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Navigating COVID-19: Female Ph.D. Students Coping with Family, Academic, and Job Duties

By Aizhan Shomotova¹, Tatiana Karabchuk²

Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, many governments introduced lockdown measures in which people were expected to work and study from their homes. Schools, daycares, and extracurricular programs were temporarily closed. All students from primary to the post-graduate level were transferred to online learning. This shift added a tremendous burden and additional workload for parents who were supposed to combine their own work and supervision of the online studies of their children from home. Recent research confirmed that women took more responsibilities for household chores and care of children during the pandemic. We conducted a study on female doctoral students because women in this demographic tend to have families by that age, pursue their graduate studies, and are often involved in full-time and part-time jobs to contribute to their family income. We suggest that the gender equality sustainable development goal can be achieved through doctoral education, opportunities for combining academic careers with family responsibilities to women; and the support of women in the knowledge-based economy. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore female Ph.D. students' lived experiences under the pressure of the pandemic and investigate the main strategies of coping with the multiple duties they had. This case study applies a qualitative methodology, interpretative phenomenological approach. The data source is the in-depth semi-structured interviews with six female Ph.D. students who comprised a homogenous and purposeful sample as they shared the same experience.

Keywords: Doctoral studies, Ph.D. students, Motherhood, Parenting, Female, Work-family balance, Coping strategies, COVID-19

Introduction

The pandemic outbreak of COVID-19, which began in late 2019, rapidly evolved into an international emergency affecting the economy, education, healthcare, and social development worldwide. The closure of schools and universities has affected more than 1.4 billion children in 136 countries to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Ng, 2020). These closures increased the workload for parents, who were forced to create a suitable learning environment at home by providing their children with Internet services and electronic devices like computers, tablets, or smartphones (Sebugwaawo, 2020).

In March 2020, in response to the outbreak, the UAE government initiated a series of emergency management mechanisms, including social distancing, such as the lockdown of cities and shutting down all educational institutions (Ng, 2020). Initially, the UAE's Ministry of Education (MOE) closed schools and universities across the country for one month, and e-learning was introduced; later the online learning was extended until February 2021 with the optional choice for schools to re-open onsite if they could provide the safety conditions ("Coronavirus: UAE schools," 2020; Ng, 2020; Rasheed, 2020). From August 2021, all schools and universities

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were officially announced to be re-opened for physical onsite attendance but with options for hybrid modes.

For more than a year, most students in the UAE were studying from home. Moreover, with schools, daycares, and extracurricular programs closed, the need to homeschool or keep children occupied has added significantly to workloads in a way that most parents were not prepared for. In addition, a cross-national survey of 18 countries proved that women were the ones to take on more responsibilities for household chores and care of children than men during the pandemic (Azcona, Bhatt, and Love, 2020).

This research paper discusses one of the most challenging situations for women who combined family responsibilities with doctoral studies and full/part-time jobs under lockdown for almost one and half years in the UAE. It is important to note that Ph.D. studies usually overlap with the life-curve period when women start their families. Notably, in the UAE, in 1995, 45% of women got married between 20 and 25, while 8% at the age of 15-19 (Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005). So, by the age of doing their doctoral studies (24+), female students might have two or more children.

Literature provides a thorough discussion on different strategies to cope with multiple duties for females in general, but not that much in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown and online schooling. Moreover, previous literature does not cover the work-life balance challenges for women in academia in the UAE or Gulf region. Therefore, this study sheds light on the Emirati female doctoral students' multiple daily roles (mother, doctoral student, and employee) and adds to the ongoing discussions of women's life experiences coping with family, studies, and work under the COVID-19 pandemic.

