



## Article

# “It’s Not Just about Work and Living Conditions”: The Underestimation of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Black Canadian Women

Melanie Knight <sup>1,\*</sup>, Renée Nichole Ferguson <sup>2</sup> and Rai Reece <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON M5B 2K3, Canada; rreece@ryerson.ca<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Work, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON M5B 1G6, Canada; renee.ferguson@ryerson.ca

\* Correspondence: melanie.knight@ryerson.ca

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has increasingly been defined as the *shecession* for its disproportionate debilitating impact on women. Despite this gendered analysis, a number of health activists have called on governments to account for the experiences of Black communities as they are disproportionately suffering the effects of this pandemic. In the media’s address of the impact of the pandemic, we ask, what experiences are represented in news stories and are Black women present in these representations. Performing a content analysis of 108 news articles, a reading of media discourses through a racial lens reveals a homogenization of women’s experiences and an absence of the Black experience. In the small number of news stories that do focus on Black women, we see that the health disparities are not simply the result of precarious work and living conditions, but also the struggle against anti-Black racism on multiple fronts. In critiquing, however, we also bring forth the small number of news stories on the Black experience that speak to the desire and hope that can thrive outside of white supremacist structures.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; media representation; Black Canadian women; Black Canadian Feminist Thought; misogyny



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world and in particular, the most marginalized in our society. As of late, it has been defined as the *shecession*, a term coined by C. Nicole Mason that describes its disproportionate debilitating impact on women (Gupta 2020). Feminists point to the gendered politics of work-life balance and care work disproportionately affecting women (see Alon et al. 2020; Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020; Sevilla and Smith 2020). Daily news coverage emphasizes the exacerbation felt on the part of many women concerning employment, livelihood, work-life balance, health, mortality and overall well-being. This understanding of the pandemic’s impact on women, however, still falls short. As of late, a number of health activists have called on governments to account for the experiences of different communities, including Black communities, in part, with the collection of race-based data. Empirical research in Canada finds that Black communities are disproportionately suffering the effects of this pandemic (Bowden and Cain 2020; Seucharan and Bascaramurty 2020; Wilson 2021). In exploring these inequities, we ask, in the media’s address of the impact of the pandemic on women, what experiences and impacts are represented? What assumptions are made around work-life balance? As such, are racialized women, and more specifically, Black women, present in those media representations? Performing a content analysis of 108 news articles, we argue that while the media, in part, accounts for the pandemic’s crushing impact on women, it homogenizes their experiences. Readings of gendered work-life complexities assume a particular type of worker, lifestyle, family structure and family income that speak to the experiences of white women. News coverage on the broader category of race fails to account for the specific

experiences of Black communities, and in particular the experiences of Black women. A smaller number of articles focused more specifically on the Black experience do in fact provide more depth and a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the pandemic for Black communities. These stories contextualize the pandemic within the systemic pervasiveness of anti-Black racism (Nelson 2008; Walker 2010; Maynard 2017).

A reading of media discourses through a racial lens reveals a homogenization of women's experiences and an absence of the Black experience at a time when it is most crucial. Our focus is on Black Canadian women's experiences. Locating this work in a Canadian context means using Black Canadian Feminist Thought as a guiding framework to elucidate how misogynoir<sup>1</sup>, i.e., the entanglement of race and gender, configures into this dynamic. Patricia Hill Collins (2002) reminds us that Black women cannot be emancipated without the elimination of intersecting oppressions that permeate many facets of their lives, and thus a Black feminist perspective has the ability not only to address the particularities of Black women's needs, but to also respond to broader issues of social justice. Media narratives serve as barometers for policy priorities and policy windows. If the existing media narrative fails to address the degree to which the pandemic has impacted the lives of Black women, then their wellbeing will not be properly addressed by any policy aimed at addressing the fallout from COVID-19. In critiquing, however, we also bring forth the small number of hopeful stories on the Black experience that speak to what communities' desire, following Tuck's (2009) work on desire-based framework. The desire is for the creation of Black community spaces where art, support, resistance and empowerment can thrive outside of white supremacist structures.

This paper falls at the intersection of multiple fields of study. To contextualize the media representation of the impact of the pandemic on women, we call on the role/importance of media in shaping policy, feminist research on economic restructuring and work-life balance and on research that calls for Black feminist theory as an essential framework.

## 2. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black: Health, Media and Policy

Research on work-life balance is often discussed in relation to social constructions of the ideal mother or worker, the conflicting experiences of the work-family interface, the multiple demands for time and resources or the effect of these on the wellbeing of women (Ekinsmyth 2013; Duberley and Carrigan 2013; Gupta et al. 2009; Eddleston and Powell 2012; Desrochers and Sargent 2004; Reynolds and Renzulli 2005; Shelton 2006; Voydanoff 2005; Parasuraman and Simmers 2001; Malenfant et al. 2007). Important points of references within these discussions relate to normative gender roles/identities and gender-specific motives (Gupta et al. 2009; Porter and Nagarajan 2005; Ergeneli et al. 2010). Some caution against the essentialization of motherhood and advocate for critiquing the ideological and moral discourses underpinning the category (DiQuinzio 2007) or critiquing how the competing discourses of the ideal mother and worker frame notions of choice and agency (Hays 2007). Feminist research attends to the complicated lived realities of women who attempt to (re)produce and/or resist the categories of mother and worker. The interplay of these lived realities and the complexities that these create for mothers remain obscured, if not completely hidden, within the context of social policy development. While feminist research has been clear that women have been written out of policy in the context of neoliberalism, feminist critiques of working conditions, work-life balance, family responsibilities, gender roles/identities, structural barriers and subsequent impact on health fail to account for race, and more specifically, the experiences of differently located women, namely Black women.

