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Daughter-mother perspectives on feminist activism in the academy

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Daughter-mother perspectives on feminist activism in the academy

Abstract

This article addresses feminist solidarity between a daughter and a mother in academia. We are respectively a PhD student and aspirant early career academic, and a senior academic, both identifying as feminists and engaging in forms of activism to improve gender equality. We take an autoethnographical approach, drawing from vignettes and conversational dialogues, focusing on feminist perspectives, activism, our contested identities, fears and hopes. We reflect on the challenges of living feminist lives whilst working in gendered university institutions and highlight strategies to enact feminism whilst trying to progress and maintain an academic career at different positions on the career spectrum. Our contribution is to highlight differential experiences and understandings of academic activism between daughter and mother, early-career academics and senior leaders, in order to enhance mutual understanding and action on feminist solidarity and praxis in the academy.

Keywords: feminism, activism, academia, autoethnography, solidarity, universities

Daughter-mother perspectives on feminist activism in the academy

Introduction

We are a daughter and a mother, who identify as feminists and engage in forms of activism to improve gender equality. We are also respectively a PhD student, aspirant early career academic, in her twenties, seeking her first permanent academic post at the beginning of her academic career, and a senior academic in her fifties, established in her academic career and in a university leadership position. Our experiences and working conditions give insights into the differential positioning of early career academics and senior management, while our personal relationship, as daughter, mother, friend, and feminist, enables us to share our challenges, difficulties, opportunities and hopes for change in the gendered academy.

We are inspired by Sara Ahmed's (2017) book, *Living A Feminist Life*, to elaborate on living our own feminist lives. After outlining the context of the gendered academy, and briefly introducing Ahmed's work, we draw from autoethnographical vignettes and conversational dialogues to discuss our feminist perspectives, activism, and contested identities. In doing so, we address our experiences of feminist solidarity between our positions as feminist academic activists, and daughter and mother, outlining our fears and hopes for the future.

Feminist activism in the gendered academy

Universities are widely recognised as gendered institutions (Mihăilă, 2018), which individuals experience through gendered advantage and disadvantage (Pullen et al., 2017). In the UK, where we work, women in the top tier of university management structures remain at 31% in 2018, the same as 2016 (WomenCount, 2018). Being a professor is usually a prerequisite to becoming a vice-chancellor, a pro-vice-chancellor or a Dean, but in the UK women are only 28% of all professors in the latest figures (HESA, 2021). Furthermore, only

1% of professors in the UK are black, with even fewer professorships being held by black women (Coughlan, 2021; HESA, 2021). This suggests that the pipeline to academic leadership is difficult and unequal. A new generation of early career academics is confronted by increasing casualization of labour (HESA, 2021), which disproportionately affects women, through contractual precarity, the predominance of women undertaking care work, and not complying with the care-free masculinized ideals of competitive performance (Ivancheva et al., 2019). The ‘ideal’ academic is a White male with no familial responsibilities (Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Bleijenbergh et al., 2012; Martinovic and Verkuyten, 2013; Mauthner and Edwards, 2010; Monroe et al., 2008; Morley, 2013). However, feminists in the academy have long challenged such inequalities through activism, writing, research, and resistance (see, for example, Bendl et al., 2014; Haynes, 2008; Lund and Tienari, 2019; Pullen, 2018; Reedy, 2020).

We are inspired by the contemporary academic feminist, Sara Ahmed, whose academic praxis we admire. Ahmed is a feminist writer and independent scholar. Formerly an academic professor in race and cultural studies, she resigned her academic post in protest at the failure to deal with sexual harassment in her university (Ahmed, 2016). Her work has addressed gaps between the symbolic commitments to diversity and the experience of those who embody diversity (Ahmed, 2012) and explored the concept of complaint as diversity work and a feminist challenge to power (Ahmed, 2018; Ahmed, 2020). As Ahmed (2017: 12) identifies as ‘a brown woman, lesbian, daughter’, and as a scholar working on intersectionality and race, we appreciate that we cannot share her experience of race and sexuality from our positions of privilege as White, Western, heterosexual, cis-gendered women. Nonetheless, Ahmed challenges us to consider our own complicity in institutional racism and heteronormativity, and we reflect further on our solidarities with others later in this paper.