Homeschooling and care for young children can sometimes require 24 hours of assistance. The nanny/maid option was not always available due to the restrictions on receiving visitors at home under pandemic regulations and lack of family income in some cases. Sharing childcare responsibilities with husbands was one of the solutions. The common, widespread practice of involving grandparents in babysitting was also impossible due to the COVID-19 lockdown regulations on older people's isolation. In general, time pressure or uncertainty during doctoral studies can decrease Ph.D. students' well-being and performance (Cornwall et al., 2018; Corcelles et al., 2019). The pressure to cope with multiple tasks was intense during the lockdown for female doctoral students, which motivated us to study this issue from women's perspectives.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study is to explore the life experiences and daily routine under the COVID-19 lockdown of female doctoral students, who combined their studies with full/part-time jobs and family responsibilities, having two or more children. Moreover, the qualitative interviews enabled us to investigate the strategies practiced by the female doctoral students coping with the multiple tasks, duties, and needs.

The results of this research have substantial policy implications. First, this research is vital to achieving gender equality sustainable development goals in doctoral education. Second, it is crucial to understand how to provide more opportunities to women to combine their academic careers and family responsibilities to stimulate fertility rates. Third, according to the current programs and country mission of female empowerment, women are essential unlocked human potential and resource power that could endorse knowledge-based economic development.

Women's Work-life Balance in Academia

Previous studies showed that women are under-represented in research (Wright, 1997; Bowl, 2003). Despite increasing numbers of women acquiring postgraduate degrees (Stroude et

al., 2015), most females find the long-term journey of doctorate studies very challenging. The most common reason is high stress from balancing home and academic life as young women are torn between their roles as a wife/mother and a doctoral student (Brown and Watson, 2010; Fathima et al., 2020). The tension and conflicts that arise from this process might be the key reasons why many women choose to drop doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Women in academia experienced more exhaustion and family-related challenges than male academics which leads to slower progression and fewer career achievements (Fox et al., 2011; Beddoes & Pawley, 2013; Huppatz et al., 2019; McAlpine et al., 2020; Ren & Caudle, 2020). Furthermore, women in academia faced higher work pressure from publication demands (Li & Shen, 2020).

Despite that, men in academia were generally seen to take a lesser parenting role than women (Harris et al., 2019). Those men who shared childcare and domestic work with their partners reported that having children delayed their research career progression (Baker, 2016). Junior male tenure-track faculty with children believed that faculty mothers are disadvantaged to a greater extent than faculty fathers (Reddick et al., 2012).

In addition, when a female Ph.D. student cannot cope with her doctoral studies, family and friends often advise them to quit, saying that their life should be focused on family and the home (Carter et al., 2013). Work-life balance was a statistically significant predictor of abandoning doctoral studies for women with small children, especially for mothers who try to provide maximum support for their children's needs (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004; McAlpine et al., 2020).

Financial support from family, household management, safe childcare facilities, flexible work timings to accommodate family duties, and support from research co-workers can help women scientists achieve work-life balance (Boussemart, 2016, Fathima et al., 2020). Moreover, female scholars use behavioral, interpersonal, and intrapersonal strategies (Ren and Caudle, 2016) as well as they try to engage themselves in recreational activities, relaxation, hobbies, and exercise to cope with work-life conflict pressure (Fathima et al., 2020; Cornwall et al., 2019). Very often to balance family and doctoral studies, mothers take their children to daycare (Maunula, 2017).

This qualitative study is critical to highlight women's struggles in academia. As the literature review discussed above, women are more disadvantaged than men in terms of work-life balance (Wilson, 2003; Morrison et al., 2011; Beddoes & Pawley, 2013; Huppatz et al., 2019; McAlpine et al., 2020; Ren & Caudle, 2020). With the COVID-19 outbreak this balance became even more challenging to maintain. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, the Ph.D. parents were "double-locked" with multiple burdens of new responsibilities without any childcare support, especially when he/she is the only caregiver in the household (Abdellatif and Gatto, 2020).

Despite dozens of publications on female work-life balance in academia, there are no papers about female doctoral students coping with work-study-family conflict under the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in the UAE. Therefore, this qualitative study sheds lights on the described gender social challenges and strategies practiced by the female doctoral students to cope with the multiple tasks and needs.

