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Vietnamese university teacher mothers' juggling roles when teaching online

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan [ID][a], Linh Thi Thuy Pham [ID][b] and Tho Xuan Pham[c]

[a]Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; [b]Faculty of English Language Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam; [c]Faculty of Language and Cultures of English Speaking Countries, University of Languages and International Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people's lives have been affected on a global scale. In academia in particular, the focus has been on the challenges of academic mothers juggling their careers with raising children during social distancing time. The excessive demand of work changes such as the conversion to online teaching and family increasing attention has given rise to additional workload and negative emotional responses of university teacher mothers. Analysing in-depth interviews with nine Vietnamese university teacher mothers of young children, this article shows how they had to reorganise their work-life structure as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The article features the challenges and struggles of teacher mothers as they had to teach from home and homeschool their children at the same time, while navigating the 'new normal' situation in a way that least possible affected their life and work organisation. The article also unveils the lack of support from family members and the workplaces of the university teacher mothers and questions the gendered burden and inequality entailed by the pandemic. The study highlights how resilient the university teacher mothers were with constant changes in their personal and professional lives due to the pandemic. We argue that the new situation provided a unique opportunity for university teacher mothers to re-imagine their teaching practices and maternity performances in an interlacing way that they might not hitherto have considered .

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on people's lives on a global scale. In the higher education context in particular, the challenges of university teacher mothers juggling their career with raising children are well documented in previous literature. Besides the duties of teaching, research, and administration work, university teacher mothers have to fulfil their parental roles and domestic housework. The excessive demand of work and family participation lessens the chance of a tenure and promotion in academia, when teacher mothers

CONTACT Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan ✉ N.Q.A.Phan@kent.ac.uk

are less likely to obtain a stable position and to publish frequently (Mason *et al.* 2013, Maheshwari *et al.* 2021, Maheshwari 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation; because of school and childcare closures, teacher mothers were mainly responsible for child care organisations while academic work did not stop. Added to the everyday teaching and research duties, the transition to online teaching with a radical change in the mode of instruction and pedagogy rendered additional workload and negative emotional responses of university teacher mothers (Phan and Pham 2023). That is not to mention the frequent abrupt switches between online and offline delivery also contributed greatly to the roles conflict and the disruption of determined attempts to reorganise university teacher mothers' work.

The work-family conflicts put considerable pressure on university teacher mothers as the division between work and family seems to be significantly blurred (Phan and Pham 2023, Phan 2023). Time, concentration, and contemplation were hard to find when mothers worked from home. Research has found that female academics, particularly those who have children, reported a disproportionate reduction in time devoted to research compared to men and unmarried or childless women (Deryugina *et al.* 2021). Although fathers' roles are not denied, studies show that teacher fathers tended not to be nearly as responsible for child-rearing as their female colleagues (Dickson 2018). Both men and women experienced substantial increases in childcare and household duties, but women reported heavier burdens (Deryugina *et al.* 2021). Gender disparity, therefore, continued to exist and even aggravate in higher education during the pandemic.

Although there have been efforts to discuss the equity issue in academia, the increasing complexity and demands of childcare and academic work under the pandemic protocols reaffirm the need to continue to explore the literature surrounding the juggling roles of female teaching staff. In addition, according to Maheshwari *et al.* (2021), there is a dearth of research investigating women in higher education in non-Western context, including Vietnam. This article, thus, will be helpful to understand the position of women in Vietnam in the higher education sector during COVID-19 and simultaneously their roles within their domestic space. It does so by focusing on the impact of the global pandemic on nine university teacher mothers in Vietnam, the intricacies and difficulties of their performing work at home, and the ways the Vietnamese university teacher mothers managed the competing demands of care and wage labour amidst the COVID-19 situation. It hopes to raise the visibility and audibility of the care and crisis of mother work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It also aims to throw light on the hidden intricacy and complexity of juggling roles of university teacher mothers in Vietnam who play an essential role in the country's socio-economic development (Hong 2018), thus are socially expected to be 'capable of national affairs and duteous at housework' (Giỏi việc nước đảm việc nhà).