Many Black women reside on the periphery of society, occupying precarious employment in occupations that provide little to no job security, health benefits or possibilities for advancement. There has been a plethora of scholarly expositions providing analysis on the intersection of work, family and Black women in the United States (Jones 1982; Branch 2011). Furthermore, research illuminating contestations regarding race and Black motherhood (Collins 1987; Roberts 1997) have also been noted. In Canada, although there

has been research in the area of Black Canadian Feminist Thought, (see [Wane 2009, 2013; Massaquoi and Wane 2007](#)), our work here specifically seeks to address the erasure of Black women's experiences in relation to media, policy and work-life balance. As a framework, Black Canadian Feminist Thought is about intersectionality, anti-essentialism and privileges the narratives of Black women in Canada by providing distinct experiences and herstories unique to a Black woman's life in Canada ([Bristow et al. 1994; Brand 1999; Cooper 2000; Reid-Maroney et al. 2018](#)). We detail this theoretical framework later on but briefly focus on research that accounts for the work-life, health experiences of Black women often homogenized in feminist critiques of neoliberalism and capitalist forms of exploitation.

Research on the impact of structural racism and health disparities among Black people ([Williams and Collins 2001; Williams et al. 2009; Williams 2012; Gee and Ford 2011](#)), and more specifically Black women ([Collins et al. 2014; Lewis et al. 2017; Taylor 2020; Yearby 2020](#)), have long been noted in the United States. In Canada, research aligned with similar foci has required more attention. One of the few studies conducted by [Veenstra et al. \(2016\)](#) used nine cycles of the Canadian Community Health Survey to analyze multiple health outcomes in a sample of 3127 Black women, 309,720 white women, 2529 Black men and 250,511 white men. They concluded that Black Canadians who experience racism have higher rates of comorbidities such as diabetes and hypertension; Black Canadians have lower rates of heart disease and cancer and Black Canadian women "represent a mental health paradox similar to the one that exists for African Americans in the United States" ([Veenstra et al. 2016](#), p. 51). Interestingly, their study indicated that Black women and men were more likely than their white counterparts to report diabetes and hypertension, and Black women were less likely than white women to report cancer and fair/poor mental health (*Ibid*). There is no paradox of the Canadian healthcare system in Canada when it comes to illuminating the impact of racism, access and health inequities for Black women. [Katshunga et al. \(2020\)](#) note the disproportionate number of Black women living with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cancer (see work by [Nnorom et al. 2019](#)), HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease, lupus and hypertension. Anti-Black racism and in particular misogynoir has been a key determinant in the negative outcomes and experiences of optimal health for Black women. Furthermore, Black women are experiencing rising incidences of mental health issues such as depression. Entangled with an ongoing racial pandemic and unprecedented health pandemic, lack of health data specific to Black women's health provides little solace or comfort during these challenging times.

Knowing this information on health matters for Black women, it stood to reason that COVID-19 would also produce distinct experiences that needed to be understood. With the first case of COVID-19 diagnosed in Canada on 25 January 2020, the rise of the novel coronavirus, first disaggregated by country before ballooning into a global pandemic, has been fashioned after much-ballyhooed neoliberal narratives of governmental social control, collective community-care and access to universal healthcare in Canada for "all Canadians". As the rising contraction and morbidity rate of the virus steadily increased among racialized groups, particularly Black people in Canada, this narrative soon changed. Many noted that much of the initial rhetoric and concern about the contraction and survival rates of the virus omitted a discussion about the need to collect race-based statistics in terms of the virus' impact on marginalized and racialized populations. Social pressure and commentary placed political pressure and importance for the Canadian government to take note of the relevance of collecting race-based COVID-19 data and specifically its impact on Black communities. For example, UNIFOR, Canada's largest private sector union has called on federal, provincial and municipal governments to direct public health bodies and other data collection agencies and departments to collect racial data on COVID-19 testing, infection and mortality rates ([Unifor n.d.](#), see also [McKenzie 2020](#)).

Health disparities among Black women in Canada have called for a national Black health strategy as a way to address anti-Black racism ([Katshunga et al. 2020](#)). The recent

work of a research team led by Dr. Roberta K. Timothy seeks to fill this gap. In January 2020, Timothy's research team launched the first ever community-based database, collecting information from members of African/Black communities impacted by COVID-19. Drs. Timothy and Reece also held the first ever webinar in Canada titled, "Black Health Matters: Responding to COVID-19" to discuss the importance of race-based data collection and the Canadian government's lack of response to the crisis and its disproportionate impact on racialized communities (see [Reece 2020](#)). Despite the crucial and underrepresented nature of work such as that of Dr. Timothy, the media's accounts of racial health disparities with the COVID-19 pandemic present a largely uncritical non-Black-experience-informed understanding of the risk, harm and overall experience of the pandemic for Black women in particular ([Huncar 2020](#)).