Methodology

Study Design

The selected data collection and analysis method is the interpretative phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA provides more in-depth data collection than the general inductive approach (Alase, 2017). This method allowed the participants to discuss their personal lives and coping strategies with multiple duties and demands within the COVID-19 context, which

could be treated as a 'lived' experience of a "critical crossroad" that significantly affected a participant's life (McCormack and Joseph, 2018).

This study is based on the in-depth semi-structured interviews that were conducted via the online communication program "Zoom". The interviews were designed to explore perceptions of the 'lived' experiences from an empathetic standpoint (Fontana & Frey, 2008). This type of interview facilitates a space in which participants feel comfortable considering aspects of their lives (Spiers, & Smith, 2019). Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting 'lived' experiences with sensitive details (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005) as they are easily managed, allowing a rapport to be developed and giving participants the space to think, speak, and be heard (Smiths et al., 2009).

Data Collection Process

Interviews were run in English and were audio/video-recorded in Zoom, then transcribed using Otter.ai. Interviews lasted between 35 to 60 mins and were collected in November-December 2020. Before the interview, the researchers showed the consent form on the shared screen in the online Zoom meeting, informed and explained to participants of the study what to expect from the interview and what likely outcomes of data analysis might be, particularly, the inclusion of verbatim extracts in published reports. The participants read the informed consent and signed it before the interview was collected. Ethical approval was obtained from Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee at the UAE University. To protect anonymity, the participants' names were coded and only those characteristics were listed that are relevant to the nature of the study. The interview consisted of open-ended questions on the interviewees' demographics, job-related, family-related, and doctoral study-related questions.

Participants' Selection Criteria

IPA advocates purposive homogeneous sampling, meaning that groups of participants should be deliberately selected and have meaningful features in common, such as age, gender, or socioeconomic status, etc. (Smith et al., 2009). The selected interviewees fit these IPA criteria as all six female participants are in their 30s, of the same nationality, and are doctoral students at the same college at one university in the UAE. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the participants. The participants openly shared their personal experiences and replied to the questions in detail.

Table 1: Interviewees' Background

#	Participants' coded names	Age	Family status and number of children and their ages	Nationality	PhD Year in	Type of job, year of working experience	Husband's type of job and mode of work during pandemic outbreak	Number of nannies and housemaids
1	Latifa	35	Married, 4 children (ages: 1, 4, 9, 11).	Emirati, Al Ain	second year	Full-time	Full-time, online.	1 nanny, 1 cook

2	Mariam	30	Married, 2 children (twins 5 years)	Emirati, RAK	second year	Full-time	Full-time, online.	1 housemaid
3	Leila	34	Married, 3 children (ages: 1.5, 5, 8).	Emirati, Sharjah	second year	RA Part-time	Full-time, online from March- May, then onsite.	2 housemaids (nannies)
4	Hind	35	Married, 4 children (ages: 3, 7, 10, 15).	Emirati, Fujairah	second year	Full-time	Full-time, army onsite.	1 housemaid and 1 driver
5	Aisha	39	Married, 5 children (ages: 3, 4, 10, 15, 16).	Emirati, Al Ain	third year	Full-time	Full-time, army onsite.	2 nannies, one cook, one driver
6	Fatima	30	Married, 3 children (ages: 3, 7, 9).	Emirati, Abu Dhabi	fourth year	Full-time	Full-time, online	1 nanny and 1 housemaid.

Authors' Personal Reflexivity

The authors strictly followed the selected IPA approach data collection and data analysis steps (Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers must be reflexive: they must consider the possible impact of their own experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions on the research process (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

Both authors are females in academia from the same higher education institution as the participants: a Ph.D. student and an associate professor. Both authors of the article have children and faced similar work-family challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, as the described participants' experiences were clear and understandable, what is required by the IPA research approach (engaging in a double hermeneutic) is to provide transparent and objective interpretations of the data collected and to analyze it with minimal bias (Smith et al., 2009). The familiarity with participants in person allowed the authors to be fully engaged during the interviews.