Literature review

Challenges of teacher mothers pre and during the COVID-19

Prior studies have confirmed the gender role differentiation in various national contexts despite development levels and population size. While men devote more time to paid work, women dedicate more time to domestic housework, and childcare is the activity

that requires most of women's work (Donehower *et al.* 2019). Even women who are breadwinners do most of the care work in the family (Chesley 2017). A meta-analysis by Cukrowska-Torzewska and Matysiak (2020) shows a wage gap of around 3.6–3.8% between mothers and comparable childless women, which is explained by their career breaks and the choice of jobs that give them more opportunities to combine their work and childcare duties. Also, the loss of job experience and work productivity, and the discrimination of employers contribute to the wage penalty for motherhood (Budig and England 2001).

In the context of higher education, studies by Maheshwari (2023), Maheshwari *et al.* (2021) have noted that gender equality is not always practised and expected, because women are challenged by various inhibitors in order to climb up the promotion ladder. This phenomena is not unique in any particular country, either in developed or in developing countries, and intensified during the global crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic caused undue disruptions to work and family life for many, but the effects were not equal between men and women. It has been shown in previous literature that the research productivity of women, especially early-career women, was affected more than that of men (Andersen *et al.* 2020, King and Frederickson 2021). The centrality of mothers as care leaders in the family was once again confirmed when they performed most of the household duties, besides working as wage earners (Manzo and Minello 2020). Despite the flexibility of working from home, the division of labour remained highly gendered in many families. Specifically, mothers with young children had to reduce their work hours four to five times more than fathers, and the gender gap in work hours grew by 20–50 per cent (Collins *et al.* 2021).

Time and concentration without concerns for family obligation is the ideal foundation for scientific productivity, which was extremely hard to find in the COVID-19 time with school and childcare facilities closures. Expectations for tenure and promotion, therefore, became unrealistic as the ideal conditions to sustain work-family balance could not be achieved. Having the second child was even described as 'tenure suicide' for university teacher mothers (Vomvoridi-Ivanovic and Ward 2021, p. 45). It is worth mentioning that school closures led to more intense involvement of parents to children's education where schools offered remote or hybrid teaching and the gender gap was widened (Collins *et al.* 2021). These tremendous challenges of work-family conflicts contributed to academic mothers' severe stress and exhaustion, discouraging them to stay in the profession (O'Connell *et al.* 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 caused the switch to online teaching, which took more time in preparation for the new mode of pedagogy and instruction (Myers *et al.* 2020, Phan and Pham 2023). These problems led to tensions in both roles of university teacher mothers: as teachers and as mothers. They seemed to struggle on their own to reorganise their life and keep the work-life balance.

The Vietnamese context

In Vietnam, the COVID-19 pandemic was under good control with prompt and drastic measures of the government. Although schools were open and provided in-person instructions to students most of the time, there were disruptions during

lockdowns and school closure periods. Despite efforts to bring online learning opportunities to children and students, the lack of technological devices and unstable Internet connection, as well as the unfamiliarity of online teaching tools hindered the continuity of education via online platforms. Parents, especially mothers, had to spend more time with their children when staying at home. In most cases, they had no choice but to become teachers of their own children to facilitate their learning and development during this critical time. Even when online classes were available, parents' supervision and guidance was necessary to ensure a safe and stimulating online environment for young children. Women, therefore, bore the brunt of the pandemic with children's education and growth, which is what they are expected to do normally, regardless of the advent of the pandemic (Nguyen 2013, Pham and Phan 2023).

The Coronavirus propelled schools around the world to convert to online delivery; however, this switch was not constant in Vietnam. After a closing period in each pandemic peak, schools and daycares in Vietnam were back to traditional operation. This means teachers were forced to be familiar with both online and offline teaching, and to be flexible and responsive to overnight conversion of mode of instructions when necessary. The challenges to define and redefine the new work-life organisation became much tougher since any new work-life configuration seemed not to work due to abrupt, frequent, and radical changes. Another point worth mentioning was moving to online teaching and learning in Vietnam involved synchronous classes, meaning that teachers and students met at the same time virtually. Many classes of young children were required to be conducted in the evening when parents were at home after work so that they were available for assistance with technological manoeuvres. As noted above, parents of any profession, including teacher parents, were expected to become the substitute or even the primary teachers for their children during the critical time. This means that the workload for academic parents and mothers in particular were multiplied because their teaching, research and administrative duties did not stop.

