this white paper, see above.
- Manage workload to make space for activities that would **boost the employee’s career plans**. This could include e.g. postpone non-essential activities, redistributing work amongst the department, decrease education load, decrease service work, hire assistants, direct funds available to the department towards the affected employees. One point of attention in implementing these measures is that **employees should not be cut off from activities beneficial for their careers**, e.g. leadership positions in committees. **Here mentors could play an important role by actively supporting and sponsoring younger employees**, for

example by proposing early career researchers as a speaker at a conference.

Please note that the idea is to create a level playing field and to encourage a more mindful management.

- We strongly advise managers and supervisors to inform and encourage employees to use the existing short-term care leave, calamities leave and other extraordinary leave (see sections 4.21-4.25 CAO) as a way to attain an **emergency care leave** during short-term quarantines due to Covid-19 (e.g. closure of schools due to positive tested pupil). Unfortunately, often employees are not aware of their options. We want to highlight as well that the practice of some managers to suggest employees to take vacation leave to accommodate a short quarantine is not in line with UM's sustainable employability vision and not an equitable approach as it leaves people with care tasks with considerable less recovery time.

**For the longer term we believe the following two recommendations could establish a better work-life balance beyond the pandemic:**

For the longer term, during the pandemic and beyond, we recommend managers and mentors to support (3) **flexible, family-friendly HR policies and schedules** and remote working to support the employees who have to combine work and caregiving. When meetings are scheduled, we recommend flexibility with timing and, when possible, to record the meeting for employees that cannot attend due to caregiving responsibilities or to provide minutes. It is important to create an understanding culture where home-working caregivers may leave virtual meetings due to unexpected interruptions.

To (4) help **normalizing caregiving for the longer term**, we recommend that line managers make it clear that they support all family circumstances, including family units with or without children and that they value and aim to achieve a healthy work-life balance [12]. We recommend listening to the employees and support their goals, especially when they disclose that they are growing their family. The reaction of the line managers to such news might discourage or empower the employee to make use



of their rights and return to campus [13]. Furthermore, we expect that all direct line managers and supervisors are familiar with the UM parental leave policies in order to help employees navigate all options and make informed decisions [14].

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**13.** Fulweiler, Wally & Davies, Sarah & Biddle, Jennifer & Burgin, Amy & Cooperdock, Emily & Hanley, Torrance & Kenkel, Carly & Marcarelli, Amy & Matassa, Catherine & Mayo, Talea & Santiago-Vazquez, Lory & Traylor-Knowles, Nikki & Ziegler, Maren. (2021). Rebuild the Academy: Supporting academic mothers during COVID-19 and beyond. *PLOS Biology*. 19. e3001100. [10.1371/journal.pbio.3001100](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3001100).

**14.** Fulweiler, Wally & Davies, Sarah & Biddle, Jennifer & Burgin, Amy & Cooperdock, Emily & Hanley, Torrance & Kenkel, Carly & Marcarelli, Amy & Matassa, Catherine & Mayo, Talea & Santiago-Vazquez, Lory & Traylor-Knowles, Nikki & Ziegler, Maren. (2021). Rebuild the Academy: Supporting academic mothers during COVID-19 and beyond. *PLOS Biology*. 19. e3001100. [10.1371/journal.pbio.3001100](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3001100).



Photography by Brian Megens

## What is FEM doing?

Since the beginning of the pandemic FEM proactively engaged in raising awareness of its impact on those with care responsibilities, especially women. We have encouraged women to share their stories in order to normalize care perception (including the [#FEMstories](#) on Twitter). We also have organized two webinars (one on the impact of the [pandemic on female researchers](#) and one on [establishing a kinder research culture](#)) where researchers on these fields presented research showing the extend of the problem and suggesting solutions. Furthermore, we have successfully campaigned NWO to adjust the [VIDI deadlines](#), the ISFR, and we are currently [negotiating with the ERC Council](#) to do the same.

Next to highlighting the impact of the pandemic, FEM has continued organizing lunch sessions to raise general awareness on gender diversity and has organized online training sessions on negotiation skills for women. We finally organized an [online festival for women researchers](#) to give them a platform to show their research and engage.

## Contact

FEM would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in our statement in more detail. Any questions should be directed to [fem@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:fem@maastrichtuniversity.nl).

For more information regarding our activities please visit the [FEM website](#) and the FEM social media accounts.

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