Analytical Strategy (IPA steps) and Data Coding Procedures

The essential part of the qualitative research process is data coding procedures (Alase, 2017). The data analysis of the IPA is described as an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The authors follow Smith et al. (2009) and Alase (2017) to implement qualitative analysis of the IPA interviews.

First, interview transcripts of the individual cases were read several times with line-by-line analysis (i.e., coding) of each participant's experiential cases, concerns, and perceptions (Larkin et al., 2006). At the same time, with an idiographic focus, emergent patterns were identified in single cases, and the notes of potential themes were made across multiple cases. Second, the themes were interpreted in detail to establish interrelationships between them and then organized to develop

meaningful statements that made sense of the participants' experiences. Last, the table of the final structure of subordinate themes was developed to illustrate the relationship between themes.

The initial analysis sought to develop an understanding of the females' experience during first months of lockdown of the pandemic outbreak and their coping strategies. The following topics were outlined: (1) ranking of family, job, and doctoral study related tasks (2) the first two weeks of experience of balancing study, work, and family life under lockdown context; (3) daily routine during the lockdown; (4) emotional state about participants' life with multiple duties during pandemic; and (5) individual coping strategies with multitasking.

The authors identified super-ordinate themes of coping strategies with multitasking that have few variations of sub-themes across the interviews' transcripts. After identifying recurrent themes, Table 2 below visually shows the interconnections between the recurrent group themes.

Table 2: Super-ordinate Themes, Sub-themes, and Contributing Participants

<i>Super-ordinate theme</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	Contributing participants					
		Latifa (35 years old)	Mariam (30 years old)	Hind (35 years old)	Leila (34 years old)	Fatima (30 years old)	Aisha (39 years old)
<i>Time management</i>	Rearranging the schedule/timetable	V		V	V		
	Planning every hour of the day in the morning	V		V			V
	Using sticky notes around the house	V		V			
	Managing and planning time for others (nannies and children)	V		V			V
	Sleeping shorter hours and working at nights when kids are asleep			V	V	V	
<i>Task management</i>	Making a to-do-list and following up	V					V
	Prioritization of the tasks	V			V		V
	Focusing on one task				V	V	
<i>Emotional support and help from the others</i>	Talking to positive people			V			V
	Nanny's help	V			V		V

	Husbands' help	V	V	V	V	V	V
	Mothers' help	V		V	V		V
	Teachers' support and understanding (Children's school)		V		V		
	Professors' support and understanding (PhD Studies)		V				V
<i>Delegation of tasks</i>	Delegation to eldest kids	V		V	V		V
	Distribution of tasks to every child			V	V		V
	Sharing the tasks between spouses		V	V	V	V	
<i>Recreational activities</i>	Attending online courses and webinars			V	V	V	V
	Listening to podcasts and watching videos	V		V		V	
	Hobbies				V	V	V
	Family activities			V	V		V
	Doing physical exercises		V		V		V

Findings

The questions during the interviews were asked in chronological order of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The interviews were focused on managing three types of duties: family, job, and Ph.D. studies. The participants were asked to share their experiences and challenges in each of the mentioned domains. It would be essential to start the discussion of the results by declaring that the priority in life for all the interviewed Ph.D. female students were family tasks, then they put their jobs or Ph.D. studies. It speaks for the context of Arab culture, which often puts the family first over everything (Lambert & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015).

The participants used the present simple and future simple tenses while telling their stories, though they referred to the lockdown experience. It should be noted that English is not their first language, and they were not focusing on grammar while speaking. It may relate to the fact that they had a strong sense of struggle at that period, so they still had this feeling about that challenging experience during the interview. Moreover, participants often used the word 'like' in their answers that may refer to the more approximate example of things as they tried to recall their exact actions in the past and draw a clear picture of that experience.