Although there are a number of studies on the hardships of academic motherhood in the COVID-19, they are mostly autoethnographies of mothers in the U.S. and European countries (for example Guy and Arthur 2020). The picture in developing countries like Vietnam remains murky and unexplored. Meanwhile, the distinctive features of the COVID-19 management, culture, and education system in Vietnam may bring new insights into the experiences and strategies of university teacher mothers, which hopes to mitigate the negative effects and reduce the persistent gender gap. As the Coronavirus pandemic represents a unique situation, which has only limited historical precursors in the world and in Vietnam, this study hopes to be among the first to explore the issue of roles navigation among Vietnamese university teacher mothers.

Theoretical approach

The current study follows the feminist perspective, which is 'primarily concerned with and focused on women's experiences and accounts of being gendered subjects within

society' (Kiguwa 2019, p. 223). It is crucial to note that to bring about social change for women involves the understanding of gender and socio-political framings of the society (Hines 2015). The interconnections in the feminist approach helps to grasp more nuances of meaning in women's lived experiences. Although feminist research is diverse in their emphasis and method, it generally challenges the dualistic thinking, dividing the world into dichotomous, opposing variables. Instead, gender roles are socially and culturally constructed, and therefore dynamic (Ferguson 2017). As a core principle, the focus on women's experiences and voices embodies the very essence of feminist research and practice. In this study, the university teacher mothers' relationships are interwoven, with infusing power in their family, workplace, and the community. Feminist perspective, therefore, allows us to dig into the diversity of women's experiences, establish interconnections of relationships, and produce new insights into social change.

Feminist research is reflexive in nature and practice. It is not easy to explore, understand, and interpret nuances and complexities in women's experiences, thus requiring the active participation of researchers in a continuous process of reflexivity. This alerts us possible biases in feminist research to minimise subjectivity, and to bring rich and deep details and understandings about the topic. In this study, the first author is an academic mother, enabling her to have a deep empathy with other teacher mothers and share authentic experiences with them. However, any experiences among teacher mothers participating in this study are not taken for granted, but are reported and interpreted truthfully.

Methodology

This paper derives from a larger project on teacher emotions whilst migrating to online teaching during the global health crisis conducted in 2020 and 2021 (see more Pham and Phan 2022, 2023, Phan and Pham 2023). In this study, in-depth interviews were adopted to explore the experiences and responses of academic mothers in the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were designed to be conversational in nature and covered a range of subjects including challenges in motherhood performance during social distancing periods and with children's home schooling, changes in household organisation while working/teaching from home, available resources and strategies to manage a new work-life situation. We also asked participants questions about their sources of emotional support. Due to the social distancing protocol at the time this study was conducted, all interviews were carried out online.

The study used purposive sampling to recruit participants (Merriam 2009). We deliberately chose nine university teacher mothers who had over ten years of teaching experience and had different numbers of children under 15 years old. The reason is that, from our observation prior to conducting this study, children under 15 tended to require more care and assistance from mothers when they had to stay at home and their study was shifted to online platforms. Before the interview started, the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and that the interview would be recorded. Verbal informed consent was also given at this point, followed by a written consent form sent by the participants via emails. The participants were encouraged to only talk about what they felt comfortable with and they could stop whenever they wanted without any repercussions. The

Demographic details of the participants.

Participant	Teaching experience	Number of children	Qualification level	Length of interview
Mai	Over 20 years	2	PhD	57 minutes
Duong	11 years	1	MA	60 minutes
Hoa	14 years	2	MA	70 minutes
Binh	10 years	1	MA	40 minutes
Thu	11 years	1	MA	60 minutes
An	11 years	3	MA	44 minutes
Minh	11 years	2	MA	45 minutes
Lan	11 years	3	MA	39 minutes

interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, recorded, transcribed and translated by the authors. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. Each interview lasted from 40 minutes to over an hour. Table 1 provides demographic details of the participants.

We decided to not use interview analysis software because of the following reasons. First, the number of the interview was small enough for us to do manual coding. Second, as we wanted to be reflexive, manual coding helped us to easily reflect and keep track of our own thoughts and interactions when reading and re-reading the transcripts. Third, by doing manual coding, we found it easier to discuss and reach a consensus.

