

WORK

Women academics seem to be submitting fewer papers during coronavirus. 'Never seen anything like it,' says one editor.

Men are submitting up to 50 percent more than they usually would



(Courtesy of Leslie Gonzales/Einat Lev/Erica Williams; iStock; Lily illustration)



Caroline Kitchener • April 24

This was supposed to be a big year for Einat Lev. She planned to do field work in Hawaii and Alaska, submit a major research proposal, then finish writing the last of five papers necessary for her tenure application. In September, she would finally go before the review committee, the final step to becoming a full-fledged associate professor of seismology at Columbia University.

Now, with her 7-year-old daughter at home, Lev can only work four hours each day, instead of her usual 10. She mostly had made peace with the delays, finding joy on long walks, helping her daughter identify neighborhood flowers and birds.

But then she heard from a male colleague. They'd started their careers around the same time. His wife took care of their kids full time. Lev's husband has a full-time job.

"On the bright side of things," the colleague said of his experience, "[self-quarantine] gives me time to concentrate on writing."

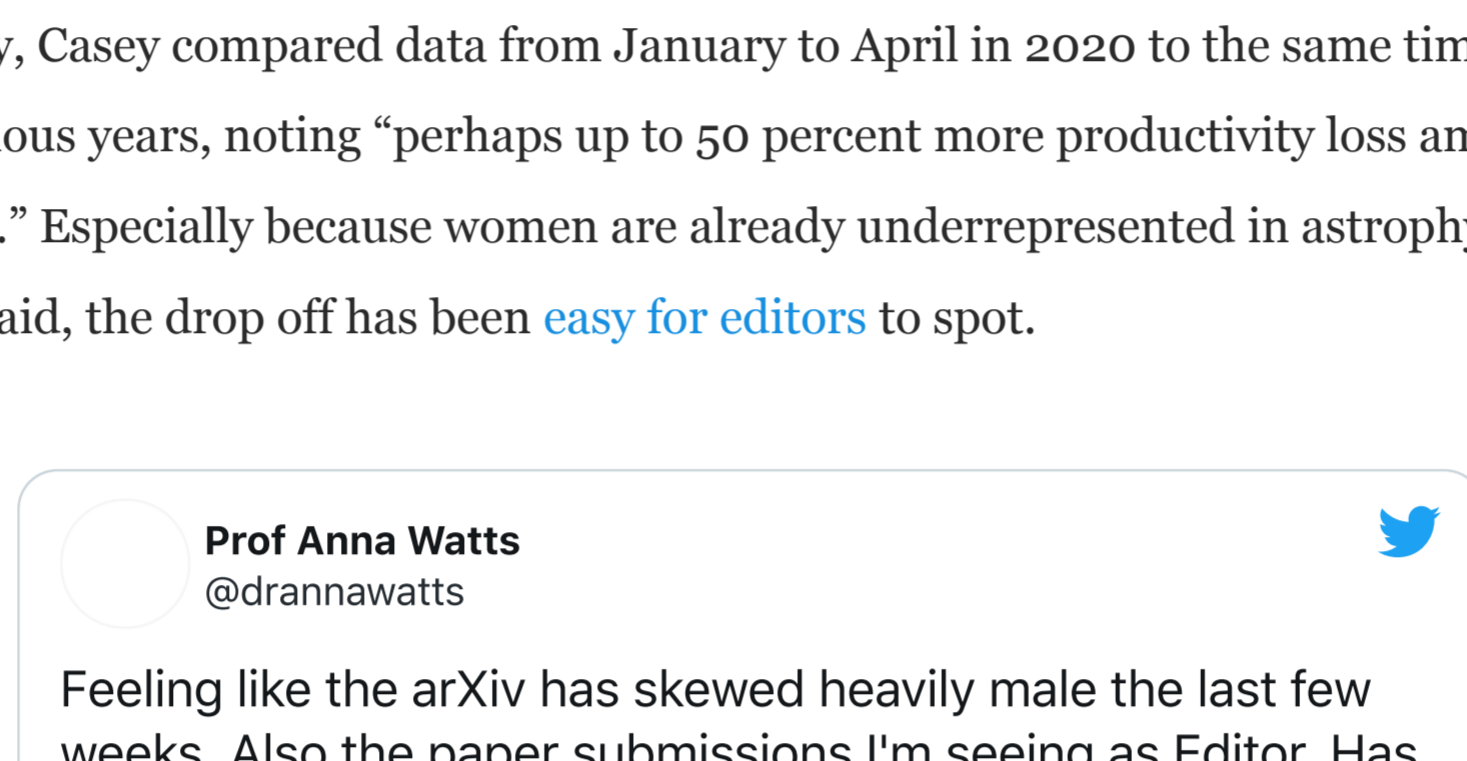
Lev wanted to scream.