First Two Weeks of Lockdown under the Pandemic Outbreak

The first couple of weeks as well as the first few months were identified as the most difficult to adjust to the lockdown situation and online schooling. Though mothers indicated their

families as being a priority, they did not pay much attention to their children and families during the first two weeks of lockdown. And after they had started receiving signals from schools on 'unaccomplished homework' or 'dropped performance' they responded accordingly. Notably, younger children needed more support and guidance from their mothers in their online schooling.

I had to sit with my daughter, especially, she did not know how to use the iPad. I had to teach her a lot of things that she didn't know how to use. So, we really spent a lot of time (Leila, 34, three children, part-time job).

Due to the unexpected transition to online learning, mothers were not ready to spend much time on their children homeschooling, in addition to their personal adaptation to distance working and studying.

At the beginning, I started to talk to their teachers, like, please don't give them so many tasks. I'm a working mother and I am doing my own study. (Mariam, 30, twins, full-time job).

It was tough for the mothers to organize free time and space to pursue their job tasks. Many of the female doctoral students were employed as instructors to teach courses. Their teaching shifted to online modes too. Challenges of online work responsibilities and supervision of one's own children's online studies put much stress on the mothers.

I was missing deadlines in my job; it became very disorganized. Yeah, until the summer, that was a very bad time. So, it became very stressful, and exhausting, and time consuming (Latifa, 35, four children, full-time job).

For all the participants, doctoral studies were a dream and personal development goal. Despite all the difficulties, at the beginning of the lockdown, none of the respondents wanted to abandon their studies, while quitting the job was a common contemplation for them.

I tried to quit from job many times; it was hard. The stress in the work raised dramatically, everything was online. And my PhD was like extremely in danger. I never think of quitting of PhD at that time. I don't know why because this is something I want to do. So, I just think about quitting the work like several times (Hind, 35, four children, full-time job).

PhD is another responsibility; I have a full fellowship. And it is one of the dreams that I've been thinking about for a very long time. I didn't want to drop out or you know, just stop because of this new occurrence of the COVID (Leila, 34, three children, part-time job).

Daily Routine during COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

All participants shared a similar daily routine during the pandemic lockdown. They were waking up early and starting their day preparing their kids for homeschooling: giving them breakfast and setting up the technology. At 8 am they were beginning their job duties online. In parallel, they were constantly checking on children, especially younger ones who were not

experienced in online learning and required help and guidance during the classes. The job duties were officially finishing between 12:00 pm and 2:00 pm. However, most of the time, the online work mode required them to continue longer hours and be attached to their emails for process coordination, incoming inquiries, announcements, and other administrative communication.

I continue working on my, my work, emails, and tasks during evening, I continue working because your boss can WhatsApp you or call you to finish a certain task. We were working remotely, but that doesn't mean we are working 24 hours (Mariam, 30, twins, full-time job).

...But now with online emailing a lot, sending emails, sending announcements explaining everything through emails, and many students they are not available, or they are not present in the class. They don't attend the classes. After that, they will start asking questions. So, I continue, like, office hours and meeting and professional development related to the work till, three, and sometimes four (Fatima, 30, three children, full-time job).

In the afternoon, from 2:00 pm till 4:00/5:00 pm, mothers spent time with their children, helping with the homework. Some participants mentioned having a short break after their work if it was possible. In case of extended hours of job duties, the time with children was postponed to later hours of the day, but they all mentioned spending at least two hours per day with the children to follow up on their studies. A few days a week in the afternoon, the participants had their doctoral classes online. Mainly, those days were worse than others to coordinate and fully participate in all the parallel tasks. Often, mothers let their children play outside in the garden to have “some time to work.” If female doctoral students were not able to balance two demands simultaneously, they selected personal duties over the children’s duties.

So, when I have my class, I skip their [children's] classes. They didn't attend the classes, because I need to attend my classes (Mariam, 30, twins, full-time job).

In the evening after 5 pm, women had their family dinners and then prepared their children for bed by around 8:00-10:00 pm. Very often, female doctoral students started working on their own studies’ assignments late in the evenings, when children had gone to bed.