A six-phase thematic analysis (Clarke *et al*. 2015) was conducted to uncover the key themes. We started by independently coded a small sample of data before discussing together to establish preliminary codes. Our coding process was guided by the theoretical bearings and the literature review (the feminist approach), meaning that we particularly focused on the participants' experiences and emotions, tracing the relation between such experiences and emotions and the society expectations of a Vietnamese woman's role, and the women's subjective understanding of their gendered role. For example, we focused on the tensions and reorganisation of the university teacher mothers' household life as a result of the work-from-home protocol, or the gendered roles that they were primarily responsible for. We also paid particular attention to the gendered power dynamic within the domestic space of the female teachers through their relationships and interactions with children, spouses and other family members, as well as their perceived of power hierarchy in their institution. We then coded the remaining data, adjusting the codes and categories to make sure we had the same interpretation, and refining themes in the iterative process. After all the key themes were collated, we again returned to the data to confirm our mutual interpretation. In what follows, pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Results and discussion

This section delineates the two main themes drawn out from analysis: reorganisation of work-life structure, and family and institutional support.

Reorganizing the work-life structure

The participants described how their work-life structure was reorganised in order to cope with the new situation. This theme included four sub-themes: (i) multiple 'new' hats to

wear; (ii) diminishing boundaries between life and work; (iii) teaching 'from' home and teaching 'at' home; and (iv) a mixture of mother guilt and satisfaction.

The participants had to adapt to the new work situation, acquire new skills, and develop new work routines as the work routines were now compounded by their mothering practices during COVID. In the new context, the university teacher mothers' workload increased significantly, with workload encompassing both the quantitative meaning (the number of tasks and the limited time to complete the tasks), and the qualitative meaning (the level of difficulty of tasks). There was a new organisation of time and priorities of all university teacher mothers in the study, whose schedule totally depended on their children's. Prior to the global health crisis, when their children spent most of the time at school, the mothers admitted that they had a great joy, leaving the parenting-self behind to spend time for themselves and focus on their work. In contrast, now during the pandemic, being a mother meant they had to perform multiple roles in their family: a household manager, a teacher, a chef, a nurse, and a conflict resolver. Mai listed her roles:

> a housekeeper, supervisor, I need to supervise what they do at what time. A nutritionist, to plan what they eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And a doctor when they are sick. I have no time or quiet moments for myself. Being home with my kids all the time sounded terribly depressing to me.

Similar to Mai, other participants reported that had to teach their children, create activities for them, supervise and provide technical support when their children studied online, break up fights, and clean up after them. When the mothers finally had some time for themselves, it was already late at night and they felt exhausted. Being a stay-at-home mother drained them, and having a limited amount of time to recharge after a long day became a luxury that they could not afford.

The COVID-19 home confinement also had negative effects on the participants' well-being, mood, and feelings (Phan and Pham 2023). Working with a computer all day and lacking social interaction outside their family caused Mai's emotional claustrophobia and exhaustion. She understood that her children, similar to her, wanted and needed peer contacts. Social distancing meant that the children could only turn to their mother for physical interactions and communication. Therefore, they asked her lots of questions, even though they knew the answers. Mai, similar to other mothers in this study, craved for going out, taking a deep breath of fresh air, and talking to colleagues, which she described was to make her 'feel alive'. Working in a cramped condition for a long time during the pandemic easily led to stress, anxiety, grief, and worry, not to mention deleterious physical health problems due to an increased sedentary lifestyle (Ashwin *et al.* 2022). Duong even commented, 'It is a nightmare that I have to dream everyday'.

Unlike the beginning of the pandemic, Hoa felt shocked because of the startling transformation that she thought she definitely could not handle. 'I told my husband that I would go to the psychiatric hospital if the lockdown was long. I could not endure it anymore'. The sudden change led to her utter confusion and inability to redefine her life organisation, causing a dysfunctional relationship with her children, her family members, and her work. She had never played the role as a primary school teacher to teach her

son spelling, writing and doing simple calculations. The learning environment at home, undoubtedly, was far different from that at school. 'They asked millions of questions, and I had to persuade them, explain to them, even scold them. Everything was driving me crazy. But I could not leave them alone. Whatever they do, I have to watch them to ensure their safety', Hoa explained. Echoing previous studies (for instance Rider *et al.* 2021, Ashwin *et al.* 2022), this article demonstrates how disruptions to routines amplified family stressors and social isolation, leading to the university teacher mothers' feeling exhausted and not in control. It also shows the increasing importance of the teacher mothers' roles within the domestic space when social interactions were limited and prohibited. Their task was not only to manage and organise the family routines in response to the new situation, but also to operate it as effectively as usual.