The significant relationship between media and policy has been well established in communication research. Media plays a critical, powerful role in the policy agenda setting phases ([Fawzi 2018](#)). The influence at this first phase is integral as it impacts all other phases. Agenda setting, under the right political conditions, leads to imminent policy adoption ([Hays and Glick 1997](#)). The media also serve as knowledge brokers, circulating and sustaining policy-relevant information within the policy ecosystem to a range of policy actors ([Yanovitzky and Weber 2019](#)). In this knowledge broker role, media brings awareness, accessibility and engagement from science to various types of policy actors ([Gesualdo et al. 2020](#)). Most critically, media has the power to define and delineate how we culturally come to understand what is happening in the world. It can influence policy debates by "framing or defining an issue using dialogue or rhetoric to persuade or dissuade the public", and "... change not just the attention paid to those issues, *but the different types of policy solutions sought*" ([Soroka et al. 2012](#), author's emphasis). COVID-19 and the associated economic repercussions bear crucial policy windows; the recognition of the role of the media during such moments requires a closer reading of the media's construction of the work-life balance dilemma during COVID-19.

The paper examines where race, and especially gendered Blackness are simultaneously visible and invisible in media discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before situating and contextualizing the diverse identities and experiences of Black women, we assert that media must be read through a critical race feminist lens, with particular attention to anti-Black racism.

### 3. Black Canadian Feminism

Judy [Scales-Trent \(1989\)](#) reminds us that "in a society that sees as powerful both whiteness and maleness [B]lack women possess no characteristic associated with power ... [t]hey are therefore treated by society in a manner that reflects a status different from, and lower than, both [B]lack men (who have the status ascribed to maleness) and white women (who enjoy the status associated to whiteness" (p. 43). It stands to reason, then, the importance of intersectionality and that Black women's experiences ought to be grounded in an analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized and racialized communities. Moreover, Black women's precarious position in the Canadian labour market is driven by capitalism and is part of a broader struggle for empowerment and social justice that, for Black feminism, is undergirded by "vulnerability and accountability, of solidarity and transformation" ([Nash 2019](#), p. 115). This means that the various ways in which Black women see the world are never in isolation of the colonial (her)stories/subject positions that they occupy nor the solidarity and transformation they build. Racial capitalism negates Black women's experiences of misogynoir, rendering the political economy and material conditions of Black women's lives invisible. In this paper, we consider the unique position of Black women in Canada via a critical Black Canadian feminist lens. As an important anti-racist feminist methodology this framework theoretically presents an opportunity to examine the interplay among COVID-19, anti-Black racism and the material conditions of Black women's lives in Canada.

Given the varied life experiences and the ways in which misogynoir impacts Black women's lives in relation to precarious employment, health disparities, mental health and work-life balance, Njoki Wane (2009) reminds us that "Black Canadian feminist theory is rich in terms of how it could be informed by the heterogeneity and uniqueness of the particular Canadian experience" (p. 66). Black Canadian Feminist Thought, then, recognizes the diverse experiences of Black women in Canada and this methodological framework allows us to examine the paradigmatic bridge between the political economy of work and health for Black women. This guided framework explores the connective threads that impact media and policy since policies inform the legality of how social and political institutions operate, and Black and racialized women often bear the brunt of precarious employment (Das Gupta 2006; Delaire 2020). Furthermore, given the historical negation of the gender factor in theorizing about race, (see Blauner 1972; Gilroy 1993; Fredrickson 1981; Kenan 1996; Memmi 1983), Crenshaw (1991) reminds us that the experiences of Black women are critical because the experiential base upon which many feminist insights are grounded is white. As such, Black Canadian Feminist Thought further provides a necessary lens through which to examine and understand the practical landscape of the health and work of Black women in Canada.

#### 4. Methodology

Consistent with other critical race research, this study is guided by three research questions that are informed by Black Canadian Feminist Thought and the overarching need for epistemological standpoints of Black women in relation to public health and work-life balance. We use a Black Canadian Feminist lens that can account for the intersecting experiences of Black women in Canada. This foundational methodology allows for an examination of the close relationship between media, policy and Black Canadian women's lived experience by paying attention to visible key media narratives on race, gender and the pandemic. In the media's address of the impact of the pandemic on women, what experiences and impacts are represented? What assumptions are made around the gendered work-life balance? As such, where and how are Black women's experiences represented? Certain parameters were placed on the data collection process. We limited our analysis to English-language newspapers across Canada covering each province between the dates of 1 March 2020 and 1 November 2020. To start, a Google search was conducted to ascertain examples of provincial newspapers (and those in Territories). With a substantial list overall, we then examined their availability through the University database. Only the English-language newspapers that were available through the Ryerson University and the University of Toronto libraries were consulted. Although this is a limitation of this study, this method ensured a diversity of sources across Canada.