However, we are all daughters, and like Ahmed, we know that ‘there can be violence at stake in being recognizable as women’ (Ahmed, 2017: 15), whether it is through gendered stereotyping, gendered work, or literal sexual and gendered violence. This position informs our perspectives on feminism and our activism. Although there are clear differences between us as women, ‘feminism as a collective movement is made out of how we are moved to become feminists in dialogue with others’ (Ahmed, 2017: 5, see also chapter 5). Ahmed’s (2017) work resonated with us about the daily challenges of being feminists, and the possibility of feminist theory being generated by everyday life and experience, encouraging us to reflect on how it is possible to live feminist lives whilst working within gendered university institutions.

Autoethnographical vignettes and conversational dialogues

We are also inspired by Gilmore, Harding, Helin and Pullen’s (2019: 4) call for articles that explore ‘writing differently’, that is writing which brings insights into working life in ways that demonstrate ‘how we live, think, feel, work, see others’ and explore our humanity. We draw from the rich tradition of autoethnography, an approach to research and a genre of writing where the researcher is the focus of reflexive inquiry while being situated within a social context, thus addressing the wider social, cultural and political environs of the researchers (Haynes, 2017). We present autoethnographical dialogues based on typical conversations that we would have at home as daughter and mother, and as feminist academics, contextualised with short vignettes to illuminate our positionality. To construct the dialogues in this article, we recorded several actual conversations around its themes, and then drafted some composites (see also Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018), which went through several iterations. In crafting the autoethnography, our aim is to evoke ‘a feeling that the experience described is true, coherent, believable, and connects the reader to the writer’s world’ (Denzin,

2014: 70). Our conversations and vignettes represent our positions at the time of writing: Florence as a PhD student and part-time research assistant, aspiring to a permanent academic position, and Kathryn as a senior academic, in a leadership role as a faculty Dean. We provide a postscript on what happened next at the end of the paper.

Our next step, before presenting our dialogues, is to provide short personal statements to offer some contextual background. We have presented these in generational order to give the reader a sense of generational movement from mother to daughter.

Kathryn:

I am from a working-class background with a typically gendered upbringing in the 1960s, with my mother working part-time and undertaking the household duties and my father's influence as breadwinner, mechanic, and technician being much greater on my brother. I had a strong female presence in my life from my mother and grandmother. Encouraged by my mother's love of reading, I also read voraciously and was the first and only member of my family generation to go to university. Education was, for me, a means to expand my opportunities and economic means, meaning that I would now be perceived and self-define as middle class, aware of the privileges that my education has brought me. As a teenager, I was active in class-based and anti-racist activism, but feminism always felt intuitive to address the gendered inequalities I observed around me. In my 20s and 30s, I was married, bringing up daughters, working in a male-dominated field where there were few senior women, and studying for a PhD. Subsequent to this, after entering academia, my 'feel' for practical feminism developed into a deeper, more theoretical, understanding, which informed my academic career and personal identity.

Florence:

I have defined myself as a feminist since being a teenager, influenced by my mother, who brought me up to be aware of inequalities and who has always been a strong female role model to me. She showed me that it was possible to challenge expectations around womanhood, including pursuing and being highly successful in a career, whilst being a loving, present and supportive mother. Of course, this was a highly privileged upbringing, but I was always in awe of my mother, growing up as a working-class girl and becoming a successful academic. She was such a role model to me that I wanted to follow in her footsteps, always knowing that higher education was an area I wanted to pursue. Again, this shows the level of privilege in my upbringing; higher education seemed an obvious option for me, whereas many face huge challenges to enter and navigate the higher education landscape. In contrast to my mother, I was brought up in an academic world, going into university with Mum as a child when she could not find childcare, travelling to academic conferences, listening in to presentations and conversations. Alongside this privileged upbringing, I first experienced gendered violence at age fifteen and I continued to experience and be a victim of gender-based violence during my teenage years and beyond. These experiences were a significant catalyst in my development as a feminist and activist, the point at which my personal became political. I became angry, passionate, afraid, and I had a deep sense of wanting to change the world to make it safer for women and girls. My PhD is on feminist academic activism, something I pursued because I was looking for an outlet, to turn my feelings into action. Academia felt like a safer way to engage in discussions about feminism and activism and I found myself amongst others who shared my perspectives, as well as those who challenged my privilege and facilitated my feminism to grow beyond gender to solidarities with other forms of exclusion and inequality.