Working from home meant that physical boundaries between working life and private life vanished and multi-tasking was expected from academic mothers. Syrek *et al.* (2011) define the work-nonwork balance as the fit between a person's desired integration of various roles in different life domains and the actual combination of these roles. Now as a consequence of the social distancing protocol, the balance of multiple identities performance of university teacher mothers was seriously distorted.

As the job moved from office to home, the previous clear-cut boundaries between workplace and home before COVID-19 happened now got blurred. Binh complained about the overuse and abuse of online platforms for work purposes. Teaching and learning activities were shifted to the digital environment, so were staff meetings and other work engagements. The problem, according to Binh, was that since teachers did not have to physically travel and worked from home, it was often assumed that teachers would have 'more free time', and everything was more convenient and comfortable for them at home. Binh specified her frustration over the 'going online' work routines:

> There seemed no boundary between work and home. I was required to attend a staff meeting in the evening when I was supposed to have a rest after a day teaching and spend time with my family. Sometimes I was given tasks late in the evening that required urgent attention.

Minh had a similar observation, stating that onsite meetings seemed to save more time for teachers because the meetings would be wrapped up before lunch time. Online meetings, in contrast, often took longer than expected, which could affect her personal life organisation (for instance meal preparation for children). Duong, another teacher, recalled one time when a staff meeting was scheduled at nine in the evening and did not end until late at night, which made her husband feel uncomfortable. As the office-home boundaries seemed to be erased, the participants were dragged into a messy, unstructured mixture of work and life that consequently affected their physical and mental health, and their family routine. In other studies, researchers have mentioned the diminishing boundary between life and work as a negative impact on people's lives (Rider *et al.* 2021, Phan and Pham 2023). In this article, however, we argue that the pandemic increased the vulnerability of women at work, subjecting them to another layer of oppression from the work arrangements on virtual platforms which compounded their engagement with professional activities by offering both benefits and downsides.

The COVID-19 pandemic required teachers and students in Vietnam to respond to an unprecedented challenge: transition rapidly at mid-semester from their traditional face-to-face contact to synchronous virtual classrooms. The virtual classroom became the inevitable educational meeting grounds. Working from home, nonetheless, is never the same as working within a school or office environment (DeCoito and Estaiteyeh 2022, Phan and Pham 2023). Time, attention, and concentration were not for the lessons or students only, but were divided for children and other household worries. Lan said, 'I want to appear professional in front of the students, so I have to force my kids to leave my room. But sometimes, they suddenly rushed into the room and interrupted my teaching'. Ongoing negotiations with their children over the supply of snacks and screen time became common strategies so that the mothers could concentrate on their teaching. Furthermore, the mothers in our study mostly worked when their children were sleeping: at dawn, at night, and during the post-lunch nap. They had to take advantage of any quiet time to prepare lesson plans, mark papers, and teach. Binh and Duong, for example, had to wake up at five in the morning, worked for two hours until seven when their children would wake up and have their morning routine. At night, after putting the children to sleep, they continued their work from ten in the evening until work was finished, which might end at around two in the next morning.

Maintaining a degree of normalcy and efficiency at work required lots of professional efforts and personal life reorganisation from the university teacher mothers. The change in their daily routines also depended on their reordering of priorities. Since their children spent all their day at home, the working mothers had to make sure their children's needs were met before their own. Duong said:

> My son comes first in terms of priority, followed by my teaching schedules, then my moonlighting classes or the translation jobs which contribute to my income. I no longer have time for myself, for exercise or for pleasure [. . .] I even had to cut down on professional development activities like attending workshops or seminars because time didn't allow.

