



GYA Women in Science stay and work from home: How might we make Covid-19 lockdown work for us?

Global Young Academy Women in Science working group¹

Last week, on Tuesday, she switched off the laptop and sighed. Another day went by that she wore many different hats – teacher, researcher, educator, supervisor, parent, relative, friend, spouse and so many others. She has always had to do all of these but now, she is at home taking on extra responsibilities and stressing about the future of the world. Everyone looks up to her for answers and solutions and now she is ready to go to bed with a heavy heart and a bit demotivated; she knows that tomorrow will be the same again. She has read articles on how to plan her everyday life, to have a routine or not to have a routine at all, but she needed something more practical and it felt that women in science and academia encounter unique challenges.

And then, she had an idea “I will contact my colleagues and fellow Women in Science group members; they all deal with their circumstances so productively, efficiently, graciously and positively. They will be able to help me...” A couple of hours later, she put the phone down and smiled; she realised that she was not alone, she shared the same challenges, anxieties and difficulties as women scientists (and not only they) all over the world. Why did she smile then? Because all of them had a small win to share with the others, a small suggestion to make life easier. Collectively, they could make a difference in each other’s lives.

Gender discrimination and gender inequalities in the workplace are widely documented in the literature, while the workload at home is similarly distributed in a skewed way. “In the 2019 Women in the Workplace report, 40 percent of women said they do all or most of the childcare and housework for their families. Just 12 percent of men said the same. This disparity holds true globally. According to a survey OECD conducted in 20 countries, women do an average of 173 minutes of housework each day, compared to just 71 minutes for men. Meanwhile, one in eight

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women worldwide are single mothers”². The pre-pandemic conditions that were already challenging have worsened during the global Covid-19 crisis for women who struggle to juggle all their different roles. Scientific journal editors provide anecdotal evidence that the number of submissions by male authors are substantially higher than those by female authors during the current pandemic. “If men and women are at home, men ‘find a way’ to do more academic work”³. Trade-offs between the roles and having to make decisions in prioritizing career, family, and personal life are on every woman’s daily agenda, as is the daily guilt for spending more time on one of these versus the others, sometimes to the detriment of the women’s mental and bodily health.

This paper does not aim at identifying and discussing the challenges – instead, we aim to share our own experiences, personal wins and things that have worked for us. We, the GYA Women in Science Working Group, certainly, do not boast that we have everything under control: on the contrary, we all admit it takes effort. Small but consistent and continuous changes in mind-set can have a significant impact on one’s mentality and everyday life. Not all advice is relevant for each of us. We advise fellow scientists –not only women – to pick, mix and match the suggestions that fit their own circumstances and personalities best. In addition, we argue that indeed the only long-term solution is a global effort towards gender inclusivity and equality, but until then, our life is in our hands.

Be generous with yourself – many things are out of your control, but many things are. Remind yourself that you can change your choices and that this situation is temporary. Remind yourself that you can reach out and that it’s okay to have moments of ups and downs.

Lemonade (or Pink Lemonade) out of Lemons – Take action

- “I was working on the topic of garment workers in Bangladesh right before the lockdown. It was a qualitative study so that we could design a technology to support them in their daily lives. We (me and my students) spent weekends with them – in their houses. It was clear that they had no savings, no concerns around healthcare and the living spaces were extremely congested. The directives for social distancing worried us a lot. We used this feeling to write blog articles, research articles and more so that it turns out in a way to support them by generating awareness, or hopefully, by reaching out to policy makers.”
- “The feeling of lack of control of my conditions has made me feel more stressed and anxious these days. I am a routine person and a control freak, I admit. So, after a few weeks of this feeling taking over, I decided that every time I feel there is nothing to be done I will find something to do. This translated into more writing and blogs to possibly assist others to see positive, and finding more structured activities and tasks at home, suggest new projects at work or the organisations I am involved in. I feel like that I can still change the world, even a piece at a time.”
- “Nobody else knows our needs and what can be done and what not better than us and our research teams. In order to respect the confinement, we stopped the experiments in the

² <https://leanin.org/article/women-shoulder-most-of-the-extra-work-because-of-covid-19?fbclid=IwAROP-eiQERs3pWt-Rp6-MUJgdCpgeTqSRPRQo438DBMFsrT7llpn9sHzbTo>

³ <https://www.theilily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/>



laboratory and we have focused on the interpretation of the already obtained results and on the writing of articles.”

- “Normally we do a monthly research group meeting at the University. With the confinement, we had to start doing it online. The result was excellent because people from different places can participate! Our research networks are getting stronger!”