Dialogues

Perspectives on feminism

Florence and her partner have been living with Kathryn and her husband, Florence's step-father, for the last four years, the so-called boomerang generation of young adults returning to a family home while trying to establish themselves (Olofsson et al., 2020). We are lucky, or privileged, enough to have a big enough home for them to do so. During this time Florence researched for her PhD and Kathryn took on her senior management role. Picture us around the table in the kitchen in our home. We eat dinner together most nights, often talking at length, with a glass of wine, about our daily academic work and our struggles. We bounce ideas, release the tension of the day, act as each other's critic, and feminist friend. We learn a great deal from each other's work and world. Our partners often join the debate, engaging with feminist ideas, empathising with women's struggles, both pro-feminist supporters (see also Tienari and Taylor, 2019). We acknowledge this makes our personal lives less of a struggle, but we confine our dialogue here to daughter and mother.

Kathryn: "What does feminism mean to you as a young woman? Is it still relevant?"

Florence: "Yes. Feminism is ultimately 'the personal is political', acknowledging that people's individual experiences of oppression are part of a wider systemic problem of patriarchy. It's also about layers of oppression and the ways in which multiple characteristics, including race, class, sexuality and others, affect people's levels of privilege"

Kathryn: "For me, it's seeing things through a gendered lens and being aware of how gender leads to inequalities or oppression."

Florence: “So, you haven’t mentioned the word ‘feminist’, do you prefer the term ‘gender’?”

Kathryn: “Absolutely not. I consider myself a feminist but I’m also conscious that, while I support women, I don’t necessarily agree with and represent all women because we’re not just essential biological beings as women. There is difference between us. For example, there may be real differences between the values that I hold and those of other women.”

Florence: “Yeah, I think, for me, feminism also encompasses left-wing politics, anti-capitalism and de-colonialism so I can struggle with feminisms that are overly ‘liberal’ and White.”

Kathryn: “So how do you reconcile yourself to that, being a White, middle class, Western woman?”

Florence: “I suppose I’m always learning and trying to listen to the perspectives of women with different backgrounds to my own and to challenge my own potential complicity. I also struggle with some gender-critical radical feminists, who are trans exclusionary, because I strongly believe feminism ought to be inclusive of trans women and non-binary people.”

Kathryn: “Your position on feminism is informed by recent debates on sexual and body politics. I do agree, but I also think that some early elements of ‘liberal’ feminism, such as equality of opportunity, have supported women’s causes and lives.”

Florence: “I do see that, and I am grateful for the work that has been done by feminists before me. But I think for me feminism should be a shared struggle and ‘liberal’ feminism can place much of the emphasis on the individual. The idea of equality of opportunity assumes that everyone starts from the same point, failing to

acknowledge structural and societal inequalities, particularly race and class. For me solidarity and inclusion are about recognising structural privilege.”

In this dialogue, we are emphasising that there are many perspectives on feminism, within which people identify their own position. Although women around the world protest at unequal rights, institutional sexism, sexual harassment, femicide, domestic violence and gender-related unequal power relations, unity and shared purpose amongst all women does not necessarily exist, as post-colonial feminists and non-Western feminists clearly point out in relation to White, liberal feminism (Mohanty, 2003; Raman, 2020; Spivak, 1988). Feminist solidarity between women has to be fought for and made real through individual and collective action, requiring transformations of power relations linked to race, class, sexuality, disability and legal status, as well as gender (Emejulu, 2018). While recognising that there is a multiplicity of feminist identities, we acknowledge a mutual respect for the general struggle of women in our societies. Yet, solidarity can only occur by engaging with our own privileges and through action which addresses other structural inequalities, significant to feminists from all backgrounds. For both of us, feminism is personal and entwined with other aspects of our identities, such as politics and values, experience of gendered work or gendered violence. Each of our feminist positions, illustrated in the dialogue, reflects these experiences. Ahmed’s suggestion that a collective feminist movement involves ‘dialogue with others’ shapes our understandings of feminism and solidarity. For us, solidarity involves the consolidation of the personal, bringing together individual’s personal experiences and backgrounds and understanding them in the context of structural inequalities and a shared struggle.

Activism

At the time of writing our dialogues, Florence is working on her PhD which is explicitly about feminist activism, talking to other feminists, understanding their motivations and challenges, and considering the role of education in promoting gender equality and feminism. She is also gaining some additional experience, and income, as a part-time research assistant.

Kathryn is an executive Dean of a large faculty and also leading on a pan-university institutional project to reform academic career pathways, which intends to promote parity of esteem between research and education, and which, she hopes, will value more readily academic tasks often routinely assigned to women (see also Angervall and Beach, 2020; Ashencaen Crabtree and Shiel, 2019).

Kathryn: “What does being a feminist activist mean to you?”