"That sounds like such a luxury," she replied. "I can't even imagine."

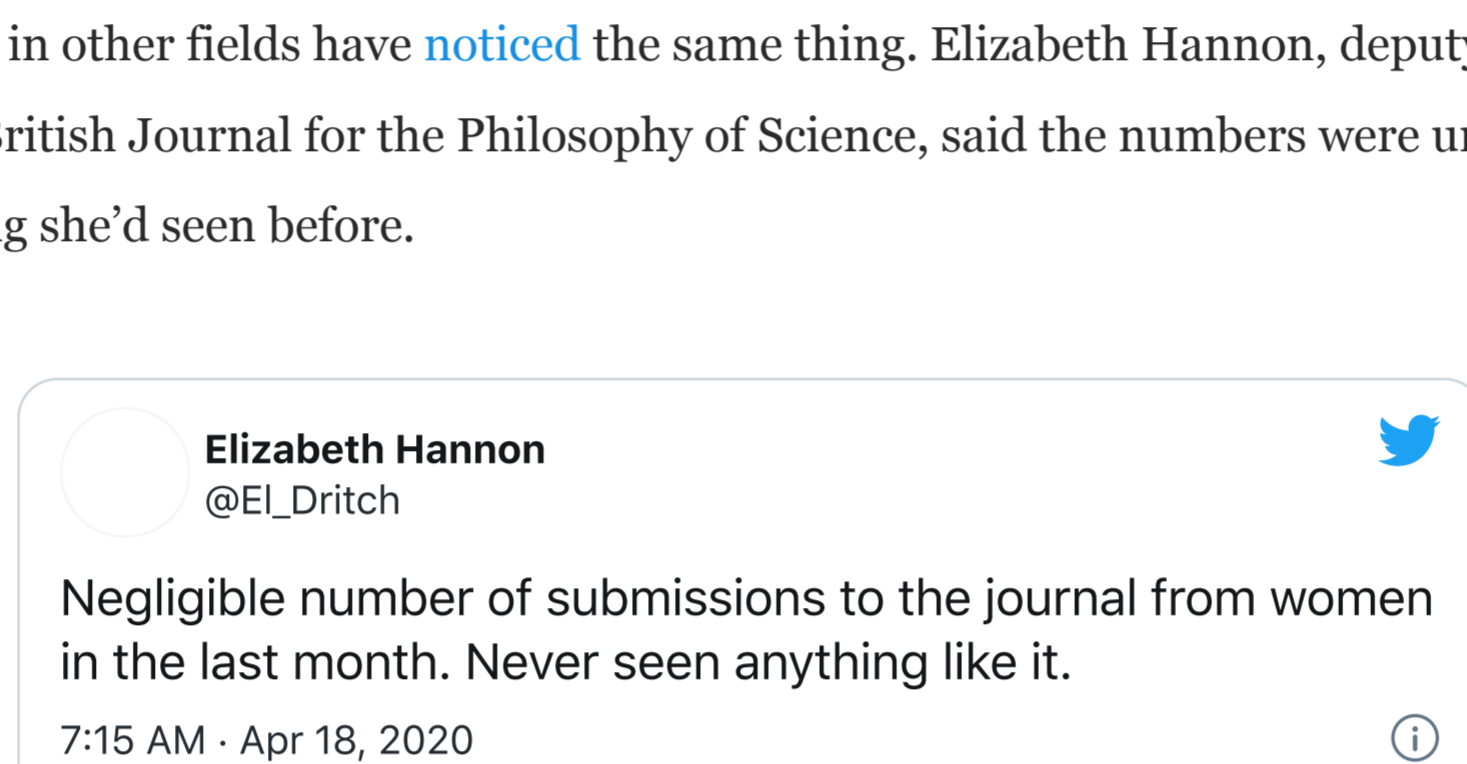
Six weeks into widespread self-quarantine, editors of academic journals have started noticing a trend: Women — who inevitably shoulder a greater share of family responsibilities — seem to be submitting fewer papers. This threatens to derail the careers of women in academia, says Leslie Gonzales, a professor of education administration at Michigan State University, who focuses on strategies for diversifying the academic field: When institutions are deciding who to grant tenure to, how will they evaluate a candidate's accomplishments during coronavirus?