We divided the search between Central, Eastern, Western and Territories in Canada. Five areas connected to our research questions guided the search in the database: (1) COVID-19 and work-life balance, (2) COVID-19 and race, (3) COVID-19 and Black and/or anti-Black racism, (4) COVID-19 and gender and (5) COVID-19 and parenting. As we wished to analyze the representation of the impact of the pandemic on Black women, we felt these five areas were both broad and narrow enough to capture gender, race, work-life and health stories. We were hopeful that our desired analysis on the representation of the impact of the pandemic on women would be covered with search terms such as gender (or women) and work-life balance and parenting. For coverage on Black communities, and Black women, although we welcomed the idea of possibly seeing articles in the work-life, gender search, we also felt that adding race could reveal more. We also knew, however, that the concept of race often homogenizes, and in some instances is conflated with, ethnicity and felt it important to specifically name Black and anti-Black racism.

Our coding method process did reveal issues with generalizability, in that more articles on Black communities were written in Ontario, most likely a reflection of the higher concentration of Black communities in the province. We also are not making the claim that stories on certain Black communities are representative of all. What we did see is that even

with a focus on the local/provincial stories focusing on Black experiences (e.g., anti-Black racism and the Toronto Transit Commission), national and systemic issues concerning racism were present and relevant (e.g., the need for national race-based data collection in education, employment, health). Excluded in searches, however, were broad search terms, such as pandemic, COVID-19 or narrow ethnic identity terms. For the former, we initially found the content to be related to vaccines, federal financial relief or information on school and business closures. The latter yielded few results as it was too narrow in scope. Each province and territory yielded different numbers of relevant articles. Western Canada and the territories yielded 17 sources, 70 in Ontario and 21 in Quebec and Eastern Canada for a total of 108 newspaper articles. All articles were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet.

The first step of analysis was preliminary, inductive manual coding. As Ontario yielded many more sources, its analysis was shared among all three researchers. In total, the researchers independently examined roughly 35 articles each. Each researcher had their own Excel Table to start. Demographic-type information was recorded including region, newspaper, title of article and date of publication. The five themes were given numbers (1–5) recorded as numbers, repetition of phrases, ideas and relevant quotes. Assigning articles to one of five themes was meant to separate the different coverage of COVID-19 as it was evident in early observations that race-based tracking was not prevalent early on in the pandemic, but was taken up in later media coverage. Up to this point, there were few differences in perspectives, except that stories that covered parental issues were largely talking about struggles with work-life balance.

A closer reading of the newspaper articles required that researchers develop more coding precision as just having a category of work-life balance, for instance, would not provide much insight into the representation of this issue. As such, for this study, as a second phase of coding, researchers identified a priori specific possible guiding concepts that would provide a lens for the reading of the newspaper articles within each of the five sections. For example, the issue of work-life balance is not simply one of a division of labour/tasks. A Black Canadian feminist reading pays attention to gendered language, assumptions about gender norms and practices and how race and class inform politics of gender. As such, researchers paid particular attention to (a) racially gendered and classed assumptions, (b) questions of access, exclusion and barriers, and (c) notions of vulnerability, dependence, safety and emotional toll as all being connected to health outcomes. More specifically, in articles coded as COVID-19 and work-life balance, we asked: How was the issue of access to additional income or childcare, for instance, conceptualized? Who has the ability to leave one's job or to homeschool children? It should be noted that the a priori concepts developed in the second phase arose in conversation with one another. Researchers discussed their personal and family experiences of the pandemic, the experiences of their children, the scholarly requests that were being asked of them, largely tied to debates on anti-Black racism, gender, health and Black communities.

In terms of process, with the a priori guiding concepts, we read our assigned news articles and independently highlighted specific quotes about work-life, parenting, access and safety that were featured prominently in the news stories. We then collectively discussed the quotes we had highlighted (for all 108 articles) and unpacked the significance of those quotes for each of us. It is from this type of close reading and conversation that distinct themes were "elevated" and identified as more significant. As such, we show a more nuanced understanding of the silences and absences of Black women's experience in media representations. We did feel certain topics extended too far for the purposes of this paper. The idea of activism proved too broad, as was the topic of violence. We also realized that the daily practices of advocacy, as having an impact on health, was also difficult to undertake adequately.

Despite the fact that early on, the positioning of the COVID-19 citizen was inherently privileged, distinctively middle-class and heteronormative, we noted a shift as time progressed where the pandemic was increasingly defined as a burden on women. The representation of this gendered subject homogenized women's experiences, leaving out

analyses of race and the experiences of diverse women. We also see more stories more focused on Black communities that account for systemic anti-Black racism and the subsequent impact on the nuances of the impact on health. We also see stories of desires and wishes for Black communities that speak of hope.

## 5. Findings

In the early days of the pandemic there was much confusion and panic. At that time, people did not know a great deal about the virus, its transmission or its potential effects. In terms of media coverage, of the total number of articles that were sampled by researchers, approximately one-fifth (25) focused more specifically on the general malaise of work-life balance, in large part for parents. These articles point to class privilege and a particular kind of subjectivity. Increasingly evident is the legitimization of an enterprising neoliberal subject who rationally and consciously calculates the costs and benefits of all their choices, actions and beliefs (Lemke 2001) and whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity to self-care—the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. These show the COVID-19 citizen as in fact inherently privileged, distinctively middle-class and heteronormative. As time progressed, the pandemic was increasingly defined as a burden on women. Representation of the impact of the pandemic on women, however, spoke to the experiences of a particular classed and raced subject, namely privileged and white. Lastly, as time progressed, more news stories began to account for race and even Black communities. Despite the lack of a nuanced understanding of Black women's experiences, which in turn fails to account for the health impacts, a smaller number of news stories focused on desire and hopes for diverse Black communities.