Florence: “I suppose it means enacting feminism in everything you do, always being critical and challenging gendered norms. For example, my PhD research is one way in which I enact my feminist principles, highlighting feminist voices, giving feminist narratives, following a feminist methodology”.

Kathryn: “But I would also describe you as an activist in other ways outside academia”.

Florence: “I think I might be more vocal in my feminism than you are. I’m potentially more likely to challenge people in the pub, or call people out on Twitter, for sexism or misogyny, even when that can be a very uncomfortable and even dangerous thing to do sometimes. I am part of feminist networks, which don’t necessarily organise activist activity, but they offer space to talk about feminist issues and to connect with other feminists.”

Kathryn: “Do you think that’s because you are a stronger feminist activist or because you are a bit braver in confronting people?”

Florence: “I don't think it's either of those things. I can't *not* do it, or half do it, because otherwise I'm not being authentic. It's not to do with being a stronger feminist, or more of a feminist, or braver; I just think it's how I behave. I get so angry and confronting people is a way of expressing my anger. Don't you ever get angry?”.

Kathryn: “Yes I'm angry, but my way of dealing with it is to try to do something about it, fix it, quite a practical activism relating to things that I feel I can achieve within a certain context, rather than a more confrontational activism where I'm fighting against people.”

Florence: “You're a tempered radical”. (see Meyerson and Scully, 1995)

(Kathryn laughs).

Kathryn: “That's why I'm so invested in the academic career pathways project. Although it's an institutionally sanctioned project rather than my own radical cause, I volunteered to lead it because I think, if implemented effectively, it could bring about greater equalities in academic careers for everyone, but particularly for women. I view this institutional work as a form of feminist activism within the gendered academy. It is trying to do something about it”.

Florence: “Yeah, you are more likely to try quietly to persuade and influence, whereas I'm more outspoken and direct. We are different, but we both stand up to sexism, discrimination, racism and misogyny when we see it”.

In this dialogue, we both acknowledge that we are not involved in formally organised, collective activism. However, we resist the critique of being so-called 'slactivists', since digital networks and individual actions can highlight wider structural problems and assist a more robust feminist politics (Mendes and Ringrose, 2019). Kathryn, from a position of senior management, tries to influence and lead institutional agendas, and Florence, is vocally

and digitally engaged. In addition, we both enact our feminisms through our research, which focuses on feminist issues in our respective disciplines, hoping expanding the reach of feminism itself further. ‘Feminism needs to be everywhere because feminism is not everywhere’ (Ahmed, 2017: 4). We are also constantly developing our own perspectives on feminism by exposing ourselves to new feminist ideas and perspectives through our online activity and research, and through our daughter-mother feminist conversations: ‘to become a feminist is to stay a student’ (Ahmed, 2017: 11). Ahmed (2017: 6) reminds us that ‘Individual struggle does matter; a collective movement depends on it’. Feminist research, online commentary, and institutional actions, even on an individual level, can be considered as aspects of a feminist activist movement.

Our contested identities

At the time of writing our dialogues, we are studying and working in the same institution, albeit in different faculties, which potentially prevents a conflict of interest. Our home is an hour’s commute away from our university. We drive to work together, sometimes meet for coffee or lunch, to make sure we can support each other through our demanding days or simply catch a breath. As we have different family names, not everyone realises we are related. Occasionally, around campus or in the café, we see people looking and wondering about our relationship. Why is she with her?

Florence: “How do you think your position as a senior academic and university leader affects your feminist activism?”

Kathryn: “Since moving into academic leadership, I think I’ve become more of a manager and less of an academic which means that sometimes there are difficult choices for me to make. I can use my position to lead or influence structural initiatives

that I hope will support greater equalities, but I also have to be committed to the wider university strategy and uphold its policies. Sometimes I feel part of the problem not the solution.”

Florence: “Well you are ‘management’!” (laughs)

Kathryn: “I do get annoyed when others refer generically to people in my kind of leadership role as ‘evil Deans’ or demonise us as ‘management’ without recognising that many of us are actually trying our best to practice more values-driven leadership, shift the culture, improve women’s careers, and support individual women. I think this is a kind of activism, in the face of university marketization.”

Florence: “I definitely notice an ‘us and them’ rhetoric from academics towards management”.

Kathryn: “How do you feel about your mother being ‘management’? Does it concern or embarrass you, or put you in a difficult position when colleagues are being critical?”