At the evening, I put them to sleep and after that I start my PhD study. (Fatima, 30, three children, full-time job).

And you know, for the work of the PhD, if I have, like, writing assignments and so on, I usually do it at night when I'm done with everything, and my kids are relaxing... I sit and then I sleep late. One point you should know about me I sleep less than five hours sometimes (Hind, 35, four children, full-time job).

I couldn't do any work until my kids went to sleep. So, after they slept, I started my own studying, working on my deadlines (Leila, 34, three children, part-time job).

Emotional Well-being of Female Doctoral Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In IPA qualitative interview analysis, it is crucial to identify what matters to participants (Larkin and Thompson, 2012). The collected data consistently showed how stressful it was for the female doctoral students to be locked with online learning for their children and their own studies. The pressure accounted for a negative impact on their mental health. The interviews all pointed out exhaustion, anxiety, stress, depression, demotivation, and frustration faced by many working mothers across the Globe (Clancy, 2020; Guy and Arthur, 2020). During interviews, participants used the verb 'imagine' which could demonstrate that they were seeking empathy and understanding of their experience of "survival" through this challenging and stressful period in their lives. Notably, the continuous anxiety and exhaustion resulted in an extended effect of having negative expectations of the future days that reflected in uncontrolled behavior reactions (e.g., screaming or shouting) and bad attitudes to oneself and others, particularly children.

I started getting very anxious, very exhausted, I would wake up already dreading how difficult this day was. This is when we started and when the baby was much younger. So, I would say from March until the summer of you know, this summer, I was always angry, I was screaming a lot. I was fighting a lot. I was negative, I treated my children and myself badly (Latifa, 35, four children, full-time job).

There was anger. Yeah, and even I could remember my daughter telling me that, 'why you're angry?' Like I was, you know, I was angry all the time. You know, you just don't know what to do to get it less, by time, by time it gets less (Hind, 35, four children, full-time job).

Coping Strategies for Multitasking under COVID-19 Lockdown

This section analyses the patterned strategies of female doctoral students when it comes to coping with multiple demands from different social roles under the lockdown. To deal with different types of pressure and stress, the female doctoral students applied a multitasking regime to their daily routine discussed above. The interview narratives identified the following strategies used by these women to keep their doctoral studies, jobs, and family duties going.

Time Management

In line with previous studies, the interviews showed that time management was a vital tool in multitasking for female doctoral students (Maunula, 2017). Therefore, the participants' first strategy to adapt to the new normal life of online working-studying-schooling was the re-arrangement of their schedule or timetable, particularly the time to wake up and go to bed. Daily plans of every hour helped in confusing and anxious situations. Moreover, it was essential to manage and plan the time for the participants themselves and other family members, including nannies.

...And once I had that plan, I was able to if I start getting confused, or nervous or anxious, I would be able to fall back on the plan... Oh, wait, it's one o'clock, I have a break. Now just relax. Don't worry about anything. Or Oh! it's four o'clock, okay, the kids should be done with the homework now... So, the planning helped me a lot. (Latifa, 35, four children, full-time job)

First of all, I have to manage my time, and manage the time of my nannies and children. (Aisha, 39, five children, full-time job)

Task Management

Preparing 'to-do-lists' for the day separately for job-related tasks and doctoral studies, prioritizing the tasks on the list, helped female doctoral students to organize their time better and finish the tasks faster. Alternatively, the interviewed doctoral students chose to focus on one task until it was accomplished.

I have to a do to-do-list so that I know what things I have to finish today, what is required from me or from my employees to finish and to see what tasks I have for university. (Aisha, 39, five children, full-time job)

Emotional Support and Help from Others

Another good strategy that helped in coping with multiple demands was help and support from other people. Before the pandemic, doctoral students' mothers could visit and help with children while they had classes. During the lockdown, it was not possible. So, mothers with young children less than three years old needed more help from their nannies. It should be underlined that all the participants had nannies or housemaids who helped them with the children and housework. Most mothers in the UAE consider nannies or housemaids' help as relatively common and affordable "live-in childcare" (Dickson, 2019). Participants' husbands provided significant support during this challenging period as some of them worked online or stayed home on temporary leave.