It should be noted that moonlighting, or tutoring extra classes in the evening, is common for English teachers in Vietnam since the salary makes it hard for them to make ends meet (Le 2015). At the same time, many of the participants took the full-time responsibility of helping their children with school work. Duong, for instance, invested lots of time and energy in preparing for her son's transition from kindergarten to primary school. Other participants further reported how hard it was to both entertain and teach their children. Although they tried to be creative in designing activities and educational materials, they admitted that it was not an easy task. It took time to search for appropriate resources and required certain skills, qualities and knowledge that only kindergarten teachers had. We, then, concur with Lewis (2020) that 'school closures and household isolation are moving the work of caring for children from the paid economy – nurseries, schools, babysitters – to the unpaid one' (n.p.) and mothers tended to bear the much larger part of the new burden.

While the university teacher mothers had to deal with their teaching and professional work being shifted online, they also struggled with a dilemma: simultaneously having mother guilt and mother-children increasing bonding. The participant mothers agreed that although their care responsibilities multiplied when their children stayed at home, they had more time to teach, learn and play with them, which made mother-children interactions increase in both quantity and quality. Minh was one among the participants who showed the most satisfaction with the new configuration of mothering practices. Minh said:

> I actually felt happy because now I know better what my son is learning at school and I can follow his progress closely. I can prepare meals for him, like breakfast, which I couldn't do before the COVID time because previously, in the morning he often rushed to school and I rushed to work. He could only have a quick, easy-made breakfast. Now as we both stay at home, I can take care of him better and give him more choices for breakfast, for example.

Binh came up with projects that she and her daughter could do together, such as making video diaries. Duong also happily shared in the interview that her son really enjoyed spending time with her and he often told his cousins what games they played together. The findings in our study share similarities with the research by Benzeval *et al.* (2020) that parents report an improvement of the relationship with their children during lockdown periods. The mothers not only took better care of their children but also became friends, play-mates, and study-mates of their children, rather than merely being substitute teachers.

However, the stress that came with increasing workload, limited social interactions, and shuffled routines also took a toll on the mother-children relationship. The participants noticed the rising frequency of their nagging and complaining of their children. 'I am turning into a tiger mom', said Binh. Losing patience with children was common among the university teacher mothers, so were promises that failed to be delivered. Binh explained:

> I planned to teach my daughter English every day, but then I had meetings in the evening for three days consecutively. I couldn't teach her at all. Or our mother-daughter projects like creating V-logs together. As I was occupied with work, the project just stopped. My daughter asked me why we stopped the project. I had to apologize to her and tell her we would continue once I completed my work.

The findings in this study highlight the juggling roles of the participant mothers who all prioritised their childcare responsibilities and agreed that the bonding between mothers and children was stronger due to increased time and interactions together. They were able to adapt to the new situation and worked out the strategies to balance their work life, although it took them some time to reorganise their household duties, work responsibilities and day structure. However, their teaching and other professional work, and the blurring boundaries between home and work did leave them in dissatisfaction, impatience and stress. The analysis shows the teacher mothers internalised the expectations from cultural traditions and customs to perform family responsibilities, manage the household core tasks, and contribute to family total income. Compared with the pre-COVID situation, such expectations were not less (Pham and Phan 2023). In other words, it was not because of the pandemic that the social expectations of a woman'

responsibilities increased. The problem lies in the fact that the space and time for women to manage all the tasks compressed to the extent that it made them constantly doubt their maternal performance, feeling guilty, and trying harder to fulfil their role. Our argument is supported by Nguyen's (2013) suggestion that the Confucian impacts on Vietnamese culture renders stereotypical standards of a woman including being dutiful wives, mothers and homemakers.

Family and institutional support

In this section, we presented the support offered to the university teacher mothers categorised into two sources: family and institution.

Family support

The support that many university teacher mothers received during the pandemic was dishearteningly limited. Hoa's husband was "jealous of" her stay-at-home when he had to go to work every day. The emotionally distant husband added into the struggles and disappointments, which made her feel lost and completely alone. Although Hoa was offered support from her parents, she refused it because 'grandparents tend to over-indulge the kids and spoil them. The way they teach the kids is not what I want'. Hoa, henceforth, struggled with managing her work, two young children, and the household duties all by herself. In other cases, although the husbands understood their wives' challenges, they had to go to work all day and could not share the household burdens or offer meaningful support. All duties such as feeding, bathing, caring, and teaching children at home awaited the mothers. Some other mothers reported living with their parents or parents-in-law, and the grandparents' help in child care was critical in this pandemic situation. However, Binh experienced tensions between herself and her parents, because 'I sometimes was not happy with my parents because of the way they taught my daughter or talked to her. It didn't happen frequently, but it did sometimes, and I got furious', Binh recalled in the interview.