### 5.1. *Shecession*

Despite the narrative of a responsabilization and privileged class undertones of media articles, as time progressed, many articles, 23 in our sample, begin to refer to the COVID-19 pandemic as the *shecession*, signaling how women have been the ones bearing the brunt of the shrinking economy. One article notes, “the COVID-19 pandemic has derailed the working lives and economic prospects of Alberta women” (Stephenson 2020). Women are more likely to consider quitting their jobs in order to accommodate their family roles, in particular the care of children with virtual schooling. More women report having thought about leaving their jobs, finding it stressful to juggle work and family during the pandemic and have turned down job opportunities because of high family pressures. Household chores, although more evenly distributed amongst partners than decades ago, are nevertheless still gendered and overwhelmingly fall on women (e.g., cooking, shopping, cleaning, household management, childcare and homework helping). The age-old debate of better access to childcare needs vast improvement in order for women to cope. In this regard, one article notes, “as the pandemic pushes women's participation in the labour force down, economists and investment leaders say the country's economic recovery is at risk if employees can't access affordable child care to get back to work” (Johnson 2020). A great focus on women is also evident with news stories focusing on violence against women and girls and some have referred to the pandemic as a “shadow pandemic” (Wakefield 2020).

Many of the news articles that have a “woman-centered lens” point to the problematic “good mothering” message. In one article it notes, “for the good of her family, the 33-year-old made the decision to take a leave from her job” (Stephenson 2020). While the unemployment rate has risen for both women and men, it seems that it is women, not men, who are making the decision to opt out of the workforce entirely. In the article, we are told that she and her partner have been working from home and juggling child-care demands since the start of the pandemic and are, in her words, “mentally and physically exhausted” (Ibid). Data for the story was the result of a recent survey by the industry advocacy group Women in Capital Markets. This survey indicated that women finance professionals are 16 per cent more likely than men to report a decrease in mental health since the start of the pandemic and 10 per cent more likely to report increased stress levels. A similar narrative

is echoed in other stories, “Mongoven had just ended a hectic 20-year career as an event planning professional to start a health coaching business, which she can run remotely. Her family is currently living in a home previously owned by her partner’s late grandparents, and enjoying the ample space and access to nature. They plan to settle in a small town permanently.” (Chiu 2020).

Despite the feminist critique of the pandemic, we see a particular kind of female subject in these news stories. It is a subject who is responsabilized and self-reliant with the ability to pivot and make the best of a difficult situation. In a call that is reminiscent of war efforts, white middle-class women are called upon to demonstrate their neoliberal sensibilities and transform into supporting the efforts and safety on the homefront. We must question the choice of being able to leave one’s employment, turning down opportunities or end a career; that these were ever individual choices in the first place. As we will see in the following section, it is also worth noting the new-found calls for better childcare, something desperately needed for racialized women who are more likely to occupy precarious employment. Even the focus on specific kinds of female workers, managerial upper level positions who most likely have amassed years of experience, possibly status, resources and savings to have the opportunity to leave paid work.

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## 5.2. *The Black Experience*

As time passed, governments heeded to calls for the collection of race-based data in particular as the COVID-19 numbers began to rise. In approximately 15 of the articles in our sample, media articles focused more explicitly on racial health disparities concerning COVID-19. Despite the identification of racial disparities, many news stories pay attention to the impact of the pandemic, such as job loss and financial instability. What we begin to see with impact are correlational-type surveys of cause and effect. In most cases it is charting how people of different ethnicities have fared with regards to unemployment, financial stress, access to health care and food. Few of the news stories, however, make note of specific groups and also tend to assume many racialized people are immigrants.

In doing more specific searches with terms such as “Black”, “pandemic” and/or “COVID-19”, many of the news articles (12 of the 41) focus on what we see as more visible instances of anti-Black racism. For example, some stories cover an incident where a young Black high school student had a graduating thank you message to his grandmother replaced with a racist message next to his picture making reference to him as Harambe, a gorilla at the Cincinnati zoo (Follert 2020). Another article details the event of a white woman calling police on a Black man while out on a trail. Yet another article, entitled “Trustee apologizes for online posting of photo showing teen in closed park” relays the story of a Black teen who was playing basketball in a park alone. The Ottawa school board trustee posted a picture on Facebook and rationalized her actions as protecting the community as parks and outdoor spaces were closed. The boy’s father was angered at the photo being posted and the shaming, harassing and potentially causing future harm to his child’s athletic prospects is yet another example of anti-Black racism. Other articles highlighted the Black Lives Matter movement being called a “terrorist group”, while others detail the story of a Black



Canadian doctor being subjected to unfair blame and racism when accused of spreading the virus within a small community. Many of these news stories focus on the subsequent legal measures taken by individuals and community protests against anti-Black racism.