I will be moving between the two kids. And of course, the baby is crawling all over the place. And one of the housemaids is helping me with a baby (Leila, 34, three children, part-time job).

If I had classes, the nanny would hold the baby. And then when the baby needed milk, I would give my students a break and feed the baby (Latifa, 35, four children, full-time job).

Now the biggest advantage, at least there is something positive. My husband was just staying at home because of pandemic because he is working at the airport. And the entire airport was closed. So, he was helping them with homework (Fatima, 30, three children, full-time job).

It was really hard, but, with some encouragement from my husband and his support as well, just to let me come down, he was taking some of my

responsibilities, sitting with the kids, doing their homework, that helped me to go over hard time (Mariam, 30, twins, full-time job).

With the lessened lockdown restrictions, the participants asked their mothers for help in looking after the children.

If I have any classes during that time, I will pack all our bags and we will go to my mother's house. She will watch the kids while I have my class (Leila, 34, three children, part-time job).

You know, when I started going to my mom's house, I took my kids there like for hours. That made me free for some hours (Hind, 35, four children, full-time job).

Delegation of Tasks

Having elder children enabled additional help via delegating them some house chores or childcare of younger siblings. Another strategy was teaching children to accomplish some tasks independently.

When I'm busy with one of them. I let the other one help her like sit with her (Hind, 35, four children, full-time job).

But I don't try and waste my time on anything that could be, you know, delegated, or that could be ignored, or that is not so important anymore. I taught my children how to do a lot of things on their own (Leila, 34, three children, full-time job).

Recreational Activities

Recreational activities were identified as the mechanism to cope with stressors and balance work-family demands (Fathima et al., 2020; Van Bortel et al., 2019). The interviews revealed several different activities that the participants were engaged in to cope with the stress and pressure as a result of continuous multitasking. Along with the traditional stress-relief activities such as yoga and handcrafting, female doctoral students found another interesting engaging activity such as attending online sessions and webinars. The COVID-19 pandemic enabled growth of free online certificate courses, sessions, and webinars on personal development and more.

So, I like to sew, and I like to knit and crochet. During lockdown. I completed a very large blanket, all handmade. (Leila, 34, three children, full-time job)

I was looking for myself; I was looking for any other ways where I can forget about my work you know, at that time I had also an obsession to learn piano. I was playing piano before, but not advanced. At that time, I wanted to do something that I love. I wanted to escape from reality. (Fatima, 30, three children, full-time job)

I was maintaining my exercise. Even if I was busy with these three tasks, I used to do my exercise for one hour every day. So, you know, we like doing exercise that would take that negative energy from you. So that helped me to be stronger, to be active during the day. (Mariam, 30, twins, full-time job)

I love professional development and I love attending lectures and sessions, but because of my duties, and always those sessions need physical presence (to go and apply and to pay), most of the sessions at that time were free online. (Fatima, 30, three children, full-time job)

I started listening to self-help podcasts and YouTube videos about how to stop procrastinating and how to manage my time. (Latifa, 35, four children, full-time job)

Discussion

This qualitative research was dedicated to understanding how female doctoral students coped with multiple social roles and demands during the lockdown under the COVID-19 pandemic. This study adds to the literature by analyzing interview data from married female doctoral students who work full/part-time and have more than one child in the UAE. In addition to multiple duties and demands, social distancing, staying at home, uncertainty, and disruption of regular routines during the lockdown resulted in increased psychological distress (Rahman et al., 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2021).