In addition, the belief in the conventional gender roles: men as the breadwinner and women as the caregiver still persists in some participants (Nguyen 2013, Phan and Pham 2021). When being asked whether she received support from her husband, Thu said that 'No, no, I need to take care of the children; my husband earns money, he is the breadwinner. After work, he plays chess and I need to deal with the kids'. Gendered family role assumption can have harmful effects on women's work, reinforcing the motherhood penalty (Bear and Glick 2016, Phan and Pham 2023). However, research shows that the compliance with this identity of traditional mothers improves their well-being (Nguyen 2013, Brown and Roberts 2014), and Thu seemed to be satisfied with this responsibility allocation. Similarly, An and Duong were both aware that they were better with playing with and teaching their children than their husbands, which made them feel content with the increasing responsibilities of childcare. An explained 'I am better at teaching and taking care of the kids, my husband was not as patient as me'. Although they did receive help from their spouses, they were still the primary caregivers because the fathers did not work from home due to their professional requirements. In this regard, the women internalised their primary responsibility as a homemaker who is responsible

for taking care of the family and household work (Yukongdi and Bension 2005). In fact, the unpaid childcare provision is done more often by women than men during lockdowns (United Nations 2020), not only because of the persistence of traditional gender roles but also because of the structure of women's economic participation (Power 2020). This argument is supported by Thu's emphasis on her husband's role as the main financial provider while hers as the main carer. Although this household division of responsibility is not unusual in multiple Asian societies including Japan, Singapore, China, South Korea, Thailand or India as systhesíed by Maheshwari *et al.* (2021), it is still worth noting that in Vietnam, women have been considered essential part of the labour force, and their presence in leadership roles has significantly increased over the years (Phan and Pham 2023). As yet, being devoted wives and mothers is still considered by many Vietnamese women, including participants in this study, most important and the core identity according to the Confucian moral values (Nguyen 2013, Phan and Pham 2021).

Institutional support

The toll COVID-19 took on the university teacher mothers' mental and physical health comes as no surprise. It was the result of increased stress due to the necessity to reconcile child care and schooling with remote work and new teaching and professional practices. However, the participants reported that they received little support from their institutions, regarding their teaching workload and well-being.

The class time and duration was required the same as normal, which meant they had to start from seven am or one pm, and each class lasted three to four hours. This rigid schedule was not only ineffective for the teaching and learning process but also incompatible with the participants' roles as mothers. Although the institution offered teachers workshops and training to use online platforms for teaching, the participants reported that other challenges that might influence their teaching performance went unacknowledged, such as more preparation time, limited interactions with students and colleagues, and disrupted work routines because of family commitments. Duong, for instance, took an example of one particular course that the conversion to online learning took lots of her time and efforts to change her teaching approach as well as pedagogical activities in order to maintain teacher-student interactions and students' engagement. 'It took me a year to re-design the course', Duong admitted. From what the teachers shared in the interviews, it was evident that the institutional supports mostly centred around the technological use of the new platforms and less on in-depth pedagogical issues springing from the conversion to the new mode of delivery.

Simultaneously, little attention from the institution was paid to the juggling roles of female teachers with children. While the disruption to teaching and learning resulting from the pandemic was obvious, the disruption stemming from the reorganisation of female teachers' personal lives were not taken into account. We are aware that it is not an easy task for institution leaders to respond to the new situation in a way that could satisfy all stakeholders. Nonetheless, teachers' mental health is important and their increasing workload should not be ignored (Cohen-Fraade and Donahue 2022, Nabe-Nielsen *et al.* 2022). We hence offer some recommendations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study proposes the following recommendations. First, it is time for institutions to rethink the inflexible regulations that they are likely to cling to. The more effective and engaging learning model would be the balance between synchronous and asynchronous instructions with inquiry-based learning to reduce the teacher's time and benefit the students (Zhao and Watterston 2021). The teachers should be given autonomy to adjust the curriculum, lesson plans, and their time allocation (Collie 2021). Second, the participants also mentioned difficulties in allotting time for different tasks including teaching, providing feedback to students remotely, answering students' emails, and filling administrative reports. The pandemic has highlighted the need for more teacher-student interactions, so the teachers had to spend more time counselling students and curating learning resources. Therefore, it is critical for institutions and governments to acknowledge these challenges and provide support systems for the teachers. Providing socioemotional support for teachers and focusing on what is pedagogically effective is crucial to ensure teacher wellbeing and avoid teacher burnout. We also argue that the boundaries between work and life should be respected in a way that makes teachers feel more empowered and comfortable rather than privacy-violated.