"We don't want a committee to look at the outlier productivity of, say, a white hetero man with a spouse at home and say, 'Well, this person managed it,'" says Gonzales. "We don't want to make that our benchmark."

Astrophysics is one field in which covid-19 seems to be having a disproportionate effect on female academics, said Andy Casey, an astrophysics research fellow at Monash University who analyzed the number of submissions to astrophysics "preprint servers," where academics typically post early versions of their papers. For The Lily, Casey compared data from January to April in 2020 to the same time period in previous years, noting "perhaps up to 50 percent more productivity loss among women." Especially because women are already underrepresented in astrophysics, Casey said, the drop off has been [easy for editors](#) to spot.



Editors in other fields have [noticed](#) the same thing. Elizabeth Hannon, deputy editor of the British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, said the numbers were unlike anything she'd seen before.



While Comparative Political Studies, a journal that publishes 14 times a year, received the same number of submissions from women this year and last year, the number of submissions from men has [increased](#) more than 50 percent, according to co-editor David Samuels. Other journals have only seen a dip in the number of [solo-authored papers](#) submitted by women: Submissions are stable for women working as part of a team.

This evidence is anecdotal: Some journals say they've seen no change, or are receiving comparatively [more](#) submissions from women since self-quarantine began. But the anecdotes are consistent with broader patterns in academia, says Gonzales: If men and women are at home, men "find a way" to do more academic work.

When men take advantage of "stop the clock" policies, taking a year off the tenure-track after having a baby, studies show they'll accomplish far more professionally than their female colleagues, who tend to spend that time focused primarily or solely on child care. Some of the responsibilities are determined by biology: If a woman chooses to breast-feed, that takes up hours every day. Women also face a physical recovery from giving birth.

[[It's not just Sarah Milov. Female academics aren't credited in media 'all the time.'](#)]

Academic writing and research requires "the time and space to breathe and be creative," said Erica Williams, chair of the sociology and anthropology departments at Spelman College: It's not something you can do in fits and starts.

Williams splits child care with her husband, working from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., and watching her 4-year-old son through 6 p.m., when they all come back together for the evening. All her work time goes to daily tasks: replying to emails, facilitating departmental logistics. She "has not touched" either of her two pending book projects, which she'll need to finish before she can earn a full professorship, particularly important to Williams because there are so few black women with that title. She'd hoped to reach that goal within two or three years. Now she'll probably have to wait longer.

Still, Williams knows she's lucky: She already has tenure.

Lev can't stop thinking about how this might affect her chances. At her last review, she was told to submit five papers by September, authoring at least some on her own.

"If that's not happening, that's a problem," said Lev. A large group of university faculty, as well as 20 external reviewers, will look through her portfolio.

"They might look at it and think, 'You were home for four months, why weren't you writing?'"

[[A female historian wrote a book. Two male historians went on NPR to talk about it. They never mentioned her name. It's Sarah Milov.](#)]

During the day, she manages her daughter's education, clicking through virtual lessons from the school. When those are done, she has to come up with other things to do. Her husband takes over when she's in meetings, but she never has a chunk of time to herself during the day. She's been trying to work at night, after her daughter goes to bed. By then, she's too tired to do anything that requires much brain power.

"A day in the office is less exhausting than a day with a 7-year-old," Lev says.