Florence: “I think people at a similar level to me, in non-management positions, see me as one of them and see the management as ‘other’. They talk about ‘management’ in general, like a term relating to the people at the top, you know, people *over* us, saying things about them that are offensive or highly critical. I understand and sympathise with these views but I also kind of want to say: ‘they’re not all like that!’ I see the challenges you face and how hard you work, so it’s a kind of conflict between these two positions.”

Kathryn: “I think it could be perceived that I am complicit in senior management decision-making that people disagree with, but someone’s got to step up and try to

lead, and I feel as if it might as well be me because I think I can do it as well as or sometimes better than other people”.

Florence: How do you feel about the experience I have had as a PhD student?”

Kathryn: “As your mother, I think you deserved and should have received better support for mental health, career development and teaching opportunities. As an academic manager, I can see the challenges facing the institution that sometimes make it difficult to achieve everything that is desirable.”

Florence: “I don’t quite feel like a ‘real’ academic yet, as a PhD student, maybe you never do. But now it seems much harder for PhD students and early career academics than when you entered academia. Competition for jobs and precarious contracts are a real concern amongst my peers, and the ways in which universities have become increasingly competitive and sometimes hostile working environments.”

In this dialogue, we highlight some contestations related to our feminist academic activism, our positioning as early career and senior academic, and our daughter-mother identities. Just as there are differences between our feminisms and activisms, there are also tensions and differences between our identities. Florence perceives a tension in the difference between being an aspirant early career academic in a precarious position against a senior academic in a stable job. She offers individual support to Kathryn as her mother, but ambivalence for the role of ‘management’ more generally. Kathryn, as a mother, wants more support for her daughter’s experience of studying for a PhD, but as a manager understands the institutional challenges faced. Our dialogue suggests that we both see ourselves as ‘other’. Florence’s otherness stems from a fear that she is not yet a ‘real’ academic but is marginalised in an insecure and temporary role as a PhD student and a research assistant aspiring to a permanent role. Whereas Kathryn’s otherness is based on being perceived as an ‘evil Dean’, who works

to enhance the neo-liberal, managerial institution, marginalised in two ways: by the expectations of management and institutional compliance, and by being perceived as ‘other’ by non-management academics. Yet, within our contested identities is the ability to appear to be compliant, whilst actually resisting: ‘identification with the institution and its core values might only be an impression. An impression can be strategic’ (Ahmed, 2017: 100-101). Moreover, solidarities can emerge from these contestations and tensions.

Feminist solidarities

As we have explored in our dialogues, there are differences between us in the ways we approach feminism and even in our underlying motivations towards feminisms. Nonetheless, we both define as feminists and respect each other’s position as feminists. By trying to understand each other’s feminisms, we create a space for solidarity, sharing and reflecting on our similarities and differences. The solidarity that we feel as daughter and mother springs from a shared love, a need for mutual support, shared outrage at experiences of gendered violence, shared care at moments of vulnerability, shared fun, laughter and living. There is both difference and similarity between us in these aspects of our relationship, but shared dialogue is the backbone of our solidarity as it enables us to explore all these experiences freely and safely. We support each other through the dark times and enjoy our lives in the light. When we talk, discuss, critique, and challenge each other, we try to do it in a respectful and non-combative way that both of us feel comfortable with. The solidarity that we feel as academics has the same root of mutual respect, but plays out in different ways, in terms of how we challenge, act, and enact our feminisms, whether through research (both of us), institutional policy change (Kathryn), or digital protest and confrontation (Florence). These actions express solidarity with other women and supportive others.

Yet, sometimes there is simultaneous tension between our academic positions, precarious and established, alongside solidarity, as daughter and mother. As Florence points out: “I wouldn't be able to be a precarious early career academic if you, as my mother, hadn't housed me and fed me”. The ability to support a child using financial means earned through a senior management professorial role also smacks of privilege as well as solidarity. As White, middle-class academics, we also stand in solidarity with our colleagues who are significantly under-represented in senior academic positions that afford such financial privilege; for example, only 1% of UK professors are black and only 7% Asian (Coughlan, 2021). Moreover, the demands of academia too often relegate elements of identity, such as being feminist, a lesbian, or working class, to an outsider position (Taylor, 2013). Ahmed (2012) reminds us that racism and inequalities persist by being continually overlooked by institutions, and this includes those who are promoted to positions of leadership. In addition, we recognise the structural gendered inequalities in academia, brought starkly to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw women being disadvantaged in numerous ways (Górska et al., 2021; Guy and Arthur, 2020; Utoft, 2020). However, we also acknowledge our positions of privilege in being part of the White, middle class majority in academia, and in being financially, practically and emotionally able to support each other, having the education and vocabulary to express our ideas and underpin our actions, having supportive partners, and academic roles where we can make a difference. We are not alone. We are in solidarity as daughter and mother, and as feminist academics, together, and with others.