What was most noticeable in the findings of this study is the invisible and unpaid work of the university teacher mothers, or the care economy (Power 2020, Pham and Phan 2023), that was reinforced by the new situation of the health crisis. The emotional labour of the university teacher mothers was also taken for granted and went unnoticed and undervalued as they had to tend to the emotional well-being of their children during the critical time. At the same time, they had almost no time for themselves and this fact might not be recognised by either their family members or the institution because of the deep-rooted social customs and gendered roles in Vietnam (Nguyen 2013, Phan and Pham 2021). The gendered consequences of the pandemic that can be predicted from this study is that Vietnamese female teachers continue to be expected to do the majority of care-work at home but are at a greater risk of losing their additional income from their moonlighting classes while being subjected to the scrutiny of students, parents and institutions. In that sense, although female teachers received family and institutional support, it does not mean that their challenges diminished. This finding echoes what Maheshwari *et al.* (2021) and Maheshwari (2023) note in their review of female leaders in Vietnamese higher education. While women leadership is not the focus of the current study, the findings can potentially contribute to this area of literature, delineating obstacles that hamper women teachers from shouldering senior management roles.

Conclusion

Forced conversion to online teaching, restricted mobility and prohibited gatherings, as well as the closure of educational institutions at all levels imposed multiplied burdens on professional working mothers. University teacher mothers learned to embrace the new teaching practices in ways that upheld the values of being a dedicated mother while retaining efficiency and resilience at work. Nonetheless, it was no doubt stressful and overwhelming for them as demonstrated in the findings. On the one hand, the virtual classroom has become the inevitable educational meeting ground whereby teachers and

students tried to make the best of an unprecedented situation. On the other hand, it involved more efforts of university teacher mothers investing in their own children's real-time learning via online platforms than previously. While as teachers, they were tasked with developing strategies and approaches to meet their students' needs through the virtual classroom, as mothers, they were also tasked with providing assistance for and supervision of their children during their distance learning sessions. We argue that the new situation provided a unique opportunity for university teacher mothers to re-imagine their teaching practices and maternity performances in an interlacing way that they might not hitherto have considered.

The findings in our study highlight how resilient the university teacher mothers were with constant changes in their personal and professional lives due to COVID-19. Working from home for university teacher mothers brought about both increased stress from balancing paid work and family care, and increased satisfaction of fulfilling maternity performances. Work satisfaction, in this case, was also badly influenced, though at varying degrees to each teacher. The flow of work and work routines of the teachers were also disrupted (Pham and Phan 2023). Despite the stress, difficulties and multiplied responsibilities they had to bear, the participants still managed to reorganise their life in a way that guaranteed there would not be too much negative impact on their children and family well-being. Although none of the participants were satisfied with the new life structure, they were all well adapted and felt optimistic about the new normal such as having more time for family care and less commuting to work, and most importantly, better bonding with their children.

We fully acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic had negative, potentially severe, consequences for people of all groups of all walks of life regardless of marital status, genders, occupations, with or without children. This article is not meant to suggest that all teacher mothers shared the same experiences, or the toll of this crisis was restricted to female teachers with children alone. Neither do we intend to negate the support from husbands or male partners of teacher mothers, or suggest that male teachers had no or less burden caused by the global health crisis. However, we focus on university teacher mothers in this study because the impacts of COVID-19 within the higher education system elsewhere in the globe have been shown to be disproportionately greater on mothers (Andersen *et al.* 2020, King and Frederickson 2021). Our study thus highlights the vulnerabilities of university teacher mothers who juggled personal needs and child-care while trying to keep a good performance in their profession and beyond in the changing circumstance.

Disclosure statement

ORCID

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9979-1321
Linh Thi Thuy Pham 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1341-2680

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