Under these frustrating conditions working and studying mothers were challenged to find their own strategies to cope with multiple tasks and succeed in their Ph.D. studies. First, our findings align with previous studies showing that time management is a crucial strategy, and mainly females are responsible for the planning and organizing the families' use of time (Maunula, 2017; Tammelin, 2009). However, the interview analysis added on sub-strategies of time management such as rearranging the schedule/timetable by waking up earlier and going to sleep later, planning every hour of the day in the morning, using sticky-notes as reminders around the house, and sleeping shorter hours and working at nights when kids are asleep. These strategies might be exceptionally applied during crisis time and should be considered for further research and implications.

Second, task management included preparing a to-do list for oneself and others and prioritizing and delegating tasks that helped female doctoral students accomplish multiple tasks. These findings align with the previous results on prioritizing and organizing work-life balancing (Ren and Caudle, 2020). Similarly, the disclosed discussion on delegation of the tasks to the elder children contributes to the idea that children's support via such delegation adds to the mother's success (Shalom-Tuchin, 2013). Sharing the family responsibilities with their spouses was found to be helpful by women, in addition to paid childcare services (Ren and Caudle, 2020; Shalom-Tuchin, 2013; Fatima and Sahibzada, 2012). The emotional support from husbands played an essential role in female doctoral students' well-being. Search for teachers' support and understanding at children's schools and professors' support and understanding in doctoral studies at university could be identified as a novel theme to be investigated further.

Third, the collected narratives demonstrated that mother-doctoral students were forced to adapt quickly to the new normality and managed multitasking under emergency and lockdown

restrictions, which led to feeling 'negative', 'stressed,' and 'guilty' concerning their children and growing 'online fatigue.' Indeed, the increased pressure of the multiple demands and duties results in suffering from a "guilty conscience" of not managing multiple tasks (Maunula, 2017; Leonard, 2001; Moen, 2004). As a recent study shows, there is a significant association between marital status, number of children, job stress, and work-life balance (Solanki and Mandaviya, 2021). Moreover, "married women have scored higher psychological distress due to multiple roles in professional and personal life" that resulted in emotional exhaustion, frustration, anxiety attacks, confusion, and fatigue, etc. (Solanki and Mandaviya, 2021).

Finally, the outcomes speak for the strategy theme on different types of recreational activities. According to the published studies, physical exercises positively affected emotional and mental health during the lockdown period (Schinke et al., 2020; Maugeri et al., 2020; Aperribai et al., 2020). Other recreational activities such as doing hobbies, watching videos, listening to podcasts, meditating, and reading were also used as coping strategies in previous studies (D'Mello, 2021; Sameer et al., 2020). Attending free online seminars/courses and professional development workshops could be considered as an added new piece of information in the list of the coping strategies of the married female doctoral students with more than two children.

Conclusion

This study provides an insight into the female doctoral students' strategies to cope with multiple social roles and demands under the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The findings of the study are vital to understanding the gender bias in the burdens of doctoral education. The study results are significant for further developing family-friendly policies to reduce gender bias in academia. The described lived experiences allow for thoughtful decision-making while providing opportunities for women in their academic careers. Higher education institutions could, for example, incorporate employee well-being strategies, like flex work, and foster supervisor support, and a sympathetic and collaborative work culture (Solanki and Mandaviya, 2021). The creation of flexible work conditions enables women to perform better on domestic and work fronts (Belwal and Belwal, 2014).

The important outcome of the interviews' analysis was that the doctoral mother-students were "applying multitasking regime[s]" to their functions daily, comparing themselves metaphorically to "octopus", trying to do multiple things simultaneously. To cope with all the multiple tasks, they applied different strategies described in the five subthemes in the results section.

As for the limitations of the study, it should be mentioned that subjectivity is a possible limitation for the empathetic interviewing approach (Fontana & Frey, 2008). The goal of the study was to explore the lived experiences of the working and studying mothers in the UAE, and the results should not be generalized to all female doctoral students. So, the results of the presented IPA analysis are more appropriate for theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability of the participants' experiences in the context of crisis. The paper provided a rich, transparent, and contextualized analysis of the accounts of the married female doctoral students in the UAE.

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