Fears and hopes for the future

Ahmed suggests being a feminist activist can feel ‘like making your life harder than it needs to be’ (2017, p. 235), as feminists are constantly aware of subtle and overt gendered injustices that are occurring around them. She uses the figure and concept of a ‘feminist killjoy’ to

represent the way in which a feminist presence is perceived by others as disruptive and challenging; feminists are considered to be ‘killjoys’ when their very existence makes those resistant to change feel uncomfortable. We become the challenge within. Paying attention to injustices and trying to do things differently in academia requires work, all of which can cause a feminist activist to feel worn out and become emotionally and physically exhausted. Both of us have struggled with the emotional toll of academic work, our emotions encompassing anger, frustration, distress, as well as enjoyment, laughter, and wonder. Our bodies have been tense, tired, aching, longing for respite, invigorated. Both of us have experienced self-doubt about our future as academics.

Yet, being a ‘feminist killjoy’ is not a gloomy position, but a source of resistance, challenging gendered inequalities. Ahmed offers a feminist ‘killjoy survival kit’ (Ahmed, 2017: 235), reminding us that our emotions and our bodies can be a resource that we can draw on:

“To be a killjoy is often to be assigned as being emotional, too emotional; letting your feelings get in the way of your judgement; letting your feelings get in the way. Your feelings can be a site of rebellion. A feminist heart beats the wrong way; feminism is hearty” (Ahmed, 2017: 246).

Our bodies are also part of that survival kit and need to be looked after:

“Bodies speak to us. Your body might tell you it is not coping with what you are asking; and you need to listen. You need to listen to your body. If it screams, stop. If it moans, slow down. Listen. Feminist ears: they too are in my survival kit” (Ahmed, 2017: 247).

Our continued feminist activism in the academy requires a belief that the situation can improve, otherwise any effort would be pointless. This belief in the possibility of improvement is hope. We retain hope in order to continue in the work of challenging

gendered norms and structures: ‘survival can also be about keeping one’s hopes alive’ (Ahmed, 2017: 235).

Florence: “Getting a job in the current climate scares me but I still think academia has so many positive aspects such as the freedom to do research, the ability to keep developing and learning, to engage with students, teach and write about something I am passionate about, so I am still hopeful and excited about the future. If I didn’t have hope, there would be no point continuing to be a feminist or an academic.”

Remaining hopeful while working in a gendered space can be a difficult task, particularly if one encounters opposition from others. This is where solidarities with other feminists give emotional support and reaffirm the importance of trying to bring about change: ‘It is about the experience of others who recognise the dynamics because they too have been there, in that place, that difficult place’ (Ahmed, 2017: 244). For us, as daughter and mother, and sister feminists, we could not survive without each other’s support and that of others.

Postscript to our dialogues

Florence passed her PhD and obtained two part-time, fixed-term, post-doctoral positions in different universities some 100 miles apart. Her routine involved managing her travel and her time, engaging in two different projects with different teams, juggling the different cultures of two institutions. Although neither project explicitly focused on gender, she continued her feminist work through creating new networks and building feminist relationships. She found this exhausting yet stimulating, long hours of travel and the complexity of the work, taking its toll on her body, as well as her mind. Eventually, the uncertainty and insecurity of precarious employment, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, began to take too much of a toll on her mental health and wellbeing. She is consequently leaving academia, moving to a professional research role as Policy and Research Manager for an organisation which focuses

on higher education student career development and graduate employment. She is disappointed to be leaving academia, but excited to be involved in work which has the potential to influence the higher education landscape for the better.

Kathryn has stepped down from her senior management role after completing a term of office. She listened to her body and took some time out to recover from the relentlessness of the workload, the responsibility, and the bruising exhaustion of trying to lead ethically. She has taken up a new position in a different university where she has time to read and research again and she can be intellectually active through student engagement, research and mentoring early career colleagues.

Although we acknowledge our own vulnerabilities and failures, through our own forms of academic activism, solidarity and survival, we both remain hopeful. As Ahmed (2017: 235-236) states:

“Survival can thus be what we do for others, with others. We need each other to survive; we need to be part of each other’s survival.

To be committed to a feminist life means that we cannot not do this work; we cannot not fight for this cause, whatever it causes, so we have to find a way of sharing the costs of that work. Survival thus becomes a shared feminist project.”

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