Use power of technology – don’t let it use you, though

- “I used the social distancing opportunity to connect with many friends and family members around me and across the world. There was a Bengali New Year celebration last week. I have spent that day with my mother for the last nine years – joined her for lunch this year over a video call.”
- “In many studies, we see experts suggesting that during these times with all the fake stories and all the re-posts of lies, to be blatant, one must completely switch off social media. I tend to disagree as for me social media are now my window to the world: I can’t walk to the office kitchen to make coffee and say hello to my colleague but I can definitely check what photos she posted, or I can’t travel to my home country so this is the way to keep our contact real. The idea is to use social media and not let them use you and your time.”
- “I started video conferencing with my friends and that was really nice! We cooked together a meal for the first day of Ramadan. Without knowing everyone was at home experiencing social distancing for the first time in this holly month, this would not be possible. How engaged one usually is with his/her own daily business becomes only then visible, when the routine is broken!”
- “Take advantage of the information and services of the institutions. As a senior lecturer, I followed a training organized by our university (University of Tunis El Manar) on the use of an E-learning platform. It was very informative and I am preparing my courses for students in Master degree courses.”
- “To get some exercise and motivate myself, I invited a friend to start exercising together. With strict lockdown measures, we have an appointment on a specific time and do our exercises together – later on, just jogging together where allowed. So, while exercise, the mind can be cleared and relaxed.”

Add a new dimension to your interactions with the students

- “Online classes were challenging. But I felt great where I got to spend time talking about how my students are feeling; some students had the sound of roosters, birds who joined me from the suburbs. We also had a class party on Bengali New Year.”
- “To be able to provide to my students a good learning experience, even before the current conditions, I always asked myself what I would want from my supervisor – the idea of “be the supervisor you would want”. In these times, I sensed that the students from one day to

another lost all their social interactions, their study groups and the chance just to be students. They are stuck at home stressing and many of them in extremely difficult conditions. What I do now is once a week I suggest a “check in” exercise so that we can escape a bit from the academic content and socialize. The one week was send-a-picture-of-your-pet studying, the next was show-your-working/studying-station.”

- “I found online teaching particularly useful for postgraduate students. I could engage them in the online live class more since they could share their screen and discuss things in a more articulated manner. This is an excellent exercise for writing their theses later on.”

“Humour is one way for women in academia to face the pandemic’s consequences for their work and family lives.”⁴

Doing something that you never had the time to do

- “I tried many new things over this lock-down period. Some of them were on my wish list and some took me out of my comfort zone. I made my own YouTube channel (from wish list), took a dance class (out of comfort zone), ruined a fancy top being inspired by Pinterest (not sure what to call it). Watched movies and read books.”
- “It is not necessarily the time to completely re-invent yourself and become a super version of yourself. Take it easy and day-by-day. Learning something new or doing something you always wanted to do but never had the time will give you a sense of accomplishment (long before you receive the so wanted “We are pleased to inform you that your manuscript is accepted for publication...”). Even reading a book that has been staring at you from the bookcase for months will make a difference. I also read somewhere that if, after the lockdown, there are still things that you always wanted to do and never did, maybe you never reaaaally wanted to do them.”
- “I started baking with my daughters. We explored so many different recipes and we experienced success and failure together- and above all- had so much fun!”

Motherhood is a wonderful thing; don’t forget to enjoy it!

- “This pandemic can teach some of us an important lesson: mothers and fathers together are facing a short-term reorganization of care and work time. In the long run, these changes in productivity will affect careers. Those with fewer care duties are aiming for the stars. Will anyone in the academic community take into account our unbalanced approach to family care and work? No. All of us will participate together in open competition for promotion and positions, parents and non-parents alike.”

⁴ Alessandra Minello, in: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01135-9?sfns=mo>

- “I am not helping my partner, and he is not helping me, we are in that together. It is not easy always but we have a common goal: a harmonic, efficient, productive and happy everyday life. That’s how I manage to see motherhood as not another task in the day but the miracle that it is.”
- “Quality time with the kids – and not only school work...I try to spend more time with my children to tell stories, play educational and interactive games or watch movies.”
- “Single parents – particularly mothers – is not an uncommon occurrence in current societies. I am not a single mother but I know the difficulties from having been raised only by my mother. I make an extra effort to contact all my friends that raise their kids alone, even more in these times. A message, a call, a “hang in there” can take them a long way.”
- “The world slowed down. Probably not for most mothers, but it did slow down, and we had to reinvent ourselves as moms, partners, daughters, human beings. We had to handle everything if possible, with a positive attitude, to make our children feel safe. At the beginning, my to-do list was filled with obligations and worries... After a while, I realized that everything passes, and I was surrounded with the most precious things in my life and I was too worried to enjoy them. The change of my mind-set set me free to enjoy my little darlings and finally to love our slowed down world. At the end of the day, this is all that matters. This is all I will remember. My 3 little miracles smiling as if nothing catastrophic is happening, just an exceptionally long family vacation.”

Find your own new normal

- “Reading online how to deal with kids these days, the opinions and advice vary from "let the kids play the whole day" to "have a strict schedule and routine". In our household, we are pro-routine (at least three of the four... our youngest is more of a free spirit). Our boys are calmer and friendlier when they know what to expect from their day. We had to show them somehow that we are not on holidays. As the parents have to work, the kids also have to “work” at certain times of the day. We enjoy the weekends all together that differ from the working days. Calmness comes only from the realisation that we are not all the same and each family knows at heart what works: usually, it is what always worked before the lockdown.”
- “I try to take care of my health and my body by doing some sport activity. For that, I resumed the use of the electronic walking carpet which had been abandoned for years!”