Most senior members of her department are older: If they had kids, she says, they had them a long time ago. She worries they won't empathize with her situation. (Other women had the same concern, but wouldn't speak on the record because they feared it might jeopardize their chance at tenure.)

"I can see people being like, 'Oh it was hard for everyone, we were all home and nervous,'" Lev said. It will take some effort, she says, to explain why she may have been less productive than some of her colleagues.

Before coronavirus, Whitney Pirtle, an assistant professor at the University of California in Merced, was also slated to go up for tenure this fall. But when the school offered a "one-year covid extension," she decided to take it. She'd been planning to submit her book to an academic press in May. March and April were supposed to be "writing crunchtime." Instead, she's been at home with a 4 and 9-year-old. Her husband still goes to work daily, facilitating free lunches as the principal of an elementary school.

Pirtle knows she's taking a risk with the extension. Her colleagues have been talking about the possibility of a recession: If she waits another year, her department might be operating on a tighter budget. It could also be harder to get another job somewhere else.

Everyone trying to get tenure adheres to the same timeline, Pirtle says. She is acutely aware that she is 33, in her sixth year on the tenure track. She already delayed one year when she had her 4-year-old.

"My other fear is just, does this look bad? We understand what a typical timeline looks like. How does it look to ask for an extension?"

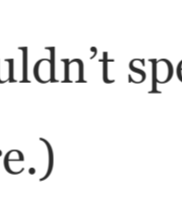
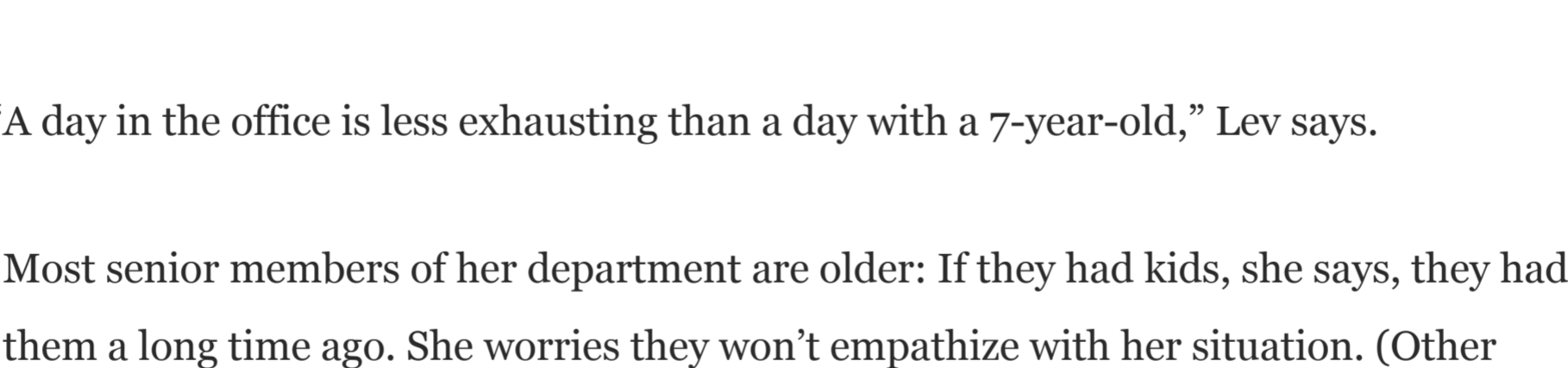
Many universities across the country are offering similar one-year extensions. That's good, Gonzales says, but it's not enough. An extension "does nothing to account for a dip in productivity": If a woman with young kids at home takes an extra year, evaluators still might wonder why she didn't accomplish more during that time.

For the next few years, there should be a letter added to every tenure application, Gonzales says, instructing readers to consider how the "fallout [from coronavirus] has very different effects across gender and race." Evaluators should consider each applicant's individual set of circumstances, she said.

"We essentially want to say, 'Hey, this was a big deal for a lot of people.'" If someone didn't finish all three papers she'd been expecting to write, maybe that's okay.

Lev has started to keep track of her days, writing down how many hours she spent with her daughter, and how many hours she was able to work.