Another prevalent theme in the news articles (13/41) are stories that begin to point to the specificity and chronic nature of anti-Black racism as a “cumulative effect” (Paradkar 2020). Some news articles speak of specific initiatives such as the health impact of the pandemic on Black communities and the stigma and judgement for seeking treatment for mental illnesses (Ngabo 2020). In the piece by Ngabo (2020), the coverage is on the initiatives of three professionals who launched Black Mental Health Matters. They note that the “continued effects of racism, going back centuries, contribute to increased levels of anxiety, PTSD, depression and other possible mental health issues among the Black population”. This article speaks to the root causes of inadequate treatment of Black individuals, bias in assessment tools and a lack of services. Another article by Myers (2020) calls out many anti-Black systemic issues found within the Toronto Transit Commission system. With few, if any, Black board members or senior executives on TTC boards, the needs of Black residents are often ignored, devalued and dismissed when transit plans are developed in Scarborough, a city with a high concentration of Black residents. The author goes on to say that the TTC’s response to the pandemic reveals anti-Black racism as systemic. To address failing ridership the TTC cut service levels by 16 percent and laid off 1200 TTC employees. No fare inspector, however, was laid off. In fact, more were hired despite the suspension of fare enforcements during the pandemic. The key issues highlighted are crowded buses, lower fares and a permanent end of fare enforcement. Knowing that Black women are concentrated in precarious frontline care work, that there is a high proportion of Black migrant workers in agriculture, that a high concentration of racialized/Black workers are in the gig economy and that prisons as an epicentre of infections disproportionately impact incarcerated Black people, why are Black communities absent from discussion on addressing systemic issues in relation to the pandemic (Jones 2020)? In order to find the Black experience, one must actively look. More generalized articles homogenize, dehistoricize and assume commonality or shared experiences as they relate to work-life, family and livelihood.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Whose Shecession?

In news articles representing the impact of the pandemic on women, the work-life balance debate is often framed in relation to choice and flexibility in raising children and participation in employment. Perpetuating the ease or flexibility of self-employment and family balance feeds into, for some, the so-called “good mother” message—a gendered division of labour that naturally positions women as the ideal caregivers. Absent, however, is an analysis or understanding of race. Challenging this gendered perspective of work-life balance, Tracey Reynolds (2001) contends that for Black women, “good mothering” is not so much defined by “traditional Western ideologies of mothering and employment that present the two as separate, and often incompatible, gendered entities” (p. 1054). For Black women, “good mothering” is interlocked with wage work and, therefore, presents a “distinctive alternative to the idealized and normative representation of the ‘good mother’—the mother who remains at home to care for her children, in particular during the formative years” (p. 1054). There are two important things to note here. One is the assumption that “good mothering” is tied to unpaid work (remaining home), an expectation that has never truly been linked to Black women for whom motherhood has always been tied to paid work and mutually integrated political and private realms; and two, the intersection of race and gender in contextualizing the lack of media narrative focusing on and disaggregating the specificities of Black women’s experience in relation to work-life balance. Just as Crichlow et al. (2020) argue, the conceptualization of the *shecession* has failed to recognise racial capitalism and, in turn, misogynoir and the present-day exploitation of Black labour and the specificities of Black parenting.

In representing the impact of COVID-19 on women, the message is of women being pushed out of wage work or in some instances pulled out of love for their families. This, as we argue, assumes a particular female worker. One must acknowledge the history of jobs that were most likely available to non-white women. In media narratives, women workers squeezed out are not essential (largely Black) frontline healthcare workers, and so the plight of having been pushed out speaks to a particular kind of female worker, namely white. This de-raced assumption then fails to account for the experiences of different women and the social impact of this pandemic on their lives. [Gordon \(2020\)](#) notes that in one study conducted by Statistics Canada, nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate for racialized women was 10.5% in November 2020 compared to 6.2% for white women of that same time period. [Galabuzi's \(2006\)](#) work has highlighted that the differential treatment that racialized people experience includes unequal access to the Canadian labour market including housing access, education and healthcare. What is lost here is also the specific impact on Black women's health. Their continued precarious paid work without benefits or sick days, living in neighborhoods with high infection rates often not within accessible public transit essential for Black families is also vital to the Canadian nation and comes at emotional and physical costs, not only to them but their families and communities.

### 6.2. What Impacts Black Women's Health?

As time progressed, more news stories began to account for Black communities (13/41 of the 108). What does a focus on Black communities and Black women reveal? The small number of such articles reveal the need to account for the chronic aspects of anti-Black racism (nuanced understanding) and subsequent impact on health. COVID-19 is exposing an issue that is long-standing for racialized and Black families. In addition, [Walzer's \(1996\)](#) use of the term mental labour is useful here and is meant to distinguish the thinking, feeling and interpersonal work that accompanies the care of babies from the physical tasks. She includes in the general category of mental labour what has been referred to as *motion work*, *thought work* and *invisible work*. She includes aspects of *baby care work* that involves thinking, feeling or managing thoughts that are not necessarily perceived as work by the person performing it. For the purpose of this study, it is not so much the focus on acknowledging that mental labour in relation to the managing of anti-Black racism is labour but acknowledging that this type of labor is one that is often invisible and unaccounted for in the understanding of social determinants of health as it relates to Black communities.