Use your Tiger Time

- “We are not productive at the same rate throughout the day and we should not be. Trying to find a schedule that will suit our family, I tried to wake up very early in the morning to work in parallel with my husband, then help the boys with school work, and continue working in the afternoon. That resulted in me feeling that I am working 24/7 and constantly tired, irritated and impatient, let alone unproductive. And then I realised: I always enjoyed working late at night, when everything is quiet, everyone is asleep and I can really focus. That is what I do nowadays: I devote my mornings to my boys in between a few urgent

meetings and emails, I take a good afternoon nap, and as soon as my husband takes over later in the afternoon, I start working, firstly the lighter things and then as the house gets quieter the things that need more attention. I sleep very late in the night but I am productive that way and it works for me.”

Allowing imperfection

- “At times, I became impatient. I had a panic attack when my daughter needed a sudden surgery ... I had meltdowns and felt bad for not being patient. Then I had to force myself to let go of this, realizing it is ok to be imperfect. We all are little bit imperfect from time to time.”
- “One of the constant challenges perfectionists like me have is to make sure that work, family and the house are always immaculate. However, the conditions are not the same anymore, so how can that be? The first week of lockdown, I was stressed for every bit of dust, every cloth on the floor, every unwashed dish. And then, I realised I should think always that these are not the important things in life. It is fine if the dishes are not done at the end of the day, as long as my family and I are happy and healthy. And you know what? We eat from paper plates now!”

Keep a positive journal ... and mind-set

- “We are living in unprecedented conditions and the “once in a lifetime” has never been truer. Now is the time to keep a record of everything that is happening around you. My advice is to keep it real but positive. There are two things that I do every day that help me: 1) I created a WhatsApp group called “Thankful for”; all of us write there something big or small that we are grateful for every single day. It is beautiful to see what others are thankful for and gives all of us a sense of positivity amidst all the negativity. 2) Every evening, I post our daily photos on Facebook. In a sense it forces me to relook at the beautiful moments we have together and these are the pictures I go to bed with.”
- “Talking with my GYA women scientist friends helped, and it was all a matter of change in attitude: converting all negative thoughts into positive ones. It really works. Since then, everything has changed. I successfully complete all my pending tasks without compromising on the household work and spend more quality time with my two daughters. The only change I made was to force myself to convert negative thoughts into positives; the rest follows.”
- “One day, when I was sitting on the balcony, gazing mindlessly into the distance not looking at or thinking about anything in particular, I realised that there were so many simple things that the world had to offer. I realised that no conditions are perfect; one can only get absorbed in what one is doing and can only do so much by contributing one’s own bit. So, I decided to go with the flow, as what had come upon my city, my country, the world was not in my control. I realised that the magic of flow lies in the joy, thrill, creativity and process when we are immersed in life. So I started spending more time on activities that led to emotional and mental satisfaction and made me happy (spending time with my family, reading, painting, photography, focussing on my work, interacting and connecting with my students through online platforms and learning new things related to my work), rather than

getting caught up in activities that only gave short-lived joy. Going with the flow, I felt in control of the situation and the hours just flew by. I have also learnt to focus and concentrate on one task at a time rather than trying to multi-task as I always had the feeling that our generation was suffering from an epidemic of multi-tasking. I personally feel that multi-tasking leads to panic and lowers one's productivity. Through this pandemic, I have learnt to be more patient, focus on important things in life, keep myself from being carried away by negative emotions as there is only so much one can control."

- "For me, the most difficult thing is not to plan my routine... I had the whole year planned and controlled to be productive and to handle everything with my children, my family, and my work. And suddenly I did not know what the next day would look like. I did not even know if we would be here the next day. It took a lot of reflection, meditation (although I have never tried before, it felt like an urgent need), dive dip into my soul, to find the answer: live one day at a time, and enjoy it if you can. Have no expectations. Today is called the present for a reason! And the most precious thing for me was to finally learn to enjoy the ride, enjoy the process, without obsessing about the results at the end."

Concluding thoughts

We live in unprecedented times in the history of humankind, and that is an indisputable fact. The already heavy workloads of women scientists around the world have been topped with more responsibilities and of course, the additional anxiety about the future. The members of the Women in Science Working Group of the GYA are not an exception from those trends, however, here they demonstrated that small things in our everyday routine, in our mind set and approach of life can work wonders. We need to stress again that not all advice and examples are applicable to every case, but a few shared ideas and the promotion of the idea that we are all in the same *storm* can provide inspiration and strength to all to deal with their situations.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL YOUNG ACADEMY

The GYA was founded with the vision to give a voice to young scientists around the world. By empowering early- to mid-career researchers to lead international, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational dialogues, the GYA mobilises talent from six continents for capacity-building, mentoring, engaging in science policy and improving the existing research environment. Members are chosen for their demonstrated excellence in scientific achievement and their commitment to service. Currently, there are 200 GYA members and 258 alumni from 83 countries. The GYA Office is hosted at the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina in Halle (Saale), Germany. For more information on the GYA and the Women in Science working group:

<https://globalyoungacademy.net/>