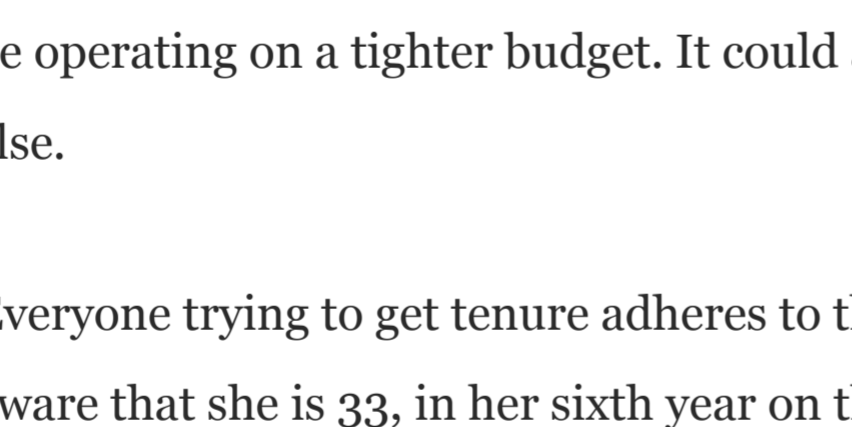
If anyone ever says she wasn't "productive" during coronavirus, she'll have the records to prove them wrong.



Caroline Kitchener

Caroline Kitchener is a staff writer at The Lily. Prior to joining The Washington Post in 2019, she was an associate editor at The Atlantic. She is the author of "Post Grad: Five Women and Their First Year Out of College."

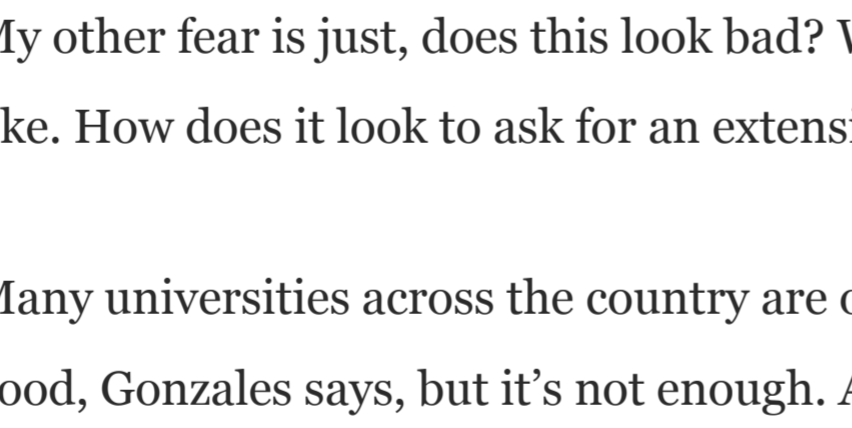
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WORK

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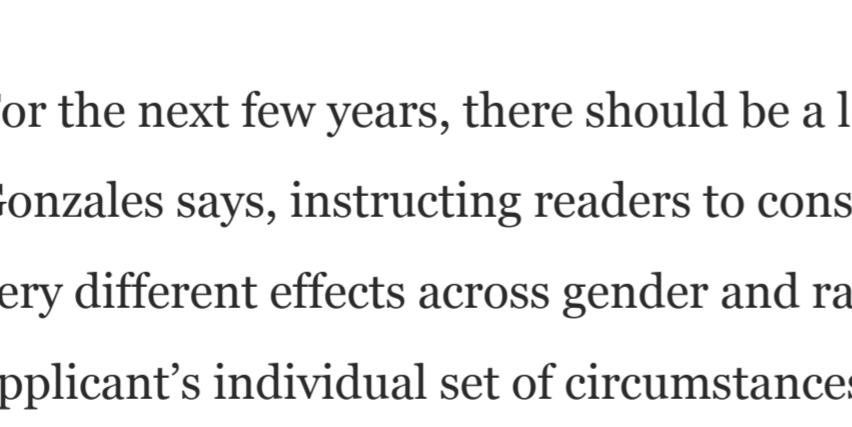
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