In Canada, the health disparities for Black women are not simply the result of precarious work and living conditions, but also the eradication of social programs and the simultaneous push to individualism, which has not only rendered invisible their continued precarious state as waged workers and their unpaid care work, but has legitimized the reordering of racialized women as having disordered relationship to the state when they are unable to enact individualized non-state solutions to better their work and family situations ([Scott and London 2008](#)). For Black communities and Black women, what most news articles fail to capture is the continued strain that is not an aberration of the pandemic. It is the impact of prolonged unemployment, uneven or nonexistent access to healthcare services and ensuring the safety of children expanding the idea of barriers to learning.

There is a lag in research in the area of Black women's health as it intersects with their historically informed work/employment (see [Knight 2016](#)). Black Canadian Feminist Thought ushers in two key issues pertaining to our topic: the racial and gendered dynamics of Black women in Canada's labour force, and Black women and health. When looking for the scholarly connections between Black women's work and health, one exception is the recent study by [Katshunga et al. \(2020\)](#), which outlines a number of socio-political issues germane to Black women in Canada. Among them, two issues pertaining to our topic arise: the racial and gendered dynamics of Black women in Canada's labour force, and Black women and health. Their work underscores how racism has also played a pivotal part in the ways in which studies about the material conditions of Black women's

lives have been negated or completely left out of any *political economic* analysis in Canada. Prior to COVID-19, the marginalized position of Black women in regard to their lack of economic, political and social resources can be seen as a contributing factor related to the disproportionate numbers of Black women who are economically deprived. For example, the Canadian Association of Social [Canadian Association of Social Workers \(2005\)](#) noted that in 2000, 34.5 percent of Black women's wages and salaries in family contexts fell below the low-income cut-off of Statistics Canada (the unofficial poverty income line in Canada is \$20,000). The report further indicates that the "incidence of Black women in families who are poor is two and a half times higher than other women in families (13.7 percent) and almost three times higher than men in families (12.0 percent). Among unattached individuals, the discrepancy is not as great, but it is still higher—52.7 percent for Black women compared to 41.9 percent for other women and 33.6 percent for men" (2005, p. 11). In comparison, sixteen years later, [Katshunga et al. \(2020\)](#) note that in 2016, the labour force participation rate for Black women was 66.1% (five percentage points higher than that of non-racialized women), yet unemployment among Black women was about twice the rate of non-racialized women (12.2% vs. 6.4%) and Black women earned 59 cents for every dollar that non-racialized men earned ([Katshunga et al. 2020](#)).

What of Black children? Aside from an article asserting that it is natural to fear telling children about the details of the pandemic, most speak of intensive school divides between marginalized and privileged communities. Although the amassing of quantitative race-based data is informative and important, COVID-19 health disparities and their immediate cause (e.g., loss of work) is but one element. Essential is assessing the inter-related facets of life that contribute to stress (e.g., having to support a child cope with racist acts). In exploring Black families in Canada, [Calliste \(2003\)](#) examines Black family structures in Nova Scotia and Toronto. She argues that histories of oppression inform gender relations, gender role identities and the division of labour within Black households. Others have explored the meaning of motherhood and experience of Black mothers, a standpoint that is different from non-Black mothers. [Collins \(1987\)](#) argues that Black mothers, who often do not assume full responsibility of the care of their children, are redefining notions of mothering. Others examine Black mothering as maternal activism that responds to systemic racial oppression and economic exploitation ([Lawson 2019](#)). Teaching children resistance, social activism and giving them a sense of racial pride are essential for Black mothers ([O'Reilly 2014](#)). Some Black parents are taking the matter of education both formal and informal into their own hands, choosing to homeschool or supplement school curriculum with positive Black-focused and empowering content ([Haddix and Sawyer 2013](#)). The failing of the school system, streaming, low teacher expectations, lack of parental involvement, peer pressure and lack of role models have all contributed to this practice ([James and Benjamin 2010](#); [James 2012](#)). Despite the failing public system for Black children, in its absence, the continued fight for educational, legal justice and healthcare justice taken on by Black women and mothers in particular cannot be ignored as contributing to stress, fear and exhaustion. It is not only that anti-Black racism exists and affects Black communities (lack of housing, jobs, policing), but that there is immense mental labour in the management of anti-Black racism and that is underreported and unrecognized as contributing negatively to our health. As such news articles present a myopic understanding of risk and harm, negating the chronic effects of systemic racism for Black women.

In a book by [James and Benjamin \(2010\)](#), entitled *Race and Well-being: The Lives, Hopes and Activism of African-Canadians*, the authors discuss the multiple manifestations of racism. Here, they include the daily life experiences of racism experienced by Caribbean, African and African-Canadian communities. Among many experiences of racism include dehumanization, exoticization, marginalization and alienation. The latter would cause worry about the future of their children, disappointment in the standard of living, being treated as foreigners by other Canadians and having others constantly remind them of their minority status. Walter's framework is useful to think about the mental labour involved in the management of anti-Black racism. Although a practice that is not new, acknowledging

the work that Black women do on an everyday basis is critical to understanding the interlocking oppression of race and gender. Although more recent research and policies point to racism as a social determinant of health, much of the research tends to focus on systemic factors as contributing to poor health. We see a lack of employment and a lack of housing for education tied to anti-Black racism as creating stress and anxiety. What we are less inclined to acknowledge or see in those configurations are the daily ways in which those very things require an intense amount of mental labour exacerbated by racial dynamics.

### 6.3. *Stories of Dreaming and Transforming*

We acknowledge Tuck's (2009) work on shifting from damage-centered research of pain and loss, or in our case, the media's representation of pain and loss in order to have policy makers respond and create change. Tuck's warning is clear that the "danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (p. 413). To further this, we add that bending to a deficit-saturated analysis of Black women's experiences with life under COVID-19 risks participating in neoliberal worldviews of scarcity and competition that underpin decisions about who deserves support under a leaner welfare state. Tuck proposes a focus on desire-based framework to capture the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (p. 416). From Tuck's work, we appreciate the challenge to reimagine the role of research and theories of change as part of suspending the damage narrative and see this challenge alongside Black feminism's engagement with self-transformation and political transformation (see Nash 2019). In a small number of articles throughout the category of the Black experience, we did see stories that were evidence of Black women carrying on the tradition of reimagining and transforming. There were clear desires put into action, such as the desire for more spaces for Black art and artists in a pandemic, the desire for more support for struggling Black-owned businesses, the desire to access important positions in the education system and also a desire for governments and governing bodies to be accountable for anti-Black racism. From this desire, we saw stories of Black women who built and led creative projects that provided mutual aid and support for communities during a period marked by Black death and grief. For example, creating popup kitchens to provide food and groceries to Black families during the pandemic or the steady and consistent grassroots work of organizing to achieve justice for Black people who have been harmed during and before COVID-19. In highlighting the gaps that we see in the media, we do not wish to lose sight of those stories and we too, ultimately, desire for more of those stories that speak to the complexities, contractions and nuances of Black life.

## 7. Limitations

We recognize that in writing this article that, in our critique of the homogenizing of women's experiences, we too have homogenized the experiences of Black women. We recognize the diversity of identities of Black women, and we are not relying on tropes of multiculturalism (see Philip 1990) to erase the uniqueness of Black women's experiences. As such, one key finding from our analysis of coverage of race and the pandemic is that we have been able to discern a more fluid connection made in the media between race and immigrant status. In many instances, racialized communities were defined as immigrant communities. In those instances, although on occasion ethnicity was noted, we could see those new to Canada, struggling with limited social support due to migration and separation from families of origin, anti-Black racism and insufficient knowledge about how the Canadian system operates. We saw very little however on Black immigrant experiences and Black women's immigrant experiences given the unique position that Black immigrant women have occupied in the precarious healthcare employment sector and domestic labour force in Canada. In the coverage of Black communities, the major differences were sometimes regional where those in Nova Scotia were identified as Black Nova Scotian. In some instances, studies in news articles advocated for disaggregated

race-based data. That said, this does not account for the nuances of Black women's different experiences with regard to gender dynamics and anti-Black racism. If anything, we hope this study and the important questions brought forth within the news stories on Black experiences generates more depth in media coverage.

## 8. Conclusions

The mainstream media de-racializes the experience of work-life balance in the context of COVID-19. Media stories covering the gendered impact of COVID-19 report stories of white, able-bodied and gender-normative women who struggle to pivot between moving their middle-class salaried employment into the private sphere while taking up the additional burden of family and household care. Implied in these stories are not only the differential and gendered impact of the pandemic, but a latent threat of undoing decades of gender progress. Black women are generally invisible from this dominant thread in the media. Stories of Black women thriving in and struggling with COVID-era work-life balance is simply not present in the media. The emphasis on white women's experiences with work-life balance during the ongoing pandemic positions white women as the ideal neoliberal citizens for whom empathy is granted in the form of (limited) policy change, such as universal daycare and more flexible and safer employment arrangements. While the invisibility of Black women on the gender agenda is not new, configurations of the impact of misogynoir has become even more important as governments analyse the impact of a she-cession and plan for progressive policy. Because of this, we call for a more fulsome accounting of the work-life balance narrative that is rooted in a pre-covid analysis of Black women's interconnected experiences in economic and family life.

Black women are at theoretical and policy positionalities that make "connections between the self to survive and be a catalyst for transformation, and the ability of the conscious experience of transformation to empower others" (Massaquoi and Wane 2007, p. 298). Black women, then, have a central role to play in feminist theory and policy, "and a contribution to offer that is unique and valuable" (Hooks 1984, pp. 16–17). Furthermore, Black Canadian Feminist Thought pays attention to the ways in which the political economy of Black women's lives are directly connected to, and influenced by, white supremacist structures of domination that impact the material conditions of Black women's lives by paying particular attention to work and health disparities. The fulsome and nuanced experiences of Black women are critical at this time, in part because of the media's integral role in shaping the context in which social policy is developed. Soroka et al. (2012) identify media as important because media helps to set a context and agenda which is taken up by politicians, policymakers and other actors. We are at a moment when gender and race are on policy agendas and policymakers are obligated to address the burden of the pandemic on racialized people and women, but the conversation must be intersectional. If the existing media narrative fails to address the degree to which the pandemic has impacted the lives of Black women in ways that are different to those of white women, then Black women's wellbeing will not be properly addressed by any policy aimed at addressing the fallout from COVID-19.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> The term misogynoir was coined by Bailey and Trudy (2018) to describe the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience.

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